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Hillary and the Corporate Elite

By Paul Street
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“Mainstream” U.S. media is struck by the “strange bedfellows” phenomenon whereby a number of right wing foreign policy neoconservatives and top business elites – including at least one of the notorious hard right-wing Koch brothers – are lining up with Democrat Hillary Clinton against the Republican Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential race. But what’s so strange about it? Trump is off the elite capitalist and imperial leash. He channels some nasty things that have long been part of the Republican Party playbook: frustrated white nationalism, racism, nativism, and male chauvinism.

At the same time, however, he often sounds remarkably populist in ways that white working class voters appreciate. He has been critical of things that elite Republicans (and elite corporate Democrats) hold dear, including corporate globalization, “free trade” (investor rights) deals, global capital mobility, cheap labor immigration. He questions imperialist adventures like the invasion of Iraq, the bombing of Libya, the destabilization of Syria, and the provocation of Russia. He’s a largely self-funded lone wolf and wild card who cannot be counted to reliably make policy in accord with the nation’s unelected and interrelated dictatorships of money and empire. And he’s seizing the nomination of a political organization that may have ceased to be a functioning national political party.

Things are different with Hillary. She’s a tried and true operative on behalf of both the nation’s capitalist and imperialist ruling class who sits atop the United States’ only remaining fully effective national and major party – the Democrats. She’s a deeply conservative right-winger on both the domestic and the foreign policy fronts, consistent with the rightward drift of the Democratic Party (and the entire U.S. party system) – a drift that she and her husband helped trail-blaze back in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1964, when Mrs. Clinton was 18, she worked for the arch-conservative Republican Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign. Asked about that high school episode on National Public Radio (NPR) in 1996, then First Lady Hillary said “That’s right. And I feel like my political beliefs are rooted in the conservatism that I was raised with. I don’t recognize this new brand of Republicanism that is afoot now, which I consider to be very reactionary, not conservative in many respects. I am very proud that I was a Goldwater girl.”

It was a telling reflection. The First Lady acknowledged that her ideological world view was still rooted in conservatism of her family of origin. Her problem with the reactionary Republicanism afoot in the U.S. during the middle 1990s was that it was “*not conservative* in many respects.” She spoke the language not of a liberal Democrat but of a moderate Republican in the mode of Dwight Eisenhower or Richard Nixon.

The language was a perfect match for Hillary and Bill Clinton’s politico-ideological history and trajectory. After graduating from the venerable ruling class training ground Yale Law School, the Clintons went to Bill’s home state of Arkansas. There they helped “lay...the groundwork for what would eventually hit the national stage as the New Democrat movement, which took institutional form as the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC)” (Doug Henwood). The essence of the DLC was dismal, dollar-drenched “neoliberal” abandonment of the Democratic Party’s last lingering commitments to labor unions, social justice, civil rights, racial equality, the poor, and environmental protection and abject service to the “competitive” bottom-line concerns of Big Business.

The Clintons helped launch the New (neoliberal corporatist) Democrat juggernaut by assaulting Arkansas’ teacher unions (Hillary led the attack) and refusing to back the repeal of the state’s anti-union “right to work” law – this while Hillary began working for the Rose Law firm, which “represented the moneyed interests of Arkansas” (Henwood). When the Arkansas-based community-organizing group ACORN passed a ballot measure lowering electrical rates residential users and raising them for commercial businesses in Little Rock, Rose deployed

Hillary to shoot down the new rate schedule as an unconstitutional “taking of property.” Hillary joined the board of directors at the low wage retail giant Wal-Mart.

During the Clintons’ time in the White House, Bill advanced the neoliberal agenda beneath fake-progressive cover, in ways that no Republican president could have pulled off. Channeling Ronald Reagan by declaring that “the era of big government is over,” Clinton collaborated with the right wing Congress of his time to end poor families’ entitlement to basic minimal family cash assistance. Hillary backed this vicious welfare “reform” (elimination), which has proved disastrous for millions of disadvantaged Americans. Mr. Clinton earned the gratitude of Wall Street and corporate America by passing the arch-global-corporatist North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), by repealing the Glass-Steagall Act (which had mandated a necessary separation between commercial deposit and investment banking), and by de-regulating the burgeoning super-risky and high-stakes financial derivatives sector. Hillary took the lead role in the White House’s efforts to pass a corporate-friendly version of “health reform.” Along with the big insurance companies the Clintons deceptively railed against, the “co-presidents” decided from the start to exclude the popular health care alternative – single payer – from the national health care “discussion.” (Barack Obama would do the same thing in 2009.)

The Clinton White House’s hostility to “big government” did not extend to the United States’ giant and globally unmatched mass incarceration state or to its vast global military empire. Clinton’s 1994 crime bill helped expand the chilling expansion of the nation’s mostly Black and Latino prison population. Clinton kept the nation’s “defense” (Empire) budget (a giant welfare program for high-tech military corporations) at Cold War levels despite the disappearance of the United States’ Cold War rival the Soviet Union.

Mrs. Clinton’s service to the rich and powerful has continued into the current millennium. As a U.S. Senator, she did the bidding of the financial industry by voting for a bill designed to make it more difficult for consumers to use bankruptcy laws to get out from crushing debt. As Secretary of State (2009-2012), she repeatedly voiced strong support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – a secretive, richly corporatist 12-nation Pacific “free trade” (investor rights) agreement that promises to badly undermine wages, job security, environmental protections, and popular governance at home and abroad. In Australia in November of 2012, she said that “TPP sets the gold standard in trade agreements for open free, transparent, [and] fair trade...”

Bernie Sanders supporters like to claim that they’ve been moving the eventual Democratic nominee Hillary “to the left.” But nobody actually moves a dyed-in-the wool Goldman Sachs-neoliberal-top-of-the Ivy League-Council of Foreign Relations Eisenhower Democrat like Hillary or Bill Clinton or Barack Obama to the left. All that might shift somewhat to the portside is such politicians’ purposively deceptive campaign rhetoric. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce knows this very well. A top Chamber lobbyist calmly observed last January that Mrs. Clinton will be on board with the unpopular TPP after the 2016 election. The Chamber understands that she has no choice right now but to pose as an opponent of the measure as part of her unavoidable election year job of impersonating someone who cares about the working class majority.

Nobody grasps the Machiavellian nature of her campaign rhetoric better than Hillary’s Wall Street funders. A report in the widely read insider online Washington political journal *Politico*

last year was titled “Hillary’s Wall Street Backers: ‘We Get It.’” As *Politico* explained, “Populist rhetoric, many [of those backers] say, is good politics – but doesn’t portend an assault on the rich...It’s ‘just politics,’ said one major Democratic donor on Wall Street...many of the financial-sector donors supporting her ...say they’ve been expecting [such rhetoric] all along.” One Democrat at a top Wall Street firm even told *Politico* that Hillary’s politically unavoidable populist rhetoric “is a Rorschach test for how politically sophisticated [rich] people are...If someone is upset by this it’s because they have no idea how populist the mood of the country still is.”

It’s nothing new. In his bitter and acerbic book on and against the Clintons, *No One Left to Lie To* (2000), the still left Christopher Hitchens usefully described “the essence of American politics” as “the manipulation of populism by elitism.” It’s a story that goes back as far as the 1820s but nobody has perfected the game more insidiously and effectively in the neoliberal era than the Clinton machine.

Partisan liberal Democrats don’t like to hear it, but, there’s nothing all that surprising about the Koch brothers turning to Hillary over Trump. It’s not at all difficult to believe that Bill Clinton will succeed in his recently reported efforts to court support from other Republican billionaires. It’s not at all surprising that Wall Street and corporate America prefer the good friend they know.

In a subsequent essay, I will show why there’s nothing all that strange or surprising about the support Hillary is getting from foreign policy neoconservatives.