

Trump: Just the Tip of the Iceberg

Democrats, Trump & the 2020 Elections

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2019

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To many liberals, progressives, unionists, activists of various just causes, Democrats of all stripes, democratic socialists and concerned citizens, the problem the U.S. is facing is essentially that Donald J. Trump is president, and is backed by the Republican Party. I disagree with this widespread belief.

It is likely that Trump will be removed from office in the next two years, whether by impeachment (unlikely due to the Senate Republicans) or by national elections (probable but not certain). Liberals, progressives, etc., look forward to this as a glorious day. The sun will come out from behind the darkling clouds, little birds will sing again, the miasma of evil and stupidity will lift from the land, and all will be well again. Things will finally go back to “normal.”

Alas, I do not think that things will be “normal” ever again. I too long to see the vile Trump gone. I am not cynical and have hopes for the future. Yet I do not see the replacement of Trump by a Democrat or other establishment politician as the coming of a glorious new day.

But first I should make clear my views on Trump. As a revolutionary anarchist-socialist, I have never liked any of the presidents of my lifetime. But I have particularly hated a few, starting with Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson, because of the U.S. war on Vietnam. (We chanted, “Hey, hey, LBJ! How many kids did you kill today?”) And I especially hated the Republicans Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. They were the cutting edge of the ruling class’ attacks on working people of the U.S. and the world.

But I have never hated any politician as much as I hate the despicable Trump. Personally he is utterly devoid of conscience or of empathy for others. Mean and cruel, he is completely self-centered. Devoid of honor, he breaks laws and ethical norms, big and little, and sells out friends and associates (and “his” country) without a qualm. He sees women as things to be used. He is a racist. He cannot keep from lying on matters important and unimportant. While he has a certain sly cunning, Trump is ignorant, incurious and stupid. He makes stupid decisions – not just from my standpoint but from that of U.S. imperialism.

Politically, he holds some bizarre views which are unusual even among the corporate rich and the right wing Republican establishment: his attachment to the Russian state and Putin, his unwillingness to condemn Nazis, his reckless use of tariffs, his commitment to building a wall on the Mexican border, his quarrels with U.S. allies, etc. While most Republican politicians have bowed to anti-immigrant fervor, Trump really believes in the “threat” of immigrants. He is not a fascist, but neither is he a non-fascist.

As a result of all this, Trump is a very unpopular president according to the polls. This is so even in spite of a relative (if shallow and uneven) prosperity (which raises the question of how voters would react if the next downturn takes place before the national election). Why do the Republican politicians still support him? Mitch McConnell, leader of the Senate Republicans, is an intelligent man – if totally cynical. Why does he back Trump, considering what he must think of him? There are two pro-Trump forces pressing on the Republicans, one from above and one from below.

From above: Most of the capitalist class did not support Trump in the last election and would prefer someone else even now. But they love the enormous tax cuts for the rich which the Republicans passed, with his strong support. They like his and his party’s attacks on Obamacare. They love the deregulation which he has pushed through all parts of the executive branch. They are delighted with the conservative, pro-business judges whom he has appointed – to the Supreme Court and throughout the federal judiciary. And so on. They do not want to kill the goose that is laying the golden eggs, even if the goose is otherwise nuts.

From below: Around 40 percent, more or less, of the population supports Trump solidly and fervently. This is the base of the current Republican Party. Republican politicians fear being voted out in primaries if they oppose Trump. This grouping ranges from crazed fascists (who identify with the Nazis and Klan) to some who voted for Obama in previous elections (the loosest part of this base). These people have been lied to and miseducated in a conscious effort by right-wing forces. They are fed a steady diet of Fox “News,” talk radio and Internet blogs which put them in a delusional bubble. Their sexual fears are whipped up, over homosexuality and abortion rights, by their church leaders. Many are strongly racist and vote for Trump for that reason; others vote for him for other reasons but are not turned off by his racism.

Many of these people do have real grievances: after eight years of Obama, including a brittle “recovery,” much of the country was still poor, stagnant and lacking good jobs. This included many rural and semi-rural areas, in and out of the “Rust Belt.” The white workers and middle class residents of these regions rejected Hillary Clinton as an establishment politician. They expected (correctly) that she would continue the policies which had not helped them (but many also rejected her because she was a woman). Unfortunately, turning to Trump was no answer to their problems.

The Historical Pattern of Presidents

Does this mean that kicking Donald Trump out of the White House will bring things back to “normal”? Even though big business will still push for its program of tax cuts and deregulation and even though a big minority continues to support right wing politics? Can these forces be defeated through elections?

It is worth going over some history here. The Democrat Lyndon Johnson, who had betrayed liberals’ hopes by his war on Vietnam, was followed by Richard Nixon. Hated by the Left, and caught up in the Watergate scandal, Nixon was forced to resign. Then his hand-picked successor was beaten in an election by Jimmy Carter. To liberals, progressives, etc., these were indeed glorious developments. A new day dawned! Yet Carter, after one term, was defeated by Ronald Reagan, a far-right “conservative” (which is what reactionaries are called in the U.S.). He won two terms, plus one presidential term for his vice president, George H. W. Bush. But Bush was then defeated by Bill Clinton.

Clinton could play the saxophone and appeared to get along well with African-Americans. Again, a glorious new day finally seemed to have dawned! But after two terms of Clintonian Democracy, the people voted down his vice president, Al Gore, and elected George W. Bush. (Actually Gore won the popular vote, by a hair’s width, but the Supreme Court majority put Bush in.) Bush was terrible and stupid, said the liberals, progressives, etc., gnashing their teeth. He won a second term (probably fairly).

Then Barack Obama was elected, an African-American president! Liberals were ecstatic. Pete Seeger sang at the inauguration with Bruce Springsteen. Naturally, African-Americans were particularly pleased, although few of them believed claims that the U.S. was now a “post-racial” society. Sure enough, the history-making Obama was then followed by... Donald Trump. (Actually Trump lost the popular vote by a few percentage points, but the archaic Electoral College put him in.) I am not going to discuss voting suppression by the Republicans, and various shenan-

gans by Comey of the FBI, the Russians, etc., which undermined Hillary Clinton. The U.S. state has intervened in other countries' politics at least as much as Russia has.

This little history does not mention the effects of mid-term elections, which often empowered the reactionary opposition to block Democratic presidents from carrying out their more-or-less progressive agendas (as in Obama's last six years). Nor am I discussing just how limited these "progressive" agendas turned out to be, time after time – much to the surprise and dismay of the liberals, progressives, etc. (as in Obama's first two years). My point here is the obvious one that the repeated defeats of reactionary presidents and presidential candidates has not ushered in the dawn of a glorious new day. Instead, more-or-less progressive presidents have repeatedly been followed by another reactionary president. Over time the Republicans have gotten more reactionary and the Democrats have occupied the space once taken by the Republicans – until we have reached the current president, a new low in U.S. history.

Why is this? Partially the reason is the two-party system. Unlike many other countries, U.S. laws make it very difficult to form effective third parties. (There has not been a new major party since Lincoln's Republicans replaced the Whigs.) So if people get fed up with one party, they have little choice but to turn to the other. The range of political discourse is very limited, generally from mildly liberal to extremely reactionary (but not usually fascist). The newspapers and television play this up, mostly analyzing elections as "horse races" and ignoring programs. Citizens are taught to look at the personality of the individual running rather than at what programs they might implement.

However it would be a mistake to focus too much on U.S. factors. The growth of right-wing, nationalist, "populism" is world-wide. Other countries, with leaders with personalities quite different from Trump's, and with electoral systems quite different from the U.S. constitution, have developed their own forms of reactionary "populism." There is Britain with its "Brexit," authoritarian right-wing leaders in Hungary, Poland, Italy and Brazil, the rise of the far-right LePen in France, Netanyahu in Israel, Modi in India, Duterte in the Phillipines, and other examples. There are also authoritarian regimes which do not bother with elections but have similar politics – Putin's Russia being somewhere in-between these types.

So, on the one hand, there has been a pattern of increasingly bad presidents, ratcheting down, through waves of "moderate" Democrats and reactionary Republicans. On the other hand, there is a world-wide growth of far-right, authoritarian regimes. These developments demonstrate that the problem is bigger than just Trump.

Something New is Happening

For decades after World War II, U.S. politics swung back and forth between the Democrats and the Republicans. There was little difference between the two. It was a platitude of U.S. "political science" that this was a strength of U.S. politics, providing stability and consensus. This changed about the time that the post-World War II prosperity came to an end (in the 1970s). The economy stagnated, and making profits became more difficult. Big business declared war on the working class (and the environment) in open and covert ways. The Republicans became the leaders of that attack. Today many look back on the era of political consensus with sighs of regret. The bitter partisanship of the two parties is dismaying to many politicians, political "scientists" and

ordinary voters. The Republicans have moved to the far right, and the Democrats have stayed just behind them.

Even this development has been shaken up in recent years. On the right, there has grown white-supremacist, fascist, violent forces. (By “fascist” I do not mean people who are simply very conservative, but people who wish to overturn the representative bourgeois democracy of the U.S. and replace it with a dictatorship.) They have been encouraged by Trump and have encouraged him, even if he himself is not a fascist.

Perhaps even more surprising is the growth of a socialist movement. Polls have found thirty to forty percent of the population – especially young adults – with a positive view of “socialism.” Many have become disillusioned with capitalism. The presidential runs of Bernie Sanders built on this sentiment and encouraged it. The Democratic Socialists of America rapidly expanded, attracting people of varying views (even some anarchists joined, to form a Libertarian Socialist Caucus). Socialists were elected to local and national office, the most well-known, besides Sanders, being Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

These socialists are not very “socialist.” They do not advocate taking away the wealth of what Sanders has called “the billionaire class.” They do not propose socializing the major corporations – not even the oil producers and the rest of the energy sector. By “socializing” I mean anything from national government ownership to municipal ownership to worker management to consumer cooperatives. (As an anarchist-socialist, I am for the last two.) Their model is usually an idealized version of the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt. This was an effort to save capitalism from its own failures in the Great Depression – to save capitalism from itself. That is, they hope to use the existing capitalist state to manage the market economy in a more efficient, more benevolent, fashion, supposedly in the interests of the working population. As such their program is not particularly different from that of liberals such as Elizabeth Warren. This should not be surprising given the semi-liberal programs of European social-democratic parties, such as in the Nordic (Scandinavian) countries, the UK, France or Germany. Although far from Stalinist totalitarianism, liberals and democratic socialists have an unjustified faith in the effectiveness of the state to solve social problems.

The Democrats?

As I am writing there is a year and some months to go before the election. The Democrats still enjoy over 20 candidates for their presidential nomination. They are struggling over how “left” their rhetoric should be and how generous their proposals should sound (so far, not one has called for big cuts in the military budget). If they sound “too left” they may seem to threaten the capitalist system. This could drive off the big donors who otherwise would support them against Trump. And it might (or might not) drive off the moderate base of the Democrats (as opposed to educating them). But if they are not “left” enough, they will not really challenge Trump, his Republicans and his corporate backers. Nor will they motivate their liberal base. What to do?

Liberals often complain about how wishy-washy and spineless the Democrats are in the face of right-wing attacks. This is in contrast to the Republicans who are “principled” and even fanatical about their goals. There is a reason for this difference. If the Republicans stir up their white, relatively privileged, racist, middle class base into hysterical frenzies this might result in the nomination of a Trump or, at worst, an attack on bourgeois democracy – but not on capitalism.

But if the Democrats were to rile up their base – to excite the African-American community and blue collar workers, to mobilize unions and to organize mass action by youth – this could threaten capitalism. Unlimited demands by workers, People of Color, people threatened by climate change, etc., would go past the limits of the capitalist economy. This the Democrats cannot allow and will not permit.

The Democratic candidates are vying to be the top manager of the most dangerous institution in the world today – the U.S. national military-state and its capitalist economy. I am not sympathetic to this goal. (The U.S. has a military force larger than the next eight national states combined. It is a key part of the life-threatening, climate-destroying, system of national states and the capitalist world market.)

Some liberals, progressives, etc., are impressed with the current flock of Democratic candidates. This requires taking their words at face value, ignoring what they do not say (about foreign policy or military spending, for example), and focusing on individuals, rather than the history of the party. Others, more realistic, argue that the Democrats are the “lesser evil.” This is to admit that they are evil, even if lesser. I would not deny that, especially in comparison to Trump and his minions.

But here is my question: Who has a program which is adequate to solve the deep problems of the U.S. and world? That is, global warming and other ecological catastrophes, the danger of nuclear war, the probability of a collapse of the capitalist economy – as well as “lesser” problems such as continuing racism, gender oppression, LGBTQ repression, economic inequality, stagnation, “small” wars, political authoritarianism, and so on. The very survival of industrial civilization, and perhaps of humanity and our fellow creatures, is at stake. Whether the Democrats mean well or are hypocrites and liars, their programs are simply inadequate for the crises we face. Can it be claimed, by any knowledgeable person, that any Democrat has such a needed program?

It would be delightful to get rid of Donald Trump, this pustule on the ass of humanity. But if the result is that we are still on the road to Armageddon and the destruction of the world, then my joy is limited.

What Shall We Do?

This is not a discussion of whether any isolated individual should vote. I don’t really care. I doubt that the votes of a handful of anarchists – or even of all the conscious socialists and radicals in the country – would make a difference.

The issue is not what a few individuals should do. It is what we radicals should advocate that mass institutions and movements should do. This includes the unions, the African-American community, Latinx communities, LGBTQ groups, the ecological and environmental movement, feminist organizations, etc. These are the base of the Democratic Party. They donate a large amount of money, and human energy and time, to the Democrats’ electoral efforts. Yet their rewards have not been great. In recent elections, the Democrats have turned their backs on them, especially on the unions and the working class. Similarly, unlike the Republicans, the Democrats have admitted that there is a climate crisis. Yet they have done little about it and advocated limited programs. They have sought African-Americans votes but done little to improve their lives. And so on.

Errico Malatesta, the Italian revolutionary anarchist-socialist, was a co-worker with Bakunin and Kropotkin. He commented,

Electionists... compare what is done in the electoral struggle with what would happen if nothing were done; while instead they should compare the results obtained when other methods are followed and with what might be achieved if all effort used to send representatives to power... were [instead] employed in the fight to directly achieve what is desired. (*Towards Anarchy*; *Malatesta in America 1899–1900*, 179, reviewed in this issue)

There need to be massive union organizing drives through the U.S. There should be city and regional general strikes to fight back against attacks on working people. There need to be massive and militant demonstrations, with civil disobedience, to fight against police brutality and other aspects of racism and poverty. Cities should be brought to a halt until steps are taken to limit global warming. Colleges should be occupied by their students. Factories and other workplaces should be occupied by their workers, who should run them for the common good.

If a Democrat is elected president, with a Democratic Congress, we can expect liberals, progressives and activists to be disappointed. The Democrats, whatever their motives, will stay within the limits of capitalism. Therefore they cannot stop climate change or improve the living conditions of working people – not under the current conditions of capitalist stagnation and decline. This disappointment will lead to greater opposition, I hope. Opposition should not be channeled into the Democratic Party (there to wither and die), nor into other electoral parties (that is, into other supports of the capitalist state). They should be directed to direct action and militant activities.

To save the humans, a different system is needed – one based on cooperation, equality, and freedom, with production for use not profit, and with radically democratic self-management of the economy and all aspects of society. Only a few are for this now, but a radical left wing of the developing movements can be built to fight for this revolutionary goal – if we are not mesmerized by the flimflam of the electoral system. (*written for www.Anarkismo.net*)

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2019

Retrieved on 28th January 2021 from syndicalist.us
From Anarcho-Syndicalist Review #77, Fall 2019

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