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Hillary and the War Party

By Carl Boggs
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You haven't heard much from the Democrats lately about foreign policy or global agendas – indeed virtually nothing at the Philadelphia convention and little worthy of mention along the campaign trail. Hillary Clinton's many liberal (and sadly, progressive) supporters routinely steer away from anything related to foreign policy, talk, talk, talking instead about the candidate's "experience", with obligatory nods toward her enlightened social programs. There is only the ritual demonization of that fearsome dictator, Vladimir Putin, reputedly on the verge of invading some hapless European country. Even Bernie Sanders' sorry endorsement of his erstwhile enemy, not long ago denounced as a tool of Wall Street, had nothing to say about global issues. But no one should be fooled: a Clinton presidency, which seems more likely by the day, can be expected to stoke a resurgent U.S. imperialism, bringing new cycles of militarism and war. The silence is illusory: Clintonites, now as before, are truly obsessed with international politics.

A triumphant Hillary, more "rational" and "savvy" than the looney and unpredictable Donald Trump, could well have a freer path to emboldened superpower moves not only in Europe but

the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Pacific. While the candidate has not revealed much lately, she is on record as vowing to “stand up” to Russia and China, face off against Russian “aggression”, escalate the war on terror, and militarily annihilate Iran the moment it steps out of line (or is determined by “U.S. intelligence” to have stepped out of line) in its nuclear agreement with global powers. Under Clinton, the Democrats might well be better positioned to recharge their historical legacy as War Party. One of the great political myths (and there are many) is that American liberals are inclined toward a less belligerent foreign policy than Republicans, are less militaristic and more favorable toward “diplomacy”. References to Woodrow Wilson in World War I and Mexico, Harry Truman in Korea, JFK and LBJ in Indochina, Bill Clinton in the Balkans, and of course Barack Obama in Afghanistan (eight years of futile warfare), Libya (also “Hillary’s War”), and scattered operations across the Middle East and North Africa should be enough to dispel such nonsense. (As for FDR and World War II, I have written extensively that the Pearl Harbor attacks were deliberately provoked by U.S. actions in the Pacific – but that is a more complicated story.)

In something of a political twist, the “deranged” Trump candidacy – with its almost daily flow of bizarre utterances and proposals – actually serves Clinton’s neoliberal/neocon mission nicely, providing a foil to her outwardly more sane persona. Trump, of course, is far too irrational, too narcissistic, too unstable to assume the role of Commander-in-Chief. Who knows what might happen once his shaky hands get near the “nuclear trigger”? Worse yet, here is a bona fide challenger for the White House who has reportedly cozied up to that imperialist dictator, that great enemy of national sovereignty, Putin! No need for any discussion or debate here. It follows that Hillary will be more reliable (even if more “untrustworthy”), more in command – clearly the best option to manage imperial affairs. Why else would all those neocons and Republican super-hawks be so happy to sign on to the Clintonite project. The alliance of Hillary and foreign-policy hard-liners has, however, scarcely dampened the enthusiasm of her phalanx of liberal and progressive boosters, who endlessly talk, talk, talk about her amazing “pragmatism”, her ability to “get things done”. (That she can “get things done” in the realm of foreign policy is beyond question.)

A new Clinton presidency can be expected to further boost the U.S./NATO drive to strangle and isolate Russia, which means aggravated “crises” in Ukraine and worrisome encounters with a rival military power in a region saturated with (tactical, “usable”) nuclear weapons. Regime change in Syria? Hillary has indeed strongly pushed for that self-defeating act of war, combined with an illegal and provocative no-fly zone — having learned nothing from the extreme chaos and violence she did so much to unleash in Libya as Secretary of State. There are currently no visible signs she would exit the protracted and criminal war in Afghanistan, a rich source of blowback (alongside Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Israel). Increased aerial bombardments against ISIS in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and elsewhere? More deployments of American troops on the ground? Such ventures, with potentially others on the horizon, amount to elaborate recipes for *more* blowback, followed by *more* anti-terror hysteria, followed by *more* interventions. Uncompromising economic, diplomatic, and military support of Israeli atrocities in Palestine? Aggressive pursuit of the seriously mistaken “Asian Pivot”, strategy, a revitalized effort to subvert Chinese economic and military power – one of Clinton’s own special crusades? No wonder the Paul Wolfowitzes and Robert Kagans are delighted to join the Hillary camp.

No wonder, too, that billionaire super-hawk Haim Saban has pledged to spend whatever is needed to get the Clintons back into the White House, convinced her presidency will do anything to maintain Palestinian colonial subjugation. Meeting with Saban in July, Hillary again promised to “oppose any effort to delegitimize Israel, including at the United Nations or through the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement.” She backs legislative efforts begun in several states to silence and blacklist people working on behalf of Palestinian rights. For this her celebrated “pragmatism” could work quite effectively.

Democratic elites say little publicly about these and other imperial priorities, preferring familiar homilies such as “bringing jobs back” (not going to happen) and “healing the country” (not going to happen). Silence appears to function exquisitely in a political culture where open and vigorous debate on foreign-policy is largely taboo and elite discourse rarely surpasses the level of banal platitudes. And Hillary’s worshipful liberal and progressive backers routinely follow the script (or non-script) while fear-mongering about how a Trump presidency will destroy the country (now that the Sanders threat has vanished).

Amidst the turmoil Trump has oddly surfaced to the *left* of Clinton on several key global issues: cooperating instead of fighting with the Russians, keeping alive a sharp criticism of the Iraq war and the sustained regional chaos and blowback it generated, ramping down enthusiasm for more wars in the Middle East, junking “free trade” agreements, willingness to rethink the outmoded NATO alliance. If Trump, however haphazardly, manages to grasp the historical dynamics of blowback, the Clinton camp remains either indifferent or clueless, still ready for new armed ventures – cynically marketed, as in the Balkans, Iraq, and Libya, on the moral imperative of defeating some unspeakable evil, usually a “new Hitler” waging a “new genocide”. Who needs to be reminded that Hillary’s domestic promises, such as they are, will become null and void once urgent global “crises” take precedence? The Pentagon, after all, always comes first.

Trump is of course no great bargain, a combative warrior looking to slay dragons lurking about in a dark, menacing world – something of a high-level Rambo figure – and this he happily and repeatedly advertises. Like the mythic Rambo, he is also an uncontrollable maverick, eccentric, prone to hair-brained “solutions” — much to the dismay of even Republican officialdom. And he is emphatically and unapologetically Islamophobic. At the other extreme, Clinton emerges in the media as the most “rational” and “even-tempered” of candidates, ideally suited to carry out the necessary imperial agendas. A tiresome mainstream narrative is that Hillary is “one of the best prepared and most knowledgeable candidates ever to seek the presidency.” And she is smart, very smart – whatever her flaws. All the better to follow in the long history of Democrats proficient at showing the world who is boss. The media, for its part, adores these Democrats, another reason Trump appears to have diminished chances of winning. Further, the well-funded and tightly-organized Clinton machine can count on somewhat large majorities of women, blacks, and Hispanics, not only for the march to the White House but, more ominously, to go along with the War Party’s imperial spectacle of the day. Most anything – war, regime change, bombing raids, drone strikes, treaty violations, JFK-style “standoffs” – can escape political scrutiny if carried out by “humanitarian”, peace-loving Democrats. Bill Clinton’s war to fight “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing” in the Balkans, cover for just another U.S./NATO geopolitical maneuver, constitutes the perfect template here.

There is a special logic to the Clintonites' explosive mixture of neoliberalism and militarism. They, like all corporate Democrats, are fully aligned with some of the most powerful interests in the world: Wall Street, the war economy, fossil fuels, Big Pharma, the Israel Lobby. They also have intimate ties to reactionary global forces – the neofascist regime in Ukraine, Israel, Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states. Against this corporatist and imperialist backdrop, the “deluded” and “unhinged” Trump becomes far too unreliable for entrance to the Oval Office; he could too easily bungle the job of managing U.S. global supremacy. In March 121 members of the Republican “national security community”, including the warmongers Wolfowitz, Robert Kagan, and Brent Scowcroft, signed a public letter condemning Trump for not being sufficiently dedicated to American (also Israeli?) interests. Trump compounded his predicament by stubbornly refusing to pay homage to the “experts” – the same foreign-policy geniuses who helped orchestrate the Iraq debacle. A more recent (and more urgent) letter with roughly the same message has made its way into the public sphere. Predictably, Trump's “unreliability” to oversee American global objectives has been an ongoing motif at CNN, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*.

Returning to the political carnival that was the Democratic convention, amidst all the non-stop flag-waving and shouts of “USA!” Hillary made what she thought would be an inspiring reference to Jackie Kennedy, speaking on the eve of her husband's (1961) ascent to the White House. Jackie was reported as saying “that what worried President Kennedy during that very dangerous time was that a war might be started – not by men with self-control and restraint, but by little men, the ones moved by fear and pride.” We can surmise that JFK was one of those “big men” governed by “restraint”. History shows, however, that Jackie's esteemed husband was architect of probably the worst episode of international barbarism in U.S. history – the Vietnam War, with its unfathomable death and destruction – coming at a time of the Big Man's botched CIA-led invasion of Cuba and followed closely by the Cuban Missile Crisis, where the Big Man's “restraint” brought the world frighteningly close to nuclear catastrophe. As for “fear” and “pride” – nothing permeates JFK's biography of that period more than those two psychological obsessions.

Could it be that Hillary Clinton, however unwittingly, was at this epic moment – her breakthrough nomination – revealing nothing so much as her own deeply-imperialist mind-set?