

Why Can't We Be Friends? The History of and Prospects for Left and Right Antiwar Collaboration

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The range of ideological opposition to U.S. foreign policy is the most diverse since before World War II. Liberal and progressive critics, long the primary bastion of dissent, are [once again](#) making their presence known after a lapse during the Obama administration. And, on the right, fissures over U.S. foreign policy, which [erupted](#) in 2016, are [here to stay](#). These disparate dissidents are attempting to parlay and turn their [shared opposition](#) into action.

Many within the commentariat are confused by this perplexing alliance. Some have slandered this relationship as a tenuous “[Red-Brown coalition](#).” Such characterization is an unfortunate (if not an intentional) mischaracterization of this budding partnership. Left-wing opponents to the foreign policy status quo are not communists. Nor are the ranks of the right overpopulated with Nazis. Instead, the two wings of dissent are the inheritors of distinct but often overlapping strains of foreign policy opposition. Both traditions are firmly rooted in the American experience; neither are alien imports of a totalitarian ideology.

The reemergence of both strains signals a return to an earlier norm where opposition to U.S. foreign policy was not a definitive litmus test for a party or ideological affiliation. Understanding this history and how they came to be consumed by partisan politics should reassure those who desire a change in how the U.S. government conducts itself abroad.

The early interwar period constituted the high point of American non-interventionism in the 21st century. The horrors of the Great War and transpartisan suspicion of centralized power created a broad range of antiwar sentiments. In both Congress and the broader political culture, Americans across the political spectrum opposed American involvement in foreign wars, particularly at the prospect of fighting in Europe. Famous works like [War is a Racket](#) by retired major general Smedley Butler challenged the naive assumptions of American foreign policy and charged that economic and government interests had become intertwined. Butler’s treatise was preceded by another expose of the corporatist roots of modern war, [Merchants of Death](#). Authored by H.C. Englebrecht and Frank Hanighen, *Merchants of Death* served as a forerunner of the “[military-industrial complex](#)” concept.

They helped to spawn a [congressional committee](#) to investigate the origins of U.S. entry into the Great War. The differing ideologies of its authors served as proof of broad antiwar sentiment at the time. Englebrecht was a frequent columnist for *The World Tomorrow*, a leading magazine for Christian socialists; Hanighen would join the America First Committee (AFC) and co-found *Human Events*, a leading conservative magazine founded to advocate for non-interventionism.

Despite its reputation as an exclusively conservative organization, the AFC had former progressives among its members, like NAACP co-founder and former editor of the *Nation* magazine [Oswald Garrison Villard](#) and dissident liberals such as journalist John T. Flynn. The AFC also found much of its inspiration from progressive historian Charles Beard. While not officially a member of the AFC, Beard's views paralleled their efforts. The AFC listed his book, *A Foreign Policy for America, Giddy Minds and Foreign Quarrels* on their book list, along with other antiwar books like *Merchants of Death*. Conversely, *The Progressive*, a left-wing antiwar magazine, ran articles from conservative non-interventionists like Frank Hanighen.

In this fluid ideological environment, boilerplate left-wing critiques of capitalism merged with right-wing criticisms of state power to form a potent opposition to future American involvement in overseas wars.

Despite this early consensus, the Overton Window on American involvement in overseas wars narrowed as Hitler's armies marched across Europe. Nazi Germany's conquest of France and the Low Countries and assault on the British Isles turned most liberals towards intervention. Similarly, the German invasion of the Soviet Union caused American communists, who had hitherto been counted among the ranks of the non-interventionists, to flip on a dime and join the cause of the Allies. In this collapsed ideological environment, only predominantly right-wing groups like the America First Committee and progressive holdouts like Charles Beard and *The Progressive* remained in opposition to U.S. entry into the war during the waning months of 1941. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor caused official American entry into the war and narrowed the contours of American foreign policy debate for a generation.

However, even with the narrative weight of WWII, significant dissent remained across the political spectrum in the critical years before the Cold War became a fixture of American geopolitics. Individuals and groups that opposed conscription and its more encompassing cousin, [universal military training](#), were as ideologically diverse as the American Labor Party and the American Civil Liberties Union on one side and Old Right figures like [Howard Buffett](#) (R-NE) on the other. The edges of the political spectrum also opposed the [Marshall Plan](#), military aid to [Greece and Turkey](#), and other key aspects of the early Cold War.

Despite these early dalliances, right and left-wing anti-imperialists were ultimately driven apart by the double burden of defeated fascism during World War II and the escalation of the Cold War. The so-called [vital center](#) was able to use the legacy of right-wing extremism (fascism) and the presence of the current left-wing threat (communism) to neutralize dissent on either side of the political consensus. Similarly, many so-called "Old Right" non-interventionists were active McCarthyites who relished the opportunity to red-bait individuals who had [brown-baited](#) them in the waning days of U.S. neutrality in World War II. Dissidents did, however, remain on either side of the political divide. Examples on the left included organizations like [Fair Play for Cuba Committee](#) and National Committee for a Sane

Nuclear Policy (SANE). On the right, groups like the Citizens Foreign Aid Committee and remnants of the Old Right in Congress opposed critical facets of the Cold War consensus. However, by the mid-1950s, the social costs of association created by hegemonic anticommunism, coupled with substantive differences over nuclear policy and the response to communism in the Western hemisphere, presented an ideological divide too great to span.

The bloodshed and horror of the Vietnam War once again presented opportunities for left-right cooperation. Libertarians like Murray Rothbard, Leonard Liggio, and former Goldwater speechwriter Karl Hess attempted to make inroads with like-minded members of the New Left. To this end, Liggio and Rothbard founded [Left and Right](#), a radical libertarian journal dedicated to, among other things, opposition to the draft, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War generally. Their enterprise, however, was not to last as the cultural and political divides between the two halves were too vast to bridge.

Similarly, in the aftermath of Vietnam, the Republican Party homogenized its foreign policy thinking as the New Right emerged as strident supporters of the Cold War consensus. The [transformation](#) of the Republican Right occurred as Vietnam War opposition became [ideologically coded](#) as a left-wing, and the vestiges of the Old Right's non-interventionism were [purged from the airwaves](#) by the federal government. The result of this transformation ushered in the Reagan Revolution and set the ideological landscape on foreign policy which remained the norm until 20 years of war snapped the Reaganite consensus.

The current ideological landscape of dissent on U.S. foreign policy is the most diverse it has been since the mid-1930s. The cost in [blood](#) and [treasure](#) of 20 years of war has opened the minds of vast swathes of the body politic to the idea of foreign policy restraint. And, unlike previous eras, there is no overriding "threat" that *should* be able to wedge the left and the right apart when it comes to antiwar activism and non-interventionism. While its impact remains to be seen, President Biden's [autocracies v. democracies](#) rhetoric lacks the narrative authority of past authoritarianisms, nor does it possess a clear ideological wedge that can be leveled against either side of the dissident camp.

Also, for the first time since before WWII, left and right-wing antiwar and non-interventionist critiques largely mirror one another. Common to the various strains of foreign policy dissidents, both left and right is a rejection of the [corporatist consensus](#), which created and benefits from the interventionist status quo. While left critics may focus on the capital side of the consensus and the right on the state, they both observe and critique the same institutional problems. There is no ordained reason why opponents of this consensus cannot work around this relatively minor difference in their diagnosis to achieve a shared goal of greater restraint in America's behavior in the world. If America is to stave off collapse and survive as a political entity resembling a democratic republic, then the left and right need to find ways to do so.

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