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Trump the Loser

By Andrew Levine
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Donald Trump claims to be good at making deals; what he is actually good at is gaming the system. He is even better at selling snake oil. The snake oil he sells is himself.

He was so good at it last year that he has now become a clear and present danger – to people around the world and to the vast majority of Americans, especially Muslims, Hispanics, people of color, people who don't conform to prevailing gender norms, and women.

He is also a danger to the rule of law and to the basic rights and liberties of all but the filthy rich.

He is a danger to the planet as well, and to world peace.

And he is a bumptious buffoon, a joke. This, as he would tweet, is “very sad.”

The American public enabled him; now it is up to that public to disable him and, as much as possible, to undo the damage he has already done and will do before he quits or is impeached or, God forbid, rides out his term until the next election.

First, though, the public has to get smart.

H.L. Mencken famously said that “no one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public.”

He had a point, in just the way that, for example, Ambrose Bierce did when he said that “war is God's way of teaching Americans geography.” These are witticisms, however, not statements of fact.

Lately though, Mencken's quip is close to becoming literally true – now that the allegedly beneficent deity has turned Trump loose upon us.

But only part of the public has succumbed. This is why it no longer makes sense to talk, as Mencken did, about the public as such. It would make more sense to talk about two publics. The unintelligence of one of them is, if anything, even worse than Mencken thought; the other, the part that is rising up against Trump, is a different story altogether.

It is in the political sphere that the American public, the part that is not rising up, is unintelligent, stupid, dumb, idiotic or whatever word Mencken could just as well have used.

There and perhaps also in the world of commerce — where alarmingly many Americans are easy marks for mountebanks and shysters, susceptible, for example, to sales pitches for goods and services to which the name “Trump” is attached.

In other areas of life, we Americans are no less intelligent than other people. There is nothing special about how even the dumbest of us, in Mencken's sense, negotiate our way through life.

Mencken's remark was not a journalistic equivalent of a playground taunt, and neither was it just a humorous way of expressing disagreement. Whatever else he was doing, he was rendering a judgment – that in politics and related matters that bear on public life, the public, or some significant part of it, holds views that are not worth taking seriously.

Democrats and Republicans are among the worst offenders.

Nevertheless, what they say and do cannot be ignored or dismissed out of hand. Because they wield power, their words and deeds have material consequences. On that account, they must therefore be taken seriously, notwithstanding the fact that, on the merits, life is too short to bother.

Intelligent life in the Republican fold has been rare and endangered for a very long time. To be sure, there have been genuine conservatives and principled libertarians, operating under the GOP tent, who have, from time to time, advanced interesting but flawed ideas.

These exceptions to the rule are few and far between, however. For the most part, all there is is stupidity, stupidity, and more stupidity.

Democrats are less stupid; their views on neoliberal economic and trade policies and on “humanitarian” interventions, though pernicious, are at least worth engaging. Indeed, that they have considered views at all puts them ahead of their Republican rivals. They, like Trump, only know what their guts and their rightwing, mind-numbing news sources tell them.

This was how it was, in politically active circles, before Election Day 2016, and how it was poised to be again after the ballots were counted. Trump’s was, after all, just a vanity campaign that was sure to fail.

Those of us who thought that way failed to take the full measure of Hillary Clinton’s candidacy into account; we failed to realize that, as a candidate, she would be even more inept than as a First Lady, a Senator, and a Secretary of State.

Even so, she did get some three million more votes than Trump. Many of them were cast in the wrong jurisdictions, however, and were therefore effectively superfluous.

As a result, two remarkable things happened: the intelligence, in Mencken’s sense, of the large and growing part of the American public that is actively resisting Trump took a great leap forward, while the intelligence of the part that still likes the Donald has taken a nosedive of alarming proportions.

The millions of people who voted for Hillary in the last election were not stupid in Mencken’s sense; their views, right or wrong, were worth taking seriously. Many of them were just voting *against* Trump. There is nothing stupid about that.

Debates about the wisdom of voting for Clinton on lesser evil grounds were raging not long ago, and, even now, one or another sore loser brings the old arguments up again. Many people consider the issue still unsettled.

It is much the same with debates over other reasons that her supporters adduced for voting for Hillary: for example, that the case for electing a woman was overwhelming, or that Hillary is a “progressive pragmatist” who could and would accomplish great things. I think these positions are wrong, but they are certainly worth taking seriously.

The views of Democratic Party leaders, the Clintons among them, were not stupid either; and neither was the thinking of the captains of industry and finance who bankroll them. Nefarious, avaricious, and self-serving perhaps, but not “unintelligent.” The case for taking the Clintonite turn and staying on that course is wrong-headed, but not too ridiculous to be taken seriously.

Quite to the contrary, the Party leaders and “donors” were too clever for their own good. They wanted to win elections, and they thought that the way to do that was to hone in on the dead center. With corporate media urging them on, so did most rank-and-file Democrats.

Meanwhile, public opinion moved steadily leftward, while the political center careened to the right. That is how undemocratic our politics had become!

This paradoxical state of affairs did strange things to Democratic voters. When elections were looming, many of them would cast aside their passions and interests in order to think like media pundits or old-fashioned politicians, the kind that used to hammer out deals in smoke-filled rooms.

They weren’t very good at, however; seasoned party operators made better choices. But thanks to workers and others whose families had always voted Democratic, the Party usually held its own at election time.

Nevertheless, the passion that made a liberal-labor coalition possible in decades past was slipping away.

Obama restored the flame briefly in 2008 and 2009. But after a few months of him in office, the words “hope” and “change” began to stick in the craw, and out it went again.

Last year, of course, there was Bernie Sanders. Had the Clintonites not rigged the election for Hillary, he would have won the nomination and then the election, running against Trump. Then Trump would still be nothing more than a pathetic joke, and the nightmare we currently find ourselves in would never have gotten underway.

But the Democratic National Committee and its media flunkies – not the Russians! – did rig the election. Sanders therefore lost. Once that happened, he went over to the Clinton side, and out went the flame again.

The leading figure fueling resistance to Trump now is therefore Trump himself, aided by Steve Bannon and his alt-right minions, and by Trump’s cabinet and cabinet level appointees; among them, some of the most reactionary and incompetent nincompoops in creation.

And don't forget that peerless duo, Jared and Ivanka. Ivanka is becoming her father's Hillary, while Jared is morphing into his father-in-law's alter ego. It's not just in the traditional sense but in a literal sense as well that Trump is running a Know Nothing operation.

The old Bernie still sometimes springs back to life for an interview or to give a speech, but the fact remains that he has made himself irrelevant. The Democratic Party that he might have led to glory is more irrelevant still.

Its failings are many and so are their causes, but, until lately, stupidity was not among them.

However, the Trump phenomenon changes everything. If Bannon really did have movie-making smarts, he'd make an action film starring the Donald as a superhero with the ability to turn everyone and everything around him whacky.

That is precisely what he has done to the Democratic Party. Once it dawned on their patrooms that Trump had to be taken seriously, they set a process in motion that might as well have been concocted expressly to prove Mencken right.

How else can efforts to make an enemy of Russia and generally to bring the country and the world to the brink of a nuclear conflagration be explained?

Like Obama, Hillary has never shown much fondness for whistleblowers –especially ones that make her look bad. They all do, of course, if they involve her at all; how could they not? On Edward Snowden, for example, she has been consistently worse even than Obama; and Wikileaks is at the top of her enemies list.

It is relevant too that red baiting, even when there are no reds to bait, is inscribed in her DNA.

Through no fault of his own, Snowden received asylum in Russia; and American propagandists had been attempting, largely in vain, to distract attention away from embarrassing Wikileaks revelations by insinuating that the organization has, or benefits from, a Russian connection.

So, when it started to look like maybe, just maybe, Hillary would have to work a little to defeat the Donald, she played the Putin card. Needless to say, she played it badly; that's the Clinton way. Notwithstanding decades of propaganda making her out to be someone who knows how to get things done, just the opposite is the case.

And so, after she went down to defeat, the party of corporate servility, pusillanimity, and phony progressivism became a party of sore losers.

For being beaten by someone as beatable as Trump, they blame everyone but themselves: from James Comey, the FBI director, to the white working class victims of their policies, to African Americans and other persons of color who didn't come out to vote in sufficient numbers – despite the entreaties of their “leaders” and of the “civil rights icons” that the Clintons have been courting for decades. Most of all, they blame Vladimir Putin.

Drawing on long dormant Cold War sentiments to ignite a new Cold War is a risky business. Surely, someone who has passed as much time in the White House and at Foggy Bottom as Hillary has should realize this. Perhaps she was counting on the demon of the hour to defuse the situation should it spiral out of control.

That worked for Obama; if it hadn't been for Putin, the United States would now have many more "boots on the ground" in Syria than it does.

Hillary is less thoughtful than Obama and more inclined to shoot first and concede later that, as they say in Washington, "mistakes were made." It was a dangerous game she was playing.

Indeed, it was and still is idiotic; and now that the entire Party and all its media flacks have taken up the cause, the level of idiocy has risen exponentially.

Rank-and-file Democratic voters who go along with the reckless nonsense they are barraged with aren't stupid in Mencken's sense – just gullible or unable to go against the current or too revolted by the political scene to care enough to do anything about it.

It is an open question how stupid they are according to the conventional meaning of the term or even in Mencken's sense. There is no doubt, however, that the warmongering campaign they are promoting is idiotic.

Or that it is at least borderline idiotic to make charges on the basis of evidence they have not seen but that the CIA, FBI and other stalwart "intelligence community" sources vouch for. Surely, they would never do what Democrats or Republicans tell them to do, or lie to further their own institutional interests; surely they would never even think of fabricating stories about, say, weapons of mass destruction – or Russian hackers.

There is also another dimension to the demonization of Putin that should be born in mind – its monumental hypocrisy. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black! The United States routinely interferes with the elections of other countries – Russia and other former Soviet republics included.

Never mind that, however; Democrats are shocked, shocked that foreigners, much less Russians, would think of interfering in an American election. This doesn't make them stupid, at least not in the conventional sense, but it does make them ignorant or dishonest or both.

And a little stupid in Mencken's sense. Shouldn't it have occurred to them to make up a plausible story about what the Russians did to affect the outcome of the election? The best they have come up with so far is that, by embarrassing Hillary, they got potential Democratic voters to stay home. Gimme a break. Many did stay home, but credit where credit is due. Hillary did that herself.

If anything, the people who voted for Trump are smarter, in the conventional sense, than the Democrats now blaming the Russians for their own failings. No doubt, some of those Trump voters were and are irredeemably “deplorable.” But many, maybe most, of them thought that Trump’s election would improve their material situations. There was never any chance that this would happen, but, with unadulterated Clintonism as the alternative, the belief that it would was not entirely unreasonable.

Some Trump voters were so down on Clinton and Clintonism that they were willing to scrape the bottom of the barrel to elect anyone but Hillary. Even if they realized that the alternative was a bona fide charlatan, temperamentally unfit to hold any public office whatsoever, this line of thinking was not quite foolish enough to count as stupid in Mencken’s sense. After all, at the time, it wasn’t yet obvious that Trump would turn out to be a caricature of himself or that he would empower a gaggle of miscreant gzillionaires to run the country.

Even so, some of them now must be feeling pretty stupid in the conventional sense of the term; this is what happens when people realize that they have been conned. Before long, the numbers of persons who feel that way will swell into the millions, and millions more will feel too ashamed to admit their mistake.

People are like that, but this side of human psychology doesn’t, and probably never will, fully explain Trump’s lingering popularity.

The reason why he is still popular in corporate boardrooms and on Wall Street is obvious — greed. Capitalists at the top of the food chain believe, not unreasonably, that the Donald can help their bottom lines. No doubt, many of them are embarrassed and even repelled by their President and his crew; but the love of money trumps all.

However, sheer cupidity only accounts for the feelings of a tiny fraction of the one-percent. What is keeping the others on board?

The explanation, I think, is partly cultural and partly psychological.

Americans venerate men (always men) who are successful in business, where success is measured by how much money they have or, as in Trump’s case, claim to have.

Mencken may well have had something like this cultural norm in mind when he derogated the intelligence of the American public. But while venerating businessmen is crass and unseemly, it is not stupid in Mencken’s sense. What is stupid is applying that norm to Trump and people like him.

Trump and the others are not relevantly like the one-percenters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who became rich as Midas partly by making shrewd business decisions, but mainly by exploiting working stiff. Their exploits hardly make them worthy of veneration. But at least they were involved in causing the real economy to grow. Also, many of them put their ill-gotten gains to good use – advancing culture, enlightenment, public health, economic development, and international peace.

Trump is more like a Wall Street high flyer. His ventures do sometimes add something to the real economy, but, for the most part, he makes money out of money. And although he claims to be a philanthropist, there is no sign of it.

In short, the cultural flaws that made it possible for Ayn Rand to have a following also make it possible for misguided souls to venerate Trump and others like him.

But this does not entirely explain why distressingly many people are willing not only to disregard their own class interests, but also to overlook Trump's many, perfectly obvious flaws. The main reason for that is psychological: it is that people, some people anyway, want, more than almost anything else, to be on the winning side. Trump is good at getting gullible people to believe that winning is what he does.

But that perception is bound to change as his presidency sputters from one failure to another.

Therefore, let there be two, three, many Obamacare defeats! Shatter the illusion! Reduce it to smithereens!

The bad news is that, for this to happen, Democrats will have to overcome their chronic spinelessness. The good news is that, as long as resistance to Trump and to all things Trumpian continues to grow, the easiest course for Democrats who want to survive politically may actually be to become less pusillanimous.

As the scales fall from the eyes of Trump voters, and as the Republican Party's cultural contradictions and the machinations of its feckless leaders continue to tear the GOP apart, the circumstances are right for the large and growing resistance movement that Trump's presidency has brought into being to morph into an organized political opposition that actually does stand a chance not just of defeating Trump but of turning back the neoliberal tide altogether.

Unfortunately, Democrats will have to take the lead. How much better it would be if that wretched party would just go away— if it could somehow be replaced by a less compromised, more thoroughgoing and principled opposition.

That isn't going to happen, however; its Clintonite sector is too large, too deeply entrenched, too well financed, and too important to corporate and Wall Street interests. But the party could split. Of all the outcomes with a non-negligible probability of coming to pass, this would be, by far, the best.

Let's hope, though, that even the actually existing Democratic Party keeps the pressure up — defeating Trump whenever and wherever it can.

There are two passions that move the “malefactor of great wealth” who now occupies the Oval Office: the love of money, of course — that has always been the guiding principle of Trump's life — and a degree of vanity that puts mere narcissists to shame.

It seems that, as of now, while the Trump brand has taken some hits, the money is still pouring in. Evidently, there are a lot of marks out there, and a lot of vulgarians ready to buy into the Trump idea of luxury and taste.

However, Trump's bluster and delusions of grandeur aside, the (non-alternative) fact is that the man is a loser. The clearer this becomes to ever-wider swathes of the public, the sooner Trump's income will start drying up.

So too will the adulation he receives from the segment of the public whose intelligence, in both Mencken's and the conventional senses, can hardly be underestimated.

If scandals help do him in too, then so much the better. Too bad that the ones that now seem most likely to succeed are the ones sore loser Democrats are promoting. Where the Trumpian menace is concerned, there is no time or point in being fastidious.

The bastard is digging his own grave, more deeply with each passing day. If the anti-Trump resistance does its job, then, barring gross Democratic Party malfeasance, the time is coming when he will find himself unable to get out of town quickly enough.

Then the whole world can breathe a sigh of relief.