

Et Tu, Bernie?

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There are two versions of Bernie Sanders. There is the old Bernie Sanders, who mounted a quixotic campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination as a democratic socialist who refused corporate cash and excoriated corporate Democrats. And there is the new Bernie Sanders, who dutifully plays by the party's rules, courts billionaires, refused to speak out in support of the lawsuit brought against the Democratic National Committee (DNC) for rigging the primaries against him and endorses Democratic candidates who espouse the economic and political positions he once denounced.

Sanders' metamorphosis began in December 2015 when he saw the groundswell of support for his candidacy and thought he could win the nomination. He dropped the fiery, socialist rhetoric that first characterized his campaign—he had given whole speeches on democratic socialism shortly after he announced his candidacy in May 2015. He hired establishment Democratic Party consultants such as Tad Devine, who, ironically, played a role in the creation of the superdelegates that helped fix the nomination victory of Hillary Clinton. He would spend tens of millions of the some \$230 million he raised during the campaign on professional consultants. When it was clear he would lose, Sanders and his influential campaign manager, Jeff Weaver, began coordinating closely with the Clinton campaign. By May of 2016, Sanders had muted his criticisms of Clinton and surrendered to the Democratic Party machine. He has been an obedient servant of the party establishment ever since.

Sanders was always problematic. His refusal to condemn imperialism and the war industry—a condemnation central to the message of the socialist leader Eugene V. Debs—meant his socialism was stillborn. It is impossible to be a socialist without being an anti-imperialist. But at least Sanders addressed the reality of social inequality, which the Republican and Democratic establishment pretended did not exist. He returned political discourse to reality. And he restored the good name of socialism.

Weaver and Clinton's campaign manager, Robby Mook, built a de facto alliance in the weeks leading up to the convention. As the convention was about to begin, [WikiLeaks exposed](#) the Clinton campaign's nonaggression pact with the Sanders campaign. Many Sanders delegates, by the time they arrived in Philadelphia in July 2016 for the convention, were enraged at the theft and fraud orchestrated by the DNC. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, the DNC chair and the architect of the theft, stepped down. Some DNC staff members were fired.

Sanders delegates were deluged on the eve of the convention with messages from the Sanders campaign to be

respectful, not to disrupt the nominating process and to support Clinton, messages that often turned out to have been written by Clinton staffers such as Mook and then sent out under Sanders' name. Sanders was a dutiful sheepdog, herding his disgruntled supporters into the embrace of the Democratic Party machine.

The scope of fraud in the primaries was breathtaking. Donna Brazile, who took over the DNC after Wasserman Schultz was removed, later revealed the existence of a joint fund-raising agreement among the DNC, the Hillary Victory Fund, and Hillary for America.

“The agreement—signed by Amy Dacey, the former CEO of the DNC, and Robby Mook with a copy to Marc Elias—specified that in exchange for raising money and investing in the DNC, Clinton would control the party's finances, strategy, and all the money raised,” Brazile wrote. “Her campaign had the right of refusal of who would be the party communications director, and it would make final decisions on all the other staff. The DNC also was required to consult with the campaign about all other staffing, budgeting, data, analytics, and mailings.”

Sanders, although he knew by September 2016 that the process was rigged, said nothing to his supporters. He was tacitly complicit in the cover-up. It was left to one of the architects of the fraud, Brazile, to reveal the scam. But by then it was too late.

Sanders' capitulation in the face of the overwhelming evidence of the rigging of the nomination process was political and moral cowardice. He missed his historical moment, one that should have seen him denounce a corrupt, corporate-dominated party elite and walk away to build a third-party candidacy. Sanders will never recover politically. To see the future, he has only to look at the campaign events he held on behalf of Clinton after her nomination. His crowds dwindled from thousands to a few hundred after he endorsed Clinton. Data collected by Harvard Harris Poll charted the downward spiral of his favorability ratings as he became more and more obsequious to the Democratic Party establishment. His 2020 campaign for the presidency will be a pale reflection of 2016. His “political revolution” slogan has been exposed as another empty public relations gimmick.

If we are to defy corporate power, which is vicious when it feels threatened, we need leaders with the fortitude to withstand the onslaught. Debs never sold out. He was sent to prison in 1919 and ran for president in 1920 from his prison cell. If we are not willing to pay this price we better not play the game.

“There is but one thing you have to be concerned about, and that is that you keep foursquare with the principles of the international Socialist movement,” Debs said in a June 16, 1918, speech in Canton, Ohio, that led to his being sentenced to 10 years in prison on a charge of violating the Espionage Act. “It is only when you begin to compromise that trouble begins. So far as I am concerned, it does not matter what others may say, or think, or do, as long as I am sure that I am right with myself and the cause. There are so many who seek refuge in the popular side of a great question. As a Socialist, I have long since learned how to stand alone.”

Those who support Sanders' capitulation, including his high-priced establishment consultants, will argue that politics is about compromise and the practical. This is true. But playing politics in a system that is not democratic is about becoming part of the charade. We need to overthrow this system, not placate it. Revolution is almost always a doomed enterprise, one that succeeds only because its leaders eschew the practical and are endowed with what the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr calls “[sublime madness](#).” Sanders lacks this sublime madness. The quality defined Debs. And for this reason Sanders is morally and temperamentally unfit to lead this fight.

“I never had much faith in leaders,” Debs said. “I am willing to be charged with almost anything, rather than to be charged with being a leader. I am suspicious of leaders, and especially of the intellectual variety. Give me the rank and file every day in the week. If you go to the city of Washington, and you examine the pages of

the Congressional Directory, you will find that almost all of those corporation lawyers and cowardly politicians, members of Congress, and misrepresentatives of the masses—you will find that almost all of them claim, in glowing terms, that they have risen from the ranks to places of eminence and distinction. I am very glad I cannot make that claim for myself. I would be ashamed to admit that I had risen from the ranks. When I rise it will be with the ranks, and not from the ranks.”

Heather Gautney, the author of “Crashing the Party: From the Bernie Sanders Campaign to a Progressive Movement” and an associate professor of sociology at Fordham University, has detailed the numerous ploys used by the Democratic Party establishment to deny Sanders the nomination. These tactics included the party elites’ appointment of 718 superdelegates—Democratic senators, governors and members of Congress, party officials, dozens of registered lobbyists or “shadow lobbyists” and wealthy corporate donors. More than 400 were pledged to Clinton before Sanders announced his campaign. The party also banned those who were registered as independent voters from voting in many primaries, although the taxpayers pay for the primaries. It orchestrated the theft of the vote in caucuses such as Nevada’s. And it limited the number of debates to deny exposure to Sanders. Brazile passed on the CNN debate questions in advance to the Clinton campaign.

“Over a third of under-30 voters—Sanders’s core constituency—weren’t registered to any political party,” [Gautney writes](#) in an article in The Guardian. And when they got to the polls they were turned away. In the New York primary, she notes, “between 3 and 4 million ‘unaffiliated’ voters were disenfranchised due to a statute that required changing one’s party affiliation 25 days prior to the previous general election.”

The Democratic Party in New York in the upcoming primary requires unaffiliated voters to register as Democrats 11 months before the primary, a condition that will cripple the progressive candidacy of Cynthia Nixon for governor. Sanders, bowing to the demands of the party elite, has refused to endorse Nixon’s bid against Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

Gautney calls the system broken, but it works exactly as it is designed to work. The Democratic Party elites have been refining the mechanisms and exclusionary rules since the presidential election, along with purging the party of progressives, to ensure that an insurgent candidate like Sanders will never get close to the nomination. Sanders, no doubt, thinks he can overcome these obstacles by being obedient to the party hierarchy. This is a terrible miscalculation.

In state after state, as Gautney details, Sanders was systematically robbed. And he and any other insurgent can expect the same treatment in 2020. Yes, the party formed a tripartite Unity Reform Commission with representatives from the Clinton campaign and the Sanders campaign to review the rules. But the Unity Reform Commission is cosmetic. It cannot make changes to DNC rules, only recommendations, which have to be approved by the rules and bylaws committee and the DNC members. The rules and bylaws committee and the DNC are stacked with lobbyists, consultants, establishment and Clinton loyalists, and people, like Brazile, who rigged the election against Sanders. They retain control over any changes to the rules. The public has no say. There is not one Sanders supporter on the committee. The final recommendations submitted by the commission said nothing about the chief source of corruption that grips the Democratic Party—corporate and billionaire money. It didn’t mention campaign finance reform. Any attempt at reform is meaningless until corporations and billionaires stop bankrolling the party.

The Democratic Party is neither democratic nor in any real sense a political party. It is a corporate mirage. The members of its base can, at best, select preapproved candidates and act as props in a choreographed party convention. Voters have zero influence on party politics.

“I’ll never forget watching the primary votes being counted for Michigan, one of the key states that decided the 2016 election,” Gautney wrote in The Guardian. “Sanders’ ‘pledged delegate count’—which reflected the number of votes he received from rank-and-file Democrats—exceeded Clinton’s by four. But after the superdelegates cast their ballots, the roll call registered ‘Clinton 76, Sanders 67.’ ”

“In Indiana, Sanders won the vote 44 to 39, but, after the super delegates had their say, Clinton was granted 46 delegates, versus Sanders’ 44,” she wrote. “In New Hampshire, where Sanders won the vote by a gaping margin (60% to 38%) and set a record for the largest number of votes ever, the screen read ‘16 Sanders, 16 Clinton.’ ”

Sanders, who calls himself an independent, caucuses as a Democrat. The Democratic Party determines his assignments in the Senate. Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York, who oversees Wall Street campaign donations to Democratic candidates, offered to make Sanders the head of the Senate Budget Committee if the Democrats won control of the Senate, in exchange for the Vermont senator’s support of Clinton and the hawkish, corporate neoliberal Democratic candidates running for the House and Senate. Sanders, swallowing whatever pride he has left, is now a loyal party apparatchik, squandering his legacy and his integrity. He routinely sends out appeals to raise money for party-selected candidates, including the 2016 Democratic senatorial candidates Katie McGinty in Pennsylvania, Maggie Hassan in New Hampshire, Ted Strickland in Ohio and Catherine Cortez Masto in Nevada. Sanders made a blanket endorsement of every Democrat running in the 2017 election, including the worst corporate Democrats.

There was about \$6 million left from the Sanders campaign, and it was used to form an organization called Our Revolution in August 2016. The organization was set up ostensibly to fund and support progressive candidates. It was soon taken over by Weaver, who ensured that it was not registered as a political action committee (PAC), a group that can give money directly to campaigns. It was set up as a 501(c)(4), a group prohibited from having direct contact with candidates and giving donations directly to candidates. The 501(c)(4) status allowed it to take and mask donations from wealthy donors such as [Tom Steyer](#). Sanders’ decision to quietly solicit contributions from the billionaire oligarchs who funded the Hillary Clinton campaign and control the Democratic Party betrayed the core promise of his campaign. Yet, even as he [created a mechanism to take money](#) from wealthy donors he continued to write at the bottom of his emails “Paid for by Bernie Sanders, not the billionaires.”

Eight of the 13 staffers of Our Revolution resigned in protest. The organization is now adding a PAC.

Meanwhile, the DNC rules and bylaws committee has recommended a rule that any candidate in a primary be required to demonstrate he or she is a “faithful” Democrat. This loyalty test, intentionally vague, gives the DNC, which will consider the rule change in August, the power to disqualify candidates and [block them from appearing on the ballot](#). If the party elites feel threatened, they can nuke any candidacy, including one mounted by Sanders, before it even begins.

The Democratic Party elites in an open process and without corporate backing would not be in power. They are creations of the corporate state. They are not about to permit reforms that will see themselves toppled. Yes, this tactic of fixing elections and serving corporate power may ensure a second term for Donald Trump and election of fringe candidates who pledge their loyalty to Trump, but the Democratic elites would rather sink the ship of state than give up their first-class cabins.

The Democratic Party is as much to blame for Trump as the Republicans. It is a full partner in the perpetuation of our political system of legalized bribery, along with the [deindustrialization](#) of the country, austerity programs, social inequality, mass incarceration and the assault on basic civil liberties. It deregulates Wall Street. It prosecutes the endless and futile wars that are draining the federal budget. We must mount independent political movements and form our own parties to sweep the Democratic and Republican elites aside or be complicit in cementing into place a corporate tyranny. Sanders won’t help us. He has made that clear. We must do it without him.

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