



China's 'Great Leap Forward' a lesson for Green New Deal advocates

BY FRANK R. GUNTER, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 02/14/19 08:00 AM EST
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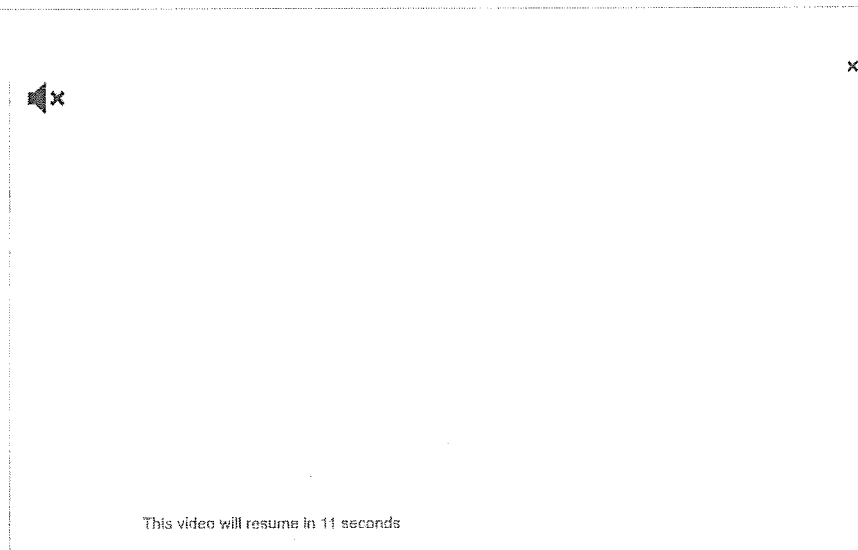
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The Green New Deal is bold but not unprecedented. There are several versions of the proposal, the best known, perhaps, put forth by [Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) (D-N.Y.), and the most detailed, by the [Green Party USA](#). However, they all state that this is a modern version of President Roosevelt's [New Deal](#) of 1933-1936. But for all of the controversy that Roosevelt's New Deal raised, it was limited — it was an attempt to save capitalism, not end it. A better, more recent example along the lines of a plan to rapidly remake an entire nation's economy would be China's [Great Leap Forward](#) (GLF) of 1958-1962.

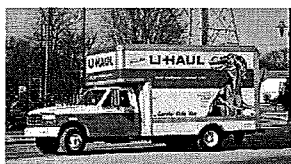
Like the GLF, the Green New Deal is aimed not at marginal improvements but at a complete restructuring of an economy. The GLF sought to turn an agricultural country into an industrial powerhouse in half a decade. The Green New Deal seeks to completely restructure U.S. labor markets and environmental, financial and democratic processes. Some of its elements are popular, such as guaranteeing employment, shifting to renewable energy, canceling homeowner and student debts, and ensuring a constitutional right to vote. However, some of its elements are unusual or bizarre, such as amending the Constitution to eliminate "corporate personhood" or replacing long-distance air travel with high-speed trains.

Another similarity between the GLF and the Green New Deal: both have lists of "enemies" that must be pushed aside if progress is to be made. In China, landlords and business owners were enemies because they were

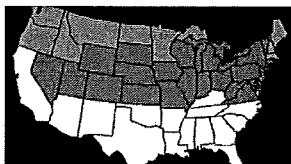
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believed to exploit poor farmers and workers. To end this perceived exploitation, private farms and businesses were taken over by government collectives or merged into state-owned enterprises. In the Green New Deal, the villains include large business owners, bank managers and the rich. It would establish government bureaucracies to provide public-sector jobs for anyone unemployed, to determine who is eligible for loans and to constrain corporate activities. Wealthy persons are to be cut down to size with high tax rates and currently unconstitutional wealth taxes.

Both the GLF and the Green New Deal are based on detailed plans endorsed by some intellectuals who have little practical experience. Extensive changes in the economy are promoted by persons who have never run even a small business. The environmental proposals are advocated by persons who appear to have avoided science courses in college. The complete restructuring of America's financial system is promoted by people who never worked as even a junior loan officer in a bank.

As a result, when one questions the practicality of any Green New Deal proposal, there are usually one of two responses. The first, common response is to argue from authority. In China, GLF advocates would reference former Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong. When one questions features of the Green New Deal, the answer often is a similar variation: "I don't know how to answer your question, but Nobel prize winner Paul Krugman supports the Green New Deal."

The second common response is worse. To question the practicality of any Green New Deal proposal is considered evidence of evil intent. Oppose the ideas and you are not simply ignorant, you are a bad person. Ask whether some economic or environmental proposal is practical, and a not uncommon response is that you want people to be poor, or favor a worsening of global warming.

If the Green New Deal were to take effect, it would take a decade or more to determine if there is a final terrible similarity between it and the Great Leap Forward. The GLF led to economic decline, severe environmental degradation, political chaos, and one of the worst human rights disasters in history. Tens of millions of Chinese, whose livelihoods and traditional rights got in the way of the plan to build a new China, were swept aside. Along with their property, their liberties — and often their lives — were eliminated.

Of course, the United States in 2019 is not the same as China six decades ago. But it seems arrogant to assume that the same types of policies that devastated China somehow would lead to dramatic economic, environmental, political and social progress in the United States. Before attempting to turn our country upside down, advocates of the Green New Deal should try to learn from the troubled history of China's Great Leap Forward.

Frank R. Gunter is a professor of economics at Lehigh University and senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. His teaching includes the economic development of China. A retired Marine Corps Reserve colonel, he was mobilized after 9/11 and served 13 months in Iraq. He is the author of "[The Political Economy of Iraq: Restoring Balance in a Post-Conflict Society](#)" (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013).