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“America is Back”: Make the Best of It



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

America is back; Joe Biden says so. Therefore, it must be true.

He seems as pleased as can be about it too. So is the entire political class, except for the miscreants wedded to Donald Trump or to rightwing views, distinguished mainly by their vileness and stupidity.

There are alarmingly many Americans who hold those views, but there are more who do not. Thank God. But not too much.

For one thing, it is far from clear that Biden and his minions will be able to undo many of the harms that Trump has brought on; also, Trump’s popularity remains robust. Even so,

the smart money is on those who believe that “truth, justice, and the American way” are on their way back, and that the transition cannot happen soon enough.

Liberal corporate media are on board; rightwing media not so much. But even in their dark quarters, pre-Trumpian “normalcy” has a certain appeal among folks with functioning minds.

The deplorables” at the bottom of that barrel Hillary Clinton spoke of are another story. So are quite a few godly folk hellbent on bringing on Armageddon.

Their trajectory points downward, however. Deprived of Trump’s tweets and of 24/7 news coverage of his antics, they might as well crawl back under the rocks from which they came, or stay in their churches, or retreat back into “lives of quiet desperation.”

Biden’s determination to restore the Obama years, even as he, unlike Obama a dozen years ago, “goes big,” has therefore taken on a ’bipartisan” coloration. Before disappointment sets in, as it has not yet done, this makes it irresistible to many Americans.

It is, after all, a core dogma of the American civil religion that bipartisanship is a virtue – not because it is somehow good-in-itself, but in the way that Plato and countless ethical theorists after him understood the term, according to which the virtue of a thing is that which makes it work well.

Thus, sharpness is the virtue of knives used for cutting; it makes them function as they should. Bipartisanship makes governing polities work well – not as a general rule, as is the case with sharpness and knives, but in “democracies” like ours, with duopolistic party systems. For persons living in circumstances such as these, being bipartisan and cheering on bipartisanship is practically a civic duty.

Trump could have cared less about that, however. In this respect, he is not all that different from most American politicians. After all, partisanship is inherent in the very idea of competitive party systems. Trump’s partisanship was more extreme than most, but hardly different in kind.

Officially a Democrat for much of his life, the extreme Republican partisanship Trump has been evincing – and instigating — ever since he decided five or six years ago to go where the morons are, the better to promote his brand and influence outcomes to his own advantage, hardly runs deep.

This is one reason why Republicans who trust him are fools. A more compelling reason is that, no matter how willfully blind they may be, they have witnessed Trump throw scores of his base and servile followers under the bus, even after years of faithful service, for any and all signs of disloyalty.

What makes any of them think that they would be any different? Trump's partisanship is and always has been about himself, his immediate family (insofar as they remain loyal), and nothing more; the GOP least of all.

Biden, on the other hand, comes on as a selfless warrior fighting, like Superman, for "truth, justice, and the American way." To hear him and his team tell it, their highest priority is to undo Trump's assault on those values. What they want, they say, is not to aggrandize themselves or to build a brand of their own; it is only "to build back better."

To that end, they embrace the subtext of their message: that "America is back" means that American world domination is back – not just the aspiration but also, as much as is still possible, the reality.

What this might mean for countries in various stages of development is all over the map — because every case is different and because there are decades of historical experience to sort through and reflect upon.

The consensus view notwithstanding, chances are that in most cases it would be better for what used to be called "the Third World" to go it alone or to look elsewhere for help – from Europe or even from Russia and China, the targets of our Cold War mongers. Not long ago, it was widely believed that the so-called BRICS countries – those two "adversary" nations plus Brazil, India, and South Africa – would rise to the occasion. Events have made that thought hard to sustain.

In a slightly better possible world, the United Nations could be of enormous help to developing nations. That was the hope at the time of its founding. However, the Cold War, the original one, and Western, especially American, reactions to the decolonization struggles that resumed after World War II ended, put the kibosh on that prospect.

The UN has been a godsend for countries in the throes of development, but seldom in ways that alter their subaltern status vis-à-vis the United States and other Western and East Asian powers.

Over the years, Biden has been among the most Israel-friendly American politicians on the national scene, but it is not even clear that America being back would be good for that most favored nation. When the Kushner family and some of Trump's real estate cronies were calling the shots, Israel had carte blanche to do almost anything its rightwing government wanted.

It could come back to that under Biden, but it most likely will not. Even if Biden wanted that to happen, he would be hard pressed by now to get the support he would need.

But this would not alter the fact that America being back is unlikely to do much good for Palestinians, except perhaps in inconsequential, mainly cosmetic ways.

Many Democrats, younger ones especially, gentiles and Jews alike, already favor justice for Palestinians; in the future, there are likely to be many more still. And, in at least some respects, Biden is turning out to be more susceptible to pressure from Democrats on his left than most observers ever dared expect.

But the pressure to stay the course on Israel-Palestine is well-resourced and still enormous, and old dogs are nothing if not loyal to their old masters. Thus, even if he wanted to, which he surely would not, the chances that he would expend political capital in ways that would tilt the U.S. position in ways that Israeli Jews would oppose are practically nil.

America's traditional allies – in Europe, Japan, South Korea and elsewhere – are reportedly nearly as pleased as Biden himself that America is back, though some of them still have to convince themselves that the Trump years were an anomaly that will never come again. Some sixty percent or more of the American population knows that feeling well.

It is a pity that the European powers and Japan are unwilling or unable to set out on a more independent course. A few more years of Trump and they might have had no choice but, with Trump gone, the ruling classes and the citizenries of those countries have no pressing need to strike a different deal with the American hegemon than they have in the past.

Loathe as I am to say anything good about the Donald, he did have a point in castigating the governments of the allied nations for their reluctance to strike out on a more independent course.

America being back is hardly an unmixed blessing for Americans or, more precisely, for Americans outside the military-industrial-national security state complex either.

To be sure, being back Biden-style is better than the alternative; anything would be. Beyond that, however, reasons to be glad that America is back are hard to come by.

Being the dominant power in the world or even just in the so-called “Free World” was less of a boon for Americans than is widely assumed. It diverted money and other resources that could otherwise have been put to socially useful purposes into efforts that were, at best, wasteful, but that are more often than not nefarious and destructive. In the process, if it didn't entirely wreck the moral and political health of the republic, it came perilously close.

After all, the neoliberal ideology of Democrats and Republicans is not the only reason why our public sphere is in such a sorry state. “Defense” spending plays a major role as well.

With the American economy no longer many times stronger and larger than the economies of other countries, and with the bad old days of empire becoming increasingly unsustainable in any case, a full-fledged restoration of the old imperialist “normal” is emphatically not what Americans nowadays need.

What we need to enhance our own well-being and to make the world more peaceful and just is a soft landing, a kind and gentle transition to a more equitable world order than the one we now have or the one we would have with America back in anything like the way it used to be.

Thus, even as we rejoice, as best we can, in being back from where Trump was leading us, the task ahead is to make the best of a bad, or at least very complicated, situation.

It is too soon to tell for sure but, as of now, it looks like a strong and growing Left Opposition can push Biden to the left on many, though hardly all, matters affecting health, education and welfare within the United States.

Much of it may amount to nothing more than niggling around the edges, and there is nothing radical, just commonsensical, about any of it, but anything that improves the neoliberal status quo merits praise.

At the same time, there are commonsense departures from prevailing norms, and gestures of basic human decency, that are and will likely remain taboo.

For example, no one should count on Biden to let up on the persecution – and prosecution, if he can get his hands on him – of Julian Assange.

How the U.S. can even claim jurisdiction over an Australian citizen whose so-called “crimes” were committed in Europe is a mystery, though nobody in a position to put the matter to rest seems to question the hegemon’s right.

It is mysterious too how the authorities are able to charge Assange with espionage. After all, he was a publisher, a journalist, not a spy; and what made him an enemy of the (American) state was just that, in doing what journalists are supposed to do, he embarrassed Hillary Clinton, the Obama administration, and the Pentagon.

In the larger scheme of things, embarrassing them, or worse, is, if anything, a positive duty. But for those who determine the agenda around which public discourse revolves, the very topic, it seems, is not “fit to print” or even honestly discuss.

This is an extreme example, and politics is “the art of the possible,” but still: the Bidens of the world can be moved only so far – which means, in practice, only as far as our ruling elites and therefore the mainstream Democratic Party are willing to go.

Thus, while NATO ought long ago to have gone the way of the Warsaw Pact, with America back its tenure is secure. While Cold War mongering poses a clear and present danger, Biden is not about to stop it; quite to the contrary, with him in the White House, expect its pace to pick up.

And while extreme measures need to be taken as soon as possible to avert impending ecological catastrophes, count on the Biden administration to “moderate” (slow down) efforts to stop environmental degradation and to encourage remediation.

Even so, to the pleasant surprise of many, it seems that, up to a point, progress is possible with Biden in the White House. And, of course, it is also the case that he will not be president forever.

More important, along with America being back, a genuine left opposition is beginning to emerge. To say that it is “coming back” would be an exaggeration at best, but in comparison to what actually is coming back, it is, more than anything else, where the idea of building back better, not just in words, but also in deeds, comes into its own.

Now is therefore a good time to call attention to and reflect upon more far-reaching departures from the status quo that could, someday soon, amount to more than idle possibilities, if and when they catch hold of the popular imagination.

Because there is nothing localized or gradual about a nuclear Armageddon, and therefore no way, as it were, to kick the can down the road, avoiding nuclear war is, if anything, an even more pressing concern than staving off ecological catastrophes that can take a while to develop and come to fruition, and that are, in any case, seldom of immediate global consequence.

Since 1945, the world has been astonishingly lucky in not being blown to smithereens and irradiated for generations to come. There were some near misses and there have been plenty of wars and lesser armed conflicts, but nuclear weapons, though plentiful, in the U.S. and Soviet (now Russian) arsenals, have never been fired in anger in the course of any of them.

The more nuclear powers there are, however, the less likely that this luck will continue.

With the genie out of the bottle, full-scale nuclear disarmament is unfeasible in the short term. Nevertheless, countries with nuclear weapons have been able to concoct and abide by *modus vivendi* that have, so far, kept the very worst at bay.

This was the case when the U.S. and the USSR were, by far, the major players; the only ones that really counted. China has now joined that club too; with its enormous economic presence, it could hardly be kept out.

Durable arrangements for avoiding catastrophic conflicts between these three seemingly inevitable players may be the best that we can reasonably hope to achieve for now. Much more far-reaching departures from the status quo are urgently needed of course, but if the political will is there, the three majors should be able to diminish their nuclear arsenals considerably, even if they are unable to eliminate them altogether, and that would be an unequivocally good thing.

Then they, along with the rest of the world, should be able to see to it that the minor players – those that already have the bomb and those that, so far, do not, but could before long – leave the nuclear temptation behind. They have little to lose, and much to gain.

Britain and France have possessed nuclear weapons almost from the beginning of the nuclear age. At first, this enabled them to maintain illusions of grandeur and geopolitical importance, even as their empires slipped away. But those illusions have been on the wane since even before Suez, and hardly anyone accords them importance now. The British and French nuclear arsenals are there mainly for vanity's sake; their elimination could be to the advantage of all the interested parties.

Getting India and Pakistan to disarm would be more difficult and keeping North Korea from developing a bomb of its own, raises even more vexing problems still. But there is a certain urgency in these cases, and in others like them, that would likely arise before long if nothing is done to head them off.

These are problems that diplomacy should be able to solve, especially if there are virtuous examples to follow. Let Britain and France be those examples and let the three majors work out the diplomatic solutions, even as they too partially disarm.

This won't be easy – the political class in India and Pakistan will resist for reasons that, in their minds, have more to do with national survival than national vanity – but with a world to save, between calls to common sense and offers that the interested parties cannot refuse, competent diplomats should be able to pull it off.

The same goes for North Korea where, as Trump has shown, incompetent diplomacy is worse than useless.

Thanks to the machinations of Israeli governments, and the Bush-Cheney, Obama, and Trump administrations, the hardest case, Iran now finds itself in the most troubled region of the planet.

And while the wisdom of pursuing friendly relations with that country is hard to deny on the merits, doing that would go against the grain of the “normalcy” that Biden and other mainstream Democrats claim to champion.

Can anyone imagine Biden or any other mainstream Democrat proposing to make the entire region, including Israel, the most bellicose state of all and the only one that actually has nuclear weapons — it has had them for decades — a nuclear free zone? So obvious, and yet so out of reach, this side of radical change for the better!

That such an obvious move is out of the question is perhaps the best reason yet to be wary of America, under Biden, being back, and skeptical of the idea that under the leadership of the actually existing Democratic Party it will be built back better.

But the glass, though half empty, is also half full.

Building back better while remaining within the Democratic fold is not impossible. Neither is transforming the party of the Clintons and Obama beyond recognition, or, better still, replacing its rotten carcass with a new party of an anti-capitalist, internationalist Left that could not be easily marginalized.

Not impossible, but not easily doable either. Getting from where we now are to a point where moving forward to that end has actually become a feasible long term goal.

Making the best of America being back, even if only Biden-style, can be a step in that direction, provided aroused and militant citizens, not ashamed to call themselves or actually to be people of the left, keep Biden from succumbing to temptations that he has so far resisted tolerably well.

Poor man, facing historical challenges that he is ill-suited to address, yanked out of a comfortable retirement by party leaders and “iconic” civil rights firebrands (marshmallows now) from the distant past – for whom Clinton and Obama, not FDR in those rare but genuinely transformative moments when he rose to the occasion history thrust upon him, or LBJ in the years when the Great Society, not Vietnam, defined him, set the limits of the politically possible and desirable.

The Pelosiites and the Schumerians must never be forgiven for doing a number on the Democratic Party’s burgeoning leftwing, purportedly to assure Trump’s defeat, though Trump defeated himself, and though either Sanders or Warren would have been far better anti-Trump candidates, especially for down-ticket Democrats.

What Biden stood for was the neoliberal, liberal imperialist politics that put Trump in the White House in the first place, while they stood for the repudiation of much of that and for a vision of a more equal, more solidary, social order, something to aspire towards.

But, for now, Biden is what we’ve got, and we have no choice but to make the best of it. So far, that is turning out to be a lot less onerous than I and many others would have thought.

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