



THE CONSERVATIVE CAUCUS, INC.
3057 Nutley Street, Suite 502 • Fairfax, Virginia 22031
540-219-4536 • TheConservativeCaucus.org • Info@ConservativeUSA.org

TCC POLICY BRIEFING

POPULISM'S A "THREAT"?

BY DR. STEVEN J. ALLEN

Yes, if you're enjoying your unearned privilege and power over others.

At the heart of the current conflict in American politics is the belief among privileged elites that grassroots members of the pro-Trump movement —the “populists” — are ignorant low-lives, “deplorables” who should stay in their trailer parks and be barred from the halls of power. That perception justifies in their minds actions ranging from boycotts and blacklisting to window-smashing protests and illegal spying on political adversaries.

Consider Michael Hayden, the former director of the CIA and NSA who likened President Trump to Hitler. Hayden is responsible for literally billions of violations of Americans' Fourth Amendment rights, and lied to the American people about spying on Donald Trump, about Trump being a Russian asset, and about the Biden bribery laptop. Today, he heads an institute in his name at George Mason University (my PhD alma mater) outside Washington, D.C. One of the Hayden Center's programs is dedicated to “examining the ongoing assault on evidence-based institutions, like intelligence, the media, the law, and academia, in a post-truth world darkened by the rise of populism and autocracy.” Hayden proclaimed in 2016 that “Trump is the current face of authoritarian populism inside the United States and Vladimir Putin is the global poster child for authoritarian populism.”

Also at George Mason University, a supposedly libertarian think tank called the Mercatus Center hosts a blog called The UnPopulist, dedicated specifically to denigrating populism. The American Enterprise Institute, which for many years was the flagship of the conservative intellectual movement, announced in 2018 a “unique collaboration” to fight populism alongside the Center for American Progress, the think tank run by longtime aides to Hillary (“Deplorables”) Clinton. Matthew Continetti, founding editor of the *Washington Free Beacon* and a historian of the conservative movement, associates “demagoguery, scapegoating, and conspiracy theories” with the movement's populists. (Continetti's organization funded the original fabricated research behind the Trump/Russia hoax, and his father-in-law is the anti-populist conspiracy theorist William Kristol.)

Why the negative connotation of “populism”? Roger Kimball, editor of the *New Criterion* and of the book *Vox Populi: The Perils and Promises of Populism*, noted two reasons: One is that commentators associate “populist” with “demagogue,” which originally meant “a popular leader.” The other is that they have –

a disdain for the unedified masses, the soil in which populism takes root. Anyone who watched the commentary on Brexit, Donald Trump’s campaign, the early months of his administration, or the recent French election will have noted this. . . . [T]he populist politician is said to forsake reason and moderation so as to stir the dark, chthonic passions of a semiliterate and spiritually unelevated populace. “Populism,” that is to say, is wielded less as a descriptive term than as a delegitimizing one.

In politics, to define your opposition is to discredit it and, ultimately, to defeat it. Today’s populists must define their movement lest the establishment do it for them.

Defining populism

In defining modern populism, I start by pointing out that it is as American as the Declaration of Independence.

In 1776, in his draft of the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson proclaimed that forms of government are illegitimate if they establish the dominion of one group over another, “that all men [human beings] are created equal & independent.” In keeping with this principle, Jefferson in his draft called slavery an “execrable commerce,” one of the “horrors” perpetrated by King George III, and he explicitly referred to enslaved persons as “men,” that is, as human beings who are equal under any legitimate form of government. (That’s right: The person who first put forth the idea that slavery was always wrong — not wrong just when slaves were mistreated, but *always* wrong — was Jefferson, whose legacy the Left today seeks to erase.)

In 1813, Jefferson wrote to John Adams about the “aristocracy” that should be honored and entrusted with power—an aristocracy not of privilege, not of wealth and birth, but of virtue and talent:

. . . I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. . . . There is also an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents . . . The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society. . . May we not even say that that form of government is the best which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government? The artificial aristocracy is a mischievous ingredient in government, and provision should be made to prevent its ascendancy.

In an 1824 letter to Henry Lee, Jefferson noted that, in a free society, people naturally divide into two parties, one that protects privilege and one that represents the people.

Men by their constitutions are naturally divided into two parties: 1. Those who fear and distrust the people, and wish to draw all powers from them into the hands of the higher classes. 2. Those who identify themselves with the people, have confidence in them, cherish and consider them as the most honest and safe, although not the most wise [that is, experienced and cunning] depository of the public interests. In every country these two parties exist, and in every one where they are free to think, speak, and write, they will declare themselves.

Two natural parties: elitists and populists.

The abolitionist Frederick Douglass, in 1852 in his greatest speech, paid tribute to Jefferson's beliefs: "I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ring-bolt to the chain of your nation's destiny; so, indeed, I regard it. The principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost."

In an 1857 speech criticizing the *Dred Scott* decision, Abraham Lincoln noted that the principle of equality in the Declaration of Independence was "meant to set up a standard maxim for a free society." In an 1859 letter, Lincoln wrote:

All honor to Jefferson - to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.

Concluding the Gettysburg Address (1863), Lincoln declared that the Civil War was being waged for what we now call populist ideals: "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Indeed, the point of the Gettysburg Address was to justify the war by tying it to the historic mission of the United States as a fulfillment of Jefferson's promise in the Declaration.

Flash forward 113 years. Ronald Reagan, running for president in 1976, campaigned against the "Washington buddy system," and a Reagan brochure that year proclaimed his opposition to "the forces that have brought us our problems—the Congress, the bureaucracy, the lobbyists, big business and big labor. If America is to survive and go forward, this must change. And it will change only when the American people vote for a leadership that is not part of the entrenched Washington establishment, leaders who will not be fettered by old commitments and friendships . . ."

Speaking at the Conservative Political Action Conference in 1977, Reagan described his vision for a new Republican Party:

The new Republican Party I envision will not be, and cannot be, one limited to the country club, big business image that, for reasons both fair and unfair, it is burdened with today. The new Republican Party I am speaking about is going to have room for the man and woman in the factories, for the farmer, for the cop on the beat and the millions of Americans who may never have thought of joining our party before, but whose interests coincide with those represented by principled Republicanism. . . . [The GOP should] welcome them, seek them out, enlist them, not only as rank-and-file members, but as leaders and candidates.

Populism: Equality under the law. No “artificial aristocracy” based on wealth and birth, only a “natural aristocracy” of virtue and talent. A party that identifies with the people and has confidence in them as the safest repository of power. A government that is of, by, and for the people. A movement that stands up to the old-boy networks, the “buddy system,” and other forms of entrenched power, and fights for the sorts of people who work in factories, grow our food, and protect us from criminals.

Today, as never before in living memory, our country is in peril. The commanding heights – the White House, the Congress, the news and entertainment media, academia and the educational system, the bureaucracy including the Justice Department and the Intelligence Community – are held by privileged elites with utter disdain for the principles the country represents, and for the working-class and small-business-class people who are the country’s backbone. The United States, the first country founded on principle rather than on territory or “race,” the first country to reject the idea of permanent social class, of aristocracy and slavery, could soon fall. This bold experiment in freedom and equality could end, vanishing into the mists of history.

And it’s **populism** that’s a threat?? Yes, in the sense that, if you’re a member of the elite, comfortable in your unearned privilege, nothing scares you more than populism, the idea put forth by crazy extremists like Thomas Jefferson, Abraham, Lincoln, and Ronald Reagan.

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Dr. Steven J. Allen (JD, PhD) is vice chairman of The Conservative Caucus. Some of this material appeared previously in *American Greatness* magazine.

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