

JUST A VERY WEIRD POLITICAL YEAR OR A CRUCIAL POINT IN OUR HISTORY?

by Bill Woods

Few will deny 2016 has been a weird year in politics. Who



would have thought that an outrageous real estate mogul/ Reality-TV actor would be the Republican nominee for President? The real question to ask, however, is have we reached a critical turning point

in our country's history?

Historians such as Arnold Toynbee chart the rise and fall of civilizations in terms of their responses to the challenges they confront. They analyze how empires and countries have responded over time to major social, economic, and political challenges. Their successes or failures and eventually their rises or falls depend on the actions taken by these societies to deal with issues such as war, economic depression, or social unrest.

How has the U.S. In recent times been responding to the challenges in its midst?

A review of major trends prompts an answer of not very well. Our business and political leaders seem to be particularly lacking in their abilities to make decisions that improve the economic, social, and political health of the country.

In fact, could the emergence of Donald Trump be a result of the distrust and disgust that many people feel toward the so-called establishment? Although a majority of white males, who traditionally vote Republican, did not abandon the Party in the primaries, they, nevertheless, gave the raspberry to establishment candidates like Jeb Bush and opted for The Donald. After all, many of these Trump supporters have been falling further and further behind economically, and they realize that the Bushes and Romneys and their corporate backers have paid no attention to their plight. It may appear strange that a billionaire real estate mogul has gained the allegiance of so many economically depressed whites, but Trump is shrewd enough to recognize their malaise and to offer them simple solutions and an array of scape goats.

The Amazing run of Bernie Sanders

On the other side of this year's political equation, how does one explain the amazing run of Bernie Sanders?



How has an avowed Socialist in his mid-seventies garnered so many votes and such enthusiasm when all the pundits knew the Democratic nomination was a lock for Hillary Clinton? It appears many Democratic voters were also

opting for the less establishment candidate of their Party.

They see in Clinton a person who feels comfortable receiving huge speaking fees from Goldman Sachs. They

associate her with Bill Clinton, a President who presided over bank deregulation, who backed and signed a bill that ended Aid To Families With Dependent Children, and who supported mandatory sentencing policies that resulted in filling U.S. prisons with young Black males. Many progressives and young adults are thus fearful that Hillary Clinton is a candidate groomed by a political establishment that accepts the current, cozy corporate /government status quo.

Now that the primaries are over and the nominees have been decided what are we to make of all this voter rejection of the establishment? One thing seems certain. This antipathy is not going to go away, and it does encompass different reactions to some very unhealthy trends in our society.

Economic conditions are not working for average people, and we have a growing number of families and individuals living below or just above the poverty line. Income inequality is as extreme today as it was after the Civil War when the Robber Barons held sway and immigrant labor could be easily exploited. At least the Robber Barons created jobs by building the railroads and companies such as Standard Oil and U.S. Steel. Today so much of the wealth is made by Wall Street and other high finance speculation often at the expense of jobs.

During the post-Civil War era, business tycoons bought state legislatures and members of Congress, and that phenomenon has reemerged again today. The process

may be more subtle, but huge contributions to campaigns effectively achieves the desired goals. Thanks to the growing costs of campaigns and the impact of Supreme Court cases such as Citizens United, wooing "big money" out weighs doing the people's business.

Polarization

Besides the "big money" issue, political polarization exists as the other factor that prevents Congress and other legislative bodies from addressing the real social and economic problems that face us as a nation. Rather than accepting compromise and negotiation as necessary behaviors to forge legislation, Representatives and Senators remain obsessed with ideology and with defeating the other Party at all costs. These major influences on politics and government make it tough to pass a budget much less working on complex policies aimed at improving "the general welfare."

This brief review of long term economic and social problems and the inability of the corporate and



governmental establishment to address them leads us back to the emergence of Donald Trump as the presumptive Republican nominee. Even accepting his primary victories as in

part an anti-establishment response by voters, most of us view The Donald as an absolutely unacceptable response. Since a Trump Presidency would undoubtedly make

conditions in this country much worse than they are now, it leaves us supporting Hilary Clinton.

Nevertheless, we cannot be satisfied by simply making sure Trump doesn't occupy the White House. Just as Bernie Sanders has managed to prod Clinton further away from her establishment positions, we must steadily push her and the progressive wing of the Democratic Party to tackle growing economic inequality and the social tensions that it nourishes. Further, we must take advantage of the anti-establishment mood in the country and campaign vigorously for reforms that will revive democratic institutions and give them the capacity to respond to the huge challenges that confront us. If we fail to take action at this critical juncture in U.S. history, we will live up to Pogo's famous dictum: "We have met the enemy, and he is us!"