

Lord Ashcroft's Republican Convention Diary. Day One: Trump begins as he means to go on

An American political convention makes a British party conference look rather like a village fete. This year's Republican National Convention is taking place in Cleveland, Ohio, in the twenty-thousand seat arena that is home to the Cleveland Cavaliers, the



city's world championship-winning basketball team. I am among the fifty thousand people visiting for the event, along with 2,472 delegates, many of the stars of American politics (including Karl Rove, architect of George W. Bush's two presidential victories, whom I caught up with yesterday pictured), and the fifteen thousand members of the media, who comprise the biggest international press corps outside that of the Rio Olympics. Cleveland itself inspires mixed views. Some like to refer to it as "The Mistake On The Lake", or to remind you that the Cuyahoga

River which runs through it was once so polluted that it caught fire. This is unsporting, since the city has plenty of merits, not the least of which is the world-class Cleveland Clinic, of which I am both a proud trustee and a grateful former patient. I spent a total of twenty-nine days in its intensive care unit last year recovering from septic shock. At one point I found myself surrounded by fifteen doctors. This was a new experience for me – fifteen lawyers in a room, yes, but never doctors. I had to tell them I preferred the lawyers.

As the reader will know, the Republican Convention was last held in Cleveland eighty years ago, when the party nominated Alfred M. Landon, who went on to be trounced by the incumbent president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Landon lost Ohio, his home state of Kansas, and indeed every other state apart from Vermont and Maine.

But if there is one thing we know about Donald Trump, the presumptive nominee, it is that he is not troubled by precedent, either in the way he has conducted his campaign or in the results he anticipates. Trump has confidently declared that he is going to win the states of Michigan ("by a lot"), Pennsylvania ("easily") and New Jersey – none of which have been won by a Republican presidential candidate since 1988 – and that he will campaign heavily in California and New York. The commentators we speak to here assume he is kidding; the GOP operatives hope he is.

After a more than usually bruising primary campaign, one of the Trump team's challenges will be to unite their party behind their candidate. The party's two most recent nominees, Mitt Romney (who tweeted "Donald Trump is a phony, a fraud. His promises are as worthless as a degree from Trump University") and John McCain, and its two most recent presidents, George W. and George H. W. Bush, will be staying away, as will many other prominent figures in the party. Some like Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona, are not bothering to conceal their disdain for the spectacle ("I've got to mow my lawn," he told a reporter).

In an interview last week, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush lamented: "I can't vote for Donald Trump and I can't vote for Hillary Clinton. It breaks my heart." Trump, he said, was "barely a Republican," let alone a conservative." In an article for the *Washington Post* on Saturday, Bush wrote: "I do not believe Donald Trump reflects the principles or inclusive legacy of the Republican Party. And I sincerely hope he doesn't represent its future."

After some of the things Trump has said about his fellow candidates, none of this is very surprising. Jeb Bush: "an embarrassment to his family". Ted Cruz: "I have watched Lyin' Ted become more and more unhinged." Carly Fiorina: "Look at that face. Would anyone vote for that?"

Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus is leading the reconciliation effort. "The convention's coming at a good time for us to turn the page", he said in an interview last week, while the Trump campaign Paul Manafort predicted "a unifying convention" – we would see over the next five days "the party coming together".

After day one, that seems a forlorn hope. Yesterday afternoon a procedural motion brought by anti-Trump delegates was defeated, prompting a chaotic shouting match between the two factions on the convention floor.

Meanwhile, Trump called into the Bill O'Reilly Show on Fox News to remind the nation that John Kasich, and the last man standing among Trump's primary rivals (and of whom Trump once said "I have never seen a human being eat in such a disgusting fashion") had "got beaten very, very badly" and "just hung around" rather than pulling out of the campaign when he should have done – thereby torpedoing weeks of careful diplomacy aimed at getting the popular Ohio Governor to endorse the presumptive nominee or at least set foot in the Convention hall.

Still, Priebus is doing a valiant job of insisting that everything is going according to plan. As well as a likeable, intriguing, interesting candidate, the party had "a good field operation, with all the technical requirements we're going to need and with a candidate that is the epitome of change in a year of change." That last part is certainly true.

Lord Ashcroft's Republican Convention Diary. Day Two: The GOP frets over Trump's underfunded and ill-disciplined operation

One of the things about Donald Trump that bemuses commentators and exasperates Republican campaign professionals is that, as one analyst put it to us, "he is running something that looks nothing like a campaign." For one thing, he has raised nowhere near as much money as Hillary Clinton, and will probably be outspent by hundreds of millions by November. "If he's worth as many billions as he says he is, he should spend some of it," one frustrated operative grumbled.

For another thing, he has no ground operation to speak of – no troops on the ground knocking on doors in the states he needs to win: "Ground organisation matters. It can't buy you ten points but it can get you two or three. It only matters if it's close, but the Democrats have invested in it and Trump hasn't."

For a third thing, Trump is running no TV ads. Opinion in Cleveland is divided as to whether this reflects a bold rewriting of the campaign rulebook or suggests he has no idea what he is doing. Either way, Clinton is running anti-Trump spots in swing states – including here in Ohio – and there is some polling evidence that they are having an effect.

As if that is not enough, some professionals worry that Trump himself is showing no discipline. In his first appearance after the FBI director described Clinton as "extremely careless" in her use of private email while Secretary of State, instead of exploiting the issue Trump launched into an extended rant at the media over a tweet he had sent featuring a Star of David and a pile of cash. The previous month, rather than highlight the very poor jobs figures that had been released, he decided to lash out at an Hispanic judge in Indiana, calling her "a Mexican". He is also known to be focusing on relatively small details, such as insisting on the redesign of the stage at the Convention ("I didn't like the shape. Too straight. Too nothing. Didn't have the drama," he explained).

Though this unpredictability is part of his appeal, some fear it also means he may be missing opportunities. As one veteran campaigner suggested, Trump is ahead on the economy, and could get real traction on the issue if he put his mind to it. The distractions were threatening the GOP's chances of making changes: "Republicans have plenty of good reforms ready to go. All we need is a president."

So far, Trump has relied largely on the media to get his message out. As one experienced Donald-watcher explained, he has an ambiguous relationship with the press. Reflecting on his tendency to single out reporters for sometimes vitriolic criticism, she said: "It's not that he hates the media – he doesn't like investigative reporting about himself. Hillary hates the press. She'd be fine if the press never covered her again, but Donald Trump wouldn't." Indeed, despite the odd tirade, he seemed to enjoy dealing with journalists: "Donald Trump's media team is two people, and one of them is him. Before he entered politics he would call the gossip pages of the New York papers and describe himself as a source close to Trump."

Reporters had similarly mixed views about him. On the plus side, he is one heck of a story. “I love covering Trump because he’s such an unusual phenomenon,” one journalist told us. “I had to spend 2012 coming up with interesting angles on Mitt Romney.” But some were less forgiving of his occasionally hostile attitude: “I have never seen a presidential candidate say he will open up the libel laws, whatever that means, so he can go after individual journalists. If he does win you can probably write to me at a re-education camp in the desert somewhere.”

Foreign policy rarely features in a presidential campaign, but this is one of the areas that causes the most apprehension for Trump critics. At a briefing for the International Republican Institute yesterday afternoon, Governor John Kasich told us he was concerned about growing nationalism, the increasing tide of isolationism, the growing pattern of anti-immigration and anti-trade rhetoric. “That stew, I’m very worried about it.” He didn’t say who he was thinking of, but he didn’t need to.

Isolationism was encouraging for those who did not wish the West well. (“Who was the happiest man in the world after Brexit?”, Kasich asked. “Vladimir Puti...” I raised my hand. “Oh you were?”)

Others were more direct about their fears. Jennifer Rubin, who writes on the issue for the *Washington Post*, told us Donald Trump was the only candidate the Republicans could have come up with who makes foreign policy an advantage for Hillary Clinton. Though the first evening of the Convention had been devoted to national security “we didn’t hear a lot about what Donald Trump would do in the world, because he doesn’t know what he would do.” What we do know, she continued, was that he speaks admiringly of authoritarian regimes, and does not value America’s international alliances. “His wacky ideas are bad enough – let’s build a wall and get someone else to pay for it – but worse is that he admires strength, not decency and democratic values.”



Worst of all, his erratic approach could have disastrous consequences. He had seemed prepared to discard the relationship with Britain after David Cameron criticised his proposed ban on Muslims entering the US, so “what if the same happened in the Baltic, and he said ‘we don’t need you’, and the next day the Russians came in? I won’t sugar-coat it, it’s frightful.”

Was there any scope, I asked, for him to surround himself with two or three serious foreign policy advisers, such as a proposed Secretary of State? No, she said: “He has no-one there to impart a foreign policy message to him, and he wouldn’t listen to them if there were.” And if he were to change his foreign policy message, no-one would believe him. “It’s lipstick on a pig time.”

Speaking of the transatlantic partnership, I ran into Kevin Brady (pictured), Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, whose responsibilities include trade

agreements. He told me the UK would certainly not be at the back of the queue when it came to a trade deal with the US and that Liam Fox and Boris Johnson would find a warm welcome in Washington.

Lord Ashcroft's Republican Convention Diary. Day Three: The experts reflect on why they were wrong about Trump's chances

The reporters, commentators and political professionals we have spoken to in Cleveland have been remarkably open in admitting they were wrong about Donald Trump's chances. "I was speaking at a meeting last August, and I told them there was absolutely no way Trump would be the nominee," one experienced campaign consultant confessed. For once, no-one has blamed misleading polls. Instead,



between them, they cite four main reasons. One is that they simply did not believe the polling numbers they were seeing, or decided there was a ceiling to his support, which he had repeatedly broken through. Secondly, they felt his lack of a traditional campaign infrastructure would restrict him against the experienced election winners he was up against. Thirdly, they assumed that given the calibre and record of the other candidates, Republicans would surely

choose one of them over the wildcard Trump, if only to give them more chance of winning in November.

And finally, they assumed that Trump would simply implode after one gaffe too many. Instead, he had if anything been strengthened (at least with primary voters) from a series of self-generated hullabalos, any one of which might have finished a more conventional candidate.

They started to realise he could win for different reasons – when he drew huge crowds to rallies in unexpected places with people you might not expect to see at a Republican event; when he shrugged off incidents that would have sunk other candidates; and when it dawned on them that he was serious about it himself: “when his pronouncements started to hurt his business brand, when he started to sacrifice things for this goal, I knew he was for real,” one journalist told us.

It was some comfort that his fellow candidates had not seen it coming either: “It’s not just the media that got it wrong, everyone got it wrong.”

This was echoed by senior staffers from three rival primary campaigns who came to speak to us: “When the campaign started, no-one saw this guy Trump.” One reason was that, from the outset, Trump refused to play by the normal rules. “We thought the Republican Party had four buckets,” one of them told us. “Moderates, libertarians, Tea Party conservatives and evangelical conservatives. We decided we needed evangelicals, Rubio and Bush would fight for the moderates, and so on.

Some candidates make the mistake of trying to play all four buckets. We're at his convention today."

As Trump gathered more and more support "we began to understand the degree to which political physics were not playing a part in the campaign... It was like trying to get a grip on applesauce." In any other year, "his policy positions would have killed him. He had talked about gun control but he was getting votes from libertarian hunters in New Hampshire. They were voting for the tone and the persona."

The media had been a major factor. One recalled ruefully that they had been unable to persuade the networks to show up at a major campaign event for their candidate. "If Donald Trump had farted on air, they would have covered it live, with a panel beforehand to discuss which way the wind was blowing."

In retrospect, "if you rewind the whole thing, there should have been a healthy conversation about stopping the train that was gathering speed", though none of our panel was very confident anything would have worked. And as the election season drags on, rational decisions are harder and harder to make as everyone is so exhausted: "The way these guys run, it's amazing what they do every day. The most precious thing you protect as a campaign manager is the candidate's sleep, but you can't make them sleep once they get in their hotel room. They watch TV and check Twitter all night."



Most of the action at the Republican Convention takes place in the evening, when the delegates gather to be entertained and inspired. I have made the most of the chance to enjoy the atmosphere and meet some of the delegates (including some from Texas, pictured), and to revive some old friendships. Earlier in the year I met Mike Pence, Governor of Indiana, (apictured) at the Kentucky Derby. Though he expects to be Vice President, he assured me his invitation to next year's Indianapolis 500 still stands.

A senior Trump advisor told us the campaign had three goals for the week in Cleveland: to show people a new side of the candidate "that they don't always get from his TV show", including his family life; to describe the challenges facing America as seen by ordinary people; and to highlight the answers they propose: "one of the myths perpetuated is that we don't have policy solutions." Unusually, there would be no chance of the post-Convention bounce in the polls that campaigns hope to see, since the Democrats are following on next week. Once the campaign gets into full swing, we could expect to see Trump's children taking a more active role in the campaign, and more talk about policy, especially on the economy, border control, energy independence and foreign affairs: "In the Cuban missile crisis, we were actually afraid for our own personal safety. That went away. With ISIS, people are literally scared for their own lives." There would also be a relentless focus on Hillary

Clinton's record as Secretary of State: "Right now, she probably wishes she didn't have a record."

The campaign hoped to appeal to voters who felt the economy had left them behind, who "don't see the next generation doing better than this one", and are so disaffected that they had stopped voting: they believe twenty-five million evangelical voters did not participate in 2012 but could be persuaded to do so this time. This way, they could put in play states that had not been competitive in recent presidential elections.

Didn't that seem optimistic, given the level of distaste for both candidates? "When the country is frustrated, turnout goes up. One of the few places people have to take out their frustration is the polling booth." Would Trump be toning down his language now that he was out of the primaries and addressing the whole country? No again: "Mr Trump's appeal is that he tells it like it is. What has frustrated American voters is that politicians seem so guarded because all they want to do is get re-elected, so they never get to a solution." (Indeed, as we heard from another campaign professional, some voters give him the benefit of the doubt on his wilder statements – not being a politician, he has not had the practice at politician-speak).

How worried was the campaign that senior figures in the party had decided to stay away from the Convention? Not at all. If anything, they reinforce the candidate's anti-establishment credentials: "There is a frustration in America that he has captured, and Bernie Sanders did on the Democratic side as well. I think the party is coming together well. The best example is not the people at the convention but support from the Republican party – we're getting 88 or 90 per cent of the Republican vote. Whether John Kasich shows up in Cleveland matters less than whether Donald Trump is capturing their imagination."

OK, but what about Mrs Trump's now notorious speech? Was the plagiarism a deliberate ploy to associate Melania with Michelle Obama, casting her in their minds as First Lady, with Donald in the Oval Office, thereby getting the voters to think past the sale? "I wish we were that smart."

A bullish view, and one shared by some on the teams of his primary adversaries. "I think he can win", one told us. "They don't like him, but they don't like her either... If I have to bet I truly think he wins. Gary Johnson [the Libertarian candidate] and the Greens could get ten per cent, so he has to get to forty-five, and I think he can do it. If you take Romney's score among white voters and add 3.1 per cent, which he could do, and increase their turnout by 3.1 per cent, which he could do, he doesn't need a single minority vote."

The others were more equivocal: "If he can convince people he can handle the nuclear codes and not blow up Denmark because someone tweeted against him, that will make a difference." He would need a more serious attitude to policy and debate preparation: "The one-liners can get you to Cleveland but I don't think they get you to Washington."

This was too sanguine a view for Larry Sabato of the University of Virginia (who is a very wise man: he told me he reads everything on Lord Ashcroft Polls and was

particularly impressed with my EU referendum-day poll). Professor Sabato is behind the modestly titled Crystal Ball website, which currently predicts a Clinton victory by 347 to 191 in the electoral college.

The electorate doesn't like to give parties a third term in the White House ("tenure is great for academics and we deserve it! But for politicians it's a terrible idea"). Had the Republicans nominated any of three or four of the primary candidates, they would therefore probably be ten points ahead now. But "partisans do strange things that don't necessarily further their interests. This is Exhibit A, believe me. Every now and then, a party commits suicide. It happens. Then you have resurrections. Four years after Goldwater, there was Nixon. Four years after McGovern, there was Carter."

It was not impossible for Trump to win – he rated the chances at thirty or thirty-five per cent – but for it to become a realistic prospect would probably take an unexpected recession or a series of domestic (not international) terrorist attacks.

The map was a huge hurdle for the campaign, but there was one legitimate if unlikely possibility: if Trump won all the states Romney won in 2012, plus Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin, he would get to 270 electoral college votes: the magic number.

What would it take for Trump to win California? "A major earthquake that takes out northern California and most of the rest of the state. I think even Orange County is going to vote for Hillary Clinton this time."

Lord Ashcroft's Republican Convention Diary. Day Four: "This is not the weirdest election in history, just in our lifetimes."

One feature of the campaign that everyone seems to agree on is that the battle is between the two most unpopular candidates of modern times. Among Trump supporters, the proportion saying they have an unfavourable view of Hillary Clinton is in the high nineties; the same is true of Trump's unfavourable rating among Clinton voters. Meanwhile, "undecideds hate them both", according to the experienced campaign pollster Greg Strimple, who came to speak to our group of international visitors. This goes well beyond the usual disdain for politicians and the pervasive view that "they're all the same." The big question is how this will affect turnout. Will turnout match the level of anger, as our Trump insider suggested yesterday, or will non-partisan voters "be so disgusted that they sit on their hands?" "The best thing each candidate has going for them is an opponent who is not liked," we heard from Amy Walter of the Cook Political Report. "If her problem is motivating the Democratic base, no-one will do it better than Donald Trump." At the same time, Clinton's presence on the ballot is Trump's biggest advantage – reinforcing the trend towards what Professor Larry Sabato calls "negative partisanship", where party supporters turn out in droves for the sole purpose of defeating the other side.

A further consequence is that, come January, we could well see the lowest ever approval ratings for an incoming President. The new chief executive usually enjoys a

rallying, but this seems unlikely given the climate. As Walter told us, “it used to be that the President got a honeymoon. This one will be lucky to get a weekend away.”

On both sides, the effort to reinforce those views is unrelenting. Thousands of hours and tens of millions of dollars are devoted to opposition research. The file on Hillary Clinton already runs to more than 7,500 pages, according to Joe Pounder, who runs America Rising, a political action committee dedicated to “exposing the truth about Democrats”.

A major part of their effort is video tracking – following Democratic candidates with cameras wherever they go, in the hope of capturing something that could be used as ammunition against them or even, in some cases, change the course of a race. Their operatives have already attended around 3,500 Democratic events in 2015 alone.

Perhaps their most spectacular success to date was filming Iowa Congressman Bruce Braley telling trial lawyers at a Texas fundraising event that if the Democrats lost control of the Senate, its Judiciary Committee could be chaired by “a farmer from Iowa who never went to law school.” Iowan voters did not take kindly to the insult to farmers, or their popular Senator Chuck Grassley (who did indeed go on to become Chairman of the Judiciary Committee). Braley is now a former Congressman.

Even when public views of a candidate are well established, these tactics can undermine their campaigns. Last July, a video tracker from America Rising filmed Hillary Clinton boarding a private jet in Des Moines after giving a speech about climate change. The Clinton campaign responded by promising to be carbon neutral, but its next set of spending returns made no mention of carbon offset – a second story.

The group knows where to draw the line, Pounder explained. They do not film candidates’ families, and they stay the right side of privacy laws, which vary from state to state. Besides, there was no need to break the rules: “We have too much good information to screw up by doing something really stupid.”

I have been here with a delegation from the International Democrat Union, a grouping of centre-right parties from around the world. We had the privilege earlier in the week of hearing from Karl Rove, the architect of George W. Bush’s gubernatorial and presidential election victories. He reminded us to keep some perspective: “This is not the weirdest election in history, just in our lifetimes”. The point was illustrated in his new book, *The Triumph of William McKinley*, in which he looked back over the history of American politics to an era of “sex, violence, backstabbing, betrayal and really cool nicknames.”

He told us all sorts of other interesting things, but insisted they stay in the room. “I don’t want to be tweeted. Just remember I still have a lot of friends in the intelligence community.” Wandering on the Convention floor I ran into Senator Mike Lee (pictured below). As well as kindly inviting me to visit Utah, he – like Congressman Brady earlier in the week – said he would be happy to support a UK-US trade deal. Far from being at the back of the queue, it seems our allies are queueing up to help.

Ben Ginsberg, an MSNBC commentator famous as one of the lawyers working for George W. Bush on the 2000 Florida recount, explained to us some of the mysteries



of the Convention. For example, even most of the delegates have no particular loyalty to the presumptive nominee: “Most of them are not there because they love Donald Trump, but because their brother-in-law is the county chairman. It’s a great tactic if they’re coming over for Christmas – make them a delegate and they might not behave like such a jerk.” After the rules fight, the Melania plagiarism mini-scandal and the reaction to Ted Cruz’s non-endorsement (which, I can tell you, was a thing to behold – more like a 1980s Labour Party conference than the fully scripted American convention we have become

used to), the week has not gone entirely to plan for the Trump campaign. “But that’s all process,” Ginsberg says. “The long term takeaway is whether Donald Trump delivers tonight.”

This would involve defining himself against his opponent (“not a heavy lift in this case”), and articulating a long term positive view for where he wants to take the country.

The campaign that follows will be brutal. With the two least popular candidates in history, “both candidates have got the only opponent they could possibly beat.” The debates, if they happen, will be fascinating, and could be the most-watched TV events in political history. “I have been fortunate enough to help candidates prepare for TV debates. It is as difficult, tension-filled a process as you can imagine. Imagine Donald Trump having to stand up for ninety minutes answering questions about substantive policy issues.” And for Hillary, “having to deal with a totally unpredictable debater in the form of Donald Trump can’t give her a warm and comfortable feeling in the cockles of her heart.”

A number of clever people have told us in plain terms just how hard it is for Donald Trump to win. Amy Walters says it comes down to “the mood and the map”. The mood is that people want major change, even if it’s not possible to predict what that change will be. Many people have still not recovered from the 2008 crash, and “if things are not working, they don’t trust institutions to fix things because they don’t trust the institutions themselves.”

But then there is the map. The thirteen states have been carried by every Republican candidate since 1992 add up to 102 electoral votes; the eighteen that the Democrats have consistently won over the same period add up to 242. If Clinton wins every state John Kerry won in 2004 she is more than 90 per cent of the way to 270, and if she then wins Florida it’s all over.

On top of that are the demographics. In 2000, the electorate was 81 per cent white. In 2016, this is likely to have fallen to 70 per cent. In 2004, 43 per cent of Hispanics voted for President Bush (“his Spanish is as good as his English”, as the old joke goes); only 27 per cent voted for Romney eight years later, and Trump’s numbers among the same group are in the teens. A recent survey found that zero per cent (yes) of African Americans had a favourable view of the Republican nominee.

On paper, Trump is claiming a lower share of a growing market, and his path to 270 electoral college votes looks perilously narrow.

The veteran Ben Ginsberg is not so sure: “When I worked for Reagan in the 1980s, the Republicans had a lock on the electoral college. It would never be broken, until it was. For it to be broken, you need a disruptive candidate. Like Donald Trump.”

And think of the times: “Would you prefer to be the establishment candidate with the perfect résumé, who had done everything you’re supposed to do to be president, or the ‘throw all the bums out’ candidate? In this particular year?”



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