

The Establishment's Bi-Partisan Fear of Popular Revolt

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The two most powerful think tanks in Washington, representing center-left and center-right political elites, have responded to the populist shocks of the 2016 presidential election by trying to reposition themselves and the Democratic and Republican Parties as more sympathetic to populist concerns even while maintaining their attachments to the interests of big business and the complex of war-making.

The Center for American Progress (CAP), linked to the Democratic Party establishment, and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), which is close to the Republican Party, have issued two long papers in recent months reflecting their high anxiety over the rapid growth of populism on both sides of the Atlantic — especially in light of the shocking success of both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump against Hillary Clinton and mainstream Republicans during the 2016 presidential election cycle.

But the papers suggest that neither organization is ready to depart from the economic and military policies preferred by the powerful elites that still control the two major parties. And the more recent paper attacks Jill Stein and Bernie Sanders for being insufficiently hawkish in regard to Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

An initial joint [paper](#) published on May 10 urged the two parties to make far-reaching changes in policy and operations, citing their “need to recognize that they are in a moment of crisis — a moment that could portend a long-term realignment — and develop a strategy for managing change.” It also warned that they “got into the current crisis by seeming indifferent to the concerns that drive constituencies drawn to extreme populists.”

The authors of that paper further identified a series of “striking commonalities” between left-wing and right-wing populism in the United States regarding attitudes toward key issues: “deep suspicion of America’s overseas military actions; alarm about the rise of a surveillance state; mistrust of major institutions; and suspicion of global elites.”

Endless Wars and Recession

They pointedly warned, “Much of this cynicism is borne from the endless wars since the beginning of the 21st century as well as the experience of the Great Recession — ascribed by many to the misdeeds of an elite that avoided accountability.”

The paper also said parties “need to support structural changes to the political system that will increase the responsiveness and accountability of electoral representatives.”

Those recommendations suggested a sense of urgency about making radical changes. But none of the 31 top executives and vice-presidents of CAP were involved in the writing or approved the text. It was co-written by Vikram Singh, CAP’s former vice president for national security and international policy and now a senior fellow; Liz Kennedy, CAP’s senior director for democracy and government reform, and Dalibor Rohac, a research fellow on European political and economic trends

at AEI.

In an interview with me, Singh explained that the views expressed were only those of the authors and had not been approved by senior-level CAP officials.

Like the initial paper, a joint CAP-AEI statement [released](#) on July 31, co-authored by Singh, Rohac and Danielle Pletka, AEI's senior vice-president for foreign and defense policy, strikes a conciliatory tone toward the rising tide of populism. It also recognizes the abject failure of institutions and policies to which the establishments in both parties were committed. But in the end, it shies away from any alternative policies.

The three co-authors suggest that populism "is not inherently bad" and reject "futile attempts to conserve the status quo." They concede, "The shortcomings of the [European Union], NATO, [World Trade Organization], and other forms of international cooperation have provided a fertile ground for those calling to upend existing structures."

Even more remarkable, they acknowledge that US- and European-led military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya have mired the United States and Europe in "long and unpopular wars," and that "limited intervention in Syria" had "led to much of the refugee crisis that hit Europe's shores in the summer of 2015."

That language — especially on Iraq — could not have been easy for Danielle Pletka of AEI to accept. She was one of the small group of neoconservatives in Washington who had [pushed](#) for implanting pro-US Iraqi exile leader Ahmad Chalabi in power by military force. Pletka has never admitted that the war was a mistake and has continued to [blame](#) the state of chaos in Iraq on the failure of the Obama administration to keep troops there.

Aware of Suffering

The authors refer to a "deepening frustration" over a globalization that had brought "unprecedented worldwide growth" but also "led to economic stagnation and structural unemployment, particularly in the West." They further acknowledge that the financial crisis of 2008 had an "impact on the middle class in developed economies as well as confidence in the free enterprise system's ability to deliver shared prosperity."

The authors warn that the "threat of authoritarian populism will not recede unless a new generation of political leaders offers a credible agenda for improving people's lives that is more appealing to the public than the populist alternatives."

But Singh and Pletka offer no suggestion of an alternative to the economic management model that has caused such socioeconomic distortions and dislocation. In the only hint of future policy direction, they write, "Both the political right and left need to make a stronger case for economic openness as a cornerstone of the West's prosperity."

Furthermore, Singh and Pletka use the joint statement to push for toughening the US and European stances toward Russia, and to accuse two main left-wing opponents of the Democratic Party centrist establishment — Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein and Independent Sen. Bernie Sanders — of having been apologists for Russia or Russian President Vladimir Putin, or very close to it. In both cases, however, the charges are without foundation and amount to a reversion by CAP and AEI to McCarthy-style political smears.

They write that Stein “justified Russian aggression” by declaring that “NATO has been surrounding Russia with missiles, nuclear weapons, and troops.” And in an interview with me last week, Singh said, “Stein is an apologist for Russia and for Putin. She is inclined to say the U.S. is to blame.”

In the interview to which the CAP-AEI statement referred, the Green Party leader did indeed say, “NATO has been surrounding Russia with missiles, nuclear weapons, and troops,” which was literally true. But she did not suggest that this situation “justified Russian aggression.” Responding to a question about Russian annexation of Crimea and involvement in the war in Ukraine, Stein referred to the US support for “regime change” through the armed uprising in Ukraine in 2014. “Regime change is something we need to be very careful about,” Stein said. “And this is a highly inflammatory regime change with a nuclear armed power next door.”

Stein’s assertion that Russian moves in Crimea and Ukraine came in response to U.S. support for regime change was not substantially different from a commentary [published](#) by CAP in 2017. The only difference between them was that CAP supported the U.S. policy of support for regime change in Ukraine rather than opposing it.

Contacted for her comment on the statements made by CAP-AEI and Singh about her, Stein said, “It’s telling that anyone who rejects the oversimplified Cold War narrative and addresses the real-world complexity of geopolitics gets accused of siding with the enemy by CAP and other shells for the bipartisan war party.”

Pletka and Singh also question whether Sen. Bernie Sanders has been sufficiently supportive of NATO. While acknowledging that Sanders had issued a statement in 2016 supporting a NATO role in protecting Eastern Europe “against any kind of Russian aggression,” they accuse Sanders of having been “concerned about the alliance’s expansion to the East” as provocative of Russia in 1997.

Singh conceded in an interview with Truthout that Sanders’s skepticism about NATO expansion in 1997 “is not per se evidence of being an apologist for Russia.” But he added, “It quickly gets very close to saying it’s our fault — we provoked them.”

But Singh and Pletka were ignoring the fact that in the mid-1990s, many of the most experienced US government specialists on Europe had opposed the Clinton administration’s decision to expand NATO into former Soviet territory in Central Europe and the Baltics. In 1995, a group of 18 former senior Pentagon and State Department officials and diplomats had warned against NATO expansion as likely to provoke Russian geopolitical countermoves and [proposed](#) as a non-provocative alternative bringing Central European states into the European Union and its nascent defense organization.

Among those opposing Clinton’s policy were Paul Nitze, a major US Cold War strategist and the main US negotiator of arms control agreements with the Soviet Union, as well as former US ambassadors to the Soviet Union, West Germany, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Bulgaria.

Singh and Pletka were thus using what was supposed to be a reconsideration of populism as a response to serious failures of centrist governments to stigmatize leading left-wing US figures for positions on US policy that are shared by many mainstream analysts. That tactic takes on more sinister implications in the present atmosphere of almost complete political and media unanimity in believing that Russia is an existential threat to US democracy.

The attacks on Stein and Sanders provide further evidence that these centrist power centers have

been unable to resist clinging to familiar policies and political strategies long after they have proven to be a path to political disaster.

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