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www.afgazad.com

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by ANDREW LEVINE

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What We Know About 2020, Eighteen Months Out

Those of us who had been looking forward to a substantial span of time after last year's midterm elections when interest in electoral politics would subside enough for real politics to happen have been disappointed.

We had been hoping to be able to discuss and act upon the pressing environmental, economic, political, and social concerns addressed by social movements and by others who think seriously about politics, without regard to their bearing on one or another candidate's electoral prospects in the 2020 election.

We didn't get a substantial span of time; we got a few weeks around the holidays. By the time that was over, electoral politics was back with a vengeance.

Electoral politics is about raising money from rich donors and others to set up marketing programs, similar to the kind that corporations use to market their wares, in order to sell candidates to voters. Real politics is about struggles over ends and means in societies divided by class, race, gender, and other socially or ideologically pertinent factors.

The hope had been that, for a while, there would be time out from electoral politics and that real politics could gain some breathing room in its absence. Those who hoped for that hoped in vain. By January 2019, November 2020 was sucking up all the political energy there was.

With so many people desperate to be rid of Donald Trump and Mike Pence and the miscreants around them, this was probably inevitable. Nevertheless, it is far from clear how obsessing now over a nomination process that would not even get underway full-throttle for another year would help with that. But no matter. Jumping into the electoral

circus now may be premature, but it is a way of doing something, anything, ostensibly political to satisfy a deeply felt and widely shared desire on the part of many to go after Trump ASAP.

Trump merits all the rancor the anti-Trump “resistance” can muster, but if the world makes it through his tenure without being blown to smithereens, then if and when a definitive balance sheet is drawn up, we may find that, compared to Democrats, Trump is not quite the unmitigated disaster he seems to be. Indeed, he actually comes off looking a little better than his Democratic rivals in at least one respect; in word, if not in deed, he has generally been less bellicose than many Democrats, and less eager to intervene in the affairs of other nations. He certainly beats Hillary Clinton in these respects.

Without meaning to and probably without realizing what he was doing, he has also been more disposed to causing, or allowing to happen, something that genuine progressives ought, at the very least, to applaud: the American empire’s decline.

If done right, this would be a blessing for the world, and for the people of the United States. The empire’s decline is desirable and inevitable, but a softer landing than the one that the foreign policy establishment was leading the US into is surely possible. Trump’s efforts are likely to end badly; they always do. But at least he has it in him to talk up better sways of proceeding, and some of that could stick.

Also unintentionally, the Trump presidency seems to have sparked transformations within the Democratic Party that bode well, if all goes well with them.

We should not make too much of these developments, however. A transformed Democratic Party would likely amount to little more than an up-to-date version of the kind of politics that the neoliberal-Clintonite turn in the eighties and nineties undid. On the other hand, once the spirit of reform is unleashed, who knows what course events might take.

What will ultimately come of the Trump phenomenon, besides a lot of grief, is still an open question; at most, there are only reasons to be hopeful.

What is becoming clearer already, though, is that while focusing on the nominating process now is by no means necessary for moving the process along, it is probably not harmful either. Quite to the contrary, if only for arousing peoples’ interest in what the Democratic Party is up to, it may actually speed changes for the better along.

In the meanwhile, though, the territory we inhabit is nerve-racking and potentially dangerous; and nothing if not bewildering; and it is all, or nearly all, the fault of the

teenage vulgarian in an old man's body who, when not golfing at one or another of his over-the-top resorts, logs serious "executive time" in the Oval Office.

It has become rare for American presidents to serve only one term, and rarer still for one or the other duopoly party's control of the executive branch to last fewer than eight years. But with each passing news cycle, Trump becomes less likely to last out the current year, and if he has not yet brought the Republican Party down with him, he is on his way.

Trump is the reason why electoral politics and the larger political scene in which it is embedded — and life in America generally in 2019, the year before the next presidential election — feels so unlike the years that preceded other presidential elections still in living memory; why it seems so much more bewildering and out of control.

Media that give Trump the publicity he craves, even as they berate him at every turn, are also culpable. Their problem, which has become our problem, is that they don't much care about enlightening or even informing the public they purport to serve; they are neither willing nor able to do much of anything of that kind.

The contrast with the year leading up to the 2012 election is revealing. Then, as now, a president whose party had gotten "shellacked" in midterm elections the preceding year was seeking a second term. Obama got what he sought. Trump will be lucky if a shellacking is all he gets.

In 2011, there were developments abroad and at home that seemed on track for moving history along, bending what Martin Luther King Jr. called "the arc of the moral universe" closer to justice — the Arab Spring, the anti-austerity rebellions in Greece and elsewhere in the European south, the struggles of American workers and their allies to save public sector unions from the predations of newly elected Republican governors and legislators, and, of course, the Occupy Wall Street movement and its many offshoots. There was an election looming in 2012, but there was also history being made. This was too plain even for our corporate media to ignore, notwithstanding their inveterate fixation on American electoral politics, to the exclusion of everything else.

The moment passed — not just because as the election approached, it increasingly sucked up all the air in the room, but also because it soon became apparent that if the arc was bending at all, it was in the wrong direction — that these potentially momentous developments would turn out poorly to say the least. But nobody knew that in 2011. Optimism was in the air.

Optimism is in the air now too, at least to some extent. The recently concluded midterm elections are the reason why – in part because Republicans got their own well-deserved shellacking, intimating more to come in 2020, when Trump, even if he is gone by then, just might receive his just deserts, and also because there is now a faint chance that the formerly useless, when not complicit, Democratic Party may be transforming itself for the better — thanks to the handful of good women and men elected to Congress last November.

There are perhaps a dozen or so of them who could do the country and the world a lot of good if they stick to their guns, and there is a better than fifty fifty chance that, with those newbies in mind, at least a few more seasoned left-leaning representatives will, for once, make their constituents proud.

Even Nancy Pelosi seems to have realized that she is going to have to give freer rein to her progressive side, and to the progressive legislators she leads, than was her practice in her first stint as Speaker. Pelosi is no less a corporate liberal than before, but she is a survivor, who knows how to go with the flow.

When challenged by Bernie Sanders in 2016, Hillary Clinton claimed to be a “progressive pragmatist.” Nobody quite knew what those weasel words meant, however. What all but the willfully blind did know is that, at heart, she was and would forever remain the same old Hillary.

Pelosi is more adept and politically astute than Clinton could ever hope to be. Needy liberals in search of idols to extol surely exaggerate her skills; and with corporate media towing the line, conventional wisdom follows suit. However, this time, for once, the conventional wisdom seems to be generally on track; smelling blood in the water as Trump mentally decomposes, she is showing by example what “progressive pragmatism” could mean. She is providing a template.

This is a welcome change. Some things, however, have not changed – for example, the fixation on Trump and all things Trumpian. If anything, this has become even worse.

Therefore, even if events that don’t involve Trump directly become as momentous this year as, say, the Arab Spring or anti-austerity politics in Greece did eight years ago — the yellow vest (gilet jaune) movement in France has that potential – don’t expect to hear much about it on MSNBC or CNN or to read about it in any of the other propaganda arms of the DNC, the still Clintonian Democratic National Committee.

In that world, “mum’s the word” on anything that might get people thinking that there could be more constructive ways to advance a progressive agenda in our time and situation

than by plunging into the 2020 electoral circus. Maybe it will be different in 2020; or maybe, even then, most peoples' time will still be better spent doing politics outside the electoral arena.

For now, though, with the only non-marginalized game in town still being the one that focuses on the duopoly parties, corporate media continue to reinforce the idea that the sun rises and sets with the Democratic and Republican Parties, and that news only matters insofar as it affects their electoral prospects. From within that stultifying purview, Trump really is all.

By spending so much time on him or, what comes to the same thing in their minds, on the villainy of Vladimir Putin and "Russian hackers" out to do who knows what (certainly they don't), there is little time for anything else – except, of course, the race for the Democratic nomination, which, being unsettled, is an obsession in its own right.

That obsession connects synergistically with the fixation on Trump and Putin, making the choice of a nominee depend, in part, on her or his slavish adherence to the prevailing story line on Russia. Two pernicious ideas working together and feeding off one another! Don't count on that ending well!

I have argued here ("Adversary Russia") and here ("Who Cares Which Democrat Comes Out on Top?"): (a) that the anti-Russian, anti-Putin obsession that is nowadays taken for Gospel truth by Democrats and Republicans alike is mostly fatuous; and (b) that, within limits, it hardly matters who the Democratic nominee is – so long as it is not a billionaire businessman, an unreconstructed Clintonite, or Joe Biden.

I have also argued (c) that Tulsi Gabbard's entry into the race leads me to think that (b) is more complicated than I had thought — not so much by making the choice of a candidate matter more than I thought it did, but by taking into account the ways that candidates' personalities and histories, when genuinely "diverse," can help shape mainstream political discourse in constructive ways.

Gabbard's father is a Pacific Islander from American Samoa – no need to worry that Trump or someone of his ilk will concoct a birther plot on that account; residents of American Samoa are American citizens – and her religion is Hindu. Not many folks like that in our politics today; for the kind of diversity that matters to liberals nowadays, she gets an A-plus. The kind of diversity I had in mind is the kind that classical liberals like John Stuart Mill esteemed – diversity of ideas, including political ideas. She gets high marks for that as well.

Since politicians of all stripes are under extreme and unrelenting pressure to conform to mainstream ways of thinking, it almost doesn't matter whom the actual winners in the electoral circus turn out to be; everybody ends up doing more or less the same thing anyway. But what people are talking about can matter a great deal – for determining what the mainstream is and what its trajectory is likely to be. My point was that Gabbard's candidacy could change the foreign policy conversation in the United States in constructive ways.

Elizabeth Warren's call for a wealth tax on the hyper-rich is important for much the same reason, even in the short run.

Evidently, with candidates like Gabbard and Warren in the mix, focusing on the horse race even this early on can be more useful than I had originally imagined.

What prompted this reconsideration was the eruption of the latest (in a disgracefully long line) of U.S. supported coups and coup attempts in Venezuela.

This time, the meddling has been so in your face obvious and so egregious that even a Trump obsessed media cannot keep it entirely under wraps.

What they can do, though, is deflate its significance and misinform the public about, augmenting the already stupendously vast level of hypocrisy in the ambient political culture.

Thus when corporate media report on Venezuela, all they have to say is how wonderful things there used to be, and how awful they have become since that ungrateful country began its struggle to break free from American domination.

They neglect even to mention, much less instructively discuss, the U.S. role in bringing on the economic crises that the Venezuelan people have had to deal with through fair means and foul.

Well-off Venezuelans who collaborate with the plotters and schemers, American and homegrown, have been discomfited somewhat by the events now transpiring there; the less well-off majority that formed the old Hugo Chavez "base," have suffered egregiously and unnecessarily.

The causes of their misery have a lot to do with the vagaries of the world oil market. Also, as every report out of Venezuela maintains, corruption runs rampant there. But the main culprit, directly and indirectly, is the malevolence of the hegemon of the hemisphere (and much else besides), Uncle Sam.

For decades now, overt class war has been raging in Venezuela. Either the United States has been on the wrong side of it all along or, as some would insist, it has been the wrong side. To hear corporate media tell it, however, all of Venezuela's problems are the fault of Hugo Chavez and his successor, the country's duly elected president, Nicolás Maduro, and, more broadly, of Chavismo ideology, and — why not? — of socialism itself.

When they cannot help but focus on a situation what could easily become a full-fledged civil war right in our hemisphere and close to our shores, or on America's role in mobilizing subservient Latin American – and lately also European governments and Canada to support the installation of Juan Guaido, by all accounts a biddable dunce, reeking of “the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie,” in Maduro's place, they naturally fall into line behind their past and present mortal enemy, praising him for acting, this one time, not like a spoiled little boy but rather like one of those celebrated “adults in the room.

With nearly the entirety of the political class and its media flacks on board, opposition has been faint at best. Of all the many politicians operating at the national level in the United States today, the one clear exception is Tulsi Gabbard.

Her chance of winning was vanishingly small on the day she announced, and her first weeks as a declared candidate have unfolded poorly, to say the least. But, as long as she is allowed to affect the national “conversation” on interventionism and violations of national sovereignty – in other words, the longer she stays in the race – the more good her candidacy will do.

Political figures seldom articulate their foreign policy views directly. Tabbard is no exception; none of the contenders for the Democratic nomination are.

Moreover, politicians are generally “flexible” – some might say “opportunistic” or “unprincipled” — in their thinking, especially when in pursuit of higher office. If there is any reason to think that Tabbard is different in that regard, I am not aware of it.

In her case, though, there is enough evidence to draw defensible conclusions about the general drift of her thinking.

On that basis, it is fair to say that she is a proponent of a kind of leftwing realism that underwrites a generally non-interventionist foreign policy and that focuses honestly on national interests, not hypocritically or self-righteously on convenient values.

This contrasts sharply with the liberal imperialism of the Clintonites in the foreign policy establishment. The views, as best they can be ascertained, of the other candidates for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination are liberal imperialist too; they may be more or

less critical around the edges, but basically they all support the empire, thinking it a force for goodness in the world for the kinds of fatuous reasons Barack Obama would lay out every chance he got. Gabbard is the outlier.

Republicans and Democrats are cut from the same cloth. The kind of liberal imperialism with neoconservative inflections that the Clintons champion has become the norm on “both sides of the aisle,” as they say on the cable networks; it is a bipartisan affliction.

Gabbard’s anti-interventionism does not seem to follow from principled anti-imperialist convictions, but neither is it a form of old school “isolationism.”

Trump sometimes talks like an anti-interventionist too, but it is hard to tell what he is thinking or even if he is thinking about anything other than how best to work his con when he finds himself in circumstances in which he intuits that adopting a non-interventionist guise could do him some good.

Trump has become notorious for saying one thing and then, hours later, doing something else altogether different. He even has defenders – “deplorables” too proud to fess up to having been conned – who persist in thinking of the Donald as a consummate deal-maker, and who will say that being inconsistent is just a strategy that Trump resorts to from time to time in the course of deploying his deal-making “artistry.” This is nonsense, of course. The man acts out, but he couldn’t negotiate his way out of a paper bag.

Gabbard is on a different plane altogether. She supports the rule of law in international affairs and therefore opposes violations of the core legal principles upon which the United Nations and other international institutions were founded – first among them being non-intervention in the affairs of other nations, except as authorized by the United Nations or other competent authorities.

In her view, as best one can tell, no nation should use military force against another without such authorization, except in self-defense or upon the invitation of the party aggressed against.

Putin takes these principles a lot more seriously than Obama or the advisors he and Hillary Clinton empowered. In word (sometimes), if not in deed, Trump does too. He is always awful, but he isn’t always wrong. On the other hand, liberal imperialists are seldom right.

Thus, for Democrats, Gabbard’s views on foreign policy threaten the politics they stand for – in much the way that a serious tax on wealth threatens the billionaire-friendly politics of the billionaires now testing the waters for a presidential run: Michael Bloomberg and Howard Schultz.

Schultz has gotten an even more hostile reception than Gabbard, not so much for his politics, which is no worse than many a Democrat's, but because he wants to run an independent campaign. Being richer than God, and probably a lot richer than Trump as well, he might be able to pull that off. Nobody thinks he could win, but he could be a "spoiler."

And so, all the old arguments against such "spoilers" as Ralph Nader and Jill Stein are being trotted out again. They are no more compelling than before, but Trump is so profoundly loathsome that, this time around, it almost makes sense to discourage attempts at breaking through the duopoly's stranglehold just in case they actually would put the wrong candidate over the top.

A far better reason to disparage the Starbuck's honcho is that he is, at best, just a garden variety Clintonite; unlike Nader and Stein who, if only they could move out of the margins and into the mainstream, could actually do the world a world of good.

Gabbard doesn't have much more of a chance than Schultz, but not because she could spoil anything – she is only running against other Democrats, and she is not about to split the party, even if she could.

Sanders might have been able to do just that two years ago, once it became obvious to his many supporters in the primaries and the caucuses how rigged the nomination process was. They didn't need Wikileaks to tell them about that either. Once they realized that the fix was in, and had been in all along, many of them would have been more than eager to break free from the Clinton juggernaut.

Had Sanders led his supporters out of the Democratic Party, perhaps to join forces with the Greens, Democrats and others would now be blaming him for Trump. We know that in retrospect that, however plausible this might have seemed, the blame would be falsely ascribed; it was Clinton and the Democratic Party establishment that put Trump in business.

Warren is a more complicated story; she is a front-runner with excellent prospects looking forward. Storm clouds are already gathering, however; wealth taxes and corporate Democrats don't mix well. Also, her DNA keeps coming back to haunt her.

But unless more incontrovertible evidence of efforts on her part to game the situation surfaces, Trump's "Pocahontas" antics will only weaken, not destroy, her. And much as they might like their party to field a candidate more mindful of their interests, establishment Democrats, at this point, see no percentage in vilifying her; better her, after

all, than Bernie. But if and when the idea of a wealth tax takes hold and gains popular support, all hell could break loose.

With Gabbard, all hell is already breaking loose. Media friendly to the Democratic Party have even taken to red baiting her – or whatever you call it in a world the GOP has appropriated the color red.

Thus NBC claimed that there has been an up-tick in social media “chatter” of the kind that, they say, the Russians used to get their man Trump elected. According to Glenn Greenwald, the evidence comes from a report presented in an article in a publication called “New Knowledge” that is a journalistic fraud. Read Greenwald’s account in [the Intercept](#) (Feb. 3).

And what are Gabbard’s unforgivable crimes? High on the list is waiting until adulthood before expressly rejecting retrograde ideas she picked up about marriage and homosexuality from her Christian conservative father. Another is talking, just talking, to Bashar Al-Assad in Syria, his record on fighting a civil war in his own country notwithstanding.

First son-in-law Jared understands. Assad is so awful that no loyal patriotic American Congresswoman should even speak with him; look what he has done to some Syrians in the course of the civil war that Obama and Clinton did so much to instigate.

Benjamin Netanyahu has done as bad or worse to Palestinians, not just in the lands Israel has occupied illegally for more than half a century, but within the internationally recognized borders of the Israeli state as well. Nevertheless, it is a mitzvahto give up your bed for him when your felonious father invites him to spend the night at the family home in New Jersey. Got it? Put that on your résumé Jared!

As far as I know, Gabbard has never said a word about Israel or Palestine, though I confess that mine may be a willful ignorance. If I am right, though, that she has kept her views to herself, I hope it is because she is picking her battles, not because, like every other member of the House of Representatives before the last election, she is in AIPAC’s pocket. But I really don’t know. What I do know is that she is realist enough to be willing to talk to anybody.

Hell, after the Electoral College made him the second American president this century to win his office with fewer votes than his rival, she even sought out and got a meeting with Trump.

It seems too that RT, Russia Today, has run several features on her candidacy, more than on any other candidate, and more than any U.S. media outlet has run on her so far. To hear

them tell it at CNN and MSNBC, RT is Putin's Fox News. In fact, it is far superior, by any relevant measure, to the liberal news channels that deride it.

Their argument comes down to this: that RT is funded by the Russian government, and is therefore a propaganda organ. CNN and MSNBC are funded the way the Good Lord intended — by advertisers, and are therefore beyond reproach.

I would urge anybody interested in the respective merits of these contentions to look for themselves. Viewers of RT will learn something about the world, unlike, say, viewers of Rachel Maddow, for whom all politics is electoral, and whose sneering mockery of Republican cretinism isn't even funny any longer.

Nevertheless, conventional wisdom holds that because RT finds Gabbard interesting, she must be a Russian stooge. QED.

One also has to wonder why, if "the Russians" want to promote Gabbard's candidacy so badly, they would be so open about it. One would expect a little more subtlety from those world class "masters of deceit," as the late J. Edgar Hoover called them. Surely, at a time when they are being relentlessly vilified, they would be a tad more discreet.

Indeed, if Putin and his cohort were anything like the formidable opponents that our military-industrial-national security state complex needs them to be, why would they go for Gabbard at all? Her prospects, never very promising, have only gotten worse in the weeks leading up to her formal campaign launch.

She displeased the party establishment in 2016 by supporting Sanders over Clinton, and more recently she is feuding with Hawaii Senator Mazie Hirono. This isn't her only problem back home; Politico has reported on others in ways that corroborate the views of those who say that she is too inexperienced and impulsive to run for higher office at this time.

It has also been said of her that she has done a bad job delivering constituent services. That was how the party establishment rid themselves of another up and coming left-leaning woman of color, Donna Edwards of Maryland, not long ago. Poor Donna – she is now reduced to practicing punditry alongside superannuated generals and "special" agents of one or another intelligence service at MSNBC.

And, unless her luck and ours turns, poor Tulsi too – the Powers that be have already seen to it that she will have a challenger, State Senator Kai Kahele, in next year's Congressional primary. That could finish off her political career. Could this be why the always loyal Daily Kos endorsed him almost from the moment that Gabbard announced

that she would launch her campaign? By going against liberal imperialist orthodoxy, did she strike a nerve?

Let me be clear about what the harm in all this is. It is not that she won't be the nominee; that was never going to happen. For all I or anybody else knows, she may not even be ready for prime time; she may not ever be ready.

And neither is it because what candidates think about "the issues" matters as much as most voters think and most pundits assume. Except when they, like Trump, are palpably unfit for the office they seek, or in other extreme and unusual cases, outside pressures and unpredictable contingent circumstances, not ideological dispositions or prior views, dictate where candidates end up when they gain the offices they seek.

Candidates' views can affect what people think and talk about, however.

If Warren's flat-footed mishandling of her genetic profile doesn't derail her candidacy first, her putting wealth taxes on the agenda can matter –a lot. Sanders' talk of socialism in 2016 mattered a lot too, even though his "socialism" was little more than an up-dated version of New Deal – Great Society liberalism or a riff on mid-century European social democracy.

With or without Warren in the picture, Gabbard isn't necessary for carrying forward what Sanders got going in 2016; there are others chomping at the bit; and, of course, there is still Bernie himself.

But Gabbard is the only one who has so far shown any sign at all of being in tune with the growing disdain throughout the country and in Washington too with the bipartisan foreign policy orthodoxy of the entire post-War period.

To the extent that her candidacy gets people thinking along those lines, it could matter more, in the final analysis, than the identity of the Democrat who actually will go up against Trump, if he is still around, or Pence or whichever other dunce the more execrable duopoly party, if it is still around, puts forward.