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Extirpating Trumpism From the Body Politic

By Andrew Levine

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By Groundhog Day, Donald Trump's favorability ratings were in the low 40s, a historic low for a President in office for such a short period of time. His unfavorability ratings were correspondingly high.

The groundhog saw his shadow, but nobody knows how many more weeks – or months or years – of Trumpian rule that portends. The situation is unprecedented.

The one sure thing is that, unless he and his god awful minions manage to crush the spine and will of civil society, his popularity will continue to decline – as it dawns on the poor suckers who

voted for him, the ones who thought that he would somehow make their lives better, that he was feeding them a line and will actually make their lives worse.

Before long, his and his administration's malevolence and incompetence will start to weigh on Trump voters too, as it does on the majority of Americans who did not, and never would, vote for the Donald. They will realize that they have been deceiving themselves.

Their self-deception was unforgivable. It is understandable, however.

For nearly four decades, neoliberal politicians had been running the show in the United States and other developed countries – causing wages to stagnate, union membership to decline, manufacturing jobs to disappear, and the financial sector to become ever more malicious as it metastasizes throughout the economy. Under their aegis, the gap between the hyper-rich and everybody else has increased to unsustainable levels.

The Clintons, along with Barack Obama, did more than any Republican President could to advance this sorry state of affairs. They may not be true believers, but the “donor class” they serve insisted, and they obliged. They accomplished all they did because, as Democrats, they were able to bring along or neutralize the opposition.

Trump was fortunate to have a Clinton to run against. It was child's play for him to convince his marks that a vote *for* him was a vote *against* her and all that she represented.

But the majority of Trump voters did not think that they were voting to turn the clock back a century or to put incompetent millionaires and billionaires in charge of high government offices. And only the truly deplorable among them thought that they were voting to advance anything like the white supremacist, quasi-fascist worldview of Steven Bannon, the Donald's Svengali.

But that is precisely what Trump's voters, along with everyone else, will get. Because there were enough of them in the right places, the Electoral College made the Donald the President of the United States – notwithstanding the expressed will of a substantial majority of the millions who cast ballots.

High unfavorability numbers normally indicate widespread opposition. In Trump's case, they reflect that and more: the fear that, with the powers conferred upon him by his office, the man is a clear and present danger.

The problem is not just that the Trump White House will be spectacularly reactionary. It is worse than that – in ways that transcend the parameters of normal politics.

But reactionary it will surely be.

Over the course of many years, Trump, like other plutocrats feathering their own nests, gave huge sums of money to Republicans and Democrats alike. Because he operated mainly in New York State and New York City, and then in New Jersey and southern Florida, he seemed, to

those following the money, that he was closer to Democrats than to Republicans. In fact, he was neither one nor the other; he went whichever way the wind was blowing.

When he decided to run for President, he found it expedient to run as a Republican. That made sense: by all accounts, “crooked Hillary” had the Democratic nomination for 2016 sewn up, and the Republican base was full up with sad sacks practically begging to be duped by a billionaire “populist” whom they knew from television shows and who seemed, like Hugh Hefner before him, to be living out a certain sybaritic-consumerist version of the American dream.

Hardly anyone thought of him as a reactionary; people thought of him as a joke.

That he is; and, by now, he is a Republican too. In retrospect, all the signs were there.

Trump needed the Republican Party in order both to win and to govern. His instincts on social issues were probably more like Clinton’s than like those of the dunces he defeated for the GOP nomination, but he had, and still has, no settled convictions or principles. It was in his interest to take on a Republican coloration, and that is what he did.

Even so, before Election Day, it was far from obvious that, if elected, he would install such a blatantly reactionary administration or advance hyper-reactionary ideas himself. He had, after all, run to Hillary’s left on several issues – on trade and infrastructure development, for example. On good days, he even had kind words to say about single-payer health insurance.

And, on foreign policy, he talked a good earful about rejecting interventionist ideologies, and about dealing with foreign countries on sounder – albeit unspecified – bases.

The contrast with Hillary seemed real enough; she, after all, is a liberal imperialist with neoconservative inclinations. Along with her fellow Democrats and their media flacks, she advocates “regime change” whenever the empire’s foreign policy establishment deems it in America’s interests.

There was, and is, ample reason to reject that. Aided and abetted by “liberal” media, and in alliance with John-McCain and Lindsey Graham and other irksome Republican warmongers, the Clintonized Democratic Party is now hell-bent on taking the wind out of Russia’s sales – if need be by precipitating wars that could easily turn nuclear. It is as if the entire political class somehow learned “to stop worrying and love the bomb.”

During the campaign, Trump took, or seemed to take, a rather different line. Even now, he is the one of the very few politicians in America at the national level who is at least skeptical of efforts to demonize Russia and to make Vladimir Putin out to be qualitatively more wicked than other world leaders.

Perhaps because they see it as a way to delegitimize his presidency or perhaps because they really believe what they say, liberal politicians and pundits these days are pushing the line that Trump is a Putin stooge. The jury is out on that, but at least he is not hard at work laying the foundations for World War III.

That Trump's views on Muslims, women, and people of color are vile is, and always has been, beyond serious dispute. Prospectively, though, it did seem that a Trump presidency would come with at least a few redeeming features.

Insofar as appointments are policy, it is no longer possible to believe that. Trump's apparent desire to come to terms with, rather than go to war with, Russia is the only redeeming feature left; and one can only wonder how long Trump will stick with that in the face of media scorn and pressure from (temporary) allies within the Republican fold.

Even if he does hold fast, however, it is still far from clear that the world is any safer with him in the White House than it would have been with Hillary. Trump could precipitate a nuclear Armageddon with a few ill-timed, poorly thought out tweets. He has it in him.

Now that the composition of the Trump administration is largely settled, it is certain that, for the next four years, reactionaries as bad as any that, say, Ted Cruz might have empowered, will be calling the shots.

It is also certain that there will be resistance from civil society. This will help mitigate the harm.

If we had a real Left in the political mainstream – one that would obstruct, obstruct, and obstruct yet more, in much the way that the Tea Party did after the 2010 Congressional elections, but more effectively and for a better purpose, it would help more still.

But, of course, we don't have any Left at all; we have the Democratic Party, the party of Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi — and the Clintons.

Since Trump assumed office, there have been hopeful signs that at least a few Democrats would become genuinely oppositional. There could be a lot more of this. But for the Democratic Party as such to stop being part of the problem, it would have to undergo a nearly total transformation.

There is little chance of that, no matter how much pressure the Democratic base is able to bring to bear.

This is why it would make sense to abandon the Democratic Party altogether, and to build a true opposition from the ground up.

Unfortunately, our institutions make doing this inordinately difficult. But because the Clintonized Democratic Party is almost certainly beyond redemption, it is eminently worth attempting.

In the meanwhile, there is the very urgent problem of keeping Republicans from setting the country back a hundred years. And there is the more urgent problem still of permanently retiring Donald Trump.

The problem isn't just that he threatens social progress; it is that he threatens the basic structures of liberal democracy – not for the sake of any more democratic, more humane, or more ecologically sound alternative vision of ideal social and political arrangements, but in order to advance the pernicious goals of nativists, racists, and Islamophobes.

Above and beyond its “conservative” extremism, this is the problem the Trump presidency poses.

So far, Trump and Bannon *et. al.* have only been testing the waters – most conspicuously with their travel ban on Muslims from seven countries where the Trump Organization has no substantial business interests.

If they get away with that, it is not impossible that they will next concoct some functional equivalent of the 1933 *Reichstag* fire – to use as a pretext for scapegoating and then going after Muslims and other vulnerable populations, and, in due course, for weakening or even abolishing long established political rights and freedoms. The pieces are in place.

On the bright side, though, the pieces are also in place for forming a resistance movement on the model of the anti-fascist popular fronts of the 1930s – joining together everyone from “moderate” Republicans and Democrats to genuine liberals (or “social democrats”) of the Bernie Sanders-Elizabeth Warren variety to bona fide leftists and leftwing populists.

As long as Trump can be kept from chilling dissent by having his police repress dissenters, he is a godsend for organizers. Even so, the good he does just by being awful is more than outweighed by the harm he will do, and the catastrophes he might unleash, as his time in office unfolds.

This is why getting rid of the Donald, the sooner the better, is and ought to be Task Number One. It can be done. There very likely is enough militant opposition within the political class, in both elite circles and within the general population, already.

A majority of citizens have lost confidence in Trump; many more will be joining them soon. In this sense, his presidency is illegitimate and becoming more so — irrespective of the legitimacy or not of his victory in the 2016 election.

Parliamentary systems allow for votes of “no confidence” that can lead to new elections. The American system does not. The prescribed way to remove a President from office in the United States is impeachment, a time consuming process concocted by the authors of the Constitution for the sole purpose of removing persons from elective office for treason, bribery or other “high crimes and misdemeanors.”

Trump's impeachment would not remove the administration he has installed; it would not make the government less reactionary; it would not lead to new elections. What it would lead to is a Mike Pence presidency.

So would his removal under Article Two, Section One of the Constitution, which, in addition to death and resignation lists “inability to discharge the powers and duties of the ...office” as a ground for removal. This could be construed to mean gross incompetence.

That Trump is grossly incompetent, in the colloquial sense, is obvious; he provides incontrovertible proof of this with every tweet. But that he meets what the courts would deem a legal standard is doubtful.

Impeachment is therefore the way to go, especially inasmuch as he already has numerous impeachable offenses under his belt. He has been in violation of the Constitution’s emoluments clause from the moment he took office. It has been all downhill from there.

The sad fact, though, is that a Mike Pence presidency is nothing to look forward to.

At the policy level, it might actually be worse. Pence is a thoroughgoing reactionary, and a theocrat to boot. Trump is neither; indeed, he isn’t much of anything – except insofar as he needs to be to advance his nefarious purposes.

For the time being, that means advancing positions pleasing to people like Pence and appointing people like Pence to cabinet positions and other high level offices. Trump is a phony reactionary; Pence is the real deal. Other things equal, this is worse. But other things are not equal – not by a long shot.

Pence stands at the far right end of the political spectrum, but he is not about to turn the country into a quasi-fascist dystopia, and he is not likely to start a nuclear war in a fit of pique; Trump could well do one or the other or both.

He is, in short, the lesser evil of the two — not so much in degree, as in kind. The world would be a better place if he were in the White House instead of Trump.

Lesser evil voting led to the Clinton-Trump election last year, which led, in turn, to the situation we now are in. But this is not about voting; arguments for or against lesser evil voting don’t apply.

When they do apply, it is always on a case-by-case basis. I would say that in cases involving presidential elections in the United States, the case against is almost always more compelling than the case for.

When this is so, the arguments boil down to three main points: that lesser evil voters tend not to consider all relevant factors in determining which candidate actually is the lesser evil; that they wrongly ignore or otherwise discount the long-term consequences of participation in a process that generates increasingly worse choices; and that when all the choices are morally or politically unacceptable, it hardly matters which candidate is worse.

My view was that, in the Clinton-Trump election last year, all three considerations weighed in against voting for either Clinton or Trump.

It is clearer now than it was two months ago that Trump was the greater evil – though in view of Clinton’s ideologically driven war mongering and Russophobia, even this remains debatable. But the plain fact that President Trump is worse than candidate Trump changes nothing.

Two months ago, it seemed that the only defensible stand to take was not to vote for President at all or, better by far, to vote for someone other than Clinton or Trump — like the Green Party’s candidate Jill Stein. It still does.

At the time, hardly anyone gave Pence a thought. This was only natural; he is so bland that it is easy to forget about him. Also, hardly anyone believed that Trump would win; therefore, why worry about who would replace him when he would be impeached.

However, in retrospect, it was shortsighted not to think that a vote for Trump might be a vote for Pence; and not to worry about that. We don’t have that luxury now. Now we must face up to the fact that a Pence presidency is a worrisome prospect indeed.

But the prospect of four more years of Trump is a lot worse. Pence is the lesser evil; and that fact, in this case, carries the day.

This is why efforts to force Republicans to join the large and growing majority of Americans who want to be rid of Trump as quickly as possible, ought to be encouraged and pursued vigorously and resolutely.

For Trump to be impeached, the House would have to draw up articles of impeachment, and then a trial would have to take place in the Senate. For as long as Republicans think they can use Trump to get what they want, none of this will happen.

How long will that be? It depends on how the anti-Trump resistance movement goes.

The spirit of resistance is now loose in the land, but ultimately what will happen depends on Trump. The more vile, lawless, incompetent, and dangerous he is seen to be, the more resistance there will be. If and when a tipping point is reached, Republicans will turn against him and he will be toast.

When opposition to Nixon reached a tipping point, he had the good sense to resign. By then, however, Nixon was a broken man.

Trump is not broken, and because he is too egotistical to face reality, he is probably unbreakable.

It is not impossible, though, if he sees that his and his family’s bottom line is in peril, that he will decide to rethink the whole President thing, and beat a hasty retreat.

It was venality, as much as vainglory, that brought him into the race in the first place; the poor bastard only wanted to boost his brand. Too bad for him that his brand is already taking a hit.

Daughter Ivanka is, for now, the Trump most directly bearing the brunt. Under pressure from consumers, major department store chains, most famously Nordstrom, and other fashion retailers have decided to drop her merchandise.

The Donald has taken to tweeting about how “unfair” this is, calling Ivanka’s troubles to everyone’s attention. This should help the boycott movement enormously.

How long before Trump’s own hotels, golf clubs and resorts fall prey to even more intense opposition?

The way things are going, not long at all. By the time that Trump and his minions start rounding up “bad hombres” (women and children, mostly), putting them in concentration camps, and then deporting them, the name “Trump” will stink in the nostrils of all but the terminally deplorable; and the impulse to shun Trump products, and shame those who do not, will take on a life of its own.

In the midst of all this, it turns out that Melania is suing a British tabloid, *The Daily Mail*, for \$150 million — not for publishing reports that she had worked as an escort, they’ve already settled on a claim for that, but for the effect that publicity has had on her ability to cash in on her First Lady status by selling a line of fragrances bearing her name.

Trump must have signed off on this; he is the man of the house, after all. He must be proud of his trophy bride — for being so inveterately mercenary, like a true Trump, born and bred.

Or is that really what this is about? I would like to think that, like the even more preposterous Nancy Reagan years ago, Melania will turn out to be a force for good in the midst of the otherwise villainous circle of people inside the President’s bubble.

And if only because her job, full time escort to the Donald, is so onerous – the only worse job that comes to mind is crash test dummy – I would also like to think that, on the sly, she is actually on the people’s side; that, the point of her lawsuit is to call attention to the power of shaming in the luxury market world.

Of course, the Donald might still stay the course, even if, thanks to a well-organized and highly motivated resistance, the Trump Organization starts losing serious money. He is that pig-headed.

But what it would take to get someone more in the normal range to quit on his own is also what it would take to get Republicans to draw up articles of impeachment, and then to convict in a Senate trial.

Either way, his disgrace and fall will be glorious to behold.

More important by far, though, is being done with him altogether, extirpating Trump and all things Trumpian from the body politic.

That will require working with Republicans, a distasteful, but necessary, course of action. Think of it as the end justifying the means. Republicans like Pence are hard to stomach, but this is no time to be fastidious; the stakes are too high.