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Rubio's Exit and the G.O.P.'s Spoiled Buffet

Frank Bruni MARCH 15, 2016

As he exited the race for the Republican presidential nomination on Tuesday night, Marco Rubio told a crowd of dispirited supporters that “this may not have been the year for a hopeful and optimistic message.”

I'll say. It's a year for florid disruption, fisticuffs and a rejection of anyone and anything blessed by the guardians of the status quo.

Rubio was thus blessed, and so he was cursed. There's little surprise in his political demise, though it was a mesmerizing development, given how long and confidently many Republican leaders and pundits clung to their forecasts of his eventual transcendence.

Equally mesmerizing was Donald Trump's string of Tuesday victories, including his trouncing of Rubio in Florida, because they came after several tumultuous days of violent campaign rallies, intensified denunciations of his candidacy and a barrage of negative advertising against him. He easily weathered it all.

For party stalwarts, the race for the Republican presidential nomination began in a state of euphoric excitement about a buffet of political talent, with governors and ex-governors galore.

Tuesday's results left the party with slim pickings. John Kasich, who notched a life-and-death victory in Ohio, is the best of the remaining three candidates and would be fiercest in the general election, but has little to no chance of pulling past either of the other two in the delegate count. Those two, Trump and Ted Cruz, are merely different flavors of rancid fare.

Trump had a much bigger night than Cruz. He not only overwhelmed Rubio in Florida but also won Illinois and North Carolina, where Cruz had hoped to stage upsets. Those triumphs bolstered his lead and showed that the turmoil of recent days — and the violence at his rallies — didn't scare off his fans.

But it's not over. Not even close. And many Republicans are still faced with grim calculations, compromises and reckonings.

They see a probable Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, who is so personally flawed, politically clumsy and out of sync with this anti-establishment moment that she's ripe for defeat. Then they look at their own contest and see an outcome that might well ensure her victory.

Kasich and Cruz together should do well enough in the states ahead to prevent Trump from getting a majority of delegates. That foretells a chaotic convention, and it's hard to see how the bedlam will position the party well.

There's no consensus yet among Republicans. There's more acrimony than clarity. Who's to say whether former Rubio supporters and donors flock to Kasich, Cruz . . . or even Trump?

There are traditionalists rooting for Trump over Cruz, and the thinking of some goes like this: Neither candidate can win the presidency. But while Cruz has almost no crossover appeal beyond committed Republicans, Trump might draw enough independents, blue-collar Democrats and new voters in states like Ohio and Pennsylvania to buoy Republicans in tight Senate races there.

Besides which, he scrambles all rules and all precedents so thoroughly that you never know. Victory isn't *unthinkable*, and better a Republican who's allergic to caution, oblivious to actual information and

altogether dangerous than a Democrat who'll dole out all the plum administration jobs to her own party.

Republican traditionalists who prefer Cruz are no more ebullient in their outlooks.

"Cruz is a disaster for the party," one of them told me. "Trump is a disaster for *the country*."

"If Cruz is the nominee, we get wiped out," he added, with a resigned voice. "And we rebuild." The party needs that anyway.

In fact, some Republicans have insisted to me that a Cruz nomination and subsequent defeat would have a long-term upside. It would put to rest the stubborn argument, promoted by Cruz and others on the party's far right, that the G.O.P. has lost presidential elections over recent decades because its nominees weren't conservative enough.

If anything, those nominees weren't sufficiently *moderate*. A Cruz wipeout would prove as much.

He moved assertively over recent days to send a message to Republican leaders who loathe him that a partnership is still possible — that love could yet bloom! The talk of Trump's culpability for his menacing rallies has given Cruz a new opening to encourage supporters of other candidates to take the Cruz plunge.

"Come on in," he said at a rally in North Carolina on Sunday. "The water's fine."

Sounds like something someone in "Jaws" blurted out right before the shark made an appetizer of her ankle. The water's fine only if the alternative is the River Trump, a bloody churn of piranhas and Palins.

Republicans started out with what they thought was a feast of possibilities. Now they're poised to be eaten alive.

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