

Trump's Missed Debate Opportunities

Donald Trump missed chances in the first debate, including failure to exploit a U.S. intelligence report that cited U.S. support for an Islamic State forerunner, part of Hillary Clinton's scheme for Syrian "regime change," notes Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

Hillary Clinton stood calmly at her podium smirking during most of the first U.S. presidential [debate](#) as she provoked emotional reactions from Donald Trump in what appeared to be a strategy to rattle him and keep him on the defensive most of the night.

Clinton needled Trump on his plan to fight the Islamic State, on him not paying his taxes, on his treatment of women, on his denial of climate change, on his denigration of Muslims and his position on nuclear weapons – all legitimate criticisms but delivered with an intent to do personal harm. As Trump grew angrier and angrier, Clinton appeared to be laughing at him. At one point, she told him he was saying "crazy things" and living "in his own reality."

Clinton got under Trump's skin by telling him he started life with a big inheritance, while she was the daughter of a humble small businessman; that he had four (or more) times filed for bankruptcy, did not pay his workers, called women "pigs," and had been sued by the government 40 years ago for racial discrimination in a housing development he owned (and which he settled out of court).

Trump seemed uncharacteristically nervous and restrained as the first debate of three got underway, displaying a grudging respect for Clinton by calling her "Secretary," while labeling her "Crooked Hillary" on Twitter. But a series of humiliating jabs by Clinton worked to get Trump's back up leading to several gaffes, including an apparent admission that he has paid no federal taxes.

After noting that a couple of tax returns which had been released in connection with a casino application showed no federal taxes and suggesting that Trump would not release his tax returns because he may be hiding this reality for other years, Trump lost his cool and interjected that it "makes me smart" not to pay.

Ruthless

It was a calculating strategy on her part, cooked up by her team of ruthless campaign operatives and her own experience of 38 debates in her political

career. This was Trump's first one-on-one debate. And it showed.

She took a week off to prepare, while Trump did not hold one mock session. She depended on a team of highly experienced opposition researchers who have dug up every scrap of dirt they could find on Trump.

At one point when Clinton accused him of calling a contestant at one of his beauty pageant "Miss Piggy," Trump feverishly responded "Where did you find this? Where did you find this?"

"He loves beauty contests, supporting them and hanging around them," Clinton said, slowly inserting the needle and twisting it slightly. "Then he called her 'Miss Housekeeping,' because she was Latina. Donald, she has a name."

"Where did you find this? Where did you find this?" Trump asked.

"Her name is Alicia Machado," Clinton calmly said.

"Where did you find this?" he repeated.

"And she has become a U.S. citizen, and you can bet..."

"Oh, really?" Trump interrupted.

"... she's going to vote this November," said Clinton.

That he wouldn't know Clinton's "oppo" researchers would come up with something like this, and then would blurt out his astonishment that they did from the podium is itself astonishing.

It showed how little he understood this dirty game of modern politics and how poorly prepared he was. His opposition research seemed to be based solely on the considerable Clinton negatives already in the public domain. He hit her hard on the emails, but she swatted it away, and Trump backed off.

Trump seemed to think he could wing it. But he ran into a political juggernaut, with master dirty tricksters like former rightwing operative David Brock conjuring up ways to rattle Trump, exposing his temper and his weak command of the facts. Meanwhile, a studied and scripted Clinton merely laughed at him, giving him the rope to hang himself.

Russia Did It!

Trump did score some points, though they have been largely ignored in a corporate media analysis that scored a decisive knockout for Clinton. In one exchange, she clearly said that Russia had hacked the Democratic National Committee and Trump called her on it.

CLINTON: "There's no doubt now that Russia has used cyber attacks against all kinds of organizations in our country, and I am deeply concerned about this. I know Donald's very praiseworthy of Vladimir Putin, but Putin is playing a really ... tough, long game here. And one of the things he's done is to let loose cyber attackers to hack into government files, to hack into personal files, hack into the Democratic National Committee."

TRUMP: "I don't think anybody knows it was Russia that broke into the DNC. She's saying Russia, Russia, Russia, but I don't – maybe it was. I mean, it could be Russia, but it could also be China. It could also be lots of other people. It also could be somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds, OK?"

TRUMP: "You don't know who broke in to DNC. But what did we learn with the DNC? We learned that Bernie Sanders was taken advantage of by your people, by Debbie Wasserman Schultz. Look what happened to her. But Bernie Sanders was taken advantage of. That's what we learned."

Trump's rhetoric on Russia (and with no political record, rhetoric is all we have) is clearly saner than Clinton's, who has an alarming record. It is simple to understand why Russia would favor Trump. He is not threatening Russia while she is. And she's left a trail of destruction behind her in Libya, Syria and Honduras making it more than mere words.

No one has come up with any evidence to back up the Clinton campaign's charge of a Trump conflict of interest because he either owes money or has business in Russia. Frankly, I hope he does have businesses there. It would make him even less likely to stir up a crisis with Moscow if he should win.

Nor has anyone come up with any evidence to prove Russia was behind the DNC hack. After the debate CNN either deviously or incompetently did a "fact-check" and said Trump was wrong about "the question that was posed, 'Who is the leading suspect in the DNC hack?'"

But Clinton didn't talk about the "leading suspect." She flat out said Russia did it.

Her continued hammering on these supposed business interests and that Russia did the hacking is suspicious. Linking Trump to Russia has done little to hurt him in the polls. In fact, he rose to a virtual tie in the weeks since the hack. So why does she keep at it? There could be something else at play, an admittedly sinister scenario, but entirely possible in the Clinton camp. (Perhaps, her "oppo" team is planning to drop another shoe regarding Trump's relationship with Russia.)

If she should lose a close election to Trump I would not be surprised if she

contested the outcome charging that Russia had hacked the electoral databases and changed the result. If she could challenge enough electors to bring him below 270 Electoral College votes needed to win, the result could be thrown to the House of Representatives (as it has three times in history) where a Republican majority, many who hate Trump, just may side with her.

With the way the American public has been relentlessly conditioned to fear and despise Russia, evidence of Moscow's alleged tampering may not be needed. With the corporate media playing along, evidence wasn't necessary for the tall tale of Russia's "invasion" of Ukraine, the dubious claim that Russia was responsible for shooting down Malaysia Airline Flight 17 in 2014, or Russia's supposed attack on a humanitarian convoy in Syria last week.

No Mention of Syria

Curiously, there was absolutely no discussion of Syria in the debate, beyond an incidental mention by Clinton. The focus was on the Islamic State's threat inside the U.S. and what to do about it.

Trump accused Clinton, as secretary of state, of creating a vacuum by pulling U.S. troops out of Iraq, allowing ISIS to be established. Here Trump insisted again that he never backed the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which he correctly said caused immense instability creating the conditions for ISIS.

But Trump missed a tremendous opportunity to hit Clinton for being secretary of state when a precursor of the Islamic State was directly aided by the administration she served in when the U.S. and its Mideast allies were seeking "regime change" in Damascus and tolerating jihadists who were spearheading the effort.

And this is the tragedy of Trump. He's wrong on so many things: torture, climate change, tax breaks for the rich, increased military spending, law and order, stop and frisk, and guns. So, when he's right, such as wanting good relations with Russia to avoid catastrophe, he doesn't adequately explain his position, while being subject to a massive smear campaign.

Only on trade and rebuilding the country's infrastructure has he been right for the good of American workers, and has also amply laid out this position (spending more time on that in the debate than anything else.)

Last month, Trump caused a firestorm when he said that Obama and Clinton had "created" ISIS. He later said Obama "founded" ISIS. While that is an exaggeration, there exists a document proving the Obama administration's complicity in the rise of this group, a document Trump must be aware of, but has never made use of. The debate would have been the perfect time.

The declassified Defense Intelligence Agency [document](#) of August 2012 said the U.S., some European countries, Turkey and the Gulf Arab states were facilitating the establishment of a Salafist principality in the east of Syria to put pressure on Damascus. The document warns that likeminded jihadists on the Iraq side of the border could join with them to create an “Islamic State.” The document actually uses that name a full two years before the Islamic State was declared.

Trump must know about it because Ret. General Mike Flynn, the DIA director at the time, [told Al Jazeera](#) that the document shows the administration was not turning a blind eye to this but that it was a “willful decision” by Washington. Mike Flynn is a Trump foreign policy adviser, so it’s inconceivable that Flynn did not tell Trump about the document.

And yet Trump inexplicably has never mentioned it, even when he was under heavy fire from establishment Washington and the corporate media for his remark.

Instead of bringing it up at the debate, he merely attacked Clinton for revealing her plan to fight ISIS on her website. “I don’t think General Douglas MacArthur would like that too much,” Trump said, referring to the commanding U.S. general in the Pacific during World War II, a head-scratching reference for the vast majority of Americans born in the post-war era.

“Well, at least I have a plan to fight ISIS,” Clinton retorted.

“No, no, you’re telling the enemy everything you want to do,” Trump shot back.

Instead of mentioning the DIA document he repeated his numbskull idea that ISIS would not exist if his idea of “taking” Iraq’s oil had been followed. ‘Had we taken the oil – and we should have taken the oil – ISIS would not have been able to form either, because the oil was their primary source of income,” he said. “And now they have the oil all over the place, including the oil – a lot of the oil in Libya, which was another one of her disasters.”

Clinton cut his knees out from under him again, saying Trump “actually advocated for the actions we took in Libya and urged that Gaddafi be taken out, after actually doing some business with him one time.”

It looks like it may be a very long six weeks until Election Day for Donald Trump. And if avoiding a confrontation with Russia is the single most important issue of the day, more urgent even than climate change, the alternative, a Clinton back in the White House, could be a very chilling four years for the rest of us.

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Clinton's Faulty New Scheme to 'Fight' ISIS

Exclusive: Even as Hillary Clinton pushes a new scheme for defeating ISIS, the reality is that contradictory U.S. policies in the Mideast that she helped formulate are fueling the growth of jihadi extremism, writes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Hillary Clinton has unveiled a two-part plan to defeat the Islamic State, and just as critics might expect, it's a doozy. One part calls for an "intelligence surge" to combat the group both at home and abroad while the other urges that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Islamic State's self-styled caliph, simply be knocked off.

Both are indicative of why the disaster in the Middle East can only get worse. The problem with an "intelligence surge" is twofold: (1) it's not clear what it's supposed to do beyond undermining civil liberties in the name of anti-terrorism and (2) whatever information it turns up will only be as good as the people who use it. Stalin had excellent sources warning him in 1941 that a German attack was imminent. But since some said the attack would occur in April, he was able to ignore them once April came and went and stick with his original conclusion that Hitler would not attack at all.

Since the U.S. is unwilling to examine how its policies have contributed to the growth of the Islamic State, stepped-up intelligence will undoubtedly do the same, i.e. confirm all of Washington's preconceived notions and allow it to continue on the same disastrous course.

Moreover, considering that U.S. authorities received advanced warnings not only about Ahmad Khan Rahami, the 28-year-old Afghan-American charged with last week's bombings in New York and New Jersey, but also about Boston Marathon bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev, "underwear bomber" Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, and Orlando shooter Omar Mateen, it would seem that what's needed is not a super-sophisticated intelligence "surge" so much as old-fashioned police work like knocking on doors and following up leads.

Instead of “big data,” the FBI needs to do a better job with “little data” in the form of a concerned father phoning up the FBI to warn that his son has developed an unhealthy fascination with jihadi music, poetry, and videos.

As for part two of Clinton’s anti-Islamic State plan – knocking Al-Baghdadi off – it’s simply a medley of her greatest hits, i.e. the murder of Muammar Gaddafi (“We came, we saw, he died”) and the assassination of Osama bin Laden (“I was one of those who recommended the President launch what was a very risky raid”). Since Clinton seems to think her ratings go up every time she kills an Arab leader, she figures it can’t hurt to kill more.

But what she ignores is that doing so only makes matters worse. The record is clear. Seventeen days after killing Bin Laden in May 2011, Barack Obama bragged about the “huge blow” that Al Qaeda had just suffered, saying: “even before his death, Al Qaeda was losing its struggle for relevance, as the overwhelming majority of people saw that the slaughter of innocents did not answer their cries for a better life. By the time we found Bin Laden, Al Qaeda’s agenda had come to be seen by the vast majority of the region as a dead end, and the people of the Middle East and North Africa had taken their future into their own hands.”

Taking a Break

But as the world now knows, the mujahedeen were just taking a break. By August 2012, which is to say a scant fourteen months later, the Defense Intelligence Agency was reporting that Al Qaeda was among “the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria,” that the West, the Arab Gulf oil states and Turkey were backing such forces to the hilt, and, even more astonishingly, that the rebels were seeking to establish a “Salafist principality in eastern Syria ... and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want in order to isolate the Syrian regime.”

Al Qaeda was stronger than ever. The only thing killing Bin Laden accomplished was to remove a leader who was a bit out of touch and allow even more aggressive jihadis to take his place. Gaddafi was a bit different: rather than a holy warrior, he was an anti-mujahedeen who, in a February 2011 phone call, tried to warn Great Britain’s former Prime Minister Tony Blair that the pro-Al Qaeda forces seeking his ouster “want to control the Mediterranean and then they will attack Europe.”

Needless to say, he was ignored. The only thing killing him did, therefore, was to remove the last barrier to a Salafist offensive bought and paid for by Qatar, which the U.S. had recruited to join the anti-Gaddafi effort and which promptly paid Washington back by distributing some \$400 million to fundamentalist

forces. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Hillary Clinton's 'Entangled' Foreign Policy](#)."]]

By 2014, the former "Al Qaeda in Iraq" had spun off into the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL and Daesh) and was claiming large swaths of Iraq and Syria, even as Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Nusra Front, was taking over other areas of Syria and bringing U.S.-backed "moderate" [rebel groups under Al Qaeda's command structure](#).

Al Baghdadi is a bad guy whom no rational person would miss. But bumping him off will be just as ineffective as killing bin Laden. Indeed, we already have an idea of who his successor would be, and it's not pretty.

According to an article by Giorgio Cafiero in the well-informed Al-Monitor website, it's [Turki al-Binali](#), an influential 32-year-old cleric from the island kingdom of Bahrain who is seen as a rising force within ISIS and who may have authored the bizarre fatwa allowing ISIS soldiers to take captured Yazidi women as sex slaves.

If al-Binali takes over, Cafiero says that it "would mark a major transfer of authority from the old vanguard of global jihadists to a younger and more puritanical one." The changeover would have a particularly "toxic effect" on Bahrain and other Arab Gulf states where young people are "vulnerable to the dark trap of radicalization."

Instead of radiating outwards from the Persian Gulf in other words, al-Binali's accession could conceivably cause jihadism to reverse course so that it flows back in. The upshot could be an eruption of ISIS-style terrorism right under the nose of the U.S. Fifth Fleet anchored at a \$2-billion naval base on Bahrain's Manama Harbor.

U.S. policies make this more likely than not. Bahrain is a deeply polarized society, torn between [a 60-percent Shi'ite majority](#) that has suffered some [15,000 arrests](#) since the government called in Saudi troops in March 2011 to help crush Arab Spring protests and a Sunni minority that enjoys a virtual political monopoly under the al-Khalifa family dictatorship.

Making Matters Worse

What makes matters even worse is the monarchy's policy of importing Sunnis from places like Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Pakistan – an estimated 100,000 over the last decade – granting them citizenship, and then using them to staff its security forces and bolster the Sunni population in general.

Since the "New Bahrainis" are recruited for the express purpose of bashing

Shi'ites, the effect is to strengthen Sunni militancy and drive up tensions another notch. Since the island kingdom is dependent on U.S. military protection, it has tried to ingratiate itself with Washington by sending jet fighters to bomb ISIS positions in Syria.

But when Islamic State launched a blitzkrieg across eastern Iraq in mid-2014, top officials could barely contain their glee. Finally, they said, militant Sunnis were striking back at an Iraqi government in Baghdad that, with typical sectarian paranoia, they see as an arm of the international Shi'ite conspiracy no less than the Baathist regime in Damascus, Syria.

Even while denouncing ISIS as a "deviated cult," Foreign Minister Khalid al-Khalifa therefore tweeted his suspicion that America was using the group as an excuse to attack Sunnis. Minister of Information Sameera Rajab chimed in that rather than an eruption of terrorism, the ISIS offensive represented a Sunni uprising against Shi'ite oppression.

"ISIS is a name," she said, "that is being thrown around in the media as a cover-up to silence the will of the Iraqi people for freedom and dignity." What the U.S. called terrorism was really "a revolution against the injustice and oppression that has reigned over Iraq for more than ten years."

Rhetoric like this is common in the Persian Gulf where Saudi Arabia's longtime foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, told Secretary of State John Kerry around the same time that "Daesh is our [Sunni] response to your support for the Da'wa," the pro-Shi'ite party that rose to power in Baghdad on the heels of 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. As much as Persian Gulf Sunnis dislike ISIS, they dislike Shi'ites even more and therefore can't help applauding when Islamic State deals the Shi'ites another blow.

The effect is to provide ISIS with an opening to exploit. Thanks to Bahrain's two-faced attitude, commenters on pro-ISIS websites brag that they enjoy more freedom there than anywhere else in the Gulf. The government allows Sunnis to fly ISIS flags from their cars and to wave Al Qaeda banners and pictures of Osama bin Laden at public protests, activities that would earn Shi'ites a stiff prison sentence if they tried anything similar.

Bahrain allowed Turki al-Binali to preach openly before leaving the kingdom in 2013 and permitted his writings to be sold in local bookstores. Yet when Nabeel Rajab, a leading civil-rights campaigner, tweeted, "Many #Bahrain men who joined #terrorism & #ISIS came from security institutions and those institutions were the first ideological incubator," Bahrain threw him in jail.

Rather than mollifying ISIS, the combination of war abroad and tolerance at home

drives the group to ever greater heights of fury. In September 2014, ISIS released a video showing four young men armed with assault rifles urging members of the Bahrain security forces to turn their guns on the ruling family and join Islamic State. In October 2015, a member of a Bahraini ISIS cell attacked a Shi'ite meeting place a few mile away in Saudi Arabia, killing five worshipers and injuring nine others. A few months later, ISIS issued four more videos urging supporters to kill Shi'ites in both countries.

ISIS despises the al-Khalifa family not only because the monarchy bombs their positions in Syria, but because it allows alcohol and other sinful Western practices and merely jails Shi'ite protesters rather than killing them outright. The more the regime tries to meet ISIS halfway, the angrier the group grows.

A Blind Eye

The U.S. contributes to the same vicious cycle by turning a blind eye to Bahraini sectarianism. Hillary Clinton ventured a few mild criticisms at the height of the crackdown. But she welcomed Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa to the State Department a few months later and then, in May 2012, announced that the administration would go ahead with a range of weapons sales.

The tone changed even more markedly in 2014 as Bahrain leaped upon the anti-ISIS bandwagon by bombing Syria. Now it was as if a crackdown had never occurred.

As Ala'a al-Shehabi, a Bahraini dissident, noted with regard to ISIS, "The monarchy's Western allies are ... more concerned about the monstrosity growing in the bosom of the Arab world rather than the environment that bred and nourished it."

Indeed, the West not only ignores such conditions, but contributes to them by backing Sunni sectarianism to the hilt. This is the case not just in Bahrain but in Syria where Riyadh is attempting to overthrow Bashar al-Assad not because he's a dictator – as if the Saudis could care about anything so paltry – because he is an Alawite, a variant of Shi'ism. It is also the case in Yemen where at least 10,000 people have died as a result of a Saudi campaign aimed at crushing an uprising by Houthi Shi'ites.

The more the U.S. assists in such crusades, the more bigotry will grow. The more it grows, the more arch-sectarian outfits like Al Qaeda and ISIS will prosper. Thanks to her close ties to the Sunni Gulf states – Persian Gulf interests have contributed as much as \$75 million to the Clinton family foundation – Clinton's new plan is not a strategy for defeating ISIS, but a recipe for helping it grow. ISIS should send her a letter of thanks.

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Clinton Toned Down Her Hawkishness

Exclusive: Hillary Clinton's strongest point in Monday's debate may have been what she didn't say, as she avoided a return to her hawkish rhetoric that has alienated many anti-war Democrats, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

By most traditional standards of marshaled facts and detailed proposals, Hillary Clinton "won" the first presidential debate over a sometimes rattled and erratic Donald Trump, but perhaps her best decision was what she chose not to say: she steered clear of her most hawkish rhetoric that has unnerved the anti-war Democratic base.

Except for some relatively restrained comments about Russia's alleged role in hacking the Democratic National Committee's emails, Clinton didn't do what she has in some other venues, which is to engage in extreme Russia-bashing and to call for escalated U.S. military involvement in Syria.

In her last debate with Sen. Bernie Sanders, Clinton also continued to use hyperbole to justify her key role in the U.S.-backed "regime change" in Libya in 2011. Last April, she called the ousted, tortured and murdered Muammar Gaddafi "genocidal" to justify his fate – when that was clearly untrue (as a recent British parliamentary [report](#) concluded).

Earlier this year before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, Clinton promised to take the U.S.-Israeli relationship to "the next level." That and her courtship of American neoconservatives have driven a number of anti-war Democrats away from her candidacy. Her bellicose rhetoric has sounded to some of these usually reliable Democratic voters like fingernails on a chalkboard. On Monday night, Clinton chose not to annoy them again, at least as much.

She even cleverly went on the offensive against Trump for allegedly supporting the Iraq War, which she also supported as a U.S. senator in 2002 and backed until 2006 when she reversed herself in hopes of winning the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination.

Trump has claimed repeatedly that he opposed the Iraq War although some pre-war comments suggested otherwise. By raising the issue first, Clinton forced Trump

onto the defensive and into a convoluted explanation of his position. Clinton's more substantive support for the disastrous war went largely unaddressed.

Clinton also got to skate away from her promotion of the Libyan "regime change" that has left that oil-rich country in north Africa in political chaos five years later and has given radical jihadists another foothold in the region.

Though largely ignored by the mainstream U.S. media, the British report and its blunt conclusions about Iraq-War-like deceptions on Libya could have become a damaging club to use against Clinton's diplomatic credentials and her trustworthiness. If pressed, would she continue to repeat the anti-Gaddafi exaggerations that were debunked by a bipartisan British parliamentary foreign policy committee?

Iran-Bashing

On Iran, Clinton even posed as the relative peace candidate by claiming a role in President Obama's diplomacy to ensure that Iran didn't develop a nuclear weapon, although her actual position was more hawkish than Obama's and more in line with Israel's desire to provoke another "regime change" in Tehran. Obama's diplomacy succeeded only after she left the job as secretary of state.

But Trump instead held to the tough-guy Republican position, denouncing the Iranian nuclear deal as a mistake, making himself look like the relative warmonger. For voters who are fed up with endless warfare and who are tired of Israel manipulating U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, Trump's belligerence on Iran didn't help with them.

Yet, whether Hillary Clinton's reticence on war talk represents a conscious decision or was simply driven by the dynamics of Monday's debate is unclear. She has seemed determined to ingratiate herself with Official Washington's neocons, apparently thinking that they are an influential opinion bloc or perhaps she is just one of them.

Whatever the outcome of the Nov. 8 election, there is little reason for celebration among Americans who want to pull back from the precipice of ever-wider and more dangerous wars.

Trump represents a wild card who favors negotiations with Russia and China but calls for an intensified war on "terrorism," including the reinstatement of torture and promises to "knock the hell" out of the Islamic State.

Clinton has a long record of pushing for wars behind the cloak of "humanitarianism," bloodshed rationalized by phony propaganda. She seems to have bought into the demonization of Vladimir Putin and the idea of a costly and

dangerous New Cold War with Russia. She also has called for more electronic spying at home and abroad and for the assassination of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

So, whoever wins, anti-war Americans may have no choice but to organize to challenge the war policies of the new president even before he or she takes office.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America's Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

The Challenging Politics of Global Warming

Though global warming represents a grave danger, it received only passing notice in the first presidential debate, in part, because the politics of climate change are challenging, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Going into the first televised joint appearance (commonly called a debate) of the two major party presidential nominees, the 2016 election campaign had given disturbingly little attention to the looming long-term catastrophe represented by climate change.

Certainly the issue deserves much more attention as measured by the relative intrinsic importance of topics that do get discussed. This includes not only diversionary topics such as Hillary Clinton's emails but also real policy issues such as ones involving the political future of Syria.

It's not as if the candidates do not represent major differences in what they have said about climate change. Hillary Clinton considers it a serious problem and has presented a [list of proposals and policies](#) intended to address it. Donald Trump exhibits the sort of inconsistency he exhibits on many issues, but all that he has said on the topic is far removed from Clinton's position.

The closest Trump comes even to acknowledging the issue is [to say](#) that he's "not a big believer in man-made climate change" and that although "there could be some impact from climate change" it won't be "devastating". At other times he [has said](#) that climate change is a hoax perpetrated by China.

Besides Trump's inconsistency, another major challenge in addressing the issue in this election year has been the same sort of challenge as on many issues on which Trump has emitted a flurry of falsehoods. One has to work to establish basic truths – however firmly established those truths may be outside the circle of Trump and his most committed followers – before even getting to debate about the best policy prescriptions.

With so many falsehoods to combat, there is hardly time left for real policy debate. And it is hard not to sound pedantic when talking about the scientifically recognized truths about man-made climate change.

That gets to one of the major obstacles, as Edward Luce notes, to effective public action on climate change: a widespread distrust of experts, including scientific experts. A second major obstacle Luce identifies is the fear among many people that doing something about climate change will make them poorer. This fear feeds opposition to something like a carbon tax, which sounds like it would increase the cost of living.

The political obstacles to effective action to arrest climate change persist as the technological obstacles have been diminishing. Technological advances involving renewable sources of energy have made cost comparisons with nonrenewables much more favorable than they were just a few years ago.

Trump's campaign, even if he loses in November, obviously constitutes a negative regarding any hopes for a realistic and effective policy toward climate change that will have strong public support. But the political problem goes far beyond Trump. Powerful politicians were doing fatuous climate-change-denying stunts such as throwing snowballs in the Senate before Trump began his candidacy.

The current Republican Party platform does not call climate change a hoax but its policy proposals would hardly be different if it did make that call. It opposes any governmental encouragement of renewable energy ("This is the triumph of extremism over common sense, and Congress must stop it."), opposes any carbon tax, and opposes the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement.

Political Resistance

Clearly at least as much careful thought and effort must be devoted to overcoming the political resistance in the United States to effective action on climate change as to developing the most technically and economically effective solutions to global warming and to handling the also difficult international diplomatic issues. The political challenge involved is large, but some techniques such as the following might help.

One is to play off current natural disasters and other conspicuous climate-

related problems that can command attention. This does not mean making the same kind of faulty argument as the climate change deniers who point to every winter cold snap as a refutation of global warming. One can be intellectually honest while still being politically astute in picking visible problems to highlight. Take, for example, the threat that the encroaching sea poses to military facilities in the Hampton Roads area and especially the U.S. Navy's large presence in Norfolk, Virginia.

Defining climate change as a national security problem only insofar as it affects military facilities and operations reflects an overly narrow conception of national security – surely having a habitable planet is as much a part of our citizens' security as anything else – but it may have greater attention-getting power. A rising sea level is not even the entire problem in this instance (the land is also sinking in Norfolk), but it certainly is part of the problem.

Another technique is to emphasize the immediate, short-term economic positives of action. Especially with the advances in renewable energy, there are ample opportunities to do so. The main story should not be coal miners losing jobs but rather the opportunities for new jobs and economic advancement, for them and for others, as part of a more sustainable economy.

A potential catastrophe still looms, but the best ways to avert it may involve talking not just about the catastrophe itself but about narrower concerns that have greater political resonance in the United States.

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