

# We Need ‘Somebody Spectacular’: Views From Trump Country

Appalachian voters know perfectly well the candidate is dangerous. But they’re desperate for change.

Op-Ed Columnist

By ROGER COHEN    SEPT. 9, 2016

Paris, Ky. — After Bill Bissett, the president of the Kentucky Coal Association, told me that “President Obama cares more about Paris, France, than he does about Paris, Kentucky” — a sentiment that seems broadly shared around here — I decided to check out this little town with a big name set amid the verdant undulations of picket-fenced Kentucky horse country. Soon enough I ran into Cindy Hedges, whose boot store stands on Main Street and whose hours, as described by a sign on the door, are: “If I’m here, I’m here. If I ain’t, I ain’t.”

Straight talk, the way the people of this particular Paris like it, is the kind of talk they recognize in Donald J. Trump. Hedges is a garrulous woman who says she’s “never met a stranger.” But recent times have tried her affability. Her business has been slow. Her husband, Mitch, lost his job as the coal business collapsed, she has been withdrawing money from savings, and the couple are struggling to afford health insurance. All of which has led her to the conviction that the country is off track and needs “somebody spectacular to get us halfway straight.”

For her, that somebody is Trump. She voted for Barack Obama in 2008, and says her political choices are gut-driven rather than party-driven. “I have never

been this political,” she tells me. “This is the most fired-up I’ve ever been for a candidate.” She believes Trump will get business going, revoke trade deals she sees as draining domestic jobs, and “clean up the mess Obama has left us.” But what, I ask, of Trump’s evident character flaws? “Sure, he’s kind of a loose cannon, but he tells it the way it is and, if elected, people will be there to calm him down a bit, tweak a word or two in his speeches. And I just don’t trust Hillary Clinton.”

Kentucky voted twice for Bill Clinton before going solidly Republican in presidential elections. Now Kentuckians are clambering aboard the Trump train — and to heck with its destination. Obama is blamed for the collapse of coal, particularly in eastern Kentucky, and the ever more stringent standards of the Environmental Protection Agency. Beyond that, the blame is aimed at airy-fairy liberals more concerned about climate change — often contested or derided — than about Americans trying to make their house payments.

The number of Kentucky coal jobs has plunged to fewer than 6,500 from about 18,000 when Obama took office; the number fell 6.9 percent between this April and June alone. Hillary Clinton’s words in Ohio — “We’re going to put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business” — echo on Republican radio ads, plucked out of context from her pledge to replace those jobs with opportunities in clean, renewable energy. By contrast, Trump declared in West Virginia in May that miners should “get ready, because you are going to be working your asses off!”

“I don’t believe Obama has a white board on how he’s going to torture us, but he has,” Bissett told me at his office in Lexington. “I cannot tell you how rabid the support for Trump is.”

That support is proving resilient. The post-convention Trump free fall has run into the obstinacy of his appeal — an appeal that seems to defy every gaffe, untruth and insult. The race is tightening once again because Trump’s perceived character — a strong leader with a simple message, never flinching from a fight, cutting through political correctness with a bracing bluntness — resonates in places like Appalachia where courage, country and cussedness are core values.

“Trump’s appeal is nationalistic, the authoritarian shepherd of the flock,” Al Cross, an associate professor at the University of Kentucky, told me. “That’s why evangelical Christians are willing to vote for this twice-divorced man who brags

about the size of his penis. There's a strong belief here still in America as special and exceptional, and Obama is seen as having played that down."

But the Trump magnetism goes deeper than resentment at Obama's regretful tone from Havana to Hiroshima. It seems to go beyond the predictable Republican domination in this part of the country. There's a sense, crystallized in coal's steady demise, that, as the political scientist Norman Ornstein put it to me, "Somebody is taking everything you are used to and you had" — your steady middle-class existence, your values, your security. It's not that the economy is bad in all of Kentucky; the arrival of the auto industry has been a boon, and the unemployment rate is just 4.9 percent. It's that all the old certainties have vanished.

Far from the metropolitan hubs inhabited by the main beneficiaries of globalization's churn, many people feel disenfranchised from both main political parties, angry at stagnant wages and growing inequality, and estranged from a prevailing liberal urban ethos. I heard a lot about how Obama has not been supportive enough of the police, of how white lives matter, too, and of how illegal — as in illegal immigrant — means illegal, just as robbing a bank is. For anyone used to New York chatter, or for that matter London or Paris chatter, Kentucky is a through-the-looking-glass experience. There are just as many certainties; they are simply the opposite ones, whether on immigration, police violence toward African-Americans, or guns. America is now tribal, with each tribe imbibing its own social-media-fed ranting.

The Clintons were feted here in the 1990s, but two decades on Hillary Clinton is viewed with cool suspicion. That's because both the economy and values have moved on, too. Jobs went south to Mexico or east to Asia. Somewhere on the winding road from whites-only bathrooms to choose-your-gender bathrooms, many white, blue-collar Kentucky workers — and the state is 85.1 percent white — feel their country got lost. The F.D.R. Democrats who became Reagan Democrats and then Clinton Democrats could well be November's Trump Democrats.

America is no longer white enough for that to be decisive, but it is significant. To these people, Trump's "Make America Great Again" is not the empty rhetoric of a media-savvy con artist from Queens but a last-ditch rallying cry for the soul of a changing land where minorities will be the majority by the middle of the century.

Hazard, set in the mountains of eastern Kentucky, is a once bustling town with its guts wrenched out. On Main Street, the skeleton of a mall that burned down last year presents its charred remains for dismal contemplation. Young people with drugged eyes lean against boarded-up walls on desolate streets. The whistle of trains hauling coal, once as regular as the chiming of the hours, has all but vanished. So have the coal trucks spewing splinters of rock that shattered windshields. In the age of cheap natural gas and mountaintop removal mining, a coal town is not where you want to be.

Hazard is in Perry County, where unemployment is above 10 percent. On a bench opposite the county courthouse, on the Starbucks-free Main Street, I found Steve Smith and Paul Bush. Smith used to work underground at the Starfire mine. He earned as much as \$1,500 a week, but was laid off a while ago. His unemployment has dried up and he has four children to feed. His family scrapes by on his wife's income as a nurse. He'd been in court over a traffic offense; now an idle afternoon stretched away.

"Trump's going to get us killed, probably!" he told me. "But I'll vote for him anyway over Hillary. If you vote for Hillary you vote for Obama, and he's made it impossible to ship coal. This place is about dried up. A job at Wendy's is the only thing left. We may have to move."

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“Yeah, another year without change and they’ll be shutting Hazard down,” Bush suggested.

He was awaiting his son, in court on a drug charge for the painkiller Percocet. A retired operator of heavy equipment for the Road Department, Bush said his son did nothing, “just a few odd jobs.” He continued: “Obama’s probably never known hardship. He and Hillary don’t get it. At least Trump don’t hold nothing back: If he don’t like something, he tells you about it.”

His son’s girlfriend emerged from the courthouse. “They locked him up,” she said.

“Why?”

“He failed one of the drug tests.”

“Well, ain’t nothin’ we can do about it,” Bush said.

There are people here who are not resigned, people thinking about what can be done about a post-coal Hazard. Self-reliance remains an important Appalachian value even if many people are “on the draw.” An initiative backed by Congressman Hal Rogers, a Republican, to bring broadband access to rural areas in Kentucky has been announced.

Jenny Williams, an English teacher at Hazard Community and Technical College, told me it’s past time to get over divisions between “Friends of Coal” — a popular movement and bumper sticker — and anti-coal environmentalists to forge a creative economy around agriculture, ecotourism, education and small-scale manufacture. Coal, she observed, was never going to last forever. “How could any idiot support Trump?” she said. “But when you’ve been on \$70,000 a year in coal mines, and your life’s pulled out from under you, who else can you be mad at but the government?”

That anger simmers. It’s directed at Obama, and by extension Clinton, and by further extension a Democratic Party that, as the former Democratic senator Jim Webb from Virginia told me, “has now built its constituency based on ethnic groups other than white working people.” The frustration of these people, whether they are in Kentucky, or Texas, or throughout the Midwest, is acute. They are

looking for “someone who will articulate the truth of their disenfranchisement,” as Webb put it. Trump, for all his bullying petulance, has come closest to being that politician, which is why millions of Americans support him.

Bissett, the Coal Association president, made clear to me that he did not dismiss the emissions concerns about coal; what bothers him is what he sees as Obama’s and the E.P.A.’s refusal to seek a reasonable balance between the economy and the environment. The administration, he argues, has moved the goal posts to kill coal. It is this that feels punitive. For example, the E.P.A.’s Clean Power Plan, first presented in 2014 with no backing from Congress, requires every state to submit proposals for reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 2018. The Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision, blocked the initiative early this year. But that was just before Justice Antonin Scalia died. “We need Trump for a reasonable Supreme Court and an E.P.A no longer skewed against fossil fuels,” Bissett argued. “A lot of jobs here still depend on coal and cheap electricity. That’s why Clinton is toxic right now.”

At Jabo’s Coal River Grille, a popular restaurant in Hazard, I met Phillip Clemons, known as “Jabo” (“perhaps because I used to box”). He owns the Locust Grove mining company, with 15 employees, down from 150. As a hedge, he opened the restaurant, where he was working a shift to keep payroll down. He called the election a “terrible choice,” but he’s with Trump, because he believes that, as a businessman, Trump will respect the need to “balance the books,” past bankruptcies notwithstanding. “Obama just hates coal,” he said. “I don’t dislike people because of their color. I liked Herman Cain a lot. I can tell you the only black person who’s ever been mean to me is Barack Obama.”

What’s happened to eastern Kentucky is devastating, but far from unique. At France’s diner, another popular Hazard hangout, Daniel Walker, who works from home for a medical software company, told me: “Look, I lived for a while in Mansfield, Ohio, and General Motors moved its stamping plant there to Mexico, with the loss of thousands of factory jobs. The decent middle-class life is gone.” There are many places, here and abroad, where people feel shoved aside by technology and cheap global labor, leading them to seek radical political answers. Trump is one of those answers; Brexit, the surprise British vote to leave the European Union, was another; the fall of Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany

next year could be a third, after she trailed an anti-immigrant party in a local election this month.

Trump can't reverse globalization. Nor is he likely to save coal in an era of cheap natural gas. His gratuitous insults, evident racism, hair-trigger temper and lack of preparation suggest he would be a reckless, even perilous, choice for the Oval Office. I don't think he is a danger to the Republic because American institutions are stronger than Trump's ego, but that the question even arises is troubling.

Still, in a climate where disruption is sought at any cost (whether political in Hazard or economic in Silicon Valley), it would be foolhardy to suggest that Trump cannot win. He can; and he can in part because of the liberal intellectual arrogance that dismisses the economic, social and cultural problems his rise has underscored. Whatever happens in November, these problems will persist, and it will take major public and private investment and an unlikely rebirth of bipartisanship in Washington to make any dent in them.

Back in Paris — the Kentucky one — I sit down in a coffee shop with Cindy Hedges and her husband, Mitch. He worked for more than 30 years as a welder and then a supervisor in a factory that refurbished mining equipment. It was dirty work — coal is black, grease is black, hydraulic oil is black — but it was a good living. He lost his job in February, before returning on a temporary contract a couple of weeks ago, and when I ask him why his full-time employment disappeared, the answer is by now familiar: the E.P.A. and Obama, for whom, like his wife, he voted in 2008. But when I turn to this political season, he springs a surprise.

“Look, there's nobody to vote for,” he says. “Trump is an idiot, he pisses everyone off, he's scary, he'll pump his mouth off to some foreign country and we'll be at war. He's a billionaire on a power trip with as much reason to be president as I have. If Trump had shut up, he'd win the election. So do you vote for the one who's going to lie, or the one who takes you to war? I'm leaning Hillary.”

“Oh, come on, Mitch!” says Cindy.

“What? With Bill Clinton the economy was rolling. I was working a 50-hour week

and my 401 (k) outperformed my salary. He's going to be advising Hillary, suggesting she needs to do this or this."

"They don't get along, Mitch."

"Well, I'm scared of Trump."

"I guess we'll cancel each other out then," says Cindy.

At the boot store, Carrie McCall, a FedEx driver, appears with a package.

"I love Trump," she declares. "He shoots from the hip."

But, I ask, isn't that dangerous?

"I don't care. After all we've been through, I just don't care."

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A version of this op-ed appears in print on September 11, 2016, on page SR1 of the New York edition with the headline: We Need 'Somebody Spectacular'.