

To Hawthorn Friends & Family –

For those seeking words of comfort in these trying times, I refer you to my favorite philosopher in the Western collection, the Sage of Austin, Willie Nelson:

**“It's been rough and rocky traveling
But I'm finally standing upright on the ground
After taking several readings
I'm surprised to find my mind's still fairly sound.”**

I hope that can be said of all of us (and, I readily admit, for some of us it would be an improvement).

Hearing from a Different Voice --

While we run a fiercely bi-partisan public affairs shop here at Hawthorn, it's no secret I'm one of the resident Democrats and I thought you might enjoy hearing, for a change, from an experienced and insightful Republican operative, Brent Bahler, whom I've counted as a friend for four decades.

Missouri Valley College is far more famous for its football teams than for producing political consultants, but in the 1970's it produced two. Graduating in 1971, I went the path of Democrats: Missouri Secretary of State Jim Kirkpatrick, Congressman Jerry Litton, Senator Tom Eagleton, Governor Joe Teasdale, and the AFL-CIO.

Graduating in 1975, Brent took the GOP path: press secretary for a U. S. House committee and to two United States Senators (including the great Bob Dole), head of public affairs for two federal agencies (including NTSB) and a national trade association.

Listed in Who's Who in Politics, he's now, with his wife Carlene, in Indianapolis and here are his thoughts:

For everyone who thinks Trump is a shoo-in and Biden cannot win, it just ain't so.

In 1980, Jimmy Carter went into his re-election campaign with numerous negatives but with all the advantages that incumbency provides. On the other side of the ballot, challenger Ronald Reagan was mocked by many as nothing more than an amiable but dangerous aging actor.

Reagan campaigned for increased defense spending, touted the benefits of supply-side economic policies, and pledged a balanced budget. His campaign was aided by Democratic dissatisfaction with Carter, who was mired in the Iran hostage crisis and a worsening economy marked by high unemployment and inflation. The incumbent

attacked his challenger as a right-wing extremist and warned that Reagan would cut Medicare and Social Security. The challenger promised a shining city on a hill if elected.

In the end, Reagan received only 50.7 percent of the popular vote in that election while Carter received 40 percent (Independent candidate John Anderson got 6.6 percent, which was not enough to make a difference).

So why did Reagan, who a year earlier was widely considered unelectable, win the election?

In my opinion, Reagan did not win that election. Instead Carter lost it as enough voters cast a “no” vote against him to make the difference.

The negatives that the incumbent had built up during his four years of office – and especially in the year before the election – gave voters ample reason to vote for a challenger. If, that is, they could imagine the challenger as an acceptable risk.

In that regard, the great communicator Reagan was able to calm the nerves of enough skeptical voters that voting against Carter was “permissible.” Another way to look at it: the voters who made the difference in the 1980 presidential election did not vote for Reagan, they voted against Carter.

The negatives that Carter had accumulated as president were far more powerful than the perceived negatives associated with the challenger. It was a classic case of choosing the lesser of two evils.

I believe this campaign season offers some striking parallels to the 1980 presidential election.

As we get closer to the election, President Trump’s efforts to stem the coronavirus pandemic is increasingly being perceived as inept at best. The collapse of the economy caused by a failed response eliminates the very thing that the incumbent was banking on to win the re-election – a roaring economy, full employment, and growing retirement accounts. That, and the power of incumbency, had the potential to outweigh the president’s accumulated personality-related negatives.

The result is that voters, even many of those who helped elect Trump in 2016, may find a reason to vote against him in 2020. If, that is, enough of those voters find the alternative acceptable.

That alternative, former Vice President Joe Biden, is not without his own negatives. Foremost is his age, which has diminished his level of energy both physically and, at times, mentally. This is especially apparent when he has to speak extemporaneously. Furthermore, Biden has an established record from his 36 years in the Senate which causes many in his party (especially its more progressive, left wing) to be both skeptical and unenthusiastic about him. Legislative records pose pesky problems for candidates seeking executive office, and Biden has left a lot of footprints in the snow that will surely

be used against him.

Yet Biden has the advantage of being perceived as a moderate, someone who can reach across the aisle and bring our nation together as Trump projects the polar opposite. Biden's most appealing feature, and the one that makes him more acceptable to skeptical voters, may be his "nice guy" persona. In that regard he offers a stark contrast to Trump. In the "which candidate would I rather spend an evening with?" test, Biden wins that match-up in a landslide.

I foresee an election this year that will again be decided not by the candidate that voters cast ballots for, but instead by the candidate they vote against. As in 1980, this election will be a referendum on the incumbent, Donald Trump.

I believe the odds now are against him.

Postscript from Brent:

Since emerging from his string of Super Tuesday primary victories, Joe Biden has attempted to broaden his base by appealing to the more progressive Democrats that supported Senator Bernie Sanders. He has committed to pursuing several of Sanders' policy goals and went even further by pledging he will have a female as his running mate.

These commitments are simultaneously unnecessary and risky. The large core of younger voters that were energized by Sanders are frankly irrelevant. As has been widely observed, the youth vote for Sanders has not been and will not be sufficient to ensure his nomination. Furthermore, history illustrates that young voters have not turned out for prior elections in significant numbers. There is no evidence 2020 will be any different.

Also risky is Biden's commitment to a female running mate without first citing the necessary qualifications she must have. Now, however, he may be perceived as pandering to identity politics without regard to those more serious considerations. After all, Biden will be 78 on January 20, 2021, so selecting a running mate who has the experience needed to assume the office should be of greater importance.

Such commitments cross-pressure the former Vice President's image as a moderate. Embracing (or appearing to embrace) Medicare for All, free college tuition, and elimination of college debt sends the wrong message to voters in the center (like me) who may be socially liberal but fiscally conservative.

With the odds against Trump's re-election, this race is the former Vice President's to lose.

I am honored Brent would let us share his views.

Hope you stay well: healthy, safe and reasonably sane.

John