

Trump's success and Obama's disdain

Clownish or not, tycoon's message strikes home

by Darrell Delamaide in Washington

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US President Barack Obama broke with longstanding precedent to disparage a presidential candidate publicly in a foreign setting. He used the occasion of the G7 summit in Japan to say that world leaders are 'rattled' by Donald Trump, the tycoon and presumptive Republican nominee, 'and for good reason', because of his 'ignorance of world affairs' and 'cavalier attitude'.

Trump, Obama said, was more interested in headlines than thinking how to keep America safe and the world on an even keel. Obama's words received apparent confirmation with yesterday's news that the Republican will make a publicity-hogging visit to the UK on 24 June, a day after the European Union referendum – where Trump has backed the Leave campaign.

Yet the president's disdain, in a nutshell, is why Trump is a serious contender to win November's election. The world is on anything but an even keel. Expensive wars, the debacles in Libya and Syria, and the rise of Isis have done anything but make Americans feel safe.

Trump's unconventional success renders an unambiguous verdict on what Americans think of their politicians. An establishment filter in the US and international media emphasises the clownish aspects of Trump's candidacy, while failing to convey a central message striking home with millions of voters.

Many middle class Americans feel their politicians have sold them out so that corporations can maximise profits in a global economy. Trump promises he will reverse that trend, bring back jobs to America and protect American workers.

Politics, not only in America, is something of a game, akin to reality television. Trump has shown himself adept at succeeding on this plane.

Some of his main tenets are undeniably populist: rejecting trade accords that encourage US corporations to move jobs abroad, reforming corporate tax to keep profits in (or bring them back to) the US, and finding a workable way to provide universal healthcare.

Trump wants to rebuild the country's physical infrastructure, implement more burden-sharing in military expenses with allies, and maintain support for fossil fuels.

In some cases, these concepts echo standard Republican positions; others conflict with accepted Washington conventions. But they make sense to many American voters excluded from a prosperity that shows up in statistics but has made little impact on people who scrape by with three jobs at the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour.

One other factor works in Trump's favour – Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton. Her supporters believe widespread opposition to Trump will enable the former first lady and secretary of state to crush her Republican rival. Yet they may be underestimating visceral opposition to Clinton herself.

The two presumptive nominees seem to be vying to see who can be more unpopular. Trump's favourability ratings are improving, while Clinton's are falling. Clinton continues to wrestle with the scandal of using a private email server while secretary of state, in violation of government security protocols, and then – even worse in political terms – dissembling about it for the past year.

Clinton's qualities and experience may still enable her to triumph in November, but it's not the open-and-shut case predicted by observers abroad, or the elites in their bubbles of prosperity in New York, Washington, Los Angeles and Silicon Valley.

Trump may be the oddest presidential candidate since Herbert Hoover, another independent entrepreneur with virtually no political experience who won his 1928 campaign. But no one should underestimate the Republican party's ability to coalesce behind him, do whatever it takes to recapture the White House, and maintain its grip on congressional power.

The conventional wisdom – backed by some polling – is that Trump's unscripted remarks have offended large groups of voters, particularly women and Latinos. And yet there are grassroots groups working to mend fences with these blocs – women for Trump, blacks for Trump, Latinos for Trump and even Muslims for Trump. Many seem willing to overlook his excessive rhetoric because they basically agree with his politics.

While headline unemployment of 5% looks good, it masks considerable slack in the labour market. Persistently low inflation, still well below the Federal Reserve's 2% target, shows how consumer demand remains depressed.

The positive economic data strengthen the hawks on the Federal Open Market Committee favouring gradual monetary tightening. But Janet Yellen, the Fed chair, may urge delay in raising rates, especially since she does not want the Fed to be perceived as interfering in the presidential campaign.

The Fed and the markets are a sideshow in the political drama. Global issues such as Britain's referendum, the Syria crisis, Russia's sabre-rattling and China's military stance are almost completely absent in a campaign focused daily on emails, name-calling, and real or imputed sexism.

There are still two months before the parties' nominating conventions finish their work. It's anybody's guess how these meetings in Philadelphia and Cleveland will go.

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