

Overcoming Bitterness and No Longer Assuming the Worst of Democrats

For decades, I have been obsessed with exposing the Clintons and like-minded Democratic politicians' dangerous foreign policies, challenging liberal naiveté that ignores or excuses such hawkish proclivities, and underscoring the need to withhold support until they embrace more responsible positions. What I am belatedly discovering, as this campaign season is drawing to a close, is that while such concerns are not without merit, such efforts have ended up contributing to what may be an even bigger problem: the anger, frustration, cynicism, self-righteousness, isolation and other self-defeating tendencies on the left.

It was such attitudes that played a decisive role in the narrow election victories of Richard Nixon over Hubert Humphrey and of George W. Bush over Al Gore and over John Kerry, resulting in horrific consequences to millions of people in the United States and the world. Indeed, it could possibly even lead this coming week to the most disastrous outcome of all: the election of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton.

It was twelve years ago, at the 2004 Tikkun conference near Washington, DC and in a subsequent edition of the magazine, when I bitterly attacked Democratic nominee John Kerry—in hindsight, the most progressive candidate the party has nominated since George McGovern—in ways that fed such perspectives. Subsequently, I went on the attack against Hillary Clinton during both of her campaigns for president.

In my articles, interviews, and speeches during Senator Kerry's run for the presidency, I launched strident attacks against him for abandoning his anti-war principles which first got him elected to Congress twenty years earlier and accused him of embracing essentially a neoconservative world view. As I would later argue during Clinton's two presidential runs as well, I insisted that anyone who voted to authorize the Iraq War and who defended Israeli violations of international legal norms were militarists who sought to undermine the United Nations Charter and the post-World War II international legal order and were therefore too dangerous to be allowed to become president.

Only very recently have I begun to question such an approach, both in terms of its political impact, but also on the assumptions that led to such anger and bitterness.

I am a child of the immediate post-WWII era, in which a new international legal order was established through the UN Charter, the Nuremberg Principles, and the Geneva Conventions forbidding nations from invading and occupying other countries and from expanding their territory and colonizing other lands by force. Almost exactly sixty years ago, in early November 1956—the very week I was born—a Republican president successfully forced Britain, France, and Israel to end their invasion of Egypt and soon thereafter to completely withdraw from the territories they had occupied. Despite sharing their opposition towards the Nasser regime, President Dwight Eisenhower was willing to challenge those democratic pro-Western governments because he recognized that such actions were illegal and counter-productive. He noted that it would be wrong for the United States to have so vehemently criticized the Soviet Union's illegal aggression against Hungary, which took place less than two weeks earlier, while defending three U.S. allies doing the same thing. If the prohibitions against aggressive war enshrined in the UN Charter were not consistently upheld, he argued, such important international legal principles which grew out of the carnage of World War II would not survive, resulting in ever more bloodshed.

My critiques of Clinton, therefore—like my critiques of Kerry twelve years earlier—were never based on a radical or leftist perspective. Though sometimes strident in tone, they have always been rooted in moderate mid-20th century liberalism. It has been what I saw as a rejection of these principles and her embrace of what appeared to be a 19th century belief in the right of conquest—as evidenced by her support for President Bush on Iraq, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on Palestine, and Moroccan King Mohammed on Western Sahara—which made me so hostile.

I say “apparent” rejection, because I now realize that I may have been reading too much into her positions. Three people whom I trust and who have been personally close with John Kerry for decades believe I was wrong in making similar accusations against him back in 2004. They insist he was convinced that supporting the invasion of Iraq and a number of illegal Israeli actions was not in fact rooted in a rejection of international legal norms, but because he was convinced that taking such positions would help him politically. Though Clinton has tended to demonstrate a more hawkish predisposition than Kerry, it may still be unfair to assume the worst in terms of her worldview as well.

The former Kerry associates and others I have talked with who have worked with nationally-prominent Democrats have reminded me that rarely does a politician subscribe to a consistent doctrine. It appears likely that Kerry and Clinton voted in favor of invading Iraq not out of a rejection of the UN Charter, even though they likely recognized it was indeed a flagrant violation. Nor did they necessarily believe the United States or any other country has the right to invade a country that is no threat to us, even though that is exactly what they were voting to approve. Nor was it likely for any of the other nefarious reasons for which I have repeatedly accused them over the years.

As an academic and policy analyst, it is easy to take a series of decisions by a politician and thereby assume that, that taken as a group, those decisions show that the politician *must* be an adherent to a certain doctrine such as neo-conservatism. In reality, most politicians operate in an environment in which almost everyone with whom they work looks at each new decision from an extremely narrow perspective which rarely comes from a conscious ideological perspective. There are certain assumptions, what is often referred to as “conventional wisdom”—such as the idea of “American exceptionalism,” which can be difficult to challenge.

According to knowledgeable observers on Capitol Hill during the fall of 2002, there were deep divisions among both Kerry and Clinton advisors as to whether the senators should support the Iraq war resolution. Neither side actually thought the war was necessary. Nor would any of their advisors likely supported the idea of invading Iraq had Kerry or Clinton been president. Indeed, there were serious doubts regarding the Bush administration’s claims regarding Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction” and other claims used to justify such an unprecedented military action. Yet because they realized that Iraq was in fact quite weak militarily, they figured it would be a quick and easy U.S. victory and thus the war would be popular with the American public. (Indeed, in the year prior to when it became apparent that U.S. forces were going to be stuck in a long-term counter-insurgency operation, polls showed a solid majority of Americans supported the decision to invade the country even when it was apparent that there were no “weapons of mass destruction” or ties to Al-Qaeda after all.)

Both Kerry and Clinton were eventually convinced by these advisors that because virtually all Republican members of the House and Senate, along with at least a few Democrats, were going to vote in favor of the war resolution, thereby guaranteeing a solid majority of support, the authorization would pass regardless of how they voted. They would not be able to stop the war. Seeing how voting against authorization of the Gulf War in January 1990—a war that proved to be popular with the American public—had ended up hurting the presidential ambitions of a number of Senate Democrats and having presidential ambitions themselves, they were advised that failing to support the younger Bush’s war resolution would severely damage their White House hopes, while opposing it wouldn’t make any positive difference.

As a result, rather than their vote to authorize this illegal and unnecessary military operation constituting a conscious break with twentieth century international law, as I have repeatedly alleged, it now appears to have simply been seen as the safer vote.

Ironically, given the disaster that the war became, it ended up so alienating progressive voters, many of us refused to vote for Kerry in the November 2004 election, resulting in his narrow loss to Bush, the one most responsible for the war, and costing Kerry the presidency. Similarly, Clinton’s support for the war led to her unexpected defeat for the 2008 Democratic nomination against Barack Obama, who repeatedly contrasted her vote with his prescient opposition to the invasion and occupation in the course of that close primary campaign.

Since I had predicted on the pages of *Tikkun*, in a cover story in *The Nation*, and in quite a few other places that the invasion of Iraq would be a disaster—as did quite a number of Middle East scholars, State Department veterans, and other familiar with the region—I had mistakenly assumed that Kerry and Clinton had supported the invasion despite knowing of the

consequences. Instead, it appears that my overstating their malevolence was in part a result of my overestimating their wisdom. As Kerry later lamented in regard to Bush's handling of the occupation, "I had no idea he would fuck up so badly!"

Another thing that confused me was the fact that, for nearly two years in the case of Kerry and three years in the case of Clinton, they continued to defend their war vote, even after the major reasons they gave for supporting the authorization—such as Iraq's supposed possession of "weapons of mass destruction"—had proven to be unfounded. For years, I interpreted this as a kind of an acknowledgement that they did not support the war out of concern for U.S. security, as they had claimed, but were essentially admitting that they did it for the sake of oil and empire.

Yet quite a number of Capitol Hill veterans have reminded me of how difficult it is politically for elected officials to admit they have made a mistake. Indeed, despite Kerry's insistence during the 2004 campaign that he only opposed the way that the Bush administration was conducting the occupation, not the actual decision to invade and occupy the country, he was still attacked as a "flip-flopper." Recognizing that it is even more difficult for a female member of Congress to change her position may explain why Clinton has never apologized for her war vote and only finally acknowledged her "regrets" as late as 2014, when she was gearing up for her second presidential run.

Not Just Iraq

For years, I rejected claims that their support for the Iraq War was an aberration because of a number of other positions which seemed to reinforce my sense that they were backing a radical departure from longstanding international legal norms. An example I repeatedly cited was Kerry and Clinton's attacks against the 2004 International Court of Justice ruling against Israel's separation barrier being built in the occupied West Bank, in which they declared that the unanimous (save for the U.S. judge) decision was a denial of Israel's right to self-defense. Since the World Court decision explicitly upheld Israel's right to build such a separation barrier along its internationally-recognized border—challenging only its construction inside occupied territory as a means of effectively incorporating illegal settlement blocs into Israel—I argued that Kerry and Clinton therefore opposed the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention to territories under foreign belligerent occupation. Indeed, their insistence that such questions should be handled by Israeli courts led me to argue that, since domestic courts only have jurisdiction within the sovereign territory of their respective countries, Kerry and Clinton were therefore claiming that the occupied West Bank was part of Israel and, as a result, allying themselves with Israel's hard right.

This was reinforced by their endorsement of right-wing Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's "convergence plan," which included the annexation of large swathes of the occupied West Bank into Israel. I therefore concluded that both Kerry and Clinton were rejecting the United Nations Charter and other longstanding international legal principles regarding the inadmissibility of the expansion of any country's territory by force. As a result, in speeches, articles, broadcast interviews, and more, I insisted that having either Kerry or Clinton as president would result not only in undermining the UN Charter and international law, but in having the United States and its allies invade and annex all or part of other countries at will.

Similarly, their defenses of Israeli attacks on civilian targets in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Lebanon and their attacks on reputable human rights groups and international jurists who documented them convinced me that they believed killing civilians was okay and that U.S. allies—and presumably the United States itself—could commit war crimes at will in the name of "fighting terrorism."

In reality, from what I have subsequently learned, is that they recognized that making statements and sponsoring non-binding Senate resolutions opposing the World Court ruling, supporting Sharon's expansionist agenda, and defending Israeli war crimes had no legal standing, that relatively few Americans particularly knew or cared about the particulars of international law, and that taking any other position would be depicted as being "anti-Israel." Though a majority of Americans would presumably oppose such right-wing positions, the vast majority of those who cared about or were even aware of their statements and resolutions supported them. Again, it was a political decision, not one revealing a categorical rejection of international legal norms as I had projected.

Implications

Notwithstanding all of the above, it is still important to recognize that a President Hillary Clinton will likely be far more prone to support military intervention, downplay human rights, and ignore international law than President Obama has done or a President Kerry would have done. Based on statements she has made in the course of her campaign and the orientation of many on her foreign policy team, she could end up being the most hawkish Democratic president since Lyndon Johnson—if not James K. Polk.

However, this is nowhere near a certainty. If Hillary Clinton is anywhere near as opportunistic and willing to bend with the political wind as many of her opponents claim, then the responsibility belongs to those of us who support human rights and international law to make it at least as problematic politically to oppose such principles as it is to support them. Whatever proclivities she may have personally, her default position has been on the right because the political forces pushing her in that direction have been stronger than those of us pushing her to the left.

She supported the Iraq War because, at the time of the October 2002 vote, the forces pushing for war were more powerful. She has defended Likud policies in Israel for the same reason. The answer, then, is not to refuse to vote for her on Tuesday and risk the election of the far more dangerous Republican nominee, but to challenge her hawkish proclivities after her election.

Democratic officials have rarely led when it comes to progressive foreign policy. They will tend to go along with the perspectives of the national security establishment. In most Democratic administrations, they have generally had to be dragged kicking and screaming by their constituents to do otherwise. We were indeed able to force many Democratic elected officials to embrace more progressive positions than they had originally regarding Vietnam, Central America, South Africa, East Timor, globalization, Iraq, and other issues through large-scale mobilization. Already, Clinton has found it necessary to downplay her hawkish positions on a number of issues in response to the growing anti-interventionist sentiment within the party.

As result, it is up to us to prevent future Iraqs and continued support for allied war criminals. And those of us whose bitterness, frustration, and sense of betrayal by hawkish Democrats has contributed to the cynicism of so many progressives has made it all the more difficult to do so.

Yes, it is critical to challenge the pathetic excuses many of Clinton's supporters have made for her Iraq War vote (i.e., it was *not* about simply "getting the inspectors back in," it is *not* true that most Congressional Democrats supported the resolution, it would have been an illegal and unnecessary disaster even if Iraq really did have "weapons of mass destruction.") And it is important that the excitement over the long-overdue election of a woman president not blind us to her patriarchal militaristic tendencies.

However, we must not lead people to think things are hopeless, that a President Hillary Clinton is hell-bent to pursue a Bush-Cheney kind of foreign policy regardless. We must recognize that not only is it important who we elect, but the choices the American people give them. Building a movement that could lead to a more progressive foreign policy agenda is difficult if it is driven by the kind of bitterness and cynicism I have too often displayed on these pages and elsewhere. We indeed have a right to be disappointed and upset. However, we must not let these emotions cloud our thinking. Movements for change have never succeeded on such bitter feelings. They need to have an accurate analysis, a clear vision of alternatives, and an effective strategy for change.

While it is tough to do so if one naively assumes the best of a Democratic administration, it is also difficult to develop if one assumes the worst of intentions. It is challenging to empower people to work for change if you put your energy into constantly ranting about how liberal Democrats who take foreign policy positions which show little concern for human rights and international law are inherently evil and therefore do not deserve our vote, even if the result is the election of right-wing Republicans who are far more dangerous. Instead, we must recognize that Hillary Clinton and other Democratic elected officials are political animals under constant pressure by powerful national security elites and other special interests who are only willing to defy such pressure if there is a sufficient counter-veiling force.

It is up to us to make that happen.