

Right-wing attack on Princeton historian: Marco Rubio smears Sean Wilentz

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Republican Senator Marco Rubio has authored a vicious right-wing diatribe against Princeton historian Sean Wilentz. The commentary by the two-term Florida senator and candidate for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination was published August 23 in *The Federalist*.

The incident that set Rubio off was the occasion in early August, reported by the *Washington Post*, in which five writers and historians visited the White House, at President Biden's invitation, to give him their perspective on the significance of the mounting threat to American democracy from the "semi-fascism" of the political right, as Biden himself has since described it. Wilentz was one of the five.

After Rubio, in an appearance on Fox, attacked the historians as "snobs" and "elitists" opposed to the feelings and interests of "everyday people," Wilentz replied with an op-ed column in the *Post*, bearing the headline, "Rubio's fake populism is no match for real history."

After pointing out that Rubio had no idea what actually happened at the White House meeting, Wilentz wrote:

Rubio's contempt for historians and his predictable attempt to stir up hostility against them are part of a long American fake populist tradition of vilifying intellect, a tradition that infects our politics with reliable frequency. It extends from the Anti-Masons and the Know-Nothings of the 19th century through Father Charles Coughlin and McCarthyism in the 20th century to Donald Trump today.

He concluded:

It doesn't take much to see the imminent perils facing American democracy. They come from those who planned, abetted, whipped up and participated in the attack on the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

This rejoinder sparked the subsequent outpouring of venom

from Rubio in *The Federalist*. He denounced Wilentz and other liberals for "peddling imaginary threats," including climate change, the COVID pandemic, and above all, "by suggesting that conservatives are planning 'an authoritarian takeover' of the United States."

After denouncing the Princeton professor for the supposed offenses of American academia, Rubio concluded with these words: "I'll wear criticism and slander from Princeton with a badge of honor, just like I do criticism from the regimes in Beijing, Moscow, Caracas, and Havana." This is the sort of crude amalgam generally employed by red-baiting witch-hunters.

Wilentz is a prominent liberal intellectual, a supporter of the Democratic Party, with close personal ties to Bill and Hillary Clinton. In 1998, he testified before the House Judiciary Committee opposing the right-wing campaign to impeach Clinton. His visit to the Biden White House was an expression of the politically untenable view that it is possible to defend American democracy against fascism through the mechanism of the Democratic Party.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has fundamental political differences with Sean Wilentz, rejecting his support for the Democratic Party and his defense of US foreign policy. Wilentz's recent statement in an interview with CBS, linking the fight against fascism in the US to support for the US-NATO war in Ukraine, undermines and contradicts his democratic commitments.

But the WSWWS views the targeting of Wilentz as an expression of efforts to intimidate American scholars, especially those active in the study of US history. Wilentz is a distinguished historian of 19th century America. His historical writings have focused especially on the role of the working class and small farmers in the early years of the American republic. He has stressed the centrality of class and the struggle for social equality in US history.

His best-known work, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (2005), won the Bancroft Prize and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Wilentz played a leading role in opposing the falsification of the American Revolution and the Civil War by the *New York Times*' "1619 Project." He helped organize a letter of protest

by five prominent historians to the *New York Times Magazine*, which compelled the editor to issue a lengthy and duplicitous response, rejecting the criticism, even while the magazine secretly corrected one of the most blatant errors.

Who is Marco Rubio, the supposed victim of Professor Wilentz's "elitism"? While he postures as the spokesman for "ordinary Americans," opposed, like the late fascist demagogue George Wallace, to "pointy-headed liberals" in college lecture halls, he is a political instrument of the wealthiest and most reactionary sections of the American financial oligarchy.

Rubio got his political start in the anti-communist Cuban exile milieu of south Florida, where he won a seat in the state legislature in 2000, rising to become the Republican speaker in 2006. In 2010, he won the Republican nomination for US Senate as the favorite of the right-wing Tea Party movement, then the general election.

As is typical of Republican pseudo-populists, his own record, political and personal, reeks of hypocrisy. Opposing debt relief for students, his own \$100,000 debt incurred as a law student was taken care of with a timely \$800,000 book advance provided in 2012 by the Penguin Group.

Rubio has burnished his populist image with an \$80,000 speedboat and a \$50,000 Audi. Messy details about his private finances have been the subject of press reports. But Rubio's difficulty with aligning income with expenditures has been eased over the years with the regular assistance of a billionaire campaign donor, Norman Braman, who according to a 2015 *New York Times* article, "subsidized Mr. Rubio's [earlier] job as a college instructor, hired him as a lawyer and continues to employ his wife."

Rubio's Senate record is one of rabid militarism and anti-communism, with a particular focus on defending the most right-wing client states of American imperialism in Latin America, like Colombia, and opposing reformist governments of the so-called "pink tide," which he invariably depicts as stooges of Cuba, Venezuela, Russia and China (the same list he employed to smear Wilentz!)

Rubio is an indefatigable defender of corporate interests, and has received a 98.67 percent rating from the American Conservative Union. He denies the reality of global warming, and opposes the right to an abortion, even in cases of rape and incest.

It is revealing that when Rubio made his abortive run for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016, one of his main backers in Congress was then Representative Mike Pompeo, later Trump's thuggish CIA director and secretary of state.

Rubio's opposition to Trump was driven by nothing more than his personal ambition. The intellectual high point of the fight between the two candidates was a vituperative and frankly disgusting argument at a public debate over the comparative size of certain body parts.

Having failed through this display of his intellect to cut Trump down to size, and more out of desperation rather than

principle, Rubio several times suggested that Trump was an anti-democratic figure. In an interview on CBS, he said of Trump: "If he's our nominee, it could be the end of the Republican Party. It will split us and splinter us in a way that we may never be able to recover."

This makes Rubio's attack on Wilentz for pointing out the anti-democratic character of the Trump faction all the more cynical and desperate. He depends on the support of Trump and Trump's "base" for his political future, including his contested reelection only two months from now.

In the aftermath of the January 6, 2021 coup attempt, Rubio joined most Republicans in the Senate to oppose the impeachment of Trump, calling a trial for the fascistic insurrection "stupid."

Rubio specifically condemns Wilentz for explaining that the "false populists" pretend to support the common people but actually do the bidding of the wealthy. He writes, "I am not against intellectuals or the study of American history, nor am I on the side of 'plutocrats.' Anyone familiar with my record can see how ridiculous those accusations are."

Anyone who is familiar with Rubio's record can see how ridiculous this denial is. While personally of humble origins, his father a bartender and his mother a hotel housekeeper, as he never tired of declaring on the campaign trail, he has had the backing of some of the wealthiest Republican financiers.

As the WSWS noted in February 2016, citing a *Wall Street Journal* profile: "The super PAC supporting Republican Senator Marco Rubio received over half of its money in the second half of 2015 from financial industry contributors. The two biggest donors were hedge fund billionaires Paul Singer (net worth of \$2.1 billion) and Ken Griffin (\$6.6 billion), who gave \$2.5 million each in the last two months of the year. Hedge fund billionaire Cliff Asness and Florida mega-investor Mary Spencer each donated \$1 million."

In 2017, Rubio voted for the Trump tax cut legislation that enriched the ruling class, and he has been a reliable supporter of austerity policies aiming to impose the costs of such tax handouts on working people, through cuts in social programs, including Medicare and Social Security.

His disclaimer about not being on the side of the plutocrats is as false as everything else in his diatribe against Wilentz. This is intellectual charlatanry and bullying of the most brazen kind.



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