

Donald Trump and the Borscht Belt

My father, who was a contractor to home and apartment builders, spoke well of Fred Trump. The elder Trump was born in Woodhaven, New York, not far from where my family owned real estate. When Fred's son came into the business, my father said at the dinner table something along the lines of, "I don't think I'll be doing any more work for the Trumps. I met Donald today and, well, I just don't think it's going to work out with him. He is about your age, Cliff, and he wants to be a high roller." My father, at the time, had suffered heart problems and he did not want any more aggravation in business than was absolutely necessary. Dad was smart. Many of those people who did business with Donald Trump early on found themselves in bankruptcy court, waiting in line to get paid, or just had to suck up their losses.

I listened intently to Donald Trump at his Town Hall meeting recently. Trump is great for American politics. He has made many people listen to the political debate about the next President of the United States, and that cannot be bad for our system. The enemy of America's future is apathy. People seem to be anything but apathetic about Donald Trump.

When I was a kid, I did not go to summer camp like the other kids in my hometown. My summer experience was to be sent up "to the country." What that meant is that I got to spend several weeks or more in Swan Lake, New York, where my grandparents owned a small dairy farm. My mother and uncles were raised there until they started college in New York City. The farm was sold off to the National Hotel, and my grandmother was able to keep a bungalow for summer use. We were also permitted to use the facilities of this very stereotype Jewish borscht belt "complex." One of my enduring memories was Saturday night. We would go to the canteen to watch and listen to the singers, magicians, jokesters, and a variety of other entertainers. The humorists spanned the spectrum from Yiddish-speaking Brooklynites to Midwestern Protestants. Each comedian had a *shtick*. What exactly is a *shtick*? A "shtick" was an approach, an act, a way of relating to people that could be funny, serious, entertaining or crass, but always memorable in some way.

Donald Trump is surging in the polls because he has a *shtick*. He is very much like a borscht belt entertainer, memorable because of how he speaks and the way he presents himself, rather than his content. The experts will have to parse the substance of Trump's message, if any, but his entertainment value should not be underestimated. He is making people sit up and take notice, whether he is hated, loved, or whether he just makes people shrug their shoulders and giggle.

Donald Trump is not dumb, of course. There is a method to his madness. As the pundits have said, the real estate developer has tied into the frustration and anger people feel with the American political system. People are disgusted with politics as usual; people in office being sold, sometimes not even to the highest bidder. The politicians we elect seem more beholden to the status quo than to any sort of long distance vision for America. In that way, Trump and Bernie Sanders have a lot in common. They both have a message. Sanders, almost shunted aside for the time being, has a particular vision for America based upon his political pedigree. Sanders wants the rich to support the poor, and the state to be the rising tide which lifts all boats. Trump wants to poke his finger in the eye of the establishment, and probably everyone else. Trump is about Trump. He wants to see his name in lights, on a wall separating the United States from Mexico, and to translate our economic system into a kind of American-Trump Tower.

Donald Trump has learned how to be a good salesman. Someone once told me that the Apostle Paul was the world's greatest salesman. I never understood what that meant until I brushed up on my ancient near eastern history. Every great leader has been a terrific salesman, whether it be Adolf Hitler, may his name be forever erased, or Franklin Roosevelt. Salesmanship means the selling of oneself, not necessarily the portrayal of great products and ideas. In the legendary Broadway show, *The Music Man*, Harold Hill was not selling musical instruments to the townsfolk of River City, Indiana, but rather he was selling himself and a vision of happy townsfolk proudly watching their kids play musical instruments. The opening number in the show is "Ya Gotta Know the Territory." Donald Trump knows the territory. He understands that Americans are tired of boring blather that sounds an amalgam of warmed over ideas that have not worked in the past. Trump is offering something new: **HIMSELF!**

This is not to say that Donald Trump is either a Hitler or a Harold Hill. Doubtless, should the Trump phenomenon continue, at some point the pedal will have to meet the metal and Trump will need to talk about real solutions. This writer suspects that Trump will essentially adopt the Richard Nixon plan to end the war in Vietnam: "I have a plan, and I will tell you when I get elected; but I am not exactly sure what it is." The plan worked. Nixon was elected, we got out of Vietnam, and Americans accepted their loss less than gracefully.

Trump will not be the progenitor of any great ideas. He does not have to do that. He will figure it out on the fly. The problems of war in the Middle East, nuclear proliferation, the national debt and bankrupt entitlement programs are all issues too big for any one person to solve while running in a field of primary candidates. The best candidate, whether it be Trump or someone else, will lean on a lot of other people to figure out the problems as they are encountered. The real issue will be whether a salesman, who is capable of understanding the basic psyche of the American voter, will be able to turn his acrimonious rhetoric into problems solved.

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