

Republican Perspective

1 May 2019

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RUSSIA MEDDLING

“The people who cast the votes decide nothing. The people who count the votes decide everything.” Joseph Stalin, General Secretary, Communist Party of Soviet Union

The current political talk on the Left and by Progressives has more than a whiff of socialism. Leading the 2020 Democrat presidential polls is Democrat Socialist Bernie Sanders. Voters would do well to read Amity Shlaes, “The Forgotten Man.”

Republican Calvin Coolidge won the presidential election in 1924 beating both the Democrat and Progressive candidates. Coolidge had a strong belief in private enterprise and small government. He cut taxes, reduced government spending and filled regulatory bodies with people sympathetic to business. Coolidge once said, “The chief business of the American people is business.” He also rejected US membership in the League of Nations and set high tariffs on imported goods to protect American industry. Some similarity to President Trump except for runaway spending.

Economists estimate that the highest level of unemployment under Coolidge was 5% in 1924. It dropped to 3.2% in 1925 and then to 2% and 1%! Americans could afford Henry Ford’s Model T. The stock market began to rise ushering in individuals with little knowledge of investing. Economist David Hale believes that stock pickers borrowed so much money from brokers that it was the equivalent to 18% of GDP. Coolidge, after five and one-half years in office, decided not to run for president in 1928.

Despite the country’s economic success, in the summer of 1927, a large group of academics, writers and union leaders made their way to Russia. The travelers included Rexford Tugwell, an economist at Columbia and future member of FDR’s “Brain Trust” and Undersecretary of the Department of Agriculture; Roger Baldwin, founder of the ACLU; socialist James Maurer, president of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor.

At the time, the US did not recognize the Soviet Union diplomatically. The group labeled themselves as an unofficial American trade union delegation. The itinerary was controlled by the Stalin regime. Stalin had two reasons to invite the Americans. One, if he could draw the group to his side, he might eventually capture the US labor movement. The other was that Communism needed Western cash to survive. To get money, Stalin needed legitimization.

The group met with several Soviet leaders including Trotsky and Stalin. Stalin gave five members 6+ hours of discussion. He wanted to make clear that he had a genuine labor following in the US. On their voyage home, the group wrote a positive report of Russian

life. Tugwell focused on agriculture and admired the active role of government toward farming.

Tugwell's trips to Russia influenced his decisions in FDR's Agriculture Department and the New Deal. FDR, fond of Tugwell, provided him his own agency — the Resettlement Administration (RA). The RA would rehabilitate poor people and poor land together. Collectivization a la Russia.

One of the demonstration camps was in Casa Grande, AZ. The RA developed two-acre plots for farmers. But Tugwell believed that individual farms would yield too little. Drawing from his Russian visits, he thought a large cooperative would make economic sense — the farmers would share the land. One tractor for all.

To bring success to Casa Grande, Robert Faul was hired. Officials believed he was a competent manager as he ran the Arizona Turkey Growers' Association. Although Faul tried his best, Casa Grande struggled. He quit in a rage in 1939. The Associated Press headline: "Quits Farm Security Administration, Likening Projects to Soviet's."

The farmers of Casa Grande fought against Faul as they felt they were being treated as factory shift workers. Missing was the pride of owning their own land. The more they discussed the collective concept, the more it did not make sense to them. A visiting economist asked a nearby farmer his view of cooperative poultry coops. The farmer commented: "But the thing I can't figure out is how a man tells his own chickens apart, runnin' them all together like they do there."

Residents of towns close to Casa Grande chided the cooperative settlers. They called them "reds" when they met at gas stations, grocery stores, and barber shops. The squabbles continued on the collective farm. The producers fought over both crop losses and gains.

In 1943, Congress' patience with the Casa Grande and like projects ran out. They barred the Farm Security Administration from using any appropriated funds for resettlement projects unless that money was used to speed liquidation of collective farms.

Russia's interest in American politics has a long history. Members of FDR's administration, as well as his many supporters, thought worthy of the Russian collective model. Did Stalin favor FDR over Republican challengers?