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Golden Oldie: Michael Lind On The Hegemonic War Against Social Security

by: [Paul Rosenberg](#)
 Fri Nov 12, 2010 at 10:30

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Note: While looking back for something else, I stumbled over this diary, and realized that it neatly filled a hole. I would have been remiss not to talk about this sooner rather than later in the fight that's just roared back to the front burner. But here I'd already done it, and linked to a great piece by Michael Lind as well.

Today, the trustees who oversee Social Security and Medicare issue their annual report, and Michael Lind has an **excellent preparedness guide** posted at *Salon* to help you deal with the inevitable propaganda assault. It's got the catchy title, "Let's cut Social Security to pay for banker bailouts!" because that is, at bottom what the privatizers are all about this time around, as Lind explains:

By the way, the huge expansion of the deficit and debt in the last year has had nothing to do with Social Security (without which not only retirees but the economy as a whole would have been much worse off). Indeed, thanks to the modest stimulus and the much larger bailouts, the contribution of Social Security to long-term deficits -- always pretty small -- has just gotten a lot smaller in relative terms. Anyone who says that the costs of the bailout mean we must now cut Social Security is literally saying that in order to bail out the bankers who created this crisis we need to slash benefits for American retirees.

But in addition to a hand-guide to the standard bogus arguments, Lind includes some of the backstory about how the modern assault on Social Security got its start:

Who is behind this disinformation campaign? The deficit hawks include billionaires like Ross Perot and Pete Peterson, Republican conservatives, libertarians and "fiscally conservative" Blue Dog Democrats. This coalition has campaigned against Social Security for more than a quarter of a century.

In 1983, in the *Cato Journal* published by the libertarian Cato Institute, Stuart Butler, a transplanted British Thatcherite, and Peter Germanis published their manifesto "Achieving a 'Leninist' Strategy." Small-government conservatives, they argued, should learn from Lenin, who sought to shape history rather than wait patiently for the inevitable evolution of socialism: "Unlike many other socialists at the time, Lenin recognized that fundamental change is contingent both upon a movement's ability to create a focused political coalition and upon its success in isolating and weakening its opponents."

You really do have to ask yourself why it is that the right is so in love with authoritarian Soviet leaders. Lenin in this case, Trotsky as the father of neo-conservatism. When it gets right down to it, they really have no use at all for Edmund Burke. And why should they? Once Social Security and the rest of the New Deal and Great Society institutions became part of the organic fabric of American life, Burke would have defended keeping them in place. And that would *never* do for this rapacious crowd of sociopaths.

Lind's account continues on the flip

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Our two Leninist libertarians went on to argue: "First, we must recognize that there is a firm coalition behind the present Social Security system, and that this coalition has been very effective in winning political concessions for many years. Before Social Security can be reformed [destroyed], we must begin to divide this coalition and cast doubt on the picture of reality it presents to the general public." Because the "political power of the elderly will only increase in the future," Butler and Germanis argued that any plan to phase out Social Security should assure the elderly and near-elderly that they would get their benefits: "By accepting this principle, we may succeed in neutralizing the most powerful element of the coalition that opposes structural reform."

Of course, it's worth noting what's totally irrelevant to this calculus—that is, whether or not the "firm coalition behind the present Social Security system" actually represents the overwhelming majority of the American people, as well as basic fiscal prudence. In short, one must ask if regarding Social Security as supported by a "firm coalition" is not in itself a symptom of delusional thinking, which is incapable of seeing *anything* in terms *other than* coalition politics. My point here is that those who do not believe in the *existence* of the common good (as opposed to special interest benefits) are ontologically incapable of serving it. This was true of Stalin, and it's equally true of Stalinist movement conservatives.

Lind continues:

While pursuing a divide-and-rule policy to "neutralize" the elderly and other supporters of Social Security, the authors of the Leninist strategy called for libertarians to build up a counter-alliance consisting of institutions that could profit from the privatization of Social Security: "That coalition should consist of not only those who will reap benefit from the IRA-based private system ... but also the banks, insurance companies, and other institutions that will gain from providing such plans to the public [emphasis added]." They continue: "The business community, and financial institutions in particular, would be an obvious element in this constituency. Not only does business have a great deal to gain from a reform effort designed to stimulate private savings, but it also has the power to be politically influential and to be instrumental in mounting a public education campaign."

There is a very clear and obvious asymmetry here: the existing system benefits the nation as a whole, as well as tens of millions of individuals who receive modest, but utterly vital monthly checks—both for retirement, and survivor benefits. The opposing coalition would consist entirely of affluent special interests. It's a classic case of organizing the few to pillage the many. It's what *real* conservatism has always been about, dating back to ancient Sumeria and the earliest Egyptian pharaohs—if not beyond.

Lind Again:

In true cunning Leninist fashion, the opponents of Social Security would disguise their revolutionary goal by pretending to be interested only in modest, piecemeal reforms: "The first element consists of a campaign to achieve small legislative changes that embellish the private IRA system, making it in practice a small-scale Social Security system that can supplement the federal system." Only when all of the pieces were in place -- when the concerns of the elderly had been "neutralized" by reassuring words, when banks and other businesses seeking to cash in on Social Security privatization were part of the libertarian alliance, and when business-funded campaigns of "education" [that is, propaganda] had convinced most Americans that Social Security was untrustworthy, would the Leninist right reveal its true colors: "If these objectives are achieved, we will meet the next financial crisis in Social Security with a private alternative ready in the wings -- an alternative with which the public is familiar and comfortable, and one that has the backing of a powerful political force."

Hello *Shock Doctrine*!

I mean, really. Is this the ultimate smoking gun, or what? Twenty-six years ago, Butler and Germanis, in a journal they must have expected few if any non-libertarians to read, laid out the elements of the dishonest and cynical campaign against Social Security that the right has pursued ever since, right up to George W. Bush's support in his second term for the partial privatization of Social

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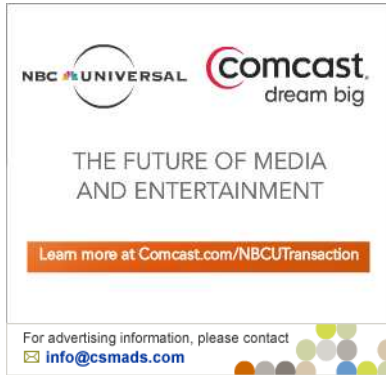
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Security. Stuart Butler is still at it; only last year he called, again, for abolishing Social Security as an entitlement and turning it into a program for the poor that would be funded or not from year to year at the whim of Congress.

You need to read the whole thing, but this should be enough to give you the flavor and to explain what I take to be the moral: These are deeply immoral people, and all who make these sorts of arguments are either evil or dupes. There is no good faith negotiating with the likes of these, and those who believe otherwise are themselves second-order dupes.

Hegemonic warfare is no more a disinterested marketplace of ideas than Stalin was the heir of Benjamin Franklin, and Tom Paine.



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Ross Perot (0.00 / 0)

My recollection is that Perot's main social security recommendation was eliminating the cap on payroll taxes. Perot was popular with a lot of conservatives (probably due to his folksy mannerisms and his efforts related to Vietnam War POW/MIAs,) but aside from his deficit obsession, he was left of both Clinton and Bush Sr. on most issues. He was probably the most leftist major presidential candidate since McGovern.

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by: [miasmo](#) @ Fri Nov 12, 2010 at 13:13:23 PM CST

Aside From That Mrs. Lincoln, How Did You Like The Play??? (0.00 / 0)

Perot's entire campaign was deficit reduction. With some serious bashing of illegal immigrants thrown in--at least at the grassroots level. Man those folks were angry!

"You know what they say -- those of us who fail history... doomed to repeat it in summer school." -- Buffy The Vampire Slayer, Season 6, Episode 3

by: [Paul Rosenberg](#) @ Fri Nov 12, 2010 at 14:07:03 PM CST
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liberal on most issues (0.00 / 0)

Yeah, I get your point. He talked a lot about the deficit, and he opposed NAFTA. I don't remember the immigrant bashing, but maybe I missed it. But on most issues - federal funding of abortion, gay rights, environmental regulations, education (especially early childhood education,) etc. - his positions were liberal positions.

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You've Got A Point (4.00 / 1)

And I don't recall him being big on immigrant-bashing. But his followers were. Particularly those I saw here in California.

The thing is, his big two were NAFTA & blancing the budget. The former was good, and both party's ignored him (not

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