



A Green New Deal ignites an old red scare

Dan Zak

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In February, a congressman from Utah started a caucus. This is not hard to do. You just file some paperwork. There are hundreds of caucuses in Congress. There's a wine caucus. There's a horse caucus. There's a Mongolia caucus. There are caucuses for hockey, for shellfish, for unexploded ordnance. Rep. Chris Stewart, R, wanted an anti-socialism caucus.

Stewart came up with the idea after watching some Democrats withhold applause for one of President Donald Trump's big lines during the State of the Union in January: "Tonight, we renew our resolve that American will never. Be. A socialist. Country." Republicans sprang to their feet and craned their necks at Democrats to see who would defend capitalism by slapping their hands together and chanting "U-S-A." How could anyone scowl at such a line? Stewart thought to himself, looking toward the perturbed figures of Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y, both democratic socialists.

Two days later, Ocasio-Cortez unveiled the Green New Deal, a plan to confront climate change by correcting "systemic injustices" and shifting the American economy away from fossil fuels. The move electrified debate over what to do about the climate, but Stewart looked at the word "Green" and saw red. In the text of the resolution, he sniffed out socialist ideology cloaked in environmental concern.

Over the past century as the United States unleashed and then grappled with its own superpower, Americans have fought over how big our Big Problems are. Faced with economic depression, or systemic racism, or threats to public health, politicians have proposed turning the ship of state by ushering everyone to one side while the government throws its weight against the wheel. And when they do, other politicians start talking about socialism:

The government is not our master and commander.

We're not all meant to be rowing in unison.

Yes, the climate is changing. But must we abandon our traditions and change with it?

Stewart's Utah district is mostly nature and public land: salt flats and ski resorts and national parks and forests. The Republican wants to protect these resources; he accepts that the climate is changing and that we are contributing to it. But climate change is not an existential threat, to him. Socialism, on the other hand -

"The government will come into almost every part of everyday life, from energy to transportation to literally what you eat," Stewart says of the Green New Deal from his home in Farmington, between the Great Salt Lake and the Wasatch Mountains. A week after Ocasio-Cortez introduced the resolution - which says the government has a duty to eliminate "greenhouse gas emissions as much as technologically feasible" - Stewart announced his new caucus.

A week and a half after the State of the Union, Stewart's office put out a news release announcing his new caucus. Socialism, it warned, "is back in fashion." Socialists "want to destroy freedom, democracy and the rule of law," and "the Anti-Socialism Caucus will play a part in how we will defeat socialism once again."

Climate change is another one of our Big Problems, perhaps the biggest of all - new and uncertain and frightening. Big government gone awry is a more familiar threat, with stock enemies that are easy to spot and marginalize: tree-huggers, social-justice warriors, "radical" Democrats refusing to chant the initials of the country when its threats are enumerated.

The socialism of the Green New Deal would "literally destroy the economy," Larry Kudlow, director of the National Economic Council, said to his fellow conservatives at the last Conservative Political Action Conference.

"Red-baiting, like its ancient forerunner, witch-hunting, is a great game politically," a Washington Post columnist wrote in 1930.

"Join us to put socialism on trial and then convict it," Kudlow said in closing.

The story of America is also the story of its enemies, and a scary one for over a century has been socialism. Socialism, hiding under our beds! Socialism, ready to snatch our money and freedom! Socialism, the gateway to communism!

A week before the 1928 presidential election, Republican candidate Herbert Hoover accused Democratic candidate Al Smith of sponsoring "state socialism," because Smith supported public ownership of hydropower stations.

"Socialism is the cry of special interests," Smith rebutted at a rally in Boston. "It is a subterfuge and a camouflage, and the people are sick and tired of it."

Hoover trounced Smith, and a year later the economy collapsed into the Great Depression. After Franklin Roosevelt wrested the presidency from Hoover, he launched the rescue and reformations of the New Deal - which both Hoover and Smith decried as socialism.

"I knew that in the end they would shackle free men," Hoover said of Roosevelt's New Deal policies in 1936, while urging people to vote him out to "save the soul of America."

Distrust of a ruling power is in our DNA, seeded by founders such as Thomas Jefferson and inflamed by presidents such as Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. Recently, on Twitter, the historian Kevin Kruse listed things that were smeared as socialist during the decades after the New Deal: the polio vaccine and the interstate highway system in the 1950s, the Great Society programs and Civil Rights Act in the 1960s.

Any social program was bad, because any social program was a step toward socialism. Which was a step toward totalitarianism.

"You and I are going to spend our sunset years," Ronald Reagan said in a 1961 ad campaign against the public-health proposals that would eventually become Medicare, "telling our children, and our children's children, what it once was like in America when men were free."

We're all in this together, except when we don't want to be.

Enemies of socialism can be artful with their rhetorical brushstrokes.

A state highway becomes a slippery slope. A red cross becomes a hammer and sickle. An environmental regulation becomes one more clamp on the muscles of capitalism.

Green becomes red.

Even before "environmentalism" became a distinct movement in the 1970s, conservation and public health were treated as secondary to wealth and prosperity. By the first decade of the 20th century, industry was asking Americans to choose between jobs and regulation. People who protested surface mining were communists, coal barons said. The chemical industry labeled Rachel Carson a communist after "Silent Spring" spooked suburbia with its revelations about pesticides in the 1960s. When the Soviet Union broke up, conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer argued that socialists would use environmentalism to smuggle their bankrupt ideas into the American mind.

It is "the perfect escape hatch for the left ... to do precisely what it tried to do under the banner of socialism: allow educated elites to tell everyone else how to live," Krauthammer wrote in 1990, after green parties had blossomed in European politics. "Social control, once asserted on behalf of the working class, is now asserted on behalf of the spotted owl."

In 2008, Václav Klaus, then the president of the Czech Republic, said that socialism was no longer the largest threat to freedom and democracy. "It is, instead, the ambitious, arrogant, unscrupulous ideology of environmentalism," Klaus wrote in his book "Blue Planet in Green Shackles."

What's scarier: a planet in extremis, or socialism? Rising temperatures and seas, or tinkering with the economic system that is contributing to those changes?

Public opinion on both climate change and socialism has morphed almost in tandem. Nearly 60 percent of American adults say that climate change is affecting their local community, according to the Pew Research Center, and 72 percent of Americans consider global warming an important issue, according to a survey from Yale and George Mason universities. Meanwhile, among candidates seeking the Democratic presidential nomination, Sanders is polling second, Gov. Jay Inslee, D-Wash., has made climate change the central issue of his campaign, and Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., has endorsed the Green New Deal and pledged to cease drilling on public lands on her first day in office.

More Americans now view socialism as a system of equality rather than of government control (the opposite was true in 1949, near the start of the Red Scare), and Democrats have a more positive view of socialism than capitalism, according to Gallup. Fewer than half of young adults

in America view capitalism positively. Membership in the Democratic Socialists of America has increased tenfold since early 2016. By last summer, over 400 U.S. mayors - representing 70 million Americans - had agreed to uphold the Paris climate accord from which Trump has vowed to withdraw.

Into this political environment - or, rather, out of it - comes the Green New Deal, which envisions a "new national, social, industrial, and economic mobilization on a scale not seen since World War II and the New Deal era" to confront the most collectivist issue imaginable: the fate of the planet.

Out comes the red paint.

The Green New Deal is a "radical, socialist wish list," the Republican National Committee tweeted April 22. It is "a Trojan horse for socialism," declared the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in February. If the Green New Deal is implemented, "America as we know it will disappear entirely," wrote Justin Haskins on Stopping Socialism, a website launched by a think tank that has tried to undermine climate science (and that was once underwritten by Exxon Mobil).

Jerry Taylor, a "recovering libertarian and passionate moderate," used to wield a brush back when he worked at the Cato Institute. He started his own think tank, the Niskanen Center, partly because he could no longer ignore climate change for ideological reasons. The technique, he says, is to find environmental leaders who make provocative statements and use them to paint the whole movement as fringe or radical.

"The argument they labor to advance is that the greens are simply the environmental wing of the ideological anti-capitalist left," Taylor writes in an email, and that they "represent the movement's true underlying sentiments: if not 'socialist,' than at least 'anti-liberty.' "

The fate of any major government push to fight climate change won't turn just on whether its backers are able to effectively sell it to the American people. It will also depend on whether its opponents will be able to get people to look at something being touted as "green" and see red.

The men with red paintbrushes stopped a push for national health care backed by President Harry Truman, says Ellen Schrecker, a professor emerita of history at Yeshiva University and a leading authority on the Red Scare during the Cold War. Fear of socialism and communism - and the exploitation of that fear - chilled discourse on college campuses, intensified military interventions such as the Vietnam War, underpinned Reagan's arms buildup and hobbled the Clinton administration's push for health-care reform.

The tactic might be less effective today, Schrecker says, because the Soviet threat is now 30 years gone, and because politicians also have other scapegoats, such as immigrants. But the muscle memory is still there.

"When the United States went to war in World War II, the entire country mobilized," Schrecker says, "but people didn't attack rationing as socialism. They wanted to win the war. There are ways in which you can support intensive government action without a negative view of it, but that's not what's happening with climate change because there are interests involved - oil and gas interests, Republicans who want to keep the government small, and they're using socialism because it seems to be a way to mobilize politically."

In the coming months, Stewart, whose top campaign contributor is the oil and gas industry, will throw a kickoff event for his new anti-socialism caucus. He'd like to get prominent executives to speak alongside a Russian dissident who lived under Soviet rule and a Venezuelan who has been crushed by economic collapse in that country, which is governed by a socialist party.

If history is any indication, the speakers will warn about a slippery slope. They'll praise free-market capitalism for lifting billions out of poverty, for being the developing world's best shot at prosperity. They'll speak of an enemy to be thwarted, and a nation whose soul needs saving - concepts far sexier than the subtle transformation of the Great Salt Lake, where the water level has declined 18 feet since 1987, partially due to climate change and other man-made interventions, or the Wasatch Mountains, where the shrinking snowpack is melting faster each spring.