

Democratic Party think tank Third Way launches campaign against socialism

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On August 6, Jonathan Cowan told the *New York Times* that his organization, the ostensibly “moderate” Democratic Party think tank Third Way, was “preparing for the next war that is coming.” Cowan was not referring to Donald Trump, the Republican Party and the accelerating descent into fascism, but rather a \$15 million campaign to discredit socialism.

The phrase “third way” was used in the 1990s to describe the politics of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, US President Bill Clinton and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, supposedly dismissing the distinction between left and right as irrelevant. The 1999 Blair-Schröder paper “The Way Forward for Europe’s Social Democrats,” warned against equating social justice with equality of outcome, rejected public expenditure as a measure of social conscience, and called for transforming welfare into a “springboard to personal responsibility.”

The Washington think tank Third Way was founded in 2005 by Cowan, Bennett, Jim Kessler and Nancy Hale out of the gun control group Americans for Gun Safety. Staffed by Clinton administration veterans, its institutional ancestor was the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) established by Al From in 1985, which sought to replace the Democratic Party’s traditional connection to “organized labor” with an orientation toward the emerging technology sector. Clinton chaired it in 1990-91 and carried its program into the White House: NAFTA, the abolition of Aid to Families with Dependent Children, repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act providing for bank regulation, and the passage of the 1994 crime bill.

By the time the DLC dissolved in 2011, Third Way had already assumed its functions. That January, Obama named JPMorgan Chase executive William Daley as White House chief of staff. Daley had joined Third Way’s board of trustees the previous July and described its agenda as “moderate, pro-business, and pro-growth.” Cowan called the appointment brilliant and praised

Daley’s business credentials as a means of deepening relations with the private sector.

Third Way’s current target is the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), whose candidates won Democratic primaries in New York City, Denver, Detroit and statewide in Michigan and Florida. Cowan said the money would fund opposition research, polling, social media operations and political education for Democratic activists and officeholders. It would target not only DSA members but candidates such as Michigan Senate candidate Abdul El-Sayed, whom Cowan accused of performing the “DSA dodge” by accepting its support while remaining distant enough to avoid the label of socialist.

A week later, journalist Ken Klippenstein published a leaked Third Way email dated July 23 announcing the hiring of a “Director of Anti-Extremism” to counter what it called radical and illiberal forces within the party. DSA activists, the email claimed, “want something closer to Cuba than to Scandinavia.”

This is of course a grotesque anticommunist slander. The DSA actually advances a social program that falls well short of the Great Society liberalism of Lyndon Johnson, let alone Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. They do not seek the expropriation of the billionaire oligarchs, which is a prerequisite for genuine socialism, but minor reforms that would leave the financial aristocracy untouched, but give the Democratic Party a “left” fig leaf.

On July 1, Cowan and executive vice president Matt Bennett published a *Washington Post* column, “No more appeasement. Democrats need to fight the DSA.” Opposing the DSA, they wrote, has “a proud precedent”: the founding of Americans for Democratic Action in 1947 by Eleanor Roosevelt, Hubert Humphrey and UAW leader Walter Reuther, which “refused to let the communist-aligned left speak for American liberalism” and helped Harry Truman defeat Henry Wallace the

following year.

Cowan and Bennett credit this campaign with producing the coalition that passed the Civil Rights Act and Medicaid. They do not mention what else it produced: the expulsion of eleven unions from the CIO, the loyalty affidavits imposed by the Taft-Hartley Act and the destruction of the UAW's left wing by Reuther himself, paving the way for the despicable McCarthyite witch-hunts of the 1950s.

Nine days after Cowan announced Third Way's current "Anti-Extremism" campaign, DNC Chair Ken Martin closed the party's summer meeting in Austin by calling the Democratic Party a "big tent," urging members to stop applying litmus tests after delegates resolved their deadlock over whether to demand abolition of ICE or merely its reform by adopting both resolutions. A decision on Israel and Palestine was deferred until after the midterms.

The call for a "big tent" and the Third Way purge are two sides of the same operation. Asked how it defines extremism, Third Way spokesperson Kate DeGruyter said its effort targets the DSA, not liberal Democrats, without explaining where the line between them falls.

Cowan issued an open letter and op-ed against El-Sayed before the Michigan primary because of his DSA affiliation, although El-Sayed is not a DSA member and identifies as capitalist. Third Way senior fellow Yemisii Egbewole, a former Biden White House official, labeled Wisconsin gubernatorial candidate Francesca Hong as "not a real person" after she called for a one-year moratorium on AI data center construction.

Third Way's "anti-extremism" campaign defends specific corporate prerogatives, including the massive AI infrastructure buildout. In response to Trump's AI Action Plan, Third Way published an agenda urging Democratic leaders to reject pessimism about the technology, allocate federal land for data centers and work with industry to accelerate development. On March 12 it circulated a memo advising Democratic campaigns on the issue.

Third Way's own research shows the unpopularity of its position. Its polling found data centers less popular than every other category tested, including Trump and both major parties. A June focus group found swing voters, including self-identified liberals, siding with Tucker Carlson that data center campuses do not justify their costs. Yet Third Way commissioned this research and continues advising Democrats to support the buildout.

The organization's political reach is reflected in its congressional Honorary Co-Chairs. Senators Jeanne

Shaheen and Chris Coons joined in 2011, Representatives Suzan DelBene and Scott Peters in 2015, and Marc Veasey, Darren Soto, Sharice Davids and Marilyn Strickland in 2021.

Two positions are particularly significant. DelBene chairs the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which in 2018 recruited an unprecedented number of former CIA, Pentagon, National Security Council and State Department personnel into Democratic congressional races. Ten of the 22 districts prioritized in the DCCC's "Red to Blue" program went to military-intelligence candidates.

Coons is Ranking Member of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, making him the senior Senate Democrat overseeing the defense budget. His office promoted the FY2026 defense appropriations bill's \$852 billion total. The fiscal responsibility Third Way invokes against social programs does not apply to US imperialism abroad.

Third Way is a policy and messaging operation for the corporate wing of the Democratic Party, financed by unidentified donors and staffed by former officials of administrations whose policies it defends. Its output supplies Democratic officeholders with the vocabulary for defining the limits of the politically permissible.

The \$15 million Cowan is raising to "combat extremism" is itself an admission: those directing the Democratic Party recognize that millions of workers and young people are drawn to socialism as the alternative to capitalism and the despotic oligarchy it produces. The way forward requires the independent mobilization of the working class, organized through rank-and-file committees in schools and workplaces, and armed with a socialist and internationalist program. That means a break not only with Third Way and the Democratic Party, but also with the Democratic Socialists of America, whose function is to keep opposition to capitalism inside the Democratic tent.



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