

November 8, 2020

Hi Ted,

I don't have much to add to all the analysis that is coming out of the US on the election. The wall-to-wall coverage I heard today on the car radio ranged from the excited to the ecstatic—and that was just from the journalists!

Several media organisations trotted me out again to talk about concession and victory speeches, so my quadrennial academic 'relevance' survives! A fact checker from the *Atlantic* magazine called me a couple of times to discuss a forthcoming article by Barton Gellman that quoted and used my work ([The Election That Could Break America](#)). That was one of a great many 'what if Trump doesn't concede?' pieces that have appeared for the past several months, and remains even today an effort to crank up the fear and suspense. Only two days ago a writer for the L.A. Times emailed me to try to set up a phone call, but I never heard from him again.

More interesting (for me) was a phone call a couple of weeks ago from Joe Richman, a program producer at NPR, who had read some of my publications on concession speeches and wanted to interview me for a podcast on concession speeches. I had a couple of phone conversations with him and we set up an interview date. The taping went for over two hours. From that conversation, he developed the podcast based on brief edited bits of the interview. He glued them together with historic sound and video files, and references to a couple of other academics, mainly about the 1896 election that William Jennings Bryan lost. Much of Richman's 'glue' draws on the interview, publications, and a couple of emails I answered in response to his questions. It was quite interesting to have a glimpse into what is a very complex process of weaving together a piece for radio. It is certainly more interesting and broader in scope than my publications on the subject.

You can probably listen/watch the podcast, 'How to Lose an Election: A History,' on the Radio Diaries website [here](#).

I suppose it's not too late to stick my neck out with a little 'poli-sci analysis.' In fact, Richman did ask me (not for use in the podcast) the question that was on many peoples' minds, *What did I think Trump would do if he lost?* My answer then remains my best guess now. What I told Richman was that defeat tends to concentrate the mind, even with respect to (otherwise) successful politicians. My view has been that, even with a Trump, a failed candidate, even in denial, will stew in his juices for a while, but eventually get the message, which he will have been hearing from the people around him (especially the Trump family, and his close advisors and one or two friends), and on Twitter, television and everywhere else. The message is that he's had his turn, he had a great run (no, for Trump, a GREAT run...!), and he needs to get over it and not make a (Great) fool of himself. Many 'influencers', millions of them, will already be assuring him that his blustering denial is achieving precisely that, a diminishing asset in free fall.

I could easily hear, in several phrases in Biden's victory address today, Biden's gentle nudge that he, Trump, should do himself a favour and walk, allowing a few politicians and commentators to say some nice things about him as they wave goodbye to him. He'll be hearing a lot of that. The press in particular, but also the winning candidate, always use the term 'gracious' *about* the loser's concession speech, even when it isn't. If Trump *doesn't* give one, there will still be some commentators who conjure one anyway, portraying his

departure as somehow a peculiarly graceful exit, one that only he was capable of doing, and appreciated by those for whom it was crafted. Those with such a cunning imagination will summon Trump's concession speech out thin air and incandescent silence.

It wouldn't surprise me if Trump goes ahead with his bluster about law suits and court injunctions, but I think not for long. Trump knows from experience when to declare bankruptcy and disappear.

As I said to Joe Richman, there are thousands of people in Washington that organise Inaugural ceremonies, parades, dinners, moving vans, transfers for documents, furniture, storage etc. These people will, as they do every four years, start doing these things, and Trump will literally see this happening around him. The more he tries (if he tries) to stop them, the more he will simply be humiliating himself.

There may be a couple of close vote recounts, and this will take a week or so, but I think it's worth remembering that Trump himself doesn't believe the stuff he's said about fraudulent vote counting, so I think he'll be inclined to look for the exit. It's hard to imagine that he will go quietly, much less gracefully, but it's likely that he'll create a fantasy story that somehow casts him as the star attraction, preparing for his next Great Act that is Much More Important than sticking around in Washington. And much more profitable. There's a whole heroic narrative beckoning out there about his last two weeks of frenzied campaigning (the Greatest in US History!), which some Democrats will be happy to acknowledge. And news commentators will build a begrudging legend about his great final attempt to turn the tide.

Will Trump ever give a concession speech? Obviously, I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised if he refused; it would be effectively unique, which I think would appeal to his ego; and it would be a chance to poke a stick in the eye of venerable presidential traditions as well as the Washington Swamp. That would go down well with his unhappy followers.

In Trump's mind, losing is for losers, so it's a bitter pill. Going by his track record, I'd expect him to build an account about how he, himself, didn't really lose. He was white-anted by his own advisors, the GOP, or some imagined Dark Force. In other words, he didn't lose; all sorts of people failed him.

It's hard to imagine Trump taking it on the chin. It's hard to imagine him making an exit in a way which would honour his colleagues, the branches of government, the Republic. It's even hard to imagine him finding his way to a form of words that would honour himself. But there are speechwriters around, even in the White House, who could do it.

Anyway, that's the view from the other side of the planet.

Paul

PS

Early in the Presidential campaign I did predict this image. But to be honest I thought it would be the page one headline in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*!

