

After Impeachment—What Next for U.S. Politics?

The Democrats Vs. Trump

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As I write this, the U.S. House of Representatives has passed articles of impeachment against President Donald J. Trump—by its Democratic Party majority. Unless an asteroid hits the earth, Trump will be acquitted, by the Senate’s Republican majority. This is in spite of the way in which the personally vile Trump has repeatedly abused his power, broken laws, violated the Constitution, truckled to foreign governments for his own interests, and acted in a generally incompetent manner against both human decency and the interests of the U.S. imperial state. His actions include the caging of children at the U.S./Mexican border, the betrayal of the Kurds, a war on the environment, making money off the presidency, and, most recently, almost causing war with Iran without consulting Congress. These make the issues listed in the impeachment articles (which are real and justified) seem minor, like the indictment of Al Capone for tax evasion. After the Senate acquittal, both parties will gear up for the 2020 national elections, less than a year away.

At the same time, Democrats and Republicans have worked to produce several “bipartisan” bills of significance. This includes a lightly updated North American trade bill, opposed by the Autoworkers and Machinists unions and which does nothing against global warming. The two parties passed a new military policy bill. At \$738 billion it is one of most expensive military plans in U.S. history. It authorized a new branch of the military, a “Space Force.” It does nothing to prevent Trump from again raiding military funds to pay for his idiotic, nativist, border “wall.” It continues military support of the U.S. for Saudi Arabia’s aggression against Yemen. The bill was passed over the objections of a handful of progressive Democrats and “libertarian” Republicans.

The Democrats claimed that this was the best military bill they could get. They pointed to its expansion of family leave for government employees. But really the Democrats agree with the Republicans on the key issues: the need for massive U.S. military power, bigger than the next 9 military forces combined; the need for dozens of military bases around the globe; for being able to wage several wars at once; for enough nuclear bombs to be able to exterminate humanity several times over. These goals have been carried out through a series of Democratic presidents and Democratic-dominated Congresses, well before Trump. Consider President Obama, who passed a hugely expanded nuclear missile program, stepped-up the war in Afghanistan, and used drones to kill people around the world in countries with which the U.S. was not at war.

These military and trade laws show the real nature of the political system we live under. Democrats and Republicans, while squabbling over the spoils, are in fundamental (“bipartisan”) agreement over maintaining U.S. military might and domination of world trade.

The Impeachment

As soon as he was elected in 2016, there were Democrats who called for Trump’s impeachment; these calls increased after the 2018 mid-term elections which returned the House to Democratic control. But the established leadership of the Democrats, especially Nancy Pelosi (House Speaker and Democratic leader), opposed impeachment. They felt that it was too dangerous for them politically, that it would turn off moderate “independents,” and that it might rouse up the Republican base. A number of Democrats had been elected in fairly conservative districts; better not risk their re-elections. There was only a year or so until the next election; it would be wiser to focus on health care, raising wages, drug policies, and other bread-and-butter issues. So they reasoned.

These calculations may have been right, from the viewpoint of conventional politics. We will see how impeachment actually impacts on the next election. But the Democratic leaders probably had no choice, once Trump's shenanigans with the Ukrainians came to light. Lacking any sense of right or wrong, and being fairly stupid, the freakish Trump simply could not hold himself back from outrageous and illegal behavior. They had to respond.

The Republicans' defense of Trump has been rather limited. *He didn't do it, and anyway you can't prove he did it, and even if he did do it, it wasn't so bad as to be worth impeachment and removal.* Trump himself has rejected the last "defense"—he wants complete exoneration. The Republicans have tried to confuse the issue every way possible, by denouncing the Democrats' motives (they don't like the president!), condemning the process, claiming that Trump was really trying to deal with Ukrainian corruption (as if Trump was ever concerned about corruption besides what he could get away with!). They even puffed up the nutty conspiracy theory that the Ukrainians, rather than the Russians, intervened in the 2016 U.S. elections. (Why the Ukrainians? Why not the Zambians or Uruguayans?)

The Trumpites have a point about the Bidens. When Joe Biden was Vice President and frequently dealing with Ukraine for President Obama, his son Hunter Biden got a high-paying job on the board of a Ukrainian oil company. His only qualification seems to have been his last name. Whether there was any actual U.S. government help for his company, it was not very ethical. But for Trump, with his family making business deals all over the place while he is president, to cry "corruption" is laughable.

The Constitution

Everyone swears deep love for the U.S. Constitution. Indeed the Constitution is a founding myth of the system. It was drawn up by a coalition mostly of big landowners, merchants, and slave-owners. They did not want another king nor a revolutionary dictator (this was before the French Revolution but not that long since the English Revolution had resulted in the dictatorship of Cromwell). But they also did not want a "democracy," which most of them regarded as mob rule. ("Your people, sir, are a great beast!" said Hamilton.) Too much power to the majority might result in breaking up big landed estates or cheap money policies which would benefit poor debtors. So they devised this system with its two houses (the Senate with six year terms), different election years for different positions, two Senators from each state regardless of population size, Supreme Court judges for life, limited controls on a president (an elected monarch), the Electoral College, and so on. The undemocratic aspects of the Constitution were so obvious, that the Jeffersonian left would only support it if they got a promise to add a Bill of Rights immediately after its passage.

The founders did not foresee the evolution of the parliamentary system, where an unpopular leader can be challenged through a vote of confidence. So they put in the impeachment process as an emergency control on a corrupt or dangerous president. They also did not foresee the two-party system, which has made impeachment such a difficult matter.

As history ground on, the Constitution got better in some ways, such as abolishing slavery, providing the right of women to vote, and being "interpreted" as including a "right to privacy" which protected women's reproductive rights and LGBT people. But the current system remains essentially undemocratic, with its gerrymandered election districts, the domination of big money

in elections, the massive lobbying, the biased media (now with overtly reactionary television and radio channels and social media), and so on. While not a fascist or Stalinist dictatorship, neither is this truly a democracy. That is why I am not excited by fervent statements of loyalty to the Constitution raised by hypocritical politicians of whatever stripe.

The Democrats are not so much interested in reviving the Constitution as in restoring business-as-usual for U.S. capitalism. They want the national state to be run rationally and smoothly. They want at least the appearance of concern over global warming, without actually ending fossil fuel use. They want to seem to care about benefits for the working class. They want other nations' governments to trust the U.S. again, to rely on the U.S. military and diplomatic policies. They want reasonable government efforts to limit economic downturns, to the extent this is possible. They want immigration reforms to provide cheap labor for big business. They want to keep a lid on overt fascist and racist movements. They want trade deals to keep wages down and promote profits. Sections of the capitalist class which have traditionally supported the Republicans also want these things.

During the impeachment hearings in the House, the Democrats made a point of puffing up the security forces of the CIA and FBI, foreign affairs officials, military officers, bureaucrats, and others whom Trump has denigrated as the "deep state." Instead, they praised the professionalism, honesty, patriotism, and honor of these people. Whatever their personal virtues (being more honest than Trump is a low bar), these people are part of the repressive and imperial apparatus of the state—what the left has long called the "permanent government." They have overthrown foreign governments and supported terrorism around the globe.

Just recently a scandal broke out. It was shown that the FBI had cut corners and even lied to judges (!) in applying for warrants to investigate people. Since the victims were on the right (as opposed to leftists or poor people of color), this was shocking, shocking! Also a movie is showing about the CIA's torture of prisoners and destruction of evidence afterwards (The Report, with Adam Driver). Such matters were not raised during the hearings.

The Underlying Problem

The Republicans and Democrats are thrashing about because they are dealing with an unprecedented situation. Within the U.S. and on a world scale, the capitalist economy is weak. After the shock of the Great Recession, the recovery has been weak, uneven, and brittle. Those at the top have gained much, while the rest of the population has had stagnant wages, insecure jobs, and poverty-stricken regions, with vastly increased inequality. Mainstream economists are greatly worried that when the inevitable downturn comes, the system will not have the resources to deal with it. Meanwhile global warming is advancing at an alarming rate, with nothing being done to moderate it, let alone reverse it (even as Australia burns). Wars continue to rage around the world, always with the background threat of nuclear extermination. The rulers of the U.S. are frantic about the decline of U.S. power and wealth in the world, which has led to the increased influence of China. Since at least Obama, the U.S. state had determined to "pivot" toward China (new military bases in Australia, etc.) but it has remained stuck in the secondary theater of the Middle East. Having a totally incompetent national administration has only exacerbated matters.

One result of these developments has been a massive increase in popular dissatisfaction. Given the U.S.'s politics and culture, much of this has been channeled into the right. Despite all his fail-

ures, Trump has the staunch support of about 40 % of the voting population. This Trumpian “base” dominates the Republican party. Once a broad right party, it has become utterly reactionary. A big minority of this minority is neo-fascist (for using guns to overturn the more-or-less democratic mechanisms of the state) while a small but vocal minority is overtly fascist (Nazi or Klan). This right-wing growth is partly due to racism, nativism, and misogyny. White evangelicals are at the core of Trump’s base, motivated by superstition and sexual hysteria (fear of homosexuality, women who are sexually free, and Mexican “rapists”). But for many people, attraction to Trump is also due to economic decline, poor jobs, and real suffering, all associated (correctly) with the status quo of established Democrats and Republicans.

On the other hand, there has been an increase on the left of liberalism and even “socialism.” About 40 % of the population has a favorable view of “socialism” and so does an even higher percentage of younger people. What “socialism” is, or what they mean by it, is quite unclear of course, but it is no longer an evil word to the extent it once was. Bernie Sanders has an apparent possibility of winning the Democratic nomination, while calling himself a “democratic socialist” and calling for a “political revolution.” The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) has grown to about 60 thousand members. Despite having an anarchist caucus, the DSA is strongly electoralist and deep into the Democratic Party. In no way is it as militant on the left as the Republican base is on the right. Meanwhile, the part of the historic left with the potentially greatest power, the unions, is mostly quiescent. Their leaders are totally tied to the Democratic Party, even as union numbers decline. There have been some important strikes, but no movement for a major working class struggle against capitalist attacks. But this may yet change as conditions worsen.

As the situation decays, the middle falls away. Even so, there are cries to return even more to the center—a center which is further to the right than it was in the past. As I write, the Democrats are torn between those who want to swing to the “left” and those who insist on sticking to the “middle”. How much should they promise the voters? How much should they worry about turning off their big donors? How much should they worry about the “moderate” voters (who have been deliberately miseducated by these same big capitalists)? How much should they rely on exciting their own base by promising them all sorts of new approaches? But will they risk disappointing their excited base when they are unable to carry out their promises once elected? (The DSAers are excited about “socialist” candidates but seem to have no knowledge of the history of socialist politicians elected to manage capitalist states. They are apparently ignorant of recent examples, such as Lula in Brazil, Syriza in Greece, the ANC in South Africa, Morales in Bolivia, Allende in Chile, the Labour Party in Britain, etc., etc., and so on. Socialist electoralism has never ended well.)

Personally, I regard Trump’s impeachment as probably a Good Thing But I doubt that even a Senatorial removal of Trump (not going to happen) would be a Very Good Thing. No, not even the defeat of Trump in the 2020 national election (a probable but not certain outcome). It would be good to see him gone, this disgusting human being and malign influence. But the fundamental problems would remain: the decline of U.S. and world capitalism, the growth of inequality, the looming environmental crisis, the continuing wars, the dangerous right wing movement (including the growth of outright fascism), and the incapacity of the rulers—conservative and liberal—to know how to handle any of this.

As the left wing grows, in rebellion against both the conservatives and the Democratic liberals, we have to build a revolutionary, anti-imperialist, libertarian socialist, direct action, and anti-electoralist wing of the movement. If at all possible.

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