To Beat Trump, Clinton Brings Back Triangulation and the Politics of Fear

written by Arun Gupta | August 7, 2016

The enduring cliche of the 2016 election is a comment by Trump that provokes outrage, rebukes, and the declaration: “He’s gone too far.”

This happened the moment Trump declared his presidential bid by denigrating Mexicans, then when he attacked veterans, women, the disabled, Muslims, and the judiciary among others, and most recently with his vendetta against Khizr and Ghazala Khan.

Trump’s attack on the Khans seems curious as he had nothing to gain. The couple grabbed the moral high ground at the Democratic National Convention by pointedly telling Trump, “You have sacrificed nothing and no one,” in reference to the death of their son as a U.S. Army officer in Iraq in 2004.

The self-inflicted wounds are unlikely to cause Trump permanent harm, however.*The New York Time*s found his attacks on military members and families mainly affected the opinion of undecided veterans, representing just a sliver of voters. Trump also recovered after a similar racist tirade against a U.S.-born judge overseeing lawsuits against the defunct Trump University. Republicans inside the Beltway freaked out in private over Trump’s antics, but in public they are loathe to break with him when polls show 81 percent of the party supports him along with41 percent of the public overall.

Moreover, Trump’s ranting about the Khans is consistent with his trickle-down revenge and nativism that’s congealed a white nationalist rebellion around him. It shows little sign of faltering.
In battleground states like Ohio, North Carolina, and Iowa, Trump trails Clinton by less than 1 percent. And while Democrats have opened up new fronts in Arizona and Georgia, Trump lags by 6 percent or less in delegate-rich states such as Florida, Michigan, Wisconsin, Virginia, and Nevada.

Digging into local data in Ohio and Pennsylvania exposes the seismic shifts in public attitudes that Trump capitalized on. In Pennsylvania’s Luzerne County, a white working-class enclave Obama won by five points in 2012, Trump has a 23-point lead over Clinton. Ohio’s Mahoning and Trumbull counties are the heart of now-vanished “Little Steel” that Obama handily won in 2012 with more than 60 percent of the vote. But with voters flocking to him, Trump is poised to flip these former union strongholds. Even if many working-class whites are intoxicated by Trump’s racism, they are equally embittered by their declining economic fortunes under Obama.

These whites are America’s Brexit voters, battered workers distrustful of politicians, media, and business leaders who have hoodwinked them for decades about the benefits of globalization and empire, even if their anger is nursed on a diet of bigotry and bizarre conspiracies. So they shrug off

Trump's tantrums or spread slander such as Khan is an "al Qaeda double agent." As some have told Telesur, they support Trump because they want him "to blow up the system."

Trump's allegiance to the Republican Party is limited to hijacking it for his outsized ego and ambitions. But he has a death grip on the wheel of the GOP and is blase about driving it off a cliff. Even in defeat Trump will emerge victorious with an army of aggrieved whites, a fundraising machine, and a megaphone to foment trouble. He is already spinning racially tinged yarns that if he loses it's because the election is rigged. If Clinton triumphs as seems likely, the Trumpian hordes will treat her as delegitimized even before she assumes office.

Given elite antipathy toward Trump there is a danger of underestimating his chances. In July his campaign and the Republican National Committee hauled in $82 million, mostly in small contributions that indicate the depth and breadth of his support. Fine-tuned demographic analysis reveals up to 10 million more white voters over 45 who lack a college degree—Trump's bedrock—than previously estimated nationwide. If Trump sticks within a point of Clinton in the polls, this subterranean force could tip the election his way, just like Brexit passed despite consistently trailing in surveys.

Hillary Clinton's strategy is to revert to Clintonian form. In 1994, congressional Democrats were shellacked by Newt Gingrich's mob of bigots, bomb-throwers, and conspiracists who established right-wing rule of the House that has lasted for all but four of the last 22 years. Bill Clinton responded with "triangulation," treating unions and progressives as the left counterpart to the rabid right. He staked out the center with insipid initiatives like a "national conversation on race" and a push for school uniforms meant to distract from his anti-poor agenda that rivaled Reagan's. Meanwhile, Clinton spent his second-term political capital on free trade, loosening banking and commodities regulations, and supercharging media monopolies.

Fast forward a couple of decades to the 2016 DNC. To their credit, Sanders and his rebellious supporters wrested concessions from the Democrats. But Hillary Clinton's vague calls for raising Social Security benefits, a living wage, tuition-free college, and a jobs program for infrastructure served a purpose other than placating the left. Her proposals sugar-coated the triangulation at the DNC. Nods to social justice and Black Lives Matter were drowned out by bigwigs extollingpatriotism, God, militarism, and American exceptionalism. Gen. John Allen said with Clinton as commander-in-chief, the United States would continue to be the "indispensable, transformational power in the world" with a military that would "defeat ISIS … defeat evil," while equipped with "the finest weapons, the greatest equipment."

Likewise, the Democrats calculated they could insult their base by featuring Michael Bloomberg as a prime-time speaker with little backlash. As New York City mayor, Bloomberg bitterly fought attempts to end racist stop-and-frisk, had police spy on every mosque in a 100-mile radius, imposed big rent increases on millions, and attacked public schools, social programs, and unions with gusto. Bloomberg was only the first billionaire for Clinton, with Mark Cuban, Meg Whitman, and Warren Buffet trotted out after the convention. Whitman is doubly notable as Clinton had courted the right-wing tech executive and she was joined by other prominent Republicans in backing Clinton.

Then in an utterly cynical maneuver, Obama announced days after the DNC he would push the lame-duck Congress to pass the Trans-Pacific Partnership this year. It showed the dishonesty of Clinton and her vice president pick Tim Kaine in suddenly claiming they were opposed to the trade deal

after consistently championing it.

New Deal liberals like Thomas Frank fret that Clinton's right-wing swerves risk snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. But this is a misreading of history. The elites are aware that the Democrats are more capable managers of capitalist globalization, diplomacy, and war than the Republicans. It's why Clinton is attracting a bipartisan cast of Wall Street, Silicon Valley, Hollywood, the mainstream media, and the military and foreign policy establishment.

Clinton also has unions, feminists, and civil rights groups behind her. They serve as progressive window dressing and troops for swing state trench warfare in return for a "seat at the table," but no real say. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka told me at the DNC that organized labor is with Clinton because the Democratic agenda "is our agenda." When I pressed Trumka about Clinton's record of supporting nearly every free-trade deal that came before her, he responded, "I'm not worried at all, she's against TPP" (before smacking me in the face with a cardboard sign).

Trumka is covering for Clinton, and misleading workers because organized labor has no strategy other than clinging to the globalization express and begging for crumbs off the banquet table. The Democratic election strategy is to win the Rust Belt through micro-targeting of uncommitted whites, a massive canvassing and get-out-the-vote operation, deploying the good ol' boy band of Bill Clinton, Joe Biden, and Kaine, and pounding Trump in the media from every imaginable angle—including harkening back a half-century to the infamous daisy ad to ring the alarm about Trump with the nuclear codes. Clinton is also counting on Trump to keep shooting himself in the foot, and he looks likely to oblige. Big business, celebrities, and Obama will throw their full weight behind Clinton. Democrats need to peel off only a small percentage of whites in the Midwest to decisively defeat Trump.

Overall, Democrats are happy to paint white workers as irredeemably racist so they can reject working-class politics. If determined, Democrats could enact legal and regulatory changes that provide unions with the tools to rebuild the labor movement. But that would alienate the corporate constituency the Democratic Party belongs to and relies on for its core support. The logical path, then, for the Clintons, Obama, and the rest is to look to the right for votes.

The Democrats are seeking a historic triangulation by trying to occupy the center for a generation. They will then berate the left, telling them there is nowhere else to go, and watch the radical right flail around with guns and sinister ideas, damaging society but not elite power. The Democrats think they can deliver a fatal blow both to Trump and Trumpism with a blowout victory this election, while demographics takes care of any lingering threat. But this is a fantasy as Clinton's right-wing policies will produce new white nationalist threats, as they did during the 1990s. And elements on the right are taking advantage of the Democrats' disdain for workers by scheming on how to turn the GOP into "a (white) workers' party."

From this viewpoint, the left response is simple: it should do nothing to help Clinton, not even push people to vote for her in swing states. If Clinton can't beat Trump with the combined might of capital and labor, then a tiny, disorganized, threadbare left is not going to make any difference. Instead, the left should affirm people's right to decide if they want to vote and then whom to vote for, such as Jill Stein, Sanders, Vermin Supreme (my favorite), or Clinton. And it should denounce Clinton apologists working feverishly to bully or scare people into voting for her. Fear-based politics makes a mockery of any democratic claims.

Jill Stein will far outstrip her 2012 vote total of 469,000 as she harvests the anti-Clinton vote on the left. But her current polling average of 4 percent will shrink by election day, which is typical of third-party candidates. Stein serves a vital role by blasting Clinton for a "terrifying track record" on the economy, foreign policy, and climate change. She reminds voters Clinton is distinctly dangerous. But pouring energy into Stein's bid replicates the mistake of prioritizing electoral politics above all else. Third-party presidential runs measure discontent that exists. They do little to build radical movements and often divert energy and resources from organizing. (Though local elections can create space and provide aid for movements.)

But there should also be no illusions about a Trump presidency. It would be open season for the police, state, and vigilantes on Black Lives Matter, Muslims, immigrants, Mexicans, and the left. Left forces would be on their heels, fighting limited defensive battles and grateful to survive, even in a weakened state. Whatever remains of Sanders political revolution would dry up and blow away.

But climbing on the Clinton train means muting criticism of her right-wing policies. It would hobble the left going into four years of more war, more free trade, more oil and gas drilling under Clinton. And that's exactly what the Wall Street Democrats want.

The left should concentrate on what it does best: laying the groundwork for new movements such as the anti-war and global justice movements, Occupy Wall Street, union, immigrant, and low-wage worker organizing, and Black Lives Matter. Clinton has bankers and liberals, pundits and billionaires, hawks and Republicans all advocating for her. Someone needs to advocate for people.

Originally posted here.