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## Let Trump Be #NeverTrump



By Marty Kaplan



JIM URQUHART / REUTERS

I bet a friend dinner that Donald Trump would win the Republican nomination. Now I need to decide whether to bet a bottle of wine that Trump will beat Hillary Clinton. What I take from the tightening polls is that either side could win, a prospect that terrifies me, and not just because I'd be out a good Bordeaux. What will tip the election, I suspect, is whether Trump can make more people hate Clinton than the Clinton campaign can make hate Trump.

When Maureen Dowd asked Trump last Friday about his Twitter feud with Elizabeth Warren, his reply was, "You mean Pocahontas?" We already knew he has a black belt in bullying. His contribution to the art of negative campaigning is that it's Trump himself - the candidate, not his running mate, surrogates, paid ads or PACs - who's slinging the feces. His case against Crooked Hillary is the familiar right-wing trash talk of the past quarter-century, with an accent on her marriage. The only open question is how close Trump's tone will come to the Facebook page of Tony Senecal, his faithful Mar-a-Lago butler ("Stop the LYING BITCH OF BENGHAZI, NOW—killery Clinton!!!!!! She should be in prison awaiting hanging!!!!!!").

The Clinton campaign has signaled that she'll stay out of the mud and leave the daily back-and-forth to her messengers. When asked by the press about Trump's charge that she was her husband's enabler and is therefore herself anti-women, she frames her answer in terms of Trump's failure to fight for issues women care about. But what if he slimes her on the debate stage? Shaming might work, if not with him, then with voters: "Have you no sense of decency?" Or she could adapt Carly Fiorina's "I think women all over this country heard very clearly what Mr. Trump said." She could even do a version of Lloyd Bentsen's "You're no JFK" to Dan Quayle: "You're not a tenth the man that Bill Clinton is." And if Trump tries to pull it more than once, there's always Reagan's debate line to Jimmy Carter: "There you go again."

Clinton's ads could use Trump's own words against him, but they may not stick; that's why Trump has been called a Teflon candidate, as was Reagan. The Clinton campaign can try to brand Trump a liar, but though fact-checkers have given him a record number of pants-on-fires and Pinocchios, people aren't joining or leaving him because of accuracy; that's not what a protest movement is about. Besides, fact-checking just plays into Trump's applause line that the media are disgusting liars.

The irrelevance of facts is part of what observers mean when they say that the normal rules of politics don't apply to Trump. What's also abnormal is his obliterating the boundary between campaigning and reality TV, an absorption of politics by entertainment that is abetted, and profited from, by the media. This transformation of the election into a soft-core S&M reality show is also where Trump's greatest vulnerability lies.

Reality TV is the spectacle of humiliation. So is Trump's campaign. He won the primaries by humiliating his rivals. Now he's unifying his party by humiliating them again.

For the audience of this campaign - the people formerly known as voters - it's sadistically sublime to watch Marco Rubio, who called Trump a "con man," manacled by his pledge to support his party's nominee. It's delicious to watch Rick Perry, who once said Trump was a "cancer on conservatism," now say he's commander-in-chief material. Chris Christie called Trump a "carnival barker" whom he would never endorse; seeing Christie turn up as an apprentice butler at Mar-a-Lago is as pleasurable as watching a *Celebrity Apprentice* contestant degraded. Early on in the campaign, Trump, who evaded serving in Vietnam, called John McCain a "loser" because he was a prisoner of war, so now there's pathos in watching McCain masochistically endorse him. But since McCain is also the man who nearly put Sarah Palin a heartbeat from the presidency, there's *schadenfreude* in seeing that, too.

Trump will lose if his fans figure out it's not just his rivals who are being humiliated - that they, his voters, are a bunch of losers to him, too. The political press calls Trump's steady abandonment of his signature positions a "pivot." That's too elegant. What he's really doing is demonstrating his contempt for his base.

Trump has to believe his supporters are cowards, because they're not screaming bloody murder now that his "self-funded" campaign has hired a hedge fund veteran to raise a billion dollars of special interest money, kicked off by a \$100 million bribe from gambling mogul Sheldon Adelson. Trump has to believe his voters are Low Energy Jebbs and sad Little Marcos, 98-pound weaklings who'll eat whatever sand he kicks in their faces, like recasting his ban on Muslim immigrants as "just a suggestion." "I'm very flexible," he says. What's next to get flexed - the wall?

Voters need to see, and the Clinton campaign needs to say, that this show isn't a story about Trump. It's a story about them. The challenge isn't to reveal Trump as a liar; it's to reveal that putting your faith in him makes you a doormat in his eyes. It's no accident that one of the phrases Trump uses most often is, "Believe me." The challenge isn't to reveal Trump as a liar; it's to reveal that putting your faith in him makes you a doormat in his eyes. It's no accident that one of the phrases Trump uses most often is, "Believe me." If you do, what you're really telling him is, "Step on me."

*This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at [martyk@jewishjournal.com](mailto:martyk@jewishjournal.com).*

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Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director