

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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OTHER VIEWS

Bernie Sanders, Socialism's Reagan?

From the beginning the presidency of Donald Trump has inspired analogies to the years of Jimmy Carter. Though personally the two men are ever so slightly different, they seem to occupy a similar space in the arc of political history — both outsiders who seized control of a divided,



ROSS DOUTHAT COMMENT

exhausted, yet still powerful political party, both men who tried to push their coalitions into a new ideological formation, both presidents who commanded legislative majorities but accomplished next to nothing with them.

The term that seems to fit them both is “dis-junctive,” from the cat-

egorizations of Yale political scientist Stephen Skowronek. As Carter straddled the old New Deal-Great Society liberalism and the age of Reaganism and neoliberalism to come, so Trump's presidency is at once the seeming last gasp for the Reagan coalition and a possible doorway into a future where socialism and right-wing populism contend for mastery instead.

But if Trump is a Carter figure, trying and probably failing to build a new conservative majority inside the decaying institutions of the old one, then who is ready to play Reagan — the ideologically ambitious rival who wins the presidency and actually ushers in realignment?

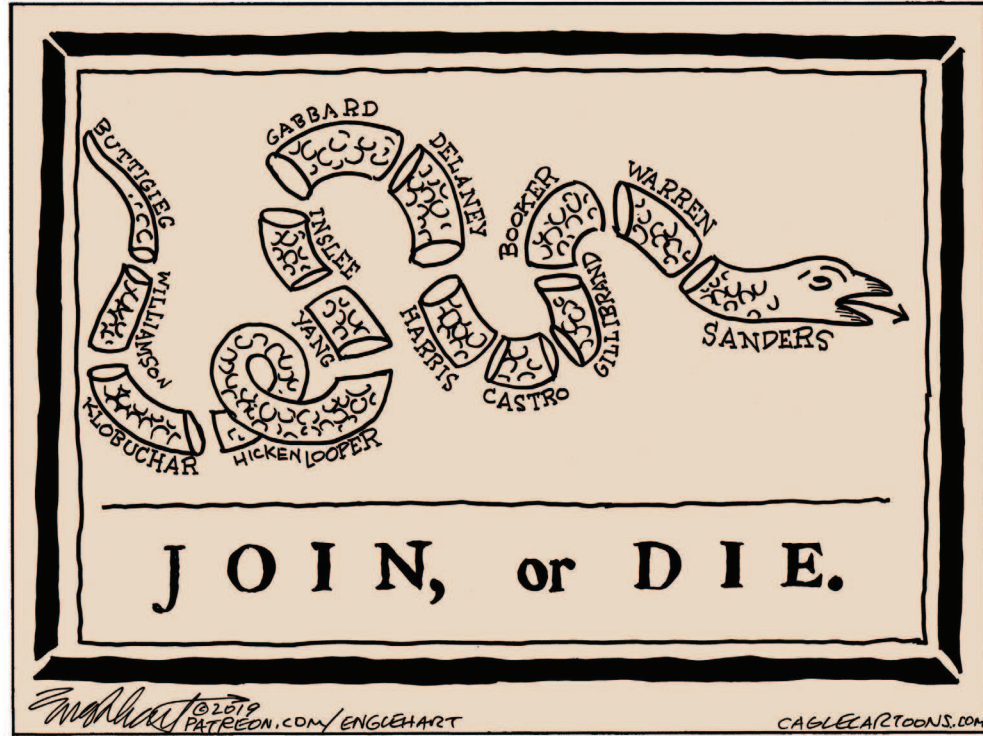
The correct answer might be nobody, because history doesn't actually repeat or mirror or rhyme that simply, and because the decadence of American institutions threatens to make every president effectively disjunctive, keeping real realignment forever out of reach.

But if you're eagerly looking for the repetition or the rhyme, the 2020 primary campaign supplies an obvious figure: The Reagan to Trump's Carter, the left-wing answer to the first movement-conservative president, can be only Bernard Sanders.

If you doubt me, consider the parallels. Like Reagan following his attempt to primary Gerald Ford in 1976, Sanders is coming off a near-miss insurgent campaign against an embodiment of the party establishment, who then went to an excruciatingly narrow general election defeat.

Like Reagan, Sanders is widely judged too old to be elected president; he is older than the Gipper, but just as Reagan's age in 1980, 69, roughly matched American life expectancy at the time, so does Sanders' age of 77 match life expectancy today.

Like Reagan, Sanders is widely considered too extreme to be nominated, and certainly too extreme to win: Some Demo-



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crats fear that his nomination would give oxygen to a third-party centrist (with Howard Schultz ready for that role) as Reagan's prompted John Anderson to run as a liberal Republican; some Republicans hope that a Sanders-led ticket would help the unpopular incumbent sneak to re-election.

And like Reagan, Sanders comes by his supposed extremism honestly, having been ideologically left-wing for his entire public life, preaching socialism in the midst of the Reagan and Clinton eras just as Reagan made himself a spokesman for the Goldwaterite right in 1964, at its moment of epic political defeat.

Of course the analogy is imperfect — don't come at me with Bernie never governed a major state and Reagan was a New Deal Democrat and had a whole celebrity career before he went into politics, I'm well aware. But it's an interesting echo, at the very least. And the parallels between the arguments used to dismiss Sanders and the Reagan-can't-win assumptions of late-1970s pundits have kept me moderately bullish on the Vermont socialist's 2020 chances.

With Sanders officially in the race, the reasons for bullishness have grown. Whether he is technically the front-runner or not depends on how you assess the impressive poll numbers of the undeclared Joe Biden: Are those a real signifier that

the Democratic Party's moderate wing is ready to have the former vice president as its champion, or just an artifact of name recognition that will collapse once Biden starts having to answer for his record?

But every normal metric makes Sanders a front-runner, and a stronger-looking candidate than all his declared rivals: His fundraising is impressive, his crowds are big, and his early poll numbers give him both the expected 20-25 percent floor and room to grow. (In the weekend's poll of Iowa, he would claim almost a third of Biden's supporters if the ex-vice president decided not to run.) And he's facing a field sufficiently large that the advantages of having a core of unshakable supporters are likely to be magnified.

Meanwhile his campaign so far is suggestive of the ways — again, like Reagan — that a long history of ideological extremism can actually be helpful to a presidential candidate. Precisely because Sanders is a known quantity, because nobody doubts his commitment to left-wing policies, there may be less pressure on his campaign to embrace every idea floated by reporters or touted by activists. (It's probably a good sign, for instance, that he was just attacked from the left by Julián Castro for insufficient zeal on reparations.)

Nor does he need to adopt the strident

tone of younger would-be revolutionaries or the politicians pandering to them to prove his socialist bona fides. As conservative writer Ben Domenech noted recently, “the truth is that Sanders, despite his socialist label, seems to have a less harsh vision of politics than many others within the party.” Because his record is what it is, he won't always have to be the most zealous candidate on stage — and like Reagan, he might even be able to promise certain kinds of moderation while keeping his base secure in his fundamentally revolutionary intentions.

Of course this last possibility is just a hypothetical, and Sanders' ruffled-professor style of socialism (and all those Soviet-friendly video clips lurking on YouTube) might ultimately inspire more backlash than Kamala Harris running hard to the left or Elizabeth Warren filling in all the policy details that Sanders leaves a little hazy. To argue that Sanders has qualities in common with Reagan is not to argue that he's necessarily the most electable Democrat, or that in nominating him the party wouldn't be taking a substantial risk — as Reagan really was a risky choice in 1980, and his victory by no means foreordained.

But it is to argue that if you want a new president to be transformative — as, obviously, many people on the left desire — there are clear advantages in electing somebody whose entire career is associated with an ideological insurgency, and whose victory would shock the more adaptable sort of politician into understanding themselves as inhabitants of a new political reality, in which no matter what poll numbers show on any given issue, it's taken for granted that the former world has passed away.

You can't get that change just by electing an ideologue as president; his actual presidency also has to be understood (as Reagan's was, rightly, despite the vigorous critiques offered by a certain Vermont mayor at the time) as a success. And there are good reasons, conservative and otherwise, to doubt that a President Bernie would be successful enough to run on his own version of “morning in America” in 2024.

But Bernie-ism is obviously where a large fraction of the Democratic Party wants to go, and with Trump weak and Carter-esque the chances that someone will get elected on a very left-wing platform are reasonably strong. In which the case for Sanders will remain simple and intuitive throughout the primaries to come: If we're going to do this thing, let's do it with the guy who's actually spent years or decades planning for a realigning moment.

Sanders 2020: Accept No Substitutes.

Ross Douthat is a columnist for the New York Times.

OTHER VIEWS

Trump is indeed a target of 'presidential harassment'

President Trump often complains that he is the victim of “presidential harassment” — or, as he sometimes puts it, “PRESIDENTIAL HARASSMENT!”



BYRON YORK COMMENT

“After more than two years of

Presidential Harassment, the only things that have been proven is that Democrats and others broke the law,” Trump tweeted on March 3. “Presidential Harassment by ‘crazed’ Democrats at the highest level in the history of our Country,” he added later. “PRESIDENTIAL HARASSMENT! It should never be allowed to happen again!” he tweeted Feb. 7.

The president's adversaries, of course, dismiss his protests as self-interested whining. But the fact is, Trump has a point. He is the target of an extraordinary combination not just of federal law enforcement and congressional probes, but a long list of less-discussed but potentially consequen-

tial investigations by state and local prosecutors and regulators.

Together, it adds up to a pile-on of unprecedented proportions — by and large the work of blue-state Democrats who stand to gain politically if their investigations succeed in crippling the president.

Recently the New York State Department of Financial Services, the agency that regulates the insurance business, issued what *The New York Times* called an “expansive subpoena” to Aon, the insurance broker for the president's companies. The agency leaped into action after former Trump fixer Michael Cohen told the House that Trump had at some point inflated his assets to an insurance company. Cohen, who has pleaded guilty to lying to Congress and faces serious questions about the truthfulness of his latest testimony, supplied no details. None were needed. “The



subpoena that was served on Aon contains no indication that the company or any of its employees engaged in misconduct,” the *Times* reported. “Nor does it specify any possible wrongdoing that is the focus of the inquiry by state regulators.” The subpoena demanded “a broad range of materials” related to Trump's dealings with Aon going back a decade, the *Times* said.

Also in New York, the State Department of Taxation and Finance announced last October that it is investigating Trump's taxes going back at least 20 years.

Outside of New York, the attorneys general of

Maryland and the District of Columbia are suing Trump, accusing him of violating the emoluments clause of the Constitution.

Then there is the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, based in Manhattan. Prosecutors there are said to be investigating the Trump Organization's finances, the funding of the Trump inauguration, and the funding of the Trump super PAC Rebuilding America Now.

The SDNY investigations hold a large place in the hopes of Trump opponents who fear Trump-Russia special counsel Robert Mueller might deliver an

underwhelming report that does not make the case that Trump colluded with Russia to fix the 2016 election or that he obstructed justice in the aftermath. Indeed, a number of observers believe the SDNY probes pose a more serious threat to Trump than Mueller.

On Capitol Hill, Democrats have long viewed Trump's tax returns — his refusal to release them broke 40 years of precedent — as a sort of Holy Grail of Trump investigations. “We have to have the truth,” Speaker Nancy Pelosi said before the election. Now, the House Ways and Means Committee is reportedly preparing to demand the Treasury Department turn over the returns. The demand is based primarily on suspicion that Trump must have done something wrong with his taxes or he would have long ago released the returns. If Democrats get the returns it's likely they will start even more investigations.

Beyond that, there is the House Judiciary Committee's recent decision to

demand documents from 81 people associated with Trump — a request so wide-ranging that even some Democrats worry that their party's investigators have overreached.

The point is, the scrutiny directed at the president from all sides so far exceeds anything in the past that it could well qualify as presidential harassment.

Democrats would no doubt respond that Trump is singularly corrupt, or that he brought it all on himself. He did not. What has happened is that Democrats, in Congress and in some key blue states, saw investigation as a way to weaken a president they never thought would be elected and want to ensure is not re-elected in 2020. And Trump, with the most extensive business history ever brought to the presidency, presented a lot of avenues of investigation. When he complains about harassment, he has a legitimate case to make.

Byron York is chief political correspondent for *The Washington Examiner*.

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