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Clinton vs. Trump: State of the Race

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With the conclusion of the summer political conventions in America and Labor Day approaching in the States, the race for the White House is entering its final phase. The Republican and Democrat gatherings in Cleveland and Philadelphia respectively were poles apart and presented two starkly different visions of America. Mr Trump's Republican Convention painted a portrait of America like something straight out of the book of Revelations and the End of Days. Trump's apocalyptic rhetoric attempted to caricature the US under the Obama administration as a country on the brink of civil breakdown, characterized by death and destruction, widespread political corruption, economic malaise and a country full of fear and anger, in steep decline which Trump promises will be reversed with his slogan of «Make America Great Again».

Indeed, the slogan encapsulates a deeper problem which is emerging in the United States and the rise of Trump is merely a symptom of this and perhaps even a forerunner of what is to come. Even if Donald Trump loses the November 8th Presidential election, what he stands for and his devoted followers are not going away and will become an entrenched and even more aggrieved and aggressive feature of American society and politics.

Last autumn while attending the Georgetown University Leadership Seminar of which I am member we were treated to a fantastic lunch at the Finnish Embassy in Washington, DC. The guest speaker was the former Director of the Office of Management and Budget under President

Clinton and Vice-Chair of the Federal Reserve, Ms Alicia Rivlin. I posed a question to her on a subject I had been thinking about regarding all the talk of American decline. For over half a century Americans have been raised on a discourse of American greatness and exceptionalism. Every American over the last 60 odd years is constantly told by their media, business leaders, politicians, military generals et al how the United States is the greatest country on Earth and is the number one Superpower on the planet. No other country, so the discourse runs, comes close to American strength, greatness and dominance. Rivals and challengers of the past whether it be the British Empire, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan or the Soviet Union have all fall by the way side in the titanic struggle of nation states and Great Powers.

So I asked Ms Rivlin, hypothetically, how she thought Americans would react if in a couple of decades to come a significant and visible economic gap opened up between the USA and China. Unfortunately, she didn't really answer the question and became needlessly defensive. Rivlin started off by making a false analogy with how Britain in her opinion adjusted rather well to its diminished role after the Second World War and the loss of Empire. Clearly she was unaware about the never ending debate in Britain regarding its place and role in the world and position in Europe. As the former Secretary of State Dean Acheson said of the UK in 1962: «*Britain has lost an Empire and yet to find a role*». After the EU referendum and Brexit I think that comment is just as apt in 2016 as it was in 1962. So she was wrong on that point and then dismissed the talk of American decline and the Rise of China in a blasé manner as just «silly». She failed to see, whether intentionally or not, that whatever one thinks about the merits of seriousness or silliness of such talk and concerns, a lot of people in America believe it is happening as encapsulated in Mr Trump's campaign slogan: «Make America Great Again». Clearly, a great deal of people in America think the country is in terminal decline and want something radical to reverse such decline. Hence their messenger Donald Trump and his rhetoric of America First.

Now, America in 2016 is still the number one economy in the world and the strongest military power on the planet. Yet quite a lot of Americans are suffering economically especially after the Wall St induced global financial crisis and Great Recession. I personally think America still has many great days ahead, but that does not negate the fact, that for many people in America they don't feel America is still preeminent, they worry that the country is losing its dominant Superpower status and even if it is preeminent, many of its citizens do not feel they are getting any return in their own lives from this global primacy. So if the rhetoric and politics of Trump can flourish in 2016 just imagine what could emerge from this group of disaffected if say come 2036 and China has over taken the US to become the world's number one economy, how then would the «Trumpers» behave and what politically would they embrace?

Over on the other end of the political spectrum the Democrat Convention could not have been more different. Whereas Cleveland was all doom and gloom, Philadelphia was sunshine and love. The Democratic Party successfully replicated the themes and optics of Ronald Reagan's uplifting 1984 «It's morning in America» Convention and wrapped themselves in the flag with a parade of Hollywood celebrities, optimistic pop singers, military veterans and Generals and a powerful speech from a Gold Star father Mr Khan.

The central message of the Philadelphia gathering was that America is back from the brink of 2008-09 and the foundations have been laid for a boom with a more prosperous and egalitarian society in the making and the best days are still yet to come.

From all the post-Convention opinion polls and further surveys taken through August thus far, it would appear Mrs Clinton has successfully unified the Democratic Party behind her and her policy platform and vision is resonating successfully with the majority of American voters in contrast to Mr Trump's imploding campaign and negative poll numbers. Part of what Trump represents is not only a deep seated anxiety that America is on a downward trajectory this century, hence his China bashing and protectionist rhetoric, his candidacy also represents a white backlash against the increasing and rapid demographic changes in America society. America is on course by the 2050s to no longer be a white majority country. The population growth of non-white ethnic minorities is over taking that of white Americans. Thus Trump's dog whistle racism with lines such as: «*We speak English in this country, not Spanish!*»

Mr Trump may have had an appalling August but he is not to be underestimated. There is still a long way to go before November 8th. Who could have thought a majority of the British people would have been so ignorant to endorse the lies and bigotry of the Leave campaign and opt to plunge the UK into its greatest existential identity crisis since WWII. For Mrs Clinton paradoxically this is her moment of maximum peril. It is always at the moment when she is doing best and riding high in the polls that the US national media turn on her and attempt to burst her bubble.