What’s Left of the Lesser Evil?: A Foreign Policy Critique

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The Question of the Lesser Evil

In a recent article for Counterpunch, Gary Leupp details the long history of Hillary Clinton’s foreign policy record and concludes with the question: is the possibility of her winning the general election in November 2016 really *that* much less frightening than the possibility that Donald Trump does? Here, we want to explore a potential answer to that question.

While we all know that voting is just one small, overemphasized form of political activity, we think it is fairly intuitive that whom people decide to support now—given the hyper-focus on political candidates in the US electoral system—will have a significant effect on the degree of their political mobilization during this cycle, and this is especially important when we take into account the difficult decision many former Berners turned potential "oh fine, Clinton" voters will have to make—especially in swing-states.

We want to give people on the Left, who are deeply afraid of a potential Trump victory, another good reason to withhold conceding to the Clinton machine. Our case is rather simple, though definitely speculative: it is irrational (or at the very least, not as obviously rational) to vote for Hillary Clinton because she represents the lesser evil in a choice between her and Donald Trump. Our hope is that by delegitimizing the superficial mythology that Hillary Clinton is clearly a “lesser evil” on foreign policy, we can make an effort towards keeping the probable impending electoral failure of Bernie Sanders from either simply demobilizing a large portion of a new generation of politically conscious young people or drawing them into the neoliberal clutches of the Democratic Party.

Comparing Evils

On domestic policy, it may very well be true that Hillary Clinton represents a lesser evil. Hillary is likely to support some small increase in the minimum wage (which is admittedly better than no increase or a decrease). Hillary is likely to support consistent funding for Planned Parenthood and the pro-choice agenda more broadly, especially through potential Supreme Court nominations. Hillary is likely to continue to support marriage equality (now that she isn’t opposed to it any longer). Hillary may even advance the fight for gay and transgender anti-discrimination laws—a position that the supposedly reactionary Trump has recently shown sympathy towards. She will likely do nothing for labor beyond the minimum wage. She will, however, likely continue her previous support for neoliberal trade policies, like the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Beyond these reasonable assumptions, it is hard to tell what other domestic policies she might pursue, but they would likely be more "progressive" than Trump's (It would be hard to do otherwise—again, assuming we can actually conceive of his platform ever becoming policy without massive popular resistance.

Even if we accept that Hillary would be better on domestic policy, her foreign policy, we want to argue, *could* be more dangerous and harmful than Trump's—thus making her not the obvious lesser evil candidate she is often portrayed as.

Hillary supports an activist, imperialistic foreign policy, but she also has the international (and domestic) legitimacy to implement her superficially benevolent, but nonetheless aggressive, foreign policy agenda. How can anyone say that Hillary is a far-and-away less harmful candidate? Simply because she would protect a certain set of existing privileges for certain Americans, all while destroying thousands if not millions of lives in other countries, all with an air of legitimacy that we fail to see how Trump could ever attain?

Hillary has the perceived legitimacy of a legacy of ostensibly progressive but still-moderate politics on her side. She has her tenure as senator and Secretary of State that confer international legitimacy to her policy positions. She also gets to appear in opposition to the near-fascist, definitively and grotesquely illegal, proposals offered by Trump—who has openly called for actions that would easily meet the rather high standards for war crimes and crimes against humanity (advocating actions exceeding torture and the open targeting of civilian populations with military actions including air strikes). It is likely that due to the egregious nature and obvious illegality of much of Trump's foreign policy platform that any attempt on his part to implement it would be met with extreme resistance in the US and internationally.

What can we look forward to from Hillary Clinton's foreign policy then? Likely it would include a continuation of her past practices, supporting military interventions to overthrow regimes who oppose US hegemony (like Saddam Hussein's in Iraq and Muammar Qaddafi's in Libya). We can look forward to a continuation, if not an expansion, of the US's War of (sorry, on) Terrorism, including the illegal US drone program. She has called for increased US military action against ISIS (Daesh). Clinton supports the use of pre-emptive military force against Iran as well. There is little doubt we would be looking forward to the continuation of the massive US support for the illegal occupation of Palestine and the systematic oppression and occasional attempts at extermination of the Palestinian people. The lesser evil? We need to ask ourselves, what degree of "lesser" are we contented by?

What is beyond question is that if we look at only Trump's rhetoric, which would assume he could accomplish what he has said, Clinton becomes a clearer lesser evil—but still a very evil lesser evil. However, the likelihood of Trump being able to accomplish his foreign policy agenda is low given just how flagrantly inhuman(e) and illegal most of the proposals are. The recent history of American military adventurism in Iraq and the eventual war fatigue it produced, alongside international opposition would make a drastic expansion of American militarism improbable—barring any unforeseeable crisis (or perhaps a crisis that will be, as they often are, vaguely predictable in hindsight).

If upon realizing that his masturbatory fantasies of carpet bombing civilians and torturing the families of suspected terrorists aren't exactly realizable due to a combination of international and domestic constraints, it seems likely that Trump, should he become President, would pursue a foreign policy similar to what Clinton would if she were President. If it were the case that Trump became President and pursued a policy agenda similar to what Clinton would, the GOP's standard-bearer's rhetoric would still likely be much more militant and aggressive—and as such would make attaining legitimacy for these mainstream hawkish Clinton positions more difficult for Trump than it

would be for a more politically savvy and perceivedly legitimate President Hillary Clinton to do so.

What seems possible then, regardless of whether a Republican or Democrat is victorious in November, is a continuation of the Obama administration's "clandestine" militancy or a slightly more aggressive version of it. On the off chance that Trump is somehow able to win in a general election though (which is certainly not out of the realm of possibility), we sincerely hope our faith in the disciplinary potential of international norms, emergent social movements, and the recent memory of the American people is not misplaced—though we've been disappointed before.

Towards a Lesser-Lesser Evil?

If you can only see Secretary Clinton as an evil and not as the lesser evil some have argued she is, the response must not be to retreat from the political process. Become more active! Support one of the other Left "third party" candidates or organizations attempting to create real progress in the US. For many of these groups like Socialist Alternative, Solidarity, SPUSA and the Green Party, this progress must be made in opposition to all forms of imperialism and international aggression.

In this case, the lesser evil becomes the potential for institutional political impotency that comes with supporting an actual left party or organization in the US—a structural problem that continues to plague a resurgent, but nascent, Left within the American electoral landscape. The lesser-lesser evil might well be the possible electoral failure produced by this necessary attempt to build a genuinely left political party outside the two major parties in the US.

If, however, you still think a Trump presidency would do significantly more harm than a Clinton one when foreign and domestic policies are taken together, then sure, go ahead and make your "practical" vote in November, but just don't fool yourself that there is a massive difference between the candidate(s) you oppose and the one you are voting for, at least when it comes to issues that directly affect the other 6.5+ billion people on the planet.

If you're telling yourself that you'll vote for Hillary to stop Trump, but then plan to oppose her every step of the way once she is in office, just don't make the mistake of voting for her and then forgetting why you really didn't want to. Don't forget that second step. This is the politics of demobilization we should be genuinely afraid of and actively guard against.

Hillary and her corporate backers in the DNC win if we do not stand up and refuse to justify her positions on foreign policy by saying "well, she is much better on domestic issues" (which is probably true). We think we owe the other 6.5+ billion people in the world who don't live in the US a much deeper interrogation of her foreign policy, and we certainly owe it ourselves on the Left to remain in vigilant opposition to significant aspects of her broader platform.

While Trump may be more unpredictable, those on the Left considering voting for Hillary Clinton to avoid Trump winning the general election need to grapple with the fact that Hillary Clinton will certainly be predictable—predictably neoliberal and imperialistic. Perhaps the lesser evil is opposing both Trump and Clinton. The Left should thus refuse the predictably minimal lesser-evilism of Clinton, reject the unpredictable evil of Trump, and embrace the unpredictably radical potential of a genuinely progressive and democratic political movement. Blatant, extensive, and politically legitimated imperial militarism should never be lesser enough of an evil to garner substantial support, never mind from the Left.

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