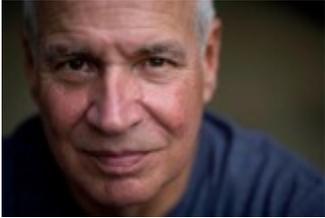


Democratic Strategist Sees Trump As 'Incredible Hulk'

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(CN) - The first tentative signs of spring are in bloom just beyond the porch of David "Mudcat" Saunders' home on the banks of Bank Creek in Roanoke, Virginia.

But it's not the arrival of warmer weather that's on the Democratic political strategist's mind as he lights an unfiltered Camel cigarette, and promptly curses the addiction he once thought he had licked.

"It's the darnedest thing," he tells a reporter almost apologetically.

"I quit for seven years, and then I started working on Mark Warner's campaign [for Virginia governor in 2001,] and this time, it's just so much harder to quit," he says in a drawl thick with the history of the southern Appalachians he calls home.

What's much on the mind of late of the man who served as chief strategist of former Sen. John Edwards' 2008 presidential campaign is another "darnedest thing," the state of the current race for the White House.

Unlike many pundits, Saunders says he understands perfectly well how Donald Trump, a New York billionaire never reputed to have a common touch, has emerged as a populist hero and the current frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination.

"The media act like they're so surprised by the Trump phenomena, but that's because most of those who are covering this race rarely if ever get outside the [Washington] Beltway," he says. "They don't see the rest of the country or the problems we're having here in rural America."

He continues: "Everybody says his appeal is based on anger. Is there anger? Yes. But what is the source of the anger? It's more than simple frustration. It's a matter of survival. I mean, people on the coasts assume the recession is over, but people out here -- and in much of the rest of the country -- are still living day-to-day."

Saunders, who worked as a developer in Roanoke before getting into politics, is widely credited with playing key roles in Mark Warner's election as governor of Virginia, and in Jim Webb's election to the U.S. Senate in 2006, ousting one-time GOP star George Allen.

In political circles he's best known for encouraging Democratic candidates to respect and be mindful of rural culture as a way to break down the barriers that have kept conservative blue collar white males who nevertheless identify themselves as Democrats -- so-called "Blue Dog Democrats" -- from voting for the party's candidates in large numbers.

Many call this approach "adopting a Bubba strategy," a conscious decision to embrace the so-called NASCAR vote in all its permutations.

Saunders maintains rural America won't prosper -- and literally might not survive -- unless they do.

"If you look at the primaries and caucuses that have been held to date, the people Trump is appealing to are those caught in a real bind," he says. "When it comes to the South, the Republicans take rural America for granted, and the Democrats don't think they can get our vote, so what ends up happening? We're forgotten."

Saunders co-authored a book expounding on that contention with political strategist Steve Jarding. It's called

"Foxes in the Henhouse" How the Republicans Stole the South and the Heartland, and What the Democrats Must Do to Run 'Em Out."

Today he maintains that reality created a vacuum that Trump has been able exploit, and while the frontrunner's opponents have made some inroads in the primaries of late, Saunders says it may well be too late for the Republican establishment -- or anybody else -- to take Trump down.

"He's like the Incredible Hulk," Saunders says. "You can hit him with a missile and he only gets stronger. I mean, the fact that they are hitting him, that they are unified and hitting him, is angering a lot of people. I know of at least five or six Democrats -- granted they're 'Blue Dog' Democrats -- who voted for Trump in the Republican primary here."

He suggests this could mean trouble for former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton if she eventually secures the Democratic nomination and squares off against Trump in the fall.

"I'm not going to vote for her, and outside of 'Yellow Dog' Democrats -- those who it's said would even vote for a yellow dog if it were labeled a Democrat -- I don't see many Democrats here in southwest Virginia who are going to support her," he said.

Here it should be noted that Saunders, whose gift for a colorful quote has made him a favorite of reporters and a frequent guest of Rachel Maddow and Stephen Colbert, has never been shy about his disdain for the Clintons.

Asked to explain this distaste, Saunders pulls no punches.

"It's because I know who they are and I know what they stand for ... I mean, the trade policies and energy policies and a host of other policies of the Bill Clinton administration decimated our culture here in the mountains of Virginia and in the rest of rural America," he says.

"I'm an economic populist. I believe in social justice and economic fairness, and I sincerely believe there is no economic fairness anywhere that the Clintons go," he continues.

"Donald Trump has warts. Anybody that's done as much business as he has -- as a developer .. is going to have things that have gone wrong with contractors, with subcontractors, lawyers and so on ... but once you start talking about economic fairness -- Hillary doesn't have warts, she's got more boils than Job.

"And I say this as a Democrat. I am a Democrat. I am not supporting Hillary Clinton because Democrats don't support crony capitalism," he says.

Saunders believes that a prolonged period of economic stagnation and political stalemate has ushered in a new age of populism not unlike those that existed in the 1830s, during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, and at the turn of the 20th century, during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt.

"Every now and then you've got to level the playing field," Saunders says. "It simply has to happen. And that's because since the dawn of time, the big son of a bitch has kicked the little son of a bitch's ass ... and if you don't watch that situation closely, it can really get out of control.

"The good thing is, there are more little sons of bitches than there are big sons of bitches ... and the little one's can take care of that problem at the ballot box -- if they can get on the same page, without the distraction of social issues."

Saunders believes economics trumps everything else in politics, and that when it comes to economics, the challenges poor and even middle class blacks and whites are experiencing in the United States are not so different.

"They're really mirror images of each other," he says. "Somehow or another we have to get these two groups, in urban America and in rural America, on the same page. Once they are -- and here I'll quote Jim Webb -- 'it will lead to the greatest realignment in modern political history.'"

"Then you'll really see things happen," he adds.

Eventually, the conversation comes around to the nastiness of the current campaign. Saunders, who first worked with Edwards on his 2004 presidential campaign, before taking a larger role four years later, in the North Carolinian's second stab at the presidency, almost laughs at those who seem to think this is something new.

"Oh ... God ... no. Nastiness is nothing new to presidential politics. People forget, but in 2008 it was terrible," he says.

"Now, I like certain amount of nastiness, to be perfectly honest with you. The nastiness doesn't bother me. If you say someone is being 'untruthful' or you say that they're lying, what's the difference?" he continues.

"And to tie this back to what we were just talking about, I believe populism talks in a loud voice," Saunders says.

"The populism movement in the 20th century really got started with William Jennings Bryan. I don't think there's ever been any political rhetoric louder than the Cross of Gold speech," Saunders said.

William Jennings Bryan, a former U.S. representative from Nebraska, delivered his most famous public remarks, the Cross of Gold speech, at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago on July 9, 1896. At the time, Americans were bitterly divided over the nation's monetary standard. Bryan advocated argued -- loudly -- against adopting the gold standard as the basis of the United States' monetary system, declaring "you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."

The speech, often called one of the greatest political speeches in American history, electrified his listeners and helped secure the Democratic presidential nomination for Bryan. He eventually lost the general election to Republican William McKinley, and the United States adopted the gold standard in 1900.

"Trump is loud and he tells it like it is," Saunders says. "And if he does as well as I think he will, I think he'll really take it to Hillary in the general election."

Which is not to say Saunders thinks Sen. Bernie Sanders has no chance. In fact, he genuinely believes the senator from Vermont is the better Democratic candidate. While Sanders has been winning a number of primaries of late, Saunders feels the candidate should be doing much, much better.

"I look at these exit polls -- I'm thinking specifically of NBC's exit polling during the Alabama primary -- and the opinions expressed seem completely upside down to me," Saunders says.

"Eighty-one percent of the people polled said Hillary Clinton was trustworthy, and only 18 percent said Bernie was trustworthy -- how in the hell can anybody who knows anything say Bernie Sanders isn't trustworthy?" he says.

"I mean, you might not agree with him, but his reputation for trustworthiness is impeccable. He's saying the same things now that he said 30 years ago," he adds, clearly chagrined.

Saunders has no doubt that Sanders will continue to win primaries, but says that in the end, "it will be extremely difficult for him to get the nomination."

"Still, I'm proud of him because the one thing he's done is brought economic fairness to the forefront of the Democratic party. He's introduced the subject into the conversation and people are talking about it. I mean, did you hear Hillary's victory speech on Super Tuesday? She talked about economic fairness, and about having to stop Wall Street.

"Now, I didn't believe a minute of it, but she sounded more like William Jennings Bryan than William Jefferson Clinton, and I think that's directly attributable to Sanders being in the race," he says.

Understandably, in the midst of primary season, Saunders speaks a lot about personalities and strategy. Those he likes and those he dislikes. For a moment though, he reflects on his own experiences and the lessons he learned while on the presidential campaign trail with Edwards.

"The first race, in 2004, was fun," Saunders says. "I was just coming off the successful Warner campaign in 2001 -- a contest in which we got the majority of the rural vote in Virginia, the first time any statewide candidate had done so in 40 years -- and John called saying he'd decided to run for president.

"This was in January 2002, and up to then, I'd really been focused on state races, so Washington was really something. I remember being like, 'There's Joe Lieberman!' 'There's Teddy Kennedy!' And the funny thing is, I suddenly found myself becoming friends with these people.

"I mean, Ted Kennedy's politics and my politics were coming from a dramatically different place, but once I met him and talked to him, I saw him in a completely different light. In fact, I called him shortly before he died, and he was very up front about what was going on and what he was going through.

"And I said, 'Well, look, I just called to say that for years I called you every kind of name in the book, but you won.'"

"He said, 'How did I win?'"

"I said, 'Well, now that I gotten to know you, I love you.' He laughed at that. But seriously, he was one of the funniest and most wonderful people to be around that I've ever met. So meeting those people and the excitement of that and other things is what I associate with 2004 campaign.

"These people who appeared larger than life before then were just people, just like me," Saunders says.

"As for 2008, it was just hell. And I had already been through the experience once, so I knew some of the hardships I was going to experience. But that brings me back to Trump. For all his bluster, I think he was honest when he said running for president is a lot harder than he thought it was going to be.

"I mean, a presidential campaign is the most hellish thing that you can ever go through in your life. No sleep. Different time zones. You can't stay in the same hotel room two nights in a row. You're constantly on the move. You're trying to catch naps on the bus. I mean, it's awful.

"And then, as we talked about before, there is all the nastiness that goes along with it," Saunders says. "If there's anything Donald Trump has found out this year it's that running for president isn't quite what he thought it was going to be."

Saunders' thoughts back in the present, he says he thinks the high volume and often toxic Republican primary battle has benefitted Clinton by deflecting the national conversation away from her record and the ongoing FBI investigation into her use of a private email server while she was secretary of state.

In the end, though, Sanders doesn't think the certain refocusing of attention and the mudslinging of the autumn will be Clinton's undoing in the general election.

"I think so long as Trump stays on course and keeps talking about economic fairness, he wins ... I really believe that. I think what the electorate has told us to date is that they're willing to vote for Trump, with all the uncertainty that comes with that.

"In a contest pitting Clinton against Trump, a vote for Hillary is a vote for more of the same, and a large number of people are telling us they don't want that," he says.

"Which again brings up what I think is the biggest problem Hillary has in this race, when it comes time to vote for either her or Trump, I think a lot of Democrats will sit out the general election," Saunders says. "Now, you'll have some, like I said, who will migrate to Trump, but then you'll have a larger number of Democrats -- those who say, 'I'm never voting for a Republican -- who'll simply say, 'I'm not voting for anyone this time. I'll wait for the next election.'"

In the alternative, he says, the domino effect in the upcoming general election could be that a lot of rural Democrats -- "what I call the screwed wing of the Democratic party," he says -- will split their tickets, voting for Trump for president and Democrats for the House and Senate.

Saunders says in his world, that of the rural voter, people look around and lament the demise of the textile and furniture-making and other industries that provided decent paying jobs and the promise of future jobs to succeeding generations of their families.

"Every one of those industries has been killed off," he says.

Now, Saunders says, the threatened industry is coal.

"I get asked from time to time, don't I believe in climate change? Aren't I for clean air and all that? And I do and I am. I am not a naysayer when it comes to climate change. But that said, right now I'm pro-coal because the people who live here need to have jobs," he says.

"Once my great party starts caring as much about the people at the bottom of the mountain as they do about the trees at the top, then we can talk about coal, and limiting its use," he continues. "But until then -- uh uh -- because they don't think about the people at the bottom of the mountain and their kids who need a job or are strung out on heroin or crystal meth. It's just a disaster.

"It's not about red or blue. It's about red, white and blue. It's about the country," he adds, growing more impassioned.

As sure as he is that Trump is positioned to win the primaries, get the nomination and prevail in the general election, Saunders thinks hard before offering an opinion on what a Trump presidency would be like.

"Hell I don't know. It might be great. It might be poor," he says. "The truth is I have no idea. But I do know this: with a Donald Trump presidency we will have change. He will shake up the system and right now that's what we need in America.

"To quote Jim Webb again, 'It's time to clean out the stable and just start over.' A lot of people believe that," Saunders says.

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