

If I Were Advising The Democratic Approach To The 2020 Election



Image source: Twitter

(A Roadmap To Defeating 'The Pinocchio President,' Who Likes Dictators And Demears Democratic Governments)

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Even though the Democrats haven't yet decided on their 2020 presidential candidate, the campaign for the White House has been under way even before Donald Trump was sworn in as president. But the first official Democratic primary debate, (which to me seemed more like a promotion for NBC and MSNBC than a true debate) was held June 26 and 27 in Miami. People can differ about which candidate prevailed. But one thing is certain: That will not deter wannabe's who didn't fare well from continuing flooding the cable news political shows until the presidential team is decided, (even though most of them have as much of a chance as getting on the ticket as I do).

Watching the debates reminded me of Stephen Sondheim's famous song "Send in the Clowns" from the Broadway show, "A Little

Night Music," but with one big difference: The clowns were already there, disguised as the after debate pundits with their as usual lame, same analysis.

The format of the none-debate debates was ridiculous. The questions only permitted the candidates to give sound bite type answers. Any resemblance of a genuine debate was absent. *(But what can you expect from a made for TV show? In my opinion, the format did a disservice to serious political discussions.)*

The truth about the debates is that whatever was said by the candidates doesn't matter in the long run. *(As the New York Times reported in a June 27 story, "Studies show polls don't change much after a debate.)* As the field shrinks, those remaining will have many opportunities to fully express their views in more substantial settings. The real winners were the cable TV political reporters, program hosts and pundits, who now will have fresh talking points to convince viewers that they really know until after the 2020 election *(Their commentary reminds me of the song from "Fiddler On The Roof, during which Tevye sings, "And it won't make one bit of difference if I answer right or wrong. When you're rich, they think you really know" Substitute the words 'if they have a TV mike' for "When you're rich" and it's a perfect fit.)* Their latest wrong pre first debate analysis was that everyone would go after Joe Biden. They didn't. However, in the second debate Biden was treated as if he was the enemy, not Trump. *(Better late than never, I guess.)*

Then to go from the less than sublime to the ridiculous, the well-known political experts on "The View" chimed in with their analysis. And trite phrases are always part of TV discussions. An aide to Joe Biden, shortly before the second debate, said the Democratic Party is a big tent party. *(Original, huh?)*

All the pundits went ga, ga over Kamala Harris, who while

having a compelling story, didn't talk as specific as what she would do as president as Kirsten Gillibrand, who I thought was the best of all 20 candidates.

Most people know me because of my career in [public relations](#) at Burson-Marsteller, where as a senior VP/senior counselor I restructured, managed and played key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports programs and traveled the world with high-ranking government officials as a media advisor.

But prior to joining B-M, I was a reporter and editor at New York City newspapers and also worked on local, state, and presidential campaigns at a political PR firm. Thus, while I don't do it often, I feel I have the background to give political PR advice to candidates. ` (I last did so privately regarding a local race in Westchester County, N.Y. and publicly in a July 2016 column titled, "If I Was Hillary Clinton's PR Person." *(Trust me on this: You don't have to be a member of Mensa to give political advice. In the political realm, common sense means more than a high IQ.)*)

Here's an excerpt from my 2016 Clinton column:

"After listening to the Republican congressional assaults on the FBI director and Clinton, if ever an aggressive counter attack against the GOP inquisitors was called for, now is the time.

"Here's what I would advise:

"Ms. Clinton is constantly criticized by the media for not being available. Now, as the GOP promises to keep her email use in play throughout the presidential campaign, she should make herself more available to the media.

- "She should hold a lengthy press conference during which she would apologize and again say she made a mistake and answer all media questions. Certainly she has had the time to perfect

answers to any questions that might arise. She should do that ASAP.

-“She should go on friendly TV talk shows answering the host’s questions.

-“At the same time, her surrogates should increase attacking Donald Trump’s statements, character and business failures 24/7 every day until after the election. The Hillary backers should make themselves available for all media requests.”

Well, my advice about Ms. Clinton’s media approach was ignored and we all know what happened. (*I’d say, “I told you so. But I’m not that kind of a guy.”*)

Here’s my free, unasked for, but pretty good advice to all Democratic candidates, regardless of what elective office they’re seeking.

-When selecting a candidate, electability should be the only consideration.

-Don’t give in to the extremist elements of your party by pushing for the impeachment of President Trump; instead hold continuous Congressional hearings on his administrations wrong doings. (The GOP-controlled Senate will not convict anyway.)

-Don’t give in to the far left elements of your party. Most Americans don’t like extremes of the left or right. (Remember, Trump lost the popular vote.)

-Don’t nominate for national office candidates like Bernie Sanders, who was responsible for dividing Democrats in 2016. Instead, nominate candidates that can be tolerated by all segments of Americans.

-Democratic candidates should play up Trump’s call for people to break the law: Examples: The border patrols and current and former White House officials to ignore lawful congressional subpoenas should be an on-on going theme. (The candidates

should emphasize that if Joe and Jane Smith ignored subpoenas, they'd have to face a judge.)

-Give some young liberal faces, but not extremists like Reps. AOC or Ilhan Abdullahi Omar, media time to better prepare them for future national election runs. (Watching the elderly male Democratic leadership reminds me of a visit to a prostate clinic.)

-One of the candidates on the presidential ticket should have a military background to contrast Trump's dodging military service. And speak often about Trump's armchair patriotism, which includes five draft deferments. (Not to worry Joe, Elizabeth, et al; even though I have military experience I will decline the nomination if offered.)

-Do not spend the months until the presidential election demonizing Trump. Instead, give specifics of how Democratic legislation on healthcare, economic matters, climate change and civil rights will benefit all Americans, regardless of party affiliation, and emphasize how his executive orders have harmed Americans.

-Playing off the government shut down, a call for bipartisanship should be part of every candidate's speech.

-A major facet of the Democrats' campaign messages should be, "We must come together like one country," in contrast to Trump's divide and conquer actions. But always with specific talking points and legislative proposals without telling people that details are on the candidate's web page, as Hillary Clinton did.

-But the presidential candidate must have the ability to go toe-to-toe with Trump, as Sen. Elizabeth Warren does. (Remember how Michelle Obama's Democratic convention speech, which included her, "when they go low, we go high" worked out. Not good.)

-Because the healthcare issue worked so well for the Democrats in the 2018 midterm election, and a Republican-appointed Federal judge declared the Affordable Care Act unconstitutional, Democrats should make healthcare their number one talking point.

-The corruption of Trump allies and appointees should be a constant talking point and they should be subjects of Congressional hearings.

-Democrats too often emphasize and campaign on a few issues, like women's rights, civil rights, health care and illegal, *yes illegal*, immigration rights, (*I prefer to use the English language as it was written, not the revisionist language created by far left liberals and the despicable verbiage of far right conservatives*), The GOP has effectively campaigned with a more expansive message –taxes, jobs, bringing back manufacturing to the U.S., fairer trade agreements, keeping our military strong, and not automatically blaming the police for everything; issues which obviously appeals to more Americans. Democrats and their candidates should do the same.

-Do not make it a must to include a person of color, a specific religion or a woman on the national ticket, the so-called balanced ticket. Nominate candidates with a long history of service to the United States who are popular and familiar to the public.

-When selecting a presidential candidate, electability should be the only consideration.

-Unfortunately, television plays a large part in our politics. Candidates should be able to shine on television.

-Because so many colleagues of the president have been indicted or have pleaded guilty of crimes, Democrats should push for numerous debates so they can continually refer to the crimes.

-Candidates should stop acting like the ‘sky is falling’ as many Democratic office holders did during the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court hearings, or when legislation is passed that they dislike. They should study the style of how Sen. Dick Durbin acts in committee hearings and during TV interviews, calm and to the point. Much more effective than shouting.

-Unlike the Sanders supporters in 2016, Democratic presidential candidates should disavow a “my way or no way” philosophy and emphasize the need to compromise. Falling on your petard to prove a point is self-defeating; only by winning can change be affected. *(Personally, I prefer the philosophy of the ancient Greeks Tacitus and Demosthenes, depending on which search site you use, who are credited with saying, “He that fights and runs away, may turn and fight another day; But he that is in battle slain, Will never rise to fight again.)’*

-Candidates should not give in to vocal protesters. They make a lot of noise but accomplish nothing. *(Republican voters are quieter, but on Election Day they vote.)*

-Democratic candidates should study the political playbook of a flawed, paranoid, but politically brilliant Republican president, whose policies today would be denounced by most of his party as leftish thinking, Richard Nixon. Nixon knew that when it came to voting, the silent majority was more important than the vocal minority.

-The presidential candidate should stay away from good sounding but meaningless campaign slogans. Hillary Clinton’s “Stronger Together” shtick meant nothing to voters, who were in dire need of government help. President Trump’s “Make America Great” slogan could appeal to everyone and was better than Clinton’s slogan. *(She might as well have had bumper stickers with the proverb, “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.”)*

-Democrats should remember that saying taking care of America's problems first is not a crime.

-During the 2016 campaign, the problems of minority populations in the U.S. were a major talking point. But the 2020 candidates should emphasize that there are many Americans who are not in the media designated minority population who also need help and the candidates should not be shy of saying so.

-I would urge Democrats to establish a fast response "truth squad" and shadow President Trump as he travels the country so they can challenge his statements within a few minutes of his making them.

-Democrats should also establish a second fast response team that can tap into fast-breaking news with immediate responses.

-The Democratic candidate should run a 50 state campaign and not ignore "sure thing states" as Hillary Clinton did in 2016.

-The Democratic candidate should ignore Trump's comments; responses to the president's vulgarities and lies should be delegated to others.

-When selecting a presidential candidate, electability should be the only consideration.

-The national ticket should have at least one individual from mid-America.

-The national ticket should have at least one individual new to presidential politics, but has been elected in state-wide and/or congressional elections, the exception being a career military person who is new to politics.

-The leaders of the Democratic congressional committees should adapt a "death by a thousand cuts" strategy regarding Trump: Keep talking about his impeachable actions, but never move to impeach. Instead, keep investigating his abusive deeds in

public hearings. However, if Trump should win reelection, they should commence impeachment immediately.

-My advice to all candidates is not to believe the polls. Campaign as if you're neck-and-neck with your opponent, even though polls show you have a decided advantage. Remember 2016 and the thin margin of victory for many candidates in 2018.

-A good visual gimmick for the presidential and vice-presidential candidates would be to create "Trump Lies Update" charts, which they would refer to at each rally and also be disseminated via twitter to all news outlets.

-It's important not to make Trump a martyr by impeaching him. Best to let him implode by his own petard.

-And Very Important: Primary voters should tune out hosts, reporters and pundits on the cable political shows, whose only interest is gaining greater viewership by creating controversy and describing every drizzle as if it was a hurricane. One of the attention-grabbing gimmicks these entertainment shows use is to play up the "surprising" strength of losers like Beto O'Rourke of Texas and Stacey Abrams of Georgia, both losing candidates. **Instead, vote for candidates that were elected.** (*I truly believe that many of these TV pundits and hosts secretly are hoping for a Trump reelection because if he loses, they'll have nothing to talk about.*)

-Democratic primary voters should be pragmatic and not follow the road map of far left candidates like Bernie Sanders and AOC. Following their road map leaves to a second term for Trump.

-“Promises not kept” should be a major theme of Democratic candidates. Doing so will enrage Trump and his thin skin and over-sized ego will have him lash out like a mad man.

-Unlike Trump, Democratic candidates should not demean primary opponents. They must remember that whatever they say will be

used by GOP operatives during the general election. *(Thus far, and during the comical and laughable TV spectacles, promoted as debates, the wannabbes are acting like a circular firing squad.)*

-Candidates should show independence to voters by condemning appalling statements by members of their own party, like Reps. AOC, Ilhan Omar and James E. Clyburn's, all of whom publicly made remarks that many people believe are anti-Semitic and/or disparaging of the Holocaust. *(The Democrats refusal to strongly criticize members of their caucus reminds me of the GOP's Eleventh Commandment – "Thou shalt not speak ill of any fellow Republican" that was popularized by President Ronald Reagan in 1966. **History Lesson:** While largely attributed to Reagan, he did not originate the phrase.)*

-My final bit of advice is for Democratic candidates to study and learn President Trump's 2016 strategy.

Donald Trump is a flawed president whose popularity is not that great among the general public. In order to defeat him, Democrats must not play to the extreme leftish elements of their party. They must choose a candidate who appeals to the majority of Americans, which will give them an opportunity to win back Democrats who voted for Trump in 2016 and 2018, plus the independent vote.

But there is a lot that the Democrats can learn from President Trump. Democrats' campaign messages are largely idealistic, like bringing fairness and equality to all facets of our society, even though many of these goals can not practically be accomplished for generations, if ever. Too often their campaigners remind me of Don Quixote, tilting at windmills while striving to achieve an impossible dream. Those talking points and goals are fine to discuss after an election, but during a campaign realistic, pragmatic objectives should be proposed.

Trump, on the other hand, campaigns on issues that are relative to today's news that engages both pro and anti-Trump voters – like the immigration issue, crime, jobs being lost to other countries, NATO countries not paying what they are supposed to, America not being the world's policeman and even the controversy regarding actor Jussie Smollett, who was arrested for faking what he said was a racial and homophobic attack, and then had charges against him dismissed. Even if all of Trump's comments are not true, these are issues that people not knowledgeable about the fine print details of important issues can still discuss and have opinions about; few can discuss the tax loopholes, the specifics of the Green New Deal and how to bring the country together, issues that Democratic candidates rage about. These esoteric subjects should be replaced with bread and butter objectives that every one can understand – like better health care, job creation and keeping America safe from terrorist attacks.

The eventual presidential candidate should study Trump's 2016 campaign playbook and copy parts of it by making themselves available to every TV show and also calling in when programs are in progress, as the president did. It was a brilliant strategy that kept Trump in front of the public eye at times when he wasn't actually at campaign rallies.

Trump also outsmarts the Democrats in securing third party endorsements. For years, Democrats have sought the backing of Hollywood stars; Trump, on the other hand, relies on law enforcement officials and family member who have had relatives killed during crimes for his staged TV endorsements. *(Much more moving than having another song sung by an entertainer whose first name is an affected spelling of Barbara.)*

Instead of being so idealistic, Democrats should become more pragmatic. Often they don't seem to realize that only winners have the ability to create change.

Politico pros might disagree with my advice. But there is one

thing that I am certain of: Who ever wins the Democratic presidential nomination must get a new set of advisors for the national campaign, because the Republican consultants are much better. Twice the GOP nominee was elected president, despite Democratic candidates Al Gore and Hillary Clinton winning the popular vote.

The most important advice that I have is: **When selecting a presidential candidate, electability should be the only consideration.**

What does the above have to do with public relations? Everything. Watching the White House briefings of Sarah Huckabee Sanders provides lessons in how not to treat the press. And watching how GOP surrogates like Rudy Giuliani, Kellyanne Conway, and too many others to name, shows that when selecting a spokesperson how important it is to choose someone who is respected and believed by the press; also that fudging or outright lying will not deter the press from seeking the truth. And as novice PR practitioners will soon learn, the press is not impressed by corporate titles or organizations when they suspect wrong doing. President Trump can confirm this.

The lessons learned from paying attention to the political scene can be applied to many PR situations that many of us will have to deal with during our careers. Over the years, I have told many PR people that they can get tuition free media relations lessons by paying attention to the political scene. Another way is to volunteer for a campaign. Candidates for minor offices don't have the funds to hire expensive PR people. They will value your contribution. Both methods were true yesterday and are still true today.

But one of the most important lessons that young PR people can learn from the political scene has to do with dealing with their immediate supervisors and top agency management. It is to remember what Niccolò Machiavelli, *an Italian political*

theorist wrote in "The Prince:" – "The *promise given* was a necessity of the past: the word broken is a necessity of the present." It was written in 1513 but it could have been written today by agency execs and politicians.

And my own advice to those who live or die for a candidate of either party: 1- "Don't believe everything your candidate promises to do. You'll surely be lied to and also be disappointed." 2- Listen to candidates regardless of their party; you might learn something, and 3- if you are a

Democrat and want your vote to count on the presidential or congressional level don't vote for dividers, like Ralph Nader, Bernie Sanders. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. or Ilhan Abdullahi Omar. Vote for candidates wiling to compromise because, short of a violent revolution, history shows negotiations are the pathway to progress.



About the Author: Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller, and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports programs. He also traveled internationally as a media adviser to high-ranking government officials. He now is a frequent contributor to public relations publications, consults on public relations projects and is on the Seoul Peace Prize nominating committee. He can be reached at **arthursolomon4pr (at) juno.com** and ArtSolomon4pr@optimumnet.