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Sanders and Trump: Magic sells

by [Charles Krauthammer](#)

The New Hampshire results have solidified the reigning cliché that the 2016 campaign is an anti-establishment revolt of both the left and the right. Largely overlooked, however, is the role played in setting the national mood by the seven-year legacy of the Obama presidency.

Yes, you hear constant denunciations of institutions, parties, leaders, donors, lobbyists, influence peddlers. But the starting point of the bipartisan critique is the social, economic and geopolitical wreckage all around us. Bernie Sanders is careful never to blame President Obama directly, but his description of the America Obama leaves behind is devastating — a wasteland of stagnant wages, rising inequality, a sinking middle class, young people crushed by debt, the American Dream dying.

Take away the Brooklyn accent and the Larry David mannerisms and you would have thought you were listening to a Republican candidate. After all, who's been in charge for the last seven years?

Donald Trump is [even more colorful](#) in describing the current “mess” and more direct in attributing it to the country's leadership — most pungently, its stupidity and incompetence. Both candidates are not just anti-establishment but anti-status quo. The revolt is as much about the Obama legacy as it is about institutions.

Look at New Hampshire. Hillary Clinton had made a strategic decision, as highlighted [in the debates](#), to wrap herself in the mantle of the Obama presidency. [She lost New Hampshire](#) by three touchdowns.

Beyond railing against the wreckage, the other commonality between the two big New Hampshire winners is in the nature of the cure they offer. Let the others propose carefully budgeted five-point plans. Sanders and Trump offer magic.

Take Sanders' New Hampshire [victory speech](#). It promised the moon: college education, free; universal health care, free; world peace, also free because we won't be “the policeman of the world” (mythical Sunni armies will presumably be doing that for us). Plus a guaranteed \$15 minimum wage. All to be achieved by taxing the rich. Who can be against a “speculation” tax (whatever that means)?

[So with Trump](#). Leave it to him. Jobs will flow back in a rush from China, from Japan, from Mexico, from everywhere. Universal health care, with Obamacare replaced by “[something](#)

terrific.” Veterans finally taken care of. Drugs stopped cold at the border. Indeed, an end to drug addiction itself. Victory upon victory of every kind.

How? That question never comes up anymore. No one expects an answer. His will be done, on Earth if not yet in heaven. Yes, people love Trump’s contempt for the “establishment” — which as far as I can tell means anything not Trump — but what is truly thrilling is the promise of a near-biblical restoration. As painless as Sanders’.

In truth, Trump and Sanders are soaring not just by defying the establishment, but by defying logic and history. Sanders’ magic potion is socialism; Trump’s is Trump.

The young Democrats swooning for Sanders appear unfamiliar with socialism’s century-long career, a dismal tale of ruination from Russia to Cuba to Venezuela. Indeed, are they even aware that China’s greatest reduction in poverty in human history correlates precisely with the degree to which it has *given up* socialism?

Trump’s magic is toughness — toughness in a world of losers. The power and will of the caudillo will make everything right.

Apart from the fact that strongman rule contradicts the American constitutional tradition of limited and constrained government, caudillo populism simply doesn’t work. For example, it accounts in large part for the relative backwardness of Africa and Latin America. In 1900, Argentina had a per capita income **fully 70 percent of ours**. After a 20th century wallowing in Peronism and its imitators, Argentina is a basket case, its per capita income **now 23 percent of ours**.

There certainly is a crisis of confidence in our country’s institutions. But that’s hardly new. The current run of endemic distrust began with Vietnam and Watergate. Yet not in our lifetimes have the left and right populism of the Sanders and Trump variety enjoyed such massive support.

The added factor is the Obama effect, the depressed and anxious mood of a nation experiencing its **worst economic recovery** since World War II and watching its power and influence abroad decline amid a willed global retreat.

The result is a politics of high fantasy. Things can’t get any worse, we hear, so why not shake things to their foundation? Anyone who thinks things can’t get any worse knows nothing. And risks everything.

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