

GUEST ESSAY

The Friend of Our Enemy Is Not a ‘Traitor’

March 28, 2022

By Peter Beinart

Mr. Beinart is a journalist and commentator who writes frequently about American foreign policy.

It’s an old story: In times of war, antiwar voices are labeled disloyal.

This month, former Democratic Representative Tulsi Gabbard appeared on Tucker Carlson’s show on Fox News, where they both alleged that the United States was secretly funding dangerous biological research laboratories in Ukraine. Prominent politicians and commentators responded by calling them traitors. Senator Mitt Romney declared that “Tulsi Gabbard is parroting false Russian propaganda. Her treasonous lies may well cost lives.” Representative Adam Kinzinger suggested that “Tulsi should go to Russia.” The former MSNBC host Keith Olbermann insisted that Ms. Gabbard and Mr. Carlson “are Russian assets and there is a war. There’s a case for detaining them militarily.” On the daytime show “The View,” the co-host Whoopi Goldberg observed, “They used to arrest people for doing stuff like this.”

Indeed they did. In 1918, the socialist labor leader Eugene Debs was sentenced to 10 years in prison for urging Americans not to fight in World War I. During World War II, the Justice Department indicted 26 Americans who espoused pro-Nazi views, even though none were shown to have conspired with Hitler’s regime.

Sometimes the people who challenge American foreign policy are noble. Sometimes they’re loathsome. Either way, calling them traitors is almost always wrong. It’s wrong morally because rhetorical intimidation can easily become legal persecution. And it’s wrong conceptually because domestic dissenters are rarely the marionettes of foreign foes. Ms. Gabbard and Mr. Carlson’s isolationist, populist and conspiratorial foreign policy views are quintessentially American. As self-styled dissidents, they gain strength by skewering the corruption and insularity of America’s foreign policy elite. Their views are often odious, but calling them disloyal is precisely the wrong way to blunt their appeal.

The genesis of Ms. Gabbard’s and Mr. Carlson’s opinions about Russia and Ukraine isn’t the Kremlin. It’s the war in Iraq. Ms. Gabbard has said her deployment there in 2004 “changed my life completely, as an individual as well as my perspective on the world.” Since then, she’s made opposition to U.S. military intervention her ideological North Star. At times that has led her to ignore the atrocities of America’s foes,

such as when she voted in 2016 against a resolution accusing Syria's government of war crimes. But at other times her anti-interventionist instinct has proved sound. Had the Obama administration heeded her call for a full withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2011, the United States might not have wasted billions of additional dollars on an unwinnable war.

Mr. Carlson has traveled a parallel journey. After working early in his career at The Weekly Standard, which aggressively promoted the Iraq invasion, he felt betrayed by the Washington hawks who he claimed had persuaded him to support it. "I think it's a total nightmare and disaster," he said in a 2004 interview, "and I'm ashamed that I went against my own instincts in supporting it." In the interview, he mentioned that he had called the antiwar conservative Pat Buchanan to apologize for having publicly criticized him. By 2008, when Mr. Carlson was still working at MSNBC, he was speaking at rallies for the isolationist presidential candidate Ron Paul. None of this had anything to do with Vladimir Putin.

Tragically, Mr. Carlson decided Mr. Buchanan was right not only about Iraq. Mr. Carlson became a vocal proponent of Mr. Buchanan's broader worldview, which fused skepticism about military intervention with disdain for nonwhite immigrants. And since Donald Trump's election, Mr. Carlson has become television's most influential purveyor of racist views. He's lavished praise on Hungary's authoritarian, nativist prime minister, Viktor Orban, and claimed that Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson's Supreme Court nomination has turned the United States into "Rwanda." Last month he said that Mr. Putin can't be that bad because he doesn't call white people racists.

Mr. Carlson and Ms. Gabbard are the latest in a long line of American politicians and commentators whose disillusioning experience with an ill-fated war mushroomed into paranoia about the interventionist inclinations of the American foreign policy elite. When Mr. Carlson says "the Biden administration may be finally getting the conflict it has longed for" and Ms. Gabbard alleges that some in the Biden administration "actually want Russia to invade Ukraine" because "the military-industrial complex is the one that benefits from this," they are echoing 20th-century isolationists like Senator William Borah of Idaho and the historians Charles Beard and Harry Elmer Barnes, whose bitterness over America's entrance into World War I led them to blame America and Britain, more than Nazi Germany, for the outbreak of World War II.

Mr. Carlson's and Ms. Gabbard's views may be marginal in Washington. But as Mr. Trump's election showed, telling Americans they're being duped by a warmongering, globalist elite can be a potent message. And answering it requires recognizing the way America's foreign policy establishment fuels populist distrust. Washington's military-industrial complex did not orchestrate Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But many of President Biden's top foreign policy aides did spend their years between government service at either consulting firms funded by defense contractors or think tanks funded by defense contractors. Few politicians acknowledge how unethical that is. By contrast, Ms. Gabbard — who this year claimed that both Democrats and Republicans in Washington are "essentially in the pocket of the military-industrial complex" — calls the defense industry's political influence a scandal. Many Americans who don't share Mr. Carlson's racial views still find it galling that politicians and pundits who lauded America's wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya can appear on television to promote their latest hawkish stance without being reminded of the disasters those wars became. Mr. Carlson does remind them, often viciously.

Ms. Gabbard and Mr. Carlson have identified a genuine problem: the corruption and lack of accountability that plagues American foreign policy. Addressing that problem will sap their appeal. Calling them traitors will only ensure that it grows.

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