

The Republicans' best bet may not be whom you expect

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

So many people are bored by politics in the U.S. that half of the voters don't bother to vote. This is not necessarily a bad thing. If politics does not affect the daily life of citizens, to the extent that most can 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 American political system can strike 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 engage in his or her preferred course of business without fear of the skies falling because the politicians disagree.

What is left in the world of presidential politics in the U.S. is a stage. In the election contest between George W. Bush and Al Gore in 2000, the close results electrified the world for weeks on end. In the rise of Barack Obama in 2008-2009, and his fight with Hillary Clinton over the Democratic nomination, we were mesmerized by the game of wills. In the battle over the presidency between Obama and John McCain at the start of the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression, the articulation of change during the Obama campaign, the hope, the end of three centuries of racism at the top, the late arrival of Sarah Palin onto the Republican scene, and the personal qualities of McCain, were all memorable. Politics can be serious fun.

In contrast, the 2012 presidential elections appears to be anything but fun. No one will challenge the president on the Democrats' side, so the Republican campaign will steal the show. Any spark between Obama and his opponent will have to wait for the primaries to settle who wins the republican nomination. At the end of 2011, all of them look uninspiring save one: Jon Huntsman, the former governor of Utah and President Barack Obama's former ambassador to China.

The former Massachusetts governor, Mitt Romney, has been around for too long in the field to avoid the image of being a blunt opportunist, exacerbated by his severe executive looks and rhetorical flip-flopping. The former House speaker, Newt Gingrich, is all muscle and no substance, a bulldozer so disliked by fellow Republicans that he failed to qualify for the primaries in Virginia, where he lives. Like all shallow libertarians, Congressman Ron Paul lives on Planet Ayn Rand. Businessman Herman Cain has been mercifully caught up by his own histrionics. A Republican congresswoman, Michelle Bachmann, is a pale version of Sarah Palin. The Texas governor, Rick Perry, seriously stumbled in a televised debate, despite early hopes among Republican elites that he had some presidential mettle in him. And a former senator, Rick Santorum, seems decent enough, but has been trailing, despite what appears to be a flourish in Iowa.

In that slate of candidates, the only one I find inspiring is Huntsman. I confess a bias toward him, having met him twice in discussions over Iraq in preparation for work I conducted for the Global Justice Project: Iraq. That the governor of Utah would show interest in such a faraway source of passionate disagreement was notable, but perhaps not exceptional for someone with an internationalist temperament.

Witness Huntsman's acceptance of an ambassadorship to China, where he managed to retain a low profile while supporting a subtle message in favor of human rights as a condition for any country, however big and powerful, to succeed. In the state of Utah, he is liked for his effectiveness and straight talk. In the Republican Party, Huntsman is a new McCain, and McCain is rightly admired for his honesty, taking up controversial issues like campaign finance, and standing up against dictatorships in countries from Burma to Iraq, at a time when the Clinton administration was engaged in realpolitik.

Jon Huntsman is still low in the polls. Maybe he is too "intellectual," too "middle of the road" for feisty Republicans during the primary season. It is too early to tell. McCain trailed well behind other Republicans in the early months of the 2008 campaign. Still, Huntsman has two aces up his sleeve he can play up in the coming weeks: A widely favorable media image and candor that makes him the only one in the Republican field who has a chance against Obama.

He must find occasions to bring those two aces together. One thing Huntsman might think of doing is linking change in the 2011 Middle East revolutions to that of authoritarianism in Vladimir Putin's Russia; or change in Iran to that in Communist China.

If any of the other frontrunner makes it in the Republican primaries, we'll have a zany, negative, off-putting, dull, uninspiring campaign that ensures Obama's comfortable victory. I prefer a healthy presidential campaign that takes the lethargy or opprobrium out of everyday politics. A Huntsman-Obama presidential contest would be fun, educational, and it would elevate party politics to the standards befitting a mature democracy. It would also be polite and engaging.

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