

A nation of old leaders

Today is 'Super Tuesday 2,' and on the Democrats' wish list of candidates will be two men just a couple years shy of qualifying as octogenarians. On the Republican side is a man who is *only* 73. *Note: Donald J. Trump was the oldest President to take office at the age of 70 plus 220 days. Prior to Trump, Ronald Reagan was our oldest President to take office (69 years and 349 days).*

This is not the first time 'old White guys' as they're called by the disrespectful among us have been contenders for President. William Henry Harrison was 68, James Buchanan 65, G.W.H. Bush was 64 and Dwight Eisenhower was 62 while Gerald Ford was 61. This field of three geezers (Trump, Biden and Sanders) may have age in common, but that's where the physical similarities end. All are self-centered, have a tendency towards exaggeration, a short fuse for criticism and a lot of personal baggage they drag with them wherever they go...but so did many other Presidents before them. Each was either a politician or warrior and others were products of the time when America respected age and even revered it. I know that for some younger readers this may sound like a made-up truth or 'fake news' but it's true. We have respected the elderly at least where I come from in the Midwest.

After a hellacious war and two terms of Eisenhower at the helm, the country was ready for a more vibrant leader. We got John F. Kennedy, a handsome, well-spoken, humorous, 43-year old who was a full twenty years younger than 'Ike.' JFK embodied the hopes and dreams of younger voters. Shot down in his prime we traded in those dreams for a somewhat wooden, crude and aloof Texan - LBJ - who was in his mid-fifties. America's younger generation went underground, especially when Johnson escalated the war in Vietnam. Johnson was forced on us by circumstance, otherwise Kennedy would probably have won a second term. America's youthful aspirations died with him and we had to settle for the older Presidents...again, through Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

Then, in 1992, the winds of youthful hopes blew strong again. Bill Clinton aced out George H.W. Bush who was two decades older than himself. The saxophone-playing lothario-in-chief appealed to the youth vote again, and his charming ways ingratiated him with the young, especially females. His end was perhaps predictable, but no one can ignore his ability to move the youth vote his way. Why? Because in addition to 'feeling our pain' he knew that the future of the American electorate lay with females and minorities...and he had them both in the palm of his hand.

Grandfatherly he wasn't, but we didn't want an oldster no matter one who had been the Supreme Allied Commander during WWII. We wanted somebody to 'identify with'- somebody with a sense of humor and who appeared genuine, even downhome. Clinton was that man for eight years. But his anointed successor, Al Gore, had no charisma nor did he possess a noticeable sense of humor, and despite being about the same age he often seemed like Clinton's older brother. You know, the one who always studied hard, was too serious and never side-stepped his girlfriend for a fling during Spring Break. No, Al was a throwback to his father's generation and for that and other things he was rejected, though narrowly.

George W. Bush, on the other hand was a 'good old boy' in the Clinton mold with the extra advantage of having an influential daddy and a colorful past. He wasn't afraid of cracking a joke and not above laughing at himself, something Gore couldn't pull off. So, at 54, 'W' appealed to both the younger 'looser' crowd of 30s to 40s voters as well as those of his father's generation. The baton was passed. Old white guys were satisfied. They were comfortable with Bush's ideology and his leadership style and they liked that he was athletic and supported the military - and carried the big stick of war. Leadership, especially that of a President, is always tested and always criticized and Bush succumbed to both. It was clear that while he managed to keep his base together, his party was losing its younger voters who were demanding a softer, gentler, more hopeful leader, preferably a younger one that spoke to them and their dreams.

The choice was obvious. Barack Obama 'out Clintoned' even Bill Clinton. His 'Yes, we can' (si se puede) message of youthful exuberance played to the crowd's pent-up desires for a return to the good old days of 'Bubba's' time and away from the seriousness and war that had come to characterize the Bush years.

Our social construct and traditional values were also under attack, and Obama became the champion of the underdog and the 'forgotten minorities' and used America's divisions to his advantage by talking around the issues instead of taking bold stands. His was an administration of soaring rhetoric, the kind that young voters like to hear and often don't follow-up on. He managed to skate by and ended his second term a very popular man. Again, in 2016, the old White voter wasn't going to buy the déjà vu Hillary Clinton was selling. She was not her husband, and no amount of identity politicking could put her over the finish line (though she did capture a sizable amount of the youth vote, to her credit).

In the movie, 'Mozart,' the Emperor tells Mozart that his latest opera is too long, that there are just too many notes. America's seasoned voters are like the emperor. We can only stand just so much filler noise before we say, "enough." And it didn't matter that Donald Trump was older than the median age for Presidents (55 years, 3 months), he looked and acted younger and wasn't afraid of being more of a marketing figure than a presidential candidate. Because of a combination of dislike for Hillary Clinton and a typically American 'roll the dice' attitude AND a rejection of puffed-up rhetoric, Donald Trump was chosen.

America wanted a good manager. If they wanted a sermon, they would go to church. They wanted a President in the White House who knew no fear and would stand up for the country, both foreign and domestically. They got what they (at least 62.5 million of them) wanted. Now there's a bit of buyer's remorse from crossover voters surfacing, coupled with a lot of fear about a certain virus. It's anybody's guess who will come out on top on November 4th and which voting group will put him there. One thing is for certain, however, we will not opt for a younger model President this time around.

Our choices will either be a proven candidate that has re-made our economy, a 'Democratic Socialist' who would undo it all or a cognitively-challenged figurehead who doesn't know where he is half the time.

Stephan Helgesen is a retired career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in 30 countries for 25 years during the Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush Administrations. He is the author of ten books, four of which are on American politics and has written over 1,000 articles on politics, economics and social trends. He can be reached at: stephan@stephanhelgesen.com