

OPINION

Defending AOC is defending NYC

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Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Tom Williams/AP)

This week, an odd juxtaposition of stories jumped out at us. Somehow Rep. Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez found herself squarely in news stories about the failed Texas power grid, which killed electricity and plunged most of the state into darkness amid freezing temperatures. Most New Yorkers probably shrugged it off, but we really need to question how a local politician got into a Texas story.

New York City has always occupied an outsized space in the American consciousness. While we New Yorkers view the city as the center of the universe, for much of the rest of the country, New York has long represented all that is wrong with the world. We are a cosmopolitan center of finance and culture. We are a global city. We are particularly diverse, and our values often represent where the country is going rather than where it was. To those holding on to the past or clinging to the present, we are the scary image that stares back at them in our national mirror.

In the 19th century, New York was derided as a place of loose morals, immigrant hordes, and pure unbounded evil. This came to a crest in 1920, when the census finally declared more than 50% of Americans lived in cities. The U.S. arrived as an urban nation. Nativism, fights over evolution being taught in schools, and prohibition to name a few major political issues were all fought out within this larger backdrop.

Even in this horror of a pandemic, the nation's hostility towards Gotham was squarely on display. Writing last March, when we were the virus epicenter, journalist Susan Milligan pointed out a sad trend as conservatives across the country "blamed" New York City for the then-current outbreak. She reminded readers that blaming New York is a very old and tired trope.

So, this week, when I watched and read about Texas' struggles with power outages caused by a weather crisis, I was not entirely surprised to see an attack on New York woven into the narrative. Now many of us laugh it off as Trevor Noah did when he highlighted clips from Fox News with various politicians blaming alternative energy, the Green New Deal, singling out AOC by name as the root of the problems in Texas. Noah went for the apparent absurdity of this, but there was a seriousness beneath his humor. The current governor of Texas initially blamed wind turbines for the outages; former Gov. Rick Perry blamed AOC and the Green New Deal.

The facts are clear. Wind power accounts for under 10% of the state's energy, and the turbines didn't freeze. And blaming the Green New Deal is equally absurd, as it is only a proposal and not law. The

cause of power problems in Texas seems to be firmly rooted in years of deregulation of the state's power grid. And while AOC pushed back against the narrative, we need to all recognize why she has become such a lightning rod for the right, even on issues to which she is only tangentially related.

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As New Yorkers, we need to put this trend's current manifestation into perspective to fully understand what really is happening. It shouldn't surprise any of us that the insurrectionists early this month were searching for AOC to do her harm. She knew it and later recounted that fear and trauma. And while we focused on her revelation of her past sexual trauma or Tucker Carlson's inhumane taunts, we forget that it was a riotous group hunting for her that triggered it. She has become, in the minds of the right, the singular embodiment or shorthand for our NYC.

Naming and blaming her for things unifies the right. She occupies an all-too-familiar space once held a hundred years ago by Meyer London, a Jewish immigrant labor lawyer in the early 20th century; Al Smith, governor and Catholic, Irish-American urbanite in the 1920s; and congressperson Vito Marcantonio, the radical representative from the city in the 1930s (the list is long). All of them were local political figures, outsiders really who for the rest of the country became representatives or a stand-in for the newly transforming America that was both representative and embracing of the marginalized. And as such, they were vilified on the national stage.

The sadness is they took the heat, the flaming arrows, alone when the arrows were aimed at NYC. Our city turned its back on them and watched as they sustained damage and in the process, our city lost.

Now this pattern is repeating itself with AOC as the target. Regardless of how one views her policy stances, let's not let her take this heat alone. Let's not repeat the past. We need to act like New Yorkers and stand up seeing these attacks as more than just attacks on her. These attacks are attacks on all of us. So when these attacks happen again, and they most certainly will, we need to act like New Yorkers and have her back.

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