

IMPERIALIST ROBERT KAGAN DISAVOWS THE BUREAUCRACY OF IMMENSE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY HE CHAMPIONED

The chattering class is in love with this Robert Kagan op-ed warning of Donald Trump bringing fascism,

not with jackboots and salutes (although there have been salutes, and a whiff of violence) but with a television huckster, a phony billionaire, a textbook egomaniac “tapping into” popular resentments and insecurities, and with an entire national political party – out of ambition or blind party loyalty, or simply out of fear – falling into line behind him.

I suppose I’m unsurprised that Beltway insiders are so gleeful that this Hillary-endorsing Neocon has turned on Republicans in such a fashion. Or, perhaps more importantly, that they’re so thrilled someone with such a soapbox has written a warning of impending fascism that so neatly disavows any responsibility – for Kagan himself, and by association, for other insiders.

But there are a couple of real problems with Kagan’s screed.

First, Kagan would like you to believe that Trump’s success has nothing to do with policy or ideology or the Republican party except insofar as the party “incubated” Trump.

But of course the entire Trump phenomenon has nothing to do with policy or ideology. It has nothing to do with

the Republican Party, either, except in its historic role as incubator of this singular threat to our democracy. Trump has transcended the party that produced him.

Kagan gets Trump's relationship with the Republican party exactly reversed. The party did not in any way incubate Trump. 80's style greed and cable TV incubated Trump, if anything. What the Republican party has long incubated is racism. Trump just capitalized on that and pushed it just ... a ... bit ... further than Republican dogwhistles traditionally go, in a year in which the GOP had lost a great deal of its credibility.

Which is why Kagan is also wrong in claiming that Trump isn't about policy or ideology. I admit that Trump has always shown great deal of ideological flexibility, both before and during this run. But he has been consistent on two points: that racism, but also protectionism. There are a lot of reasons those two ideological keystones have appealed this year, but one has to do with the failures of globalization and the related American hegemonic project it assumes. That's ideology and policy, both Trump's, but also DC's, including Kagan's.

Kagan goes on to deal with these two issues.

We're supposed to believe that Trump's support stems from economic stagnation or dislocation. Maybe some of it does. But what Trump offers his followers are not economic remedies – his proposals change daily. What he offers is an attitude, an aura of crude strength and machismo, a boasting disrespect for the niceties of the democratic culture that he claims, and his followers believe, has produced national weakness and incompetence. His incoherent and contradictory utterances have one thing in common: They provoke and play on feelings of resentment and disdain,

intermingled with bits of fear, hatred and anger. His public discourse consists of attacking or ridiculing a wide range of “others” – Muslims, Hispanics, women, Chinese, Mexicans, Europeans, Arabs, immigrants, refugees – whom he depicts either as threats or as objects of derision. His program, such as it is, consists chiefly of promises to get tough with foreigners and people of nonwhite complexion. He will deport them, bar them, get them to knuckle under, make them pay up or make them shut up.

Note the assumption that Trump’s protectionism is not an economic remedy but some unstated alternative is? Note Kagan’s treatment of racism, an ideology, as fear divorced from that ideology of white American exceptionalism?

Fear!! Kagan wants to boil Trump’s popularity down to fear! A guy who has had a central role in ginning up serial American aggressive wars is offended that someone wields fear to achieve political power!!! And having done that, this warmonger says the ability to gin up fear is precisely what our Founders – the men who set up three competing branches of government, each jealously guarding its power – were concerned about.

Which brings me to the Kagan argument that most baffles me. After bemoaning Republican politicians’ refusal to stand up to Trump’s demagoguery, Kagan then argues (though I’m not sure he even realizes he’s making this argument) that Article I and Article III (the latter of which goes entirely unmentioned in this op-ed) will be powerless to stop Trump and his “legions” once he becomes president.

What these people do not or will not see is that, once in power, Trump will owe them and their party nothing. He will have ridden to power despite the party, catapulted into the White House by a

mass following devoted only to him. By then that following will have grown dramatically. Today, less than 5 percent of eligible voters have voted for Trump. But if he wins the election, his legions will comprise a majority of the nation. Imagine the power he would wield then. In addition to all that comes from being the leader of a mass following, he would also have the immense powers of the American presidency at his command: the Justice Department, the FBI, the intelligence services, the military. Who would dare to oppose him then? Certainly not a Republican Party that laid down before him even when he was comparatively weak. And is a man like Trump, with infinitely greater power in his hands, likely to become more humble, more judicious, more generous, less vengeful than he is today, than he has been his whole life? Does vast power uncorrupt?

Never mind that Kagan describes general election numbers that simply don't exist in our democracy. What he's really complaining about is that a President – one he happens to distrust and dislike – would have “the immense powers of the American presidency at his command: the Justice Department, the FBI, the intelligence services, the military.” Of course, Kagan focuses not on the government as a whole, but on the Deep State and the Justice Department that has increasingly become an integral part of it.

The guy who, *for years*, championed the unfettered exercise of the Deep State in the hands of people like Dick Cheney is now troubled about what would happen if Donald Trump got the same powers Dick Cheney had. And for what it's worth, while I don't buy Michael Hayden's claim the CIA would resist a President Trump's order to torture (Hayden's successors at NSA and CIA will likely do just what Hayden himself did, capitulate to unconstitutional demands), I also

know that neither Trump nor anyone in his immediate orbit has the kind of bureaucratic mastery of the Deep State that Dick Cheney had.

One more really important point: the Deep State – those tools Kagan is horrified Trump might soon wield – got so powerful, creating the danger that a demagogue like Trump might tap into them fully formed, largely in the service of an imperial project significantly sold by Robert Kagan. Kagan has claimed to be selling “Democracy™” around the world, but all along that project has rotted our own democracy here at home.

Kagan (and his fellow imperialists) did that. Not Trump. Trump would just take advantage of the bureaucratic tools Kagan’s propaganda has served to justify.

I’m not denying Donald Trump is a huge threat to American democracy (though I happen to think Hillary’s foreign policy will come with great risks and costs as well). I’m saying that Robert Kagan is not the one to make this argument – at least not without a whole lot of soul searching and commitment to change the underlying empowerment of “the immense powers of the American presidency.”

But Kagan doesn’t want that. Rather, he just wants to hand those powers, still unchecked, to Hillary Clinton.