

# Dowd on America's Dangerous Choice

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The 2016 election campaign has proved a trying one for citizens who seek sobriety, integrity, and fidelity to principle in their presidential candidates. The two major party nominees' glaring deficiencies have provoked cries of despair from many high-minded voters. But that is a luxury the nation can ill afford.

The traits the candidates lack are the ones we must now summon as we assess which nominee presents the least bad alternative.

Very few, even among his avid supporters, harbor illusions about the Republican nominee. Although he has recently toned down his rhetoric and steadied his demeanor, Donald Trump has largely conducted his campaign in keeping with the persona that he has offered to the public over the last three decades. Narcissistic, bombastic, rash, and thin-skinned -- the real estate mogul and reality TV star wears his vices on his sleeve.

Whereas Trump likes to revel in his excesses, Hillary Clinton labors to disguise her shortcomings. In this endeavor she is unsuccessful, except to core Democratic Party supporters. The forced smile, the ear-splitting laughter, and the faux Southern accent that emerges below the Mason-Dixon line -- to say nothing of the constant alterations in her tall-tale alibis for behavior that would for anybody else trigger grave legal repercussions -- all advertise a proclivity to deceive. In the public eye for as long as Trump, the former first lady, senator, and secretary of state has displayed a stunning capacity over her long career to lie brazenly, and act high-handedly and corruptly.

It would take a master journalist to capture in real time the complexities of Trump's character and Clinton's. In "The Year of Voting Dangerously," Maureen Dowd rises impressively to the challenge. As she hopes, her new book does "entertain and illuminate" while providing "a guide for desperate voters in a year when more Americans than ever are disturbed and flummoxed by their choices."

This book collects more than 75 pieces by the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist. Most of those dealing with Trump and Clinton were published during the last 12 months, but some go back to the early 1990s. In addition, Dowd features powerful guest columns by her brother Kevin Dowd, a Republican, explaining his hard decision to support Trump; by her sister Peggy Dowd—who has voted for both Democrats and Republicans—expressing the hope that Trump will get his act together and earn her vote; and a "Trump rant" by her friend, former AP White House correspondent Rita Beamish.

Dowd's exploration of the candidates' virtues and vices—as well as those of numerous stars of American politics in the 1990s and 2000s—exhibits her own strengths and weaknesses. In wickedly playful prose, and often drawing on perceptive interviewing, she cuts through partisan claptrap to expose the seamy, the thickheaded, and the grotesque in our politicians while also illuminating the amusing, and the occasionally admirable and uplifting.

Her columns, however, seldom get around to the hard tradeoffs of public policy, the intricacies of constitutional government, and the prudential judgments involved in reconciling conflicting principles. When she does turn to policy, government, and principle, she often allows her inner partisan free rein.

The Donald who emerges from Dowd's reporting and opining is recognizably the “megalomaniacal” mogul who has generated fear and loathing among Democrats and not a few conservative intellectuals and Republican stalwarts. He is also more multidimensional and intriguing.

Her Trump is a “muddle of charm, humor, zest, vulgarity, bigotry, opportunistic flexibility, brutal candor, breathtaking boorishness and outrageous opening bids on volatile issues.” The muddle, Dowd recognizes, has made a contribution to our politics: “He made monkeys out of a lot of people who had it coming, and he gleefully exposed the hypocrisy, the fund-raising excesses, and professional political vultures.” She observes that Trump “seems authentic to many Americans” because he reflects their disgust with the dysfunction built into the political status quo.

Dowd's Hillary is, if anything, even less appealing than the one on public display. Clinton is forever calculating how to “seem ‘real.’” While a “talented and tireless public servant,” the first female presidential nominee “has cleaved to a bunker mentality.” Imperious, defensive, and Machiavellian, she wears “an off-putting robe of entitlement and presumption.” As a Clinton aide mordantly explained to Dowd, “Hillary, though a Methodist, thinks of herself like an Episcopal bishop who deserves to live at the level of her wealthy parishioners, in return for devoting her life to God and good works.”

Dowd traces the roots of the unholy choice between the two major party nominees in part to flaws in Barack Obama's character.

Contrary to the progressive dogma that racism-driven opposition accounts for the president's failure to bring the nation together, she explains how his shortcomings are responsible for a good part of the mess the country is in. Obama has left government “more dysfunctional” than he found it because he lacks a disposition to engage in the cajoling, cultivating, and compromising crucial to politics in a pluralistic two-party democracy. Notwithstanding his finely crafted rhetoric, he “doesn't know how to work the system” and, worse, he “doesn't want to learn, or to even hire some clever people who can tell him how to do it or do it for him.”

Republicans, according to Dowd, are even more responsible for the country's ill-temper.

“For all the Republican establishment's self-righteous bleating,” it got what it deserved in Trump because “for years, it has fanned, stoked and exploited the worst angels among the nativists, racists, Pharisees and angry white men, concurring in anti-immigration measures, restricting minority voting, whipping up anti-Planned Parenthood hysteria and enabling gun nuts.”

Dowd herself fans, stokes, and exploits the prejudices of her New York Times readers by lacing her writings with calumnies such as the oft-refuted claim that our colleges are afflicted with “epidemics of rape” and the accusation that the Tea Party was “fixated on stopping an effort to get health care to those who couldn't afford it.”

Dowd is particularly captive to crude party-line judgments concerning George W. Bush and his administration. She declares, contrary to her own newspaper's reporting, that Bush won in 2000 thanks to his brother, Gov. Jeb Bush, who enabled George to “purloin Florida.” In her telling, moreover, Bush's decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was “nonsensical.” She casually tosses off that the war—whose declared purpose was to enforce 17 United Nations Security Council resolutions requiring Saddam Hussein to account for, dismantle, and turn over his weapons of mass destruction—was “cooked-up” and fought for “silly, macho reasons.”

Dowd's gussied up progressive platitudes about supposed conservative malfeasance exemplify her penchant to take the focus on character too far by reducing complex matters of politics and security to snarky armchair psychologizing. Even the most incisive analysis of our politicians' foibles and fine points cannot replace the painstaking gathering of facts about, and analysis of, public opinion, domestic policy, the actual operation of government institutions, and national security capabilities and threats.

Voters' exercise of sobriety, integrity, and fidelity to principle in choosing their candidates and holding officials responsible depends—in the trying year of 2016 more than ever—on journalists exercising those virtues in their reporting and opining.

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