

Donald Trump, the new George Wallace?

“Something bad is happening,” Donald J. Trump said to New Hampshire voters, ominously referring to Muslims and mosques, “Something really dangerous is going on.” After caucuses in Iowa and primaries in New Hampshire it’s still too soon to answer the question: “Will Trump get the votes to snatch the Republican nomination?” However, we can clearly recognize the role he has chosen for himself: he is the candidate of fear. Not only the fear, but also the resentment and anger of working-class white Americans whose economic security vanished decades ago and whose cherished values (God, Country and Family) supposedly are mocked by liberal elites.

The high-priest of these very liberal elites, *The New York Times*, wrote that “The dark power of words has become the defining feature of Mr. Trump’s bid for the White House to a degree rarely seen in modern politics,” but this is clearly a historical mistake. If we include in modern politics the years after 1945, we can easily find dozens of local and national candidates to public office who used “The dark power of words” to great success. One has only to think of senator Joe McCarthy and to his infamous speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, 36 years ago to the day. McCarthy waved in front of his audience a piece of paper and said: “I have here in my hand a list of 205 [State Department employees] that were known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping the policy of the State Department.” McCarthy said later, at various times, that there were 57, or 81, or 10 communists in the Department of State but never produced any solid evidence that there was even one of them in the State Department.

McCarthy finished his career in disgrace a few years later, but this was not the case of Richard Nixon, who started his meteorical political rise in the California campaign for the U.S. Senate, in 1950. In that election, Nixon stated that the Democratic candidate Helen Douglas was “pink right down to her underwear,” where “pink” stood for “red,” aka “communist.” More substantially, he stated in a radio address that Douglas was “a member of a small clique which joins the notorious communist party-liner Vito Marcantonio of New York, in voting time after time against measures that are for the security of this country.” Just two years later, Nixon was elected vice-president on the Republican ticket, and in 1968 it was his “Tricky Dick” style that would propel him to the White House and cause his fall six years later.

After Watergate, Nixon has been perceived as the quintessential cynical politician, but the man who defeated him in the presidential election of 1960 was no altar boy, either. John F. Kennedy spoke about a nonexistent imbalance between American and Russian nuclear forces, quoting Gen. Maxwell Taylor: “We are now threatened with a missile gap that leaves us in a position of potentially grave danger.” In fact, the situation was precisely the opposite, with a large advantage of the USA both in the quantity and quality of nuclear weapons. The “missile gap” dominated the last phase of the campaign and was a factor in Kennedy’s razor-thin victory (0,17% of the popular vote).

All these politicians were able to tap into deep fears present in the American psyche, but if there ever was one candidate who mastered the power of words to a rarely matched level the name that comes to mind is George Wallace.

According to his biographer Dan Carter, it was Wallace who “offered to those frightened and insecure millions [white Americans] a chance to strike back –if only rhetorically- at the enemy.” And Wallace’s enemies were the same that Trump mentions today: Washington, the media, minorities (“protesters” then, immigrants now). Both Trump and Wallace make a priority of Law and Order issues, both of them boast a hyper-machismo that to many appears grotesque, but to million of small-town voters is entertaining, and politically refreshing.

Wallace loved to say that “If any demonstrator ever lays down in front of my car, it'll be the last car he'll ever lay down in front of.” Trump made his supporters cheer: “We cannot afford to be so nice folks (...) Actually, if someone hits me, I'm going to hit them so hard... oh, you have no idea, we are going to hit them back ten times harder than they have, which is what we should be doing with ISIS and everybody else”. Actually, this Trump's statement looks like a paraphrase of Wallace's “Hell, we got too much dignity in government now, what we need is some *meanness*.”

In a sense, these two candidates couldn't be more different: a billionaire the first, a politician of humble origins the second. A New York businessman who collects wives the first, a Southern segregationist married only once the second. And yet, Wallace and Trump clearly understood better than their competitors two key factors of modern American politics: first, there is a large demand for unconventional politicians, not afraid of “outrageous” statements, for the candidate as showman; second, there is a very large constituency among those white workers who have been hit hard by unemployment, wage stagnation, social, economic and cultural uncertainty.

Wallace in 1968-1972, and Trump today, have shown an uncanny ability to connect with this constituency. Despite their inconsistency, and inability to produce any coherent or reasonable political program, their rhetoric strikes a chord with the American people: Donald Trump will not become President but he is only the last one of a long list of demagogues as American as apple pie.