

Saint Bernard to the Rescue

Kevin McCarthy (2000 words)

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Several maverick presidential candidates have ridden a wave of populist enthusiasm in the age of television: the Kennedys, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Bernie Sanders. Only in the last instance did a major political party actually reject the people's candidate. Many pundits, including Trump's own pollsters, now agree that Bernie would've thumped Trump in 2016. Deprived of Bernie, we opted for the only candidate promising change.

Bernie is riding the wave again and again, neo-liberals are scrambling to suppress. The opposition is formidable — including, sadly, one of our greatest pseudo-populist heroes, Barack Obama. The arrogance is disappointing. Obama surfed to power *twice* and now apparently presumes to tell the American people that their instincts are wrong this time around. If Obama had listened to the cries for populism during his own administration, if he had begun to address the systemic problems highlighted by the Occupy Movement, many of us would be more inclined to take his advice in 2020.

Bernie opposes the power elite, so comfortable people across the political spectrum, including most cable journalists and executives, are gunning for him. They want us to settle for candidates who promise incremental change. Well, that's not good enough. We have been welching on real economic relief for the working class and legislation that truly addresses global warming for soul-crushing decades. We cannot afford weak leadership at a time when a mega-pivot is required, not only for the survival of the country but for the survival of our species. Bernie proves every day that he — and only he — has the courage to do what must be done.

THE POWER ELITE SAYS Bernie is a scary socialist. But unlike a pure socialist, Bernie does not advocate social control of the means of production. He merely proposes that we emulate to some degree the social democracies of Scandinavia — capitalist economies strongly oriented toward social justice. Making health care the province of the people, rather than of profit-driven corporations, eliminates a primary driver of poverty and bankruptcies in the middle and lower classes. To some extent, it offsets the flat wages that labor has endured for decades. It allows workers to spend in other sectors, strengthening the economy.

It's fashionable to call Bernie an irresponsible spendthrift for wanting to invest in people, as opposed to, say, weapons. "Where will the money come from?" the comfortable demand, in mock outrage. Yet no one questions our \$750 billion (up from \$598.5 Billion in pre-Trump 2015) in defense spending. If we finally decide we want to hold the deficit to \$1 trillion and cannot bear to touch the defense budget, the money can be raised in a variety of creative ways — a nano-tax on stock transactions, for example. The one thing we cannot afford is to continue to enrich the top one percent on the backs of the poor.

THE POWER ELITE SAYS Bernie's proposed legislation will be dead-on-arrival. Congress will kill Medicare for All, for instance. This argument is an oversimplification that studiously ignores the power of the bully pulpit. The president has the power and obligation

to speak directly to the people. This puts enormous pressure on congress and shapes legislation. At the end of the day, legislators must listen to their constituents. If those constituents have been listening to Bernie, they'll be demanding big change. Bet on it. It's already clear that Bernie will be a bully pulpit president. It's in his 2020 slogan: *Not me. Us.*

THE POWER ELITE SAYS Bernie is the wrong gender. You've got me there: Bernie's an old white guy. But aren't we still ostensibly egalitarian? It works both ways, you know — *all* ways. We're not supposed to care what anyone looks like. Anyway, Bernie will almost certainly have a female VP — I'm pulling for Nina Turner — and is just the kind of guy who will happily hand the reins to a strong woman once we're on the new path. Yes, we need more women in leadership roles, but Hillary Clinton showed how disastrous identity politics can be. Competence and character eclipse every other consideration.

THE POWER ELITE SAYS Bernie is too old. So we should vote for a weaker candidate because he might live a few more years? I'll take Bernie the walker over the incumbent junk-food king, however long they each happens to live. Active body, active mind. I concede that age is a consideration — it's just not a big one. All we have to do is insist that elderly candidates have younger, strong running mates like Nina Turner.

THE POWER ELITE SAYS Bernie is unelectable. By what measure? If Trump can shoehorn himself into the White House by running against another wealthy elitist, which allowed him to pretend to be a populist, then an authentic populist running against an exposed con man must surely win by a couple of touchdowns. Bernie is the most trusted candidate by every measure. "Compromise" is the defining characteristic of each allegedly centrist candidate. That will not pull voters off the couch. Bernie's truth and passion play not just to the progressive base, but to the *American* base — people across the political spectrum who believe in the core principles of the country, such as equal opportunity.

The populist movement, incorporating elements of the left and right, still not understood by mainstream political institutions and media, looks irresistible this time. Younger voters, who are less likely to define themselves in traditional, left-right terms, favor Bernie by huge margins. Many conservatives support him because he's both authentic and pragmatic. His new egalitarianism will empower everyone. His movement is the antidote to the narcissism that is driving us apart. *Not me. Us.*

It is true that most people seem to be hard-wired with a generally conservative or progressive temperament. I believe we're that way because both styles produced successful survival strategies as we evolved. In some circumstances, our ability to hunker and hoard (be conservative) saved the day. In other circumstances, our ability to travel and trade (be progressive) saved the day. Every society is a mixture of both. It just so happens that these days, in the US, gross inequality overshadows those differences. Populism is the vehicle for change and nearly everyone sweating out a mortgage is already aboard. Once the country is moving forward, we'll go back to quibbling over policy details in every arena. Respectfully this time, I hope.

It's strange that, though pundits everywhere decry the political schism in America, they are terrified of populism — the one movement that already shows signs of unifying us. Fox News has actually been giving Bernie more balanced coverage lately than the other cable news outlets do. Why? Because many of their viewers like Bernie. Why? Because their concerns are not easily cubbyholed in traditional terms. Many of these people are older and believe Bernie when he says he will protect and expand the social safety net. Some

conservatives have long agreed, after all, that everyone benefits when each person has a stronger foundation from which to build.

I think all the talk about electability actually creeps a lot of people out. It certainly creeps me out. Finding the right leader should not be a calculation or a settling. It should be a gauging of authenticity, passion and vision. That's why I always say, *Vote your conscience*. Who can win is nothing compared to who *must* win. The rank-and-file legions who propelled Kennedy, Carter, Reagan, Clinton, and Obama over the top weren't hedging their bets, they were filling a need. The only way to ensure that your politician has a conscience is to supply one.

Many Democrats are so intent on defeating Trump that they're endlessly negotiating with themselves. They honestly think they have to appease conservatives to regain power. Baloney. Hyper-conservative Reagan won over a lot of liberals by clearly defining his policies and sticking to his guns. Temperamentally, Bernie is much the same. He will eat Trump alive in debates because he knows how to stay on-topic when Mister Nasty tries to hijack the conversation by being outrageous. His clarity of vision is matched by few — certainly not Trump, who often manages to contradict himself within a single sentence. Bernie Sanders has been right about nearly everything important for 50 years. Even our tone-deaf president knows that. It scares the hell out of him.

THE POWER ELITE SAYS Bernie supporters are big meanies. Please. If passion scares you, stay away from opera and politics. Senator Sanders is passionate about being a catalyst for change and his supporters are passionate about making that happen. Of course some go too far. Every candidate has supporters who go too far. But no other candidate is being grilled about it, as Bernie is. I guess if you can't fight Bernie on the issues, you can pretend that he's brainwashing supporters to offend you personally. Desperate, much?

For the record, Pro-Hillary "friends" cured me of FaceBook in 2016 by insisting I was sexist for supporting Bernie. Then, of course, the same people ridiculed my voting for Jill Stein. (Interestingly, Dr. Stein proved herself unflappably presidential when she was recently accused of being "a Russian asset" by resentful Hillary.) Overall, not a big deal. I thank the hecklers for helping me see that social media is primarily a platform for shaming and scolding. I have better things to do.

I passed one of the worst nights of my life that summer at an advertised debate of "Sanders" and "Trump," who were played by impersonators. The place was packed. Everyone wanted to see those two square off. But it was not to be. First, many in the audience were singled out and brutally abused by "Trump." Then we were all lectured mercilessly by both impersonators for not supporting Hillary. I should've insisted on a refund. Clearly, most Americans still want to see Bernie and Trump go toe-to-toe. It will be a classic matchup: populism vs. fascism. Authenticity vs. the con.

A lot of good people voted for Trump. Most bought the faux populism, believing, once again, that billionaires feel their pain and will improve the lives of working people. (Some even still believe that supporting billionaires will somehow pave their own way to unimaginable wealth.) Many believed that Trump would stem a mythic flood of illegal immigrants — who, they understandably believe, drive down wages, make jobs more scarce, and dilute our cultural identity.

Some really had altruistic reasons for voting the way they did. One guy I know did it because it looked as though Hillary Clinton was ready to send his kids off to war. You can certainly argue that he made the right choice — though only so far and barely.

As the economist Richard Wolff recently pointed out, the one clear message we should be getting from the electorate is that they want change. Americans thought they were getting change with Obama. Nope — Obama was stonewalled by extremists and co-opted by establishment power brokers. Americans thought they were getting change with Trump. Nope — Trump was only playing populist. Sure enough, his economic policies are unoriginal: tax cuts for the rich and ill-advised monetary manipulations that will only postpone an inevitable crash until after the election.

Of all the weird things in our weird culture, the demonization of Bernie Sanders takes the cake. The guy is practically a saint, stays on point, refuses to be bought, appeals to every demographic, and speaks truth to power at every opportunity. What more do you want? Sometimes you just have to step back and recognize greatness, then work to support it. Bernie is our FDR. Yes, we deserve that. We must have it. If you can't imagine backing Bernie sooner or later, you're probably too comfortable with the status quo. And — it must be said — too comfortable with the discomfort of others. Oh, my countrymen, please — let's not blow this second chance.