

The Bench at Pothole Boulevard

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The TAFFY (Take Away Facts and Figures for You)

- *The year is 2016, (yes, 2016) one warm November day after the Presidential election.*
- *The President-elect, a woman, trounced the incumbent who had beaten the incumbent in 2012.*
- *The Millennials and the minorities were the decisive factors.*
- *Things were about to change- for the better.*
- *In 2014, 97% of income growth went to the top 1%.*
- *When a union president called for a “National No Buy by Gal or Guy” day, it galvanized the nation.*
- *No Buy day was stunning- hardly anybody bought anything. Nearly all large businesses were jolted.*
- *Executives raced to Washington and complained to Congress and the President.*
- *Decades of dollars directed to shape laws, to prevent laws, to shape lawmakers thinking has been dealt a severe blow.*
- *The election brings about the end of influence by old, white men.*

As usual, he was there on the park bench that faced across the boulevard to the group of skyscrapers. It's been years now since that spring day when I was rushing back to the office, slammed into his left arm and sent his coffee and cup flying off in many directions including the one that met up with his shirt and camel's hair sport coat. He was nicer about it than I deserved.

Since then, we have developed a series of discussions- every few days when he and his wife are here from spring to fall. It is roughly the noon hour and always at this park bench to discuss the day's issues. Always well dressed, his shirt, tie and blazer are perfectly matched and high end quality. He must be well into his '70s by now with a few more wrinkles but still looking OK. He frequently looks across the street at one of the skyscrapers with either nostalgia or dismay. Based on things he has inferred over the years, he was a high ranking executive for one of those companies.

In prior years, they would be in Florida by now, but it has been so unusually warm here and hot down there that the trip was delayed. As usual, he was seated on the bench reading the Times. He shook his head at the unusually large type above the fold. When he leaned back and looked up a couple of pieces of old paint snapped off the top of the bench and fluttered down to a rust spot on the seat. I paused to think about the neglect of the entire park.

“It is absolutely stunning!” Disbelief etched on his face. “It has to be the biggest upset in the history of Presidential elections!”

Early November, 2016. The election was held yesterday and voters were stunned by the results. Even though the polls had shown the Independent far ahead, the country seemed to be incapable of absorbing what it had done.

“A second straight defeat for an incumbent and this one was more unexpected, more unbelievable than the one four years ago.” He stopped, startled by the screech of metal on asphalt as a car hit one of the deep potholes in the street, swerved left into the path of a taxi to be rewarded by a blaring horn.

“In my column tomorrow, I’m going to say a lot about the slogan she used and how it hit the other candidates so hard,” I said when the noise stopped. “It is really remarkable that a slogan could galvanize so many people’s outrage.”

“Yes, quite an astute insight. I look forward to reading it.” He sipped his coffee. “The continuing intransigence, contempt, ‘my way or the highway’ eventually played a big part. So much rigidity- the country be damned.”

He seemed, momentarily, to run out of steam. “DTO; DTN also worked rather well for her with some voters despite how corny it was,” I said, bringing us back to the election.

“Delete the Old; Download the New! Simple jargon that worked for the Millennials and the Echo Boomers.” He paused. “This was the Millennials’ election, for sure. They finally understood that the big corporations, wealthy Boomers, Wall Street, the Super PACs and the rest of the 1% were really going to dump the deficit and entitlements on them. And, that meant they had nothing good to look forward to. Also, the Congress either had no intention of imposing real sacrifice or didn’t think they could get re-elected if they did. Now, there’s irony. All but a few weren’t re-elected anyway.”

He read for a moment. “The Times confirms it was the Millennials that dictated the results. A whopping 60% more voted than in the 2012 election when they had lost confidence in government.

He nodded and said, "True to their word, the Republicans spent the last four years cutting taxes for the wealthy, cutting spending, attacking healthcare, unions, immigrants and the EPA. Unemployment hasn't changed, the rich are richer and the middle class has all but disappeared." He looked at the skyscrapers as another car hit the pothole and its metal frame screeched.

"The keys that jumpstarted her rise in the polls; one was the Times' investigative report that the Republicans were deliberately keeping unemployment high to further drain Social Security and Medicare so they could privatize them and that this was yet another step in the "starve the beast" campaign from Reagan to George W. Bush to the incumbent. And then, that book- 21st Century Feudalism- A Return to the Right Social Order- a stunning, "cold water in the face" dialectic. The book so infuriated people that scores decided to run for office under her banner."

He shook his head slowly from side-to-side. "I remember so clearly a few months before the 2012 election reading the results of a study on the year 2010- 93% of the income growth that year went to the top 1%. That, of course, was seven years ago. And, just four months ago, your paper carried the results for 2014. Incredibly, 97% of the income growth went to the top 1%! 97%! That's feudalism!" He was angrier than I had ever seen him.

As he fumed, I added, "Normally, those studies are news in a couple of cycles so the talking heads can rant. Then, there is a national shrug of the shoulders and it's back to flipping burgers. But, when the Majority Leader of the Senate said, in effect, that it is the way it should be, the country exploded. That was a bridge too far."

He nodded, sipped a little coffee.

"When the President of that union, what little is left of it, held that press conference, it became a watershed moment," I went on. "When he said, 'Since we did not get any of the income, we obviously don't have any money to buy stuff', he galvanized the 99% in an instant. I was stunned at how quickly 'National No Buy by Gal or Guy' Day made such an impact."

"Absolutely incredible!" He sat forward on the rusted paint bench. "Just think, millions turned off their computers and cell phones. Amazon, ebay and countless others had virtually no domestic online sales! Nobody went to the big box stores, big oil company gas stations might just as well have turned off the pumps and super markets across the country were deserted. What I find unbelievable is that over 3 million people canceled doctor's appointments. One out of three scheduled to fly canceled- willing to eat the fees and package shipments dropped to levels not seen in decades. Restaurant business was off by

67%. Banks had almost no business. The electronic TV ratings results were that hardly anyone watched commercial networks. And, there was a lot more, as you know.”

“Yes, I see it clearly,” I responded. “The most costly, in economic, terms, civil protest day in our history. And, the article about lights burning brightly into the wee, small hours in executive suites across the country helped to confirm the impact. The day sent a chilling message to the Fortune 500. A sprinkling of night deposits, little revenue in the sweeps and a monumental drop in credit card charges. Business processes collided with each other causing snafu upon snafu. An unholy mess.”

Again, he looked across “Pothole Boulevard” at the skyscrapers. “I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry when the stampede of executives invaded Washington to complain bitterly to Congress and the President and implore them to fix the problem. Talk about being two-faced! Business created much of economic loss for employees and customers. Suddenly, now, they love and care about them? Corporate Social Responsibility- on permanent lip service only for years- is suddenly an executive suite concern?” He shook his head.

In an instant, he shut down that subject and turned to me with an excitement in his voice. “She came out of no-where, no-where! Suddenly, she was the center of attention, a bigger-than-life presence! A true Independent. Pulled in an amazing number of voters from both parties.” This time, I shook my head and he continued. “Building on her compelling slogan, she laid out her Agenda like a General lays out a battle plan. This is what we will do and this is what it will mean for the American people. Amazing!”

The President-elect was tall, almost at eye level with the President and the Democratic challenger. Armed with an advanced degree, she began working in R&D for a Fortune 100 company over two decades ago. Her abilities were apparent and she rose to a corporate director level position while finding time to marry and have three children. Late in 2015, she was appointed to a Congressional Blue Ribbon Committee tasked to identify ways to get the economy moving. Congress was finally getting heat from the public about the stagnant economy. It created the Committee to lateral the bad press to it. That way, the inside “reasoning” went, the Committee would recommend the same old, tired initiatives and get the public’s wrath.

Typically, Congress hadn’t fully vetted a couple of their appointments. One was a retired, black NFL All-Star linebacker, another, a rehabbed 1990s rock star. It was decided that a minority female in business would quiet much of the minority base. Each was a payback

and assumed would just fill a chair. A classic case of “beware of the law of unforeseen consequences”. The linebacker had an uncanny analytical ability, the rock star could articulate recommendations in clear, down-home sentences and the President-elect was a compelling leader. Aligned and driven, they put the Committee on page one of most newspapers and as the lead story day-after-day on evening network news programs.

As a result, she became known across the country as a potential “change agent”. On a Tuesday night, she spoke to the National Association of Manufacturers. On Wednesday night, she spoke to the AFSCME. Grasp of the issues, insights, a ‘no BS’ approach to problem-solving and a warm, self-deprecating sense-of-humor. The Times editorialized, “She is the one”.

Her campaign had burst out of the Committee work. It had none of the formalities and trappings of the established parties. The linebacker and the rock star began organizing what loosely resembled a campaign organization. A retired executive joined them, set up offices that became a Headquarters. Unemployed volunteers emerged in most metropolitan areas. A cadre of attorneys took to the Courthouses to battle a myriad of legal hurdles pro bono.

It was hardly a Convention, but hundreds of supporters got together at a southern college on summer recess. They met, planned, exchanged strategies and ideas. She gave an impressive speech, covering the debilitating last four years, her immediate plans and her vision. Then, she announced what would become the clarion call of her campaign;

“You cannot solve a problem with the same thinking that created it!”

“YOU CANNOT SOLVE A PROBLEM WITH THE SAME THINKING THAT CREATED IT!” He repeated the slogan heard over and over in the past several months. ‘Einstein was right, as always. It was like turning on a light. People all over the country, especially the Millennials, suddenly understood that the Parties that had run things for so long had no intention of seriously confronting and solving the problems that have had us on the brink of collapse.”

“Yes,” I said. “The introduction of Einstein’s dictate was, without a doubt, the ‘Ahah!’ event of the campaign! You could feel the attitudes change.”

“It was a shrewd move to lay out that Comprehensive Action Agenda soon after the Einstein intro. Very shrewd. Caught the President completely off guard.” A wry smile followed.

“This morning’s broadcasts said she had a clear majority in the House and good enough numbers in the Senate to get her key legislation passed,” I said gazing across “Pothole Boulevard”.

He was looking intently at The Times. “So, that probably means her Agenda begins moving forward next January 20. Judging by her approach to problem-solving, Glass-Steagall “21”-for the 21st century -as it has been dubbed in the media will be first in line...and she has the votes.” His voice changed to awe.

“Divesting commercial banking from investment banking in a global mega-bank era will be an incredibly complex task,” I said slowly. “I thought the Dow would fall off a cliff this morning, but it hasn’t.”

“Well,” anger in his voice, “they brought it on themselves...the arrogance, the callous disregard, ‘greed is good’...’reap what ye sew’.

“Here is a profound irony,” he continued, “According to the Times, in key districts, the same voters who swung the 2012 election to the incumbent took it away yesterday.

Following his train of thought, I added, “big money, very big money. That 2012 campaign was driven by obscene amounts for the challenger and the President. And, remember that the Democrats in the House and Senate jumped ship because the President ignored them. As a result, he lost states he had won in 2008.”

He eagerly added more nails to this President’s political coffin. “The immigration travesty really frightened large numbers of people, my wife and I included. Our son-in-law is Hispanic. Oh, he’s an American citizen and a distinguished academic but that Congress was becoming more radical- like a snowball down a mountain- with each passing day.”

He paused. I added, “The President should have shut that down at least 18 months ago, but, absolutely, when the House appropriated millions to begin mass deportations.” I angrily continued, “Either he was powerless or was indirectly sanctioning it by doing nothing. The specter of police, ICE, FBI and the Army rounding up people sent a chill across the country. People may not have approved of amnesty or granting citizenship, but the stark reality of

cuffing women and children and loading them on buses like a third world dictatorship was just too much.”

He almost interrupted me. “A neighbor of ours in Florida has a sister who lives in Alabama. She found out the state had had a secret list of people to be deported long before the House earmarked the funds. And, some were children born in this country. The House was getting ready...,” his voice began to tremble, “that is not who we are. That is not America!”

“That is over as of last night around 10:30. The control by wealthy, old white males hit the wall when she crashed through 270 Electoral votes to trounce the incumbent. It is a new day.” My tone was reassuring.

That served as a bridge to a more objective subject.

“Her Agenda is aggressive and extensive.” He spoke slowly, “One of the first, as she said repeatedly, will be the Social Security Restoration Act. It was clear when Congress passed privatization that it was special interest legislation payback that couldn’t work. If the President had had any integrity, he would have vetoed it. But, he was so captive to the Street, he just signed.”

He looked across “Pothole Boulevard”. “It won’t be easy to put the toothpaste back in the tube. I haven’t found a plan...but, she said it is going to be done.”

He read on. “Here’s a column about the key election-changing events. This one jumps out- it was the debate when the candidates could choose the subjects to be debated and the moderators created the questions. I watched that one.”

He began reading the summary. “In response to the question on values, the President responded that despite the legal wrangling, the pitched battles in Congress, in the media and the curious silence of the Supreme Court, he was going to keep pushing to have Roe v. Wade overturned. She turned to him- a camera caught her straight on with fire in her eyes and she said, ‘many years ago, my cousin was attacked by an older man and had to have an abortion. It was awful, a deplorable situation, but it is none of your God Damn business and it isn’t Congress’s and it isn’t the Supreme Court’s. Understand?’”

He continued reading. “Then in a move that likely wins an Emmy for the Director, there was a camera switch to the President standing there with that classic ‘deer in the headlights’

look. The silence was deafening. If there was ever any doubt that she had steel in her backbone, it was gone in those brief seconds.” He looked up and nodded.

“That pretty well carried the debate, for sure,” I said, and changed the subject, “I think her business management approach to problem solving will serve her well. First, there will be voices from all sides, solutions from all sides, vigorous debate, and hammering out the best results. She will really fix responsibility here to one person. Also, the problem special interest influence should be significantly reduced. Lobbyists cannot participate.”

He picked up on my point, “She clearly favors teamwork, a Delphi approach. So, since the argument about what is a fair tax on the wealthy to pay is still smoldering, her plan to find the answer is balanced and appropriate.” He paused. “I hope it works so the country can finally get to the task of digging itself out of debt.”

“Well,” I added, “there have been select committees, super committees, task forces, and so on. Some worked, most did not. At least, this one will have a different composition. It will be the Secretary, a multi-millionaire sub-chair, a tax expert, a CBO Director, a Fortune 100 executive, an IRS VP, a small business leader, a union head, a Think Tank rep, members of the House and Senate, and others to be named. She said they have eight weeks to produce a solution- status report to her in week five.”

“Yes, yes, quite.” Repeating ‘yes’ like that was one of his idiosyncrasies through the years of our discussions.

“You know,” he continued, “I’m impressed with her back-to-basics approach to many of our problems.” He looked across the “boulevard” again, then, turned to me. “Take the energy problem. Our dependence on foreign oil really hasn’t changed much recently and it has been nearly 50 years. We’re drilling all over the country and off shore but a barrel of oil is at an all-time high as are prices at the pump. The natural gas tragedy three years ago is far from forgotten, hybrids and all-electrics are still too expensive and bio fuels have yet to be the ‘go to’ alternative. So, we’ll be on oil for no less than another decade.”

He continued. “So, she was both shrewd and practical in her national conservation initiative to reduce consumption in every way possible. It calls for some sacrifice. It- conservation- was barely thought about for years. Now, it is front and center with all those incentives, rewards and a national results reporting system. She is right, I think, that once the country

has a set of conservation-driven baselines in various energy usage areas, it will be possible to focus on the weak spots and improve them.”

I nodded. “Rather like applying logistics to energy. And, she’ll have to use all of her management and political skills to get climate change out of its four year grave. I hope her emphasis on sustainability and energy performance contracting makes a big impact.”

For some reason, I checked the time on my phone. I was late. But, it was a day of major change, so, that was worth some extra time.

“This has been enjoyable, but, I have another column to start. I’ll leave you to the Times and the remarkable changes our President-elect has made. See you in a couple of days.”

“Yes, yes, quite,” he responded. “We won’t be leaving for another week or so. This is exciting.”

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