

Texas Tribune Festival: Warmongering, racist politics and calls for bipartisan unity

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12 October 2023

On September 21, a broad assortment of reactionary figures, ranging from far-right to pseudo-left, converged on the capital city of Austin, Texas. The occasion was the annual Texas Tribune Festival, hosted by the eponymous newspaper which was founded by venture capitalist John Thornton in 2009. Speakers included election denier Ted Cruz, racist falsifier of history Nikole Hannah-Jones, and DSA member and congressman Greg Casar, along with other anti-working-class politicians, corporate media hacks, and academics.

The festival held events at three venues in downtown Austin: the Omni Hotel, St. David's Episcopal Church, and the Paramount Theater. All are located just one street over from 6th Street, infamous for its homelessness. It was a stark image to see well-dressed, well-fed political celebrities promenading the same streets on which homeless people live in utterly degrading conditions, and all left to brave the Texas heat, which broke records this summer. Among the sponsors of the event, which was held without any precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, were JPMorgan Chase & Co., Chevron, Pepsi, and the American Federation of Teachers.

The event was advertised as a platform for a wide range of "bold ideas" open to the public. The "boldness" on show at this circus of right wingers was redolent of the "bold" restructurings carried out in industries entailing mass layoffs and deep cuts to wages; or the menacing "boldness" of Joe Biden's foreign policy in its reckless escalation toward nuclear war with Russia and China. Meanwhile, tickets for general admission sold for \$250, prohibitively expensive for the average working person. Far from providing a forum for democratic discussion, the Texas Tribune Fest reflected the lurch to the right of the entire political establishment and exhibited a rigid conformity to the stifling framework of the two-party system.

Ultimately, the Festival was a grand gesture of courtship made by the Democratic Party to a section of "moderate" Republicans, which the Democrats deem necessary as a bulwark against a Trump presidency and essential to maintain support for the unpopular war in Ukraine. The general character of the "centrist" Republicans that the *Tribune* could scrounge up were former Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, who, during his one-on-one, held Ronald Reagan up as a model for a return to "traditional, big tent" Republican politics; and New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu, who has previously stated, "I'm a Trump guy through and through." In delivering the opening keynote address, the latter still refused to rule out the possibility that he would support Trump in a general election.

A major theme of the Festival was bipartisanship. This sacred principle apparently goes so far as to include the likes of fascist election-denier Ted Cruz. On the program for the festival, the one-on-one with Cruz was billed as "The junior U.S. senator from Texas on why he should be reelected to a third term." No questions about the 2020 coup or his role in attempting to block the certification of the election results, which to this day he maintains was stolen, were posed. Instead, he was provided a

platform to deliver an unhinged tirade on school choice, which he called "the most important domestic issue."

Cruz scandalized his audience by defending the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* and claimed the popular outrage toward Clarence Thomas, the Supreme Court justice who aided Trump's coup attempt, was only because "he is black and conservative." Nevertheless, Cruz was able to harp on the bipartisanship promoted by the Democrats. He cynically referenced the far overdue end to the luxury tax on tampons, which has forced poor working class women to choose between period products and food, in Texas as a bipartisan victory. In a similar manner, he exploited the question of gun violence to promote the building up of the police and other repressive powers of the state. "We know who the trigger pullers are, and we want to arrest them but we can't."

Minimizing the danger of fascism was one of the central tasks of the Festival. During his keynote address, Sununu blusterously declared, "Trump is too dumb to be a danger to democracy," and was met with roaring applause. Anyone that sells this soporific after the vast majority of Republicans in Congress voted against the certification of the 2020 election results, and after at least two Supreme Court Justices were implicated in the plot, is terrified of rousing the masses, to whom they have nothing to offer.

Hysterically denying this fact, Evan Smith, co-founder of the *Tribune*, who moderated the keynote by Sununu, asserted that the crisis facing the Republican Party flowed from "the unwillingness of a certain someone to leave the political arena." The most ambitious aim of the Democratic Party is to get a different Republican than Trump nominated.

The real meat and potatoes of this "bipartisanship" is support for the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia. Sununu spoke for the privileged social layer present when he declared he is "100% behind" the war. "We're going to 'put that tin can army [Russia] in its place,'" he cooed. Sununu then gave voice to American imperialism's war aims:

...we're going to back Zelensky [but] that's not just what this is about although that is right, and it is just and we should support freedom fighters around the world and families that are literally getting murdered by the thousands but still will fight.

It sends a message to our enemies we have resolve. Don't think we're gonna let our politics divide us and weaken us. It sends a message to our allies you can trust us. When we say we're gonna back you, we're gonna back you, and boy it really means a lot. "

A panel discussion entitled "Worth Fighting For," was devoted to beating the war drum against US imperialism's latest boogeyman, Vladimir Putin. The panelists included Democratic representative Jake Auchincloss, who had just come from a meeting with Zelensky in Washington on Thursday; Evelyn Farkas, executive director of the

McCain Institute, named for the war criminal John McCain; Kay Bailey Hutchison, former ambassador to NATO; and Igor Khrestin, Managing Director of Global Policy at the George W. Bush Institute, also named after a war criminal. While repeating all the banalities and hypocritical lies about the war being a fight for “national sovereignty” and “democracy” in Ukraine, the panelists advocated for a reckless escalation, up to and including direct US-NATO intervention, in the conflict.

With the defeat of the spring offensive forming the background for the “discussion,” there was no attempt to disguise the fact that US involvement in Ukraine was aimed at protecting its own “security interests,” with one panelist calling it “existential” for US and European imperialism.

Hutchison solemnly declared that only NATO could stop Russia’s “neo-imperial” operations in Ukraine. Speaking out of both sides of her mouth, she then speciously claimed that using millions of Ukrainians as cannon fodder was the “best way” to preempt a direct conflict between NATO and Russia. There was no objection among the panelists to the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO. References to Article 5 were thrown around throughout the discussion, but none of the speakers explained what it is. Article 5 of NATO’s constitution stipulates that if a member country is at war, it can compel the other members to declare war on the enemy combatant. War between the US and nuclear-armed Russia would likely mean nuclear war and the end of human civilization.

Another significant aspect of the panel was the cover it provided for the neo-Nazis with which Zelensky’s regime and the Ukrainian armed forces are infested. Khrestin referred to the 2014 Maidan coup, in which a democratically elected pro-Russian president was overthrown, sponsored by the CIA and led by a small group of Ukrainian fascists, as a “democratic revolution.” Hutchison called Ukraine, a country in which Stepan Bandera, a Nazi-collaborator, is worshipped as its founding father, a “thriving democracy.” The West just wants to live in peace, she lamented, but the “bad guys won’t let us.”

This is connected to the hypocrisy of US human rights imperialism. Hutchison, who denounced Russia for violating the principle established after WWII that borders are “sacrosanct,” voted as a Senator in 2001 for war against Iraq. Auchincloss himself fought as an Army captain in Afghanistan. None of US imperialism’s predatory wars waged over the past 30 years were mentioned in the discussion.

Toward the end of the discussion, Hutchison criticized NATO for being “too defensive” in its war on Russia. Previously, the western imperialists had claimed Ukraine was not striking inside Russian territory. Now, the slogan is, as she put it, “let them fight.” She called on the Ukrainian military to “take out Russian bases launching missiles and drones,” and for NATO to provide them with the weapons necessary to do so. She then laid out her vision for how Russia would be defeated. It would not be through a decisive military victory, but through the “political destabilization” of Russia, therein admitting US imperialism’s plans for regime change and the carve up of Russia.

The ongoing drive to war against China factored prominently into the discussion. Parallels were drawn between Xi Jinping and Putin, and between Taiwan and Ukraine. Questions for the panel could not be asked directly by the audience; instead, they were submitted online and carefully selected so as not to make any of the panelists uncomfortable and to enable them to lie with impunity. One of the questions that did get asked was whether the US could wage war against Russia and China at the same time. The response was a thinly veiled threat: China “better not try us,” but that the US would seek to “deter” China just as it “deterred” Russia. In other words, the goal of the US is to bait China into invading Taiwan or responding to its provocations in the South China Sea just as NATO’s relentless expansion forced Putin’s hand in Ukraine. Other questions that were submitted by this writer, such as “how many people would die in a nuclear war with Russia?” did not make it through the vetting process.

The Democrats’ warmongering has allowed some far-right Republicans to posture as anti-war, including Trump himself. In reality, they only oppose the Democrats on tactical considerations. They would rather go straight for China, whereas the Democrats prefer first subjugating Russia and harnessing its resources beforehand. This is the right-wing axis on which the Democratic Party’s opposition to Trump spins.

The criminal endeavor of the Democratic Party to mislead workers into hanging their hopes on a section of the Republican Party and to conceal the fact that the latter is becoming an ever more openly fascist organization could not proceed without the involvement of the pseudo-left. In their turn, they seek to convince workers that to halt the lurch towards dictatorial forms of rule and win improvements to their living conditions, workers must limit themselves to voting for Biden in the 2024 election.

While other panels attempted to help the Republican Party save face, presenting January 6, 2021 as the work of one man, the panelists on Blue Team, a group of Texas Democrats, admitted that the majority of the Republican party consists of fascists. But this proved only a ploy to get out in front of mass opposition and lure it back into the Democratic Party.

DSA member Greg Casar, freshman Congressman from Austin, speaking at one of the events open to the public on Congress Avenue, asserted, “This is not a two-party problem. It is a one political party problem.” Another panelist said, “There are very few Republicans willing to stand up to him [Trump].” One might say the same thing of the Democrats. In the aftermath of January 6, Biden called for a “strong Republican Party.”

Since then, it took the Democrats 18 months to recommend charges against the would-be dictator. To this day, Trump remains a free man and is the top contender for the Republican Party presidential nomination. The grounds for his prosecution have been kept as narrow, and the fraction of his co-conspirators listed as infinitesimal as possible, to cover up the extent of the crisis in the political system.

Central to the efforts of the Democratic Party to demobilize working class opposition are the trade union bureaucracies. Several events were sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers, which enforced the premature reopening of schools across the country amid a raging pandemic after having sold out a wave of teacher strikes the year before.

To this end, they called out one of their oldest celebrity skills for the Democrats: the 93-year-old Dolores Huerta, cofounder of the United Farmworkers Association. She quoted Coretta Scott King as saying, “We will never have peace in the world until women take power,” before lauding Hillary Clinton, a vicious warmonger, as the “most intelligent woman.” Her solution to every problem was to vote for the Democrats. Voting is “the only game in town,” she emphasized.

Huerta spent much of her interview dwelling on the advancement of small sections of women and Latinos within the power structures of capitalist society, using the occasion to promote her *Ms. Magazine*. The identity politics which Huerta, an erstwhile longtime opponent of abortion, promoted in her interview were merely the continuation of the anti-immigrant xenophobia and right-wing backwardness she espoused during her time with United Farmworkers, in an inverted form. The United Farmworkers spearheaded attacks on immigrants, including Operation Wetline (derived from the slur “wetback”), whereby the union sent gangs to attack migrants and prevent them from crossing the border.

Nikole Hannah-Jones, a particularly zealous advocate of binding black workers to capitalism and continuing the neocolonial exploitation of Africa, spoke later the same day. Hannah-Jones led the now thoroughly discredited 1619 Project for the *New York Times*, which sought to place race at the center of American history. She began the discussion, moderated by fellow careerist and journalist Kathleen McElroy, by stating that being black and being patriotic are not incompatible.

She then reheated for the umpteenth time her repertoire of racist

claims first made by slaveholders then repackaged by black nationalist academics and finally plagiarized by Jones, including that the American Revolution was a slaveholders' revolt, that Lincoln was a garden variety racist, and that the only difference between the attitudes of whites in the North and whites in South toward blacks was to be found in the fact that more blacks lived in the South than in the North.

Hannah-Jones graphically demonstrated the right-wing character and implications of her racialist ideology when she went to apply it to contemporary events. She explained Trump's coup attempt as follows: It was "nothing new" to black Americans, whom she claimed have faced like attacks since the nation's founding; America was not a real democracy until the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1965, as only a "multiracial" democracy is a "true" democracy; and the essence of January 6 was the reaction of "white people" against democracy. Not only does this explanation shift blame from the coup plotters and the complicity of the Democrats to "white people," just as the slaveholders claimed that that "peculiar institution" benefited all white southerners; it also minimizes the historical significance of the coup.

How is the supposedly racist "DNA" of America to explain this event? The fact is that it cannot. Rather, it reflects the decay of the capitalist system since the time of Lincoln. Now that it is in a terminal crisis, the capitalist class is repudiating its democratic past and turning to dictatorial forms of rule.

The defeat of fascism cannot be left up to the calculations of right-wing scoundrels as to which Republican candidate to consolidate behind in the primaries that has the highest mathematical chance of defeating Trump. Most of the candidates have stated that they would back Trump in a general election even if he were convicted for his fake elector plot. All of them support the same fundamental policies of militarism, attacks on immigrants, cuts to social programs and the suppression of the class struggle. Nor can the fight against fascism be subordinated to the war drive of the Democrats.

Despite the lack of any democratic alternative within the political establishment, there exists within the working class, the vast majority of the population, immense hostility to war and to fascism. The social interests of the working class compel it to defend democracy. The defeat of fascism means upending it by its roots. It means fusing the struggles of the working class for better wages and working conditions with the fight against war and dictatorship. The ruling class views crushing disparate strikes as one struggle, and war abroad means waging war on the population at home.

The international working class must comport itself to the logic of the historical crisis which it faces and adopt a unified strategy to overthrow the world capitalist system. Only then can the war in Ukraine and war in general be put an end to, and the resources of the world economy be mobilized to reverse climate change, eliminate poverty and a globally coordinated strategy be adopted to put an end to the COVID-19 pandemic.



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