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www.afgazad.com

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by ANDREW LEVINE
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Trump Year Three: Three Random Late Summer Thoughts



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

The underlying premise was never plausible, but for a while it was still possible to hope that, under Trump, American foreign policy would be less bellicose than it would have been had Hillary Clinton not managed to lose the 2016 election.

Trump did, after all, seem less enthusiastic about restoring the Cold War than the almighty military-industrial complex and the liberal imperialists and neocons in the Obama-Clinton era foreign policy establishment, fed up with wars on historically Muslim lands, so plainly yearned for.

To this day, Trump's words are less war mongering than, say, Adam Schiff's or Rachel Maddow's or any of the superannuated "experts" Obama and Clinton brought on board who now draw paychecks from MSNBC and CNN.

It is far from clear, however, that his practice has been any more benign than Clinton's would have been, despite the past, present and future business interests he is still pursuing in the former Soviet Union, and despite his much publicized fondness for Vladimir Putin.

In time, we will learn what, if anything, Russian intelligence agencies and Russian oligarchs have on him, and how much, if at all, it influences what Trump says. So far at least, it hasn't influenced what he does.

Otherwise, it is fair to say that Trump's foreign policy has been unequivocally worse than Clinton's would have been.

Notwithstanding her support for the 2009 coup in Honduras, it would be hard for her post-2016 machinations in Central America to be worse than Trump's have been. On Mexico and Cuba, following Obama's lead, she would surely have been less malign. On Venezuela, she could hardly have been worse.

But for Trump, Jair Bolsonaro would probably still be on the margins of political life in Brazil. With Trump's support, he is superintending the wanton destruction of the Amazon rain forests and the cultural and physical genocide of the indigenous peoples of that vast region. Except for Trump himself, Bolsonaro is perhaps the premier environmental criminal on the planet.

Clinton would not have scrapped the Iran nuclear deal and would not have moved the American embassy to Jerusalem or otherwise made common cause with the Netanyahu government, at least not as brazenly as Trump has done.

For both ideological and self-serving reasons, Netanyahu is now escalating Israel's longstanding efforts to draw the United States into a war with Iran.

Inasmuch as Christian Zionists, more numerous than the entire Jewish population of the United States, along with most obscenely rich Jewish Zionists, are nowadays steadfast Republicans, and inasmuch as increasingly many American Jews, especially younger ones, are becoming too indifferent towards or embarrassed by Israel to care, Clinton might actually have found the courage to resist Netanyahu's entreaties.

On the other hand, with his son-in-law and his New York real estate cronies urging him on, Trump has been easy prey.

Needless to say, an Iran War would be many times more devastating in nearly every relevant way than the never-ending Bush-Cheney-Obama Afghanistan and Iraq Wars have been.

Three years ago, it was still possible to hope that “the adults in the room” – one called “Mad Dog,” the other named “Rex” – would keep this and other catastrophes-in-waiting at bay.

But those two and others like them are ancient history now. Rex is enjoying the ill-gotten riches he acquired working for and then running ExxonMobil; Mad Dog, aided and abetted by liberal media news and opinion outlets, is peddling a book he wrote, or had written for him, to cash in on the managerial “wisdom” he acquired commanding Marines.

Meanwhile Trump is busy salivating at the prospect of yet more Saudi and Gulf money flowing his way. The Clintons are corrupt as sin, but in the corruption department, the Trumps and Kushners have them beat by a mile.

Then there is Europe.

NATO ought long ago to have gone the way of the Warsaw Pact; instead, it has become the vehicle for American world domination that the United Nations could never be – not with Russia and China on the Security Council and with the General Assembly full of representatives from what Trump calls “shithole nations.”

Harm done to NATO is therefore potentially a good thing. But Trump hasn’t done any. Instead he just mouths off from time to time, for all the wrong reasons and with no practical effect.

The EU once seemed on its way to becoming a super-national welfare state, and perhaps, in time, a political and even military alternative to the declining American hegemon. Instead, it has become a vehicle for imposing austerity on all but the richest Europeans, and for conferring the many other “blessings” of the existing, American dominated, neoliberal world order.

Clinton could have been counted on to keep US-NATO and US-EU relations more or less unchanged. There is nothing to praise in that, and Trump’s badmouthing of both, and of

America's traditionally subservient allies, is not to be despised. But, on this too, all he has done is blow air. He has done it in ways that have energized rightwing "populist" forces every bit as racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic as the ones he unleashed in the United States.

Obama and Clinton and her successor at the State Department, John Kerry, were already doing their best "to pivot towards Asia" – that is, to contain China, militarily and diplomatically, with a view to bending its policies on trade, intellectual property and other matters of interest to American capitalists.

In 2016, under pressure from Bernie Sanders and his supporters, Clinton did say that she would not go ahead with Obama's Trans-Pacific Partnership. Hardly anyone believed her, however; at most, she would have insisted on a few cosmetic fixes to the TPP's most egregious, anti-worker provisions.

But no matter what she would ultimately have done, a full-fledged trade war with China was not on her agenda. It took a Trump to do something that stupid and ruinous.

Therefore, it is now clear beyond a reasonable doubt that, apart from dealing a blow to a Clinton and to Clintonism, there were no silver linings in Trump's electoral victory.

What we got was what was already evident three years ago to all but the willfully blind: unmitigated stupidity, vileness, nativism, racism, and illiberalism.

We also got crimes against the environment that are already wreaking havoc upon the earth and all that dwell therein.

Sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg is this summer's foremost anti-Trump; she inspires hope while all he inspires in anyone whose moral sense is intact is despair for the human race.

However, her arrival in the United States – on a solar-powered, state-of-the art 60 ft. Malizia II racing yacht – also raises one of the deepest perennial questions of activist politics: how to resolve the inevitable tensions that arise between saving oneself and changing the world.

Thanks to Thunberg's efforts, it is now widely understood that airplanes leave huge "carbon footprints." This will continue to be the case for a long time to come, no matter how inspiring her example may be.

Not nearly enough people to make a noticeable difference will forsake air travel; the planes will fly anyway, and there are no technological fixes in the offing. In the years ahead, the problem will only get worse.

From an ecological point of view, and also from at least one venerable ethical perspective, the kind that eschews adding up costs and benefits, Thunberg did the right thing; she was on the side of the angels. But was her decision wise?

Probably not, if we do take costs and benefits into account. It could certainly be argued that the harm flying does can be and generally is outweighed by the good that results from people being able to move around the world easily and efficiently.

Ironically, Thunberg's case provides an extreme example. She came to New York to speak at the United Nations on global warming and related matters. While in the United States, she will be giving talks and participating in demonstrations and generally helping the environmental movement grow. Later, she will make her way to Chile, to speak at a conference on energy efficiency and environmental sustainability. That is a hell of a lot of good.

And, although the benefits are seldom as dramatic, are there not nearly always good, sometimes even compelling, reasons for people to travel by air? How then do the reckonings go when costs and benefits are added up?

In my view, not usually the way that way people who won't fly suppose. But there is no incontrovertibly correct way to tell — in part because the benefits and at least some of the costs involved with air travel are difficult, if not impossible, to quantify, but also, more importantly, because the relevant goods and bads are often incommensurable and nearly always subject to dispute.

The calculations that went into Thunberg's decision not to fly, though arguably defensible, were hardly rationally compelling, even if we only focus myopically on the trip itself. Expand the vantage point slightly and the situation becomes more complicated still.

How, for example, should we factor in the environmental costs of two crewmembers now having to fly to New York to take the yacht back to England? What about the environmental costs of her travels around North America and then to Chile? And how will she get back to Sweden this winter without flying at least part of the way?

These and other complications notwithstanding, I have no doubt at all that what she did was well worth doing – not so much for its impact on public policy, but for its educational value. It was an example of a form of activism as old as political engagement itself: some call it “propaganda of the deed.” As such, it was an unqualified success. Greta Thunberg brought the harm air travel causes into public awareness to a degree that nothing else has.

There is a vast literature that bears on the larger philosophical issues that her voyage raised. There have been times in the not too distant past when, thanks to prevailing circumstances, they have been much discussed.

To cite just one by now almost canonical example, they were Topic A, in the French theater in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War – as in Albert Camus’ drama “Les Justes” (“The Just Assassins”) and Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Les Mains Sales” (“Dirty Hands”).

Perhaps the most insightful presentation of the problem can be found in Max Weber’s deservedly celebrated essay, “Politics as a Vocation” (1919), where that magisterial social theorist distinguishes what he called “an ethic of responsibility” from “an ethic of ultimate ends.”

The latter articulates the Kantian – ultimately Christian – idea inherent in the Golden Rule: that in moral deliberation, what distinguishes one person from another does not matter; what matters instead is what oneself and others have in common.

For Kant, and arguably too for the authors of the New Testament, that entails that persons never be treated only as means, not even for bringing about better outcomes, but always as “ends in themselves.”

An ethic of responsibility, on the other hand, is all about realizing particular objectives, a task that can and often does involve treating oneself and others as means only. In Weber’s view, even the most scrupulously Kantian (or Golden Rule Christian) political actors have no choice but to think, deliberate, and act in these ways.

For the most part, the two ethics, though distinct, do not conflict — but not necessarily and not always.

The “dialectic” between them can therefore be problematic. And in rare but extreme cases, the two opposites can sometimes meld together and become one, as when Martin Luther, pushed to the limit, declared “here I stand, I can do no other.”

The situation that led Thunberg to spend two weeks on a sea-tossed racing yacht — “like camping on a roller coaster,” she reportedly said — was not like that.

But, as Weber would surely have acknowledged, her decision to cross the ocean in a way that would minimize her carbon footprint was exemplary.

Indeed, it exhibited the qualities that Weber most esteemed in anyone setting out upon a political life: passion, a feeling of responsibility, and, because she was doing propaganda above all, a sense of proportion as well. Thus in her own small but thoroughly edifying way, Thunberg helped make the world a better place.

The contrast with Trump could hardly be more stark.

Finally, since for Trump, the political is personal, some revealing palace gossip is worth reflecting upon briefly, before a torrent of increasingly short-lived news cycles pushes the episode down into the public’s collective memory hole.

My first thought – and hope – when the news came that Trump’s “gatekeeper,” Madeleine Westerhout, had been kicked off Team Trump after talking to reporters from The New York Times was that all the ruckus over the Donald’s old buddy, Jeffrey Epstein, had caused him to take up pussy-grabbing again. Westerhout certainly met his much publicized “aesthetic” standards, and was always by his side; how could she not have become a target?

Not that this would have mattered to Trump supporters. It would, however, have strengthened everyone else’s resolve, especially now that so many other examples of his untrammled moral depravity are in the news. His administration’s recent attempt to kick out brown and black children in the United States for medical treatment unavailable in their home countries is a case in point.

It turns out, though, that Westerhout had been blabbing about something of far less prurient interest: the Trump family, Tiffany especially.

It is hardly a secret that the children that really matter to the Don are the three that came out of his first wife, Ivana: the peerless Ivanka, of course, and the two idiot sons, Qusay and Uday, or, as others call them, Eric and Don Junior.

Barron is still too young for Trump to care much about him; that is Melania's job. For this, he should consider himself one lucky little rich kid.

And then there is Tiffany.

According to some reports, what got Trump's goat was Westerhout telling reporters that her father doesn't like her all that much, and that he thinks she is too fat. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black!

I have a beef with Tiffany too, but it has nothing to do with her weight. It is that she could be doing her country and the world a whole lot of good with just a little innocent *lèse-majesté*.

Instead, according to press reports, she is more interested in partying up a storm – much as the Bush twins, Jenna and Barbara or, as they were known at the time, Gin and Tonic, used to do.

I have no reason to think well of Tiffany, but I do imagine that she is more morally and intellectually developed than her siblings. Having grown up without having her father much in her life, how could she not be?

I therefore suppose, based on no evidence at all, that, from time to time, she thinks about doing the right thing. One thing she could do in that regard is use her mother's name.

There is a precedent for that — Ronald and Nancy Reagan's daughter Ann.

To be sure, "Ann" is a less distinctive name than "Tiffany" and "Davis" could be anybody, whereas the surname "Maples," especially paired with "Tiffany," could only be the worst president ever's second daughter.

But then the point would not be anonymity. It would be to make a statement – that it isn't just morally and intellectually normal people who hate the Donald's guts, but that it is possible even for those who share his genes to be aware of his odiousness too.

A second daughter surname change would do far more good than the FLOTUS's body language has been doing since Day One. By now, like Trump's incoherent and barely literate tweets, or the fact that he cannot open his mouth to speak without uttering lies, that hardly even bears mention.

I have just about given up on the third Mrs. Trump. I had high hopes for her when the Faustian bargain she struck a decade and a half ago – a cloistered life in a vulgar but gilded Fifth Avenue palace in exchange for occasional legally recognized “sexual congress” with a physically and morally repellent real estate tycoon, failed casino entrepreneur, and reality TV personality – unexpectedly caused her to find herself a president's wife.

All she had to do was embarrass the Don in a way the he could not ignore. Instead, coward that she is, she has taken the path of least resistance. Shame on her!

Melania could do something good in her life, for once, but Tiffany could do so much more – because, in the reality TV cum infomercial world we now inhabit, spunky second daughters have far more power to embarrass than aging, gold-digging trophy brides.

Again, I am assuming that Tiffany's head is screwed on right, which it probably is not. To the best of my knowledge, though, there is so far no non-genealogical reason to assume the worst.

I am also assuming that her father's “Godfather” ways run deep enough to overcome the narcissistic noxiousness he exudes; that when it comes down to it, he would put Corleone family values – Vito's, not Mike's — ahead of even his own cupidity.

However, this too is probably too much to expect. More likely than not, the Don considers Tiffany dispensable. Hell, he would probably throw even his precious Ivanka under the bus if it came down to it.

“The weak in courage are strong in cunning,” William Blake taught us long ago. Thus we underestimate Trump's cunning at our peril.

Even so, we should take care not to give him and his wretched family more credit than they deserve. They are a sorry lot, nearly as pitiful as the rank-and-file denizens of his base.

With Democrats for opponents and supporters dumbed down by Fox News and worse, Trump probably could get away with shooting someone dead on Fifth Avenue. But there is nothing remarkable in that, not in our degraded political culture.

The sad fact is that, even in their villainy, neither Trump nor his family – except perhaps Tiffany, the jury is still out on that — rise to the level of ordinary, pedestrian mediocrity.

The Donald cannot stand it when that is pointed out. Therefore, the thing to do is to point it out at every opportunity. As a Rashida Tlaib, channeling W. C. Fields, might put it: “never give a mother fucker an even break.”

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