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## Donald Trump, the GOP and the Politics of Hate

By Robert Fantina  
December 11, 2015



As the three-ring circus known as the United States presidential campaign plods along towards its inevitable conclusion, wherein we will all ‘meet the new boss, same as the old boss’, the world is being subjected to the bizarre phenomenon of an oddly-coiffed billionaire entertainer soaring in the polls. Donald Trump, he of the multiple wives and unpleasant personality, is crushing the more traditional contenders, consisting mainly of current and former U.S. senators and governors. Since most of them are so far to the right as to alienate any but the most extreme of right-wing extremists, one can only marvel at Mr. Trump’s popularity.

Never one to pander to a voter’s compassionate side – there doesn’t seem to be much sensationalism or money in that – Mr. Trump has now garnered the praise and adulation of the ignorant and close-minded by saying that Muslims should not be allowed to enter the United States. This, apparently, has enabled Mr. Trump to expand his already-impressive lead in public opinion polls from 16% to 35%.

Sadly, this is nothing new in the U.S. Religious fears always seem to play well, and those seeking office always seem willing to play them.

The year 1928 was the first time that a Roman Catholic was nominated by a major party for president, when Democratic Governor Al Smith of New York received his party's nomination. Thinking people then, as well as today, aren't concerned about a candidate's private beliefs. However, Mr. Smith's nomination did not sit well with some religionists. Influential Methodist Bishop Adna W. Leonard of Buffalo issued a "call for Anglo-Saxon unity against foreigners, particularly the Latins". He is also quoted as having said that the U.S. is a "Protestant nation, and, as long as the English language is interwoven with the word of God, America will remain Protestant". How the 'English language is interwoven with the word of God' is anyone's guess. Additionally, Republicans opposed to Mr. Smith circulated photographs of him standing at the entrance of the newly-completed Holland Tunnel. These photographs were captioned to state that it was, in actuality, a tunnel to the Vatican, thus fanning fears that the election of Mr. Smith would cause the nation to be run by the Pope. While religion cannot be seen as the only reason for Mr. Smith's landslide defeat by Herbert Hoover (58.2% to 40.8%), it was certainly a major factor.

In June of 1960, prior to the Democratic presidential nomination of Roman Catholic Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, both Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn and Texas Senator Lyndon B. Johnson discussed with evangelical leader Billy Graham the likelihood that a Kennedy nomination would cause religion to dominate the fall campaign. Their prediction was fulfilled, causing Mr. Kennedy to make what became a landmark speech about religion and politics. In that speech, he said this: "So it is apparently necessary for me to state once again — not what kind of church I believe in, for that should be important only to me — but what kind of America I believe in". It is puzzling that, fifty-five years later, this concept still eludes so many people. In the election of 1960, Mr. Kennedy was victorious in one of the closest races in U.S. history, winning 49.72% of the vote, compared to Mr. Nixon's 49.55%.

In 2006, Keith Ellison became the first Muslim elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. When taking the oath of office, he opted to use a copy of the Qur'an, rather than the Bible. It should be noted that the actual oath is taken without any religious texts; after this official swearing in, Congress members have the option of having a ceremonial event at which scriptures can be used.

Yet not all of his new colleagues were pleased about his election, or his choice of the Qur'an. Virgil Goode (R-VA) had this to say about Mr. Ellison: "I fear that in the next century we will have many more Muslims in the United States if we don't adopt the strict immigration policies that I believe are necessary to preserve the values and beliefs traditional to the United States of America and prevent our resources from being swamped". Further: "...if American citizens don't wake up and adopt the Virgil Goode position on immigration there will likely be many more Muslims elected to office and demanding the use of the Qur'an". Here the double-edged sword of Muslims in the U.S., and actually being elected to office, is held aloft to awaken xenophobia, never in too deep a sleep in the best of times, in the citizenry.

History was made again in the context of U.S. presidential elections in 2012, when former Massachusetts Governor and elitist extraordinaire Mitt Romney received the Republican nomination. While there were many reasons to abhor the idea of a Romney presidency, many people, during the campaign for the nomination, and then the general election, were particularly alienated by Mr. Romney's membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The idea of having a Mormon in the White House was just too much for many voters to accept. Prejudice against the Mormons was nothing new; in October 1838, Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs issued what came to be known as 'the extermination order', which stated, in part: "...the Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State..."

Writing in 2004, journalist Amy Sullivan of *The Washington Monthly* said this, in discussing a possible Romney candidacy in the future: "His obstacle is the evangelical base – a voting bloc that now makes up 30 percent of the Republican electorate and that wields particular influence in primary states like South Carolina and Virginia. Just as it is hard to overestimate the importance of evangelicalism in the modern Republican Party, it is nearly impossible to overemphasize the problem evangelicals have with Mormonism". Little seems to have changed between then, and the 2012 election. A Gallup poll during the election campaign indicated that 18% of voters wouldn't vote for a well-qualified candidate if he or she were a Mormon. Evangelical Republicans seem to be particularly opposed to any Mormon as an elected official. Prominent extreme conservative commentator Rick Scarborough announced during the campaign that he would not endorse Mr. Romney, simply because he was a Mormon.

And now the illustrious Mr. Trump had jumped on the anti-Islam bandwagon, which appears to be gathering speed as it heads for the cliff. Because off the cliff it must go. In the same way that Catholics are routinely nominated to the highest offices in the land, and that a Mormon came within a hair's breadth of the presidency, another generation will look at the ignorance of the early millennium, and marvel that Muslims were criticized for their religious beliefs. Oh, some of this prejudice will surely remain, the same way that some people won't vote for a Catholic, Mormon, Jew, Italian, etc. But it will fade in time.

But for now, Mr. Trump is getting the mileage he wants by spreading hate, and appealing to the basest instincts of his narrow-minded followers. He may well lead the GOP to electoral defeat in November of 2016. It is only sad that there is no Democrat running for president who offers any real leadership. But that is business as usual in U.S. politics.