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[Akhil Reed Amar](#) March 17, 2016 1:49 PM



Barack Obama, Merrick Garland, Hillary Clinton.

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It's been a great week for Hillary Clinton, Merrick Garland, and Barack

Obama. Each is the very embodiment of merit, competence, and hard work. Interestingly enough, all have roots in the [land of Lincoln](#), but their success also sheds light on how some of Lincoln's legacy is now under stress.

Clinton ran the table in Tuesday's primaries, and then Garland got the nod from Obama on Wednesday. Mark, you are [bummed out by Obama's tame choice](#), but you shouldn't be. You asked whether your initial reaction hinged "too grossly on identity politics." In a word, yes.

Consider Clinton and Obama. Yes, Hillary is a woman, but so is Carly Fiorina and so is Sarah Palin and neither of the latter has what it takes to lead America and the world in these parlous times. Neither does Ben Carson, though his skin color resembles Obama's.

Clinton is winning and deserves to win not simply because she is a woman, thrilling as that is to behold in a would-be president. She is winning and she deserves to win because she is the most competent, the most experienced, the most knowledgeable, and the hardest-working candidate in modern presidential history. The presidency is a nearly impossible job. Most presidents in history are failed presidents. There is no great training for the office. But Hillary brings more to the race than anyone else, as a former presidential candidate, former first spouse, former big-state senator, and former secretary of state. (She has also lived in three of America's four big regions—the Midwest, the South, and the Northeast—and has spent time on six continents.) She is a policy wonk par excellence, and she has learned a great deal about a vast number of distinct domains that a president must master. Plus, she is intentionally presenting herself as an heir of Obama, who also embodies brains and hard work.

Merrick is like Hillary in many ways—but without [the high negatives](#). He is as

smart as they come, and no one works harder. Being a justice, like being president, is much more difficult than it looks—at least if one aspires to soar rather than coast. Very few justices have in fact soared, because few have been both brilliant and workaholics. (The late Antonin Scalia, for example, was whip-smart but far less knowledgeable about American constitutional history than he needed to be in order to rank as a truly towering, or even genuinely credible, [originalist](#); he spent his spare time [talking too much](#) and perhaps reading too little.) Like a president, a Supreme Court justice must master a vast range of old and new issues over the course of many years, and genuine mastery requires a rare combination of talents and temperament. Merrick is as good a bet as I know in the talent and temperament departments. He has been a top judge on a high-powered court for many years. On the Supreme Court, he also might be a force multiplier if he can occasionally win over one or more of the court's Republican appointees. Despite the [concerns of the National Organization for Women](#), it's cool to think about how he might teach us all how men can be credible feminists.

In announcing Garland's nomination in the Rose Garden on Wednesday, Obama pointedly invoked the phrase "Land of Lincoln." He, Hillary, and Merrick are all Lincoln's children in obvious ways. None are highborn, nor was Lincoln. All four exemplify smarts and sweat. A woman, a black man, and a Jewish man—what better trio to remind us of Lincoln's principle that [all people are created equal](#)?

This is the profound American ideal under assault from Donald Trump and even many anti-Trump elements in the putative party of Lincoln. Trump himself is a highborn American aristocrat who stokes resentment against those whom he treats as being born below him—those who are born nonwhite, or born outside America, or born to non-American parents, or born Muslim, or [born disabled](#), or [born with shortness](#) genes. Trump's leading rival

for the Republican presidential nomination, Ted Cruz, proudly promises a return to a [legal regime degrading those Americans who happen to be born gay](#), denying them their equal entitlement to the pursuit of marital happiness.

So, hooray for Lincoln and for his metaphoric children—Barack, Hillary, and Merrick. But here is the difference between him and them and the dark side of the rise of modern meritocracy. Lincoln did not go to a fancy college or law school. (In fact, he had less than a year's formal education in his entire life.) He rose late in life. By contrast, Obama, Clinton, and Garland are all Ivy Leaguers. So was Scalia, and so are all the current justices. Garland himself is a double Harvard grad. To be sure, he was a scholarship kid—as were Obama, and Clarence Thomas, and Sonia Sotomayor at various stages in their illustrious academic careers. The gateway to the modern Supreme Court seems to narrow early in life; apparently, late bloomers and non-Ivies need not apply.

And this narrowing is happening not just at the court but also in the presidency. Each of our four most recent presidents attended Harvard, Yale, or both, as did the runners-up in five of the seven most recent elections (Michael Dukakis, George H.W. Bush, Al Gore, John Kerry, and Mitt Romney). The last time Americans voted for president without a Harvard or Yale graduate on the ballot was 1984. If we include vice presidential candidates in our tally, we have to go all the way back to 1968 to find a year when none of the top four candidates went to one of these two schools.

So Barack, Merrick, and Hillary embody a brave new world in which we are all formally born equal but inequality begins to set in quite early in life, based on early grades, early test scores, and early extracurriculars. New World elites are not quite the same as the Old World elites, but the emerging schoolocracy makes me nervous, even as I myself have been a huge

beneficiary. Admissions officers goof, and not all roses bloom early. What say the rest of you?