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No More Silver Lining: Trump Turns Clintonian

By Andrew Levine
April 14, 2017



The election of Donald Trump was a catastrophe. This was clear before Election Day; it is even clearer now.

Nevertheless, his victory was not a total disaster — Hillary Clinton lost. She and her husband had done enough harm already. Three decades of Clintons is enough.

I put the point this way because with the Republicans' success in replacing the late Antonin Scalia with Neil Gorsuch, a smoother but more reactionary jurist, the Supreme Court is on my mind.

The allusion is, of course, to an infamous remark of the much venerated – and ostensibly liberal – Oliver Wendell Holmes Junior in a ruling (*Buck v. Bell*, 1927) that permitted the state of Virginia to require the sterilization of an intellectually disabled woman. Holmes declared: “three generations of imbeciles is enough.”

A god-awful sentiment, a fine turn of phrase, and an occasion to reflect on the plain fact that differences, such as they are, between liberals and conservatives are not always what they are cracked up to be.

The Supreme Court was the best reason to hope that a Democrat, even Hillary Clinton, would win the White House in 2016. Supreme Court Justices can do a lot of harm. A Democrat would likely pick someone less retrograde than a Republican, someone who would do less harm.

Now, that task won't fall to a Democrat, it will fall to Trump — or, if the gods smile upon us and he quits or is impeached, it will fall to Mike Pence. Unlike Trump whose “conservatism” is opportunistic, Pence is a bona fide reactionary, as retrograde as they come.

Democratic Party bigwigs and Clinton herself are responsible for that — not FBI muckety-mucks or white working class victims of Clintonism or sexist voters, and certainly not the current demon of America's political class and the media that serve it, Vladimir Putin.

Gorsuch is a stiff price to pay for seeing the back of the Clinton family, if indeed they really are gone. There has been talk about Hillary running for Mayor of New York City, and of Chelsea taking the plunge into the family business.

Chelsea, please, stay in your \$10.5 million condo (it's probably worth even more by now) and devote yourself to babies and hedge funds. Even one generation of Clintons is too much; and, thanks to your pal Ivanka and those other little Trumps, there is already too much bad seed loose upon the land.

Ridding the body politic of Clintons, at least for a while, was not the only upside of Clinton's defeat; nor was it the most important. In Trump's case, itchy fingers go along with tiny hands. But Hillary's fingers are itchier than his. Of the two of them, she seemed the more likely to bring on Doomsday.

To be sure, Trump says and does whatever is on his mind at the moment; with no ideology or settled convictions to speak of, he is utterly erratic.

What moves him is vanity, insecurity, and cupidity. He is a huckster more than a politician, and what he is selling is himself.

There was reason, though, to think that he wanted to work with, not against, Russia. His motives were suspect and very likely disreputable, but his intentions seemed clear.

There was therefore reason to hope that, under a President Trump, relations with Russia would take a turn for the better. Who could be so reckless as to object to that?

Hillary Clinton is who – and now that Democrats are desperately blaming everybody but Hillary and themselves for her defeat, she has a lot of company. She also has the active support of every corporate media outlet this side of Breitbart and Fox News.

Because saner minds prevail on the Russian side, and because it seemed likely that public opinion in the United States would turn against warmongering if relations with Russia were to become dicey, it seemed safe to assume that, even with Hillary in the Oval Office, the world would probably somehow yet again, avoid nuclear annihilation.

And so, anyone playing the odds, who assesses outcomes in the usual ways, had more reason to regret Trump's victory than to rejoice in Clinton's defeat.

It would be different were the Russians anywhere near as irresponsible and daft as the Democrats – or as Republicans of the John McCain-Lindsey Graham variety. Then it would be at least reasonable to think that Trump's majority of Electoral College votes was not an unmitigated disaster.

This, anyway, was how it seemed until the middle of last week, when Trump ordered a tomahawk missile attack on the Shayrat air base in central Syria. Suddenly, the blank slate that is Trump's mind seemed to be channeling Hillary – and Bill as well, inasmuch as hit and run missile attacks were a favorite of his, back in the nineties, when he was Commander-in-Chief.

Needless to say, Trump's missiles accomplished nothing of strategic value. However, they have put relations with Russia on a trajectory that must thrill the neocons and "humanitarian" interveners who cluster around the Clintons. Thanks to them, the prospects for peace between the world's two major nuclear powers are now worse than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

So much for the silver lining in the otherwise appalling outcome of the 2016 election.

It is practically a law of nature: that, in our neoliberal age, voters vote for candidates or parties who promise X but deliver Y, where Y is often X's diametric opposite.

Trump voters, the ones the Donald conned so well, thought that it would be different for them this time around; that, for once, they would get what they voted for.

What they were voting for was an attitude more than a set of policies. If Trump had policies in mind, he kept them secret – from his marks most of all. But the one sure thing, Trump voters thought, was that, by voting for Trump, they would at least not get Clinton.

Polls suggest that many, maybe most Trump voters had no fondness for their candidate; they may even have realized, at some level, that the man is a fraud. But they were willing to tolerate that in order to send a message.

Even now, as it is becoming increasingly clear that nothing Trump is likely to do will advance their material interests one iota, and that the interests he serves are those of his class, not theirs, many of them remain willing to keep on sending that message.

Evidently and understandably, they want the political class to know that they have had enough of Clinton and Clintonism (neoliberalism, liberal imperialism, perpetual war).

But will that be enough to keep them on board when they are no longer able to deny the plain fact that beneath the attitude they prize, beneath the mindless bluster, Trumpism is nothing more than Clintonism on stilts — administered by berserk billionaires and rank incompetents.

They voted against Clinton, and they got Clintonism 2.0. Now what are they going to do about it?

Will there ever be a reasoned history of the Trump administration or even a coherent narrative that makes sense? Or will it only be possible to write a chronicle, a record that this happened, then that, with no organizing principle other than the flow of time itself?

With Trump running amok, the chronicle option is the best bet.

During the campaign, there was only campaign nonsense, tailored to the audience of the hour. That would be middle aged or older, mainly male, overwhelmingly white victims of the neoliberal turn.

The commentariat calls them “working class”; some Trump voters were. Others owned their own businesses or worked for salaries, not wages. Few of them were in truly desperate financial straits, but neither were they better off than people in comparable positions forty years ago.

The conventional wisdom has it too that they were more likely to live in rural areas or small towns than in big cities or suburbs, and that most of them had little or no post-secondary education. There is some truth in this too, though not as much as is widely supposed.

The Clintons and their co-thinkers took them for granted because, they figured, they had nowhere else to go. They devoted their attention instead to social and identity issues that did not threaten the material interests of “the donor class.”

Even before the last election, it had started to dawn on clear-thinking observers that this was, at best, unwise. Since the election, the tide has turned against ‘identity politics’ altogether. Fair enough, though there is a danger that the pendulum will swing too far in the opposite direction.

What is insufficiently appreciated, however, is that Trump too was playing the identity card. The difference is just that, by pretending to be a “populist,” he targeted different identities.

Trump left women and “minorities” – an increasingly quaint term now that collectively minorities are becoming majorities in many parts of the country – to Democratic goody-goodies. He appealed instead to the identity concerns of the kinds of people who found his bumptious, politically incorrect candidacy appealing.

Thanks to neoliberal financial and trade policies that have destroyed unions and caused formerly well-paying jobs to move to distant corners of the earth, the material condition of most people in that category has been in decline for decades. But Trump’s appeal had little to do with his (transparently empty) promises of economic renewal. Of far greater importance was his ability to tap into his base’s malaise.

For his predecessor, the words “hope” and “change,” like Obama’s persona itself, worked like Rorschach inkblots. They signified nothing, but gullible people projected their hopes onto them.

“Make America great again” is Trump’s functional equivalent. The difference is that instead of being about a vague future, it is about an imaginary past.

Trump broke all the implicit rules that governed how overtly nativist, racist, and Islamophobic a politician running for national office could be; doing so served him well. But most Trump voters were not unusually nativist, racist or Islamophobic; their “darker angels” were not what drove them into the Trump fold.

Nostalgia did that. In all likelihood, most Trump voters realized how meretricious Trump’s sales pitch was; they understood full well that the Eisenhower era could not now be revived. It didn’t matter, though, not on Election Day; for most of them it doesn’t matter yet. It is hard for spiritual victims of Clintonite politics to realize that the man they look to for salvation is himself a crypto-Clintonite.

The chroniclers will therefore record that, at first, all Trump brought to the table were empty promises and a bad boy attitude, and that breaking the rules and getting away with it won him the White House; that and not being a Clinton.

Trump didn’t just run against Hillary; he ran against the Republican Party as well.

Had he gotten trounced, as would surely have happened had he run against a more capable opponent, the GOP would now be in its death throes everywhere outside the South and in a few benighted regions of the Mountain West.

This tectonic change in American politics would have left the Democratic Party in a bad place as well. Down-ticket Democrats, riding the anti-Trump wave, would likely have been swept into office, as happened eight years earlier, on Obama’s coattails. But then party unity would disintegrate, as it became clear to the party’s more progressive (less retrogressive) sectors that,

with the barbarians at the gates beaten back, there was no longer any need to support the rightwing mainstream.

The cultural contradictions that divide the Republican Party are now giving way to deep and disabling fissures for a similar reason. Hillary's political ineptitude, and the Democratic National Committee's malign neglect of everything not directly involving the White House, has made the Democratic Party irrelevant. Republicans therefore now feel free to go after each other.

Because Hillary defeated herself, Trump found himself with a country to rule, and no idea how to go about it.

All he could do, in the circumstances, was make nice to the Republicans he had savaged. This started not long after he secured the nomination. It took a while, though, for the reality to register in his head. Once it did, the process went into high gear.

There was no love lost between Trump and the party he nearly decimated, but they had resources and capabilities he needed; and, because they saw him as useful for getting their agendas enacted, they too were willing to let bygones be bygones. Evangelicals were the worst; instead of anathematizing the self-promoting philanderer, they became his staunchest supporters.

And so, we have phase 1 of the chronicle: the Reince Priebus or, worse, Paul Ryan phase. Among the consequences is a cabinet, and a raft of cabinet level appointments, that, for sheer awfulness, even Ted Cruz couldn't match.

Party apparatchiks didn't do it all on their own; they had help from Steve Bannon and his people. But without Ryan and the others, we would not now be governed – if that is the right word – by the most feckless collection of reactionary dullards in American history.

If and when Trump quits or is impeached, they won't go away. The President-in-Waiting, Mike Pence, is cut from the same cloth, and can be counted on to carry on the deluge of reaction that got going under Trump's auspices.

The debacle over Obamacare is what brought phase 1 to an end. Trump had insisted too many times to overlook that he would “repeal and replace” Obama's Affordable Care Act. This was perhaps the one point on which all Republican factions agreed. And yet, they couldn't pull it off.

Thank the Freedom Caucus for that; the obstinacy of those heirs of the 2010 Tea Party rebellion is a marvel to behold. However, the problem for them, and for all Republicans, is that their constituents, much as they become livid at the very mention of Obamacare, benefit from it, and would not take kindly to its elimination.

Seeing the writing on the wall, the Republican leadership opted for Obamacare by another name. However, Freedom Caucus Republicans weren't buying it; and while those certifiable dunces don't know much, they do know how to obstruct.

With an Easter recess looming, Ryan and the others decided to "amend" their "American Health Care Act" by making it even crueller and therefore more appealing to Republicans more reactionary than themselves. Their idea is to put the sick and elderly in a separate insurance pool, which would then receive feeble subsidies, everyone else being left to the mercies of the marketplace.

Their cynicism is palpable; they know full well that hardly anyone in the ninety-nine percent would benefit from this "amendment." They know too that, because their plan doesn't give markets entirely free rein, the ideologues who blocked their scheme before won't like it either.

But Ryan and others of his ilk are hoping that it will buy Republicans time over the Easter recess – so that they won't have to face quite so many furious constituents as in the recent past.

The ploy could work: it is aimed, after all, at people who say that they like the Affordable Care Act but hate Obamacare, its other name.

Ryan and Priebus and the others remain at least marginally in Trump's good graces because he still needs them. A true authoritarian strongman would have independent political machinery to deploy; Trump has none. This is why, since phase 1 ended, the Republicans Trump decimated and then revived, though down, are still not out.

In phase 2, Steve Bannon seems to have been the Donald's main man.

According to reliable reports, it was Robert Mercer, a libertarian computer geek, weak on people skills but richer than God thanks to software he developed that gives his ways of conjuring money out of money an edge up on his rivals', and his daughter Rebekah, the self-declared First Lady of the alt-Right, who made Bannon and his circle Trump's brain.

He also had Trump bring on board the cartoon characters we now identify with Trumpland; Steve Miller, for example, and Kellyanne Conway.

Unlike the people Trump empowered to deal with environmental issues, Mercer is not a climate change denier; quite to the contrary, he is said to believe that global warming is good for the planet. He is also said to think that nuclear wars are winnable and not all that bad.

Inasmuch as there are, as yet, no reliable accounts of palace intrigues within the Trump circle, it is impossible to say for sure, but it seems that, during the campaign against Clinton, it was Bannon and his people who kept Trump on the retrograde nationalist course that the hapless Donald had already stumbled upon on his own.

Bannon is reputed to be something of an intellectual. In comparison, say, with Newt Gingrich or Paul Ryan, he probably is. But on what does his reputation depend? Not on his writings or

speeches; not even on his film documentaries. As best one can tell at this point, all Trump's brain knows are the names of some midcentury and post-World War II rightwing European theoreticians, and perhaps also the contents of some of their books.

However, he does seem to have a genius for combining nationalism, at least on a rhetorical level, with libertarian nostrums about the glories of markets and the evils of states. Ryan and the others can therefore take heart in the perception that the clique that superseded them in influence shares their passion for “deconstructing” the “regulatory state.”

Trump still needs his phase 1 partners to get any “governing” done, and he probably still needs Bannon too – to keep his base on board. But he may be too vain and full of himself to realize this.

Thus, if the latest palace gossip is on track, Bannon too is now on the outs — a victim, as it were, of “the deep state” and of Trump family values.

There are still people who think that because he is rich, Trump knows what he is doing, even when he plainly does not.

This is why no one should conclude that Bannon really is a gonner. In Trumpland, anything can happen; absurdity reigns. Even if Bannon is on the outs now, he could come bouncing back at any moment.

Nevertheless, a story-line is emerging according to which the Donald, having won the allegiance of mainstream Republicans and then, thanks to Bannon, having held onto his base, is now doing what he really wanted to do all along – he is taking the Clintonite turn. A variant on this theme is that he is doing what the deep state wants him to do. Both could be true.

An instinct for self-preservation may also be at work. As a candidate, the Donald insulted the CIA and the rest of “the intelligence community” repeatedly. Perhaps now he just wants to make amends before those murderous bastards, allied with other deep state actors, strike back.

Trump has now also flip-flopped on Russia and on regime change in Syria. His former positions were his saving grace. Now he is discarding them.

The story they tell to rationalize the flip-flop is that “the Assad regime” – the government of Syria — used poison gas on its own people in the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province, that Trump was horrified by pictures of babies dying, and that, in response, he launched fifty-nine tomahawk missiles against the Al Shayrat airfield.

There was some media acknowledgment of the blatant illegality of Trump's escapade. But Americans have become inured; war making in violation of domestic and international law has

been the stock-and-trade of American Presidents at least since Bill Clinton. Even Democratic Party “progressives” were reluctant to condemn Trump for anything worse than disregarding Congress.

There was, however, some glorification of Trump’s lawlessness in “liberal” media – MSNBC’s Brian Williams’ rapturous account of missiles being fired was the most egregious example. The demoted former news anchor even invoked Leonard Cohen to that end; Cohen must be spinning in his grave.

Then there was Fareed Zakaria who sententiously declared on CNN that, by firing off those missiles, Trump finally became “presidential.” The sad thing is that he was right in a way.

Worst of all, though, was the display of media gullibility. A picture of a dying baby got Trump to turn one-hundred eighty degrees? That might be good enough for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, but even a ten year old who isn’t quite sure where Yemen is could see right through that.

But then what is the explanation?

That may be the wrong question to ask because, with Trump, we can never really be sure that there actually is anything to explain. Maybe “bomb Syria” and “undo relations with Moscow” just happened to jump out spontaneously from the booming buzzing confusion inside the Donald’s head. Maybe he will forget all about it a few days from now.

Assuming, though, that there really was a deliberate change of course, part of the explanation must surely be that, with the barrage of anti-Russian agitation coming out of the Democratic Party, its media adjuncts, and the John McCain – Lindsey Graham wing of the GOP, Trump felt compelled to do something that would make him look tough.

However that may be, Jared Kushner seems to be a more important factor.

It bears repeating: no one outside Trump’s most intimate circle really knows what palace intrigues are afoot. It has been reliably reported, however, that Trump admires Kushner for his loyalty to his felonious father, the real estate tycoon Charles, as well as for his unabashed Silicon Valley inflected pro-business bent.

Also, for now, Ivanka seems unable to do anything wrong in her father’s eyes; and Jared is her better half.

If Trump minds that, thanks to Kushner, his daughter is now an orthodox Jew, he keeps his displeasure to himself. Perhaps this is out of the goodness of his heart, but it must also have occurred to him that a Jewish daughter and Jewish grandchildren protect him from charges of anti-Semitism. As long as Bannon is, or is thought to be, a power behind the throne, he’ll need all the protection he can get.

Supposedly, Bannon and the Kushners are at odds. Bannon wants to keep Trump true to the causes that the Mercers, father and daughter, champion – for principled ideological reasons, and, Bannon thinks, because Trump’s base demands it.

Jared and Ivanka, on the other hand, seem to want to restore the power of the foreign policy establishment, and to promote good relations with the intelligence community.

They also seem more liberal on social matters than most Trump voters. Also, there is no reason to think that they are oblivious to the reality of global warming and to its consequences – unlike Trump’s cabinet secretaries and other close advisors.

Like Ivanka, Jared appears to be as callow and ill-informed as any other thirty-something rich kid. And yet, in phase 3, he has seemingly become Trump’s unofficial Secretary of Everything.

It is not just that Trump has no time for experts or even reasonably knowledgeable advisors. It is that, back in Queens, he caught *The Godfather* vibe.

The Donald keeps his friends close and his enemies closer; and, as far as possible, he wants his lieutenants and heirs to be family.

Shouldn’t we be relieved? Better them than Bannon, after all, or Ryan and Priebus.

Isn’t this even better than what the lesser evilists who supported Hillary were hoping for? After all, Jared and Ivanka, though free of the Bill and Hillary stain, seem to carry the Clintonite torch. The difference is that, through Trump, they are not loathed by the kinds of people who were willing to blow the whole system up rather than elect Hillary.

Will they therefore make Trump not so bad? Not likely. Even if Trump stays mired in phase 3 indefinitely, what we will be in for is, at best, Clinton 2.0 – a horror more reckless than the original version, and without any of its moderating features.

To the extent that Jared calls the shots, the Israeli Right does too. The Kushner family, now including Ivanka, actively promotes a Greater Israel. Like Trump’s former bankruptcy lawyer and current ambassador to Israel, David Friedman they almost make Benjamin Netanyahu, a Kushner family friend, look benign.

Had she become President, the Netanyahu government could have lived with and prospered under Hillary. But with Kushner and Friedman, the Bibster won’t even have to break a sweat.

Why Syria? Why now? Surely among the reasons is the undeniable, because expressly admitted, fact that the Israeli government wants the war to grind on indefinitely; it wants the several sides – does Trump even know what they are? — to fight each other to exhaustion.

Israeli governments have long promoted the idea that Iran is an “existential threat” to the Israeli – they would say “Jewish” – state, an idea that serves Israeli propaganda interests well. For the

Israeli military, however, Hezbollah is a greater threat. It has both the means and the will to defeat the vaunted Israeli Defense Forces; they have done it before, and they could do it again.

The longer they, along with all the others, stay mired down in Syria, the better, from the Israeli point of view

The United States is no stranger to this line of thinking; it was a core theme of the Reagan Administration's foreign policy during the Iran-Iraq War. It is hard to make sense of Obama's, and now Trump's, on-again off-again attitudes towards "the Assad regime" without coming to the conclusion that the U.S. is at it again.

Perhaps we shouldn't read too much into Netanyahu's immediate and unequivocal praise of Trump's missile attack. He could have just been brownnosing. But if there is a coherent Trump administration position, and if she is dutifully representing it, the interventions of U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley defending Trump's crime of aggression, along with her overwrought anti-Russian screeds, are more revealing.

With her undergraduate degree in accounting from Clemson University – Go Tigers! – Haley is overqualified, by Trumpian standards, for a delicate diplomatic position. Lucky for her that she is a ten; otherwise the Donald would surely have gone for someone more transparently ill-equipped; someone more in the mold of John Bolton, George W. Bush's choice for the job.

But the Whore of AIPAC got the nod, and is therefore now excoriating Syrian and Russian demons with a zeal that puts Samantha Power and Hillary herself to shame.

This is the sort of thing we can expect more of with the Kushners running the show.

What will happen when the Trump presidency falters under Jared's and Ivanka's guidance? This is bound to happen; the happy couple are no more equipped to call the shots than the Donald himself. Even if it somehow lasts longer than phases 1 and 2, phase 3 will surely expire— either by Pence's hand or by Trump's.

We know, from biographical accounts, that, despite his penchant for loyalty and family ties, the Donald is not beyond cutting family members loose when it suits his purpose.

But he isn't clever or strong enough to act like a real Godfather. Jared can therefore be confident that he will not end up like Carlo, sister Connie's first husband, or like Fredo. Even if he wanted to, Trump could never pull it off, much less get away with it.

But he could kick Jared upstairs.

In that spirit, let me be the first to suggest that, if he gets the chance, Trump should see to it that Jared follows Gorsuch onto the Supreme Court.

He did go to Law School, after all; that makes him at least as qualified for that job as Nikki Haley is for hers. And he is pro-business enough and young enough to hold progress back for decades.

In case he is not already a member, Jared should therefore join the Federalist Society just as soon as he can spare a moment from his presidential duties and from his business interests. And it's never too soon for his father-in-law, the erstwhile populist pretender whom we now know to be a Clintonite in wolves' clothing, to get to work conning his base into thinking that Jared would be no less socially retrograde than the Scalia substitute he and his allies of convenience in the GOP leadership threw their way.