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Forward Into the Past



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That Barack Obama’s “hopey changey thing,” as Sarah Palin called it, would be a major disappointment — not for Wall Street and others in the rich and heinous class, but for nearly everybody else — became clear when Obama chose Joe Biden for a running mate.

It became undeniable, after the Obama-Biden ticket won the general election, as news of Obama’s personnel decisions trickled in.

Everyone who ran against Obama in the 2008 Democratic primaries ran to his left except Biden and Hillary Clinton, his future Secretary of State. These were the two he empowered.

Now it is Biden doing the empowering. One might say that, at long last, his turn has finally come. That would be misleading, however, inasmuch as the time for his turn was never or, failing that, years ago. Let’s just say that blame for the fact that he will soon be the one calling the shots lies with the limited imagination of the Lesser Evil party’s old guard.

The good news is that because no one expects much from him, he will at least not dash hopes the way that Obama did. What he will do instead is what he has said he would all along: promote competence and decency and, in place of anything Palin might consider “changey,” moderation.

Compared to Trump, this is a major improvement. Compared to what the situation calls for, it is, at best, inadequate. It is also a recipe for trouble ahead.

Nowadays, Americans associate competence, decency, and moderation with the administrations that preceded Trump’s; Obama’s, of course, but also, amazingly, George W. Bush’s. Thanks to Trump, Bush is now only the second worst president in modern times.

Be that as it may, the hope now is that Biden will take up where Obama left off. To be sure, he has already taken exception to the idea – the world is different, nowadays, he says – but the fact remains that Democratic Party elites are looking forward to a functional equivalent of a third Obama term, separated from the first two by the four years long nightmare that will soon come to an end.

If only to be done with all that, a great many Americans, almost certainly a huge majority, are also looking forward to Biden ushering in a third Obama term. This is understandable, but also wrong-headed — because the situation calls for a good deal more. It is also unnecessary because, despite the efforts of Democratic Party honchos and the media that support them to drive home the notion that there is no alternative to a “no can do” attitude, there are major sectors of the general public that are way out ahead of the president-elect.

Perhaps it is just a case of hope springing eternal, but I would venture that some of Biden’s personnel choices seem a tad less wedded than Obama’s to neoliberal and liberal imperialist nostrums, to anti-Russian Cold War revivalism, and to the idea of America as an “indispensable nation.” If so, the restoration currently underway just might amount to a slight improvement over the original.

But whether or not the differences are merely cosmetic, they are minor at best. Therefore, even with Trump gone, and even if Democrats manage to gain control of the Senate, our political universe will continue to disappoint.

What the current situation calls for is a radical break not just from Trump and Trumpism, but also from the Democratic Party’s pre-Trumpian past. That is not what Biden is about.

Quite to the contrary, like the Clintons and like Obama, Biden is a living personification of the “normal,” pre-Trumpian politics that made Trump possible.

However, he may be temperamentally more disposed than the others to being pushed along by logically compelling arguments, backed by well-organized, disciplined, left-leaning popular movements. That, anyway, is the hope.

But it will take a lot to teach that old dog new tricks. Bringing his upper level advisors and personnel choices along won’t be easy either; they are stuck in the dead center too.

For now, though, he and they are hard at work, being all that Trump is not.

This is not to be despised, even as “the commanding heights” of the new administration are rapidly filling up with longtime Biden associates and other Clinton-Obama hands, and a few, generally younger, star pupils drawn from “the same old, same old” school of public affairs.

The challenges that the Sanders and Warren campaigns posed to the old regime were modest to begin with, and it is not clear how different things would now be had they prevailed. But even minor challenges to the politics that brought the afflictions of the past four years upon us are better than no challenges at all.

Needless to say, this is not the “narrative” hammered home 24/7 on the liberal cable networks and in the “quality press,” where the idea that Biden-style “moderation” may actually be bad for the Democratic Party—and for the country and the world — is , for all practical purposes, out of bounds.

Nevertheless, it is the truth. Biden’s moderation is not why he was able to garner more than eighty million votes. That came about in part because Trump’s malevolence and risibility became too much for swing voters at the margins in “battleground states” to bear, especially with a pandemic raging, and in part because left-leaning activists organized up a storm in areas within those states where black, brown, and younger voters abound.

Even so, it is well to bear in mind that not all “same old, same old” proponents are created equal. They may all be cut from the same cloth, but the politics they promote comes in many varieties.

The liberal commentariat would have people think that the burgeoning Democratic left cost Democrats down-ballot victories. Just the opposite is the case, however. What cost Democrats down-ballot victories was the pusillanimity inherent, as it were, in their party’s DNA. As Robert Frost said of liberals generally, Democrats are, by nature, too reasonable in conflict situations to stick up for their own side.

But times change, sometimes in ways that force mainstream Democrats to change as well. Mainstream Democrats and the parts of “the donor class” that support them continue to heap praise on moderation. But the truth is that they are all now less moderate and more open to change than they used to be.

To be sure, entrenched party elites are not about to acquiesce voluntarily in their own disempowerment, and capitalists are generally disinclined to give up their privileges without a fight. But when social movements present beneficiaries of old regimes with offers they cannot refuse, they sometimes do what they must in order to keep afloat.

This is what happened during key phases of the New Deal. Thanks to the dinosaurs who still run the Democratic Party, there will be no Green New Deal in our immediate future. But something like what was achieved ninety years ago could nevertheless happen again, if social movements work hard enough at giving Biden and his minions no choice.

How wonderful it would be to take a few weeks or even months off now that Trump is on his way out. But, alas, with Democrats being what they are, there can be no rest for the weary in the wake of the Trumpian maelstrom.

Thus, the flood of emails begging for money that everyone who is not an internet hermit had to deal with before November 3, so far from tapering off, has actually gained steam. This time it is about Georgia Senate runoff elections. As recently as a month ago, who would have believed that we would now be having to contend with anything like that.

With each increasingly desperate request – I may be a soft touch, but I am confident that I am not the only one receiving dozens a day – I blame Bidenite moderation more.

Long before Trump became a media obsession, I found myself unable to see or hear Rachel Maddow without feeling repulsed. It started when an earlier fascination with how long she would take to make some inane point, and how convoluted her circumlocutions would sometimes be, seemed suddenly to grow old.

It isn't just Maddow anymore; there are now two, three, many presenters (or whatever they are) on both MSNBC and CNN just as bad; and most of the “experts” – the admirals, generals, spymasters, and former Senators and House members pursuing second careers as talking heads – are even worse than them.

I blame the whole lot of them, more than anything else, for turning what would otherwise be some idiosyncratic pet peeves of mine into constant sources of annoyance.

To be sure, infirmities of age and the dreariness of life in a plague year, plus collateral damage sustained while dealing with life's vicissitudes in another kind of plague year, Year Four of the Trump era, have something to do with it too, but it is the babblers and scribblers of the corporate media world that I blame most.

Thus, I find myself lately channeling the spirit of that late, not so great, conservative “icon” William Safire. As a journalist (more or less) who did PR work for Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew and others of their ilk, Safire spent his declining years as a *New York Times* columnist and grumpy old language cop.

It should go without saying: in almost all circumstances, the less policing the better. Whatever Biden may say or think, what the country needs now is hardly more Trump-style “law and order”; it is fewer, less racist, less violent (and murderous), and less egregiously well-funded police departments.

But language cops like Safire do police work only in a metaphorical sense. They are not about state repression. What concerns them is self-enforced clarity and precision, often in circumstances of little or no political consequence.

It is of no political consequence, for example, that I find myself unnerved, as I imagine Safire would have been, when reporters and pundits use “multiple” interchangeably with “many,” in contexts in which multiplication plays no discernible role.

And although I sometimes use the expression myself, I would expect that he would find “of color” problematic too. I do not only because of its historical role in the discourses of European colonial ventures or because, all over the world, “colored” has long been a term of disparagement, not praise — but also because, even on a descriptive level, the difference between those who are and those who are not “of color” often has little, if anything, to do with color itself.

The same is true of “white.” The principal victims of the European settlers who took the land of the indigenous peoples of North America were on to something when they called their tormenters “pale faces.” Pale, we “white” folk surely are, especially those of us who live in cold climates and stay indoors a lot. But we are hardly white – not even when at death’s door or just after seeing a ghost.

It is the same with some other recent turns of phrase. What, for example, is the point of such expressions as “cities like New York?” In what relevant sense are there cities are like New York? What does that even mean? And why isn’t “for example” good enough?

I could go on, but resistance is futile; the offending expressions, though of recent derivation, are by now too deeply entrenched to be expunged, thanks in large part to social media and the cable networks.

The surfeit of blather nowadays about people looking or not looking “like them” is different. It too is annoying. Whenever I hear people talking that way, I find myself having to hold back an impulse to say either “in your dreams” or “God forbid.”

I also find myself wondering what Martians would make of Americans of all sizes, shapes, and hues finding that expression meaningful. They would have to be cued into some fairly esoteric nuances of the forms of identity politics practiced in our time and place to make any sense of it.

Unlike some of those other peeves of mine, this one cannot just be dismissed as harmless. It is that surely, but it can also be politically disabling.

Think, for example, of all the people “of color” who, along with quite a few “white” liberals are actively engaged in depicting Barack Obama as God’s gift to truth, justice, and the American way – not for anything he did, quite to the contrary, but just for “looking like” them.

No doubt, the contrast with Trump and the fact that Obama has a book to sell is playing a role as well, but even so.

John-Paul II was fast-tracked to sainthood, a move that, according to press reports, figures of great importance in the Catholic hierarchy are now beginning to regret.

Obama is being fast-tracked too — not to sainthood, of course, but to some informal secular equivalent. Reasons for regretting that in the case of President Drone, the Deporter-in-Chief, Wall Street’s Best Friend Forever, are far more abundant than in John Paul II’s case; they always have been. But not to worry, he is “of color” after all.

Obama and his Attorney General, Eric Holder — and Biden too, insofar as he played a role — let Bush era war criminals off scot-free. This made it easier for Obama and his team to do “the same old, same old” with only a few, mainly cosmetic, modifications.

It is becoming clearer by the day that Biden is eager to follow the Obama-Holder model; like before, he wants, or says he wants, to let bygones be bygones, the better “to move on.”

There is a difference though. To hold Bush and Cheney and their collaborators accountable for war crimes and crimes against the peace, an inquiry would have had to be launched.

Trump’s crimes are, on the whole, a lot sleazier than that and of less historical consequence. They don’t rise (or fall?) to the same level. Many of them would also be child’s play to prove beyond a reasonable doubt; Trump has publicly admitted to many of them and even boasted about it.

Therefore, Biden will have to intervene actively to prevent criminal investigations already underway at the federal level; something he could not do without becoming Trump-like himself by compromising the purported independence of the Justice Department.

Beyond that, if he could not persuade the relevant officials otherwise, there is nothing he could do to stop on-going investigations of Trump and his family in New York City and New York state.

Therefore, even in the absence of concerted, organized resistance on the part of Democrats and others demanding justice, Biden will have a hard time following the Obama-Holder model.

Of equal or greater importance, if the nascent Democratic Left gets its act together in due course, he will have a tough time than he would like making nice “across the aisle” – by offering top appointments to Republican miscreants.

The tougher the time he has with that, the better. Moderate to the bone, Biden has all but declared that Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren would be best left in the Senate, at the same time that his team has been floating the name of the former Ohio governor, John Kasich, abortion foe and active proponent of “moving on,” for some one or another upper level appointment.

If Democrats let that happen, then in the midterms ahead, they will amply deserve the kind of “shellacking” (Obama’s word) that they got under Obama in 2010.

Kasich, at least, ended up supporting Biden. Reports now are that Biden would even like to invest power in one or another active Trump supporter – all for the sake of restoring the vaunted “normalcy” of years gone by.

It may not quite be time just yet, but, before long, when Trump is definitively disempowered –and, if all goes well, on his way to spending his final years in penal captivity, while his brand becomes poisonous, and his finances plummet — and when it is clearer than it already is to a broad swathe of public opinion that old guard Democrats are part of the problem too, and that their continuation in power is more likely than not to lead to a Trumpian restoration,

with or without Trump himself at the helm, it will finally and directly become both timely and urgent to take on what a later-day Safire might call our “nattering nabobs of (neoliberal) normalcy.”

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