

The Decline of American Liberalism

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The American liberal tradition has become increasingly superfluous with the triumphal ascendancy of a corrosive and reactionary conservative political ideology that was consecrated during the 'Reagan Revolution' of the 1980s and steadily gained influence in every succeeding presidential administration that came to power in the United States. The Reagan revolution, or more precisely, counter-revolution, comprised a concerted effort to roll-back the gains of labor, socialist and progressive struggles around the world on behalf of corporate capital. The offensive is being intensified by the hideous Trump regime.

Domestically, Reagan's premeditated assault on 'big government' involved a deliberate attack on social welfare programs that had been constructed over five decades prior to his elevation to the presidency, primarily as a response to the Great Depression of the 1930s, the urban rebellions of the 1960s and the ravages of an unregulated capitalistic system. His expressed intention was to dismantle social welfare programs that were created by FDR's 'New Deal' and LBJ's 'Great Society'.

Reagan also waged unrestrained class warfare by signing into law the largest tax cuts for the rich in U.S. history and brutally attacking organized labor by firing the striking Air Traffic Controllers in 1981. The firing began a decades-long campaign of union busting that reduced the level of union membership from a high of 33% of the American working class in 1955 to approximately 10.5% in 2020.

In foreign policy, Reagan launched a frontal attack on the 'Evil Empire' of the Soviet Union by instigating the first phase of the 'War on Terror'. The center of world terrorism for Reaganites was the 'Red Menace' that ruled the Kremlin. Soviet extension of military and material aid to third world countries was classified as sponsorship of international terrorism by Reagan's imperious Secretary of State, George Shultz.

The breathtaking hypocrisy of the Reagan regime was revealed by its support for murderous proxy forces such as the Islamic Mujahideen in Afghanistan and the Contras in Nicaragua. Reagan and CIA Director William Casey also deployed death squads in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala in their desire to deny communism a 'beach head' in Central America.

In Europe, Reagan and Casey conspired closely with the [Vatican](#) to install a Polish Pope while working hand in hand with the deeply reactionary labor movement 'Solidarity', led by the erstwhile electrician, Lech Walesa to destabilize the Communist government of Poland.

Reagan also conducted an unprecedented nuclear arms buildup that deployed the MX missile, with its multiple warheads, in U.S. silos and placed intermediate range Pershing and Cruise missiles in Western Europe, triggering a dangerous military escalation with the Soviet Union. The offensive missile buildup was simultaneously undertaken with research and development of a 'Star Wars' missile defense shield that violated the Anti-Ballistic Missile

Treaty of 1972 and militarized space.

The 'L' word was further stigmatized by George Herbert Walker Bush during his 1988 presidential campaign against Michael Dukakis whom Bush race-bated with the infamous Willie Horton television advertisement that claimed Horton, a black convict, raped a white woman and murdered her partner after being furloughed from prison by the Massachusetts governor.

It was no coincidence that during the 1992 presidential campaign, Governor William Jefferson Clinton returned home to the State of Arkansas to oversee the [execution](#) of a mentally ill, black inmate, Ricky Ray Rector. The lesson of the Willie Horton ad campaign was well learned by the crafty Clinton who defeated Bush Senior in the general election by appearing 'tough on crime'.

Clinton's subsequent 'Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994' enhanced his reputation and led straight away to mass incarceration of the black underclass. The [law](#) was partially written by Senator Joseph Biden, who chaired the Senate's Judiciary Committee. Supporting her husband's 'law and order' posture was First Lady and former Goldwater Girl, Hillary Clinton, who referred to young black males as "[Super predators](#)." The 'War on Poverty' had been officially replaced by the 'War on Crime' under the Clinton syndicate.

The electoral success of the Reagan/Bush years pushed the Democratic Party to the right. Leading the way were the 'New Democrats' whose centrist politics would eventually devolve into a tawdry conservatism that justified the continued evisceration of the social safety net. The remorseless task was undertaken by the Clintonites with the sickening persistence of gnawing mice. Clinton's 'Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996', ended federal government control of welfare and provided the poor with an opportunity to work in an economy that offshored and outsourced millions of jobs to Mexico thanks to Clinton's 'North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) now renegotiated as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) by Trump.

The Clinton regime, led by his grotesque Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen and National Security Advisor, Sandy Berger, maintained a lethal and unscrupulous imperialistic foreign policy indistinguishable from its Republican predecessors, as exemplified by the continuation of a [starvation blockade](#) in Iraq that killed 500,000 children, [dismemberment](#) of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia prior to the bombing of Serbia in 1999, forced repatriation of Haitian refugees fleeing political persecution from a military dictatorship installed by the United States during a coup d'état in 1991, launching of cruise missile strikes against Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998 and subjugation of Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization through implementation of the [Oslo and Camp David Peace Accords](#) of 1993 and 2000, respectively.

The election of Barack Obama as America's second black president, Bill Clinton having been anointed its first by the African-American novelist Toni Morrison, saw the former Columbia Law professor conciliate a rabid Republican congressional opposition with economic, human rights, military and national security policies that could only be described as resolutely [conservative](#). Obama continued Bush's bailout of Wall Street at the expense of Main Street during the sub-prime financial crisis and extended Bush's tax cuts for the rich during his first two years in office. Obama was the first president to cut Social Security benefits by freezing cost-of-living increases for retirees. Obama's '[Affordable Health Care Act](#)' pushed aside

demands for a single payer program of nationalized health care in favor of the for-profit private insurance system that ravages Americans today.

Obama also presided over the NSA's [prism program](#) of mass surveillance, institutionalization of preventive detention, [persecution of journalists and whistleblowers](#), a system of [drone warfare](#), [expansion of Bush's wars](#) in Afghanistan and Iraq into five additional Muslim counties, coup d'états in Ukraine and Honduras and a '[New Cold War](#)' with Russia.

Both Clinton and Obama claimed the mantle of centrism, a weak-kneed political philosophy that adopted moderately conservative policy positions while appearing somewhat liberal when contrasted to Reaganite ultra-conservative politics of the Republicans. In effect, the entire U.S. political spectrum has shifted to the right in the post-Reagan era.

The economic principles of John Maynard Keynes that were adopted by FDR in the face of the 'Great Depression' of the 1930s and advocated by the Brookings Institute for the Kennedy and Johnson administrations during the 1960s, have been replaced with the neoliberal policies of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman that were endorsed by the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute and the Cato Institute during the 1970s to deregulate and privatize the U.S. and global economy on behalf of the American plutocracy. The first neoliberal experiment took place in Pinochet's Chile after the [CIA overthrow](#) of Salvador Allende in 1973.

Gone is the domestic politics of reform and melioration that characterized the administrations of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. The progressive social welfare programs of the 'New Deal' and the 'Great Society' are under continuous attack to eliminate the last pillars of the American social safety net, including Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

What remains is a legacy of political repression. It should be noted that Roosevelt interned the Japanese while ordering the FBI to [surveil](#) isolationist critics of World War II. The Truman administration forged the [National Security State](#) and inaugurated the second red scare while prosecuting the Korean War. And the Kennedy and Johnson regimes conducted the Vietnam War while extending the [FBI's Cointelpro](#) program, thus illustrating the efficacy of 'Cold War' liberalism that combined social reform with domestic repression to stabilize the bastion of imperialism.

Economic policies that favor the rich have always been advanced by the Republicans and their corporate conservative coalition. Not so for the Democrats who formed a liberal labor coalition for the greater part of the 20th century. The 'New Democrats' have repudiated the coalition and its' social base of organized labor. The 'New Democrats' have betrayed the labor movement during the era of globalization and NAFTA. The 'New Democrats' have turned their backs on the poor and racial minorities with their emphasis on 'law and order', 'welfare reform' and 'mandatory drug sentencing'. The 'New Democrats' have also betrayed civil libertarians with their support for the Patriot Act, the NDAA of 2012 and NSA warrantless surveillance.

The venality of centrist politics perfectly illustrates the repudiation of an American liberal tradition that once provided a genuine safety net for the poor, the elderly and the downtrodden. The social dimensions of that tradition advocated some modicum of justice for those who suffered from race and sex oppression. With the rise of mass incarceration and the militarized police state, the victories won before the liberal [Warren Court](#) by Brown,

Miranda, Gideon, Yates and Katz, have disappeared beneath a wave [police murders](#), [tortured confessions](#) and [warrantless surveillance](#), behind which lies the threat of [indefinite detention](#).

Perhaps the most articulate intellectual advocate of liberal reform in the United States during the early part of the 20th century was the American philosopher John Dewey. Dewey's [instrumentalist philosophy](#) is a pristine expression of middle-class liberalism as it emphasized the possibilities of progressive change and liberal democratic governance. Dewey's thought represented an extension of the progressive era that arose in the late 1890s to combat the monopolization of commerce and industry by avaricious bankers and industrialists. Even Franklin D. Roosevelt was moved to use the term "economic royalists" to decry what his cousin Teddy Roosevelt once called the "malefactors of great wealth." By doing so, they reflected populist opposition to industrialists, financiers and Wall Street speculators who were hated by the common people. The foremost demands of progressives such as free public education from elementary school through the university level, building public parks, libraries and settlement houses, extending the franchise for women, abolishing child labor and passing public health and anti-trust legislation were all championed by Dewey who saw the need to extend these reforms.

Today, the Democrats espouse a politics of social identity blind to its own contradictions. They have completely abandoned class politics for identity politics. Keynesian economic reform has given way to the neoliberal agenda of privatization, deregulation and rule of the market. The progressive features of liberal reform have been jettisoned for the rapacious economics of wealth concentration and social repression.

Underlying the political and ideological metamorphosis is a shift in class relations with the onset of globalization, a process that generated capital flight, deindustrialization and the decimation of organized labor. The American working class is fragmented in a financialized economy that is structured to produce economic contingency and debt for wage and salaried workers alongside the exponential growth of wealth for predatory financiers. With the cutting of social benefits along with wages, the ranks of the poor have swelled dramatically. The middle class is cast adrift, its social stability under constant threat.

The triumph of the corporate rich and their Washington Neoliberal Consensus has marginalized a majority of the American population, the most oppressed sectors of which can only respond by adopting a revolutionary politics to face their condition as the doctrine of liberal reform, itself the product of class struggles of a bygone era, has become a rotting corpse without significant influence within the corridors of power. The repulsive capitulation of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren to the corrupt Joseph Biden and the Democratic Party tragically illustrates the irrelevance of an increasingly dissolute liberal ideology whose adherents actively collaborate with American imperialism.

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