

The New Ruling Coalition: Opposition to Afghanistan Withdrawal Shows Its Key Factions

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An unholy union of the National Security State and the neocon-backed and corporate-funded Democratic Party are about to assume power: with media-supported internet censorship a key weapon.



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The Trump era has engendered numerous fractures, one might say realignments, in the political order. Long-time ideological allies are now adversaries, and long-time political enemies are now in full-fledged coalitions. These shifts are not temporary or Trump-dependent but enduring, because they are grounded in shared core beliefs about the defining debates shaping our new politics and how to consolidate real power: call it the Lincoln Project Syndrome.



WASHINGTON, DC - Former Obama CIA Director John Brennan (R) with The Atlantic's Editor-in-Chief Jeffrey Goldberg during the Washington Ideas Forum at the Harman Center for the Arts (Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

One major reason for this transformation is a fundamental difference in how to understand Trump: is he the primary author of America's pathologies or merely a symptom of pathologies which long pre-dated him? Relatedly: is removing Trump from power a vital

step in returning the U.S. to its previous status as a benevolent and law-abiding republic, or is isolating him as the principal cause of the nation's woes a cynical propaganda tactic for whitewashing the sins of those who are actually responsible so that they can rebuild their reputations and again assume power? Were Trump's policies some radical, unprecedented aberration from U.S. political tradition or, stylistic quirks aside, a standard continuation of it?

How one answers those questions — along with whether one believed that the Kremlin had infiltrated the White House and assumed command of the levers of U.S. power through elaborate blackmail schemes or whether one recognized that this was a CIA-fabricated propaganda fraud excavated from crusty Cold War scripts — determined where one fell on many of the most contentious political debates over the last four years (my answer to all of the questions is the latter choice).

That's why the millions of Americans who, due to fear of Trump, began paying close attention to politics and consuming news products only in 2016 were such easy marks for peddling fear-mongering narratives and revisionism: because they lacked the crucial historical context in which to place Trump and understand his ascension to the presidency.



Cover of TIME Magazine, May 18, 2017; Cover of The New Yorker, Feb. 24, 2017

But there is another critical debate, one that has rarely been conducted explicitly, that is also a key determinant of where one falls in this new alignment: *what are the real power centers in the U.S., the ones most responsible for its worst acts and greatest dangers?*

There are many places where that answer resides. One can find it right now in the ongoing effort to denounce the Trump White House for attempting to remove troops from Afghanistan, where the U.S. has been fighting and shooting and bombing in a war now about to enter its 20th year. Take a look at who is demanding that those troops remain, and there you will find the real axis of power — all of its component parts — in the United States.

This is not the first time the Trump administration has been condemned after unveiling its plans to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. In July, pro-war Democrats on the House Armed Services Committee, led by their Lockheed-and-Raytheon-funded

Chairman Adam Smith, [partnered with Congresswoman Liz Cheney](#) and her pro-war GOP allies to block the use of funds for removing troops (not only from Afghanistan but also Germany), as part of a massive increase in military spending. The oppositional left-right coalition of anti-war Democrats such as Ro Khanna and Tulsi Gabbard and America-First Trump supporters such as Matt Gaetz were no match for the bipartisan pro-war coalition which attempted to block any end to the war.

A crucial weapon which Smith, Cheney and the other anti-withdrawal Committee members wielded was a widely-hyped [New York Times scoop published days before the Committee vote](#), which — in its first paragraph — announced:

American intelligence officials have concluded that a Russian military intelligence unit secretly offered bounties to Taliban-linked militants for killing coalition forces in Afghanistan — including targeting American troops — **amid the peace talks** to end the long-running war there, **according to officials** briefed on the matter.

Repeatedly citing this *New York Times* story, based on the claims of anonymous “intelligence officials,” the bipartisan pro-war wing of the Committee insisted that to leave Afghanistan now would be particularly inappropriate and dangerous in light of this dastardly Russian interference. ([Top military officials](#) and the [commander in Afghanistan](#) later admitted the bounty program “had not been corroborated by intelligence agencies and that they do not believe any attacks in Afghanistan that resulted in American casualties can be directly tied to it,” but by then, the job was done).

And thus did this union of pro-war Democrats, Cheney-led neocons, the intelligence community and their chosen mainstream media outlets succeed in providing the perfectly crafted tool at the most opportune moment to justify blocking an end to America’s longest war. That is precisely the same coalition that drowned U.S. politics for more than three years in the [sustained, monomaniacal disinformation campaign](#) about Putin’s takeover of the U.S.

As [Trump again signals](#) that he intends in the lame-duck session to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, this same united coalition is working desperately to block it. First, Democratic Senator Tammy Duckworth of Illinois angrily condemned the withdrawal plan with deranged reasoning: that Generals are against withdrawal (as though we have no civilian control of the military); troops will come home “in body bags” not by staying in Afghanistan but by leaving it; and that withdrawing U.S. forces after a mere nineteen years of fighting will endanger “our national security.”

The new ruling coalition then stepped forward to fortify Duckworth’s demand that troops remain. Obama’s former National Security Advisor Susan Rice — reportedly slated to become Biden’s Secretary of State — [pointed to the pronouncement](#) by Brett McGurk, an early ruler of post-invasion Iraq and key advocate of the Bush/Cheney “surge” who now

works (of course) for *NBC News*, denouncing Trump's withdrawal plan as “diplomatic malpractice” that “erodes trust and confidence in the United States.” Playing the role of Liz Cheney in this debate was GOP Congressman Dan Crenshaw of Texas, who supported Rice and Duckworth by attacking independent Congressman Justin Amash for advocating troop withdrawal.

From there, Bill Kristol — a key neocon ally of McGurk during the Bush/Cheney years who is also now a beloved MSNBC pundit — not only denounced the efforts to withdraw troops from Afghanistan but in general warned of the dangers of Trump's attempt to remove troops from other parts of the world. As they usually do, Kristol's pro-imperialism tweets went massively viral due to the large social media following he has amassed from MSNBC appearances and his liberal fan base:



Bill Kristol @BillKristol

I'm told DOD has been ordered to plan further troop withdrawals, from Somalia, South Korea and Germany. Trump is doing his best to weaken America, our friends, and allies on his way out the door.

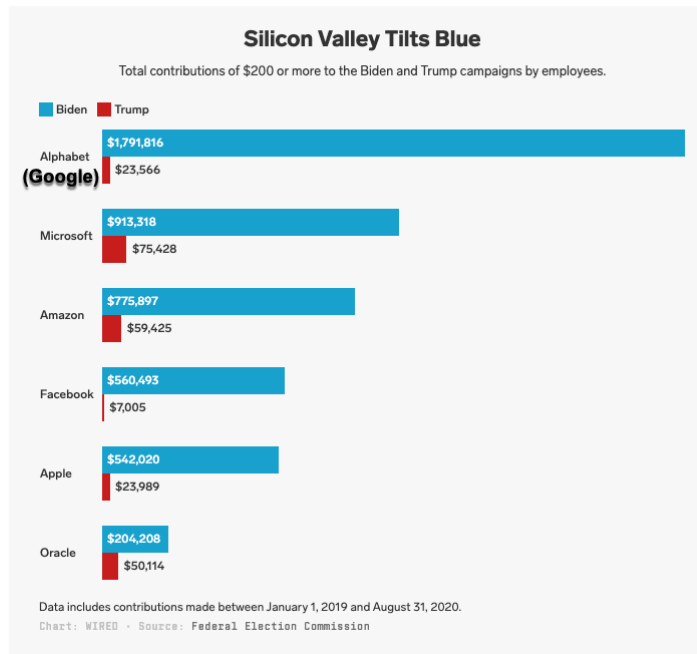
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Here we see the new coalition of power that has formed during the Trump era: hawkish and corporatist Democrats, united when necessary with pro-war/neocon Republicans, Bush/Cheney operatives, the national security state and large corporate media outlets outside of Fox News.

Democratic national security luminaries have spent the last four years formally uniting with Bush/Cheney neocons to prepare to take power in a new Democratic administration (though it must be remembered that neocons, as this 2014 *New York Times* Op-Ed by Jacob Heilbrunn explained, saw the writing on the wall long before Trump that the growing anti-war strain in the GOP (as evidenced by the success of Ron Paul's candidacy) meant that their best hope for a posture of Endless War resided in re-migrating back to what they thought at the time would be the Hillary-run Democratic Party).

The other key components of this coalition are Silicon Valley giants and Wall Street, both of which overwhelmingly donated to the Biden/Harris campaign and the Democratic Party generally. The primary weapon tech companies offer is not just huge sums of money — though that of course is welcomed and useful — but information control: I continue to regard the decision of block and suppress the ability to disseminate *The New York Post* story on Hunter Biden's laptop as one of the most shocking and alarming events of the last four years: political censorship *cheered by most of the pro-Biden press*.



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POLITICS

Wall Street donors line up behind Biden in massive third-quarter fundraising haul

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KEY POINTS

- Joe Biden's joint fundraising committees benefited from a wave of big money contributions from finance leaders on Wall Street and across the country during the third quarter.
- Biden's fundraising strength has grown as the election gets closer. The Democratic nominee raised \$383 million in September.
- People in the financial industry have largely favored Biden, spending more than \$50 million to back his candidacy, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics, compared with more than \$10 million for Trump.

But that jarring pre-election internet censorship on behalf of this Democratic-led coalition is just the tip of the iceberg of what is to come. And the key players in that internet censorship campaign — the propagandists who will lay the groundwork for it — are the corporate U.S. media outlets who have long been and still are a key part of this ruling coalition.

When Silicon Valley giants began to see the massive potential of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and even earlier when Google assumed dominance of search engines, they had no intention to censor content. Indeed, they wanted *to renounce* any responsibility to regulate discourse: not because they are noble (though many did have a libertarian belief in the value of a free internet) but because they wanted to assume the far more profitable and less burdensome model of AT&T: *we are not a publishing company that decides what can and cannot be heard, but rather just a content-neutral platform for anyone to communicate* (if Alex Jones calls Milo Yiannopoulos to plan a rally, nobody expects AT&T to terminate their call or service: that’s the hands-off model Silicon Valley giants envisioned).

These companies began censoring the internet because that responsibility was *foisted* on them — principally by corporate media outlets that ginned up anger over the content they were allowing on their platforms, and then by Democratic Party politicians who blamed Facebook and Twitter (but not themselves) for their 2016 defeat.



Numerous media outlets — *NBC News*, *CNN*, *The New York Times* — now employ stables of reporters whose primary function seems to be to act as hall monitor tattletales over the internet, flagging whatever person or group think they deserves to be censored from social media and then petulantly whining that Facebook and Twitter are failing in their sacred duties to regulate discourse.

Part of the motive is arrogant self-interest: ever since the emergence of Bush-era blogs, they have despised any ability of uncredentialed serfs to disseminate information outside of their benevolent control. Watch here as *Vox* writer Dave Roberts announces on a show this week that the public cannot possibly be trusted to communicate freely without “gatekeepers” — meaning people like him and his friends — deciding what can and cannot be heard:

 [The Mehdi Hasan Show @MehdiHasanShow](#)

[In the world of social media with no gatekeepers, @drvox says "misinformation wins". He tells Mehdi why:](#)



[November 17th 2020](#)

[110 Retweets](#)[413 Likes](#)

That our media “gatekeepers” have been the most prolific and destructive *disseminators* of misinformation — from the Iraq War to the 2008 financial crisis to unhinged Trump/Russia conspiracies — does not matter. They believe they have a divine, inherent, and superior ability to determine truth from falsity and that society must be structured to ensure the power to regulate information remains firmly in their hands.

But the primary motive is political: these corporate media outlets know that if they regain their monopolistic stranglehold on the dissemination of information, then they can control political thought and societal behavior on behalf of the factions of power which they have always existed to serve.

That this is the function of corporate media outlets such as NBC and CNN — not to *combat* propaganda but to disseminate it for the interests of the factions they serve — was once viewed as a fundamental, undeniable truth on the left. It’s the reason that [Noam Chomsky and Ed Herman’s “Manufacturing Consent”](#) became such a popular film and book, because it laid out in detail how these entities actually function: “a propaganda approach to media coverage suggests a systematic and highly political dichotomization in news coverage based on **serviceability to important domestic power interests.**” The authors urged Americans never to be deceived about the real purpose of these large media conglomerates:

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and **to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society....**

In countries where the levers of power are in the hands of a state bureaucracy, the monopolistic control over the media, often supplemented by official censorship, makes it clear that the media serve the ends of a dominant elite. **It is much more difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media are private and formal censorship is absent....**A propaganda model focuses on this inequality of wealth and power and its multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices. It traces the routes by which money and power are able to **filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public.**

The elite domination of the media and marginalization of dissidents that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news "objectively" and on the basis of professional news values. Within the limits of the filter constraints they often are objective; the constraints are so powerful, and are built into the system in such a fundamental way, that alternative bases of news choices are hardly imaginable.

Yet somehow, just a couple decades later, these corporate media outlets — just as is true of other institutions that were long distrusted and despised on the left: the CIA, the FBI, the NSA — are not scorned as villains spreading propaganda but venerated as heroes valiantly devoted to combating it.

The sectors inside these corporate media outlets devoted to fostering internet censorship call themselves “disinformation reporters” who bravely “report from disinformation spaces” — assuming the posture of a war correspondent in Mogadishu but who in fact do nothing more than spend all day scrolling through adolescent 4Chan forums and Facebook memes, on the prowl for random, fringe Terms of Services violators who should be booted offline, not unlike the junior high hall monitors who search for tardy students to report to the teachers.

And that’s the key: the “disinformation” which these NBC, CNN and *New York Times* “gatekeepers” combat is not the truly potent propaganda that spews forth from the most powerful and pernicious sectors: CIA, FBI, Wall Street, and the corporate media outlets for which they work. That is the propaganda and disinformation they specialize in *endorsing*. These are not anti-disinformation warriors: they are disinformation agents.

But they have become beloved icons to a significant segment of American liberals, who have somehow become convinced that these corporate media giants — in a radical reversal of the core principles of “Manufacturing Consent” — have suddenly transformed into truth-telling, power-confronting armies of anti-propaganda warriors. All of this is directly related to the overarching debate referenced above: *what are the real power centers in the U.S., the ones most responsible for its worst acts and greatest dangers?*

Few things will provoke the anger of liberals, and amazingly even some on the left, more than criticizing the “disinformation” reporters of NBC and CNN or the “tech reporters” of *The New York Times* who perform the same dissent-suppressing, censorious functions. Three decades after Chomsky’s comprehensive warnings, much of the American liberal-left has come to see these corporate outlets not as the instruments of authoritarianism, oligarchy and propaganda but as their opposite: the noble bulwarks against it.

That’s because — just like neocons, the CIA and the security state — these media outlets have recognized that they can lure liberals into adoring them by posturing as crucial allies in the fight against the rising threat of domestic fascism. Under this rubric, the most acute threats of authoritarianism and fascism emanate not from the FBI or CIA or their corporate masters and media outlets; instead, these factions have been elevated into the bravest and most important soldiers protecting us from those regressive forces.

Every time I denounce these corporate media censorship units and their hall monitor tattletales masquerading as “disinformation reporters,” intense rage is provoked: from their ardent fans, almost always liberals and even leftists, who somehow believe, genuinely, that CNN and NBC and *The New York Times* now expend substantial resources toward combatting disinformation and defeating propaganda. The world in which the 2004 Bush/Cheney campaign and White House Communications Chief Nicolle Wallace has become a beloved-by-liberals MSNBC host is the same one in which these media conglomerates are now revered by liberals as *anti-propaganda truth-tellers*.

Earlier this week, after I [described the crucial role](#) these media outlets are playing in elevating pressure on Silicon Valley to censor the internet even more aggressively, one liberal [reporter said my critique](#) was “so disgusting” that she “almost cried” on behalf of the “disinfo reporters” I had brutally maligned. One of those “disinfo reporters,” *NBC News*’ Ben Collins, responded to her [by lamenting](#) that the goal of critics of his corporate employer, like me, is to “make you afraid to leave the house.”

Much important than this neurotic reaction was Collins’ response to me, contained in [a series of tweets frenetically spread](#) by liberal fans of NBC, where he listed all the work of which he is proudest, that he believes demonstrates how intrepid of a combatant he and his NBC team are against propaganda, disinformation and the forces of fascism.

Reviewing his list — for what it does and does not include — is indeed highly illuminating. None of his bold, brave efforts to expose propaganda has anything to do with the most powerful entities that spread disinformation: the National Security State, the CIA, corporate America, the Pentagon, and large corporate media outlets like the one that employs him. NBC has no interest in combatting *that* propaganda: to the contrary, through people like star [CIA-spokesman Ken Dilanian](#) and actual lifelong CIA operatives like John Brennan, they are devoted to spreading, legitimizing and affirming the disinformation that comes from those most powerful factions.

While ignoring CIA and corporate propaganda, who, instead, are the targets of NBC's brave “disinformation reporting”? Fringe right-wing groups like QAnon, Proud Boys and the Boogaloo Bois; random citizens using Facebook to post claims NBC deems to be false; “Trump supporters” and Russians and various anti-government groups that express skepticism of the wisdom passed down from on high.

Now, if you are someone who really believes that the true power centers in America, the real threats to our freedoms and value, come not from the CIA and the FBI and Wall Street and Silicon Valley — the groups whose propaganda NBC never debunks but always spreads — but instead comes from fringe groups of fat middle-aged guys in the deindustrialized, decimated, deprived interior of the country cosplaying as militiamen, or random, anonymous MAGA and QAnon trolls, then it makes perfect sense that you would regard this work by corporate media outlets as heroic and necessary.

If you're living in that [self-glorifying fairy tale](#) that places you on the front lines of fighting against a new and unprecedented fascist takeover of the U.S. — one that is perpetrated not by the CIA and FBI but which those agencies are steadfastly seeking to defeat in order to keep America safe for democracy — then it makes sense that you would swoon with delight and gratitude for this work.

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But look at what it is really devoted to. They are not interested in confronting real power centers. They instead [badger an elderly conservative woman in Florida](#), by taking [camera crews to her front lawn in Florida](#), because she unwittingly posted on her Facebook page a pro-Trump rally *they claim* was engineered by Russia.

The unwitting: The Trump supporters used by Russia

A Florida woman who ran a Donald J. Trump supporters page that unwittingly promoted a Russian-coordinated event on Facebook says she doesn't believe that she was influenced by Kremlin-linked trolls <http://cnn.it/2Gx3gN3> See Less



Or they threaten to dox and expose some random citizen who created an anti-Semitic meme about CNN unless he promises never to do so again. They have their potent corporate guns turned *not* on the actual centers of power and authoritarianism — those are whose interests they serve and on behalf of whom they spread disinformation — but on random citizens who diverge and dissent from their pieties and who they therefore want banned and silenced.

But this is why that question referenced above about where real power resides is so crucial, so determinative of where one falls on these debates. If you really believe that the threat to The American Way of Life comes not from the CIA and the FBI and tech monopolies and Endless War but from the Proud Boys and the Boogaloo Bois and anonymous citizens posting pro-Trump Facebook memes — that somehow they're going to overthrow the most armed and powerful government on earth and end American democracy and replace it with their version of fascism — then it makes complete sense for you to unite behind those entities that have successfully re-branded themselves as the [bulwarks against these proto-fascist movements](#): NBC and CNN and *The New York Times*; the CIA and the FBI; Wall Street and Silicon Valley; and the neocons, Rovian disciples, corporatists and militarists who rule the Democratic Party and soon the White House. And it also makes sense for you to want to increasingly vest those entities with the power of censoring the internet in the name of Keeping Us Safe from these nefarious forces.

But that is a glaring and pathetic fairy tale, sold to you by large corporate media outlets and their glittery panels from the national security state and the neocon sectors who have every interest in getting you to believe that they're now protecting you from disinformation rather than filling your heads with it, so that you forget about their past sins and view them as pro-democracy heroes and buy their books and work to empower them in elections.

The departure of Trump is not going to rid us of this The-Fascists-Are-Coming movie. It's been far too profitable a series for far too many institutions to let it go. Even with Trump gone, they are going to use every FBI tactic to exaggerate the threat of these domestic movements to keep you in such a state of fear that you acquiesce to whatever powers they claim they need to defeat these forces of domestic right-wing darkness — just as they did in the Cold War with domestic Communism and after the Oklahoma City bombing when the Clinton Administration [demanded backdoor internet access in the name of stopping right-wing militias](#) and again after 9/11 when people like [Newt Gingrich wanted to curb free speech](#) in the name of stopping the threat of Islamic radicalism inside the U.S. This playbook is as old and obvious as it is pernicious.

And one key tactic they will absolutely continue to use is the multi-pronged campaign to demand, coerce and cajole Silicon Valley giants to continue to silence and censor whoever is an adversary of this new neoliberal ruling coalition — whether on the right *or on the left*. If you have any doubts about that, just listen to the new left-wing darling, the newly re-elected Democratic Senator from Massachusetts Ed Markey, when he spoke to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg at a Senate hearing late last month and demanded more censorship: *"The issue is not that the companies before us today is that they're taking too many posts down. The issue is that **they're leaving too many dangerous posts up.**"*

If you're a fan of corporate media outlets, if you are eager for Silicon Valley giants to more aggressively and unilaterally censor who can and cannot be heard online, if you believe that true power and authoritarianism rests not with the national security state and the political parties funded by oligarchical centers but in random fringe bands of your fellow citizens, then you are many things. A warrior against fascism and authoritarianism is most definitely not among them.