

Democrats' denunciation of America's revolutionary heritage provides an opening for Trump

Niles Niemuth
7 July 2020

Donald Trump attained new heights of buffoonery in his July 3 speech before Mount Rushmore, where he attempted to combine an absurd oration proclaiming his devotion to democracy with a carefully practiced impersonation of the dictator Mussolini.

Struggling with his teleprompter, Trump invoked “the courage of 56 patriots who gathered in Philadelphia 244 years ago and signed the Declaration of Independence. They enshrined a divine truth that changed the world forever when they said, ‘All men are created equal.’” He went on to proclaim that “our country was founded on Judeo-Christian principles.”

Trump does not know what he is talking about. Just for the sake of historical accuracy, it should be pointed out that the Founders explicitly opposed all efforts to commit the American government to favor any set of religious principles over another. Thomas Jefferson's conception of religious freedom, as he wrote in 1776 in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, granted equal legal rights to “the Jew, the Gentile, the Christian, the Mahometan, the Hindoo, and infidel of every denomination.” Later, and even more famously, then-President Jefferson wrote in his 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut that the religious clauses of the First Amendment of the Constitution had built “a wall between Church and State.”

Of course, the real problem in Trump's approach to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution is not that he is ignorant. Rather, it is that his opinions are those of an admirer of fascism. He would, if he had his way, overthrow the Constitution and preside over a military-police dictatorship. That is precisely what he attempted to do in early June. The effort failed for lack of adequate preparation, but it remains Trump's goal. His speeches at Mount Rushmore and on July 4th in Washington DC included threats to crush his political opponents, especially the “Marxists” and the “radical left.”

However—and this is what was most notable about his Mount Rushmore speech as well as the one he delivered on July 4th—Trump packaged his essentially fascistic speech as a defense of America's revolutionary democratic traditions. His

opponents, Trump proclaimed, are repudiating all the democratic principles and traditions associated with the American Revolution and its leaders. But he, Donald Trump, is the champion of America's revolutionary heritage.

How has it become possible for Trump to posture as the defender of American democracy?

As the *Wall Street Journal*, full of praise for Trump's speech, explains:

Liberal elites have created this opening for him by failing to stand up against the radicals who are using the justified anger at the killing of George Floyd as a cudgel to hijack America's liberal institutions and impose their intolerant political views on everyone else.

Noting the “*New York Times's* 1619 project, which derides America's founding in 1776 and replaces it with a history that distills the country into a slave-owning enterprise that remains racist to the core,” the *Journal* asks, “Who is really stoking division and a culture war?”

The newspaper concludes that, despite the Trump administration's disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump might even win reelection if he keeps going along these lines:

No doubt Mr. Trump hopes this theme can restart his election campaign, and for once he gave a speech that was about something more than himself. Stay on script, add a second-term agenda, and he might even have a chance. But whatever the result in November, Mr. Trump's Mount Rushmore theme isn't going away. Progressive elites are courting a backlash that will have more than one champion.

In other words, Trump is taking full advantage of the fact that

the Democratic Party is seeking to direct multiracial protests against police violence down the path of reactionary racist politics.

Trump and the Republicans have seized the opportunity to absurdly cast themselves as the defenders of the revolutionary heritage of the United States as legitimate demands for the removal of Confederate monuments have devolved into attacks on Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant, along with abolitionists who fought and died to put an end to slavery.

Following the logic laid out by the *Times* in its racist rewriting of history, the 1619 Project, which casts Lincoln as simply a garden variety racist, a monument to Lincoln and the destruction of slavery is to be removed from public view in Boston. An op-ed published by the *Times* on Monday calls for the destruction of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC. According to the *Times*, since Jefferson and many of his contemporaries were slave owners, there is no progressive content in what they did.

From the standpoint of political strategy, the disassociation of the “left” from the revolutionary traditions of the United States is a blunder of “monumental” (an appropriate word) proportions, giving Trump the opportunity to legitimize his fascist message as a defense of American democracy.

However, the attack on figures like Jefferson—the 18th-century author of the greatest Enlightenment statement, that “all men are created equal”—has nothing to do with genuine left-wing or socialist politics. Rather, it gives expression to the social interests and fundamentally anti-democratic aspirations of an upper middle-class layer.

The last four decades, beginning with the ascension of Ronald Reagan to the presidency and continued in all subsequent administrations, have witnessed an extraordinary growth of social inequality. The African American population has not been exempted from this process. A vast social chasm separates the wealthiest 10 percent of African Americans from the poorest 90 percent.

The protracted process of wealth concentration has produced over time an erosion of democratic consciousness. This has found peculiar expression in the largely upper-middle class academic community of tenured professors, increasingly hostile to theories of history that prioritize class and class struggle. This section of society is far more interested in theories that concentrate on issues of identity—race, gender, sexuality, etc.—which can be employed to demand and achieve greater access to the massive wealth now concentrated at the apex of society.

The social interests of this layer are fused with the efforts of the ruling class as a whole to divide the working class and block the development of a unified struggle against capitalism.

The Democrats and Republicans have deployed race in their own ways for this purpose. While Trump tries to cultivate a fascist base, the Democrats relentlessly stoke racial conflict with their promotion of reactionary conceptions such as “white

privilege” and the claim that police violence is the responsibility of “white people,” rather than the capitalist state.

From the milieu that surrounds the Democratic Party, including the *Times*, every issue is interpreted as a racial issue. Poverty, the impact of the coronavirus, police violence and every other consequence of capitalism are presented as products of the irreconcilable racial divide.

This framing of American society has the benefit of impeding any questioning of the capitalist system or the domination over society of the corporate and financial oligarchy. It is not a question of establishing genuine social equality, but rather “equity”—the greater apportionment of positions of power and wealth to small sections within minority populations.

No progressive movement has ever been built based on the elevation of race as the fundamental social category. Genuine left-wing—that is, socialist—politics is based on the fight to unify the entire working class, regardless of race, gender or nationality. It is only on this basis that all forms of racism can be opposed. In carrying out this struggle, the working class is the real repository of all that is progressive in the revolutionary struggles of the past, including the War for Independence and the Civil War—the two great bourgeois democratic American revolutions.

The development of such a movement is not only of an intellectual-polemical character. The decisive question is the development of the class struggle itself. It is precisely to the emergence of such a movement, accelerated by the homicidal back-to-work campaign of the ruling elites and the massive social crisis engulfing the country, that both Trump and the Democrats are responding.

The working class must be armed with a revolutionary socialist leadership. This is the central task of the Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International. We call on those who want to build this movement to join the Socialist Equality Party and take up the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact