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## The Gift of Clinton

Ross Douthat

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If the Trump campaign weren't such an all-consuming piece of performance art, the big story of this election would be the sheer shambolic strangeness of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign.

The Democratic candidate is the most disliked nominee of modern times — except, of course, for her opponent. She is widely regarded as untrustworthy and corrupt, and the rare news cycles in which her name dominates the headlines (usually with the letters “F,” “B” and “I” nearby) have only confirmed this impression.

She has claimed a political sour spot, in which her domestic policy positions are too far left to make her a unifying figure, but her sordid establishmentarianism still has left-wing voters pining for Bernie Sanders and considering Jill Stein. Her press-ducking, donor-massaging, risk-averse, joyless slog to November feels less like an old-fashioned front porch campaign than a campaign conducted from a corner mansion's upstairs window, with the plebeians allowed to shout questions from the distant sidewalk and the candidate's retainers ready to pull the sash at any time.

That this is the candidate who stands between Donald Trump and the presidency should be dispiriting to Democratic partisans, disquieting to the fiercest #NeverTrumpers on the right, and depressing to anyone who would prefer not to have to choose between a reckless demagogue and a scandal-ridden dynast.

But there are ways in which Clinton's deeply unappealing candidacy might actually be a good thing for the republic.

The Trump phenomenon, after all, did not come out of nowhere. His caudillo-esque posturing, his contempt for republican norms, his “I alone can fix it!” promises are all populist variations on our political culture's enthusiasm for untrammelled executive power, the bipartisan cult of the presidency, the Caesarism that the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama have done a great deal to advance.

No one should doubt that a President Hillary Clinton would also play Caesar whenever the opportunity presented itself. But she would lack many of the qualities that make imperial presidents particularly dangerous — powerful charisma, a passionate and devoted base, a close relationship with a compliant press, a claim on some sort of sweeping policy mandate.

Instead, precisely because she embodies so many of the establishment's vices and drags so much baggage in her wake, a Clinton administration is more likely to have a demystifying effect on the presidential cult than to amplify it in the style of Bush's "Mission Accomplished" period or Obama's 2008 Great Awakening.

Such demystification, a return to the old familiar Clintonian seediness, might be a better cure for some of the impulses behind Trumpism than the kind of landslide-cum-apotheosis that a more appealing Democratic nominee might have achieved. That's because politics often works in an imitative cycle: Were Trump defeated by someone whose charisma, star wattage and mastery of the celebrity-politics nexus outstripped his, the impulse on the right would be to double down on those qualities next time, to enter an arms race to build a better class of demagogue.

But a more sordidly transactional sort of liberalism, a progressive president whose supporters and scribes are pre-disillusioned rather than panting for the Big Win, might be a tonic for the right — not one that cures all paranoidias (just ask Drudge), but one that discourages the right's search for a Caesar of its own.

What's more, having Trump defeated narrowly rather than crushed totally might also be a better tonic for elites — Republican elites especially, but liberals and centrist technocrats as well.

Yes, there is much in Trump and Trumpism that richly deserves a total wipeout, and much in his Republican Party that deserves to be sent howling into the political wilderness. But a true landslide, a total repudiation, would also encourage unwarranted self-satisfaction and relief among the American republic's ruling class — a sense that the ideas Trump represents, the fears and concerns he has exploited, and the people he has rallied can be safely buried and ignored and consigned once more to the benighted past.

In 2002, when the far-right politician Jean-Marie Le Pen won through to the French presidential runoff, the entire French political class united against him, and sent him down to an extraordinary defeat — 82 percent to 18 percent. But this massive repudiation did not bury his populist nationalism; it only encouraged the country's leadership to think of it as buried, to leave the problems that inspired it to fester unaddressed — and about 15 years later Le Pen's daughter is just a crisis or two away from genuine power.

So it might be with Trumpism, in the event of a true landslide — the problem would be repressed, the political class reassured, and much that needs to change would not.

Thus Hillary Clinton's weakness and unpopularity might be a gift, of sorts, to the American future. Because she can't put Trump away, it's harder to dismiss Trumpism as either a pure joke or a pure evil. Because she can't put him away, we have to take him seriously — and only by taking him seriously can we learn enough to make sure the next Trump isn't far stronger, and far worse.

Unless, of course, she loses.