

Ocasio-Cortez says we need World War II-scale action on climate. Here's what that looks like.

Winning WWII wasn't socialism. Neither is the Green New Deal.

[Joe Romm](#) Feb 12, 2019, 8:00 am



Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and, on the right, Sen. Ed Markey (D-MA) announce Green New Deal legislation to promote clean energy outside the US Capitol, February 7, 2019. CREDIT: SAUL LOEB/AFP/Getty Images

The Green New Deal resolution introduced last week by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Sen. Ed Markey (D-MA) states that fighting climate change requires “a new national, social, industrial, and economic mobilization on a scale not seen since World War II.”

The world’s leading climate scientists agree. In 2015, for instance, they called for a sweeping mobilization — “a radical transition (deep decarbonization now and going forward),” as

they described it — to avoid catastrophic impacts of climate change. And last October, the world’s nations unanimously agreed with our top scientists that preserving a livable climate requires “system changes” across the economy that “are unprecedented in terms of scale.”

Judging by their initial reactions to the Green New Deal resolution, President Donald Trump, Republican leaders, and other longtime opponents of climate action seem to have decided

that the best way to block such an economy-wide mobilization is to try to paint it as “socialism.” On Friday, Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) went so far as to claim the Green New Deal begins with “socialism” but “ends with the Gestapo.” Major media outlets, [like Axios](#), have already begun parroting the GOP line of attack.

But the Green New Deal’s mobilization isn’t socialism any more than America’s remarkable undertaking to win WWII.

Yes, the WWII effort was massive and sustained and impacted every facet of American life — from energy, transportation, and manufacturing to infrastructure and agriculture. But that did not require “socialism.” In fact, under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, “labor, business, government, education, and the military” all worked together “by democratic collaboration” to mobilize America for the war effort, as Lt. Col. Thomas Morgan explained in a [1994 article](#) in the journal *Army History*.

Climate change action requires a similarly massive and sustained marshaling of resources across every sector of the economy, regardless of the fact that the president doesn’t understand either the science or the urgency. And just like the WWII effort, it will not require socialism.

Scientists have been clear about the scale of effort needed for some time. In 2013, the world’s leading nations set up a “structured expert dialogue” to review the adequacy of the 2°C (3.6°F) target to avoid catastrophic climate change. In 2015, 70 [leading climate experts reported](#) that every bit of warming above current levels “will only increase the risk of severe, pervasive, and irreversible impacts.”

So limiting warming to 2°C wasn’t really a target, goal, or “guardrail” but “a defence line... that needs to be stringently defended” — and much less total warming (1.5°C) would be vastly preferable.

What’s more, the experts made clear, defending that line would require a revolutionary effort.

“Limiting global warming to below 2°C necessitates a radical transition (deep decarbonization now and going forward), not merely a fine tuning of current trends,” they wrote at the time.

Last October, the world’s nations unanimously approved a landmark report from scientists making the same exact point. The scientists warned that world leaders must make sharp reductions in global carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 — and then take total emissions down to zero by 2050 to 2070 to have any plausible chance of averting catastrophe.

They explained that “energy, land, urban and infrastructure (including transport and buildings), and industrial systems” would require “system changes” that “are unprecedented in terms of scale, but not necessarily in terms of speed, and imply deep emissions reductions in all sectors, a wide portfolio of mitigation options and a significant upscaling of investments in those options.”

If that sounds like the Green New Deal, that’s because the resolution is rooted in science.

“Climate change is a threat that is both global and existential,” leading climatologist Michael Mann told ThinkProgress in an email. Mann applauded Ocasio-Cortez’s “bold leadership” and reiterated that “averting disaster will require a degree of mobilization of effort and resources unlike anything we’ve witnessed since World War II.”

Since few people today were around to witness America’s WWII efforts, it’s worth briefly reviewing just how substantial the wartime mobilization was — and how the effort amounted to anything but socialism.

“In nine months, the entire capacity of the prolific automobile industry had been converted to the production of tanks, guns, planes, and bombs,” historian Doris Kearns Goodwin explained in her 1994 book on the World War II homefront, *No Ordinary Time*. “The industry that once built four million cars a year was now

building three fourths of the nation's aircraft engines, one half of all tanks, and one third of all machine guns."

The scale of the war effort was astonishing. Physicist Edward Teller tells the story of how Niels Bohr had insisted in 1939 that making a nuclear bomb would take an enormous national effort, one without any precedent. When Bohr came to see the huge Los Alamos facility years later, he said to Teller, "You see, I told you it couldn't be done without turning the whole country into a factory. You have done just that." And we did it in under five years.

At the center of the mobilization, Goodwin explains, was the War Production Board, which FDR created in 1942 to literally oversee the conversion of our civilian economy to the war effort. As [Wikipedia notes](#), the War Production Board "allocated scarce materials, established priorities in the distribution of materials and services, and prohibited nonessential production. It rationed such commodities as gasoline, heating oil, metals, rubber, paper and plastics."

In 1939, war production was under 2 percent of the total GDP, but it hit a remarkable 44 percent in 1944. Over a five-year period, America produced 434,000,000 tons of steel, 310,000 airplanes, 124,000 ships, 100,000 tanks and armored vehicles, 2.4 million other vehicles, and 41 billion ammunition rounds.

Ultimately, America ended up producing two-fifths of the world's total munitions during the years 1942 to 1945, arming not just our military, but also helping Britain and the other allies as well.

Was this unprecedented mobilization socialism? Hardly.

The board included leaders from labor, business, government agencies, and the military. "The WPB worked by democratic collaboration, using negotiation, compromise, delegation, and individual initiative to achieve a common objective," according to Morgan.

"This meant production by all elements of the economy in industrial mobilization, while preserving individual initiative and a sense of justice within the limits imposed by the war emergency."

Today we have another unprecedented emergency. And we need another unprecedented mobilization.

The resolution introduced by Ocasio-Cortez and Markey outlines such an effort to combat climate change, including the goal of "meeting 100 percent of the power demand in the United States through clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources... by dramatically expanding and upgrading renewable power sources." It requires building energy-efficient, distributed, "smart" power grids. It includes "upgrading all existing buildings... to achieve maximum energy efficiency" and "spurring massive growth in clean manufacturing."

Finally, to the extent both goals are technologically feasible, the resolution calls for "working collaboratively with farmers and ranchers... to remove pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from the agricultural sector" and "overhauling transportation systems... to remove pollution and greenhouse gas emissions."

These may seem like lofty goals but as was the case with America's WWII mobilization, this is not socialism. It's survival.

This post has been updated.