

The Opinion Pages | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Is There Any Stopping Donald Trump?

Frank Bruni FEB. 21, 2016

Over the last few months and even weeks, the question among many flabbergasted Republican traditionalists and incredulous political analysts was when the forces of gravity would catch up with Donald Trump and send him tumbling to earth.

It was going to happen. *Of course* it was going to happen. You just had to be patient. You just had to be strong.

But in the wake of his victories in New Hampshire and now South Carolina, the question is no longer “when.” It’s “if.” And the answer isn’t clear at all.

Consider this: From 1980 forward, no Republican presidential candidate has won both the New Hampshire and South Carolina primaries and gone on to lose the party’s nomination.

And this: Over that same time period, only one Republican victor in South Carolina failed to become the nominee, and that was Newt Gingrich, in 2012. But Gingrich didn’t have Trump’s durable (and sizable) lead in national polls. He didn’t dominate the race’s narrative and capture an exasperated electorate’s mood the way Trump has.

As it happens, Gingrich was on Fox News on Saturday night to discuss Trump’s latest triumph, and he didn’t say: “South Carolina? It’s a muggy, marshy, inconsequential tease. I bagged it four years ago and all it got me was this gig babbling in the wee hours about election returns.”

No, Gingrich marveled at what he made clear was “a huge night for Donald Trump.”

“Nobody should kid themselves,” he added.

Trump didn’t just win South Carolina, and he didn’t just win it by a margin of 10 points. He won it despite what looked, over recent days, like a concerted effort to lose it. He won it after what appeared to be one of the worst weeks that a candidate could have.

It began at the most recent debate, where he trashed the last Republican president, George W. Bush, and accused him of lying to the American people as he led them into war in Iraq. He sounded like a liberal Democrat. Republican primary voters, especially those in the South, aren’t typically receptive to that.

Over the next days, Trump sounded even *more* like a liberal Democrat, at least as described by Ted Cruz, who went after him relentlessly, armed with Trump’s own past statements in support of abortion rights and Planned Parenthood.

The week got messier from there. Trump picked a fight with the Pope. Trump picked a fight with Apple. It became evident that no personage or brand, no matter how beloved, was safe from his wrath. You had to wonder what or whom he’d go after next. Kittens? Betty Crocker? Betty *White*?

Then Trump spoke up for a key aspect of Obamacare before realizing what he’d done and assuring everyone that he deplored *every* aspect of Obamacare, which paled in comparison with Trumpcare, whatever that might turn out to be.

This prompted extensive commentary on Trump’s inconsistencies and a fresh round of murmuring about an imminent tumble.

But what we incredulous political analysts keep failing to take into account—what I was reminded of when I went to a Trump rally last week and listened hard to his supporters—is that the people voting for him aren't evaluating him through any usual ideological lens. They're not asking what kind of Republican he is. They're not troubling themselves with whether the position he's selling today matches the position he was selling yesterday or even what that old position was.

They want to try something utterly different—utterly *disruptive*, to use the locution du jour—and that leaves them, on the Republican side, with the options of Trump and Ben Carson. Trump has the fire.

One woman told me that she loves the idea of a billionaire who is funding his own candidacy and won't be beholden to contributors and special interests. Wouldn't that be refreshing? Couldn't that be transformative? Why not give it a shot?

She'd also been to a Marco Rubio rally and was impressed: what a nice young man. But she's not in the market for nice and young, not this time around.

Another woman told me that she craves a president who is fearless, *really* fearless, and that of all the candidates in the race, Trump seems the least bowed, the least cowed. She trusts him to fight. All he does is fight. And a fight is what's in order.

A man who served in the Air Force and now works as a trucker told me that over several decades, through several presidents, the Veterans Affairs department has remained dysfunctional and his wages haven't gone up. If he keeps voting the same way, for the same run-of-the-mill politicians, shouldn't he expect more of the same? Trump isn't the same.

Gingrich analyzed his appeal perfectly during that Fox News appearance. "It's a very simple rule," he said. "If you think Washington is so sick you want someone to kick over the kitchen table, then you like Donald Trump and you frankly don't care about the details."

In an exit poll of voters who participated in the Republican primary on Saturday, there was a near even split between those who said that the best preparation for the presidency was political experience and those who put more faith in someone from outside the political establishment. Rubio performed best with the former group, getting 38 percent of their votes. But Trump performed best with the latter group—and got *63 percent* of theirs.

Going forward, Rubio is probably the bigger threat to Trump than Cruz, who won only 26 percent of South Carolina voters who identified themselves as evangelical or born-again Christians despite having campaigned as narrowly and fiercely as possible for their favor. More of them chose Trump, who got 34 percent of the evangelical vote, and plenty of them chose Rubio, who got 21 percent.

That potentially spells trouble for Cruz in the Southern states on Super Tuesday that he'd hoped to dominate. Rubio, meanwhile, is better positioned than Cruz to pick up former supporters of Jeb Bush, who ended his candidacy Saturday night, and to compete well in states outside the South.

And in the days and weeks to come, Rubio will get even more help and money than he has so far from Republican bigwigs who are desperate to see someone less truculent and divisive than Trump or Cruz burst into the lead. His South Carolina showing redeemed his New Hampshire embarrassment and renewed their faith.

But Rubio hasn't notched a single victory yet. Trump has notched two, and whether they fully lived up to the advance polling is irrelevant. They're victories, plural. They're no fluke, no fad.

Naysayers can't claim that he's just a bad gaffe or an ugly revelation away from doom. There have already been gaffes aplenty—if you can call them gaffes. There have been revelations galore.

All Trump's fans see is someone barreling forward without apology and with a largeness that makes them feel a little less small. They see a winner. And it's no longer an illusion.

An earlier version of this article misstated the name of the federal veterans department. It is Veterans Affairs, not Veterans Administration.
