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Trump, What is He Good For?

By Andrew Levine
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Voters who thought that Donald Trump's election would make them materially better off were delusional or gullible or both. The only exceptions were Trump's class brothers and sisters – plutocrats with, as Joyce wrote in *Ulysses*, “financial resources surpassing those of Rothschild or the silver king.”

He shamelessly bamboozled the rest. They ought to have known better, but perhaps they can be forgiven for being taken in. Trump did talk a good “populist” line, after all. Also, Hillary Clinton was the candidate of the other neoliberal party; that was a powerful mitigating factor.

Before Election Day, the case for calling Trump a conman, though compelling to everyone who was minimally informed, was still largely conjectural. But that was then. Victims of Trump's con who are still standing by their man, five months into his presidency, have no excuse.

There were less implausible expectations clustering around Trump's candidacy as well.

The sounder ones had mainly to do with the kinds of people who were crawling out from under the rocks Trump turned over.

Those people are indeed a worrisome lot; they are, to quote the devil, “bad hombres.” But people who voted for Hillary because they thought that Trump's hardcore supporters would enable or even compel him to turn the United States into a twenty-first century version of an inter-war fascist state were worrying too much.

He has indeed emboldened nativists and Islamophobes, along with others who enjoy the privileges that come with whiteness and heterosexuality. He has also given misogyny a shot in the arm, and made bullying respectable again.

There is no doubt too that civic life is coarser now than it was before Trump, and that the police are less constrained than they used to be. ICE is even more odious now than it was when Barack Obama, the Deporter-in-Chief, was calling the shots.

Also, black and brown lives matter less than before; and people who are, or look like they might be, of Middle Eastern origin are in greater danger than they used to be. The so-called alt-right is riding high as well.

But damaging as all this has been, these are differences in degree, not kind; the country has not fundamentally changed. Worrywarts who likened the views of the anti-Hillary Left to those of Communists in the final days of the Weimar Republic were wrong.

This will not change even if the Donald somehow manages to serve out his full term – not because his personality is less “authoritarian” than many thought, but because the institutional constraints holding him back remain well entrenched.

It is possible, of course, that a massive terror attack or a “lovely little war” would change all this in the blink of an eye. But this is unlikely. Public opinion nowadays is less prone than it was immediately after 9/11 to succumb to panic; and people are more aware than they used to be of the fragility and preciousness of basic rights and liberties.

Freedom of speech, along with the rights and liberties associated with it, therefore seem secure.

Whistleblowers who embarrassed or otherwise upset our intelligence services, military establishment, or the Clintons would probably have a more nuanced view, but it would be fair to say that, for the most part, civil liberties were fairly well protected in recent years.

Even Dick Cheney and George W. Bush were unable to do too much harm. Even as their “war on terror” unfolded, most of us only suffered minor inconveniences at airports or when entering government buildings. There was no massive uptick in the level of state repression.

So far, at least, it has been the same under Trump. He has done his best to villainize the press, but all he has actually done is make the atmospherics surrounding mainstream journalism worse.

Nothing like what happened to civil liberties in Italy under Mussolini has happened here. Comparisons with Nazi Germany are even more farfetched.

Even Muslims, the most vulnerable group of all in Trump’s America, have fared better with him in the White House than Japanese Americans did during World War II. Trump plainly does have a soft spot in his heart for authoritarian rule, but he has neither the will nor the means to become an authoritarian leader or even to weaken civil liberties fundamentally.

It is therefore no more dangerous now than it was a year ago to criticize the government or the regime it superintends. Thanks to pressures emanating out of civil society, it may actually be easier.

Needless to say, this was not Trump’s intention, but it is his fault – indirectly – because mainstream media have it in for him, and they are not about to surrender.

How ironic that Trump, the supposed authoritarian, would be the one to inspire our “free press” to relax its ingrained servility to power! But this is how it is.

Trump was and is good for ratings, and therefore for advertising revenues. The cable news networks therefore gave his campaign full spectrum coverage when he was running for president. Perhaps the people who manage and work in those organizations, and their counterparts in broadcast and print media, have guilty consciences. Whatever the reason, they have gone out of their way to make it known that they despise the man, and to lay bare the (very obvious) reasons

why. Even if Trump were a more competent politician, he would have a hard time getting past that.

Fox News and other rightwing and alt-right media outlets still try to make excuses for him. Had they been less successful in misinforming and dumbing down their target audiences, they would not now be convincing anybody. As it is, their influence is on the wane. Trump has seen to that; despite himself, he keeps subverting their efforts.

It could be argued that the Trump phenomenon shows that “it can happen here.” Perhaps so – but not now, and not under Trump’s aegis.

This is hardly news, but we can still feel relieved that the fears of those who thought it would come to pass never materialized.

On the other hand, there were other pre-election expectations that also never materialized – most unfortunately.

There was, above all, the hope that Trump would turn back the reckless, Clinton-inspired campaign to turn former Soviet republics into biddable allies of the West, and to knock Russia back down to a level where it could no longer challenge American world domination.

There was never any reason to think that Trump would do the right thing for reasons of justice or common decency. But it did seem that a man with so many properties to protect might be more reasonable than Clinton or the average Clintonized Democrat – more risk averse and therefore less inclined to act in provocative ways that could lead to nuclear war.

There was also the expectation that Trump’s administration would get the United States out of the regime-change business. Regime change was what Clinton, and her gaggle of “humanitarian” and neocon advisors, were all about.

Their conception of America’s role in the world led to mayhem and instability in and around the greater Middle East, to the indefinite prolongation of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, to the destruction of the Libyan and Syrian states, to a massive refugee crisis that has engulfed the region and spilled over into Europe, to a coup d’état in Honduras and to similar mischief elsewhere in Latin America, and, of course, to efforts to destabilize territories within and around Russia itself.

Trump may know next to nothing about world politics. But if he could nevertheless get the United States to change course on regime change, then hurray for him.

It was possible before he took office to think that maybe, just maybe, his presidency might have that effect. But now that he has been in office for what seems like an eternity, no sane person can think that still.

Trump has continued all the bad stuff that Clinton and Obama inherited or started, while, more or less on his own initiative, encouraging the most odious regime in the world, Saudi Arabia, to wreak havoc in Yemen and around the world.

Nevertheless, when Trump is right, he’s right – even if his reasons are vile.

Needless to say, when he tries to save his ass by blaming media purveyors of “fake news” for his troubles, he is only blowing air. He can hardly help it; that is what he does.

Nevertheless, there is a kernel of truth at the core of his self-serving blather. The recklessly dangerous, anti-Putin and anti-Russia campaign that Clinton and her people launched last summer, and which Democrats subsequently took up with a vengeance, is indeed a partisan concoction.

That Republicans are now on board too – most of them grudgingly, a few, like John McCain and therefore Lindsey Graham, enthusiastically – does not belie this fact. The bastards were backed into a corner.

The Democrats' Russia story is as phony as Trump's populism. And, in this case too, the people who are snookered are not entirely at fault.

They ought to know better, but how could they if they depend on CNN and MSNBC and similarly minded corporate news and opinion outlets, and on *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*?

Blaming the Russians is as American as senseless gun violence, private health insurance and apple pie. It is therefore easy to propagandize against. Small wonder that this is one of the very few things Hillary set out to do that she has actually done well.

Indeed, her media friends have done so well that someone eager to find out what is actually going on might just as well turn to Fox News, the gold standard for dumbing down and misinforming the public.

And so, insofar as he actually had a plan, his efforts to “reset” relations with Russia – to do what Obama and even George W. Bush tried to do, not entirely without success – have come to naught.

The Donald is stymied – on this, as on much else. When he complains that this is the case, it is not just because he is whacky. It is also because he is right.

In these circumstances, if he rump had a sounder purchase on reality, he would resign his office ex post haste – to work on his, and his family's, bottom lines, and to salvage what he can of the reputation of his brand. But he is too full of himself to do anything of the sort. “Self-impeachment” would be his least bad option, but things would have to get a whole lot worse for him than they now are for him to realize that this is so.

And so, irrespective of what the truth might be, charges of Trump campaign collusion with Russian “meddlers” may finally be what will rid us of the Donald.

If so, then two and a half cheers for those charges, even if they turn out to be entirely without merit. Commander-in-Chief Trump has it in him, if he feels irked enough, to take the whole world down with him. If it takes a cock-and-bull story to keep that from happening, then so be it.

Withhold half a cheer, however, inasmuch as Vice President Mike Pence is already in the bullpen warming up, and, on the raving reactionary scale, he is even worse.

In a country with enough nuclear weapons to ignite Armageddon many times over, the temperament and mental stability of the individual who has the ultimate say on matters of war and peace is obviously of paramount importance. But the fact that Trump, desperate to hold onto the troglodytes in his base, is only an opportunistic reactionary while Pence is the real thing surely counts for something.

In the circumstances, wise anti-Trump resisters would do all they could to slow down Trump's ouster – whether he leaves of his own accord or because the Republican establishment comes to the realization that they would be better off with him impeached than they would be facing an electoral season with him as their standard bearer.

Since there is no way that the hard right power that Trump brought with him to Washington can be replaced by anything less noxious before the next presidential election, stasis should be the goal. Anything Trump does will be bad; the first order of business should therefore be to keep him from doing anything at all.

There is, of course, the danger, as long as he remains in office, that something will set him off, putting everyone and everything in peril. There is therefore a tradeoff. On the one hand, an immobilized Trump will do less harm than a fully up and running Pence; on the other, there is the increased probability, under Trump, of nuclear annihilation.

Sadly, though, it hardly matters in our so-called democracy how anybody outside the inner circle of the GOP conceives the probabilities, benefits and costs. What Democrats think or do is of no importance; they have made themselves irrelevant.

This will only change if, as now looks very unlikely, the Democratic Party changes beyond recognition. If Democrats instead heed the calls for “unity” coming from the usual sources — the editorial and op-ed pages of *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, for example — the party will only become more like what it already is, a rotting irrelevance fit only to be smashed.

Meanwhile, thinking he is doing the opposite, Trump is making it difficult for GOP muckety-mucks to stand by their man. It has become axiomatic since Watergate that cover-ups are worse than the crimes they are concocted to hide. Either Trump is covering something major up, or he deserves an Academy Award for acting like he is.

During Watergate, it was clear what the underlying crime was. In this case, it is not. It is certainly not colluding with Russian meddlers in the 2016 election.

The conventional wisdom now is that while Trump and his campaign may or may not have been involved, the Russians did indeed meddle. The CIA says so, so it must be true. Seriously.

Never mind that lying is in their genes, or that, when it suits their purpose, they will politicize intelligence, as everyone knows they did in the run up to the Iraq War.

Never mind too that there is not one shred of evidence that they have released to the public. Ironically, though, evidence did surface last week — no thanks to our vaunted “intelligence community” but to one heroic leaker, Reality Winner, a woman about to join the ranks of the victims of politicians of both the Democratic and Republican parties who want to stifle efforts to tell the public things the authorities want to hide, but that citizens of a democracy ought to know. She produced a document, published by *The Intercept*. It is hardly dispositive. It does not even count as a smoking gun because there is no reason to think that any gun was ever actually fired.

There is every reason to marvel, though, at the stupefying level of hypocrisy promoters of the campaign against Russia evince. The United States interferes in elections wherever and whenever it pleases; it has been hard at it at least since the end of World War II. Russia and the other former Soviet republics have been targeted with particular intensity.

It is remarkable too that the propagandists can’t even come up with a plausible rationale for those real or imagined Russian hackers. Could it be that, in view of how easy it is for them to blame Russians, they feel they don’t have to bother?

Their main insinuation was that the Russians wanted to depress the turnout of Democratic voters by stifling the enthusiasm of Sanders supporters when it would come time for them to vote for Clinton against Trump. Supposedly, the news that the Democratic National Committee, the DNC, had rigged the election to assure Hillary’s nomination would have that effect.

News flash: it was always clear to everyone who cared that the Democratic establishment was doing all it could to assure Clinton’s nomination. John Podesta’s emails changed nothing.

Here is another news flash: there is also no evidence so far made public that Russians, official or otherwise, were the ones who hacked into the DNC’s server and gave those Podesta emails to Wikileaks.

But this hardly mattered to sore losers who saw a chance to kill, or at least wound, two birds — Russia and Wikileaks — with one stone. The entire political class hates Wikileaks because it

causes them embarrassment. Democrats are the worst; Julian Assange is number two on the DNC's shit list, second only to Putin himself.

Someday those Democrats will probably find themselves with copious quantities of egg on their face for that. In these dark and seemingly hopeless times, that is something to look forward to.

For now, though, they are getting away with it.

Recently, another insinuation has come to the fore. Now the story is that what the Russians wanted to do was more general and nefarious than just telling Sanders supporters what they already knew. Their goal, it seems, was to undermine Americans' confidence in the electoral process itself.

Do we really need Russians for that? Investigative journalists have been exposing problems with the ways Americans' votes are collected and tallied for years. The case of Florida in the election that set George W. Bush loose upon the world is only the most notorious example.

However, until now, the problem has always been Republican Secretaries of State and the people working for them; not Russians. And yet the DNC would rather blame their party's failures on Putin. Go figure!

In a similar vein, it has been known for years that it is possible, even easy, to "violate the sanctity" of voting machines. If our politicians and pundits were serious about safeguarding the voting process, they would be insisting on going back to paper ballots.

It is old-fashioned, but it works almost everywhere else in the world, and it used to work well here. Were ballots pieces of paper counted by human beings, it would be harder for cable and broadcast news outlets to call elections quickly, often as soon as the polls close. Corporate media would therefore object. But the integrity of the voting system, and the public's confidence in it, would be enormously enhanced.

More important still, if those politicians and pundits really cared about democracy, they would have Republican efforts at voter suppression in their crosshairs, not real or imagined Russian meddlers, who, even if they did all the hacking it is claimed they did, seem to have had no effect on anything at all. On that crucial point, everyone seems to agree.

The one and only good (or not too bad) thing about Trump was that he wasn't buying into the nonsense on Russia that Clinton and the others were promoting. No doubt, his reasons were self-serving. But at least he was on the right page.

Now, it seems that he is buying into it, after all; or so he claims when he is not straying too far off script. Therefore, he is no longer good even for that; perhaps he never was.

In any case, it is now plain as can be that he has no redeeming features at all; that he is just a sleazy, hyper-rich, septuagenarian ignoramus with the emotional maturity of a male adolescent, decomposing in full public view.

His one and only televised cabinet meeting, where the millionaire and billionaire scoundrels he enlisted to work under him abased themselves in public before the Dear Leader, declaring how wonderful he is and what an honor and blessing it is to serve him, says it all.

Thus it has finally become clear that Trump is good for nothing, not even for keeping the warmongers at bay.

Well, not quite nothing. The longer he stays in office, the less harm Mike Pence will do if and when Republicans cut Trump loose. That could turn out to be consequential indeed.