

Did You Just Call Me a Socialist?

By [David Swanson](#)

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On April 15, on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, Congress members spoke in defense of Medicare, Social Security, the Environmental Protection Agency, and other programs that by almost anyone's definition are socialist, programs that were denounced as socialist by opponents of their passage in decades past, programs that would not have been created without the efforts of socialists and the Socialist Party.

The debate screeched to a halt, however, because an opponent of the Congressional Progressive Caucus's "People's Budget" then under discussion suggested that its supporters might be Socialists. Congressman Keith Ellison, co-chair of that caucus, protested the vicious accusation and demanded that the words of his accuser be transcribed for the record (and possible legal action?). The Republican congress member guilty of the horrible slander announced that he was retracting it. Rep. Raul Grijalva, the other co-chair of the Progressive Caucus, thanked him sincerely for the retraction. Although polls show socialism to be far more popular than Congress, neither Ellison nor Grijalva insisted on being cleared of the label "congress member."

"Socialism," remarked Frank Zeidler, former socialist mayor of Milwaukee, "believes that people working together for a common good can produce a greater benefit, both for society and for the individual, than can a society in which everyone is shrewdly seeking their own self-interest." Missing from Washington, D.C., is not just a single individual who would hurl the term "capitalist" with the strength to have a retraction demanded. Missing also is any sense of working for a cooperative society based on the above truth — a truth apparent to any child who has neither read Ayn Rand nor viewed cable news, but a truth that sounds insane in our nation's capital.

And one more thing is missing: awareness of the debt our nation owes to its rich socialist history. That's where the best book yet by John Nichols — and that's saying something! — comes in. The author of "The Genius of Impeachment," among other brilliant books, has just published "The 'S' Word: A Short History of an American Tradition . . . Socialism."

The book is marred by a militaristic cover depicting the flag-raising pose on Iwo Jima, and its focus on the U.S. national tradition is not without problems. Nichols' goal is to depict socialism as American, as rooted in the tradition of Thomas Paine, Abraham Lincoln, the founding of the Republican Party, the rise of competent public planning in 20th century cities, the New Deal, the struggle for free speech and freedom of the press, and the civil rights movement. In this he is very successful. But a strain of thought related to much socialism and admirable in its own right holds that an idea need not be American to be the best for America. You'd think we'd learn that in KINDERGARTEN.

Nichols does not argue with such internationalism; it just fails to harmonize with the theme

of his book. Yet, while other authors have sought to bring out the rich leftist tradition of the United States as something predating and independent of, and better off without, Marxism, Nichols goes out of his way to highlight Marx's employment by a New York newspaper and communications with President Lincoln. Doing so certainly cannot hurt and makes for fascinating reading. Of course, the fascination is in large part based on the reader's imagining of the explosive cognitive dissonance a contemporary Republican might face in discovering his or her party's founding father's appreciation of Marx. This imagination may give too much credit to contemporary Republicans for cognitive processes of whatever sort.

Nichols has posted an [excerpt of his book online](#). Here is an excerpt of that excerpt:

“Could a plan decried as ‘socialized medicine’ by the American Medical Association because it was, in fact, socialized medicine really be ‘the American way’? Of course. During the Medicare debate in the early ‘60s, Texas Senate candidate George H.W. Bush condemned the proposal as ‘creeping socialism.’ Ronald Reagan, then making the transition from TV pitchman for products to TV pitchman for Barry Goldwater, warned that if it passed citizens would find themselves ‘telling our children and our children’s children what it once was like in America when men were free.’ But Bush and Reagan managed the program during their presidencies, and Tea Party activists now show up at town hall meetings to threaten any legislator who would dare to tinker with their beloved Medicare.

“Americans would not have gotten Medicare if [Michael] Harrington and the socialists who came before him — from presidential candidates like Debs and Thomas to organizers like Mary Marcy and Margaret Sanger and the Communist Party’s Elizabeth Gurley Flynn — had not for decades been pushing the limits of the healthcare debate. No less a player than Senator Edward Kennedy would declare, ‘I see Michael Harrington as delivering the Sermon on the Mount to America.’ The same was true in abolitionist days, when socialists — including friends of Marx who had immigrated to the United States after the 1848 revolutions in Europe were crushed — energized the movement against slavery and helped give it political expression in the form of the Republican Party. The same was true early in the twentieth century, when Socialist Party editors like Victor Berger battled attempts to destroy civil liberties and defined our modern understanding of freedom of speech, freedom of the press and the right to petition for redress of grievances. The same was true when lifelong socialist A. Philip Randolph called the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and asked a young preacher named Martin Luther King Jr., who had many socialist counselors besides the venerable Randolph, to deliver what would come to be known as the ‘I Have a Dream’ speech.



“Again and again at critical junctures in our national journey, socialist thinkers and organizers, as well as candidates and officials, have prodded government in a progressive direction. It may be true, as historian Patrick Allitt suggests, that ‘millions of Americans, including many of these critics [of the Obama administration], are ardent supporters of socialism, even if they don’t realize it and even if they don’t actually use the word’ to describe public services that are ‘organized along socialist lines,’ like schools and highways. In fact, contemporary socialists and Tea Partiers might actually find common (if uncomfortable) ground with Allitt’s assertion that ‘socialism as an organizational principle is alive and well here just as it is throughout the industrialized world’ — even as they would disagree on whether that’s a good thing. Programs ‘organized along socialist lines’ do not make a country socialist. But America has always been and should continue to be informed by socialist ideals and a socialist critique of public policy.”

As the co-author with Robert McChesney of some of our best books on the corporate media, Nichols is aware that we no longer have the capacity for critiques of public policy we once had. While Nichols degrades his excellent and inspiring chapter on Thomas Paine by stooping to debate the likes of Glenn Beck (and I admit I've done the same), he is fully aware of what he's involved in:

"It might seem amazing today, when Glenn Beck describes modest social spending in 'Darkness at Noon' terms and when even supposedly moderate commentators conflate social democracy with Stalinism, that the good burghers of Milwaukee would elect and re-elect a Socialist mayor throughout the McCarthy era — and in McCarthy's home state, no less. But there is simply no question that the quality of debate, the range of ideological diversity and the level of social and political awareness were far higher for most Americans in the 1940s and 1950s — and dramatically higher for media commentators. Americans in general, and Milwaukeeans in particular, understood the distinction between municipal socialists who believed in public enterprise and totalitarian dictators who wanted to rule the world."

I hope these snippets of Nichols' 300-page masterpiece whet your appetite. "The 'S' Word" could, if widely read, lead to a different view of our country, our government, and our best course going forward. Visitors to the Lincoln Memorial might recall the words of President Lincoln's first war-time State of the Union address:

"Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration."

Lincoln went on to foreshadow Eisenhower's warning of the rise of the military industrial complex. Visitors to his memorial should also recall A. Phillip Randolph, the man who made the March on Washington happen. His bust in Union Station, with the eye-glasses in his hand broken off, should cause every traveler to freeze in his or her tracks and question himself or herself as to where in the world we are all headed.

VIDEO:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTvUs4rY4to>

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