



THE BLOG 08/17/2015 03:24 pm ET | Updated Aug 17, 2016

Bernie Has It. Trump Has It. Joe Has It. Does Hillary?



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As Joe Biden polls family and friends about entering the presidential fray, he's getting two kinds of advice — personal and political. The personal is about his life, his values and what he can give to his country. The political is about Hillary Clinton's vulnerability.

Honesty and trustworthiness are top issues for voters, but majorities in swing states view Clinton as not honest and trustworthy. Biden's supporters aren't smacking their lips at the opening she's given them; they're just scared her credibility deficit is an omen that Democrats could lose the White House. If Biden doesn't answer the call of duty, they're telling him, a Bush or a Walker — or, God help us, a Trump — could be our next president.

Clinton's supporters reject claims that she's a Potemkin juggernaut. She beats Democratic and Republican rivals in head-to-head matchups. The knock that she's untrustworthy is partisan propaganda, a media meme, a red herring, a question that real voters never ask her. Move along, folks, nothing to see here.

I respect and admire Clinton. So do many of Biden's potential backers. They're just imagining the damage that could be done when billions of dollars' worth of attack ads drill "Hillary thinks the rules don't apply to her" and "Hillary thinks she's above the law" into voters' brains. Accuracy will be irrelevant. They will be attached to a narrative "out there" purporting to connect the dots between Whitewater files that rematerialized, misremembered Bosnian sniper fire, Benghazi and, now, documents that weren't classified that she didn't send on personal email and didn't scrub from her personal server.

What Biden has, what nervous Democrats fear Clinton lacks, is authenticity, the new It factor. The old It was ideological (Do they hate big government or racism as much as I do?), positional (Are they with me on guns or climate change?), demographic (Do they care about people like me?) and personal (Who I want to have a beer with?). The new It is ontological: Who's real?

Biden is real. His personal tragedies testify to that. He's not a politician, he's our brother: There but for the grace of God go I. The goofy stuff he sometimes says just shows that he's a living, breathing person. It has its upside: his impromptu endorsement of same-sex marriage on "Meet the Press" in the thick of the 2012 campaign was arguably the tipping point of Obama's, and America's, evolution on the issue.

Two candidates in the race are running on it. Bernie Sanders is drawing the biggest crowds of the campaign because he seems as honest as his hair. But his manifest authenticity ("Yeah, I'm a socialist") may make him unelectable — the same fate Clinton is feared to be facing, though for the opposite reason. Donald Trump has it, too, but, like his hair, there's artifice about it. Is Trump real? Or is he "real"? Trump works both sides of that aisle. Think of Don Draper on the deck at Esalen at the end of *Mad Men*, dreaming up "It's the real thing" for Coke.

I don't think Trump's narcissism is reality show shtick. That id isn't "real"; it's real. He may think he's playing a character, but what he's living is likely a character disorder. A man all about erecting big buildings with his name on top is practically pleading to be diagnosed. But even if it's an act, his *I-can't-believe-he-just-said-that* straight talk has broken the fourth wall of American politics. He's not just the P.T. Barnum of politics; he's the Pirandello.

Best example: He cops to the corruption of politics by money. Jeb Bush, says Trump, is a puppet of the people who give him money, and so are the other losers in the race. He has unimpeachable authority to say this. You can believe me, he says, because I was one of those donors; so are my many rich friends. I knew what I was buying, and politicians know what they're selling. They're liars if they deny it, and you're stupid if you believe them. I'm the only one who doesn't need anyone's money. It may take a village to raise a child, but it takes a plutocrat to blow the whistle.

Sanders, too, says contributors don't give out of the goodness of their hearts; they always want something. That gives him standing. So does having no super PAC. "It's easy for Trump to say, 'I don't need their money,'" Sanders said on *Face the Nation*, "because he's a billionaire." The "logical consequence" of Trump's argument: "The only people who can run for office in America who don't have to curry favors are billionaires themselves." Sanders' alternative is the 350,000 people who've contributed an average of \$31 to his campaign. This is peanuts, but it makes him real.

Clinton, too, wants campaign finance reform, and Sanders' catching fire with the base on that issue is probably what got her to talk more about it. At the same time, her campaign plans to raise \$2.5 billion. Barack Obama's credibility on campaign finance reform cratered in 2008, when he became the first major candidate to opt out of public financing. Clinton's rationale now, like Obama's then, is that she can't commit unilateral disarmament. She's playing by the rules we have; when she gets in, she'll change the game. Obama said that, too, but after he was elected, the issue sank out of sight.

Insiders explain Clinton's contradiction by citing the low priority voters put on campaign finance reform. But that's yesterday's conventional wisdom. The influence of big money on elections is turning up as voters' top issue in NBC/*Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* polls. Harvard Law School professor Lawrence Lessig has even launched a quixotic presidential campaign on this one issue.

Clinton won't go as far as Lessig wants her to, and she won't go as far as Sanders is, but she can't afford to be seen as any less credible on money in politics than Trump. Straight talk from her would be electrifying. Did the hours she spent dialing for dollars ever make her want to take a shower? Was there a contribution to her Senate campaigns she regrets accepting? Have donors asked for things that crossed a line? Where does she draw that line? (And did she really go to Trump's wedding just because she thought *it would be entertaining?*)

These are the kind of questions about campaign finance that Jeb Bush, Chris Christie, Scott Walker, Marco Rubio, Rand Paul and John Kasich should be asked. More than half of the money that Republican candidates have raised has come from just 130 families and their businesses. Trump's candor about the contributor class — his rupture with donor *omertà* — has turned the other candidates' evasions into anvils around their ankles. Questions about Clinton's money machine won't go away. They give her an opportunity. But if her answers sound as weasely as Jeb Bush's, it won't do wonders for her trustworthiness.

Another taboo Trump broke: he trumpeted the Cleveland debate's TV ratings. "There should have been 2 million people watching," he said, but instead there were 24 million. "Who do you think they were watching — Jeb Bush? I don't think so." It's a casual admission that campaigns are spectacles, candidates are infotainment talent and news is a corporate cash cow. The debate contained more than 17 minutes of paid ads and Fox News self-promotion. Networks and stations monetize the eyeballs of the audiences that their political programming attracts. Candidates win or lose, but media oligarchs always come out ahead.

It didn't used to be that way (hello, League of Women Voters!), and it doesn't have to be that way now. Why should parties and networks run the debate schedule and format? Why should Fox News or CNN get to say who gets prime time, who gets the children's table, whether there's a live audience and whether they're encouraged to emote, as they were in Cleveland, where 25 minutes of the broadcast went to laughter, cheers and jeers. When Bernie Sanders proposed that primary debates randomly mix Republican and Democratic candidates, he distanced himself from bipartisan compliance with corporate media kabuki. Clinton could spring herself, too. Unless a candidate picks a fight, the only prize at an establishment debate is an Authentic Hack badge.

"You know, they're calling it 'the summer of Trump,'" Trump said at a New Hampshire press conference last week. "But if this all happens, and I don't win, I consider it a total waste of time." That's the most subversive thing a candidate can say. It's like pointing out the obesity at the State Fair, like conceding that deep-fried butter and snickers bars are diabetes on a stick. It's like admitting that all the hours the media spent covering, and we spent watching, the campaigns of Herman Cain, Michele Bachmann and Newt Gingrich were a total waste of time. It's like recalling how stunningly inconsequential it was that Rick Santorum won the Iowa caucuses in 2012, and that Mike Huckabee won them in 2008. It's like admitting that humans are suckers for stories. We can't help being captivated by suspense, no matter how fake the stakes.

Everyone wants to know if Trump can win the nomination and if Clinton can lose the election. No-spoiler alert: No one knows. If the Republican ticket is Kasich-Rubio, will the media be held accountable for taking a journalistic kiddie ride on Trump's helicopter? No, no more than the chicken hawks rumbling for war with Iran were held accountable for war with Iraq, no more than masters of the universe who securitized subprime mortgages were held accountable for wrecking the economy, no more than the fossil fuel industry is currently being held accountable for shortening the shelf life of the planet. Authenticity, not accountability, is this season's hot product. As long as we keep buying it, the media will keep selling it.

This is my cover story in the Jewish Journal, where I can be reached at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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