

Unforgettable

Dare we say hope and change?

Words by Dave Skinner. Illustration by John Bardwell.

The best part of being a pessimist is surprises are usually pleasant. And the election of Donald Trump, for many unhappy, forgotten Americans, was a happy surprise.

I'll confess to some real schadenfreude (that's German for "pleasure derived by someone from another person's misfortune") occasioned by the appearance of a shaken John Podesta in place of Hillary Clinton in the wee hours, tasked with telling supporters to go home. Podesta's stand-in itself sent a heck of a signal about the bullet America, and especially the West, had just dodged, by maybe 100,000 total votes in three states.

In 2015, environmentalist newspaper *High Country News* profiled Podesta as the "legacy maker," quoting Bruce Babbitt's statement that "the hidden hand of John Podesta is involved in every environmental advancement accomplished" by the Clinton and Obama presidencies.

Among the supposedly Soviet-backed WikiLeaks dumps revealed just days before the election was a string of national-monument emails between Mike Matz of Pew Trusts (see *RANGE*, Winter 2017) and Mr. Podesta. Matz suggested that when Interior Secretary Sally Jewell met with Utah congressmen Rob Bishop and Jason Chaffetz, it was "imperative that she send the message that a national monument [Bears Ears] is a very distinct possibility" which Jewell "unfortunately" hadn't sufficiently emphasized. Considering that preelection "expert" speculation mentioned Podesta as the Energy nominee should Hillary Clinton become the leader of the free world...well, phew! That was close.

So, how did Donald Trump's victory come to be? And, more importantly, is he the guy who can make America—more specifically the West—great again?

The Experts, Ain't

By all accounts, media, pollsters, the operatives, party elites—all the experts—blew the 2016 election. They're still blowing it. For example, the mindless early-1990's "angry white male" narrative has been amped up for 2016 as "white male racists."

Some took passing note of what has become a stunning breakout, geographically

and economically. According to the liberal Brookings Institution, Mrs. Clinton won the richest, most-educated counties, less than 500 counties with 64 percent of America's GDP, against Trump's more than 2,600 counties with a puny 36 percent of GDP. That result has been interpreted by Beltway mavens to mean that better parts of America, with more income and education, voted Clinton.

But there was another, important dynamic. Brookings also determined that counties with a higher share of "manufacturing employment" went for Trump. New York congressman Chris Collins (R-Buffalo, heart of the Rust Belt), not coincidentally the first member of Congress to endorse Trump, told Fox News that Trump did well with voters who "make stuff and do things."

Obviously, Trump voters do the things and make the stuff Clinton voters consume, something that with few exceptions the progressive Establishment hasn't comprehended. There are some signals of glimmering awareness, such as from *Huffington Post* "ranterette" Krystal Ball (yep, that's her name). Ball describes an "incredibly revealing moment [at the Democratic National Convention]. In an effort to rev up the crowd one of the speakers called out, 'Who in this room works with their hands?' Silence."

After the election, Associated Press writer Julie Pace and others noted what the *Washington Examiner* called Bill Clinton's "lonely, one-man war he launched earlier in the election to appeal to working-class and white rural voters, whom senior Clinton staffers reportedly told him were not worth the time or effort"—or as Pace said on Fox News, "laughed at and ridiculed."

That's light-years away from President Bill Clinton campaign guru James Carville's famed "It's the Economy, Stupid" approach in 1992, which of course rang bitterly false almost immediately in rural America, espe-



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cially the public-lands West, starting with the spotted owl in Oregon, Rangeland Reform, and finishing with the Roadless Initiative and the post-Grand Staircase orgy of national-monument designations. While Mr. Clinton perhaps hoped his down-home Arkansas “rural outreach” would work one more time, Arkansas voters (who know the Clintons better than anyone else) went Trump 60, Clinton 34.

And it wasn't just Arkansas. One loyal member of the *RANGE* spy network is trucker Brian Hawthorne, a multiple-use westerner to the core. He was once paid to wear a suit and talk nice to politicians about public-lands policy, but trucking pays better and is less stressful. So, around the time of the presidential conventions, Brian was staging to unload his rig in metropolitan New Jersey after driving through Pennsylvania. “Man, Dave, there are Trump signs everywhere. The polls have got to be wrong!”

Yep, they were.

What About Trump & the West?

While Trump carried forgotten America by huge margins, westerners must understand that 2016 hinged on the Rust Belt Midwest states of Ohio, West Virginia, Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania—critically, in the last three by a total margin of less than 100,000 votes. These five states are, like the West, “make-and-do” America, but utterly unlike the West in many important ways.

It goes without saying that the Cabinet appointments Mr. Trump makes will be critical to the nation at large, with the “western” positions (Interior, Agriculture, and to a slightly lesser degree, Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency) crucial for western interests. But it is also important to remember that the G.W. Bush administration made lousy Cabinet and executive appointments: Dirk Kempthorne and Gale Norton (Interior); Lynn Scarlett (Interior, who today directs public policy for The Nature Conservancy); and Mark Rey (Agriculture, who later lobbied for Wildlaw and the Wilderness Society). The result? Almost all Bill Clinton's legacy was left untouched.

Most of the Cabinet positions relevant to rural America had a nominee by press time, with the exception of Agriculture. Secretaries of Agriculture are normally Beltway “outsiders” from a “farm state” background,

hopefully someone with subject-matter expertise and preferably a governor with bureaucratic experience and skills.

For example, South Dakota rancher/U.S. Rep. Kristi Noem (R), was vetted but then declined. Another candidate was U.S. Sen. Heidi Heitkamp (D-North Dakota), also

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considered for Interior and Energy. However, apparent U.S. Senate “balance of power” considerations (North Dakota Republicans would pick her replacement) got in the way. Further, Heitkamp's League of Conservation Voters lifetime score is 48 of 100. She supported LCV on climate change, listing prairie chickens, Land & Water Conservation Fund extension, and endangered species critical habitat (i.e., sage grouse and lynx).

The latest prospect? Sonny Perdue, former Georgia governor (R), cousin of U.S. Sen. David Perdue (R-Georgia), neither of whom raises Perdue chickens. But in meeting with Trump, Perdue saw fit to wear a tie with a tractor print.

For secretary of Energy, former Texas governor Rick Perry (R) was nominated in mid-December. He is, of course, infamous for his debate “brain freeze” where he forgot that the Department of Energy was one of three Cabinet-level federal agencies he'd like to eliminate. Compared to John Podesta?

Night and day.

Also important to the West and forgotten America is Trump's choice to head the Environmental Protection Agency: E. Scott Pruitt, currently attorney general of the state of Oklahoma. Pruitt, generally a strong advocate of federalism, is best known nationally for joining 28 state attorneys general suing to stop implementation of the Obama Clean Power Plan. The reaction of greens and the media was no surprise. The *New York Times* headlined Pruitt as a “climate change denialist,” not in an editorial, but in a news article which duly noted that greens “reacted with alarm” to his nomination.

However, the “big” pick for the forgotten West is secretary of Interior. Interior, of course, controls the Park Service, the Nation-

al Wildlife Refuge system, the Bureau of Land Management, America's subsurface mineral estate, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (which in turn enforces the Endangered Species Act).

In mid-December, three names topped the news, all western U.S. Representatives: Cathy McMorris Rogers (R-Washington); Raul Labrador (R-Idaho); and Ryan Zinke (R-Montana). The winner? Ryan Zinke.

Could Zinke be a better secretary of Interior for the West than outgoing Sally Jewell? On many topics, such as minerals leasing, climate, litigation and others, likely yes. The League of Conservation Voters scores Zinke 3 of 100. But those three points might matter.

Zinke is a self-titled “Teddy Roosevelt Republican” and, according to reporter Timothy Cama of *The Hill*, “[he] bucks many of his GOP colleagues in his strong support for the Land & Water Conservation Fund,” and “resigned his position in the committee writing the GOP platform earlier this year due to a provision in the platform advocating for transferring federal land to states.”

In My Father's Ear

In an attempt to explain Trump's pundit-puzzling popularity, trucker Brian Hawthorne drilled down to the core. Voters didn't know all that much about him: “Donald Trump is like a Rorschach inkblot, you know what I mean? People look at him and see what they hope to see.”

Conversely, what might Donald Trump know about the West? Apparently, very little, deferring to his sportsman son, Donald Junior.

Might that matter? His three oldest children (all registered New York Democrats as of the 2016 primary) are widely regarded as very influential with the president-elect. Turned on to hunting by their Czech grandpa during visits to Europe (which is already not the “norm” of typical sportsmen), Trump brothers Donald and Eric have hunted worldwide on expensive guided trips to exotic, pristine locations, including in the West. But such trips serve as escape from their buttoned-down “real life” in New York City, and there is much more to the American West than hunting and fishing.

In early 2016, primarily to get on the good side of the influential National Rifle

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Association membership after past questionable gun-control statements, Trump attended the SHOT Show gun-trade convention in Las Vegas. He gave brief interviews to sporting publications. When asked about transfer of public lands, the candidate told Anthony Licata of *Field & Stream*, “I don’t like the idea because I want to keep the lands great, and you don’t know what the state is going to do.”

However, Donald Trump Jr. gave more-extensive interviews on behalf of his father and in talking with Petersen’s *Hunting*, revealed that he is a member of not only the National Rifle Association, but “Ducks Unlimited, Trout Unlimited, [and] a lifetime member of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers”—that last group being specifically created by green operatives to weaken NRA’s allegiance with hunters, substantially funded by none other than Swiss billionaire eco-funder Hansjorg Wyss.

Finally, to the online *Wide Open Spaces*, Don Junior declared, “I will be the very loud voice about [Interior] issues in my father’s ear.” As for Mr. Zinke’s ear, time will tell.

Clearly, while the new Trump presidency beats an overtly hostile Clinton II White House by miles, westerners nonetheless must watch this new administration closely. The president-elect knows next to nothing about western matters. What he does “know” is apparently being filtered through young Donald, who in turn has had only narrow, even escapist, experiences with the American interior West.

There is a real danger that the incoming Trump White House views the West like voters saw Trump—as an inkblot, a blank slate of what one hopes to see, not as how things actually are. When it comes to the public-lands West, the Trump administration faces a steep learning curve with major knowledge gaps. Those gaps will absolutely be filled by those willing to do the filling.

If westerners don’t want to be forgotten, they will need to assert themselves to America’s new president in a way that is, yep, unforgettable. ■

Dave Skinner won’t be working in the new Trump administration, mainly because he’s forgotten where he buried the skeletons.