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IT’S TOO LATE TO STOP TRUMP: ELECTION 2016 IS 1964 REDUX

By Walt de Vries, Ph.D.

History does repeat itself and if you have lived long enough you will be reminded that the current frenetic effort by the Republican “establishment” to dump Donald Trump is akin to the stop Goldwater campaign of 1964. Except that during that 1964 election year there were “moderate” (progressive, if you prefer) Republican officeholders (principally Governors and U.S. Senators) who openly and actively led the Goldwater derailing effort up and through the GOP national convention in San Francisco. However, the moderate Republicans, after a brief resurgence in 1965-67, have disappeared and the GOP now consists of various conservative wings of the party.

I attended that 1964 convention as Executive Assistant to Michigan Governor George Romney and was the liaison between the camp’s of Governors Nelson Rockefeller, William Scranton and the Romney convention staff.

For days now--especially this past February 27-28 weekend (see the Washington Post and NY Times Sunday editions)—there has been a lot of talk, speculation and hope that the Republican “establishment” (mostly GOP Governors, Senators, Members of Congress, party officials and major contributors) should be fighting Trump and denying him the presidential nomination. Sure, lots of agreement, but no one is willing among these establishment types who want to do it. Result: nothing much is being done, but talk (a favorite Trump expression).

At this point in March, 1964, there were GOP moderate governors, legislators and party officials openly and actively organizing, funding, and campaigning for Governor Nelson Rockefeller (later for Pennsylvania Governor William Scranton) to stop the roaring Goldwater precinct delegate movement. Journalists during that 1964 campaign characterized it as a “battle for the heart and soul” of the Republican party—a refrain also heard today. Those efforts continued all the way to the July 13- 16, 1964 convention. They only ended with the final floor vote when Goldwater won the nomination with 68% of the delegate’s votes. The moderates hotly contested Goldwater’s nomination but lost with Governor William Scranton getting 16%, Governor Rockefeller, 9% and Governor George Romney 3% (at the 1968 convention Romney got 4%).

Mitt Romney, George’s son, attended the 1964 convention with his father. None of the 2015-2016 GOP presidential wannabes, to my knowledge, were at that 1964 convention.

The moderate faction of the GOP was crushed that July, 1964 afternoon in San Francisco when the Goldwater delegates hissed and booed Governor Rockefeller drowning out what he had to say. In all of my 60 years in politics, it is still my most vivid memory, as the chorus of hatred by the Goldwater delegates for the GOP moderates rose from the floor of the convention to the ceiling of the Cow Palace. It is my hope Americans should never again have to witness a repetition of that during the July, 2016 GOP convention in the Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland, but I wouldn’t count on it. We should note that in that 1964 convention there were 7 moderate and certainly “establishment” candidates competing against Senator Goldwater (3 governors, 2 Senators, 1 Congressman and 1 Ambassador).

Opposition by the progressives happened again in the 1968 Miami Beach GOP convention when Richard Nixon was nominated with 55% of the delegate’s votes while the other “establishment” candidates divided up the rest of the delegates with 21% for Governor Rockefeller, 14% for Governor Ronald Reagan, 4% each for Governors John Rhodes and George Romney, and the remaining 2% to Senators Clifford Case, Frank Carlson and Hiram Fong, perennial presidential candidate Harold Stassen and New York Mayor John Lindsay-- clearly another line-up of prominent national Republicans.

Here are my arguments that this fight is over and Trump will win:

…It is now March and the GOP convention is just four months away and only one Republican Senator Ben Sasse (Nebraska), who is hardly a prominent “establishment” office holder, has said he will not vote for Donald Trump as the GOP presidential nominee. However, neither he or any other well-known Republican has vowed, thus far, to oppose Trump on the floor of the Cleveland convention. Putting together an effort to topple Trump from his almost certain caucus and primary victories from now through the last six primaries on June 7 is, in my judgment, an impossible organizational and financial task for those four candidates currently fighting Trump for the nomination. Of course, there is a slim possibility than an outlier (like Mitt Romney, but that’s another story) to stampede the GOP delegates and rip the nomination away from Trump. Historically, however, that has seldom happened and is not in the cards for 2016.

Not only have the establishment candidates about run out of time, there are other factors working against the nomination of a single candidate to challenge Trump and they are:

…the inability and unwillingness of those four candidates and their loyal supporters still in the race—and those who have dropped out plus some like Mitt Romney—to coalesce around one of their own and present a single compromise candidate to overtake Trump. Even though the various camps may agree in terms of strategy and political philosophy, it is a much harder road to work together after debating and competing for months. Besides, it is a matter of faith that lightning my strike. That is as true today as it was in the 1964 and 1968 GOP conventions, it just doesn’t happen;

…there is no national GOP personality (like President Eisenhower) to unify the disparate factions of the party and even he failed to do so in 1964;

…funding a compromise establishment candidate—although easier today because of the unlimited amounts of money available after the Citizens United court decision from mega-donors and PAC’s—is extraordinarily difficult unless you have your own personal funds as Trump and presumably Mitt Romney have. Of the four active candidates left in opposition to Trump, none have access to that kind of money; and

…none of the 2016 candidates as yet have the kind of highly effective precinct organization and discipline used in the election of the actual delegates for Goldwater that characterized Cliff White’s 1964 delegate selection machine (see his book: *Suite 3505: The Story of the Goldwater Movement,*1967).

Finally, I believe there is just too much working against the establishment: a lack of time, no compromise candidate foreseen, not enough money and little grass roots delegate precinct activity.

So, what we are in for during the next 140 days until the Republican convention meets will be interesting and maybe unsettling. Perhaps some will consider the rest of this nomination campaign even more messy than it has been, but I think the results are foreordained.

But you wouldn’t want to miss them. After all, history may indeed repeat itself.

My bet is: Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton. Stand by.

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