

Trump will not end the march of progress

Europe must nurture greater Atlantic unity

by John Kornblum

Thu 10 Nov 2016

The date of 9 November seems fated to recall turning points in modern history. In the past it marked the end of the German Reich, the low point of Nazism and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Now the US and the rest of the world will have another reason to remember this auspicious date. In an unexpected turn of fate, America has elected as president a person without the background or character for the office. Donald Trump defeated not only Hillary Clinton, his Democratic opponent, but also 17 other Republicans with whom he debated for nearly six months before emerging as the party's nominee.

Trump was not a Republican and still has no political philosophy to speak of. But he is a fascinating product of a new self-centred public culture. Long before he decided to run for president, Trump learned how to manipulate the Orwellian values propagated in what various commentators have called the 'post-factual age'. His counterparts are Vladimir Putin and Silvio Berlusconi. Each has succeeded in bypassing political substance, instead utilising an image of audacity and personal infallibility to achieve the highest political offices.

Somewhere along the way, Trump discovered that his mindless narcissism was a perfect counterweight to the increasingly complicated messages sent by leaders of modern liberal political culture. He seemed to sense that, for many Americans, the new post-modern culture was arriving too quickly. To be fair, the political establishment, which Trump never tires of denigrating, has often neglected this 'real America', whose members have felt downgraded by the new elites.

The election of an African-American president, legalisation of gay marriage and decriminalisation of marijuana were the sorts of events which pushed many Americans beyond their sense of tolerance. Perhaps it was Hillary Clinton's long support of these liberal causes, or merely the fact that she was a woman, which offered Trump the perfect platform for his message of toughness and intolerance.

Trump's victory does not mark the end of the march of progress. But we can now see more clearly that the post-modern world, too, is marked by the painful frustrations which have marked every societal advance. Progress is upsetting to many people, and its success is not to be taken for granted.

The danger is that Trump's behaviour will interfere with the wellbeing and even survival of many around the world. The US will, for some time, not be the beacon of tolerance that many count on. Trump is singularly ill-prepared for the responsibilities he is now assuming. Doubt is more than justified.

The election result is a special challenge for Europeans. The American umbrella over Europe may be gone for good. Can Europe hold together without the glue provided by America's clout, or will its nations drift off in different directions? Will common sense, innovation and tolerance find a strong refuge here, or will Trumpian ideologies develop in Europe as well?

Trump's election signifies the end of the post-second world war system. Perhaps Europeans will now find the stronger sense of Atlantic responsibility which will be needed to confront the upheavals ahead.

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