

The Other Side of Forrest Gump: Bernie Sanders

Keely Wilson

Forrest Gump is a classic piece of American cinema that’s set against a backdrop of hit music (who could forget the iconic Freebird or Fortunate Son sequences?). Forrest stomps through decades of U.S. history with a clumsiness that encompasses his main character trait: the ability to fall gracefully. Yet, this journey through American history has dark undertones that pertain to the legacy of racism, the social costs of war, and the lasting impact of childhood abuse and drug addiction.

A fixture of American politics for more than three decades, and a two-time presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders is another well-known American institution. He commands a remarkable level of political devotion amongst his devotees even as he, like Forrest Gump, demands that we reckon with darker sides of American history. Unlike Gump, who has no remedy for America’s ills, Bernie has a plan that’s based on fair social policies directed to the working class, which harken back to socialist-inspired models of healthcare, education, and economics that emanate from American and European historical models.

While Forrest and Bernie were born only three years apart, Forrest represents the accidental golden boy, a picturesque model of American potentialities, while Bernie embodies the harsher realities of life that face those who haven’t inherited wealth. Forrest grew up amidst bucolic scenery in rural Alabama, while Bernie spent his early years on the concrete sidewalks and playgrounds of Brooklyn, dreaming, apparently, of the scenic forests of Vermont. These dissimilar upbringings account for many of the differences between the fictional Forrest, and the very real Bernie Sanders. The young Forrest only tangentially addresses social issues – such as racism in the South –while Bernie protests against housing discrimination, joins forces with organizations such as SNCC and CORE, during his time as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago.

So why invoke Forrest Gump in a reflection piece on Bernie Sanders? Because they both embody all-encompassing ideals of America. More than just a heartwarming story of a differently-abled man, Forrest Gump is a story that bears witness to several crucial decades of America. [In an opening weekend review for the Chicago Tribune](#), Michael Wilmington wrote that “the movie encases a deeply cherished national myth: that there’s something heroic about American common people, that they’ll beat any adversity, that they’re more important than rich people, generals or presidents, that they are America”. Forrest addresses the difficulties of racism in the newly integrated South and disabled veterans with a sunny disposition and heart-warming demeanor that brings light to the importance of these issues while still “looking on the bright side”. In times of war, strife, and conflict, his witnessing of American resilience remains relevant. Yes, the days of the Vietnam war and (de facto) segregation are behind us, but in the future stands other conflicts, such as the legacies of US engagement in Afghanistan, and the lingering racial biases inherent in American institutions.

Bernie Sanders has experienced all of these events, which provides him with unique insight into patterns of injustice in America. In this regard, he may be an exceptional case, who doesn’t represent all (or even most) of American society. What he does bring is an exceptional rhetoric about most of American society which runs parallel to central themes in Forrest Gump. Similar to Wilmington’s interpretation of the film, Bernie paints the beauty of America as inherent in the people themselves, rather than in institutions, a feature that runs through the narrative of Forrest Gump. But while the film deals with discrimination in the public education system and the military, in particular, Bernie Sanders seeks to address the inequality that’s inherent in all systems of American society, from healthcare to education to business to immigration. In contrast to the titular

Forrest, Sanders does not address these inequities with optimism and warmth, but rather in stern, informed opposition to structural injustice.

This comparison does beg some questions about secondary characters in the film: for instance, who is Jenny in this story, and what does she represent? She is a key character who is the steadying light at the end of the tunnel of Forrest’s adventures. She’s a friend, survivor, wife, and mother. Bernie Sanders lived through similar historical times as Forrest, but he doesn’t seem to have a “Jenny”. Instead, he is bolstered and motivated by a strong and consistent political ideology, which has fueled the kind of rhetoric that can be harnessed for his ambitions as a presidential candidate. As [Huck Gutman](#), a professor of English at the University of Vermont and a close friend of Sanders put it: “I think what motivates Bernie is a passionate desire for justice, and especially economic justice”. Bernie Sanders’ key character, his “Jenny” is Justice, in all of its complex forms and iterations. When he was running for student body president of his Brooklyn high school, protesting racial discrimination in Chicago, or taking up odd jobs to support his young family after college, he called upon this sense of Justice to guide his ambitions and decision-making. From this perspective, his political trajectory has been guided not by fame or fortune, but rather a specific set of ideals that favor the common worker in American society. His rejection of corporate donations to his campaigns is a concrete manifestation of his rejection of the disproportionate power that private corporations hold in politics.

The ending to *Forrest Gump* provides further fodder for the Bernie-Forrest comparison. After the death of his beloved Jenny, Forrest watches his son, Forrest Junior, board the bus for his first day of school. Forrest Junior offers Forrest a new dream, a new guide to live for, a new hope in a world that has been unkind to him. To pursue the comparison, we might ask: Who is Forrest Junior for the modern Bernie Sanders? I would suggest that Bernie’s own Forrest Junior is the horde of young progressive voters who support Bernie Sanders. Jenny gave birth to Forrest Gump, but in my comparison, politics have given birth to young progressive voters, incentivized by Bernie’s message. By the early 1980s, young voters already made up the majority of Sanders’ base. And, while Bernie Sanders has rallied these young progressives from the past to the present, there are new figures who represent the future of the progressive movement: AOC, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, Pramila Jayapal, and other younger members of Congress. Starting with just a few members (led by Senator Bernie Sanders) in 1991, the progressive caucus has reached nearly one hundred members. This is all the more significant in a Congress where the average House member is 58.4 years old, and the average senator is 64.3 years old. [Bernie Sanders is the only Senator in the progressive caucus](#), as young voters become increasingly involved with electoral politics and elect representatives that look, sound, and act like them.

As young people “Feel the Bern”, Sanders is reassured that his message and policy proposals will continue into the future. Bernie’s campaign slogan is “Not Me. Us.”, by which he means that while he could be a figurehead of the progressive movement, the true heart of progressive politics lies in the cumulative individuals that believe in it and the policies that it supports. The cultural heritage of *Forrest Gump* offers not only insight into the past, but also a lens through which we can understand a transition in politics, as younger politicians and activists urge for progressive change. Similar to the end of *Forrest Gump*, the feather will continue to fly through the American ether, as Bernie Sanders leads a movement that is likely to continue long after he ends his involvement in politics.