

Donald Trump and the Islam Question

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The last thing the GOP field of candidates would have wanted was Donald Trump continuing to make headlines and confronting them with such bread and butter issues of prejudice as what to do with Islam in the United States. Then there was that issue that had shadowed Trump like a storm of doubt: Is Obama really “American”? Has a follower of the Prophet been occupying the White House all this time?

Having smeared and praised Washington’s southern neighbours as marauders yet inspired by an ambitious leadership, Trump decided to go a few rounds with the issue of Islam. But he was in no mood to be ecumenical. This was familiar, reactionary terrain.

A town hall rally in New Hampshire was not perhaps the ideal venue for the trigger, but it did give Trump a chance to respond to a questioner who was sporting a good number of fears.

“We have a problem in this country. It’s called Muslims. We know our current president is one. You know he’s not even an American. Birth certificate, man.”

Trump added a boost to the questioner, saying that “we need this question. This is the first question.” This provided enough encouragement. “But anyway, we have training camps growing where they want to kill us. That’s my question: When can we get rid of them.”

Pure conspiracy theory; and purely, the politics of reaction. In such thinking, the enemy is not so much without, where wickedness is simply presumed, but within, when it supposedly lulls you, like the Devil, into a false sense of security. There can be nothing more lulling than the notion of presidential propriety when the man in the Oval Office is supposedly an agent of the enemy.

The questioner had evidently received encouragement by the recent circumstances surrounding Ahmed Mohamed’s now fabled clock. The conservative press lines were keen to find some plausibility behind the notion that the 14-year old school boy was a jihadi in a different dress in bringing a clock to school. School officials, writes Kyle Smith for the *New York Post* (Sep 19), thought “as 95 percent of Americans would, that it kinda looked like a bomb”. Ahmed was subsequently handcuffed and, once the dust settled, suspended. This is a rationale that creates its own evidence, which, when shown not to exist, is justified on the basis that it *might* have existed. The clock “beeped”; it was “strange-looking” and “homemade” – suggesting an earthy, terrorist domesticity. Such circumstances of invention duly presented themselves in the New Hampshire townhall.

Wanting to play along that line, Trump’s response was not so much feeble as conciliatory to

the questioner's position. "We're going to be looking at a lot of different things and, you know, a lot of people are saying that, and a lot of people are saying that bad things are happening out there."

The Christian-Muslim card is going to be hard sell in the US electorate. There is an assured space for bigotry and political perversions, but some of these have to be tempered as the campaign wears on. The longer Trump spends on his failed pet project of outing Obama's "birth certificate", the more time he expends on a non-issue. This will fly in some small circles, but it is idiocy misspent.

The Trump team response showed all the signs of falling into this limbo, one of embracing the politics of reaction while claiming it was one of plausible substance. "Mr Trump was referring to the need to protect Christians' religious liberties as his previous statement says and nothing more." As far as the issue of training camps was concerned, Team Trump were happy to file it in the homework folder: "we will look into it."

Such a response also showed a measure of confusion. Trump's campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, decided to iron out the evident wrinkling by suggesting deafness. "All [Trump] heard was a question about training camps, which he said we will have a look into." Some juice – most of it – had to be removed from the steak.

Naturally, such behaviour allows the Democrats room to strike, even if this risks fanning flames that really need no oxygen. "GOP frontrunner Donald Trump's racism," claimed Democratic National Committee chairwoman Debbie Wasserman, "knows no bounds." But this is not quite the case, given that Trump shows, at least at times, a certain calculating approach to how he plays the race card.

Fellow GOP contenders find themselves in the unenviable situation where they must take a stance: What is your feeling about Mr T on the subject? Mike Huckabee has decided to show support, going so far at the debates to suggest that, "The candidates we have on stage are the A team. We even have our own Mr. T, who doesn't mind saying about others: you're a fool!"

Rick Santorum and Ted Cruz decided to go on the offensive against those who reported the incident, rather than the incident itself. Lindsey Graham, Chris Christie and Jeb Bush took the line that Trump had erred in not standing up to the question, and not believing that Obama was born in the US.

Bad things are, indeed, happening "out there", but the badlands of GOP thinking continue to cause despair and amusement. Trump is revelling in it, because he never had to adapt. His fellow "A" Team members, however, are still finding the pitch that will embrace a political centre without keeling over in the process.

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