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Are Democrats Still the Lesser Evil?

By Andrew Levine
January 13, 2017

Since Election Day, it has felt as if American politics is unfolding in a dream world; the old moorings have gone missing and nothing any longer makes sense.

But with Inauguration Day almost upon us, we have no choice: either we wallow in the surreality of it all, or we recover our bearings and fight back.

To that end, it is vital that the anti-Trump resistance be disabused of illusions about the Democratic Party.

Even before the neoliberal turn of the Carter and Clinton years, Democrats were a large part of the problem. At their best, they were never more than a small part of the solution.

Then, decades ago, the Clintons and others like them effectively purged the party of its always feeble left wing.

Hillary and Bill are out of the picture for now; that is the silver lining in Trump's victory. Their influence continues to reverberate, however.

Meanwhile, Republicans are, more than ever, beneath contempt. They are good for making Democrats seem like the good guys, but nothing more.

The world would therefore be a better place without Democrats or Republicans in it. But wishing won't make it so. There is no way forward that does not take this stubborn fact into account.

Neither is there any way around the fact that Democrats are bound to play a major role in efforts to fight back against Trump. In a duopoly party system like ours, it could hardly be otherwise.

This is why the fact that Democrats have taken the lead in promoting anti-Russian animosities that could lead to nuclear war is so disconcerting – and dangerous.

Until recently, Democrats were thought to be, and probably were, less bellicose than Republicans. It is no longer clear that they are.

Of course, by most, if not all, other measures, Republicans are worse, sometimes a lot worse, than Democrats. But those measures count for nothing in a world blown to oblivion.

Does it follow, then, that the Democratic Party is no longer the Lesser Evil? The question is more complicated than might appear.

Our “founding fathers” (all of them were men) included slaveholders and merchants involved in the slave trade. They were also ardent supporters of efforts to supplant and, if need be, wipe out the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Nevertheless, a remarkable number of them were distinguished political thinkers in the Enlightenment tradition.

To this day, the incongruity hardly registers. When it is pointed out, Americans, not all of them white, shrug it off, or blame the norms of the times.

Nowadays, slavery (though not its consequences) is finished, and genocide is no longer officially condoned. On the downside, though, serious political thinkers in high office are about as common as snowstorms in July.

Work in political philosophy is now confined mainly to academic precincts where its effects upon real world politics are, for all practical purposes, nil.

Even so, politicians do sometimes talk the talk. But even when the words are the same, the ideas behind them seldom are.

Pollsters tell us that a majority of Americans, though not as many as in the recent past, call their political views “conservative.” However, their thinking, such as it is, has little to do with any of the major strains of conservative political philosophy.

Republican politicians with philosophical pretensions are especially at fault. Most of them are later-day classical (nineteenth century) liberals.

Americans who identify with the Progressive tradition and the New Deal-Great Society political settlement are on sounder ground when they call themselves “liberals.” But because many of them are too opportunistic to be principled, the connection is highly attenuated. It is also relevant that courage is rare in liberal circles; and that, as Robert Frost famously remarked: “a liberal is a man too broad-minded to take his own side in a quarrel.”

Then there are the disconnects that cluster around notions of democracy.

There are many normative and descriptive democratic theories, but they all agree that democracy is about the people taking charge of their own affairs. That description hardly fits democracy in America today.

What we have instead are Democrats and Republicans peddling candidates bearing their brands to a passive citizenry — in much the way that manufacturers of consumer goods peddle theirs.

Like the parties that field them, the candidates on offer are generally like-minded. This is no accident; for all practical purposes, they are all owned by overlapping sectors of what Bernie Sanders – remember him? — called “the billionaire class.”

Nevertheless, for at least the past century, the Democratic Party has been the friendlier of the two to Enlightenment values. There were exceptions, however, especially before the 1960s. Most of the exceptions arose out of efforts by Democratic Party leaders to keep white supremacists in the Solid South on board.

In recent decades, Democrats and Republicans have drifted apart – mainly over social issues that do not bear directly on their paymasters’ interests.

Therefore, our politics suffers simultaneously from an anti-democratic, inequality exacerbating ideological uniformity and a degree of party polarization that all but disables effective governance.

In this worst of both worlds, it is no wonder that Trump got enough votes in the right places to defeat Hillary Clinton, a living embodiment of the status quo. To many of those voters, anything seemed better than the system in place.

Trump seemed to offer something new. He did indeed. But as many of those voters will discover to their regret, the changes he offers will only make things worse – not just for the targets of his and their animosities, but for most of them as well, and for nearly everyone who is not obscenely rich.

One thing that Trump will not change is the fact that it takes a lot of wishful thinking to discern more than Coke and Pepsi differences between the two parties on matters affecting the wishes of American capitalists. In this respect, ours is a one party state – with two competing electoral wings.

Nevertheless, it is practically axiomatic to anyone with any sense at all that, in comparison with Republicans, Democrats are the lesser evil.

They are — on social issues. Democrats are less retrograde than Republicans. It isn't even close.

It doesn't follow, though, even for those for whom these differences matter a lot, that it is always wisest to vote for Democrats over Republicans.

The case for always voting for Democrats boils down to a logical principle and an indisputable fact. The principle is just that if the goal is to bring about the best possible outcome by choosing between A and B, and if A is better (or less bad) than B, choose A; the fact is that Democrats and Republicans are equally bad on everything except social matters where Democrats are better (less bad).

The argument is sound as far as it goes. But all it shows is that one should vote for the Democrat if all that matters are the issues on which Democrats are better. There are other things that can and do matter — including the long-term consequences of lesser evil voting itself.

In the 2016 Presidential election in the United States, there were additional reasons not to vote for the Democrat: among others, that it was not clear that Clinton actually was the lesser evil all things considered, a point to which I will return; and that, even if she was, there are thresholds beneath which there are pragmatic as well as moral reasons not to sink.

I have argued repeatedly, on this site and elsewhere, that, in that election, concerns about the long-term consequences of lesser evil voting, along with the failure of both Clinton and Trump to exceed even minimal threshold considerations, overcame the case for voting for the lesser evil, whichever of the two that might be.

There is no point in repeating the arguments now, except insofar as they shed light on what to make of, and do about, the Democratic Party in the months and years ahead.

The case against Hillary is moot; we dodged that bullet. The case against Trump was never seriously in dispute. There is therefore no need to demonstrate how awful he is or how awful his presidency is likely to be.

With Obama still officially in charge, nothing really bad has happened – yet. The task before us now is to prepare for when it does.

Hillary is the devil we know — too well. Trump is one of Donald Rumsfeld's "known unknowns." At this point, all we can say for sure about him is that whatever he does will be

harmful to everyone except himself, his family, and his class brothers and sisters, and that the Trump era will be monumentally corrupt.

It will be reactionary and incompetent too, if his choices to fill cabinet posts and other top-level positions are any indication; and the policies that they and he will concoct will be ridiculously inconsistent.

Even so, it is at least arguable that Clinton was a worse choice – for a reason that does indeed shed light on the role that the Democratic Party is likely to play in the struggles ahead.

When Party honchos parachuted her into New York State to be its Senator, the line was that, as a First Lady (official wife), Clinton had garnered a lot of useful “experience.” This was, to say the least, an exaggeration. In truth, all she did – apart from her role in the Hillarycare fiasco – was promote the neoliberal line championed by her husband.

However, over the past decade and a half, Hillary’s fate and neoliberalism’s came to be inextricably intertwined – in the public mind and, to a considerable degree, in reality as well.

The Clintons didn’t initiate the neoliberal turn in Democratic Party politics; they may not even have believed in it. But it was during Bill Clinton’s presidency that the transfer of wealth from workers and everyone else who is not obscenely rich to the few who are took off, with dire moral and material consequences.

Progressive opponents of neoliberal policies have become more militant and creative than they used to be; and wide strata of the public, the young especially, have become energized – to an extent not seen in nearly half a century.

Others have suffered in silence, and with less lucidity. Many who did ended up voting for Trump – if not enthusiastically, then for their own lesser evil reasons.

For this and more, Hillary has a lot to answer for. But this is not the worst of it.

As Secretary of State, Clinton, with Obama’s acquiescence, empowered “humanitarian” interveners hell bent on overthrowing governments that resist American domination — effectively guaranteeing that the United States would continue to be a serial violator of international law, and would remain enmeshed in never ending wars in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Even so, Trump is so vile and so unsuited to the office of the presidency that, running against him, she would still be the lesser evil, hands down – but for her fondness for military “solutions” to problems she and her neocon and liberal imperialist co-thinkers helped create, and the fact that her dedication to regime change isn’t confined, like Reagan’s and the Bushes’, and her husband’s were, to “enemies” that the United States could vanquish with impunity.

Like Obama, whose thinking she influenced, she wanted to “pivot” towards Asia – in other words, to take China on. More dangerous still, she wanted to reduce Russia to the miserable condition it fell into in the nineties, as its regression to capitalism unfolded.

HRC has been a Russophobe her whole life; she is now a neocon as well. Most of all, she is a Clinton; Clintons give opportunism a bad name.

When she was taking on progressive poses in order to squelch Bernie Sanders’ candidacy and coopt his supporters, she wisely decided to muffle her warmongering.

But when it was just her against Trump, it seemed opportune to let it all hang out. Nobody saw it coming. After all, the Cold War had been over for more than a generation, and even someone as infallibly wrong-headed as Hillary would know not to tempt fate by playing around with the prospect of nuclear war.

But the “liberal” media picked up the ball. Could it be that they like Hillary that much? Or is it guilt for all the free publicity their revenue-driven executives lavished on the Donald?

Whatever the explanation, the consequences are, in their own way, as ridiculous as Trump’s cabinet appointments. It is bad enough when people who should know better take “intelligence” agencies, the CIA especially, at their word. But then to broadcast the Democratic Party’s Russophobic insinuations even while admitting that there is no credible evidence supporting them, is something else altogether.

Most nauseating of all, though, is the way that warmongering “journalists” take RT, Russia Today, to task for being a propaganda arm of the Russian government, even as they work for outfits that are far more blatantly propagandistic.

As I have written before on this site, I defy any fair-minded viewer or listener, to compare, say, the evening lineup on MSNBC or CNN with RT and then conclude that the latter spreads propaganda, and the former does not. RT does responsible journalism; MSNBC and CNN make a mockery of the profession.

And it isn’t just them: *The Washington Post* is the most disgraceful of all, but *The New York Times* is not far behind. As it was during the build up to the invasion of Iraq, NPR has become impossible to listen to even for background noise.

The level of hypocrisy is appalling inasmuch as the United States has intervened in nearly every election since the end of World War II anywhere in the world that might not go the way the empire’s leaders thought it should.

And when that was not enough, it would stage coups in countries with refractory governments. Its agent of choice has been, more often than not, the liberal Democrat’s post-election love interest, the CIA.

There is a remarkable double standard at work as well. Israel interferes in European and American elections with impunity — most recently in Scotland and within the British Conservative Party. And is there any plausible impartial standard according to which Benjamin Netanyahu is not more reprehensible than Vladimir Putin? Yet in U.S. government and media circles, not a bad word is said about Israel or its government, while Putin and Russia cannot be demonized enough.

The New York Times has been especially noteworthy too for the condescending way it has been reporting on “ordinary” Americans who question the wisdom of taking intelligence agencies, like the CIA, at their word; and who wonder why so much fuss is being made about Wikileaks publishing authentic documents that are indisputably newsworthy, or, for that matter, why it would matter if Russia actually were their source.

The transmission line, it seems, runs from Hillary and her team to their flacks in corporate media, and then back to the Democratic Party itself, “progressives” and all.

With a few conspicuous exceptions like John McCain, Lindsey Graham and “Little Marco” Rubio, Republicans, so far, have not been quite as bad. Most likely, this is because they want to curry favor with the President-elect. Even so, we owe it to them that not everyone in Congress is a card-carrying member of the War Party.

Are the Democrats, then, no longer the lesser evil? It is hard to listen to them and not draw that conclusion. It is harder still, though, to see a Republican and not despair for the human race.

Will Trump staunch the rush to war? Will he even try?

And what will happen as the consequences of his victory sink in – not just with the majority of Americans who have always understood what he is about, but also with the voters who put him over the top in the Electoral College? How will they react when they realize that Trump is the Defender-in-Chief of the swamp he promised to drain?

What will Democrats and Republicans do then? When we know that, we will know which party really is less awful.

Had Trump lost, as he ought to have, and as he would have had Hillary not screwed up so spectacularly, he was on track for smashing the GOP. Republicans knew it, and hated him for it; they probably still do. But because he won, they now find themselves flocking around him shamelessly, eager for their share of the spoils.

Their abjectness must delight his egotistical soul. It could be, though, that they are actually playing him – using him to enact their own far-right agendas.

During the campaign, Trump’s vileness – and his pandering to nativists, racists, and Islamophobes – were reasons enough to reject his candidacy categorically.

But he did outflank Hillary from the left on many issues. That all seems finished now; not only did he choose a theocrat and craven reactionary for a running mate, but his cabinet appointments are every bit as awful as Marco Rubio's or Ted Cruz's would have been. The idea that the Republican leadership is calling the shots and only letting the Donald think that he is would account for that.

If it turns out that Trump is not running the show the way he thinks he is, he will be the last to know. Having fought back the Clinton juggernaut, the grandees of the Republican Party, the scribblers and talking heads that berate him in corporate media, and the near entirety of the ruling class, the sick bastard must now be thinking that he is invincible.

Why else would he feel emboldened enough to take on the CIA and the rest of the deep state? Could he not know that he is unleashing forces that can do him in, and that he cannot control?

The effects of hubris — on those in its grip, and on those affected by their folly — have been demonstrated time and again by storytellers, poets and historians.

Could Trump be ignorant of all this, and unaware too of the precariousness of his own situation? That is hard to believe. But it is easy to believe that he is egomaniacal enough to think that what applies to others does not apply to him.

When he falls, he will fall hard; and it will be glorious to behold.

It will also be dangerous, however; who knows what he will do when he lashes out!

Hillary may be more disposed than he, ideologically and psychologically, to end the world “as we know it,” but it would not be beyond the Donald, an adolescent in a septuagenarian's body, to do the same.

Should it come to that, or if fortune shines on us and it does not, will Democrats be of any use? If the answer is No, as it almost certainly is, what are the implications for what is to be done now?

The impending Trump presidency puts the urgency of this question in sharp relief. This is why getting clear about how awful Democrats are — in their own right and in comparison with Republicans — is more than usually urgent.