

Jon Huntsman for a decent American presidential contest

By Chibli Mallat

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Figure 1 - Republican presidential candidate, former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman talks with Ron Paul supporter Randal Heller, at Calef's Famous Country Store in Barrington, N.H., Friday, Dec. 30, 2011. (Associated Press)

I have grown cynical of party politics in mature democracies, including the most exciting of all, the United States. In the middle of a spectrum exclusively defined by Republicans and Democrats, I tend to favor personality and style over platforms few are able to implement.

So many people are bored with politics in the U.S. that half of the voters don't bother. If politics does not affect the daily life of the citizens to the extent that most choose to ignore it, then some wisdom has been found in the overall balance of public life.

In my native Lebanon, the fight between politicians ends up in blood on the street more often than not. In the U.S., it never does. If the political system has succeeded in striking a compromise in political competition where blood is never shed, then this may be good enough. The citizen is sheltered enough to go camping, read a book, listen to music or work her preferred course of business without fear of the skies falling over her head because politicians disagree.

What is left in the world of presidential politics in the U.S. is a stage. And politics can be serious fun. But the 2012 presidential elections appears to be anything but fun. No one will challenge the president on the Democrats' side, so the whole Republican campaign will steal the show. Any spark between Obama and his opponent will have to wait for the primaries to settle on one of the declared Republican candidates. At the end of 2011, all look uninspiring save one: Jon Huntsman.

Mitt Romney has been around for too long in the field to avoid that image of blunt opportunist made weirder by his severe executive looks and blandished flip-flopping rhetoric. Newt Gingrich is all muscles and no substance, a bulldozer whose own fellow Republicans dislike so much that they failed to inscribe him on the primaries of his home state.

Like all shallow libertarians, Ron Paul lives on Planet Ayn Rand. Hermann Cain has been mercifully caught by his own histrionics. Michele Bachmann is a pale Sarah Palin. Rick Perry stumbled over words against early hopes of the Republican elites that he had some presidential spirit in him. Rick Santorum seems to me decent enough, but I have not followed his trajectory closely, and he trails behind. In that slate of eight or so people in the running who make it to the show, Jon Huntsman is the only one I find aspiring.

I confess a bias towards him, having met him twice in discussions over Iraq in preparation for work on Global Justice. That Huntsman would find it useful to show interest in such a far-away mine of passionate disagreement was surely an exception, but no exception to his international temperament, witness his acceptance of an ambassadorship for Obama in the country most important to the U.S., China, where he managed to keep a low key while supporting a subtle message for human rights as a condition for any country, however big and powerful, to succeed.

In the state of Utah, he is liked by many Democrats for his effectiveness and straight talk. In the Republican Party, he is the new McCain, and McCain is rightly admired for talking straight, taking up controversial issues like campaign finance and standing up against dictatorships from Burma to Iraq at a time of the Clinton dominance of realpolitik.

Huntsman is still low in the polls. Maybe he is too intellectual or too middle of the road for feisty Republicans in the primary season. It is too early to tell. But Huntsman has two aces in his sleeve that he can play up in the coming weeks: an across-the-board favorable press and straight talk that makes him the only one in the Republican lot who has a chance against Obama. He must find occasions to bring the two aces together.

If any of the other frontrunners makes it in the Republican primaries, we'll have a zany, strike-under-the-belt, negative, offputting, dull, uninspiring campaign that ensures Obama's comfortable victory.

Obama is an exceptional president, so I wouldn't mind that result. But I prefer a healthy presidential campaign that takes the lethargy or opprobrium out of everyday politics. A Huntsman-Obama presidential contest will be fun, intelligent, elevating to the extent party politics in a mature democracy can be. It will also be polite and educational.

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