

Trump versus the socialist menace

By Paul Krugman

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In 1961, America faced what conservatives considered a mortal threat: calls for a national health insurance program covering senior citizens. In an attempt to avert this awful fate, the American Medical Association launched what it called Operation Coffee Cup, a pioneering attempt at viral marketing.

Here's how it worked: Doctors' wives (hey, it was 1961) were asked to invite their friends over and play them a recording in which Ronald Reagan explained that socialized medicine would destroy American freedom. The housewives, in turn, were supposed to write letters to Congress denouncing the menace of Medicare.

Obviously the strategy didn't work; Medicare not only came into existence, but it became so popular that these days Republicans routinely (and falsely) accuse *Democrats* of planning to cut the program's funding. But the strategy — claiming that any attempt to strengthen the social safety net or limit inequality will put us on a slippery slope to totalitarianism — endures.

And so it was that Donald Trump, in his State of the Union address, briefly turned from his usual warnings about scary brown people to warnings about the threat from socialism.

What do Trump's people, or conservatives in general, mean by "socialism"? The answer is, it depends.

Sometimes it means any kind of economic liberalism. Thus after the SOTU, Steven Mnuchin, the Treasury secretary, lauded the Trump economy and declared that "we're not going back to socialism" — i.e., apparently America itself was a socialist hellhole as recently as 2016. Who knew?

Other times, however, it means Soviet-style central planning, or Venezuela-style nationalization of industry, never mind the reality that there is essentially nobody in American political life who advocates such things.

The trick — and "trick" is the right word — involves shuttling between these utterly different meanings, and hoping that people don't notice. You say you want free college tuition? Think of all the people who died in the Ukraine famine! And no, this isn't a caricature: Read the strange, smarmy report on socialism that Trump's economists released last fall; that's pretty much how its argument goes.

So let's talk about what's really on the table.

Some progressive U.S. politicians now describe themselves as socialists, and a significant number of voters, including a majority of voters under 30, say they approve of socialism. But neither the politicians nor the voters are clamoring for government seizure of the means of production. Instead, they've taken on board conservative rhetoric that describes anything that tempers the excesses of a market economy as socialism, and in effect said, "Well, in that case I'm a socialist."

What Americans who support "socialism" actually want is what the rest of the world calls social democracy: A market economy, but with extreme hardship limited by a strong social safety net and extreme inequality limited by progressive taxation. They want us to look like Denmark or Norway, not Venezuela.

And in case you haven't been there, the Nordic countries are not, in fact, hellholes. They have somewhat lower G.D.P. per capita than we do, but that's largely because they take more vacations. Compared with America, they have higher life expectancy, much less poverty and

significantly higher overall life satisfaction. Oh, and they have high levels of entrepreneurship — because people are more willing to take the risk of starting a business when they know that they won't lose their health care or plunge into abject poverty if they fail.

Trump's economists clearly had a hard time fitting the reality of Nordic societies into their anti-socialist manifesto. In some places they say that the Nordics aren't really socialist; in others they try desperately to show that despite appearances, Danes and Swedes are suffering — for example, it's expensive for them to operate a pickup truck. I am not making this up.

What about the slippery slope from liberalism to totalitarianism? There's absolutely no evidence that it exists. Medicare didn't destroy freedom. Stalinist Russia and Maoist China didn't evolve out of social democracies. Venezuela was a corrupt petrostate long before Hugo Chávez came along. If there's a road to

serfdom, I can't think of any nation that took it.

So scaremongering over socialism is both silly and dishonest. But will it be politically effective?

Probably not. After all, voters overwhelmingly support most of the policies proposed by American "socialists," including higher taxes on the wealthy and making Medicare available to everyone (although they don't support plans that would force people to give up private insurance — a warning to Democrats not to make single-payer purity a litmus test).

On the other hand, we should never discount the power of dishonesty. Right-wing media will portray whomever the Democrats nominate for president as the second coming of Leon Trotsky, and millions of people will believe them. Let's just hope that the rest of the media report the clean little secret of American socialism, which is that it isn't radical at all.