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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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by ANDREW LEVINE
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Who Cares Which Democrat Comes Out on Top?

The new Congress will not be sworn in until after the New Year, but, at long last, the results of the 2018 midterm elections are finalized and certified. It looked good for Democrats from the moment the polls closed on Election Day; it looks even better now.

The “blue wave” Democrats were hoping for, along with everyone else aware of the clear and present danger Donald Trump poses, materialized; the Trump Party got schlanged.

Trump knows it; so do the miscreants in his administration who are working hard night and day to “deconstruct” the worthwhile things the government does. So do House and Senate Republicans, respectable media columnists, and the talking heads on the cable networks.

Except for Trump himself, most of them also know that Trump has mainly himself to thank for the GOP’s defeat.

Those of us who appreciate the urgency of minimizing the harm Trump and his minions do should give thanks for his narcissism-driven obtuseness and for his ineptitude. Not just us: were reason more in control, everyone would be giving thanks.

But, reason is hanging by a thread. In some circles, it has gone missing entirely, giving way to the willful blindness that keeps the Trump base on board, even as the man spins out of control in full public view.

There are distressingly many bona fide U.S. citizens who do not acknowledge or even understand how much of a menace Trump is. According to some polls, roughly two out of every five Americans haven’t a clue.

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It is understandable that, when he ran against Hillary Clinton in 2016, some voters thought Trump the lesser evil. They were wrong, but not crazy. Supporting Trump now, after so much about him has become clearer, is crazy. It defies understanding.

Does it therefore follow that the main task now is to get to work electing a Democrat in 2020? I don't think so. Defeating Trump or Pence or whichever other excuse of a human being Republicans nominate in 2020 is of paramount importance of course, but there are more urgent, politically consequential tasks calling for attention now.

Laying foundations for building an authentically oppositional left political party is an example; so would be transforming the Democratic Party to such an extent that it is more than just a lesser evil.

Trump is corrupt, ignorant, psychologically damaged, and none too bright. His political instincts, ideological predilections, and philosophical commitments are repugnant. He is as bad as it gets, and then some. But he is not nearly as much of an outlier as he seems and as is widely supposed.

He has abused the presidency more than any of his predecessors, not so much because his behavior has been less constrained by conventional morality or rational self-interest than theirs, but because he is so much cruder than they were.

The Kennedys, JFK especially, were sexual predators too. The Bushes' (père et fils) sense of entitlement – and lack of inherent merit — differed from Trump's only in the way that the bourgeoisie of Westport or Greenwich Connecticut differ from working class folks in (pre-gentrified) Brooklyn or Queens.

The Kennedys and even the Bushes had class. Try as he might to make up for its absence through conspicuous consumption and displays of bad taste, it is very obvious that Trump has none.

As December began, eulogists for Poppy Bush, W's old man, unleashed a torrent of praise for old-fashioned, decorous, conservative, WASP "decency," drawing an always implicit contrast with Trump's boorishness. What a nauseating display.

It is unseemly to speak ill of the (recent) dead but, by now, Poppy, having stayed dead for more than a fortnight, is fair game. It can therefore now be said that for all the praise they lavished upon that bastard, liberals have a lot to answer for.

They have a lot to answer for too for their encomiums for John McCain following his death last August. McCain too was morally "challenged," especially on matters of war and peace and empire.

However, Bush the Father, having by far more power throughout most of his public life, was many times worse. He did support the Americans With Disabilities Act, legislation that really was “kinder and gentler” and more conducive to “making America great again.” But in what universe does that make up for a life devoted to maintaining and expanding the American empire?

To be sure, a case could be made that, compared to Ronald Reagan and other recent American presidents, including Democrats Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, Bush wasn’t all that bad. The argument would depend on the fact that the bar is set so pathetically low. It would ultimately fail too — because, whatever else can be said about him, Jimmy Carter was a far less lethal character.

The dead Bush’s dimwitted son, and the people who worked for him, are nowadays highly regarded in liberal news outlets. What a disgrace! Except for Trump, W was plainly the worst American president in modern times; and, depending on how we score the ways that a few of his most odious predecessors dealt with slavery and the physical and cultural genocide of native peoples, it could even be argued that he was the second worst president ever.

When running for president, Trump rightly faulted Bush and Cheney for their needless and terminally stupid wars in the Greater Middle East. This fooled a lot of people into thinking that stewardship of the empire was not among his highest priorities.

And so, a few too clever by half commentators thought that, awful as he is in most respects, Trump’s defeat of Clinton was not an altogether bad thing. For her and the neocons and liberal imperialists she empowered, stewardship of the empire was the highest priority of all.

It turned out, though, that Trump’s lack of conviction and flagrant opportunism wiped out whatever differences there might have been on this account. It is now plain that Trump’s “political philosophy,” such as it is, is not all that out of line with Clinton’s and, more generally, with the thinking of contemporary mainstream Democrats and Republicans.

What is peculiar to Trump is not the content but the shallowness of his convictions. His relation to the ideas he latches onto is like his relation to the truth. The only thing that matters to him is whether they serve his purpose. His purpose, of course, is himself.

Trump is more dangerous than his predecessors not because of the political objectives he pursues, but because, even as his mind, what there is of it, deteriorates along with his body, he remains a male adolescent at heart, the kind that acts out and that thinks he knows everything, even as his ignorance overflows.

This has been evident since even before Day One, and it is the main reason why, even with Hillary Clinton for an opponent, the Donald was never the lesser evil. There was never a moment's doubt about that.

No sane person would take him on as a babysitter. Investing him with the power to end the world "as we know it" is sheer lunacy.

Too bad that the "enlightened" merchants and planters who wrote our Constitution didn't think of that when, to keep the slave states happy, they concocted the Electoral College along with other institutional arrangements so removed from real democracy – of government of, by, and for the people – that our best, perhaps our only, hope of getting rid of Trump before January 2021 is the saturated fat and cholesterol in his diet.

Also, thanks to those damn "founders," even were gluttony to get the best of him, the Trump administration would remain intact with Mike Pence in charge. Pence is a bland, reactionary theocrat, best known for his blank expression, insipid smile, and for the way he gazes adoringly upon the Donald. There has been nothing like it since the Lady Gipper, Nancy Reagan, whose smile was said to be surgically affixed.

The Trump presidency provides incontrovertible evidence for a paradoxical conclusion that had previously gone unappreciated: that, on the one hand, it does matter who the president is. It matters a lot.

Trump's victory in 2016 has put the world at even greater risk than it would otherwise be — as climate change happens, nuclear wars threaten, world order disintegrates, and the seemingly interminable suffering of vulnerable populations around the world increases.

On the other hand, Trump's victory also shows that hardly matters who the president is because the forces pulling American presidents into a single mold are all but impossible to overcome.

Whether from malice or incompetence or deliberate design, Trump has shaken everything up, making nearly everything worse. But no matter how much has changed, in fundamental respects, the country is essentially on the same course as before.

Focusing on electoral politics can be, and often is, a distraction in much the way that fantasy football is a distraction from real football. This is why becoming obsessed now with the 2020 primaries and caucuses is a snare best avoided – except perhaps by those who think the Democratic Party is salvageable and who believe that the thing for them to do is to work on salvaging it. These are not unreasonable views, but neither are they beyond dispute.

Political parties generally and, since its tent is broad and its character amorphous, the Democratic Party especially, need leaders, not just apparatchiks, not so much to succeed in the electoral arena as for the electoral projects they undertake to exhibit any semblance of political or ideological coherence.

In parliamentary systems, parties out of power generally have leaders in place; they might even field shadow cabinets. This is not the American way.

Democrats and Republicans have hierarchically structured party organizations at the national, state, and municipal levels, but the only real leaders they have, going into general and midterm electoral contests are their actual or presumptive nominees for the presidency. Cabinets don't get put together until after the election concludes, and, more often than not, candidates for president don't even talk about, much less select, running mates before their nominations are secured.

Thus we don't elect our governments even to the extent that citizens of other so-called democracies do. Except for the position at the very top, we might as well be choosing pigs in a poke.

In democracies, the people rule. In America, "we, the people" do rule, but only in theory and in a highly attenuated sense. Technically, if not substantively, we rule insofar as we take part – or not – in voting individuals into elective offices.

In typical cases, this means choosing among alternatives – seldom more than two – that are, for all practical purposes, presented to voters by our semi-established parties, mediated, in many cases, through primaries or caucuses.

For all practical purposes, in selecting presidents, it is only voters who live in so-called "battleground states" whose votes matter; barring unforeseeable and highly rapid and improbable changes in public opinion, voters living elsewhere have basically no control over the outcome of the election except in a strictly formal sense.

In presidential elections, only some ten to twelve states are actually in play — because Electoral College votes are all that matter, Electors are, almost without exception, assigned on a winner-take-all basis, and, in all but the ten or twelve states that could go either way, everybody already knows which duopoly party will win. Campaigning therefore focuses on just a few states, leaving most of the country's voters effectively, though not literally, disenfranchised.

Moreover, nowadays, campaigning is about advertising and marketing more than anything else. There is little, if any, rational deliberation involved, and not much collective

decision-making either; the idea is to sell candidates to voters in the states that count, period. So much for normative democratic theory!

The primary system is arguably more (small-d) democratic, but no less bizarre. Early primaries and caucuses play an inordinate role in knocking out potential candidates. They therefore get more attention from the contenders. Thus the citizens of Iowa and New Hampshire, not the most “diverse” states in the union, have more political influence than, say, the citizens of the largest states, California, Texas, and New York.

States with early primaries and where black political machines are strongest, like South Carolina, also exercise an inordinate influence over the nomination process in the Democratic Party, even though their Electoral College votes are all but certain not to go to the Democratic candidate.

With the primaries and caucuses structured the way they are, it is difficult, though not impossible, for the popular will to break through. Getting it to prevail is another matter. To that end, electoral campaigns by themselves are of little or no consequence.

Bernie Sanders broke through in 2016, leaving it to the leadership of the Democratic Party to get the rigged process back on track. In his case, the fix was in, and there was no way it wouldn't hold.

Until the duopoly power of the Democratic Party is broken, or until that party transforms itself beyond recognition, it is hard to see how anything more salutary could happen within the Democratic fold, even were Democrats to field Sanders again, or to go with someone else as charismatic as he.

There is nothing transformative about getting bogged down in this circus. But it will be almost impossible to avoid that fate as groundwork for the 2020 primaries and caucuses gets underway.

There is a window of opportunity now, however, actually to do the kind of work that needs to be done.

It would be a shame to see that opportunity squandered because people devote time and effort to an exercise in which, as we learned from the effort made in 2008 on behalf of Barack Obama, the hope” and “change” candidate, all roads lead basically to the same place – to a nominee who will carry on the Clintonite (neoliberal, liberal imperialist) program of the less odious, but still god awful, duopoly party.

At least, for Democrats, primaries and caucuses have so far worked well for weeding out candidates who, like Trump, are patently unfit.

The Republicans' problem lately has been that all their candidates, not just Trump, have been unfit for the office they sought. Weed out the unfit and there would be nothing left. This is essentially what happened two years ago, leaving the party vulnerable to the hostile take over that, to everyone's detriment, actually occurred.

This is not to say that it is a waste of time to dwell on the question that so many are already obsessing over – who should the Democrats' nominee be?

If kept in perspective, little harm and some good could come from discussing that even with the next election so far off, if for no other reason than that it will focus the mind on the situation before us. In a country befuddled by Trump, overrun with rightwing propaganda, and dumbed down by corporate media, minds need all the focusing they can get.

Discussing the potential candidacies of one or another Democratic aspirant can also be useful for clarifying the kinds of organizing that need to be done.

The thing to remember, though, is that just about everything anybody says will be bullshit. I mean bullshit in the sense of idle, unfocused talk, the kind that happens when people shoot the breeze in idle moments. The word is also sometimes used synonymously with “nonsense.” And it can denote seemingly profound but actually trivial or confused obscurantist gobbledy-gook.

That kind of bullshit is disconcertingly common in academic circles in the humanities. Left “theorists” are susceptible too, especially those who aspire to rock star status. There is no point in going that route.

But there is no harm in bullshitting in the just, shooting the breeze sense. Perhaps even some good can come of it if, in addition to advancing views, bullshitters also produce, or at least suggest, supporting arguments.

Obama came into national prominence as the Great Non-White Hope, and ended up the same old same old. By the time the nomination process concluded in 2008, anyone paying close attention would not have been particularly surprised; he had, after all, been thoroughly vetted by Wall Street and declared kosher by corporate media.

In 2008, pretty much any Democrat would have ended up in more or less the same place. On the other hand, in 2018, it mattered a lot that Trump was the candidate. His awfulness is in a class by itself.

I would venture that the most important consideration, when bullshitting in support of or in opposition to one or another Democratic contender, is how far to the left they stand

relative to each other. A candidate who starts out from a comparatively good place has a better chance of ending up in one than a candidate who does not.

This, I think, ought to matter more than a candidate's gender or age.

Were all else the same, it would of course make sense to go for females over males, if only to render moot the "glass ceiling" nonsense that we heard so much about two years ago.

I would say much the same about persons of color, but with less enthusiasm and more reservations. I will briefly explain why presently. It is not because, after Obama, "been there, done that, and look how it turned out" arguments have come to seem more compelling than they formerly did.

Also, being young and comparatively new to the political scene is probably a plus all things considered, though, experience matters too. When in doubt, the wise thing to do is obviously to weight these and other pertinent considerations on a case-by-case basis. In matters such as these, there are no algorithms or even rules of thumb worth following.

For me, though, gut reactions of a kind that have a generally "aesthetic" component matter most of all. Whoever is nominated will be in my life for a long time to come, and, when bullshitting, I have to ask myself how I feel about that. I suspect I am not alone in thinking that way.

The kinds of reasons I am calling "aesthetic" often meld into more directly political considerations. Even if, say, Nixon's politics hadn't been worse than JFK's, who would not prefer Camelot to the sleaze Nixon exuded? There has been nothing like it since – until the Donald and his trophy bride descended that accursed escalator in Trump Tower.

In that spirit, I would urge, above all, that the 2020 nominee not be a "moderate."

Moderation in the face of never-ending wars fought in all the four corners of the world, climate change, global warming, and the increasing likelihood of nuclear annihilation in the new Cold War that Russophobic and Sinophobic liberals are working so diligently to promote, is just too much to endure.

It isn't just Democrats that are the problem; it is moderation itself. Evidently, sometimes, sheer odiousness cannot help but register along an aesthetic dimension. Perhaps Oscar Wilde had a similar thought in mind in "The Picture of Dorian Gray."

At this point in time, "aesthetically" loaded gut feelings provide as good a guide for bullshitting about Democrats, "moderate" ones especially, as any other.

With Nancy Pelosi, the Queen of Moderation (whatever the Freedom Caucus might think) calling the shots, the Democratic Party is more likely than not to become a force for

moderation leading up to the 2020 election. Pelosi played that role after the 2006 election, the last time the Democrats took back the House, and she is gearing up to play it again.

She has already seen to it, for example, that despite the efforts of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others, there will be no Green New Deal committee in the next Congress.

And Pelosi is far from the worst of them. Compare her, for example, to Chuck Schumer or nearly any other Democratic Party grandee. They are all already doing all sorts of aesthetically — and morally and straightforwardly politically — repellent things.

Their veneration of Bush the Father and John McCain was disgusting enough. Now add the glorification of “Mad Dog” Mattis to the list. Mattis was the architect of America’s assault on Fallujah, the Guernica of our time, and is a prominent supporter of Saudi war crimes, crimes against humanity, and crimes against the peace in Yemen,

And as if all that isn’t already too disgusting to bear, consider the idolization of the FBI and CIA and of FBI-man and hero of the anti-Trump “resistance,” Robert Mueller.

Bullshitting from the gut yet again, I would urge: please, absolutely positively do not even think of Joe Biden becoming the nominee. He has been running for president seemingly forever – or at least since 1988. In 2008, he was the only Democrat, besides Clinton, to run to Obama’s right. That is about where he still is.

If only for aesthetic reasons, we ought at the very least to avoid the devil we know too well. It isn’t just the politics. Beto O’Rourke’s soft progressive credentials are weak, and if he has a genuinely leftist bone in his body, he has kept it well hidden. But inasmuch as they all end up in more or less the same place anyway, I’d as soon see Beto channel 2008 Obama enthusiasms, misguided as they were, as see the others vie to fill the vacancy left by Mad Dog’s departure for the job of “adult in the room.”

The contender with the best politics is, of course, Bernie Sanders. But he is no spring chicken, and neither is Elizabeth Warren, whose politics seem to be nearly as good, at least on keeping the country safe from banksters and other high-flying capitalist malefactors. If the choice were mine, I’d go with one or the other of them.

Better still would be someone to their left – not just on international matters, where the need is glaring, but also in pursuing “democratic socialist” agendas – advocating, for example, for that Green New Deal, and for Chinese-style infrastructure-driven public investments, and for a welfare state as generous as the ones installed in parts of Europe and Asia a half century or more ago.

How to pay for it? By taking money away from the Pentagon, of course, and the rest of the military-industrial-national security state complex, and by reestablishing genuine

progressivity in our tax system. A candidate I could favor without reservation would be calling for these and similar measures to become part of the mainstream public “conversation.”

Perhaps some of the newbies about to enter the House of Representatives could find ways to move boldly in that direction. I wouldn’t hold my breath waiting for that, but at the very least, this time around, unlike in recent years, the chances of moving the discussion along in a genuinely progressive direction are better than zero.

My bullshit opinion is that, notwithstanding the importance of “diversity” in the political sphere, now is not a time to come down hard on that; and that it might even be a good thing, in this time and place, for the Democrats to choose a nominee who is not “of color.” I think that pundits who venture explanations of the Trump phenomenon that appeal, at least in part, to the idea that white working class people are feeling left out of the Democratic Party and the political process more generally are on to something. Why add to that problem now if, from a progressive point of view, there really is no need?

Anti-racist, white progressives can be and often are as good or better for “minorities,” as they are still sometimes called, as members of those minority groups themselves. Obama is a case in point. He did a lot of good for African Americans and others just by being there, but at a policy level, he neither accomplished nor tried to accomplish much at all.

This is one of the reasons why in 2008, I favored John Edwards at first, and, more quixotically, in 2012, Virginia Senator James Webb. Edwards self-destructed, and Webb was a non-starter from Day One, even though – for reasons I would call “aesthetic”– I liked him most of all.

His politics was dubious and there was much in his past – in the Vietnam War and in the Reagan administration — that gave cause for concern, but his literary gifts were considerable, and much of his life in recent decades has been devoted to coming to terms with Vietnam and other troubling aspects of his past. Also, his populism seemed intense, grounded, and authentic.

There are many Democrats vying for the nomination now, but none of them stands nearly as much in anything like the old school leftwing populist tradition. The one who comes closest is Sherrod Brown – not because he is of it, but because his ties to the labor movement seem to run the deepest of all his rivals.

I am hesitant to say so, but that may be good enough.

I am not prepared at this point to say how Sanders or Warren fit into that calculation, but so what!

I am only bullshitting, and, while the window of opportunity remains open, and as Trumpworld disintegrates before our eyes, there are more important things to agonize over and work on as best we can.