

Opinion: Isolationist stances on the campaign trail

By Andrés Martínez

Is America great *now*?

The answer in the presidential campaign is a resounding “Hell no!” And, surprisingly, there seems to be bipartisan consensus on this misguided assessment. (Spoiler alert: America still rocks.)

On the Republican side, the ostensibly self-financed frontrunner is raising money selling “Make America Great Again” caps. For Donald Trump, America’s former greatness was traded away by “loser” politicians hoodwinked by those crafty Mexicans, Chinese, and Japanese, not to mention the terrorists and their politically correct apologists.

None of his fellow Republican competitors push back with Reaganesque optimism—they’re all eager to match Trump’s grim outlook and blame on Barack Obama. Sen. Marco Rubio accuses the president of destroying the military; Sen. Ted Cruz talks of the Constitution as if it were some banned relic from our suppressed past; and doctor Ben Carson compares the U.S. to a patient in critical condition. The Republicans all talk about the nation’s moral fiber and social indices in apocalyptic terms.

On the Democratic side, the country is also going to hell, though in the Sanders-Clinton narrative the culprits are different: Wall Street banks, those heartless 1 percent folk and their enablers in the Republican Senate and the Supreme Court.

For Bernie Sanders, things are so bad we need a revolution. Then there’s Hillary Clinton the most intriguing

doomsayer in the race. If anyone should be the candidate pointing out the sky isn't falling, advocating for continuity for the Obama record, it's his former cabinet member.

Yet Clinton feels so much pressure to match the Trump-Sanders populist anger that she can't come up with a coherent narrative. So she defers to the consensus among her opponents that the rest of the world is a very scary place, posing far more threats than opportunities. Hence her disavowal of the landmark free trade agreement with Asia that she championed when she was in the administration.

Bill Clinton's embrace of free trade, welfare reform, and financial deregulation are so out of favor now with Democratic activists that the former first lady talks vaguely about her husband's success while distancing herself from all his administration's particulars. The last presidential candidate with such a conflicted relationship with Bill Clinton's legacy was Al Gore, who stubbornly refused to run a more positive campaign in 2000, coming across instead like an angry Democrat circa 2016.

How much does the candidates' fear mongering distort our picture of the world? I went through transcripts of the two Republican and the two Democratic debates leading up to the New Hampshire primary, and found that the most frequently mentioned foreign entity was not a formal country, but ISIS with 98 mentions by all candidates. Iran was mentioned 59 times; North Korea, 41; China, 27; Russia, 24; European Union, 15; Mexico, 7. And India, the second most populous country on Earth? Not once.

This is the campaign's world –a scary place dominated by ISIS, Iran, and North Korea, where Mexico and the EU are brought up when discussion turns to dodgy migrants. No candidate is talking optimistically about American leadership and the fact that our interests are aligned with the rise of the global middle class, a transformative trend of our time.

There is a deep irony in all this talk of American decline: The rest of the world now looks enviously upon the United States as a formidable winner. It's absurd for anyone to talk about China eating our lunch, given that country's stock market meltdown, and serious doubts over the communist leadership's economic management. Japan can't seem to emerge from its stagnation; the EU is mired in crisis. Oil-rich nations, including U.S. geopolitical adversaries, are crashing hard.

The rest of the world can only look on with envy at America's unemployment rate of 5 percent after 71 consecutive months of job growth. No country can come close to challenging our military strength. America can set the rules of the world's financial game, thanks to our control of the global reserve currency.

Donald Trump, who is obsessed with polls, should realize his narrative that we're losers doesn't square with financial poll numbers: The value of the U.S. dollar keeps surging as people around the world buy dollars and Treasury bills, and our cost of borrowing keeps falling.

Everyone is betting on America, except the people campaigning to lead her.

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