
Anti-Hillary: Across the Spectrum

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For three decades or more, politicians and pundits have been proclaiming the end of the left-right spectrum. Left, right and center, they say, are or are rapidly becoming irrelevant, if not meaningless, descriptions of ideas, policies and practices.

This has always been an exaggeration at best – concocted to serve the interests of economic and political elites intent on diminishing challenges to the status quo. The challenges that concern them come from the left.

For proponents of a “third way” – Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, for example, and like-minded figures associated with historically leftwing or left-leaning political parties – blathering on about the irrelevance of the old spectrum was a more or less transparent subterfuge, part of a larger, generally successful, effort to shift politics to the right.

For others, there was no skullduggery involved. This was just how the world seemed.

But fashions change; the analytical advantages of the purportedly superseded left-right spectrum are becoming obvious again. It has been useful for understanding politics and reflections on politics for more than two hundred years, and it still is.

Even so, there seem to be more issues than there used to be on which left, right, and (some) centrist positions converge.

There is, for example, substantial agreement, at the two ends of the spectrum, and in sectors of the center, that the country and the world would be better off if somebody other than Hillary Clinton were to become the next President of the United States.

Clinton will almost certainly be the next President anyway. Hardly anyone is happy about this. But, for most Americans, the unhappiness has more to do with feelings than ideas; it is not particularly ideological, reasoned, or

even well informed. They just don't like Hillary, but will vote for her anyway – faute de mieux, because they see no better option.

She is likely to win because our elections are about selling candidates to voters. The hucksters behind Hillary have a poor product to sell. At some level, they know this, and so does everybody else. But, for many reasons that make for a long and complicated story, best not gone into here, she is coming into this election season with market share to lose.

Bernie Sanders is drawing the crowds, but she nevertheless has a leg up on him and everyone else in the contest to become the Democratic nominee; and, after that, with the Republicans running one or another buffoon, it will be clear sailing ahead.

But regardless how sure the outcome is, and regardless of the fact that feelings seem to matter more than judgments to which reasons can be attached, it is worthwhile exploring the reasons behind anti-Hillary sentiments.

They surely do play some role, even if only beneath the surface; and they are, in any case, instructive to reflect upon in their own right. The reasons are different across the spectrum. But they all point to the same conclusion.

There are some who think that Hillary inspires enmity because she is a woman, and running for President is an uppity thing for a woman to do. There is surely something to this. America has been “exceptional” – even in comparison to countries where patriarchal attitudes are far more salient – in keeping the highest office in the land under exclusively male control.

It is far from clear, though, how deliberate this has been. The fault almost certainly lies more with the filtering mechanisms inherent in the exceptionally undemocratic electoral institutions that shape our so-called democracy at the national level than with any socially constructed infrangible “glass ceiling.”

At the two poles of the spectrum and at key point in the center, the fact that Hillary is a Clinton is more important than that she is a woman.

Indeed, in many peoples' minds, she and her husband are, for all practical purpose, one and the same.

There are liberals, well represented in the media, for whom this is a plus. But for almost everyone else, it is at least a somewhat negative factor that becomes effectively dispositive at the two poles of the continuum and at point in between.

Linking Hillary and Bill together might seem unfair. After all, they are distinct individuals, held together by a shared (and troubled) marital and political history — not integral parts of a supra-individual, indivisible entity with a common soul.

However, from a political (not metaphysical or psychological) point of view, the Clinton spousal connection does indeed run deep enough to justify thinking of the two of them as if they are essentially the same.

Of the two bodies that share the Clinton soul, Hillary's is plainly the more inept.

Early on in her tenure as First Lady, she took the lead on health care reform. Characteristically, she bollixed that effort up badly enough to set the cause back a generation.

She couldn't even get what Obama got two decades later: insurance reforms that extend coverage somewhat, but that also secure the interests of Big Pharma, private insurance companies, and health care profiteers.

After failing at that, Hillary involved herself mainly in women's and children's' issues. Her publicists are now playing her commitment to women and children up for all it is worth.

Needless to say, nothing much came of her efforts; how could it? A First Lady is an unelected spouse, not a public official. Except when her husband effectively deputizes her to act in his behalf, what she does can only be symbolic. After her failure with health care reform, supposedly Bill Clinton's signature program, the deputizations were slow in coming.

Nevertheless, we are told, she remained a power behind the throne; almost a co-President. No doubt, this too is an exaggeration.

What is beyond dispute, however, is that it would take a keen eye to discern policy disagreements between Hillary and Bill. Even now, fifteen years after the end of the Clinton era, no examples have come to light.

Back in the eighties, from their perch in Arkansas where Bill was Governor, the Clintons were actively involved in “third way” efforts to refashion the Democratic Party. Hillary is said to have played a role in that as well; she probably did.

Behind the scenes politicking doesn't earn brownie points on a résumé, so we may never know for sure just how important her role was. But what else would explain why she was considered an administration heavyweight from the moment the Clintons moved into the White House?

As First Lady, Hillary performed the required duties. But despite her much publicized efforts to channel Eleanor Roosevelt, she was no more like her than Mamie Eisenhower or Nancy Reagan were.

To this day, it is not clear how much of the gravitas surrounding Hillary, especially at first, was anything more than a public relations triumph, unconnected to demonstrable accomplishments.

What is clear, though, is that parachuting Hillary into a Senate race in New York, a state to which she had no prior connection, on the basis of her political apprenticeship as First Lady, was, to put it mildly, a stretch.

No matter. She won the election – this was bound to happen, once she became the anointed nominee. A predictably lackluster Senate career ensued.

Memories of Bill were still too vivid in 2004 for her to vie for the Democratic nomination then. But 2008 was to be Hillary's year. It didn't quite work out that way.

Barack Obama's time in the Senate was even shorter than Hillary's, and his record there was also undistinguished. But he was a more charismatic figure and a better campaigner. His campaign put the kibosh on hers.

This was probably a good thing. For all Obama's shortcomings as a leader, he is plainly the more capable of the two.

Hillary fought the primary battles to the end, even though it had become clear early on that she was bound to lose. Nevertheless, for reasons that defy understanding, Obama made her his Secretary of State.

She started off doing a lackluster job at that post too. It went downhill from there.

It is better now that Hillary is gone, but foreign policy is not, and never has been, the Obama administration's strong suit.

This isn't all Obama's fault; George Bush and Dick Cheney broke the Middle East and passed it on to him.

Nevertheless, as Brother Jeb can't point out often enough, it was on Obama's watch that the terrible mess there today came about – in Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and indeed throughout the entire region.

It is not clear how to apportion blame, but there is no doubt that at least some of it, probably quite a lot, attaches to the clueless machinations of the jefa suprema at the Department of State between 2009 and 2013.

In addition to the “humanitarian” interventions – the one in Libya being the most disastrous – and the incoherent meddling in the Arab Spring, the American foreign policy establishment, with Hillary in the lead, made one colossal mess. The consequences are still unfolding – and becoming worse all the time.

But for the greater wisdom and competence of their Russian counterparts, they would have done even more harm in reviving Cold War tensions too.

Luckily for Hillary, the full extent of the damage America's mindless policies did, in Syria especially, did not become apparent until she left the State Department — to move on to serious "fund raising." Clintons know how to get top dollar for the political clout they wield.

Liberal pundits look at Hillary's years as First Lady, Senator, and Secretary of State and see a past that qualifies her many times over for the office she seeks.

On the left and the right and in key sectors of the center, people look at the same résumé and see disaster ahead. With good reason!

Count on it: Obama will start to look good just as soon as the weight of another Clinton presidency begins to register. Hillary Clinton is Obama's best hope for leaving a positive legacy.

The reason is not just Hillary's incompetence. Her abilities, or lack of them, account, at most, for only a small part of the varieties of anti-Clinton feeling at the two ends of the political spectrum and in the middle.

Right and Center

On the right, two factors are at work – one is estimable, the other not so much.

It is hard to situate the Tea Party demographic, or, insofar as there is a difference, people who might actually vote for Donald Trump, along a left-right spectrum. But the politicians they elect to represent them do cluster solidly around the right-most pole.

For the present purpose, it is therefore fair to place people who vote for Tea Party types — and people who would vote for them if they voted at all — on the right as well, even if their views are, for the most part, more reflexive than considered.

These voters and non-voters cut rightwing Republican politicians a lot of slack. But for politicians anywhere else on the spectrum, they do have a knack for sniffing out phonies.

And since there are few politicians phonier than the Clintons, this is as good a reason as any to get behind "the vast rightwing conspiracy" that Hillary famously complained of.

As the quip goes, the Clintons give opportunism a bad name. Acting on principle goes against their nature; when they lie and prevaricate, they are true to form.

From the moment the Clintons became political figures on the national scene, they have therefore rubbed people in the Tea Party demographic the wrong way. Liberals are too dense to see it

The other reason, the less estimable one, why the Clintons draw the enmity of the right is that they came to be identified with the side in the culture wars of the eighties and early nineties that genuine conservatives, along with less reputable rightwingers, vehemently opposed.

This was partly their own fault: they helped refashion the fault lines of American politics in a way that made political identities depend less on class interests and more on views about such matters as abortion and prayer in schools.

On economic policy issues and other matters of fundamental political concern, and on foreign and military policy too, Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, have long been of one mind.

Republicans were, and still are, generally more servile to corporate interests than Democrats, but not in a way or to a degree that would stir political passions. To the very considerable extent that the Clintons got their way, the traditional Sturm und Drang of political contestation took an almost exclusively cultural turn.

In part thanks to them, all that was left of liberalism was social liberalism; and even its focus narrowed – to sexual politics and related issues.

In reality, the Clintons did little, if anything, actually to advance gender or sexual equality – quite the contrary – but they were able to make themselves seem actively involved on the side of the angels.

It was much the same with race. No President did more to dismantle welfare state institutions and union protections essential for maintaining the wellbeing and improving the conditions of the vast majority of African Americans and other “people of color.” And yet, to an alarming degree, to this day, many of them still give the Clintons a pass.

The absurdity peaked when Toni Morrison called Bill “our first black President.” It doesn’t get more ridiculous than that – though, compared to the real black President we have had since 2009, Morrison’s comment no longer seems quite so off-base.

There is an historical parallel for this.

African American attitudes towards the Clintons resemble Jewish attitudes towards FDR a half-century earlier. Roosevelt did almost nothing substantive to help European Jewry in the thirties and then after World War II began – or, for that matter, to diminish discrimination against Jews within the United States.

But, by having good personal and working relations with a few conspicuously prominent Jews, he did change the atmospherics – to such an extent that the man who refused to let all but a handful of Jewish refugees enter the United States, and who refused to bomb the train tracks leading into Auschwitz, is remembered fondly to this day.

Now that Black Lives Matter has brought institutional racism back into public awareness, it is becoming hard not to see how little the Clintons actually did to advance racial dignity and equality.

On the right, though, truth doesn’t matter; appearance is all.

Centrist anti-Hillary sentiment has more to do with the enervating effects of having Clintons around for so long, and the prospect of having four or eight more years of them at center stage.

How else to explain the sudden eruption of support for Joe Biden?

The man is a Clintonite at heart; one who is, all the evidence suggests, even more inept – and certainly more daft — than Hillary herself.

Before he became associated with Obama, rightwing Zionists loved him; but not only them. The man is drawn to right-wing émigré groups like a moth to light.

This became particularly evident in the late nineties, when the Clintons were superintending the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

Central to the process, as it unfolded, was the demonization of Serbs and the glorification of Croats and other ethnic groups traditionally hostile towards them. Before and during World War II, fascist political currents made significant inroads within some of these communities.

Their influence survived after the war ended, particularly in émigré circles, where, following Israel’s example and the lead of likeminded counterparts from Latin America, they courted American politicians with zeal. Biden was uncommonly eager to oblige.

But even granting that his views on foreign policy, such as they are, are no worse than the average Democrat’s, for Democrats to dump Hillary for Joe would be like dumping Hillary for Hillary, or rather for someone even worse but in the same way.

Moreover, for their trouble, they wouldn’t even get the benefit of breaking a glass ceiling.

Yet, for many, this seems like a reasonable, albeit desperate, move. Compared to four or eight more years of Hillary and Bill, it just might be.

Then there is Al Gore. There is even talk of resurrecting him.

Liberals still won’t admit it – they’d still rather blame Ralph Nader – but, in the heat of battle, it would be hard to

deny that Gore threw the election that set George W. Bush loose upon the world.

Gore ran a poor campaign in the year 2000. Before 9/11 and with the dot-com bubble still resonating, it took some effort on his part to lose.

And in every sense but the one that matters, he didn't lose. Gore won the popular vote. He lost the election because he lost in the Electoral College, but he shouldn't have. That took some effort on his part too.

It has been clear, almost from the moment that five Republican Supreme Court Justices handed the victory to the House of Bush, that Gore ought to have been awarded Florida's electoral votes. This would have put him over the top. But he and his minions were outfoxed by Bush family fixers.

There would have been no need for a recount in Florida, in any case, had he won in his own state, Tennessee, and had he permitted Bill Clinton to campaign for him – even if only in Arkansas, Clinton's home state.

But, for whatever reason, Gore preferred not to press his case vigorously enough to prevail.

However, this history is not the main reason why Democratic Party centrists would have to be desperate – and full of anti-Hillary fervor — before turning to Al Gore.

Gore is as much a bona fide neoliberal and de facto neocon as Hillary. But his later-day (post Vice Presidential) prominence as an environmentalist and, to a lesser extent, as an entrepreneur in soft-liberal broadcasting ventures, would displease the Democratic Party's paymasters almost as much as the thought that Bernie Sanders might become the Party's nominee.

In addition, Gore has been feuding more or less openly with the Clintons since he ran for President in 2000, and so, a Gore attempt at winning the nomination would be perceived as unfriendly within Democratic Party ranks.

Were the Democrats to turn to Gore again, it would be an act of sheer anti-Hillary desperation.

This is why they will leave Al Gore on the back burner unless and until both Hillary and Biden crap out. In all likelihood, once the idea is floated, it will soon be forgotten.

Too bad: a Gore versus Clinton contest would make for a more interesting spectacle than anything involving Joe Biden. In our electoral circuses, spectacle is all there is to look forward to.

Most likely, therefore, with no more suitable candidates than Biden or Gore in the wings, expect anti-Hillary centrists to bite the bullet and grudgingly accept the inevitable.

At appropriate moments, they will probably even pretend to enthuse – fearing that voters' reluctance to elect whichever walking joke the Republicans field will not be enough to keep them in power.

They should be up to the task. If Democrats are good at anything, it is deluding themselves about lesser evils.

The View from the Left

From the time of the French Revolution, when the more radical delegates to the National Assembly seated themselves to the left of the presiding officer, Left has designated a relatively stable, though evolving and multi-faceted, political orientation. Right took on a corresponding, contrary meaning.

What those words signify is impossible to explain precisely, though the difference is generally understood because an idealized or notional left/right spectrum has been recognized, more or less explicitly, by nearly everyone for more than two hundred years.

The Left is dedicated to continuing the French Revolutionaries' commitment to "liberty, equality, and fraternity (community)." Tradition, authority and order are core values for the Right. The Left is generally indifferent, and sometimes hostile, towards those commitments.

Socialists, anarchists and some liberals are on the Left; conservatives are usually, though perhaps not necessarily,

on the Right.

This is the Left I have in mind.

Left, right and center are also spatial metaphors, and therefore relational notions, defined by contrast to one another. This is why they have no fixed meaning; and why political parties and social movements that, no matter where they fit on an idealized left-right spectrum, have their own left, right and center wings.

Nowadays, there is little of the Left left in the notional sense of the term – especially, but by no means only, in the United States.

Democratic Party cheerleaders, like the ones on in the evenings on MSNBC, are on the left only in the relational sense. And while they don't especially enthuse over Hillary – not at this point, anyway – they are fine with her candidacy.

On the notional Left, however, the story is very different.

There the problem with the Clintons is not that they are on the wrong side of the old culture wars. If anything, they are on the right side, but not enough – and, like Barack Obama, only when the polls say it is safe.

That they are rank opportunists, and that they make even people who agree with them yearn for anything other than more of them – even a Biden or a Gore – is not the problem either; not the main problem, anyway.

The main problem with the Clintons is their Clintonism.

Because the Clintons are not exactly thinkers or, for that matter, innovators, adding an ism to their name is inapt. The term is unfortunate – in much the way that, say, "Thatcherism" or "Reaganism" is.

But, then, it is even more inapt to call, say, architectural styles "Victorian." Queen Victoria was no architect; she never designed anything of consequence. But she was on the throne at a time when architecture took certain turns that have come to be associated with her name.

At least the Clintons did something to implement Clintonism. So did Thatcher and Reagan with the isms associated with their names. Indeed, what the three of them did was of a piece.

Thatcher and Reagan superintended the neoliberal turn. They didn't invent privatization or deregulation, and they were hardly alone in wanting to break the back of their countries' labor movements or in dismantling their welfare states.

But the great transformation happened on their watch, and it is therefore customary, though unfortunate, to name what came out of it after them.

They, or rather the people around them, thought of it, and they believed in it. But they were not very good at putting it into practice because they could never bring the opposition along. Even in a democracy as pale as ours, this matters.

This is why, for Reaganite or Thatcherite politics to have its day, Left or, in the American case, left-leaning political parties have to cooperate; they have to coopt or neutralize obstacles in the way. This is the essence of Clintonism; it is Reaganism for Democrats. And it is particularly pernicious on this account.

All Democrats are now Clintonites; were they to never more affect our political life, this would be the Clintons' legacy.

But then why abhor Hillary more than any of the others? There really is only one good reason: because, in this case, the legacy is so egregious that guilt by association is, if not entirely reasonable, at least understandable and appropriate.

It is the same with Jeb Bush. In his own right, he is probably no more noxious than his rivals for the GOP nomination, and though he is a thoroughly risible figure – in the tradition of his family – he is also no more ridiculous

than the others.

But he is George W's brother, and George W was the worst President ever. George W. broke the world, the Middle East especially; and he trashed the Constitution. The consequences of his eight years in office are still happening; we may not yet have seen the worst of them.

This is why a vote for Jeb, is a vote for Bush in more than just the obvious sense. It is a vote for the torture and surveillance order established under his brother's aegis, and for the perpetual war regime he launched.

Similarly, whatever says to get elected, a vote for Clinton, is a vote for Clintonism – if only because she was married to the man who Clintonized the Democratic Party. It is worse than that, however: she helped him do it, and she is doing it still.

A vote for Clinton is a vote for austerity, for imperialism, and for the augmented perpetual war regime established under her tenure as Secretary of State.

In the United States today, smashing Clintonism is, or ought to be, the (notional) Left's highest priority.

Stopping Hillary in her tracks and making sure that, at long last, we finally do see the back of her and her better half is an indispensable step towards that end.
