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Trouble Ahead: With Trump and For Him

By Andrew Levine

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The good news is that Hillary Clinton won't be starting World War III. Also, at least for now and probably forever, we are rid of the two most noxious political families in recent American history, the Bushes and the Clintons.

For this, thank Donald Trump. Remember him on Thanksgiving Day.

Thank corporate media too. They loved Hillary, but they loved advertising revenue more; and the Donald was a godsend for their bottom lines. They showered him with enough free publicity to elect a dozen buffoons.

Not long ago, when only the tabloids were reporting on Trump, it looked like the 2016 election would be a Hillary versus Jeb Bush affair that would do in one or the other of their respective dynasties, but not both.

It didn't work out that way, however. The Clintons didn't do the Bushes in; Trump did. Then, a few months later, he took care of the Clintons. Three cheers to him for that!

Will any more good come from the Donald's doings? The prospects are dimming. But if he does try to deliver on some of the positions he took during the campaign, there is a chance.

On environmental issues, Trump, a climate change denier, will be a disaster. But disaster was in the cards anyway because, like Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton comes straight out of the little talk and less action school of environmental policy. Trump is likely to be god-awful on civil liberties issues too; but, in that area too, neither Hillary nor Obama were much good either.

On trade policy, though, job creation, and infrastructure development, the positions Trump took during the campaign beat anything Hillary promised. Trump outflanked her from the left.

And his views on relations with Russia and China, regime change wars, and imperial overreach, as best they can be ascertained, are a lot wiser and less lethal than hers. These are not so much left-right issues as matters of common sense.

Clinton's overriding concern was and always has been to maintain and expand American world domination — in the face of economic decline, and at no matter what cost. Trump wants, or says he wants, to do business with other countries in the way that he did with sleaze ball real estate moguls and network executives, people like himself. He wants to make deals.

The Trump way is, as they say, "transactional." The idea is to wheel and deal on a case-by-case basis, with no further, non-pecuniary end in view.

In the real estate world and in network television, that would mean wringing as much money out of each transaction as possible. What it would mean in world affairs is unclear — except perhaps to those who think that "making America great again" isn't meaningless cant.

Better that, though, than a foreign policy dedicated to keeping America the world's hegemon. That is the foreign policy establishment's aim; it is therefore Clinton's too. It is the way of perpetual war. Trump's way is far from ideal, but it is less wasteful, less onerous and less reckless.

During the campaign, Trump would sometimes speak out against bankers and financiers, especially the too-big-to-fail and too-big-to-jail kind. For some time, though, the "populist" billionaire has been signaling to his class brothers and sisters in the financial "industry" that he is more likely to deregulate than to regulate their machinations.

This will become even clearer once Trump settles on key Cabinet posts and on his economic advisors. It is already plain, though, that the modern day counterparts of Theodore Roosevelt's "malefactors of great wealth" have little to fear; they and Trump are joined by indissoluble bonds of class-consciousness and solidarity.

Many of the rich and heinous were skeptical of Trump's candidacy at first; because he is such a loose cannon. But now that he has won, the bastards are sucking up; and glee is returning to Wall Street.

There is no doubt about it: whoever voted for the Donald for "populist" reasons is an out and out chump.

Trump is now starting too to allay the fears of the movers and shakers of the National Security State. He still has a way to go, however. We can therefore still hope that they are right to worry. What is bad for them is good for the country.

Clinton's defeat also seems to have unnerved their counterparts in European capitals, at NATO headquarters in Brussels, and in Japan, South Korea and other countries where the presence of the American military has been very very good for the few at the top, and disastrous for ordinary people.

Trump may not be quite the "isolationist" that some people think, but he has said repeatedly that the countries America "protects" should pay their own way.

If he means it, then more power to him. The United States and the rest of the world would be well rid of the American dominated military alliances now in place; NATO most of all. However, having talked with him, Obama is now telling the Europeans that Trump is fine with NATO. Time will tell.

Then there is Israel. Trump thinks that the blank check the ethnocratic settler state already gets from the United States isn't nearly enough. So much for allies paying their own way!

However, even if Trump leaves America's perpetual war regime and its military alliances intact, some good could come just from him being at the helm – not so much because, as a wheeler and dealer, he would be less inclined actually to start wars than has become the norm, but because he is vile enough, and enough of an embarrassment, to undermine America's prestige, hastening the day when the hegemon is a hegemon no more.

This would be good for most Americans, and good for the world.

The election he won has already done a lot to explode the idea, more widely believed at home than abroad, that American "democracy" is somehow a model for the world.

What an odd idea! Leaving aside the inordinate influence of private money — political corruption that a "conservative" Supreme Court regards as Constitutionally protected free speech — and the fact our two major parties have concocted an electoral duopoly system that stifles

even mildly reformist political expression, in what kind of model can Clinton garner at least two million more votes than Trump yet still lose the election?

More glaringly undemocratic yet, Democrats routinely garner more votes than Republicans in House and Senate races, but only sometimes control either chamber. In the final years of the Obama presidency, Democrats controlled neither one. A fine model indeed!

When he, like everyone else, was sure that he would lose, Trump would rail against how the system is “rigged.” It was rigged – by Clinton and Company against Bernie Sanders. It was hardly rigged against Trump; at least not in any way that mattered. Quite to the contrary, the system worked to Trump’s advantage to such an extent that, unlike Hillary, he didn’t need to cheat.

And what a system it is! After wasting prodigious quantities of money, time, and effort over more than a year and a half, it produced a contest between two of the most appalling and unpopular candidates ever to disgrace the political scene.

This is “exceptional,” all right, but not in the way that exponents of “American exceptionalism” like Obama and Clinton have in mind. Perhaps their commitment to that illusion has something to do with the zeal with which those two, along with many others, are now promoting a fallback position.

Obama especially has been trumpeting the claim that, in the Land of the Free, when an election is over and the incumbent – or, as in this case, the continuator of his “legacy” — is out, we Americans transfer power not just peacefully but also cordially. Since this is the norm in much of the world these days, since there is nothing “exceptional” about it, it is not clear how this makes our “democracy” a model for the world. But leave that aside.

Perhaps Obama had no overriding propaganda purpose in mind, and was only being gracious. Whatever the explanation, it was remarkable how he had taken it upon himself to make nice with Trump even before the dust had settled. What a feat of moral and psychological abasement!

After all, the Donald has never had a kind word to say about the President; indeed, his line, from Day One, has been that Obama’s presidency is illegitimate. Trump launched his campaign for the White House by championing birther nonsense, and it has been all downhill from there.

Nevertheless, if Obama wants to take the high ground, he should go for it. As Hillary’s campaign ads made clear, children need role models who are as unlike Trump as can be. Obama won’t be fooling anybody about the “exceptional” magnanimity of American democracy; that ship sailed long ago. But a class act on his part now might at least be good for the kids.

Obama is better positioned for that than Hillary, even though one of the few remotely plausible arguments for voting for her was that a woman President would be good for little girls – because it would show them that, like little boys, they could someday achieve the highest office in the land. Trump cut the ground out from that argument too — by devaluing the office.

As it turned out, Hillary, the role model, is teaching a less edifying lesson: that when you flub badly, blame everybody but yourself. What a piece of work that woman is! If FBI Director James Comey had done nothing that she could blame her failure on, it would be Jill Stein or Julian Assange, or most likely (and most far-fetched) of all, Vladimir Putin — anybody but her or her husband or the corporate-infested rotting hulk that the Democratic Party has become.

The neoliberal world order that the Clintons did so much to fashion, and that Hillary was poised to take over and extend, is heading for a crash. Americans had better watch out. There are no soft landings for hegemons that insist on continuing to dominate the world after their time has passed.

A soft landing would be a blessing, though – for the peoples of the world and for the American people. It would spare a lot of people a lot of grief.

Is it possible that, through sheer inadvertence, Trump could get us there? It is too soon, at this point to say what the chances are, but, by Inauguration Day, if not before, we should have a good idea.

Since Trump knows little and cares less about governance, and since he is unfit for the job the Electoral College will bestow upon him, it will be up to the people he appoints to do, or not do, what he said he wanted to do during the campaign.

On that score, the news so far has been, to say the least, troubling.

Being as sure as everyone else that Trump would lose and therefore that they were not harming their careers by dissing the Donald – that they were instead making a cost free political statement that would benefit their careers in the long run — nearly all the usual suspects that a Republican President-elect might call upon when setting up a new administration rejected Trump a long time ago. Predictably, many of them want back in now, but the Donald is nothing if not vengeful.

Therefore Trump’s “transition team” will have no choice but to scrape the very bottom of the barrel. Even Sarah Palin has been mentioned. Even John Bolton.

We already now that Reince Priebus of the RNC, the Republican National Committee, will be Trump’s Chief of Staff and that Stephen Bannon, of Breitbart News, champion of the white nationalist “alt-right,” will be his “chief strategist and senior counselor” — one mainstream mediocrity and one shameless epigone of “the darker angels of our nature,” as a later-day Lincoln might call them.

Eight years ago, when Obama’s appointments also seemed hard to make sense of, pop historians would go on about how, like Lincoln, Obama, in his infinite wisdom, was assembling “a team of rivals.” So far, no one has found anything similarly complimentary to say about what Trump and his inner circle are up to. The news oozing out of Trump Tower is too repugnant to spin.

And the reasons for this are too evident to hide. They stem from Trump's egomania and insecurity. He is therefore now doing what others like him in similar circumstances have done before: making loyalty not just the main thing, but the only thing.

Too bad for the Donald that governments are bigger and more multi-faceted than real estate operations. The "deep state" must be fed, and there aren't nearly enough people around who have a clue about what needs to be done whose loyalty Trump doesn't doubt.

The evidence suggests too that Trump considers himself too important to worry about anything but the "commanding heights" of his administration; and that he is eager to delegate the authority to pick and choose underlings. If that authority can be delegated to someone he so far trusts, and whose office carries an air of political legitimacy, then so much the better.

Enter Mike Pence.

In recent years, it has become practically an axiom of American presidential politics that by their choices of Vice Presidents, ye shall know them.

Anyone who is not quite sure what a dodo John McCain is, should reflect on Sarah Palin. And as if the support Obama got from Wall Street and corporate media wasn't enough to show which side he was on, his choice of Joe Biden for a running mate ought to have sealed the deal.

Did Hillary really take a progressive turn, as she and her handlers wanted people to think when they still feared the wrath of Sanders' supporters? By picking Tim Kaine to run with her, she settled that question. How more eloquently could she have expressed contempt not just for people feeling the Bern, but also for everyone less retrograde than she!

The best that can be said of the Vice President-elect, who famously described himself as "a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican in that order," is that he is a rock solid reactionary — in the Dick Cheney mold, with a little of Scott Walker, Wisconsin's union busting Governor, thrown in.

That, after kicking Chris Christie out, Trump chose him to head his transition-team, suggests that the Trump administration will be less disruptive of ordinary Republican imbecility than those of us who are looking for silver linings in Trump's victory would like.

We who underestimated the enormity of Hillary Clinton's ineptitude, and who still can't quite understand how any Democrat, even she, could lose to Donald Trump, were, and are, of one mind with Trump voters on that: many of them too were hoping that Trump would destroy or mortally wound the GOP. We will have to wait a while longer for that now.

Ironically, the silver lining is that now the onus will be on Trump — for having given the Republican Party new life. That should teach those Trump voters who thought they were sending a message to the GOP establishment. It should also cause them to turn on Trump sooner

than Clinton voters would have turned on her, and a lot sooner than millions of Obama supporters came to realize how wrong-headed Obamaphilia was.

By winning, Trump has placed himself in an untenable situation.

He cannot even begin to implement the agenda his base thought he would while relying only on his children and the handful of Republicans he knows and doesn't have it in for. But neither can he throw himself on the mercy of the establishment Republicans he ran against. That would go against his every instinct; and, as a man without principles or convictions, instincts are all he has.

Also, it would cost him his base.

He therefore has no choice but to muddle on as best he can, disappointing everyone.

Obama ended up disappointing a lot of people too. When he ran in 2008, the people who voted for "hope" and "change" found that what they got was the same old same old.

Now many Trump voters want change. They have fewer illusions; they don't expect their candidate to usher in a Golden Age; few of them even like the Donald. All they wanted was not Hillary and in her stead something, anything, different from what Democrats and Republicans have been handing them for as long as they could remember. They too will find that what they voted into office was what they thought they were voting out.

Therefore, they too will despair and, when the time comes, revolt. But it will be worse this time because the President they voted into office is dangerously unhinged. Whatever else he may be, Obama is cautious, thoughtful, and emotionally mature; Trump, though shrewd and adept at self-promotion, is an ignoramus with the emotional maturity of a teenage boy.

When the people who put him in office realize this, as they very soon will, watch out!

Don't feel sorry for him, though. Whether or not his villainy is heartfelt or only a huckster-politician's gimmick, he merits all the condemnation his detractors can muster.

And although many of the people who voted for him felt that there was no other way to tell the political class how justifiably pissed off they are, don't feel sorry for them either.

Corporate media and the Commission on Presidential Debates and the National Committees of the Democratic and Republic Parties saw to it that most voters wouldn't take third party alternatives seriously, even if they somehow found out about them at all.

But to express contempt for Hillary, they didn't have to vote for Trump. For example, they could have voted only in down-ticket contests, and not for President; or they could have not voted at all. Better that than voting for someone associated, fairly or not, with nativism, racism and Islamophobia.

The tragic fact is that our democracy, or lack of it, made “deplorables” of us all. Trump enthusiasts are the worst, though, for different and less reprehensible reasons, Clinton enthusiasts too have a lot to answer for too. So do all the lesser evil and *faute de mieux* voters on both sides. And so do those who didn’t bother to vote, whether out of conviction, indifference or laziness, and those of use who put integrity above efficacy by voting, as I did, for Jill Stein, or for Gary Johnson.

Once it became clear that the election would be between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, all was lost. Even trying to jack up the Stein vote to the point where the Greens could get federal funding next time around was a fool’s errand. This was clear from the moment Bernie Sanders made good on his pledge to support the Democratic ticket. Those of us who thought otherwise were deceiving ourselves.

In the circumstances, is there anything to do now except put it all behind us and move on?

The answer is emphatically Yes.

The first order of business now is to do all we can to protect the people whose vulnerability Trump exploits and endangers: Muslims and undocumented Latinos, above all; to fight back in solidarity with them – against Trump and his minions and against the miscreants in the larger society whose nativism, racism, Islamophobia, homophobia and sexism Trump has unleashed.

If Trump starts deporting people, the deportations must do all we can to stop him — by any means necessary. If he starts registering Muslims, we must insist on being registered too.

We must never lose sight, however, of the underlying cause of the Trump phenomenon – the Clintonite (neoliberal, liberal imperialist, anti-working class) turn in American, especially Democratic Party, politics.

Without making the mistake of going over to the opposite extreme, by forsaking the progressive side of identity politics, the Clintonite turn must be reversed, as quickly and definitively as possible.

And so, the struggles ahead must be waged simultaneously on two fronts: in the first instance, against reactionaries of the Trumpian sort and against reactionary Trumpian initiatives, but also against the politics of Hillary and Bill and those who think like them.

Each day brings news of opposition in the streets; and plans are afoot for massive demonstrations around Inauguration Day. This is all well and good. But it must not be forgotten that when there are no effective means for achieving political ends, actions become merely expressive, and often turn out badly. Even when the level of repression is minimal, there is always a backlash; and, when militant energies are exhausted, quiescence generally follows.

Therefore act, but also think! And learn not just from experience, but also from the enemy.

House and Senate Republicans are, as a rule, more loathsome than their Democratic Party counterparts, and they are not the brightest bulbs on the tree. But, through sheer obstinacy, they were able to prevail over a popular, albeit weak, President, and to block all but his most timid initiatives.

The emerging anti-Trump resistance can learn a lot from their example.

Needless to say, House and Senate Democrats are ill equipped to do anything of the sort; they are worse than useless. Many, maybe most, of them are no less politically retrograde than their Republican counterparts, and they are all a lot less capable of keeping a President at bay through obstinacy alone.

But if they will not, or cannot, follow the lead of their Republican colleagues, “we, the people” can.

We can obstruct, obstruct, and obstruct some more.

But with a difference! House and Senate Republicans wanted only to cause Obama’s presidency to fail. We can do better than that.

Insofar as his administration actually does do some of the comparatively progressive things that Trump promised it would, “we, the people” should support it, even as we do our best to keep Trump and his followers from succumbing to their nefarious, quasi-fascist inclinations.

There is no time to lose. It is very likely that Trump’s team, once it takes shape, will start off with some spectacularly execrable displays of malice – intended to show that the Donald is indeed a man of his word.

Trump has already said that he intends, right off, to deport some two to three million “illegal” aliens.

Had Deporter-in-Chief Obama been taken on in the past, stopping Trump now would be a less daunting task. But it can still be done – if the opposition is sufficiently militant and united.

Until its Clintonism is expunged that opposition is not the Democratic Party. Far too many liberals, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren among them, thought that it was – and look where that got us.

The opposition now, though huge, has no party – except perhaps the Greens, and they are still too marginal to count. Rectifying this situation is a matter of the utmost urgency, nearly as important, even in the short run, as defending the victims of the new order that the failed, Clintonized Democratic Party has foisted upon us.