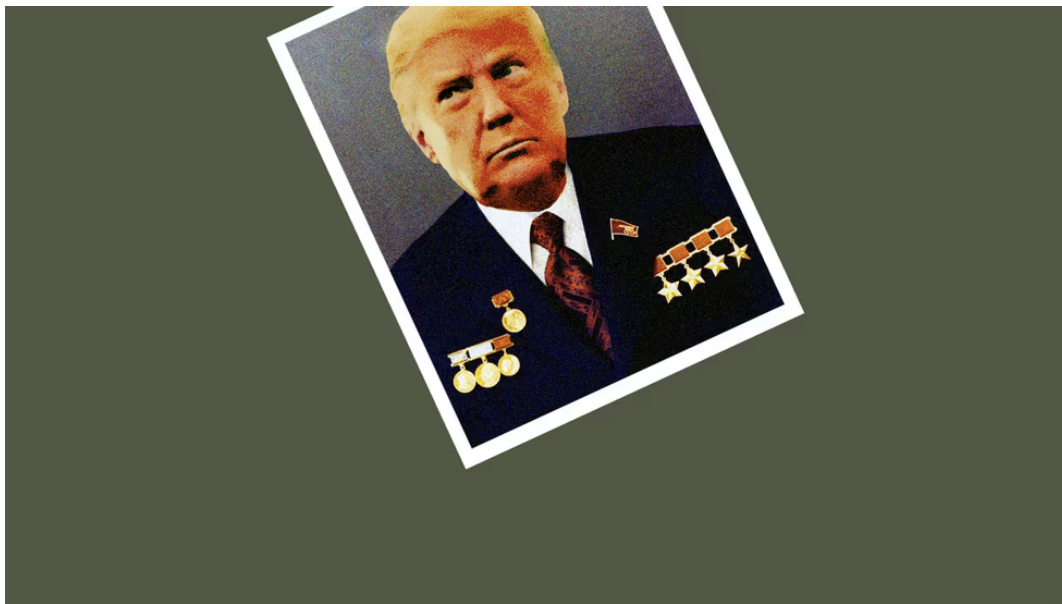


IDEAS

The Republican Party Is Now in Its End Stages

The GOP has become, in form if not in content, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union of the late 1970s.

By Tom Nichols



Getty / The Atlantic

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We are living in a time of bad metaphors. Everything is fascism, or socialism; Hitler's Germany, or Stalin's Soviet Union. Republicans, especially, want their followers to believe that America is on the verge of a dramatic time, a moment of great conflict such as 1968—or perhaps, even worse, 1860. (The drama is the point, of course. No one ever says, “We’re living through 1955.”)

Ironically, the GOP is indeed replicating another political party in another time, but not as the heroes they imagine themselves to be. The Republican Party has become, in form if not in content, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union of the late 1970s.

I can already hear the howls about invidious comparisons. I do not mean that modern American Republicans are communists. Rather, I mean that the Republicans have entered their own kind of end-stage Bolshevism, as members of a party that is now exhausted by its failures, cynical about its own ideology, authoritarian by reflex, controlled as a personality cult by a failing old man, and looking for new adventures to rejuvenate its fortunes.

No one thinks much about the Soviet Union in the late 1970s, and no one really should. This was a time referred to by the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, as the *vremia zastoia*—“the era of stagnation.” By that point, the Soviet Communist Party was a spent force, and ideological conviction was mostly for chumps and fanatics. A handful of party ideologues and the senior officers of the Soviet military might still have believed in “Marxism-Leninism”—the melding of aspirational communism to one-party dictatorship—but by and large, Soviet citizens knew that the party’s formulations about the rights of all people were just window dressing for rule by a small circle of old men in the Kremlin.

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“The party” itself was not a party in any Western sense, but a vehicle for a cabal of elites, with a cult of personality at its center. The Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev was an utterly mediocre man, but by the late 1970s he had cemented his grip on the Communist Party by elevating opportunists and cronies around him who insisted, publicly and privately, that Brezhnev was a heroic genius. Factories and streets and even a city were named for him, and he promoted himself to the top military rank of “Marshal of the Soviet Union.” He awarded himself so many honors and medals that, in a common Soviet joke of the time, a small earthquake in Moscow was said to have been caused by Brezhnev’s medal-festooned military overcoat falling off its hanger.

The elite leaders of this supposedly classless society were corrupt plutocrats, a mafia dressed in Marxism. The party was infested by careerists, and its grip on power was defended by propagandists who used rote phrases such as “real socialism” and “Western imperialism” so often that almost anyone could write an editorial in *Pravda* or *Red Star* merely by playing a kind of Soviet version of Mad Libs. News was tightly controlled. Soviet radio, television, and newspaper figures plowed on through stories that were utterly detached from reality, regularly extolling the successes of Soviet agriculture even as the country was forced to buy food from the capitalists (including the hated Americans).

Members of the Communist Party who questioned anything, or expressed any sign of unorthodoxy, could be denounced by name, or more likely, simply fired. They would not be executed—this was not Stalinism, after all—but some were left to rot in obscurity in some make-work exile job, eventually retiring as a forgotten “Comrade Pensioner.” The deal was clear: Pump the party’s nonsense and enjoy the good life, or squawk and be sent to manage a library in Kazakhstan.

This should all sound familiar.

The Republican Party has, for years, ignored the ideas and principles it once espoused, to the point where the 2020 GOP convention simply dispensed with the fiction of a platform and instead declared the party to be whatever Comrade—excuse me, President—Donald Trump said it was.

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Like Brezhnev, Trump has grown in status to become a heroic figure among his supporters. If the Republicans could create the rank of “Marshal of the American Republic” and strike a medal for a “Hero of American Culture,” Trump would have them both by now.

A GOP that once prided itself on its intellectual debates is now ruled by the turgid formulations of what the Soviets would have called their “leading cadres,” including

ideological watchdogs such as Tucker Carlson and Mark Levin. Like their Soviet predecessors, a host of dull and dogmatic cable outlets, screechy radio talkers, and poorly written magazines crank out the same kind of fill-in-the-blanks screeds full of delusional accusations, replacing “NATO” and “revanchism” with “antifa” and “radicalism.”

Falling in line, just as in the old Communist Party, is rewarded, and independence is punished. The anger directed at Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger makes the stilted ideological criticisms of last century’s Soviet propagandists seem almost genteel by comparison. (At least Soviet families under Brezhnev didn’t add three-page handwritten denouncements to official party reprimands.)

This comparison is more than a metaphor; it is a warning. A dying party can still be a dangerous party. The Communist leaders in those last years of political sclerosis arrayed a new generation of nuclear missiles against NATO, invaded Afghanistan, tightened the screws on Jews and other dissidents, lied about why they shot down a civilian 747 airliner, and, near the end, came close to starting World War III out of sheer paranoia.

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The Republican Party is, for now, more of a danger to the United States than to the world. But like the last Soviet-era holdouts in the Kremlin, its cadres are growing more aggressive and paranoid. They blame spies and provocateurs for the Capitol riot, and they are obsessed with last summer’s protests (indeed, they are fixated on all criminals and rioters other than their own) to a point that now echoes the old Soviet lingo about “antisocial elements” and “hooligans.” They blame their failures at the ballot box not on their own shortcomings, but on fraud and sabotage as the justification for a redoubled crackdown on democracy.

Another lesson from all this history is that the Republicans have no path to reform. Like their Soviet counterparts, their party is too far gone. Gorbachev tried to reform the Soviet Communist Party, and he remains reviled among the Soviet faithful to this day. Similar efforts by the remaining handful of reasonable Republicans are unlikely to fare any better. The Republican Party, to take a phrase from the early Soviet leader Leon Trotsky, should now be deposited where it belongs: in the “dustbin of history.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Nichols



Tom Nichols is a staff writer at *The Atlantic* and a contributor to the *Atlantic Daily newsletter*.