

Chicago Tribune

Column: Trump's attack on socialism is no help to capitalism

Steve Chapman

February 8, 2019

Socialism has always been a tough sell in the United States. While socialist parties won substantial support in many Western countries over the course of the 20th century, they were confined to the fringes here. In 1932, in the depths of the Great Depression, the Socialist Party presidential candidate got just 2 percent of the vote.

But the outlook has brightened lately — as demonstrated by the electoral achievements of Bernie Sanders, who won 23 primaries and caucuses in the 2016 Democratic presidential campaign, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, elected to Congress last year. Both wear the label proudly.

Now, though, socialists have gotten a boost from an even more prominent politician. “We are alarmed by the new calls to adopt socialism in our country,” said President Donald Trump in his State of the Union address. “Tonight, we renew our resolve that America will never be a socialist country.”

Capitalism deserves better defenders than this. It has been the greatest engine for the conquest of poverty and suffering in history. It has led to the mass production of marvels that our ancestors could not have imagined.

It has fostered personal freedom, broken down oppressive traditions and aided in the spread of democracy. Even European social democracies understand that capitalists and markets are indispensable. There is no constituency in America for nationalizing factories, financial institutions or farms.

Given Trump’s low standing among voters, particularly young ones, his attack on socialism — or “socialism” — amounts to a huge gift to the left. For fans of capitalism, it should evoke embarrassment.

Democrats have grown more liberal, but that shift is not because they have been gorging on Karl Marx. It’s partly because some of them have a shaky grasp of economics — and an aversion to its inconvenient truths.

But it’s partly because some social problems have gone unsolved by those leaders who defend free-market capitalism. And it’s partly because conservatives have grown more addicted to rigid ideology and less open to pragmatic remedies.

You could denounce public roads and bridges, state universities, community hospitals and national parks as “socialism.” But the question is not whether they are owned by the government. The question is whether they work — and work better than possible private alternatives.

Barack Obama proposed a health care overhaul based on a plan once championed by the conservative Heritage Foundation. It relied heavily on measures to make private insurance

available and affordable to more people. But not a single Republican in Congress voted for it. Many of them reviled it as socialistic.

In fact, it was a classic specimen of welfare-state capitalism, trying to regulate private markets for social purposes. No true socialist liked it.

It would be easier to argue that “Medicare for all” amounts to a dangerous socialist scheme. But the same claim was made about the original Medicare. In 1964, Ronald Reagan predicted that if it came to pass, Americans would “spend our sunset years telling our children and our children’s children what it once was like in America when men were free.”

Somehow most Americans don’t feel enslaved by a program that ensures health care for the elderly. Will Wilkinson, vice president for research at the Niskanen Center in Washington, notes that “some of the freest countries in the world, and the most capitalist, have single-payer systems.”

He’s right. In the latest Economic Freedom of the World report, co-published by the Cato Institute and the Fraser Institute, the freest nation is New Zealand — which has a single-payer approach akin to “Medicare-for-all.” Second is Switzerland, which provides universal coverage through a system reminiscent of Obamacare.

Conservatives depict any expansion of government as a step on the path toward socialist dystopia. But they slight the value of government action to correct failures of the market — such as voluminous carbon emissions, which produce climate change.

They also disparage the importance of providing reliable help to people who are in dire need for reasons largely beyond their control, whose numbers exceed the ability of private charity to help. Government programs should be judged not just on the costs they impose but also on the benefits they yield.

To warn of the onslaught of socialism in response to any proposed government initiative is to expose your intellectual bankruptcy. The better approach is to spell out exactly why it is doomed to fail or backfire — as so many government programs are.

If the best argument you make against a policy idea is that it’s socialist, you shouldn’t bother. You’ve already lost the debate.