

## Substack

# **The Strategy That Built America's Middle Class Still Works, So Why Won't Democrats Deploy It?**

**The same bold playbook that built the middle class  
can restore it, and voters are ready...**

**By Thom Hartmann**

**April 23, 2026**

The “liberal” commentators are shocked. It was reported yesterday that Graham Platner, the Democrat who'll most likely win the primary to run for the US Senate from Maine, has staked out some “truly radical” positions. The former Marine combat veteran and oyster farmer has called for:

- Impeaching Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas for the bribes he took from billionaires,
- Replacing Chuck Schumer as leader of Senate Democrats with a “fighter,”
- Investigating and prosecuting Trump regime officials and underlings who've been involved in illegal actions like bombing unarmed boats in the Caribbean,
- Prosecuting ICE thugs who've assaulted, terrorized, or killed people and smashed into cars and homes without warrants,
- Going after corruption in the Trump White House, including among the Trump family, the Cabinet, and Trump himself,
- Promoting aggressive new social safety net programs to restore America's middle class and take on the Epstein class, including a wealth tax on those with more than \$1 billion, and
- A national healthcare system modeled on Medicare-for-All.

One cable host mused out loud yesterday that these positions may help the 41-year-old progressive win the primary against septuagenarian moderate Governor Janet Mills, “but can that really win a general election?” This “don't be Bernie or like AOC” is the great fear and marching anthem of the mainstream media and the Democratic consultant class.

When Trump broke both US and international law joining Israel in bombing Iran without any provocation (and while they were making very real concessions during their negotiations) and in violation of the War Powers Act of 1973, Democratic House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries didn't call for the president to be prosecuted, turned over to the Hague, or even impeached.

Instead, he said, “Congress must be fully and immediately briefed.” Yeah, that'll teach

them!

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer called Trump a liar and the bombing a “major failure” and “Operation Epic Blunder,” but beyond strongly worded press releases also hasn’t called for actual consequences for Trump, Hegseth, or anybody else in the chain of command committing these war crimes.

But consider how it would have played out if Obama or Biden had begun bombing a foreign country with no justification; Republicans would have started impeachment hearings before the second wave of bombs and Fox “News” would be braying for criminal prosecution.

Tragically, the conventional wisdom across the chattering class and within leadership of the institutional Democratic Party seems to be, “Don’t make big promises or real threats, don’t be Bernie or AOC.”

The problem with this strategy is that most Americans now want a modern-day Bernie or AOC, and multiple elections (and Platner’s polling) prove it, but the DNC and “mainstream” Democrats aren’t listening and don’t want to go after rich people.

It wasn’t always this way: there was a time when Democrats boldly promoted programs that literally built the world’s first over-50%-of-the-population middle class, and weren’t afraid to take names and kick ass.

Franklin D. Roosevelt transformed America with his New Deal programs, including legalizing unions, Social Security, the minimum wage, the 40-hour work week, ending child labor, Federal emergency relief (FERA), the FDIC, SEC, FCC, TVA, NLRB, FHA and Fannie Mae, and the National Archives (among others).

He also took on the Epstein Class of his day, establishing a top 90% income tax rate and proclaiming that they and their captive Republicans had declared class war against average working class Americans:

“For out of this modern civilization,” Roosevelt told America, “economic royalists carved new dynasties. New kingdoms were built upon concentration of control over material things. ... It was natural and perhaps human that the privileged princes of these new economic dynasties, thirsting for power, reached out for control over Government itself.”

He used the language of class warfare; as with all wars, the first step is to identify the enemy. For FDR it was the fatcats of his era who weren’t content to just run their businesses and make money but also lusted for the political power they’d been given

during the 1920s by Republican presidents Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover.

“These economic royalists complain that we seek to overthrow the institutions of America,” Roosevelt proclaimed. “What they really complain of is that we seek to take away their power.”

He paused for a moment, then thundered, “Our allegiance to American institutions requires the overthrow of this kind of power!”

The crowd roared when he said that. They knew that Republican politicians had worked hand-in-glove with wealthy industrialists to suppress unions, evade taxes, and accumulate fortunes beyond anything ever seen in America. That the GOP had been running an often-violent class war against them for years.

And they were over it. Over the greed, over the theft, and over the self-righteous proclamations that the Constitution protected their avarice. Average working people knew these “economic royalists” weren’t patriots; they were looters, vandals, and political arsonists. FDR gave voice to their anger, disillusionment, and disgust:

“In vain,” Roosevelt said, “they seek to hide behind the Flag and the Constitution. In their blindness they forget what the Flag and the Constitution stand for. Now, as always, they stand for democracy, not tyranny; for freedom, not subjection; and against a dictatorship by mob rule and the over-privileged alike.”

Republicans had declared class warfare; FDR, like he would later do with the Japanese and Germans, led the charge to fight back and defeat them.

President Lyndon Johnson similarly added to the middle class, while keeping the top income tax rate at a fierce 74% on individuals and 50% on corporations. His Great Society programs included Medicare, Medicaid, Meals on Wheels, Title I aid to low-income-district schools, Pell Grants, Head Start, Job Corps, Community Action Agencies/Community Services Block Grants, VISTA, the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, ending racial quotas on immigration, Food Stamps, HUD, NEA, NEH, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (NPR/PBS).

And he and President Kennedy weren’t afraid to go after malefactors in the government itself. As Lamar Waldron and I document in our book *Legacy of Secrecy: The Long Shadow of the JFK Assassination*, Kennedy was the first president in a half-century to take on the Mafia, including its control over FBI Director Hoover; it ultimately cost him his life. LBJ similarly frequently went after big business and corrupt deals between what he called corporate or wealthy “special interests” and Republican politicians.

Had LBJ not blundered (and lied) on the Vietnam War, he may well be remembered as one of our greatest presidents; when it comes to the middle class, he and FDR were singular in their advocacy of programs that lifted working class people from poverty into relative comfort.

And Americans loved those programs, both FDR's and LBJ's; to this day, they're among the most popular in the country's history.

Progressive politics and policies are once again popular in America, as the foggy bubble of Reagan's trickle-down economics has burst, leaving us with a \$38 trillion hangover and a middle class that's been wiped out, shrinking from 65% of us when Reagan was elected to 43% of us today (and now requiring two incomes instead of just one).

Polling of Democratic voters who simply failed to show up for Kamala Harris in 2024, handing the election to Trump, found that they failed to vote because they believed Democrats were ignoring "poverty and inequality" and they wanted an explicit "economic message of taxing the wealthy to invest in infrastructure and jobs" that the Harris campaign failed to deliver.

These no-show voters, the pollsters heard, wanted to "hear a story about systemic change; instead, they heard a series of misaligned policy points that failed to connect. Put bluntly, voters felt that Democrats weren't fighting for people like them or taking on big corporations who profit from price gouging and rich people who don't pay what they owe in taxes."

They also discovered that:

"The politicians these voters like most are Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez ... as leaders who aren't afraid to challenge the system."

Polling consistently shows a huge majority of Americans favor a national healthcare system, free college, widespread unionization, doubling the federal minimum wage, and want politicians who advocate "cracking down on tax cheats," "putting a stop to price gouging" and "getting people the health care they need."

Graham Platner's "shocking" call to actually investigate and prosecute the many corrupt people and open criminals in the Trump administration — including Trump himself and his rapacious kids — is widely popular across a purple state; combine it with bold progressive policies and it's a winning nationwide formula for 2026 and 2028.

Democrats need to fire their neoliberal advisors left over from the Clinton and Obama years, take a law-and-order posture against the corruption of Trump and his GOP

lickspittles, and put forward FDR- and LBJ-like transformational programs to restore America's middle class and our status as an example for the world.

Anything less merely guarantees — like the lukewarm messages of 2024 did — more Republican victories, more tax breaks for billionaires, and more people living in tents while what's left of our liberties vanish behind the barbed wire of Trump's and Miller's "detention facilities."

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**They Know and They Do Nothing**  
**They are not confused about the danger and the damage.**  
**They are refusing to act like it is real, and that moral failure**  
**is becoming the story of Democratic leadership.**

**Lady Libertie**  
**April 23, 2026**

Remember the series ending of Seinfeld? In the very last episode, the gang was standing on the sidewalk passively watching a guy get carjacked while they crack jokes, do their Seinfeld shtick and offer absolutely no help to the victim.<sup>1</sup>

It was absurdly pointed, in a sitcom that turned nothingness into both a trope and an aspiration. At the end, creator Larry David returned to write the episode that turned on them—and us. The characters we had spent years laughing with were exposed and punished for exactly what we had learned to excuse: amoral, nonchalant worldviews that made the shoulder shrug and the walk-away a national character trait.

Buried in that joke is something that feels a little too relevant now.

Because today's Democratic Party leadership looks like Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer: apathetic, performative and standing on the sidewalk while the country gets carjacked. The amoral, laissez-faire, and blatantly selfish behavior that we have been taught to accept and normalize in our national leadership reveals them for what they have always been: selfish influence panderers.

The elected power who are supposed to be the political opposition to our fascist regime, the few people with any ability to slow or expose the corruption, watch it happen, narrate it, react to it, pretend to be appalled by it and yet continue to enable it with a sitcom-worthy shrug of indifference.

Misprision of treason

That's why misprision of treason<sup>2</sup> feels like the right moral frame here. Not as a legal charge, exactly. But as a moral indictment.

It is one of those old phrases that sounds dusty until you learn what it means. Misprision of treason is a legal term for someone who knows treason is being committed and conceals it. The traitor commits the betrayal. The person guilty of misprision is the one who knows treason is happening and fails to act. Chooses to conceal, stay silent or delay responses instead of sounding the alarm.

Indifference in those elected to protect us. Traitors by omission.<sup>3</sup>

And that is the Democratic Party leadership in one sentence: they have spent more than a year watching an open assault on the nation—on democracy itself—and they continue to respond like vaguely concerned bystanders in expensive suits.

On April 7, Trump went online and threatened to erase an ancient civilization. And what did our Democratic leadership do? What they always do. Statements. Concern. Hearings. Pained expressions. Another round of grave-sounding commentary. Then on April 15, when the Senate had a chance to block more U.S. weapons for Israel, Schumer along with Gillibrand, Coons, Blumenthal, Cortez Masto, Rosen, and Fetterman voted to continue supplying the war.

This is misprision of treason.

What do we call a political class that sees conduct, knows it is catastrophic, lawless, disloyal to the constitutional order and dangerous to the republic, yet still refuses to meet the moment with the language, the urgency and action the moment requires?

Leaders who who warn in private, who fundraise off the danger, who talk about norms while the floorboards burn and still will not act like the house is on fire? We call them traitors by omission.

They are not opposition. They are the Vichy party. Collaborators. The captured opposition. They are bystanders looking for how to use the chaos and destruction for their own benefit. People who, through cowardice, careerism, institutional superstition or plain moral failure, help conceal the scale of the threat by refusing to name it, confront it or try to stop it with the full force of their office.

It's their own form of grift.

Laundering emergency, translating danger into talking points

If you know the republic is being gutted and still behave as though this is a normal contest between two healthy parties, you are not neutral. You are helping hide the truth. You are laundering emergency into process. You are translating danger into talking points. And using it all as your next election platform.

They know Trump talks like a despot, governs like a gangster and treats war powers, corruption and constitutional limits like props in a one-man show. They know this regime has crossed lines that would have been unthinkable just two years ago. They know that a president casually threatening to wipe out a civilization is not “controversial rhetoric.”

It is disqualifying depravity.

At some point, refusal to confront betrayal becomes its own form of complicity. We need wartime leaders now. Leaders who understand that this is not a normal political season and cannot be met with normal political habits. Not politicians gaming out the safest posture for the next election, but people with the clarity to name the danger, the discipline to meet it, and the courage to act like the moment is real.

That is what real leadership would look like. Leaders who cared about us, our country, our democracy.

The scandal is not only that Trump says these things. Not only that he means them. Not only that he wages illegal wars with seeming impunity. It is that the Democratic Party leaders hear him, understand perfectly well what he is revealing, and still refuse to oppose him. In fact, they are providing aid to continue the war.

They are morally guilty of something uglier than cowardice.

They are standing on the sidewalk while the country gets carjacked, looking concerned and doing nothing—or voting to keep the bombs falling.

If you remember the Seinfeld episode, then you remember Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer were arrested in accordance with a Good Samaritan law and a jury found them guilty of criminal indifference. It was the bitter end of the series, watched by 76 million viewers.

Democratic leadership might want to think about what kind of ending they are writing for themselves now. 335 million Americans are watching.

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