

The Left's Challenge in Age of Trump

The impending Trump presidency challenges the American Left to consider how to contest a right-wing agenda and how to create electoral options beyond Democratic Party orthodoxy, as Dennis J Bernstein and Norman Solomon discuss.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Left activists plan to take on President Donald Trump from Day One, with tens of thousands of protesters promising to show up in Washington to protest his inauguration on Jan. 20 and a major women's march scheduled the next day.

But the challenge for the Left goes deeper than protesting Trump and some of his policies. The difficulty also involves how to build a progressive agenda that is not compromised by corporate Democrats at election time. I discussed these questions with Norman Solomon, media activist, author, former delegate for Bernie Sanders Delegate and Rootsaction co-founder.

Dennis Bernstein: Norman Solomon, welcome back. [...] Say a little bit about your background. I want people to know where you're coming from and, if I've got it right, you sort of came in the activists door.

NS: I did, although, that was not my first ambition. That was to be a major league baseball player and a lawyer, but I was born in the early 50's and the first time I thought about going on a picket line was in 1966.

I lived in Maryland, and there were still segregated apartment buildings, in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. And so, I learned about a picket line, went there, and it's maybe not a natural feeling, to be protesting when you've grown up in white bread, middle-America, but I got acclimated.

DB: And, how I met you as an activists in New York State working for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. You were also beginning to write columns. You also wrote books, and got deeply engaged in the anti-nuclear movement, where I believe you were arrested multiple times, in this country, and other countries.

NS: Blockading nuclear weapons trains, as well as other non-violent actions, to try to shut down nuclear power plants, as well.

DB: And, how did you become a media columnist?

NS: Well, journalism became a lot of my interest and then professional ambition as I was getting out of high school, and so writing and reporting came to seem natural, and so did protesting the horrific Vietnam War, in the late 60's and early 70's. In our culture, I think then as now, in the United States there's

this tacit, if not prohibition, at least, looking askance at, the concept of activism and journalism being unified.

I remember when Chinese reporters, before Tiananmen Square, in the 80's were protesting against suppression of the press in China, the U.S. journalists would cheer that on, but wouldn't dream of protesting themselves, to affirm the rights of freedom of the press or human rights. And I think that's a juxtaposition that for me has not made sense.

As with so many other people, including you, Dennis Bernstein, I think the reality is that, if you're a journalist, you are fighting to learn and ventilate and expose truth, [then] that goes hand-in-hand with fighting for human rights, fighting for a society where life is treasured instead of destroyed.

DB: Norman, I want to, sort of, bring you head on with the political struggle now... and before we get into strategy, let me ask you to assess where you think we are now, or what you see as the front-line dangers, given the current situation. We've seen a lot now about where this is going.

NS: Really, on the front-line and the main-line dangers, we're facing the most right-wing administrations out of the federal government, in any of our life times, no matter how old we are. And the consolidation of power, not just that it's a Republican White House coming in and Congress, as well, but how extreme it is.

And this merger of bogus, ultra right-wing populism, with corporatism, with, for the most part, great militarism and support for the military-industrial complex, and political repression, and contempt for basic civil liberties, as well as human rights....That's a toxic mix that requires, I think, whatever we're going to call ourselves, [to be] "in opposition."

And there are a lot of different, favorite terms: liberal, progressive, left-wing, libertarian. The names matter less than taking a firm position, not just in what we say over the dining room table, but what we do, which is most important. And that is activism, organizing, building institutions, strengthening the ones that exist, like the radio station people are listening to, as well as building institutions that are too weak to fight back against this right-wing, corporate, militarist onslaught, which is embodied now in what's coming up as the Trump administration. So we're in very, very deep peril.

Ecologically, we've got a climate denier moving into the White House. We've got, in terms of civil liberties, and human rights and civil rights, a racist moving into the White House, with a racist base that he has cultivated, and he continues to excite an extreme militarism.

So, we have enormous work to do. And I think we need a broad, deep and wide, united popular front, without caving in to the lowest common denominator, which is what is going to come from the top of the Democratic Party, unfortunately.

DB: Alright, I want to tap your media skills now, which are many and strong. You open up your most recent piece... I think it's up at a bunch of places. I grabbed this off of Consortium News. I think it's up at Common Dreams, as well. It's called The Left's Risk in Blaming Russia.

And you open up the piece with this comment from Donna Brazile at the DNC. And she is essentially raging about how the Russians threw the elections, in a sense that's why Hillary Clinton didn't win. And you quote her saying, "By now Americans know beyond any reasonable doubt that the Russian government orchestrated a series of cyber attacks on political campaigns and organizations, over the past two years and used stolen information to influence the presidential campaign and congressional races." She goes on to say, "The integrity of our elections is too important for Congress to refuse to take these attacks seriously." What's wrong with that statement?

NS: Well, what's wrong with it is, it implies, or directly states, that the problem with our last election was Russian interference. And, as has been documented at the Intercept and elsewhere, it's far from clear to whatever extent the interference took place from Russia. But even if we assume that the CIA has a great, credible record of honesty and integrity as a source of information to the public, and that it is "a slam dunk" so to speak— a phrase used to tell us there were WMDs [weapons of mass destruction] in Iraq more than a dozen years ago from the CIA—still, if we give all that [the] benefit of doubt, let's be real about this, I'm very concerned, so many progressives in their understandable concern, deep concern, horror...

DB: ...fears...

NS: ... that Trump is going to be president, they're somehow conflating what has occurred with a Russian menace.

And, if we want to move into a new Cold War that could escalate into a military confrontation in Europe, with Russia, and hair trigger the aiming of nuclear weapons in both directions... if we want to excite and push forward a modern version of a McCarthy era, then let's go ahead and demonize Putin.

Let's forget that it was the United States that expanded NATO despite the promises coming from the first President Bush, and President Bill Clinton. If we want to just obviate and obscure history, and demonize Putin and the Kremlin, in this time, in late 2016, and going into 2017, then we're going to have a very

dangerous political climate, made worse by progressives.

And we're getting [an] enormous tendency because people are, understandably, so upset about Trump, that they are combining in their own minds, Putin and Trump. And the fact is that, in my opinion, I think this is a fair thing to say, as horrific as Trump's positions are – even a broken clock is right twice every 24 hours. And in addition to his stance against the TPP, one of the reasons that so much of the democratic and even some of the Republican Party establishments are so concerned and upset, and angry, and denouncing Trump, is that he has departed from the hostility to Russia.

DB: And one of the victims in this move to blame the Russians, also includes the independent press.

NS: Oh, absolutely.

DB: This has become a witch hunt, you know, in terms of the blame-game here.

NS: At the rootsaction.org site we've had a petition which challenges the Washington Post's McCarthyite front page story, a couple of weeks back [which], without any sort of real journalism, endorses a 200 web site named list from a shadowy group, whose identity we don't even know, saying that they are flunkies and "useful idiots for the Kremlin." Now, what does this sound like? If you know the history of the McCarthy era, you know this is how it functioned and was a way to suppress dissent.

And yet, we have here one of the purportedly liberal papers, which actually has somewhat of a neo-con foreign policy position on the front page and the editorial page, stoking this kind of McCarthyism. And I think what a lot of groups have not recognized, including for instance MoveOn, is they have stoked this.

DB: They've jumped right on...

NS: ...Right on, "blame Putin." [...] They think they're kind of picking low hanging political fruit. It's a way to bash Trump, and get more strength for the Democrats against them, and delegitimize his election, and so forth. But when you ride that tiger of McCarthyism and militarism, and souping up a new cold war, that is a tiger that not only is going to come back and bite you, but actually quite likely is going to devour you.

If you believe in diplomacy instead of warfare, if you believe in civil liberties instead of suppression, and witch hunting against dissenters, it's time to really, I think...and part of this was propelled by these illusory hopes about the electoral college on the 19th of December...but now it's time to

recognize that progressives, rather than joining in the chorus to demonize the Kremlin and Putin, and so forth, we should be organizing against that. And at rootsaction.org we are organizing against it. Some groups definitely are.

What's at stake? What's at stake is whether we're going to have continuous momentum towards military confrontation with a power that has thousands of nuclear weapons pointed at the U.S. and vice versa. What's at stake is the entire political climate in the U.S. vis-a-vis foreign policy, militarism, war and dissent.

What I started to sort of allude to is that Trump has sounded a note of "Let's find common ground with Russia." And when it comes to ending the horrible slaughter in Syria, for instance, other diplomatic solutions, and avoiding confrontation that could turn military and [be] horrific in Europe, for instance, this is an opportunity to say, "Let's have detente."

And by hitching itself to the star of congressional leadership of the Democratic Party, all too many progressives have assumed that, "Oh, we're going to make Trump look bad, so therefore, we'll cheer lead on when Nancy Pelosi and others say 'Oh, it's the Russians who are causing it all.'" And that's a very dangerous bargain to make.

Another way to put it, Dennis, is that yes, we need a broad, deep, united popular front against Trump, at the same time we need to not have our dependency on the line of the top of the Democratic Party because they're militarists. I mean that's why Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi and the top of the Democratic Party leaders are so, in part, upset with Trump foreign policy, because they had, as Hillary Clinton did, their hearts set on a confrontation with Russia.

Hillary Clinton, very much more than Obama, was into that mode. She was a de facto neocon in that kind of foreign policy. And a lot of people, like myself, and I was a Bernie Sanders delegate to the National Convention this year, a lot of people who were Bernie supporters haven't realized that by jumping on the band wagon, that is being led by these main line, establishment Democratic Party leaders, we are strengthening the Clinton wing of the party.

Because they would like nothing more than to change the subject about what happened in the last election and just say "It's Russia's fault." It wasn't the Wall Street alliance between Hillary Clinton in the election, and for years before. It wasn't the speeches she gave for hundreds of thousands of dollars. It wasn't the fact that she lacked credibility when she pretended to be some sort of populist. It wasn't the way in which the Democratic National Committee unfairly put its thumb on the scales even while claiming to be neutral, in the primary battle between Bernie and Hillary Clinton. All those other factors, the

structural...

DB: The way she supported the coup in Honduras, it wasn't her Libya policy. It had nothing to do with the dangers of a no fly zone [in Syria]...

NS: Absolutely. Her record of talking about super-predators in the 1990s, the institutional racism, the mass incarceration, the record of the Clinton wing of the party – oh, no it's none of that. It's not the structural racism and classism that kept so many people out of the polls and [not] having their votes registered on election day this year.

No, it wasn't that and it wasn't the inability of the Democratic Party, under Clinton, as the nominee, to speak meaningfully to poor people around the country because she was so obviously a phony entwined with Wall Street, [and was] the author, with her husband, of welfare so-called reform, that was a savage attack on poor women and families of all races. It wasn't that. It was Vladimir Putin.

Well, what does that do? That kind of lying, absolutely gives more power, going forward, to the very corporate forces at the top of the Democratic Party that the Bernie campaign has been fighting.

DB: I want to ask you more about strategy, but I want to ask you another question about the media. Now, the way I see the corporate media, they wanted these two candidates. And they collaborated with the two parties to get these two candidates. And, they knew, if they could give, if you will, Trump to Hillary, they were going to have a bonanza. And they all have admitted now that they have gotten rich on Donald Trump. This corporate media, with the kinds of reporting, the shallow reporting, the misreporting, the refusal to report [meaningfully]... they gave us this moment in history.

NS: The fact is that the CEO of the CBS network said during the primaries that the Donald Trump candidacy might be very bad for America, but it's very good for the profit margin of the networks. And that is, as you say, what happened. Literally, billions of dollars in free air time for Donald Trump during the primaries from cable TV. Without that he would not have seen the light of day, in terms of a strong candidacy.

And, of course, we know, and this comes with the territory, a lot of bias against Bernie Sanders. I think FAIR, the media watch group, counted a dozen anti-Sanders' stories in a 24 hour period, out of the Washington Post. And this is the terrain that we're walking through. And now I think it's very hazardous for people who are among the 54% who voted for candidates other than Donald Trump, very hazardous to trust the mass media.

Doesn't mean that it's always wrong, obviously. But we need to be very wary and

suspicious, if you will, of the spin. And that's where I get back to this bandwagon thing about "Oh, our big threat to democracy is the Russian government." Well, this is a way of sort of cleansing ourselves of the very dirty, ugly reality of a serious, severe, debilitating lack of democracy in our own country, that is self-inflicted, and we've got to solve it ourselves.

DB: Alright, what are you going to do, Norman? What's your plan for taking on this, I mean we've got the Supreme Court, you know, coming up here. And that's going to go south, fast.

NS: Yes, well, without being over dramatic, I think this is a question that so many of us, millions of us, are asking ourselves and each other. What are we going to do, as individuals? I think of something that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned by Hitler, ultimately...

DB: War resister, died in prison, right?

NS: Yes, and he said, in his prison writings, that resistance cannot be accomplished just as an individual, that we need community. Whatever gives us community, personally, interpersonally, and in terms of relationship building and organizations and activism and organizing. We need community more than ever. Like a healthy forest we need a lot of different aspects.

We started out this discussion, you were talking, Dennis, about many different ways and diverse ways that people can respond to our situation. And I think that means that we find ways to fight back that are consistent with our particular abilities, skills, interests, personalities, if you will, and work with others. Because we can't do it on our own. So, existing organizations need to get stronger, and fight back.

Myself, as somebody who works day-to-day for rootsaction.org and the Institute for Public Accuracy... especially at Roots Action we're very much into building coalitions that can fight back to support immigrants' rights, for instance, can support Muslims who are under threat, can oppose the war machinery.

And that means, I think, [being] in the streets, petitions, and strengthening media aspects and also really putting the screws on, in a positive way, if I can say it in that respect, elected officials. Because there are a lot of democrats in the Senate and the House who, just as in the past, they have been GOP-lite, there's a big temptation, if they think it's opportunistic, to become Trump-lite. And we need to make, as constituents...

DB: You can see it already.

NS: Yeah. And absolute clarity needs to come from us. We will not accept that.

We might already need to plan primary challenges for any Democrat who in [2018] isn't absolutely resolute to oppose every [one]... of the numerous, massive, pernicious aspects of the Trump program. And that means, for those of us who may not love to do electoral politics, that we come to see it as part of the mix. It's part of the garden that we're cultivating.

Yes, we need to be in the streets, we do activism, we do organizing, non-profit work, we work in houses of worship. I'm in touch with people working at the Rotary Club for Peace. There's thousands of them around the country, everywhere, like water finding and [...] widening the cracks in the wall. We need to do all that.

And I think that needs to include already looking at the electoral arena, because if we're waiting until [2018], that's too late. Wherever you live, scrutinize those who represent you in the state legislature, on county electoral boards, in the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House... and if they're not getting the job done, let them know that you're cultivating some primary challenges if they're democrats or strong challenges otherwise.

Because we have to get that done. It's about power, and I think ultimately power is something that progressives often think is almost a dirty word. And so if we grew up with a concept of power to the people, maybe it can have a different connotation.

No wonder people hate the idea of power. Because it's usually so awful, it's coming from the top. It's so oppressive. It takes lives. It destroys the environment. It pushes for war. It makes the rich richer and the poor poorer. No wonder we hate power. But power can be something else. Power can be a countervailing force that affirms life instead of crushes it. Which is what we deal with in terms of the power structure of our society right now.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
