

## **What Happens Next – Sunday January 24, 2021**

### **Despising Presidents, Orwell, Schools, and Markets (Labor, Shoes and SPACs)**

#### **Gary Fine and William Fischel QA**

Larry Bernstein:

You're making a prediction about expected hatred of Biden. In your article, you mentioned that there were certain aspects of both Nixon and Clinton that reflected some aspect of a previous generation, and it was that relationship with a previous generation that caused anger, and the new president was reflective of that generation. Can you maybe explain what you mean by that and then apply it, if you'd like, to Biden or not?

Gary Fine:

Well, okay, what I was talking about was what I call generational imprinting, which is a concept that sociologists have used in terms of thinking about reputation work. In the case of Nixon, the hatred for Nixon emerged in the late 1940s in the lead up to the McCarthy years. For Bill Clinton, it was about the concerns of the 1960s. I think we could even make the case in terms of Donald Trump that this has to do with the decade of greed of the 1980s when Trump first became a prominent public figure. For Joe Biden, it is simply the fact that you are from a particular generation doesn't generate hatred. There needs to be a story that is constructed, something that connects Biden to that previous generation. I don't think, in his case, that there is that kind of emotional power.

Larry Bernstein:

The oppositional party tries to demonize the opponent of the other party. One of the aspects that the Republicans have used to demonize Biden is reflective of his aging and his, I'll call it, ongoing dementia. If someone has created an image of someone who is aging and forgetting and getting dementia, is that something that you can't hate? Is that just like an older uncle who's, you maybe get a little bit embarrassed about that even the Democrats are saying, "Oh, there goes Joe," type of thing, but is that description opposite to someone or something you can hate?

Gary Fine:

Right. Larry, you used the word "demonize," and that's very appropriate word in many of these cases, that the figure becomes demonic. I'm not sure that simply because one is becoming elderly... It was certainly said of Ronald Reagan that he was entering Alzheimer's territory before it was clear that he was. The same was said of George W. Bush, that Bush, it was claimed, was people saw in his lack of articulateness early onset Alzheimer's. With Bush that didn't seem to be the case. It is certainly true when you're dealing with presidents who were in

their 70s, and Biden's case, perhaps into his 80s, that this kind of cognitive decline can happen, but it is not likely to build that same kind of demonization that you saw with Nixon or with Clinton or with Trump.

Larry Bernstein:

Why do you think the opposition goes down the demonization route? Why is this best for their interests? First of all, is it a rational decision, or is it irrational? I'll give you an example. There was a sense that when the Republicans decided to impeach Bill Clinton that they knew at the trial that they would lose and that it would potentially create a negative political climate and would benefit the Democrats, but when you asked Republicans at the time, "Why are you doing this?" they would say, "You know what? We can't help ourselves." I wonder, is demonization a can't-help-yourself process or is it reflect in a decision that this is probably the best way for us to regain political control?

Gary Fine:

Okay. I guess my first response would be to suggest that this kind of hatred, this revulsion is not tied to the political party as such but to a segment of the population, that it wasn't the Democratic Party despised Nixon, but there was this element of Liberals, and of Democrats, who remembered the McCarthy era and who blamed Nixon for participating.

Likewise, for Clinton, it wasn't that the Republicans, the Republican Party in 1993 despised Clinton, but there were elements who were Republicans who despised Clinton, and those elements pushed the party into, in both cases, impeachment. I think that that is probably the case today, that I'm not sure that Joe Biden, if he had his choice, would want to have another impeachment trial of Donald Trump at the early weeks of his administration, but that there is such a push by activists in the party that it can't be helped. I'm not sure if it does the party any particular good, but I mean, the Nixon impeachment, clearly, it provided the opportunity for the Democrats to make large gains in the 1974 of the congressional election, but it didn't seem to have that effect for the Clinton administration, the Clinton impeachment.

Larry Bernstein:

What's interesting is you're taking it almost position that the individual as such doesn't matter, that Clinton just represents this generation. Would your prediction be that if he was replaced by Gore that the hate would be the same for Gore as it was for Clinton? Then one other point, when Clinton left office and he was no longer at the executive, did the hatred quickly dissipate, or was it so embedded that you couldn't get rid of that anger and frustration?

Gary Fine:

Well, I think it was purely embedded. I mean, even with Nixon, I mean, there was an essay in the Washington Post recently about how Nixon reconstructed his statesmen-like role. There is a certainly a similar argument that could be made for Bill Clinton at least until the Me-Too

movement where his role is being rethought. I doubt that there would have been that same hatred for Al Gore because it's partly the creation of a narrative, creation of a story and that Nixon had those things that he did, and there is an obdurate reality to reputations, and Clinton had his actions in the 1960s and people would be able to draw upon them in a way that probably would have been less likely for one of Nixon's opponents in 1968 or for Al Gore in 2000 or 1992.

William Fischel:

Is there anybody who's tried to quantify the amount of hatred by word counts in editorials or political cartoons, or you introduced a political cartoon, that can be quantified?

Gary Fine:

Well, there had been some surveys.

William Fischel:

... and others I think are okay, but I'm kind of lost as to how I could figure out who's the most hated.

Gary Fine:

Right. There have been surveys, and the ones that I find most interesting is when you ask the public before the inauguration, "If you had to predict how successful this administration will be, will this be a great administration, good, fair, or poor," for Nixon and for Clinton, the proportion is much higher than before they even take office, they don't get the free shave. They get 10 to 20% who think that their administration will be poor before day one. That's not true for every president. That's one way of quantifying it. We perhaps can quantify now that we have Twitter, so we have much more Twitter scraping, so we have much more ability to treat what every man, every woman has to say. Newspaper editorials tend to be less dramatic than the kinds of things that I'm talking about.

Larry Bernstein:

You're in the sociology department. This is a topic that would normally be included in the political science department. What does sociology bring to this question that is different than you would find in the political science department?

Gary Fine:

Right. Well, in sociology, there is a tradition of studying collective memory, and as part of that, looking at the construction of reputations. That is how I came to this. There are a number of prominent scholars, Barry Schwartz, who just recently passed away, who's a very prominent sociologist who studied-

Larry Bernstein:

Oh, I'm sorry to hear that he had spoken on our show a few months ago. I didn't know that.

Gary Fine:

Yeah. Just a few weeks ago, he passed. His work on Lincoln and his work on Washington are instrumental or iconic in sociology. In fact, I became interested in this topic through his work. If Barry can study the great presidents, I wanted to study the worst president, and so 25 years ago, I wrote an article on how Warren G. Harding became the worst American president. I won't get into that explanation here, but sociologists study political and cultural reputations.