

Trump and Democrats Misread Mandates

Exclusive: Neither the Democrats nor President Trump learned the right lessons from the 2016 election, leaving the nation divided at home and bogged down in wars abroad, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

One year ago, the American electorate delivered a confused but shocking result, the election of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton, a quirky outcome in the Electoral College that put Trump in the White House even though Clinton got three million more votes nationally. But neither party appears to have absorbed the right lessons from that surprise ending.

The Democrats might have taken away from their defeat the warning that they had forgotten how to speak to the white working class, which had suffered from job losses via “free trade” and felt willfully neglected as Democrats looked toward the “browning of America.”

The choice of Clinton had compounded this problem because she came across as elitist and uncaring toward this still important voting bloc with her memorable description of half of Trump’s voters as “deplorables,” an insult that stung many lower-income whites and helped deliver Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin to Trump.

For more than a decade, some Democratic strategists had promoted the notion that “demography is destiny,” i.e., that the relative growth of Latino, Asian and African-American populations in comparison to whites would ensure a future Democratic majority. That prediction seemed to have been validated by Barack Obama’s winning coalition in 2008 and 2012, but it also had the predictable effect of alienating many whites who felt disrespected and resentful.

So, while the Democrats and Clinton looked to a multicultural future, Trump used his experience in reality TV to communicate with this overlooked demographic group. Trump sold himself as a populist and treated the white working class with respect. He spoke to their fears about economic decline and gave voice to their grievances. He vowed to put “America First” and pull back from foreign military adventures that often used working-class kids as cannon fodder.

But much of Trump’s message, like the real-estate mogul himself, was phony. He really didn’t have policies that would address the needs of working-class Americans. Still, his promises of a massive infrastructure plan, good health-care for all, and rejection of unfair trade deals rang the right bells with

enough voters to flip some traditionally Democratic blue-collar states to Republican red.

Staying Blind

You might have thought that the Democrats would respond to Trump's shocking victory, which also left Republicans in charge of Congress and most statehouses around the country, by launching an apologetic listening tour to reconnect with working-class whites.

There also might have been a clear-eyed evaluation of the weaknesses of the Democratic presidential nominee who came to personify the corrupt insider-culture of Official Washington, exploiting government service for financial gain by raking in millions of dollars for speeches to Wall Street and other special interests.

Clinton also offended many peace voters because of her support for aggressive war, both as a U.S. senator backing the disastrous invasion of Iraq and as Secretary of State pushing for U.S. military interventions in Libya and Syria. Her apology for voting for the Iraq War came across as opportunistic and insincere, and her undisguised delight over Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's grisly murder ("We came; we saw; he died!") seemed ghoulish.

And, whether fairly or not, many Americans were turned off by the Democratic Party's emphasis on "identity politics," the assumption that people would vote based on their gender, race or sexual orientation, rather than on bread-and-butter policies and war-or-peace issues.

In other words, the Democratic Party could have looked in the mirror and seen what many Americans found unappealing about the modern version of a party that had done so much to build the country, from the New Deal during the Great Depression through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and taking a leading role in addressing environmental, health-care and other national challenges.

But today's Democrats instead chose to blame their plight largely on Russia and its alleged "meddling" in U.S. politics, a strategy that not only made little sense – given the many other reasons why voters turned away from Clinton and her party – but delivered a message to white working-class voters who had gone over to Trump that they were "stupid" and had been "duped."

Whatever one thinks about white working-class voters who favored Trump, calling people gullible is not an effective way to woo back a voting bloc that already feels insulted and alienated.

Missing a Chance

So, when Trump was sworn in last Jan. 20, the ball was largely in his court. He could have focused on rebuilding America's infrastructure; or he could have proposed a serious plan for improving access to health care; or he could have moved pragmatically to resolve a host of international conflicts that President Obama had left behind.

Instead, President Trump squandered his first days in office by getting into absurd arguments about his inaugural crowd size compared to Obama's and denying that Clinton had won the national popular vote. His "alternative facts" made him a laughingstock.

Last spring, when I spoke with a group of Trump voters in West Virginia, they were still faithful to their choice – and wanted Washington to give him a chance – but they already were complaining about Trump's personal outbursts on Twitter; they wanted him to concentrate on their real needs, not his petty squabbles.

But Trump wasn't listening. He couldn't kick his Twitter habit. He kept putting his giant ego in the way.

As his presidency stumbled forward, Trump also brushed aside suggestions that he reverse his image as a person who had no regard for facts by declassifying information about the conflicts in Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere – to reveal situations where Obama and his team played propaganda games, rather than tell the truth.

And, lacking sufficient knowledge about the world, Trump failed when presented with sophisticated plans for reshaping U.S. policies in the Middle East to become less dependent on Israel and Saudi Arabia. Instead, Trump jumped into the arms of Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi King Salman.

Pandering to Israeli-Saudi desires – and trying to show how tough he was – Trump fired off 59 Tomahawk missiles at Syria over a dubious chemical-weapons incident; threatened more Mideast strife against Iran; and escalated the 16-year-old war in Afghanistan.

Plus, he blustered about war against North Korea and personally insulted the country's leader, Kim Jong Un, as "little rocket man." Rather than rein in neoconservative aggression, he continued to unleash it.

When Trump did address domestic policy, he defined himself as basically just another right-wing Republican, supporting a health-care scheme that would have made matters worse for millions of Americans and backing a tax-cut plan that would mostly benefit the rich while blowing an even bigger hole in the deficit. All that red ink, in turn, drowned any hopes for investments in a modern infrastructure.

In other words, Trump exposed himself as the narcissistic incompetent that his critics said he was. He proved incapable of even acting presidential, let alone showing that he could use his power to make life better for average Americans. He was left with little to boast about beyond the economy that was bequeathed to him by Obama.

Republicans also had little to brag about, explaining why Ed Gillespie, the GOP's gubernatorial nominee in Virginia in 2017, opted for ugly socially divisive attack ads as the best hope for defeating Democrat Ralph Northam, a Gillespie strategy called "Trumpism without Trump."

But Gillespie's approach backfired with a surprisingly strong turnout of Virginia's voters putting Northam into the governor's mansion and almost erasing the solid Republican majority in the state legislature.

Trump was left to tweet about how the Virginia results, which were echoed in other states' elections on Tuesday, weren't a reflection on his own popularity, ignoring his unprecedentedly low approval ratings for a president nine months into his first term.

So, the new political question is whether Trump can belatedly learn from his failures and finally undertake some actions at home and abroad that actually serve the interests of the American people and the world. Or will he continue to bumble and stumble along?

A parallel question is whether the Democrats will misinterpret their strong showing on Tuesday as encouragement to continue ignoring their own political and institutional shortcomings – and to keep on using Russia to bash Trump. Neither side has shown much aptitude for learning.

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](#)).
