

*Unpacking Our History Article Packet*

# Dog Whistles

## State's Rights and Family Values

**THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12  
7–8:30 PM, on Zoom**

**ID: 823 648 5349 | PW: 691353**





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# The End of Family Values

Neoliberalism rests on the myth that “good” families can provide for their own without public support.

Julie Kohler

Children and Family, COVID-19, Labor, Neoliberalism, Politics



June 4, 2020

**T**he COVID-19 crisis has been a tipping point for American families. Parents are scrambling to do their jobs under rapidly changing or even dangerous conditions while caring for children and other vulnerable loved ones. Tens of millions are out of work with little sense of what jobs will return. The pandemic has magnified inequality and white supremacy in ways that make family life even harder. Black and Latinx Americans are contracting and dying from coronavirus at far higher rates than white Americans. Low-wage workers and workers of color comprise the largest share of the 40 million newly unemployed. Not surprisingly, women are disproportionately shouldering increased loads of unpaid caregiving, homeschooling, and household work resulting from school closures and stay-at-home orders.

But the conditions for the squeeze that families are currently experiencing were set long before the pandemic hit U.S. shores. The seeming impossibility of the current situation for American families is not an unfortunate byproduct of an unforeseen global health crisis. It is the inevitable result of an economic worldview that has methodically shifted more and more costs onto families’ shoulders under a façade of “family values.”

In recent years critics have placed the blame for our current economic arrangement on four decades of privatization, deregulation, and tax cuts. What has received less attention are the accompanying cultural norms for families: the heightened expectations that families will provide for their own with little public support, and the assumption, sometimes implicit, that

**The traditional family structure retains much of its cultural power due to the precarity of**

the two-parent nuclear family is the optimal family structure to do so. The two sets of norms—one economic, one cultural—are superficially distinct but deeply intertwined. In order to emerge from this crisis stronger, we must dismantle the family norms that lie at the heart of our current failed economic approach. Only then will we see the political will to invest in the kinds of public goods—from child care to affordable higher education—that today’s American families need to survive and thrive.

**contemporary  
economic life.**

It remains a daunting challenge. Neoliberalism’s resilience lies not in its empirical power—the United States has experienced less growth and economic security since 1980 than in the forty years prior—but in its political success in advancing a vastly expanded notion of what constitutes private family responsibility and enshrining it as a “reasonable” bipartisan consensus. Moreover, one of the reasons that neoliberalism has endured politically is that it has convinced many Americans that the failure to prosper in a free and unfettered market is a personal failing—a lack of virtue stemming from poor family decision-making.

This could be the moment in which such a consensus unravels, when families’ economic and time struggles become so acute and widespread that they can no longer be chalked up to poor individual choices. It is conceivable that the crisis will enable us to imagine an alternative economic future, one grounded in the recognition that families of all forms have dignity and value. Such outcomes are far from certain, but for the first time in the better part of the last half-century, they are possible. The crisis is prompting a re-examination of economic tenets that have held sway for decades. Now we must do the same for the family assumptions that played an equally powerful role in neoliberalism’s rise and resilience. And we must build the political institutions and power needed to make such a future a reality.

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Neoliberalism owes its political dominance to the common bonds forged between intellectuals, political institutions, and movement leaders. Much of the political power driving neoliberalism’s rise emerged with social conservatives: the white evangelical Christian churches that, beginning in the 1970s, became increasingly politicized as a right-wing force. Neoliberal economists and social conservatives did not necessarily share a uniform view of families; as political scientist Melinda Cooper documented in *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (2017), the value of the family

for economists was less about its innate moral virtue than its privatizing function. But Cooper's analysis reveals how symbiotic the two camps were. Social conservatives' reverence for the traditional nuclear family provided a values-based language to justify neoliberal efforts to dramatically erode the welfare state. And neoliberals elevated the married, two-parent family as a normative family ideal by establishing it as the basic economic unit of society—the container, so to speak, for individual economic success—and, by extension, personal virtue.

Social conservatives have not won the war of ideas when it comes to family structure; Americans today are more accepting of a wide range of family forms than at any point in history. But at the same time, the traditional family structure retains much of its cultural power due to the precarity of contemporary economic life. Thanks to a system with very little social insurance, almost no public investment in services for children outside of K-12 education, and jobs that do not pay enough to live on, individuals are in fact more tethered to families—through wealth and debt—than they were a generation ago. Families now bear near exclusive responsibility for helping provide a middle-class life for their children, through private financing of child care, an assortment of de rigueur private enrichment activities, higher education, and even eventual home ownership. As various forms of public economic support for families have been systematically eroded (e.g., cuts to public higher education, the scaling back of Pell grants) and replaced by private financing mechanisms (e.g., the expansion of private student loans), family economic ties through marriage and parenthood have been strengthened.

The net result is that family structure has become, along with race and gender, one of the prime sources of inequality in the United States. But just as a central tenet of neoliberalism is that individuals deserve the rewards and punishments they incur from largely unregulated markets, family security is framed as the result of individual choices pertaining to marriage and childbearing.

In reality, market capitalism has been advanced through a form of family capitalism that affixes different rewards and penalties to various family structures and uses the resulting discrepancies to define and reinforce the parameters of what's "normal." Married couples in the United States benefit from more than one thousand rights, benefits, and privileges they receive under federal law, whereas the United States attaches a particularly high penalty to single motherhood. Indeed, single mothers are more likely to be poor in the United States than they are in twenty-six of twenty-nine comparable, rich democracies.

The reason that is not their “poor lifestyle choices.” Rather, it is the result of a set of policy choices, cloaked in the language of family morality, that leave single mothers more economically vulnerable in the United States than in much of the rest of the world.

Such choices do more than solidify family economic inequality; they are a tool in the maintenance of white supremacy. The policing of family structure has always been most formal and punitive for low-income black and brown families. Welfare reform of the 1990s, for example, was the culmination of more than thirty years of moralizing about “family breakdown” in black communities and the stigmatizing of black single mothers, all while simultaneously decimating black and brown families through mass incarceration and other forms of structural racism. Neoliberals—who included not just political conservatives like Ronald Reagan but also “New Democrats” like Bill Clinton—spent the better part of thirty years enacting a series of reforms designed to enforce a particular view of family morality by establishing a state interest in paternity establishment, policing child support obligations, and in the early 2000s, promoting marriage as a solution for poverty reduction. The net effect was to transform the public interest in supporting vulnerable families into a public interest in enforcing family responsibility among low-income, disproportionately black women.

For middle- and upper-middle class families, the maintenance of an illusory family ideal has been more subtle and insidious. The white, married, two-parent breadwinner/homemaker family was a social construction of the mid-twentieth century postwar era, enforced through rigid race and gender hierarchies and enabled by the family wage once paid, and the generous public housing and higher education benefits once provided, to white, largely unionized men. Over the past half century, much about families has changed. Today, 26 percent of children live with a single parent. And 61 percent of married parents with children under the age of 18 both work outside the home. Yet there has been no commensurate reduction in caregiving and household labor and few new public supports to help families manage the responsibilities that were once relegated full-time homemakers. Nor is there any formal support—in the form of tax, monetary, housing, or other policy—for the kinds of family structures that would be better equipped to manage the responsibilities of a neoliberal economy, such as extended family or fictive kin networks.

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“We’re living with the household requirements of the 1960s but the work and parenting expectations of 2020, which is a rotten combination, especially for mothers,” *New York Times* columnist Jen Senior wrote just over a week ago. Instead, the stress parents—and especially mothers—experience from mounting economic and time pressures is framed as their individual problem to solve. “Life hacks” for greater efficiency; “self-care” in the form of consumption—the solution to capitalism run amok, we are told, is more capitalism.

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It is possible that COVID-19 crisis could cause greater numbers of Americans to reject the family norms that have allowed neoliberalism to endure as a “zombie ideology,” one whose intellectual claims have overwhelmingly failed to produce. A prolonged and severe recession could cause more Americans to reject the myth that economic security is a byproduct of individual virtue and “good” family decisions. And it could well cause more families—and particularly women—to stop accepting that the unrealistic economic and time expectations placed upon them and start demanding public support.

The seeds of such a rebellion were already there. Pre-pandemic, the economic conditions resulting from neoliberal policies—stagnant wages, high inequality—combined with skyrocketing costs of child care, higher education, and health care had created new political energy for significant new public investments: paid family leave, universal child care, tuition-free college, Medicare for All, and guaranteed income. None, however, has yet broken through.

Politically, the reason for this is clear: conservatives have blocked any form of public investment for the better half of the last century, and proponents have been unable to build the political will necessary to overcome such entrenched opposition. This is in part due to is likely the resistance of primarily white middle- and upper-middle class families who have been able to get by, if even on the margins, thanks to the labor of privately paid—and often low-paid—women of color, including many immigrants. Will the current crisis finally prompt a re-examination of those interests?

**A prolonged and severe recession could cause more Americans to reject the myth that economic security is a byproduct of individual virtue and “good” family decisions.**

COVID-19 has made domestic labor less available, requiring greater numbers of affluent families to fend for themselves, while forcing domestic workers, who often lack basic labor protections, to make impossible choices between a paycheck and their personal health and safety. The fragility of the moment could help to encourage new thinking, building greater support for solutions that don't require the exploitation of some to ensure the security of others.

Greater demand for public investment could also result from the disruption of public schools, one of the few remaining public benefits for American families. In the wake of the pandemic, vast amounts of additional unpaid labor have been added to already overburdened parents'—particularly mothers'—plates. Recent studies estimate that since the pandemic hit working parents have assumed an additional twenty-eight hours of weekly household chores and child care, with women now performing an average of sixty-five hours a week of household labor (as opposed to men's fifty). Numbers of parents report that they are "failing miserably," as they attempt to juggle work, parenting, and homeschooling.

The crisis has also revealed the risk of relying on private markets to provide essential family goods and services. Public schools are vulnerable to budget cuts in a post-pandemic economy, as states and localities will struggle to balance dramatically reduced budgets. But they will eventually re-open and remain intact. Meanwhile, the privatized U.S. child care market is crumbling. Most providers operate on razor-thin profit margins, and amidst widespread closures, are struggling to cover rent and pay staff. The child care shortages and cost hikes that will likely greet families as local economies begin to re-open (in order to compensate for lower teacher-student ratios that will be necessary to comply with social distancing regulations) could have spiraling negative economic effects, reducing mothers' employment and career advancement prospects for years to come. And amidst a prolonged recession or depression, the already crippling higher education debt load millions of young people and their families have been forced to incur may become a permanent barrier to the middle-class. A public system that bears no responsibility for family health and security is, quite simply, untenable, especially at moments of great peril.

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The open question is whether the pandemic will serve not merely a personal tipping point but also a political one that builds the political will for an alternative economic approach. Such realignment is possible, but barriers remain.



First, it is difficult to overstate the degree to which neoliberals have succeeded in convincing the public—particularly political, policy, and media elites—that their particular form of family values are just a matter of common sense. This has been especially true in the social commentary around family structure, where the talking point that “children do best with two married parents” remains relatively

unquestioned, despite the fact that the most rigorous reviews of existing research have found the “literature lacks a clear consensus on the existence of a causal effect” and that “any such effect is small.” It is impossible to identify with certainty why the idea remains so persuasive, though like much of neoliberal economics, conservative foundations with a vested interest in the promotion and maintenance of the ideology have invested heavily in efforts to popularize it. And for many elites, who are themselves more likely to have families resembling the ideological ideal, the claim likely has a certain self-serving appeal.

Second, there is no organic political counterforce comparable to what white, evangelical Christian churches provided to neoliberalism. There is excellent progressive organizing across the country, though progressive funders have tended to engage with it—and resource it—through the lenses of political constituencies to be mobilized and siloed policy issues to be advanced. In reality, what is needed is a set of political institutions, united by a set of values and a moral understanding of the economy as a means of promoting human thriving, not growth. Promising models exist in the form of organizing with domestic workers, mothers, and other progressive faith-based communities that are centering caregiving and caregivers, especially the most vulnerable, and building multi-racial political bases for greater public investment. But we have yet to fully imagine, never mind build, the infrastructure that the moment requires.

But as the contours of an alternative economic paradigm become clearer, we can also begin to envision the view of families it would enable. There is a possible future in which the public interest in families would actually support the care they provide, not extract it in the form of unpaid labor—and in which the dignity and value of families would be affirmed in an expansive range of forms, not privileging one at the expense of others.

The path to getting there is neither simple nor easy. But the urgency is there. One necessary step in the long journey is to recognize that this health and economic crisis is also a family crisis, meaning that it is rooted in a view of family that is unworkable on its

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own and prevents us from truly tackling the problems of the pandemic and the problems of our politics.

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## Julie Kohler

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# Why Is It Hard for Liberals to Talk About 'Family Values'?

[A theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/07/why-is-it-hard-for-liberals-to-talk-about-family-values/278151/](http://theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/07/why-is-it-hard-for-liberals-to-talk-about-family-values/278151/)

July 30, 2013

Racial tensions, a fear of appearing judgmental, and the sexual revolution ...?

By [Emma Green](#)

July 30, 2013

Are "family values" a taboo topic for the left? For one thing, there may be a language problem. "Family values terminology is so closely connected to the 1980s and Jerry Falwell-esque way of framing it -- it's an immediate turn-off," said Brad Wilcox, the Director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. "You should be talking about a 'family-friendly agenda.'"

True, for those who lean to the left, the phrase "family values" tends to bring back uncomfortable memories of the Reagan era and the "Moral Majority." But there's a deeper issue: An important and damaging intellectual collapse in the way the public talks about politically charged topics.

When it comes to issues like gay marriage, welfare, and abortion, liberal politicians and intellectuals are vocal and often indignant. But they're quieter about the ways that traditional "family values" are guiding their own choices. The irony is that college-educated, wealthier Americans who identify with the left are overwhelmingly raising their kids in two-parent households. This is no coincidence: Research indicates that family stability (i.e., couples who wait to have kids until they're married and then stay married) makes a difference in income equality and social mobility.

This public/private divide raises a problem: It's like stable marriage and community are the secret sauce of economic well-being that nobody on the left wants to admit to using. As Kay Hymowitz, a researcher at the Manhattan Institute who studies the relationship between family issues and economics, put it, "They are choosing that route in part because they know on some deep level that it is the way their children will be able to remain in the middle class."

At a recent *Atlantic* working summit on economic security, *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne spoke about this conversational divide. "As a country, we could be on the verge of a really good discussion of this, where we acknowledge that parental responsibility matters, that how kids are raised matters, but also that there are economic causes of this. Those of us who are on the more progressive side should be willing to engage in the conversation about family, personal responsibility, and all that."

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To be fair, there are some left-leaning public voices who engage with this issue. Take, for instance, David Leonhardt's recent *New York Times* piece on the issues driving economic mobility, which pointed to this interesting finding from a study on economic mobility:

In metropolitan areas with large numbers of single-parent families, even children with two parents face longer odds of climbing the economic ladder. That pattern suggests that a factor that the researchers were not able to measure is affecting both family structure and economic mobility -- or that family-structure patterns have effects on an entire community.

But Leonhardt and the handful of other writers who engage with these issues seem to be the exception, not the rule. "There's no question about it," Hymowitz said. Having public conversations about family structure is "much harder for the left. The left is very much defined by questioning tradition, for good reasons and bad reasons."

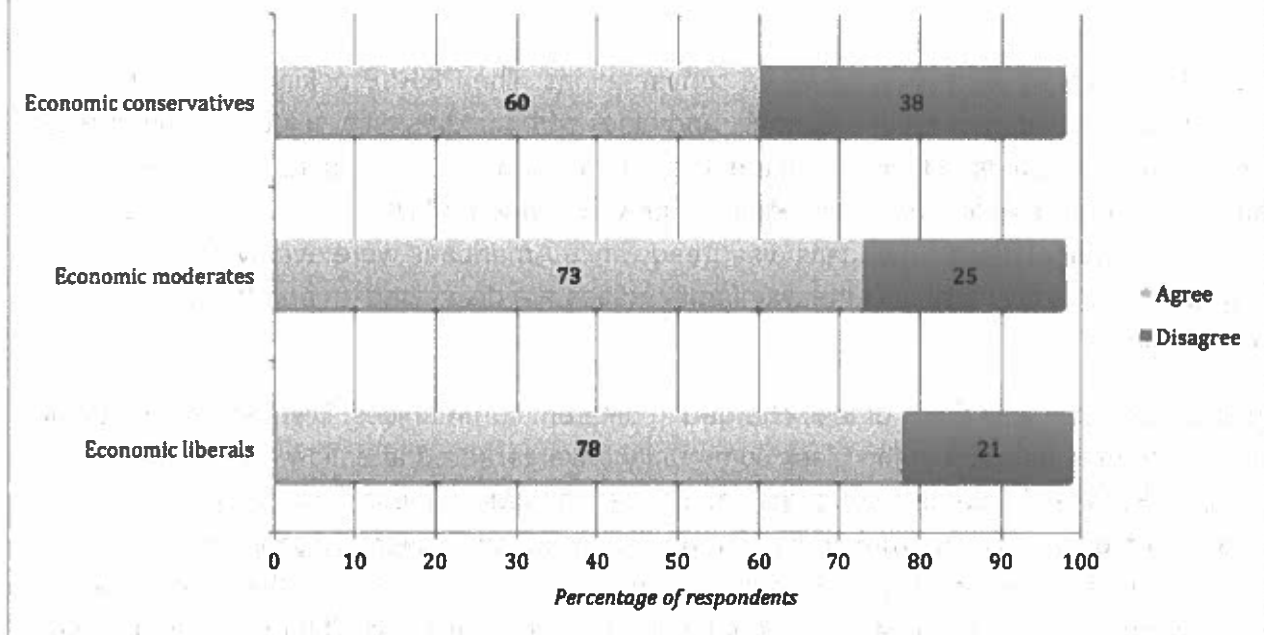
So what makes this conversation so hard for the liberal community? For one thing, religion adds a layer of complexity. Broadly speaking, religious organizations have always advocated traditional family structures -- i.e., don't have babies before you get married, and once you get married, stay married. Many on the left agree that religious institutions can play a positive role in family life -- and when people follow the mores advocated in religious communities, it turns out, they are less likely to experience poverty or commit crimes.

But liberals tend to break with conservatives on a key question: Whether religious beliefs and values should be part of public debates about social and political issues. In general, Americans don't think it should -- about three quarters of respondents in a new study by the Public Religion Research Institute and Brookings felt that religion didn't belong in these kinds of public discussions.

But, diving a little deeper into the data, among those who thought religion should be kept out of the public sphere, about 80 percent considered themselves liberal or moderate on economic issues like poverty and income inequality. Among those who thought religion *should* be included in the public sphere, the numbers of economic liberals, moderates, and conservatives were much closer.



## Agree or disagree: Religion is a private matter that should be kept out of public debates about social and political issues.



Source: The 2013 Economic Values Survey, Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution

Why do those who are center or left on economic issues want to keep religion out of the public sphere? One explanation is what could be characterized as the left's tendency to value pluralism and tolerance. The firm metaphysical framework of religion inevitably privileges certain ways of living over others, and some people are uncomfortable with that.

Another explanation is historical. "Liberals have been at the forefront of challenging all sorts of tradition as being oppressive," Hymowitz said. "That included the sexual revolution, feminism, and, of course, the gay revolution. Because the left is so identified with those themes, it becomes very difficult to propose that the break-down of the family has not worked very well, particularly for those groups the left professes to be most concerned about" -- i.e., groups like poor, single mothers.

But perhaps women need this conversation most of all. Experts believe the rising number of single mothers among lower- to middle-class women will create new challenges for those women, their children, and their communities, but the intertwined history of left-leaning politics and feminism makes it difficult for leaders to call out the problem. "Mainstream and more radical feminist groups are very uneasy with this topic, because they're concerned about questioning women's choices. They are [also] concerned about the history of domestic abuse and creating an environment where it's more difficult to talk about that and address that," Hymowitz says.

Understandably, in communities where these issues are particularly raw, leaders like pastors and politicians don't want to offend or alienate people who have made their lives work in non-traditional families. But, Hymowitz says, "Even if you're just neutral on the subject, you are still saying it's basically fine, that it's of no importance difference whether a child grows up with a father or not."

Race also matters a lot in shaping these conversations. The PRRI/Brookings study shows that perspectives among white, Hispanic, and black communities differ a lot when it comes to family issues. When asked whether the decline of traditional family structures is a primary cause of America's economic challenges, roughly 60 percent of Hispanic Americans agreed, while 60 percent of black Americans disagreed; white Americans were evenly split. Undoubtedly, this divide affects the way family issues are discussed among those communities.

Certain topics are also more or less charged in different communities. Discussions about the importance of fatherhood in the black community have garnered attention -- take, for example, President Obama's commencement speech to Morehouse College students in 2013, which drew criticism from across the media, including Ta-Nehisi Coates at *The Atlantic*. These reactions provide insight not because they adjudicate whether Obama was right or wrong, but rather because they point to a hard truth: It's difficult for prominent figures to find the language to talk about family issues without suffering backlash.

The result is a stifling of the conversation. The President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based Partnerships has an initiative on fatherhood, but as Amy Sullivan, a journalist who writes on these topics, pointed out, it has taken the softest of soft power approaches, making recommendations and convening conversations rather than putting the issue at the center of the administration's legislative or policy agendas.

"If you care about social justice, you've got to care about families. But if you care about families, you've got to care about social justice."

A quiet, government-led initiative on fatherhood is the perfect symbol of a deeper philosophical divide between left and right. To use somewhat glib shorthand, the left advocates government change, while the right wants community change; the left sees structural causes for poverty and inequality, while the right sees cultural causes. In his response to Charles Murray's controversial 2012 book on these issues, *Coming Apart*, David Brooks summed it up like this: "Republicans claim that America is threatened by a decadent cultural elite that corrupts regular Americans, who love God, country and traditional values. Democrats claim America is threatened by the financial elite, who hog society's resources."

As is so often true, though, this philosophical binary has proven counterproductive. The research seems to indicate that problems like poverty, the achievement gap, crime are both structural (i.e., "What's the best way for the government to help reduce income inequality?") *and* cultural (i.e., "How are the values parents teach their children tied to kids' success? How

does this relate to family structure?"). Wilcox pointed to a thought-provoking example: In a study of adolescent attitudes, teens with highly educated mothers were much more likely to predict that they would be embarrassed about getting pregnant before getting married.

Another study indicated that millennials view "being a good parent" and "having a successful marriage" as separate questions; in other words, getting married and having kids are becoming increasingly decoupled. Even though it's a tough question, it's important to ask: What will these attitudes mean for poverty, school achievement, and income inequality in the next generation?

As Dionne said at *The Atlantic's* working summit, "My shorthand is yeah, if you care about social justice, you've got to care about families. But if you care about families, you've got to care about social justice."

The problem is not that people on the left don't find family or values important. It's more that language, history, and ideology create political hazards, rendering family issues almost impermissible in the public sphere. As Robert Jones, the CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, put it, avoiding family issues is a survival tactic in the face of deeply divided political camps. "If I'm a politician or organizer... on the left, it's not so much a principled censorship, but a pragmatic avoidance of the issue to keep the conversation less mired."

## Cracking the Racial Code: Black Threat, White Rights and the Lexicon of American Politics

Dylan Bennett, Hannah Walker

### Racial Foundations of States' Rights and American Neoliberalism

The commitment of American conservatism to the enhanced autonomy of the individual states in relation to the national government is deeply rooted in white supremacy. The American racialized welfare state has been under heavy attack from the right since the 1970s. The conservative embrace of economic neoliberalism claims a loss of political liberty and human freedom from the twin evils of taxation and social insurance. Put together, opponents of civil rights, racial desegregation, and the welfare state find a useful tool in the appeal to "states' rights." Thus, the term "states' rights" is one of the most racially loaded terms in the American political lexicon. Here, we examine how the term is tightly intertwined with neoliberalism and racial antipathy in a manner that is particularly damaging to African Americans.

States' rights are established in the federal character of the U.S. Constitution. Many areas of public policy fall under the authority of the governments of the 50 states, including marriage and family law, criminal law, taxation, and election management. This state-level authority, quite significantly, is not derived from the liberal principle of individual equality but rather from regional power. As such, it represents a historical-constitutional bargain with localism in American political values, including the white supremacy of the southern American system of slavery. The U.S. Senate, based on two senators per state, regardless of population size, balances regional power with popular voting power at the national level in the House of Representatives. Designed in theory to protect the rights of minority groups from the tyranny of the popular majority, representation in the Senate has, in practice, often served to oppress and exclude the black minority. Yet, the authority of state governments also is limited by the U.S. Constitution's nod to the supremacy of the federal government. As the national government eventually pushed for racial equality and a modern welfare state, resistance at the state level became one of the great dividing lines in American politics.

In theory, American conservatism favors local government over distant national government. In practice, political parties often favor whatever level of government brings them victory. Nonetheless, the idea of state-level political autonomy has been a consistent source of appeal to conservatives. The term "states' rights" has had a long career. In the pre-Civil War era, it plainly meant defending the right to continue slavery. By the early 1960s, it was repurposed by Alabama Governor George Wallace to defend the prerogative of racial segregation in the South against looming desegregation. The term gained life when Ronald Reagan infamously pledged to defend states' rights in his 1979 announcement of his candidacy for president. Reagan's announcement took place near Philadelphia, Mississippi, a town notorious for the 1964 murder of three civil rights activists. The coded appeal to white terrorism has echoed for decades as "Exhibit A" in the living museum of racial political manipulation. In the present era, the term means preserving the power of states to reject political change that would bring greater equality of African Americans and other people of color. More candidly, the term is "a tacit appeal to southern white voters and domestic terrorists who used 'states' rights' to resist federal attempts to both legislate and enforce civil rights laws.'

The coded concept of state's rights extends to the political battle over the role of the national state in economic life and locates racial animosity as the driver of neoliberalism's austerity agenda to



significantly cut the welfare state. American conservatism is divided internally between a traditional variety and a libertarian version. Traditional conservatism is concerned with social stability and a prudent balance between private life free from government interference and needed government activity. The libertarian ideals of the Republican Party value business power over workers, the globalization of capitalism, deep cuts in taxation and government spending back to an idealized, but never fully articulated minimum, and a real hostility toward the welfare state institutions of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid that provide poverty relief and healthcare for tens of millions of vulnerable citizens. Libertarian conservatism emphasizes a seemingly race-neutral discourse of school choice, states' rights, and hard-working taxpayers.

Yet, libertarianism, understood by social scientists as neoliberalism, is an indirect expression of white racism in several ways. First, the historical timing of the movement is suggestive. In the 1930s, whites were part of the New Deal coalition that accepted a new welfare state. Conservatives rejected federal spending on social welfare only after the inclusion of blacks in the 1960s. A new coded language emerged to reject federal aid to blacks. The advocacy of states' rights and rejection of "central government" masked the defense of white supremacy elaborates on this historical development:

Charges of abusive federal power only arose when the federal government addressed issues of racial equality. Public schools, public roads, public libraries, and public land use were valued, desired, and expanded upon in the racially segregated industrial era. Only in the neoliberal era have we redacted from our support for inclusive public life once public life was integrated.

Hohle shows how racists in the South constructed an understanding of public programs as black and private life as white. Public life, coded black, was associated with taxation and government regulation. Private life, coded white, was associated with deregulation and austerity—cutting taxes and public spending—as an extension of personal responsibility. Thus, the deployment of language around Second Amendment rights to protect gun ownership, paired with law-and-order rhetoric leading to punitive and excessive crime policy, denote the protection of white rights and the advancement of white justice. American neoliberalism, inextricably tied up with the country's history of racial exploitation and state intervention in the form of criminal justice, serves to preserve a specifically racialized capitalism.

If neoliberalism serves to achieve racialized white goals, political scientist Lester Spence argues that neoliberalism is a force that punishes black people. First, deindustrialization, loss of labor rights, and cuts to education lead to the decay of communities. Next, communities in decline are punished for their own suffering, such as when schools lose funding or close due to low student achievement. True to form, the economic losers are blamed for their own failure and denied needed public funding. Spence describes how the attack on government develops:

As a result, a wide variety of public institutions and public goods come under attack. It isn't that people begin to hate "big government," as this is technically inaccurate. It's that people begin to simultaneously hate government programs that offer progressive assistance to populations perceived to be undeserving and desire government programs that punish those populations.

The recent trajectory of the Affordable Care Act, which is designed to make health insurance affordable to medically underserved groups in the United States, supports Spence's analysis. Sixteen southern states and the District of Columbia, home to 58 percent of blacks, have lower incomes, higher inequality, and higher rates of illness than the rest of the country, but most of those states have nonetheless

rejected the expansion of federal Medicaid health insurance. Taken together, we see the institutional structure of U.S. federalism providing a grand rationale and an efficient code for racially motivated opposition to the welfare state and public services in general, while simultaneously supporting the most significant state-building enterprise of the 20th century: mass incarceration.

# Dog-Whistling Dixie

 [slate.com/news-and-politics/2007/11/what-reagan-meant-by-states-rights.html](http://slate.com/news-and-politics/2007/11/what-reagan-meant-by-states-rights.html)

David Greenberg

November 20, 2007

History Lesson

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## When Reagan said “states’ rights,” he was talking about race.

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By David Greenberg

Nov 20, 2007 4:09 PM

An academic journal would seem a more likely place than the *New York Times* op-ed page for a pitched debate about a 27-year-old political speech. But the speech that David Brooks, Bob Herbert, Paul Krugman, and guest contributor Lou Cannon have been arguing about for the last two weeks deserves the broader airing it’s getting.

The bone of contention, as readers of “Chatterbox” know, is Ronald Reagan’s 1980 endorsement of “states’ rights” at the Neshoba County Fair in Mississippi, close to the site of the ruthless 1964 murder of three civil rights workers. This matters because Reagan’s election to the presidency that year hinged on bringing into the GOP fold several new groups—including the rank and file of white Southerners, the bulk of whom, for generations after the Civil War, wouldn’t dare check a Republican name on a national ballot. Ever since, Dixie, once “solidly” Democratic, has been more or less solidly Republican.

The current row is about interpreting Reagan’s defense of “states’ rights” and his choice of venue. Was this language, in this place, an endorsement of the white South’s wish to reverse the 20-year-old trend of using federal laws (and troops when necessary) to protect the rights of African-Americans? Or was Reagan’s remark just an expression of his well-known disdain for “big government”—and his choice of Neshoba County an unhappy blunder? In the ambiguity lies the answer.

The first point to emphasize is that the claim that Reagan was not personally bigoted—the linchpin, for example, of Cannon’s defense of the man whose life he has chronicled five times—isn’t central. Personal prejudice is far from the only or most pernicious kind of racism, and politicians who don’t think ill of blacks can still exploit racist aspects of our society for their own gain.

You have to understand that point to understand the conservative movement’s triumph. After all, by 1980 or so, the civil rights movement had for the most part established racial equality as an undisputed good. Only in the farthest reaches of American political culture did public figures dare to make nakedly racist appeals anymore. Even segregationist

standard-bearer George Wallace famously renounced his racist past in 1982 en route to re-election as governor of Alabama. These new social norms left no room for the rank white supremacism that once flowed easily from the mouths of many Southern (and non-Southern) leaders.

That doesn't mean, however, that America had attained "the end of racism," as right-wing polemicist Dinesh D'Souza claimed in a 1995 book. For one thing, bigotry continued to fester privately, in sentiments and stereotypes that people were loath to share with reporters or pollsters. Even more important, though, racial inequities had become intricately woven into many policies and structures of American life—from housing patterns to popular notions about crime and welfare—and any discussion of these issues invariably carried a racial subtext. It's against this matrix of racialized social policy that Reagan's rhetoric and ideology, and that of the conservative movement more generally, has to be seen.

In histories of the contemporary right, as historian Michael Kimmage has noted, a dichotomy exists. The conservative movement, which is highly self-conscious about its own history, has generated a library of triumphalist in-house chronicles, most of which deny that racism played a significant role in the success of Reagan or the right. In their telling, ascent stems from "ideas" such as small government, individual freedom, and anti-communism. This account, it should be noted, ignores that conservatives defined the first two of those ideas (if not the third) in ways that, intentionally or not, served to countenance racism. Conservatives spoke of "individual freedom," for instance, but they approached the concept from the perspective of a white businessman, not a black job-seeker.

On the flip side, academic historians have put race at the center of their explanations of the right's rise. These histories tend to stress the migration of the white South from the Democratic Party to the GOP. Such history sometimes shortchanges the role of the Cold War, the Great Society, and the loosening of social mores—as well as factors like the evolution of Dixie's economy. The focus is on Republican opposition first to the civil rights movement and then to later, more controversial efforts to achieve racial equality like busing and affirmative action. At its most tendentious, the argument comes close to stating that Reagan came to power because America, or at least the South, is racist at heart.

Both accounts, obviously, are overdrawn. But there are a few more nuanced histories out there, including *Chain Reaction* by Tom and Mary Edsall (which Krugman cites in his latest column) and *In Search of Another Country* by Emory University historian Joe Crespino (who has weighed in on the Reagan-in-1980 controversy here). These credit the way that race has worked as an unspoken subtext in unlikely places. The key to the argument is that Reagan's success hinged on forging messages to Americans—not just



Southern whites, incidentally, but also Catholic blue-collar workers and neoconservative intellectuals—that eschewed explicit racism while still tapping into sublimated resentments of blacks or anger at racially fraught policies like busing, welfare, and crime.

In its simplest form, this multitiered message relied on code words. No one who used the phrase “states’ rights” in living memory of the massive resistance movement against forced desegregation could be unaware of the message of solidarity it sent to Southern whites about civil rights. (The phrase, of course, had been bound up with racism at least since John Calhoun championed it in his defense of slavery in the 1830s.) But because the term also connoted a general opposition to the growth of the federal government’s role in economic life, nonracist whites could comfort themselves that politicians like Nixon and Reagan were using it innocently—and thus shrug off any guilt they might feel for being complicit in racist campaigning. It was a dog whistle to segregationists. In the same vein, Reagan’s use of phrases linked to insidious racial stereotypes—his talk of Cadillac-driving welfare queens, or “young bucks” buying T-bone steaks with food stamps—pandered to bigots while making sure not to alienate voters whom starker language would have scared away.

More important, even where code words weren’t at work, Reagan’s very ideology contained a strong dose of racial conservatism. On one issue after another, Reagan’s image and appeal was shot through with a hostility to assisting minorities with positive measures—affirmative action, legal protections for criminal defendants, welfare programs (which mainly helped whites but were perceived as mainly helping blacks). As a standard-bearer of the conservative movement, the Edsalls have written, Reagan in 1980 “revived the sharply polarized racial images of the two parties ... with racial conservatism contributing decisively to the GOP advantage.”

As Crespino notes, the triumph of the civil rights movement and its assumptions about racial equality forced conservative Southerners to find other issues with which to galvanize voters. On these fronts, too, racial politics nonetheless shaped the debate. Southern candidates created private religious schools, for example, that could escape court-ordered integration, thus recasting the fight as one of religious freedom. In my own research, I’ve found that today’s right-wing attacks on the “liberal media” have roots in George Wallace’s relentless war in the early 1960s against the national news agencies whose reporters, he and other Southern whites believed, distorted the terms of their struggle to maintain Jim Crow.

The upshot was that by 1980, race and ideology had become so commingled that one’s stand on racial issues served as a proxy for one’s partisan preference. Previously, economic issues had been the chief dividing line between the parties. By 1980, though, according to the Edsalls, the changes that followed the civil rights movement had

crystallized, and racial politics figured just as strongly. Almost 69 percent of the public, for example, thought the Democrats were likely to aid minorities, compared with just about 11 percent who thought the same of the Republicans. Conversely, roughly 66 percent thought the GOP “unlikely” to aid minorities, while about 12 percent said the same of the Democrats. Even talking about domestic government spending carried a tacit racial message, since public opposition to spending was highest and most intense when it came to programs devoted to the needy and to blacks. By contrast, support for government spending on Social Security, education, health care, and the environment remained robust even during the heyday of Reaganism.

Building on the efforts of Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon before him, as well as of a generation of Southern Republican leaders, Reagan succeeded in altering the terms of political debate when it came to race. Stripping away the crude bigotry that had cost the white South the rest of nation’s sympathy in the 1950s and 1960s, he and other conservative political leaders fashioned an ideology in which racial politics were implicit, and yet still powerful. Ever since, their followers have been able to indignantly claim that any allegations of racism are smears and slurs—and discredit the entire discussion by making it about personal prejudice rather than public policy.

# “Put Them in Trauma”: Inside a Key MAGA Leader’s Plans for a New Trump Agenda

Redden, Molly; Kroll, Andy; Surgey, Nick.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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## FULL TEXT

A key ally to former President Donald Trump detailed plans to deploy the military in response to domestic unrest, defund the Environmental Protection Agency and put career civil servants “in trauma” in a series of previously unreported speeches that provide a sweeping vision for a second Trump term.

In private speeches delivered in 2023 and 2024, Russell Vought, who served as Trump’s director of the Office of Management and Budget, described his work crafting legal justifications so that military leaders or government lawyers would not stop Trump’s executive actions.

He said the plans are a response to a “Marxist takeover” of the country; likened the moment to 1776 and 1860, when the country was at war or on the brink of it; and said the timing of Trump’s candidacy was a “gift of God.”

“Their Entire Apparatus Is Exposed to Our Strategy” (Obtained by ProPublica and Documented)

ProPublica and Documented obtained videos of the two speeches Vought delivered during events for the Center for Renewing America, a pro-Trump think tank led by Vought. The think tank’s employees or fellows include Jeffrey Clark, the former senior Justice Department lawyer who aided Trump’s attempts to overturn the 2020 election result; Ken Cuccinelli, a former acting deputy secretary in the Department of Homeland Security under Trump; and Mark Paoletta, a former senior budget official in the Trump administration. Other Trump allies such as former White House adviser Steve Bannon and U.S. Reps. Chip Roy and Scott Perry either spoke at the conferences or appeared on promotional materials for the events.

Vought does not hide his agenda or shy away from using extreme rhetoric in public. But the apocalyptic tone and hard-line policy prescriptions in the two private speeches go further than his earlier pronouncements. As OMB director, Vought sought to use Trump’s 2020 “Schedule F” executive order to strip away job protections for nonpartisan government workers. But he has never spoken in such pointed terms about demoralizing federal workers to the point that they don’t want to do their jobs. He has spoken in broad terms about undercutting independent agencies but never spelled out sweeping plans to defund the EPA and other federal agencies.

Vought’s plans track closely with Trump’s campaign rhetoric about using the military against domestic protesters or what Trump has called the “enemy within.” Trump’s desire to use the military on U.S. soil recently prompted his longest-serving chief of staff, retired Marine Gen. John Kelly, to speak out, saying Trump “certainly prefers the dictator approach to government.”

Other policies mentioned by Vought dovetail with Trump’s plans, such as embracing a wartime footing on the southern border and rolling back transgender rights. Agenda 47, the campaign’s policy blueprint, calls for revoking President Joe Biden’s order expanding gender-affirming care for transgender people; Vought uses even more extreme language, decrying the “transgender sewage that’s being pumped into our schools and institutions” and referring to gender-affirming care as “chemical castration.”

Since leaving government, Vought has reportedly remained a close ally of the former president. Speaking in July to undercover journalists posing as relatives of a potential donor, Vought said Trump had “blessed” the Center for Renewing America and was “very supportive of what we do,” CNN reported.

Vought did not respond to requests for comment.

“Since the Fall of 2023, President Trump’s campaign made it clear that only President Trump and the campaign, and

NOT any other organization or former staff, represent policies for the second term," Danielle Alvarez, a senior adviser to the Trump campaign, said in a statement. She did not directly address Vought's statements. Karoline Leavitt, his campaign's national press secretary, added there have been no discussions on who would serve in a second Trump administration.

In addition to running his think tank, Vought was the policy director of the Republican National Committee's official platform committee ahead of the nominating convention. He's also an architect of Project 2025, the controversial coalition effort mapping out how a second Trump administration can quickly eliminate obstacles to rolling out a hard-right policy agenda.

As ProPublica and Documented reported, Project 2025 has launched a massive program to recruit, vet and train thousands of people to "be ready on day one" to serve in a future conservative administration. (Trump has repeatedly criticized Project 2025, and his top aides have said the effort has no connection to the official campaign despite the dozens of former Trump aides and advisers who contributed to Project 2025.)

Vought is widely expected to take a high-level government role if Trump wins a second term. His name has even been mentioned as a potential White House chief of staff. The videos obtained by ProPublica and Documented offer an unfiltered look at Vought's worldview, his plans for a Trump administration and his fusing of MAGA ideology and Christian nationalism.

#### A Shadow Government in Waiting

In his 2024 speech, Vought said he was spending the majority of his time helping lead Project 2025 and drafting an agenda for a future Trump presidency. "We have detailed agency plans," he said. "We are writing the actual executive orders. We are writing the actual regulations now, and we are sorting out the legal authorities for all of what President Trump is running on."

Vought laid out how his think tank is crafting the legal rationale for invoking the Insurrection Act, a law that gives the president broad power to use the military for domestic law enforcement. The Washington Post previously reported the issue was at the top of the Center for Renewing America's priorities.

"We want to be able to shut down the riots and not have the legal community or the defense community come in and say, 'That's an inappropriate use of what you're trying to do,'" he said. Vought held up the summer 2020 unrest following George Floyd's murder as an example of when Trump ought to have had the ability to deploy the armed forces but was stymied.

Vought's preparations for a future Trump administration involve building a "shadow" Office of Legal Counsel, he told the gathered supporters in May 2023. That office, part of the Justice Department, advises the president on the scope of their powers. Vought made clear he wants the office to help Trump steamroll the kind of internal opposition he faced in his first term.

"We're Trying to Build a Shadow Office of Legal Counsel" (Obtained by ProPublica and Documented)

Historically, the OLC has operated with a degree of independence. "If, all of a sudden, the office is full of a bunch of loyalists whose only job is to rubber-stamp the White House's latest policy directive, whose only goal is to justify the ends by whatever means, that would be quite dangerous," said an attorney who worked in the office under a previous Republican administration and requested anonymity to speak freely.

Another priority, according to Vought, was to "defund" certain independent federal agencies and demonize career civil servants, which include scientists and subject matter experts. Project 2025's plan to revive Schedule F, an attempt to make it easier to fire a large swath of government workers who currently have civil service protections, aligns with Vought's vision.

"We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected," he said. "When they wake up in the morning, we want them to not want to go to work because they are increasingly viewed as the villains. We want their funding to be shut down so that the EPA can't do all of the rules against our energy industry because they have no bandwidth financially to do so.

"We want to put them in trauma."

"We Want the Bureaucrats to Be Traumatically Affected" (Obtained by ProPublica and Documented)

Vought also revealed the extent of the Center for Renewing America's role in whipping up right-wing panic ahead of the 2022 midterms over an increase in asylum-seekers crossing at the U.S.-Mexico border.

In February 2022, Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich released a legal opinion claiming the state was under "invasion" by violent cartels and could invoke war powers to deploy National Guard troops to its southern border.

The legally dubious "invasion" theory became a potent Republican talking point.

Vought said in the 2023 speech that he and Cuccinelli, the former top Homeland Security official for Trump, personally lobbied Brnovich on the effort. "We said, 'Look, you can write your own opinion, but here's a draft opinion of what this should look like,'" Vought said.

The nonpartisan watchdog group American Oversight later obtained an email in which Vought pitched the "invasion" framework to Brnovich.

Brnovich wrote in an email to ProPublica that he recalled multiple discussions with Cuccinelli about border security.

But he added that "the invasion opinion was the result of a formal request from a member of the Arizona legislature.

And I can assure you it was drafted and written by hard working attorneys (including myself) in our office."

In the event Trump loses, Vought called for Republican leaders of states such as Florida and Texas to "create red-state sanctuaries" by "kicking out all the feds as much as they possibly can."

"Nothing Short of a Quiet Revolution"

The two speeches delivered by Vought, taken together, offer an unvarnished look at the animating ideology and political worldview of a key figure in the MAGA movement.

Over the last century, Vought said, the U.S. has "experienced nothing short of a quiet revolution" and abandoned what he saw as the true meaning and force of the Constitution. The country today, he argued, was a "post-constitutional regime," one that no longer adhered to the separation of powers among the three branches of government as laid out by the framers.

He lamented that the conservative right and the nation writ large had become "too secular" and "too globalist." He urged his allies to join his mission to "renew a consensus of America as a nation under God."

And in one of his most dramatic flourishes, he likened the 2024 election to moments in America's history when the country was facing all-out war.

"We are here in the year of 2024, a year that very well [could] —and I believe it will —rival 1776 and 1860 for the complexity and the uncertainty of the forces arrayed against us," Vought told his audience, referring to years when the colonies declared independence from Britain and the first state seceded over President Abraham Lincoln's election. "God put us here for such a time as this."

Vought said that independent agencies and unelected bureaucrats and experts wield far too much power while the traditional legislative process is a sham. He extended that critique to agencies like the Department of Justice and the Federal Reserve, whose independence from the White House had long been protected by both political parties.

"The left in the U.S. doesn't want an energetic president with the power to motivate the executive branch to the will of the American people consistent with the laws of the country," he said in the 2024 speech. "They don't want a vibrant Congress where great questions are debated and decided in front of the American people. They don't want empowered members. They want discouraged and bored backbenchers."

He added, "The all-empowered career expert like Tony Fauci is their model, wielding power behind the curtains."

Fauci was one of the top public health experts under Trump at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and a key figure in coordinating the national response.

What sets Vought apart from most of his fellow conservative activists is that he accuses powerful organizations on the right of being complicit in the current system of government, singling out the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies, the conservative and libertarian legal network co-chaired by activist Leonard Leo. The society is widely seen as an instrumental force in cultivating young conservative lawyers and building a bench of future judges whose embrace of legal theories like originalism and textualism have led to decisions overturning abortion rights, environmental protections and social welfare policies.

Yet in his 2024 speech, Vought accused the Federalist Society and "originalist judges" of being a part of the

problem, perpetuating the "post-constitutional structure" that Vought lamented by not ruling more aggressively to weaken or dismantle independent regulatory agencies that Vought and his allies view as illegitimate or unconstitutional.

It was "like being in a contract quietly revoked two decades ago, in which one party didn't tell the other," he said. "At some point, reality needs to set in. Instead, we have the vaunted so-called Federalist Society and originalist judges acting as a Praetorian Guard for this post-constitutional structure."

Echoing Trump's rhetoric, Vought implicitly endorsed the false claim of a stolen 2020 election and likened the media's debunkings of that claim to Chinese Communist propaganda.

"In the aftermath of the election, we had all these people going around saying, 'Well, I don't see any evidence of voter fraud. The media's not giving enough [of] a compelling case,'" he said. "Well, that compelling case has emerged. But does a Christian in China ask and come away saying, 'You know, there's no persecution, because I haven't read about it in the state regime press?' No, they don't."

"A Compelling Case" (Obtained by ProPublica and Documented)

Vought referred to the people detained for alleged crimes committed on Jan. 6, 2021, as "political prisoners" and defended the lawyers Jeffrey Clark and John Eastman, who have both faced criminal charges for their role in Trump's attempts to overturn the 2020 election. Federal law enforcement agencies, he added, "are keeping political opponents in jail, and I think we need to be honest about that."

The left, Vought continued, has the ultimate goal of ending representative democracy altogether. "The stark reality in America is that we are in the late stages of a complete Marxist takeover of the country," he said, "in which our adversaries already hold the weapons of the government apparatus, and they have aimed it at us. And they are going to continue to aim it until they no longer have to win elections."

When Democrats called Trump an "existential threat to democracy," they were not merely calling for his defeat at the ballot box, he said, but were using "coded language the national security state uses overseas when they are overthrowing other governments" to discourage the military from putting down anti-Trump protests should he win. "They're making Trump out to be a would-be dictator or an authoritarian," he said. "So they're actively working now to ensure, on a number of levels, that the military will perceive this as dictatorial and therefore not respond to any orders to quell any violence."

Trump, Vought insisted, has the credibility and the track record to defeat the "Marxist" left and bring about the changes that Vought and his MAGA allies seek. In his view, the Democratic Party's agenda and its "quiet revolution" could be stopped only by a "radical constitutionalist," someone in the mold of Thomas Jefferson or James Madison. For Vought, no one was in a better position to fill that role than Trump.

"We have in Donald Trump a man who is so uniquely positioned to serve this role, a man whose own interests perfectly align with the interests of the country," Vought said. "He has seen what it has done to him, and he has seen what they are trying to do to the country."

"That," he added, "is nothing more than a gift of God."

## DETAILS

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