

The Trump-Sanders Phenomena

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As outlandish as Donald Trump is as a presidential candidate, it's pretty obvious why he's topping the polls of Republican voters: he's tipping over the carts of "politics as usual" that Americans understandably hate. In a much more responsible way, Bernie Sanders is doing the same with Democratic voters though he's still trailing Hillary Clinton in most polls.

One of the strongest arguments for Trump and Sanders is that they have refused to prostitute themselves in the scramble for million-dollar donations, a core corruption of the U.S. political process. Trump, a real estate mogul and reality-TV star, boasts about how he rejects big-money donors because he can finance his own campaign.

Sanders relies heavily on small donations and turned down an offer to create a "super PAC" that could have raised millions of dollars from wealthy supporters. Sanders's campaign says its average donation is \$31.30 as Sanders has tapped broad support among progressives in raising \$15.2 million as of July, an impressive sum but still "far behind Mrs. Clinton's fund-raising juggernaut," the New York Times [reported](#).

Neither Trump nor Sanders has competed in what many political analysts consider the key initial test for any "serious" candidate - the "silent primary" of lining up super-rich Americans who pour millions of dollars into campaign war chests so candidates can hire high-priced consultants and finance negative TV ads to tear down opponents. That process has made candidates from both parties dependent on special interests.

Ironically, for a nation that denounces Iran, Cuba and other countries for having special panels of religious elders or party leaders who approve rosters of acceptable candidates, the United States now has a political system that requires most candidates to parade themselves before billionaires who then select the finalists much like the judges do at one of Trump's beauty pageants.

Trump is not wrong when he bluntly describes how this process works, noting that the wealthy donors are sure to show up after the election with their hands out for favors if their hand-picked candidate wins. The presidency and pretty much every elected office in the United States are up for sale.

Americans across the political spectrum are rightly disgusted by this corrupt system and thus Trump stands out as someone whose personal wealth and almost comedic self-confidence make him harder to buy than, say, Jeb Bush, Scott Walker or almost any of the other Republican candidates. For different reasons, democratic socialist Bernie Sanders does too.

Clinton's Style

Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton is part of a political dynasty that has made an art form out of vacuuming up money from Wall Street, Hollywood and everywhere in between as well as faraway lands. Bill and Hillary Clinton have sucked up million-dollar bundles of campaign cash, six-figure speaking fees from mega-corporations, and massive donations from foreign potentates to the Clinton Foundation.

With the Clintons, it seems like everything is for sale, leaving much of the public dubious about where their true allegiances lie. They appear to move through the political landscape triangulating as they go, calculating what is most advantageous to say at each moment and then immediately recalculating for the next moment.

As a U.S. Senator and as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton either showed extraordinarily bad judgment or simply substituted this family process of endless triangulation for what passes as judgment. For instance, she voted for the Iraq War in 2002 not apparently out of any firm conviction that it was the right thing to do for U.S. national security but rather what looked best then for her political career.

At nearly every juncture, Hillary Clinton has opted for what seemed like the safe play at the time. Indeed, it is hard to think of any case in which she showed anything approaching genuine political courage or statesmanlike wisdom. Here is just a short list of her misjudgments *after* the Iraq War:

-In summer 2006, as a New York senator, Clinton supported Israel's air war against southern Lebanon which killed more than 1,000 Lebanese. At a pro-Israel rally in New York on July 17, 2006, Clinton shared a stage with Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations Dan Gillerman, a renowned Muslim basher who proudly defended Israel's massive violence against targets in Lebanon.

"Let us finish the job," Gillerman told the crowd. "We will excise the cancer in Lebanon" and "cut off the fingers" of Hezbollah. Responding to international concerns that Israel was using "disproportionate" force in bombing Lebanon and killing hundreds of civilians, Gillerman said, "You're damn right we are." [NYT, July 18, 2006] Clinton did not protest Gillerman's remarks.

-In late 2006, Clinton fell for the false conventional wisdom that President George W. Bush's nomination of Robert Gates to be Secretary of Defense was an indication that Bush was preparing to wind down the Iraq War when it actually signaled the opposite, the so-called "surge." Later, to avoid further offending the Democratic base as she ran for president, she opposed the "surge," though she later acknowledged that she did so for political reasons, according to Gates's memoir *Duty*.

In the early months of the Obama administration, with Gates still Defense Secretary and Clinton the new Secretary of State, Gates reported what he regarded as a stunning admission by Clinton, writing:

"Hillary told the president that her opposition to the surge in Iraq had been political because she was facing him in the Iowa primary [in 2008]. She went on to say, 'The Iraq surge worked.'"

-In 2009, Clinton joined with Gates and General David Petraeus to pressure President Barack

Obama into a similar “surge” in Afghanistan which – like the earlier “surge” in Iraq – did little more than get another 1,000 U.S. soldiers killed along with many more Iraqis and Afghans while extending the bloody chaos in both countries.

–Also, in 2009, Clinton supported a right-wing coup in Honduras, overthrowing left-of-center President Manuel Zelaya.

–In 2011, Clinton helped spearhead the U.S.-backed “regime change” in Libya, which led to the torture/murder of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi as Clinton chuckled, “we came, we saw, he died.” Like the “regime change” in Iraq, the Libyan “regime change” left the once-prosperous nation in bloody anarchy with major gains by Islamic extremists, including the Islamic State.

–Also, in 2011, Clinton pressed for a similar “regime change” in Syria adopting the popular though false notion that a “moderate opposition” would neatly fill the void after the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad. The reality was that Al Qaeda and its spin-off, the Islamic State, stood to be the real beneficiaries of the U.S.-supported destabilization of Syria. These Islamic terrorist groups now have major footholds in all three Arab countries where Clinton supported “regime change” – Iraq, Syria and Libya.

Neocon Fellow-Traveler

Throughout her time as Senator and Secretary of State, Clinton supported the aggressive foreign policy prescriptions of the neoconservatives and their liberal-interventionist allies. In each of these cases, the neocons and liberal hawks were dominating Official Washington’s debate and it would have taken some political courage to stand in their way. Hillary Clinton never did.

The enduring mystery with Hillary Clinton is whether she is a true neocon or whether she simply judges that embracing neocon positions is the “safest” course for her career – that by parroting the neocon “group think” she can win praise from the national-security elite and that big donors who favor a hard-line strategy for the Middle East will reward her with campaign contributions.

Whatever the case, Clinton has carefully curried favor with key neocons, including consulting with Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the neocon Project for the New American Century, and promoting his wife, Victoria Nuland, making her the State Department spokesperson and putting her on track to become Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs. In that post, Nuland orchestrated “regime change” in Ukraine, which like other neocon targets has descended into bloody chaos, but this adventure also has precipitated a dangerous showdown with nuclear-armed Russia.

Kagan has become a big Clinton booster. According to a New York Times [article](#) on June 16, 2014, Kagan said his neocon views – which he has redubbed “liberal interventionist” – will have a strong standing in a possible Hillary Clinton administration. The Times reported that Clinton “remains the vessel into which many interventionists are pouring their hopes.”

Kagan was quoted as saying:

“I feel comfortable with her on foreign policy. ... If she pursues a policy which we think she will pursue ... it’s something that might have been called neocon,

but clearly her supporters are not going to call it that; they are going to call it something else.” [For more, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[Is Hillary Clinton a Neocon-Lite?](#)”]

Clinton has won praise from another leading neocon, Max Boot, who wrote in [a review](#) of Gates’s book that

“it is clear that in [Obama] administration councils she was a principled voice for a strong stand on controversial issues, whether supporting the Afghan surge or the intervention in Libya.”

In other words, Democrats will have to decide if they wish to nominate a “closet neocon” to be the next president, someone who will triangulate her way into appointing the likes of Kagan and/or Nuland as key advisers or possibly to senior State Department posts. So far the Democratic campaign has focused overwhelmingly on domestic issues, giving Clinton and even Sanders a pass on their foreign policy positions.

Meanwhile, on the Republican side, the more traditional candidates all have embraced hawkish positions on international issues with the limited exception of Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, who has shown less enthusiasm for foreign interventions while still trying to avoid the “isolationist” label that was stuck on his father, Rep. Ron Paul of Texas.

But the rest of the traditional field has criticized President Obama for alleged weakness and some have attacked Trump for supposedly lacking foreign policy expertise. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, who has been one of the most consistent neocons, lectured Trump about his supposed ignorance of the Middle East, a region that Graham and his fellow travelers have thoroughly messed up.

Given all that, is it so surprising that many conservative Republicans – as disgusted with Official Washington as many progressives are – would prefer a renegade like Trump to the bland cast of grubbing politicians who are regarded by the mainstream press as the “serious candidates”? The bigger question is whether progressive Democrats are ready to make a similar break from the pack and make Sanders that sort of alternative, too.

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