

The DSA on impeachment or: How the DSA learned to stop worrying and love Bolton

Genevieve Leigh
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On November 21, the Democratic Socialists of America published an article supporting the Democratic Party's impeachment campaign in the DSA's online magazine *Democratic Left*. The article, originally titled "John Bolton is My Hero," was written by Max Sawicky, a DSA member and contributor to *Jacobin* magazine.

The title of the article caused a significant stir among DSA members on social media. New and less politically experienced members of the DSA may have assumed that an ostensibly socialist organization could not possibly be lining up behind Bolton, a notorious warmonger who is well known for his advocacy of illegal wars of aggression.

The headline was later edited, though only slightly, to read: "John Bolton is My Hero? Or, Don't Knock Impeachment."

While the title is presumably meant to be tongue-in-cheek, the logic of the argument supports the pro-Bolton conclusion. The DSA is giving its support to the Democrats' impeachment campaign, the "heroes" of which are indeed John Bolton and associated reactionaries bolstered by the Democratic Party in its fight against Trump.

"Many comrades have trouble getting their arms around the removal of the most depraved, reactionary president in memory," Sawicky writes in the opening lines of the article. "Not surprisingly, nobody in their right mind wants to launch a new Cold War against the Satanic Russians. Nevertheless, heartfelt encouragement of impeachment from the Left is fully warranted."

With his glib reference to a war with the "Satanic Russians," Sawicky dismisses the reactionary foundation upon which the Democrats are actually waging their campaign in opposition to Trump, only to make clear that he supports it fully. He states, "Democrats have Trump dead to rights on Ukraine"—that is, the complaint that Trump has undermined the anti-Russia policy of the ruling class by temporarily withholding military aid from Ukraine.

Impeachment should be wholly supported, Sawicky states, regardless of the methods employed to achieve it. "The specifics of the Ukraine affair" he adds, "should not be off-

putting on the Left."

Sawicky has no issue with forming an alliance with those sections of the intelligence establishment, the military and the corporate-financial elite that are the main forces behind the Democratic Party opposition in Washington. "Others may take different sorts of satisfaction with [impeachment]," he writes, "but our own interests can be furthered as well."

There is, in fact, no democratic or progressive content to the Democrats' impeachment drive. It is the product of a bitter conflict within the ruling class and the state between two right-wing factions.

It was a CIA agent in the White House who prepared the "whistle-blower" report that is the basis of the inquiry. Furthermore, the faction of the Democratic Party that spearheaded the impeachment campaign came from a group of "CIA Democrats" drawn from the military and the intelligence agencies. None of these "specifics of the Ukraine affair," in Sawicky's words, are "off-putting" for the DSA.

The bringing down of the Trump administration on this basis could only strengthen the political influence of the CIA and FBI in Washington and produce a government committed to escalating the confrontation Russia—including Washington's proxy war with pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine—increasing the threat of war between the world's two biggest nuclear powers.

Sawicky offers no serious consideration of any of the political dangers posed. These are ignored or simply dismissed. Instead, he argues, the impeachment campaign "can be fun."

Only in passing does Sawicky attempt to refute two objections to supporting the impeachment campaign of the Democrats: that failure of the Senate to remove Trump would enable him to claim vindication, and that removal of Trump would result in a Pence presidency.

His refutation of the latter is most revealing. He insists that there is no reason to fear a Pence presidency because, he claims, it would produce "intra-Republican bloodletting" that would "cripple the party for several electoral cycles."

There is no evidence to suggest that the Republican Party would have any problem closing ranks behind Pence, who is a more politically polished, though no less dangerous figure than Trump. But more significant than his downplaying of the dangers of a Pence presidency is the fact that Sawicky welcomes such an outcome. He gleefully writes that “resentment of Pence and any traitors by Trump’s core deplorable voters would lead to a Democratic tidal wave of victories in 2020.”

For Sawicky, and the DSA more broadly, a “tidal wave” victory of the Democrats is the real goal.

Sawicky alludes more directly to these aims near the end of the article: “Instead of being embroiled in arguments with ridiculous Trumpist loons, we can look forward to more serious debate with Democratic centrists on neoliberalism vs. democratic socialism.” As Sawicky himself points out, the orientation of the DSA is not to the working class, who it sees as hopelessly backward, but to the Democratic Party “centrists.”

What the DSA is mostly interested in is securing a seat at the table and integrating itself into the political establishment. It has no disagreements with the Democratic Party on any fundamental questions, including imperialist foreign policy.

The position of the DSA on the Democrats’ impeachment campaign is in line with its history. Its political origins lie in a tendency that was led by Max Shachtman, who began his political career as a Trotskyist in the Socialist Workers Party. Shachtman broke with Trotskyism in 1939 and moved further and further to the right, eventually becoming a key advisor to the anti-communist AFL-CIO bureaucracy. The founder of the DSA, Michael Harrington, was a close associate of Shachtman when both were in the Socialist Party during the 1960s and early 1970s.

While Harrington ostensibly broke with Shachtman over the latter’s support for the Vietnam War, he had spent years collaborating with Shachtman to provide a “left” cover for US imperialism. Harrington did not split with Shachtman and the Socialist Party until the early 1970s. His disagreement with Shachtman was not based on any principled opposition to imperialism, but rather his conclusion that the US war in Vietnam would ultimately serve “communist” interests.

The DSA and other organizations in and around the Democratic Party have, however, maintained a pretense of opposing US imperialism. Only 15 years ago, the DSA and the now defunct International Socialist Organization postured as anti-war organizations and were involved in the protests against the Iraq war under Bush—in which Bolton was heavily involved.

These protests, however, were channeled via the ISO, the

DSA, et. al. behind the election of Democrats, beginning with John Kerry in 2004 and then Barack Obama in 2008. Marketed as the anti-war candidate of “hope and change,” Obama was, in fact, the candidate of the intelligence agencies. He kept the country at war for all eight years of his presidency, oversaw the construction of immigrant detention centers, beefed up border security, deported more immigrants than any other president in history, institutionalized drone attacks, including against American citizens, supported mass surveillance of the population, and obediently carried out all of the policies of the military-intelligence agencies and Wall Street.

If Bernie Sanders, backed by the DSA, were to win the presidential election in 2020, he too would continue these policies. Already Sanders routinely criticizes Trump’s trade war policies towards China from the right, demanding even more aggressive protectionist measures that would only add fuel to the mounting global tensions that bring with them the danger of a third world war.

There is no doubt that the Trump presidency poses an immense threat to the working class. However, the fundamental lie put forward by the DSA is that the Democratic Party represents a progressive alternative.

“The alternative to progressive engagement in the impeachment drama is progressive invisibility” Sawicky writes, “just as public opinion is moving left and crying for change and leadership.” This comment really gets to the crux of the issue. The DSA speaks for privileged sections of the upper-middle class that want greater “visibility”—that is, positions within the state and the corridors of power, which bring with them added financial perks.

The DSA is not a “progressive,” “independent,” let alone “socialist” organization, but a faction of the Democratic Party.

The Democrats fear, above all else, the mobilization of the working class. The hysterical campaign over Trump’s Ukraine phone call is meant to divert the mass opposition to Trump’s attacks on immigrants and his efforts to build up a racist and fascist movement in America into safer channels. In this, the DSA is playing its assigned role.



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