

THE HARTMANN REPORT

The GOP's 60-Year Conspiracy to Kill Our Democracy: None Dare Call It Treason—But I Will

It all traces back to billionaire-backed fearmongering in the 1960s—weaponizing panic around socialism and communism to crush unions, cut taxes, and hoard profits...

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In [Wednesday's Daily Take](#) here on [Hartmann Report](#), I mentioned Russell Kirk and the origins of today's hard right GOP. A few people replied with, "Who's that?" and similar questions; others were incredulous that Republicans actually believed the middle class created by FDR's New Deal was a *bad* thing. So, here's the backstory to what I mentioned.

I was thirteen years old in 1964 when my dad, a Republican activist, gave me a copy of John Stormer's book "*None Dare Call It Treason*." The Goldwater campaign had sent it to him, and its claim that the State Department was filled with communists intent on handing America over to the USSR had his friends buzzing.

Ironically, Stormer's book and the movement it ignited within the GOP is largely responsible for that party today standing on the precipice of fully endorsing fascism as an alternative to democracy in the US.

And it was started by morbidly rich men (it was all men back then) who wanted to use the threat of a "communist menace" to gut the union movement to increase their own corporate profits and CEO pay.

The founding premise of the modern conservative movement tracks back a generation before Stormer's book to a Republican thought leader named Russell Kirk. He laid it out in his 1951 book [The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot](#), as I detail in [The Hidden History of American Oligarchy](#).

Kirk argued that the middle class was becoming a threat to America; without clearly defined classes and power structures — essentially without the morbidly rich in complete control of everything — he worried that society would devolve into chaos.

The opening chapter of his book was about Edmund Burke, the Irish conservative who [wrote](#), in 1790, that hairdressers and candlemakers should not be allowed to run for political office or even to vote:

"The occupation of a hairdresser or of a working tallow-chandler cannot be a matter of honor to any person — to say nothing of a number of other more servile employments. Such descriptions of men ought not to suffer oppression from the state; but the state suffers oppression if such as they, either individually or collectively, are permitted to rule. In this you think you are combating prejudice, but you are at war with nature..."

Kirk and his followers essentially predicted in 1951 that if today's "hairdressers and working tallow-chandlers" — college students, women, working-class people, and people of color — ever got even close to social and political power at the same level as wealthy white men, there would essentially be a communist revolution in the US, handing us over to Stalin and his Politburo.

(Keep in mind, this was when racial segregation was legal and brutally enforced, the voting age was 21, campuses were almost entirely all-male, both abortion and birth control were illegal in most states, and women couldn't open checking accounts or get credit cards without a husband's, brother's, or father's signature.)

Throughout the 1950s, Kirk and his warnings of the dangers of an activist middle-class developed a small following; the most prominent of his proponents were William F. Buckley Jr. and Barry Goldwater. Most Republicans, though, considered him a crackpot.

But when the birth-control pill was legalized in 1961 and the Vietnam War heated up a few years later, those marginalized groups Kirk had warned his wealthy white male followers about began to rise up in protest.

Kids were burning draft cards, women were burning bras, and Martin Luther King Jr. was leading a movement for racial justice that the white power structure blamed for American cities burning. Gay liberation was also having a moment.

Meanwhile, the Arab Oil Embargoes of the 1970s had lit the flame of inflation, and unionized workers were striking all over America for wage increases to keep up with the rising cost of living.

Wealthy white conservatives freaked out as the morbidly rich promoted the idea that America was experiencing a "moral decline" that could only be fixed by ending the union movement and other "liberal" causes that shared the union movements' populist goals.

They became convinced that they were seeing Kirk's prophecy play out in real time on their television screens every night: the "communists" — those uppity racial minorities, women who'd forgotten their "rightful place in society," students who objected to Vietnam, unionized workers, and gender minorities — were on the verge of "taking over" America.

These five movements all hitting America at the same time got the attention of conservatives and Republicans who had previously ignored or even ridiculed Kirk back in the 1950s. Suddenly, America's most powerful and well-known conservative commentators (like William F. Buckley Jr.) were telling Republicans that Russell Kirk was, indeed, a prophet.

They'd finally found a politically acceptable "hook" to destroy the wealth of working-class people and transfer trillions into their own money bins: fear of communism and a prophesied social decay caused by an activist middle class.

The Republican/Conservative "solution" to the "crisis" these five movements represented was put into place in 1981 when Ronald Reagan was sworn into office: the explicit goal of the morbidly rich white men funding the so-called Reagan Revolution was to take the middle class

down a peg to end the protests of the '60s and '70s, restore "social stability," and increase corporate profitability.

Their plan was to declare war on labor unions so wages could slide back down again, end free college across the nation so students would live in fear rather than be willing to protest, and increase the penalties Nixon had already put on drugs so they could use those laws against their scapegoats, particularly the hippy antiwar protesters and Black people demanding an end to police killings. They also wanted to outlaw abortion, to put women "back in their place."

Thus, Reagan massively cut taxes on rich people and raised taxes on working-class people 11 times. For example, he put income taxes on Social Security and unemployment payments, and put in a mechanism to track and tax tips income, all of which had previously been tax-free but were exclusively needed and used by middle-class people.

He [ended the tax deductibility](#) of credit-card, car-loan, and student-debt interest, overwhelmingly claimed by working-class people. At the same time, he cut the top tax bracket for millionaires and billionaires from 74% to 25%. (There were only a handful of billionaires in America then, in large part because of previous tax policies; today's democracy-destroying explosion of billionaires followed Reagan's, Bush's, and Trump's massive tax cuts on the rich.)

Reagan declared war on labor unions, crushed PATCO in less than a week, and over the next decade the result of his war on labor was that union membership went from about a third of the American workforce when he came into office to around 10% at the end of the Reagan/Bush presidencies. It's just now beginning to recover from its low of 6% of the private workforce.

He and Bush also husbanded the moribund 1947 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades (GATT, which let Clinton help create the WTO) and negotiated NAFTA, which Clinton signed and thus opened a floodgate for American companies to move manufacturing overseas, leaving American workers underemployed while radically cutting corporate labor costs and union membership.

And, sure enough, Reagan's War on Labor cut average inflation-adjusted minimum and median wages by more, over a couple of decades, than anybody had seen since the Republican Great Depression of the 1920s and '30s.

The billionaire's investment in taking the middle-class down a peg was paying off by orders of magnitude.

Had Reagan not destroyed the nation's unions, the median American income today would be well over \$100,000 a year, minimum-wage households would have a [family income](#) of \$86,000,

and a single wage-earner would still be able to buy a house, a car, send the kids to college, and have a decent retirement (as my dad did, working a union job for 35 years in a tool-and-die shop).

Instead, CEOs today keep all that money for themselves and their investors.

And Reagan's War on Colleges jacked up the cost of education so high that an entire generation is today saddled with more than \$1.5 trillion in student debt: as predicted, many aren't willing to jeopardize it all by "acting up" on campuses.

The key to selling this campaign of impoverishment to the American people to help out the billionaire class was the idea that the US shouldn't protect the rights of workers, subsidize education, grant women equal rights, or enforce Civil Rights laws because, conservatives said, all of those things were aspects of "socialism." And if America embraced socialism, we may as well be ruled by the Soviet Union.

As Reagan told us in his first inaugural, government "socialist" programs were not the solution to our problems, but instead *were the problem itself*.

He ridiculed the formerly-noble idea of service to one's country and joked that there were really no good people left in government because if they were smart or competent they'd be working in the private sector for a lot more money.

He even told us that the nine most frightening words in the English language were, "I'm from the government, and I'm here to help."

Following [Lewis Powell's 1971 memo](#), throughout the 1970s and 1980s Republican billionaires built a massive infrastructure of think tanks and media outlets to promote and amplify Reagan's message that government supports of any sort for poor or working-class people were simply gateway drugs to socialism and, inevitably, communism.

It so completely swept America that by the 1990s even President Bill Clinton was saying things like, "The era of big government is over," and "This is the end of welfare as we know it." Limbaugh, Hannity and other right-wing radio talkers were getting [millions a year in subsidies from billionaire-funded groups like the Heritage Foundation](#). Billionaire-owned Fox "News" today carries on the tradition.

It had been a pretty good scam for the billionaires who owned the GOP and wanted, back in the 1950s, to stop the union movement that was forcing them to share their profits with their workers.

First, they terrified Americans about communism and socialism, then convinced about half of us that those things came straight out of "liberal" social and economic movements.

Unions, feminism, acceptance of the queer community, civil rights, minimum wage increases, and even regulation of corporate behavior would, they told us, all lead to Soviet-style tyranny.

So, to save America from herself, Reagan gutted the American middle class, transferring [over \\$50 trillion](#) in wealth from working class people into the money bins of the morbidly rich.

By 2016, Americans were starting to figure out that they'd been screwed — and that Hillary Clinton's husband had been in on it by continuing Reagan's policies and doubling-down on free trade — and were loudly demanding change.

Into this maelstrom walked Donald Trump, proclaiming himself the savior of the country. In the GOP primary he pointed out how corrupt his opponents were, particularly Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio, and destroyed them, one after the other.

For the general election in 2016, he changed his tune and ran on what was traditionally a Democratic platform, saying he was going to bring jobs home, end so-called “free trade” policies, raise taxes on the rich so much that “my friends won't talk to me anymore,” and make sure every American had free or low-cost healthcare and access to an affordable college education.

They were all lies — something Trump had become adept at during his business career — but they worked and sucked in disaffected workers who knew they'd been screwed but weren't sure who did it to them or why.

So here we are.

We have an open fascist and apparent friend of authoritarian Russia as president after being convicted by a jury of his peers on 34 felony charges, having previously been adjudicated as responsible for sexual abuse (the judge called it “rape”) and fraud.

He's putting into place people and policies that could turn America into an authoritarian nation like Russia or Hungary, and apparently wants to re-align the United States away from NATO and the EU and toward Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea.

We are literally facing the authoritarian future that John Stormer was warning us about back in 1964. Only instead of “communists” in the State Department, it's a billionaire president with the avowed goal of ending union rights and locking up or using the Army with live ammunition against those who protest his policies.

And it all tracks back to wealthy conservatives funding a project in the 1960s to scare Americans about socialism and communism so they could stop the union-fueled growth of wages that were cutting into their profits.

Perhaps none dare call it treason. But I do.

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