

THE REPUBLICAN RIGHT-WING POPULIST CON OF THE WORKING CLASS

We must tell working people the truth that Democratic Party leaders won't: You were conned by the Republican Party.

Editor-in-Chief Nathan J. Robinson, in his essay, “Isn’t ‘Right-Wing Populism’ Just Fascism?” (*Current Affairs*, June 18, 2020), rebutted the notion of those in the Left and the Right that “right-wing populism” should be discussed as part of the same tendency as “left-wing populism.” He also addressed the idea that right-wing populism does not actually serve “the people” but, instead, serves wealthy elites.

This essay takes that latter idea further, observing—with the advantage of a perspective from five years after that essay—that the Republican Party has realigned from its historical ideology of conservatism to right-wing populism and that, as evident from the first few months of Trump 2.0 and the historical context of right-wing populism, right-wing populism is a con of the working class perpetrated by wealthy elites. Trump’s capture in 2024 of the white working class vote and increased support among the minority working class illustrate the success of the con. The Democratic Party’s leaders appear reluctant to tell the working class they are being conned; therefore, we must do it.

The Republican Party is promoting four major cons. In addition to the con of right-wing populism, the party promotes the con that the party is still conservative although it realigned from conservatism to right-wing populism, the con of trickle-down economics, and the con of white Christian fundamentalism. However, the cons of trickle-down economics and the con of white Christian fundamentalism were in place in the Republican Party before Donald Trump’s

arrival. The con of right-wing populism is the con that complements these other cons and drives the Republican counterrevolution to achieve a Republican dictatorship—a Republican minority-rule, right-wing populist, white, plutocratic, theocratic, fundamentalist Christian, and authoritarian illiberal democracy at home and a foreign policy that is not merely a return to pre-World War II isolationism but is also pro-Russia.

This is not hyperbole. [A survey conducted by PRRI](#) in August and September 2025 found a majority—56 percent—of Americans agree that “President Trump is a dangerous dictator whose power should be limited before he destroys American democracy.” Trump’s destruction of the East Wing of the White House for his ballroom was defended by some fellow Republicans who pointed to previous presidents’ renovations (although all of these took place after outside consultation). Trump’s actions remind us that dictators act to destroy the past and distort history, as observed by the University of Toronto’s Jason Stanley in *Erasing History: How Fascists Rewrite the Past to Control the Future* (2024), and former Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan in [her October 2025 essay for *The Wall Street Journal*](#), “A Republic, but Can We Keep It?”

President Trump in Trump 2.0, with the aid of his fellow Republicans, has control of the presidency, the Senate, the House of Representatives, the Supreme Court, the Federal Reserve, regulatory agencies, law firms, universities, and the ability—as demonstrated regarding DOGE and USAID—to fire federal government employees at will and abolish agencies, the ability to acquire at will interests in private companies (as he did with Intel), and the ability to convert the office of the presidency into a cash cow, making over \$3 billion in the first months of Trump 2.0.

The context for this Republican right-wing populist con comes from hero to conservatives Eric Voegelin, in his book *Hitler and the Germans*, in which he observed the Nazis in 1930s Germany captured a modern Western liberal democracy by creating a “false image of

reality,” for which, to maintain, “it is necessary to lie constantly.” The promoters of the Republican right-wing populist con are creating a false image of reality which they maintain by lying constantly.

We Were Warned by Republicans Themselves

For all its many faults, [as prominent conservative William Kristol has observed](#), “One of the historic tasks of American conservatism has in fact been to preserve and strengthen liberal democracy”—especially the *institutions* of liberal democracy. In this crucial way, it differs from right-wing populism which promotes dysfunctional, antiliberal—illiberal—values. Among the values of right-wing populism as illustrated in Trump 2.0: hate (in various forms, including racism, white supremacy, hatred of non-white immigrants, hatred of the LGBTQ community, and hatred of those who sacrifice for others), division, misogyny, resentment, conning and lying, government bad/business good, poor people bad/rich people good, “might makes right” and adoration of dictators, greed and corruption, violence, fear-mongering, cruelty, anti-intellectualism, inequality, sacredness of guns, hypocrisy, cheating, retribution, that norms and laws do not apply to Republicans, and blustery incompetence.

Four prominent Republicans addressed the Republican Party’s realignment from conservatism to right-wing populism: Alan Crawford, Kevin Phillips, Murray Rothbard, and Steve Bannon. A summary of their insights follows below.

Alan Crawford had been a former editor of *New Guard*, the journal of the conservative Young Americans for Freedom, former assistant editor of *Conservative Digest*, and aide to conservative Senator James Buckley of New York (brother of William F. Buckley, Jr.). In 1980

he warned about the risk posed to conservatism by right-wing populism in *Thunder on the Right—The “New Right” and the Politics of Resentment*. The “thunder” of which he wrote was the warning of a storm approaching conservative Republicans on the far right of their party—the right-wing populists of the “New Right”—promoting “the politics of resentment” and threatening to displace conservatism as the guiding ideology of the Republican Party. As he observed, “In a rather remarkable turnabout, the Right has shifted from conservatism to right-wing populism,” and “Today’s New Right is also a primitive kind of right-wing populism that has all but exterminated the few remnants of the Burkean tradition...”

In his 1969 book *The Emerging Republican Majority*, adviser to President Nixon and prominent conservative Kevin Phillips urged the Republican Party to reach out to the voters who voted for arch-segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace, who had been defeated in his third party run for the presidency in 1968. There Phillips referred favorably to “populism” multiple times, but he never used the term “right-wing populism.” Phillips’ recommendation to appeal to white racists in the South became Nixon’s “Southern Strategy” in 1972. That appeal was later evident in Ronald Reagan’s first campaign stop in 1980 at the Neshoba County, Mississippi Fair where he endorsed “states’ rights”. In 2013 Chief Justice John Roberts observed in *Shelby County v. Holder*, “Our country has changed...” Yet, that appeal was evident again in Trump’s 2016 campaign and afterward. The country has changed less than the Chief Justice imagined.

In 1982, Phillips favorably cited *Thunder on the Right* in his book *Post-Conservative America: People, Politics, and Ideology in a Time of Crisis*, and warned of a “drift toward apple-pie authoritarianism” under right-wing populism. Phillips acknowledged that he had urged the Republican Party to welcome into the party the supporters of George Wallace, the right-wing

populists of the “New Right,” who came from the “Sun Belt” (terms he took credit for inventing). However, he now called “a wave of ‘right-wing populism’ or ‘conservative populism,’ perhaps the most important such wave in American history,” and he predicted it would result in realignment of the Republican Party away from conservatism. Phillips also referred to right-wing populism as “American center extremism” and presciently observed, “At this point—and once again, it’s difficult to draw any parallel without straining credulity and engaging in pejoratives—American center extremism must lead us to compare its workings with the political dynamics of Germany in the early 1930s.”

Murray Rothbard was a libertarian conservative economist, Republican, leader of the libertarian movement, author of essays and books on libertarian theory, and professor of economics at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. In 1992, he urged Republicans to adopt right-wing populism as their guiding ideology after right-wing populist former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi David Duke, as Republican Party nominee for US Senator from Louisiana in 1990 and governor of Louisiana in 1991, in each election won a majority of white votes.

In Rothbard’s January 18, 1992, address to the John Randolph Club, Herndon, Virginia, he endorsed right-wing populism for adoption by Pat Buchanan’s Republican presidential campaign. The address appeared in the March 1992 issue of the *Rothbard-Rockwell Report* under the title “[A Strategy for the Right](#).” In it Rothbard rejected conservatism and invoked the 1930’s libertarian essayist Garet Garrett’s call for “counter-revolution” (a call also made by conservative hero William F. Buckley, Jr. and by leaders of the modern New Right). He endorsed Pat Buchanan for president, observing, “The proper strategy for the Right-wing must be what we can call ‘Right-wing populism’: exciting, dynamic, tough, and confrontational,

rousing, and inspiring not only the exploited masses, but the often shellshocked Right-wing intellectual cadre as well.” He added, “we need a dynamic, charismatic leader who has the ability to short-circuit the media elites, and to reach and rouse the masses directly.”

Steve Bannon is a long-time adviser to Donald Trump and was his campaign CEO during part of Trump’s first presidential campaign. In 2018, he predicted the future of the Republican Party is inevitably right-wing populism as he debated the conservative Republican David Frum in the Munk Debate in Toronto. (A transcript of the debate and interviews with the participants are provided in the slim purple paperback volume titled *The Rise of Populism: Stephen K. Bannon vs. David Frum*.) The motion before them: “Be it resolved: the future of Western politics is populist not liberal.” Bannon declared, “The future obviously belongs to populism. It’s only going to be defined by asking if it’s left-wing populism or conservative and right-wing populism...”

Parenthetically, also in 2018, in an interview with *Bloomberg* journalist Michael Lewis, Bannon explained the tactic that would guide Trump 2.0: [“The Democrats don’t matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit.”](#)

Two years earlier, fulfilling Murray Rothbard’s dream, a dynamic, charismatic Donald Trump, promoting resentment-driven right-wing populism, had short-circuited the media elites and reached and roused the masses directly as Murray Rothbard urged, and won the presidency. He, thus, completed the long road of realigning the Republican Party under right-wing populism, and, in Trump 2.0, is promoting right-wing populism absent the guardrails that constrained him in his first term.

Historical Context: The Right-Wing Populist Con Promoted by the Democratic Party in the South During Jim Crow

The reality that the wealthy Southern Bourbon planter elite during the era of Jim Crow conned white workers to divide the working class and upwardly distribute benefits to themselves was recognized by the historian W. E. B. DuBois in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935). He wrote of Jim Crow, “It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage...[and] saw in every advance of Negroes a threat to their racial prerogatives...”

Similarly, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. observed [in his speech at the end of the March from Selma to Montgomery](#), “as the noted historian, C. Vann Woodward, in his book, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, clearly points out, the segregation of the races was really a political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep the Southern masses divided and Southern labor the cheapest in the land.” The con of white workers was successful because, as Dr. King concluded, “If it may be said of the slavery era that the white man took the world and gave the Negro Jesus, then it may be said of the Reconstruction era that the Southern aristocracy took the world and gave the poor white man Jim Crow.”

In but one telling example of Jim Crow’s con, Columbia University historian Eric Foner observed in *A Short History of Reconstruction—1863-1877* that the Bourbon-dominated Louisiana legislature cut education spending so much after the Civil War that Louisiana was the only state to see literacy rates *for whites* fall from 1880 to 1900.

Bill Moyers, who served as President Lyndon Johnson’s press secretary, [recounted his former boss as saying](#), “I’ll tell you what’s at the bottom of it. If you can convince the lowest

white man he's better than the best colored man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you."

History Is Rhyming

["Past is prologue"](#) is one of "Stone's Rules" from Trump ally Roger Stone (with the expletive deleted), and it provides the context for the Republican Party's embrace of the right-wing populist politics of resentment. The Republican right-wing populist con is the successor to the Democratic right-wing populist con of the Jim Crow Solid South.

As Trump's Secretary of State and former Florida Senator Marco Rubio observed on the Republican presidential primary campaign trail in 2016, regarding voting for Donald Trump, ["Friends do not let friends vote for con artists."](#) He added regarding Trump that ["he's a con artist"](#) and a ["con man."](#) Rubio observed in a press release during his 2016 primary campaign, ["Trump University is an absolute scam"](#)—and, of course, he was right, as Trump University was found liable for \$25 million for scamming students. The truth is that, as Marco Rubio said, the Republican Party's leader, Donald Trump, is the perfect pitch person for promoting the con of right-wing populism and its politics of resentment.

[Donald Trump on the 2016 campaign trail in Iowa](#) boasted: "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters, OK? It's, like, incredible." *Even he was amazed* at how good he was at conning his voters.

After his election in 2016, Trump would embellish the reputation Marco Rubio bestowed on him. He became the first president to be impeached twice and afterward inspired a violent

coup attempt to forestall the responsibility of Congress to certify his 2020 election loss, mimicking the actions of the dictators for whom he openly expresses admiration. He later added 34 felony counts for fraudulently classifying as business expenses hush payments to a porn star he had sex with and incurred millions of dollars in civil liability for sexual abuse.

Bruce Bartlett, an economic historian who was a domestic policy adviser to President Ronald Reagan and a Treasury official under President George H. W. Bush, authored a 2016 opinion essay in *The New York Times*, appropriately titled, “[The Republican Party Has Become the Party of Hate](#).” In it he observed what is the driving concept behind this essay: that elites in the Republican Party are repeating the tactic of the Bourbon elites who dominated the Democratic Party during Jim Crow. He observed both how they maintained their power through hatred and division, and how they impoverished workers—in a lesson for the present.

Former Republican adviser Stuart Stevens observed in his 2020 book, *It Was All a Lie: How the Republican Party Became Donald Trump*, that the Republican Party had evolved into “just a white grievance party.” However, when he framed what he called the conviction that is “about as close as it can be to a definitional core belief that exists in the Republican Party,” he did not say it is that the law treats whites unfairly. Rather, it is “belief in the power of tax cuts.” Although not intending to do so, in these observations he revealed the true nature of the right-wing populism that has overtaken the Republican Party: promoting the politics of resentment—the politics of grievance—to con workers out of their votes to upwardly distribute incomes and wealth.

The right-wing populism practiced by the Republican Party today—as it was practiced by the Democratic Party in the South during Jim Crow—is *faux populism*. It is a *con* perpetrated by the wealthy on the white working class, promoting the politics of resentment and dividing them

against fellow members of the working class but who are non-white. The wealthy pay for the campaigns of political candidates who campaign on promotion of antiliberal values such as division, racism, and hate and thereby secure the votes of the working class whites, but these political candidates are beholden to the wealthy who paid for their campaigns. These candidates promise the wealthy, in return, to vote to hold down public spending and deliver them tax cuts and deregulation of their businesses once in office.

Right-wing populism was promoted by the wealthy Southern Bourbon planter elite in the Democratic Party. They appealed to the downtrodden and defeated white Southerners after the Civil War and Reconstruction with the lie of the Lost Cause, painting a patina of nobility upon the ignoble institution of slavery, and dividing the white working class against their fellow members of the working class who were non-white. They promoted antiliberal—illiberal—values including division, racism, and hate in the system of Jim Crow and drove working class whites to vote for political candidates pledged to promote Jim Crow but also beholden to these wealthy Southern planter elites. Once in office, these politicians delivered laws to hold down public spending, taxes, and business regulations to upwardly redistribute wealth and income to their wealthy benefactors.

And then, history rhymed. In reaction to the Democrats' support of the Second Reconstruction of the 1960s and subsequent cultural change, Republican leaders and Republican politicians invited into their party the "New Right"—racist, right-wing populist voters for George Wallace, whose influence, over time, grew in the party. Ultimately, under Donald Trump, with the arrival of the post-industrial economy resulting in downtrodden members of the American working class, they realigned the party from its traditional ideology of conservatism to right-wing populism, ultimately instituting Jim Crow 2.0. As the Lost Cause painted a patina of

nobility on the ignoble institution of slavery, so the Second Lost Cause of MAGA paints a patina of nobility on the ignoble institution of Jim Crow and the lamentably lost forever industrial economy of millions of factory workers on assembly lines. The Republican Party promotes antiliberal—illiberal—values including division, racism, and hate and drives workers—especially white workers—to vote for political candidates beholden to these wealthy elites who paid for their campaigns. Once these candidates are elected, they vote for policies to hold down public spending, taxes, and business regulations to upwardly redistribute wealth and income to their wealthy benefactors.

But Won't We Be Insulting Working Class Voters Who Voted for Trump?

A concern is that telling Trump voters the truth—that they were conned—amounts to condescension on the part of liberal elites, thereby risking feeding the resentment Trump voters already feel. JD Vance, himself, expressed this concern [in a 2016 interview with Charlie Rose on NPR](#). Another critique of a political strategy of telling Trump voters the truth is that [they knew what they were voting for](#)—an opinion undermined by the observations above. Millions of Trump voters did not know what they were voting for, and it is not condescending to tell these voters the truth. On the contrary, not telling them the truth is truly condescending because it assumes they cannot handle the truth.

An analogy is appropriate here—an analogy promoted by JD Vance, before he stopped expressing his concerns about Donald Trump and became Trump's running mate and eventual vice president. While he was running for Senator from Ohio, Vance observed about Donald Trump [in a 2016 interview with NPR's Terry Gross](#), "I think that he's noxious and is leading the

white working class to a very dark place.” Vance had written in 2016 *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, an insightful autobiographical account of growing up in a white working class family that had moved from Kentucky’s Appalachia to southern Ohio. Admirably, coming from such humble beginnings he served in the Marine Corps, graduated from The Ohio State University and Yale Law School, and had a successful career in a Silicon Valley venture capital firm, Peter Thiel’s Mithril Capital in San Francisco.

He elaborated on the danger he saw in Donald Trump [in a 2016 essay he wrote for *The Atlantic* titled “Opioid of the Masses.”](#) There he compared Donald Trump to the opioids—“hillbilly heroin”—destroying the people he grew up with in rural southern Ohio: “Trump is cultural heroin. He makes some feel better for a bit. But he cannot fix what ails them, and one day they’ll realize it.” He was not being condescending when he worried that people he knew would be destroyed by Donald Trump (although he apparently later overcame that fear!).

The right-wing populism Donald Trump and his Republican allies promote *is cultural heroin*—an ideological drug spreading through the middle class and poor, especially in poor white neighborhoods, promoted in a con by fabulously rich people in cities miles away from them, all for the benefit of the fabulously rich.

[In a since-deleted Tweet](#), Vance elaborated on his disgust with Trump: “Trump makes people I care about afraid. Immigrants, Muslims, etc. Because of this I find him reprehensible. God wants better of us.” A former law school roommate of JD Vance provided [this quote of his from 2016](#): “I go back and forth between thinking Trump is a cynical asshole like Nixon who wouldn’t be that bad (and might even prove useful) or that he’s America’s Hitler.” JD Vance knows now, and we know he knows now: *Trump is America’s Hitler* and, despite his previous

insightful observations, JD Vance has joined him. As has Marco Rubio after he observed Trump is a “con artist”. Each sold out their principles for power.

Taking inspiration from JD Vance’s analogy regarding Trump’s Republican right-wing populism acting like cultural heroin—like a cultural opioid: It is not condescending to tell an opioid addict that they are addicted to a drug that is destroying their health. It is not condescending to tell them the doctor prescribing these opioids, and the pharmacist filling the prescriptions for these opioids, are feeding their addiction. Similarly, it is not condescending to tell those addicted to the con of right-wing populism promoted by Donald Trump and his fellow Republicans that the Republican Party is exploiting them and not looking out for their best interests.

The world of the opioid addict shrinks to just the addict and the high the addict needs, shutting out the rest of the world. Similarly, right-wing populism acts on its followers shutting out facts and any influences contradicting their alternate reality maintained by lies—maintained by “alternate facts” it creates through social media and right-wing media. It has often been written that there is a cult of Trump—the cult of MAGA—and there is, however, with this cult there is a political ideology that is a cult: the political ideology of right-wing populism, creating a nearly impermeable bubble in which real world facts do not matter. Accordingly, because the Republican Party has realigned from conservatism to right-wing populism, *the Republican Party has become a cult.*

Democrats in 2024 were working against this nearly impermeable bubble. Months before the election, the Biden administration promoted in a press release headlines *reflecting that they were already delivering* what voters said they wanted: inflation was down, border crossings were down, crime was down, and drug prices were coming down. [The press release quoted the](#)

headlines in August 2024, just months before the election: “Illegal border crossings fell in July to lowest level in four years”—*The Washington Post*, “Homicides are plunging in Biden’s last year compared to Trump’s”—*Fox News*, “U.S. Inflation Cools Again”—*Associated Press*, and “Biden and Harris Celebrate Landmark Deal to Lower Medication Prices”—*The Guardian*.

It would not have been condescending to tell voters lured by right-wing populism that they were being lied to by Republicans to get them to vote against their own interests. As we approach the 2026 midterms, we must recognize that it is more insulting to the working people of America to believe they are incapable of handling the truth than it is to reveal to them the truth: *Republicans are conning you*.

John Seip is a retired lawyer, former Republican, and former resident of Louisiana. Dee Wood Harper is Professor Emeritus of Sociology, Criminology and Justice, Loyola University New Orleans, and is a longtime resident of New Orleans. This essay is adapted from their upcoming book, *Resist the Republican Con!—Of the Republican Party’s Realignment from Conservatism to the Con of Right-Wing Populist Dictatorship*. They previously collaborated on *The Trickle-Down Delusion* (2016).