

# THE AMERICAN MIND

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## POST-TRUMP POLITICS

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In a cover essay for the Winter 2018/2019 issue of the *Claremont Review of Books*, Christopher DeMuth [argues](#) that today’s political upheaval is “the result of powerful social and technological developments that have weakened our institutions of representative government. Harnessing today’s nationalist impulses is a task for conservatives and libertarians,” he writes, “who stand in the shoes of the liberal reformers of the middle and late 19th century.”

Among DeMuth’s recommended reforms: a reclamation of Congressional authority from the regulatory state, a civic education leavened by a dedication to free inquiry, and an orderly transition from financing the welfare state through debt to financing it through tax revenue. Each effort, DeMuth writes, “emphasizes pluralism and competition over monopoly and regimentation, and leaves cultural and ideological battles to be fought out, privately and locally, within a framework that discourages coerced conformity.”

Following are commentaries on DeMuth’s essay by Henry Olsen, F.H. Buckley, Yuval Levin, Richard Reinsch, Philip Wallach, and Frederick M. Hess. Also included here is a letter to the editor of the *Claremont Review* by Linda Chavez, and DeMuth’s response to that letter and to Henry Olsen’s commentary, from the publication’s Spring 2019 issue.

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### REVOLT OF THE SOMEWHERESES

Henry Olsen

Christopher DeMuth’s magnificent essay [captures](#) much of what underlies the West’s political turmoil. His endorsement of David Goodhart’s Anywhere versus Somewhere dichotomy strikes me as especially correct, as is DeMuth’s description of each group’s characteristics and attitudes. I also have little to quarrel with regarding his specific policy proposals for American government.

DeMuth, however, underplays the moral dimension of the struggle between Somewheres and Anywheres. He hints at it when he notes that Anywheres largely work in what they perceive to be meritocracies. For the Anywheres, DeMuth writes, “[m]eritocracy, not democracy, provides the justification for their power and the means of exercising power.”

Meritocracy, then, is simply a new version of an old word: aristocracy. Aristocracy has come to mean rule by hereditary lords, but its Greek roots betray the underlying moral presupposition. “Aristo” comes from *aristos*, or the best, and “cracy” comes from *kratia*, which means power, as in rule. Aristocracy, in other words, means “the rule by the best”— and if one is better than

others there is no reason to ask for the consent of one's inferiors. Indeed, there is every reason not to.

This is the underlying cause of our political discontent. One set of citizens has come to believe themselves to be superior to another, and hence seeks to rule without their consent or in their interest. Not surprisingly, this is creating a modern Peasant's Revolt.

Belief in one's own moral superiority as a result of learning, experience, comfort, and distance from hard physical labor have always been the hallmarks of the aristocrat's claim to rule. Today's Anywheres, graduates of elite institutions or survivors in the rigorous competition of the academy, the marketplace, or the military, equate their backgrounds with innate differences. They think they are simply *better* than the rest of us, and as such our job is to follow along and keep quiet.

It is this sense of moral superiority that leads them to prefer closed systems of governance such as the rule of judges and bureaucrats. They alone can populate those precincts of power, and they alone can navigate them. The replacement of the debates of the arena with the intrigues of the lobbies is another hallmark of aristocracy. Exposing the internal deal making and quests for power that inevitably arise from the differences between aristocrats to public scrutiny is unacceptable. To flip the *Washington Post's* much-derided motto on its head, aristocracy thrives in darkness.

This aristocratic morality has peculiar expressions on the Right and the Left. Among the Right it leads to a doctrinaire libertarianism that denies the legitimacy of collective action through direct or representative government. Any such action is merely the attempt of an embittered group of inferiors to unjustly steal power from the true *aristoi*, the owners and deployers of capital and their *aides de camp*. This view leads to *de facto* globalization and the *de facto* elimination of democracy.

It's not coincidental that the further one gets into libertarian thought, the closer you get to the idea of a libertarian judicial rule, a Council of the Hayekian Guardians, that enforces private contracts and does nothing more.

The left's less individualistic take on aristocracy is found in the socialist ethos. The intellectual replaces the capitalist as the best of the best, and her supposedly disinterested and beneficent will should be unconstrained by regressive things like laws and legislative bodies. The unfolding crisis in Venezuela is an example *par excellence* of this principle in operation—and the dire straits to which it inevitably leads.

The revolt of the Somewheres is really a revolt against aristocratic morality. "We are people, too," they cry, and accordingly they believe their consent is needed for society to govern itself and for political leaders to govern them.

It has always been the case that the many find succor in the one to combat the few, and so it is that outsized personalities like Trump and Italy's Matteo Salvini find themselves at the head of these movements. History also teaches us that these developments can lead to tyranny. The desire of the many for equality often causes them to centralize power in a dictator whose rule becomes as or more despotic than the aristocracy he replaces. But so far that has not happened; such majoritarian populist tyranny remains only a canard—a fantasy flung by the aristocratic Anywheres against their adversaries.

This moral dimension is critical to understanding our times, and to shaping them. If the nationalist conservatives and libertarians grasp this, they can rally the popular majority needed to establish the restoration of representative, democratic rule DeMuth envisions. Building and nurturing such a majority will inevitably require compromise: more taxes, welfare, and trade protection than DeMuth might want, for example. But with such a majority, conservatives, and even libertarians, can truly renew and reapply the American creed.

Without such a renewal of the American ideal of justice—of human equality and dignity—we shall simply slink into some form of despotism. It could be aristocratic and relatively benign, as the Dukes of Davos would have us believe. Or it could be more brutal and repressive, as fascistic or socialistic populism always and everywhere is. But republicanism can only thrive in the soil of moral equality, and if the soil is barren the plant will wither and die. It will be replaced by something much uglier—but better suited to the hard soil of human tyranny and servitude.

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## SEPARATED POWERS, FRACTURED NATIONALISM

F. H. Buckley

Chris DeMuth's excellent [essay](#) is a high point in the nationalist moment we're enjoying. But that makes it necessary to understand just what nationalism might mean.

Nationalism comes in two flavors. In what might be called vertical nationalism, people desire their nation's glory and preeminence over that of other countries. Vertical nationalism can be benign when it champions the superiority of French culture or German philosophy, for example. But it can be dangerous when it seeks glory and preeminence *uber alles* and hugs itself in self-delight because its weapons can reduce every other country to rubble.

Horizontal nationalism is quite different. Free from the jingoism that disfigures vertical nationalism, it rests on a sense of kinship to and solidarity with one's fellow citizens. The horizontal nationalist seeks to create an economy with jobs for those who can work and a generous social welfare net for those who can't.

Throughout American history, Republicans have been the party of vertical nationalism and Democrats the party of horizontal nationalism. Republicans wanted America to possess the biggest military in the world—and they got it. But they found horizontal nationalism in conflict with their creed of individualism. They left horizontal nationalism to the Democrats and leaders like FDR who effectively communicated a sense they cared about all Americans—a feeling one didn't quite get from Mitt Romney.

The 2016 election was remarkable because, almost for the first time, a Republican presidential candidate ran on a platform that united nationalism's two strands. Trump wasn't going to gut entitlements, despite how much his party's establishment might have wished him to do so. And he promised that we'd not just repeal Obamacare—we'd repeal it and replace it with something beautiful.

Trump found the sweet spot in American politics: the place where presidential elections are won. He campaigned on social conservatism and economic liberalism with a slogan that implied both vertical *and* horizontal nationalism.

Why have America's neo-nationalists failed to understand this? In some cases, it's because they are simply right-wingers—like Romney, and unlike Trump.

Things would have turned out differently if we'd had a Madisonian constitution. What James Madison wanted, in his Virginia Plan, was a lower house elected directly by the people, with the number of representatives in each state based on population. The upper house and the executive would have been selected by the lower house. A federal right to disallow state laws was thrown in for good measure. When Madison failed to get this, he was so disappointed that he proposed a walk-out from the Convention on July 17, 1787.

The American Constitution *isn't* Madisonian. Call it Shermanesque, after Roger Sherman, if you want. Or Morrisian, after Gouverneur Morris, the sharpest of the delegates in Philadelphia that summer. If you're looking for a Madisonian Constitution, look north instead.

Under the Canadian constitution, M.P.s are elected by voters in their districts, with representation based on population. The M.P.s in the winning party choose the Prime Minister, who then appoints members of a toothless upper house. The Canadian federal Prime Minister also enjoys Madison's "national veto"—the power to disallow provincial legislation.

This is why Canadian conservatives are more likely to be horizontal conservatives. Tory party leaders in Canada and Britain understand nationalism's gravitational pull towards left of center economic policies and embraced horizontal nationalism from the start. That was how Benjamin Disraeli broke with Sir Robert Peel over the Corn Laws, and how Sir John A. MacDonald's National Policy dished the Manchester Liberals in the opposition. As Tories, Anglo-Canadian

conservatives are vertical nationalists; as Red Tories, they are horizontal nationalists. If you want to understand 2016, learn from them.

Crucially, a Canadian Prime Minister can enforce his policies by sending in the Whips and threatening to expel dissenting M.P.s. That's a luxury American presidents lack. Much as Trump might have wished it otherwise, he was stuck with Paul Ryan, John McCain, and the separation of powers.

In a parliamentary system, all politics is national; while in America, all politics is local.

And so there are two Republican Parties: A presidential one that is nationalistic in the horizontal sense, and a congressional one that isn't. Given the structure of the American Constitution, I don't see that changing.

In particular, calls for Congress to assume its "proper constitutional role" seem unlikely to go anywhere. You don't tell businessmen how to make money, and you don't tell politicians how to win votes.

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## **A POLITICS OF NATIONAL PURPOSE**

**Yuval Levin**

On the face of it, Christopher DeMuth's extraordinary essay [offers](#) a characteristically brilliant synthesis. Pulling together the threads of our peculiar situation, he helps us draw some conceptual order out of political chaos. But in the depths of his argument, DeMuth does more than that: He offers what may be the virtue that is now in shortest supply of all in our politics. He offers genuine hope for a way forward.

The essay frankly recognizes a set of circumstances that, in its totality, has proven awfully difficult for most of us conservatives to acknowledge together. But then it proceeds to reason from these toward an agenda that is both plausible and promising, and without getting caught up in a dispute over Donald Trump. By so doing, DeMuth raises the possibility of a future in which conservatives could work together despite continuing deep differences over Trump, even though these differences matter and are not likely to be resolved. "Post-Trump," his essay suggests, need be neither "pro-Trump" nor "anti-Trump," provided that conservatives can agree that it also must not be a return to "pre-Trump."

This will not be easy to achieve, of course, precisely because intra-conservative disputes over Trump involve serious, substantive disagreements. Among other things, each side in that struggle views the other as evincing a dangerous weakness.

Trump's critics tend to look upon the case for him as rooted in a desperate panic about the left unbecoming a self-governing people and unfounded in the actual weakness of today's confused and fractious progressivism. This hysterical despair, Trump's critics say, has been used to justify the elevation and even celebration of a leader who by temperament, experience, and character is dangerously unfit and stands to disorder our national soul.

Trump's supporters, meanwhile, tend to look upon the case against him as rooted in a soft, prim complacency that is willfully blind to the dangers confronting our civilization. The critics, they say, are desperate to avoid offending elite sensibilities, eager to play only the part assigned to them by overbearing progressives, and content merely to occasionally slow our descent into decadence.

Each side takes its responsibility to the country seriously, and so finds it hard to abide what it takes (perhaps unfairly) to be the other's feeble dereliction. But DeMuth's powerful analysis helps us see that this dispute seems intractable because it is distorted by Trump's distinctly disordered personality. The real question of the moment in the politics of the West is whether the political arrangements of the Cold War era can be stretched into this century or whether a new series of pressures and priorities will give new shape to our political life.

At the heart of that question is the exhaustion of the late-20<sup>th</sup> century bipartisan elite consensus around a soft libertarianism—both cultural and economic—that has been revealed in our time to be deeply unsatisfactory to large swaths of the public. The left has so far proven unable to respond to this dissatisfaction adequately, in part because it is thoroughly wedded to the cultural facet of that libertarianism and has no way to process the public's unease with some elements of it as anything other than rank bigotry.

Some on the right, meanwhile, have insisted on holding fast to the economic elements of the libertarian elite consensus, while others have been eager for many years to articulate a 21<sup>st</sup>-century conservatism that speaks to working families and the middle class—indeed to all classes—in the language of solidarity and opportunity. But both groups of conservatives have been divided internally over Trump—with some people in each rejoicing at how he drives the left crazy and others alarmed by his narcissism, corruption, divisiveness, and recklessness.

The right's internal debates about the future have therefore been perverted by the Trump question—understandably, but dangerously. What is most important about DeMuth's essay is that he offers one plausible way to understand what sort of question we should ask ourselves instead: Should our politics be oriented by an implicit atomistic libertarianism or by a renewed focus on the nation as a crucial locus of political life?

What is national, as DeMuth suggests, should be understood not in opposition to local and communal prerogatives or individual rights, but as a natural culmination of the framework that protects them. The reinvigoration of national cohesion and solidarity is essential to the

reinvigoration of our aspirations in terms that are social, cultural, and constitutional—and therefore genuinely political.

For Americans in particular, the appeal of the national can be both philosophical and visceral—because we share a common home in which we have lived a common life together that began in a commitment to an ideal. If there is a difference between patriotism and nationalism, that difference is blurred and moderated in constructive ways by our [distinctly American national commitments](#). DeMuth helps us see what a politics rooted in these commitments might look like.

Whether Trump sees any of this or has only had it superimposed upon his rhetoric and action by friendly intellectuals is far from clear. And only time will tell if he advances or retards such a cause in practice. His critics (and I am one) are more concerned than ever that statesmanship requires leaders of a caliber the president does not approach.

DeMuth certainly implies that a functional politics will need to be very different from our current political landscape. “In the wake of the Trump rebellion, we should aim to supplant rebellion with relatively stable political competition and mutual accommodation and a spirit of common destiny,” he argues. “We need a more capacious nationalism.”

That suggests that what follows Trumpism should be very different from Trumpism. But it should be different, as well, from what preceded Trumpism. And it would be wise to emphasize the goals DeMuth sets out: the revitalization of the Congress, the refocusing of our politics on core unifying priorities, and (in the face of what has become a thoroughly bipartisan delinquency) the revival of fiscal responsibility.

Our future will be determined less by our approach to Trump than by our response to the challenge DeMuth has put so powerfully before us.

Are we up to it? Let’s hope so, and let’s do more than hope—together.

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## **PULL THE PLUG ON FUN TIME**

**Richard M. Reinsch II**

Christopher DeMuth’s “Trumpism, Nationalism, and Conservatism” is a significant essay [outlining](#) how American conservatism should responsibly incorporate the nationalist framework that has risen with Donald Trump’s politics and administration. DeMuth observes that “when President Trump has finished his work, the conservative movement and Republican Party will not be the same. The result will not be a mid-point between Trump and John Kasich.

Rather it will be a fresh formulation of what it means to be conservative or libertarian in the modern age.”

Importantly, the prior order of American conservatism—the one that Trump entombed—was heavily informed by libertarian theory and, in this, it failed to understand the political realm. Instead, the old conservative mode of discourse chose a kind of political quietism that robustly defended markets and growth as the real spirit, or even the purpose, of public life. No political leader exemplified this better than Mitt Romney, whose failed 2012 presidential campaign featured rote rhetoric about entrepreneurial capitalism, job creators, the failure of the Obama economy, and Romney’s prescriptions for economic vitality. Romney kept his words and his thoughts far from the crucial public concerns of his own electorate. Not so, Donald J. Trump. Though his rhetoric triggers a rash of other problems, it betokens a host of opportunities as well.

DeMuth captures our politics quite accurately with the typologies of “Somewheres” and “Anywheres” he borrows from British political thinker David Goodhart. The Anywheres are the relatively small class of elite individuals in corporate, finance, media, and academic pursuits, for whom borders are quaint if not irrelevant to their pursuit of the good life. We might describe this cohort as those who see themselves in the oxymoronic appellation “citizens of the world.” They fail to acknowledge their cultural debts and seem incapable of expressing gratitude for what they have been given by their country and its traditions.

I wonder, though, if this class is better understood as an attitude or an aspiration that its members live—an identity, not a lifestyle. Outside of the corporate finance guys, is there really a significant class of media, academic, and corporate professionals who are constantly on the move, this year in Washington, next year in London, and then back to Zurich? Maybe, but my sense is that the transnational progressivism captured by the term “Anywheres” is a territory of the imagination—a state of ahistorical mind that wishes to displace the temporal depth of tradition, nature, and constraint that national political borders concretely express. This is the mindset that affects elites in Brussels, London, and Washington D.C.

We also have the “Somewheres,” or the men and women who are from a particular place and work and live in that place. It’s *home*, and why would you ever leave it? Thus, we understand their frustration and their willingness to speak in an aggressive political fashion the last few years against the loss they sense the Anywheres are imposing with their dreams on the reality of the Somewheres’ homes.

Strengthening DeMuth’s analysis is Pierre Manent’s notion of the immoderate middle—the fanaticism of the center—in political establishments of western democracies. Manent notes that politics in virtually every modern western democracy was guided by the notion of two distinct but legitimate modes of politics: The Left and its social class and the Right and its national people. Both the Left and the Right, however, moved away from their constituencies in the post-



Cold War period, choosing instead abstractions or aspirations like globalization, the autonomous individual, liberal democracy promotion, and humanitarian progress.

In late twentieth century America, we witnessed the convergence of leaders of both parties on immigration, trade, many social issues, and foreign policy. These issues were considered settled. With the fracturing of that settlement emerges a new version of authorized politics, i.e., the establishment center, and a new version of unauthorized politics, i.e., populist conservatives. Thus, we have a “resistance” politics now defining the Democratic Party.

Might we also see the “[Corbynization](#)” of that party—defined by British journalist Kyle Orton as the toleration of anti-Semitism, a welcoming posture to avowed national enemies, support for domestic policies with no prospect of being funded or of being workable (i.e., the Green New Deal), and radical enthusiasms driving the party?

The resistance Democrats will likely give in to the reality that half of the country isn’t illegitimate or even deplorable. What would significantly aid this maturation process is the dethronement of what DeMuth calls “declarative government”, or rule by bureaucracies and Supreme Court opinions on contested social issues. Declarative government produces an incredibly contentious national political life. The key point DeMuth makes is that declarative government, unlike representative government, not only fails to take in the full range of interests that will be affected by an order—regulation, opinion, or informal guidance letter—but it is government heavily shaped by the Anywheres. The hope for the Somewheres is representative government or government that secures consent through debate and compromise of interests—and will thus represent the Somewheres exactly where they are.

DeMuth recommends the revival of Congress as the first plank in his conservative nationalism plan. How one does this is a question many are asking. There seem few good answers. I’m not generally persuaded by DeMuth’s proposals here, but they are worth discussion. My position is much gloomier than DeMuth’s, congressional government returns when its members understand that interest, honor, and shame compel a disciplined and powerful course of action. When that moment happens, then DeMuth’s counsels become more operational.

DeMuth also counsels that the other two federal branches and the two political parties could boost the spirit of representative government. The Supreme Court could induce Congress to resume its constitutional lawmaking powers by limiting the Court’s own *Chevron* deference doctrine. The effectual truth of the *Chevron* doctrine is that it permits Congress to send legislation with delegated grants of power to executive agencies intending the real law-making to be done by the agency’s experts, not the actual lawmaking body of government.

But I think a more likely development is the curtailment of the so-called *Auer* deference, whereby agencies are permitted to interpret ambiguities in their own rules, allowing them generally to profit at the appropriate political time from their own strategic ambiguity. *Kisor v.*

*Wilkie*, recently argued before the Court, featured exactly this argument by counsel for a Vietnam veteran who was denied full benefits for his PTSD diagnosis by Veterans Affairs because of how that Department interpreted its own regulatory term “relevant.” As counsel for the veteran noted, “relevant” can mean exactly what the VA wants it to mean, thus its use in the regulation.

Could the Court incentivize Congress to be more active in law-making if in a post-deference world agency hands would be more subservient to Congress? If so, such change would happen only at the margins of congressional power. Absent a republican *ethos* re-informing the Congress, if the Court retrenches the deference doctrines the congressional-agency nexus will only re-emerge again over time as Congress finds new ways to delegate its power to agencies—and the federal courts, with their own limitations, slowly acquiesce to the inevitable.

Could the president aid Congress’s revival? DeMuth describes a scenario of a president exercising power jointly with the Congress to give him stronger national appeal. That transactional relationship would be secured by a nationalist Republican president who recognizes that his own executive bureaucracy is his biggest enemy. He gains leverage over it by working with Congress to craft a popular agenda that must be faithfully implemented by the bureaucracy. Congress recognizes and welcomes the agenda because the president pre-commits to following certain norms that respect it as an institution. As DeMuth notes, such a course would require a statesmanlike president willing to stick to such an agenda in the smooth and the rough of political weather.

Yet the political imaginations of many members of Congress are limited, to put it politely. A better course for Congressional recovery of power will only emerge from a palpable sense of shame on the part of its members toward their own institutional impotence, and the knowledge that Congress’s approval rankings hover somewhere between the Kardashians and cancer. Enough of its members must realize that they are an embarrassment for Congress to achieve the beginning of wisdom.

Finally, political parties must grow in strength: “Party reform would aim to establish a hierarchical, willful Congress through the medium of hierarchical, willful parties,” as DeMuth puts it. That seems a tall order, but DeMuth’s emphasis on the need for strong parties is the right note. The key would be campaign finance reform that unwinds McCain-Feingold, generally letting the parties rake money in, coordinate with member campaigns, and get loyal members re-elected. Parties have been displaced in many respects by entities like so-called 527s that spring up with each finance reform package. If parties are to have power and discipline over their members, control over money is key.

DeMuth next argues that a conservative nationalism will make American identity and purpose a central part of its platform. Education, he says, must be ordered to equal opportunity and

income mobility. This can be accomplished by making K-12 education more competitive and locally controlled by means of federal incentives for charter schools, vouchers, and vocational options in high school. Second, higher education must be forced to firmly commit itself to the First Amendment, namely on speech—and I would add religious liberty—or else lose the federal financial aid and research dollars coveted (and needed) by the modern university.

This is a strong set of proposals, and under current political conditions they are much better than the current course. Still, my instinct here is to remove the federal government as much as possible from education at all levels. That may be what DeMuth is ultimately aiming at, but I can foresee a future course of federal intertwinement in charter schools and vouchers that will make us wish we had never considered this set of reforms. The last forty years are littered with failed federal education reform proposals at the K-12 level.

The better course is to end accreditation monopolies insofar as federal government is involved. Conservatives should push the federal government to remove itself as much as possible from higher education in all respects. The Left made a conscious effort in the 1970s to take over higher education and they've had a great time on campus ever since then, often at the expense of our nation and our culture. Much of what happens on campus is possible because of state and federal funding. It's time to pull the plug.

If we can't end federal student loans, they should be given at market rates of interest, with the recipient institution also on the hook for partial repayment under certain conditions—if an untoward number of your graduates regularly fail to enter full time employment and live independently of government assistance, for instance. Degrees that prepare no student for anything besides activism, i.e., gender and ethnic studies departments, would then become a net drain on a school's resources. A solid liberal arts department might become the most practical part of campus. If its graduates can write well, speak articulately, and comprehend large doses of complex information, they're employable.

DeMuth ends by highlighting the biggest lie in American politics. Federal entitlement spending is unsustainable, and we can't keep it going, but no politician wants to confront the lie that we can. (Well, Paul Ryan did, but....) I agree with DeMuth completely, but I also note that nationalist conservatism has made a commitment to entitlement spending part of its appeal. DeMuth's point is well taken: come the crisis that destroys the lie and our public finances, we will have to pay for the entitlement state in a much different fashion than the debt-finance method we have used for so long.

That collective responsibility in the midst of crisis may do more to revitalize our obligations to each other and to the country than anything else. Suffering tends to be clarifying.

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## MAKE CONGRESS (PROPERLY) POLITICAL AGAIN

Philip Wallach

Chris DeMuth's new essay powerfully and convincingly [argues](#) that well-functioning representative government is a necessary condition for national cohesion in our democratic age.

DeMuth is not starry-eyed about legislatures, or legislators. He knows that their deliberations generate “posturing, parochialism, and muddled compromises” rather than efficient or optimal policies. And yet, like [James Burnham](#) long before him, DeMuth is wise enough to see the virtues of the representative mode of public reasoning, which allows multiple factions to learn how they can live with each other through some complicated, continually evolving process of mutual accommodation.

I find his vision of Congress rediscovering some of its virtues in response to a fiscal crisis especially stirring:

*When Congress is obliged to fund a much larger share of entitlement and welfare spending with tax revenues, it will just have to pick up its fiscal reins and exercise a level of collective discipline that no current member has experienced. The political parties will have to wake up from populist hallucinations over taxation, redistribution, and economic growth. And American citizens will acquire a much keener sense of their obligations to one another.*

The practical sense of nationalism DeMuth expresses here is worth underlining. Any nation worth its salt must be able to face up to its collective obligations with a modicum of honesty—not without some dissimulation, presumably, but without indulging in fantasies of a collective political life without tradeoffs. With the once broadly accepted norm of peacetime debt retirement long gone, and with the economy ambling along well enough, our current political system lacks the gravity to pull the nation's centrifugal factions together on fiscal questions. But DeMuth is absolutely right that when the day of reckoning does come, it will not be sterling presidential leadership but a return to the rather homely virtues of Congress that will see us through it.

Having professed my admiration for DeMuth's conception of what Congress ought to be, I find myself in disagreement with his prescription for getting there. In short, I think he has prematurely lost his nerve about the potential of “ambition counteracting ambition” to rebalance our system toward Congress.

I certainly can't quarrel with the low marks he gives the 114<sup>th</sup> and 115<sup>th</sup> Congresses on this score. After Trump's election, Republican majorities sought to patch over, ignore, or obliterate the internal differences that would imperil their tenuous hold on power. That required downplaying Congress's specific institutional interests. During the last years of the Obama administration, Republican congressional majorities (more puzzlingly) did precious little to

take on their much-denounced adversary in the White House. Congress's one truly bold maneuver stands out as a kind of parable for the present state of constitutional affairs. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell successfully blocked President Obama's third appointment to the Supreme Court. But he did so in the most institutionally self-abnegating manner imaginable—not by mustering the votes to defeat his nominee, but by insisting that the matter was so important that it needed to be left to the American people's judgment in the next election.

DeMuth thinks that Congress might be reenergized by stronger parties—and indeed, it might be. But, as Yuval Levin [says](#), both our parties today are exhausted and disoriented, unsure of how their well-worn platforms match up with the current electorate's desires but nevertheless determined to sell the same ideas. Given that reality, equipping party leaders with more and bigger weapons to enforce discipline is likely to accomplish very little. What deals do we imagine a super-charged McConnell could cut with a super-charged Nancy Pelosi? Is the problem that they can see a way forward, but are blocked by unmanageable “ideological activists” on the wings of their respective parties? I know some people make this argument, but I just don't see the evidence for it. The most cherished of bipartisan initiatives to die an ignominious death in the last decade was the Simpson-Bowles Commission, and the Republicans who [withheld their votes](#) and thus killed it—Dave Camp, Jeb Hensarling, and Paul Ryan—were no Tea Partiers.

Given our current state of political confusion, what we need from Congress is not a leader who can run a tight ship, but an environment in which open-ended deliberation is allowed to play out. Members might even need—gasp—to take some votes without knowing how they will turn out in advance. That prospect is scary for reelection-minded legislators. But we should counter their prudential sense of cowardice by urging them to cultivate a properly nationalistic courage to strike out in new directions, as so many generations of Americans have done before.

What would a more open, deliberative Congress actually achieve for the American people? There is a good chance that supermajorities of legislators would find workable compromises on issues that currently seem intractable, such as healthcare and immigration. But, as DeMuth has shown us, the deeper and ultimately more consequential purpose would be to affirm the American people's commitment to self-government. As I argued in a [paper published last fall](#), genuine self-government in a republic of 325 million people is a tall order, but only by reinvigorating Congress will we have any chance of fulfilling it.

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## SCHOOLING CHOICE

Frederick M. Hess

Chris DeMuth's [brilliant treatise](#) on “Trumpism, Nationalism, and Conservatism” has much to say about the state of America society, politics, and government. But it also has particular resonance when it comes to the field I know best: education. When we look to schooling, there is much that affirms DeMuth's incisive analysis—together with some intriguing complications.

DeMuth traces our current dysfunction to the excesses of the administrative state and the way this shift has favored the cosmopolitan Anywheres while marginalizing the working class Somewheres. This has helped fuel the disaffection that has powered Trump and the populist moment. While DeMuth's measured prose accepts the legitimacy of both the Anywhere and Somewhere worldviews, it's clear that the Anywheres have been the aggressors, and also that DeMuth is unconvinced by the Anywheres' claims to know what's good, right, and in the best interests of the unwashed Somewheres.

That resonates when it comes to K-12 reform, especially when it comes to the conflicts between the nation's Anywhere “reformers” and the provincial Somewheres—whose schools the reformers are out to “fix.” Indeed, DeMuth's tale is almost a pitch-perfect synopsis, for instance, of the Common Core clash that burned so hot in the Obama years, when the foundation-funded, coastal Anywheres took it on themselves to fix reading and math standards—only to be met with ferocious opposition from right-wing Somewhere moms and left-wing Somewhere anti-testers.

But what makes the tale of K-12 reform in recent years so intriguing is that, aside from that episode, culturally progressive Anywhere reformers have generally been *embraced* by conservatives. How progressive are these Anywheres? Well, earlier this year, a new AEI study [documented](#) that political giving by the staff at more than 200 school reform organizations runs Democratic by better than a nine-to-one margin (the same ratio seen in famously liberal precincts like Hollywood or the public employee unions).

And yet conservatives have staunchly supported these Anywhere progressives—mostly because the reformers supported charter schools and criticized teacher unions. In fact, to appease their progressive allies, conservative reformers have made a wealth of concessions. They have accepted a massive increase in federal authority, an expansion of race-conscious accountability systems, and a general prohibition on talk of parental responsibility and the virtues of the traditional family. It's a peculiar state of affairs, one largely motivated by a desire to placate Democratic allies willing to help advance school choice.

This raises a big question: How much *should* school choice continue to frame the right's educational vision as it seeks a nationalist-conservative fusion? DeMuth urges a national agenda emphasizing “school choice” and “charter schools” because it “would address the interests of

the Party’s Somewhere constituents and aim to garner new constituents from poorer and minority communities.” He is certainly right that school choice resonates with left-leaning Somewheres in poorer *urban* and minority communities. Where things get dicier, though, is when DeMuth suggests that school choice is broadly appealing for right-leaning Somewheres in the suburbs, small towns, and red America.

It turns out that, for much of the Somewhere right, school choice is an answer in search of a problem. In many small towns, communities, and suburbs, reformers don’t get very far when they celebrate “disruption” and denounce “zip-code education.” Indeed, 70 percent of American families historically give their kids’ schools an “A” or a “B.” The vast majority of the nation’s 14,000 districts are defined by intensely personal relationships, with two-thirds enrolling fewer than 2,500 students.

Across these communities, the “zip-code-based” schools that reformers decry are cherished hubs of local identity. This can be true even when outsiders look at test scores and dismiss schools as failures or “drop-out” factories. Locally, high school teams are sources of pride and anchors of routine. Geographic school communities can make it easier for children to make friends who live nearby and for parents to know their neighbors. Put in terms that should resonate on the right, local schools are engines of social capital that help to forge communities.

What school choice advocates see as an attack on bureaucracy and the administrative state (which *is* true in places like New York and Chicago) is experienced in many non-urban locales as an attack on their community and the educators they like. This is why many right-leaning Somewheres regard school choice with suspicion.

Choice-based reform has compelling virtues, which is why I’ve championed it since the *last* century. But the truth is that school choice works best in dense urban communities, where the need is clearest, the logistics at their most manageable, and the disruptions minimized. These are deep blue locales. This may be a great strategy for wooing Democratic constituencies, but if we take seriously DeMuth’s call to imagine a post-Trump right that incorporates the nationalist and populist Somewheres, an education agenda framed by school choice (and vocational education) is wholly inadequate.

So, what *should* our agenda look like?

First, the right should continue to unapologetically embrace the liberating, empowering power of choice—for families *and* educators. But we must *also* do much better at appreciating why school choice can seem irrelevant or even threatening to many in the nation’s small towns, rural communities, and suburbs.

This means respecting concerns about “disruption,” for instance, by approaching school closures as regrettable, not a bloodless byproduct of market competition. It means listening to,

and not ridiculing, suburban parents concerned about how school choice might impact their schools. It means conceding that school choice may be a poor answer for communities where the next-closest junior high is 20 or 30 miles away. And, perhaps most importantly, it requires talking about versions of choice—like education savings accounts or “course choice” programs—that address practical concerns by giving families more access to good educational offerings, even when they have no desire to ship a kid off to a new school.

Second, in the past two decades, conservative education reformers have evinced less and less appetite for values-laden debates. Quite simply, this is nuts: schools are central to a healthy republic precisely because they embody, signal, and instill our societal values. As progressives have pushed schools to embrace identity politics, dismiss discipline as racist, take the left’s side in complex debates over gender and immigration, apologize for American history, and erase even the faintest vestiges of faith, the conservative policy community has stood largely silent. Pushback has been left to Fox News personalities and right-wing pundits.

This faintness of heart has, not surprisingly, driven a growing wedge between right-leaning Somewheres and the right’s school reform impresarios. Support of choice must be coupled with attention to communities and values, and a commitment to schools that embrace our common heritage, instill personal responsibility and responsible citizenship, celebrate America’s virtues and heroes, prize patriotism, make room for faith, and reject grievance politics.

As I said, education seems in many ways a microcosm of DeMuth’s analysis. As we’re often reminded, Trump may be unprincipled and ineffectual but, for better or worse, he’s a fighter—one who’s unapologetically on the side of the Somewheres and doesn’t shrink from clashes over culture. At least when it comes to schooling, it’s fair to say that conservatism sorely needs some of that.

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## **Letter to the Editor, *Claremont Review of Books***

**Linda Chavez**

There is much with which I agree in my former Reagan Administration colleague Christopher DeMuth’s article “Trumpism, Nationalism, and Conservatism” in the winter *CRB*. His proposals to revive representative government; reform education to promote school choice, charter schools, and vocational education; and to move toward a tax-financed welfare state are thoughtful and reflect his years of experience in and out of government. His broader call for a new nationalism, however, especially one inspired by Donald Trump, seems willfully to ignore the dangers nationalism has posed in the past and the threats President Trump poses to democratic norms. Trump’s nationalism does indeed bear resemblance, as DeMuth writes, to movements in Poland,



Hungary, Italy, Germany, and France. Trump is Marine LePen without her tact and intellect. His campaign was not so much directed at global elites—the villains in DeMuth’s formulation—as immigrants, especially Mexicans.

DeMuth adopts David Goodhart’s formulation of a nation divided between “Anywheres” and “Somewheres,” with the latter rooted in place and affinity with those whom they know personally. It is an interesting taxonomy, but one wonders how Donald Trump’s “Somewhere”—Trump Tower in Manhattan and the Mar-a-Lago country club in Florida—put him in touch with the West Virginia coal miner or Iowa farmer. Perhaps most glaringly, DeMuth ignores the nexus between nationalism and race, which has characterized the movement everywhere.

DeMuth says he wishes “to bring issues of American identity and purpose to the forefront of political debate.” Again, I agree, but American identity cannot, or at least should not, be based on race, color, or even national origin, as incongruous as that may sound. Americans can be born anywhere, so long as they decide to make their lives here and adopt the nation as their own, learning the language, becoming citizens, adhering to the principles, values, mores, and civic duties of Americans. As Ronald Reagan famously said in his Farewell Address: “This I believe is one of the most important sources of America’s greatness. We lead the world because unique among nations, we draw our people, our strength, from every country and every corner of the world.... Thanks to each wave of new arrivals to this land of opportunity, we’re a nation forever young, forever bursting with energy and new ideas, and always on the cutting edge; always leading the world to the next frontier.”

Speaking at the border with Mexico in April, President Trump declared, “Can’t take you anymore. Can’t take you. Our country is full.” The contrast could not be more profound. To those who might object that Trump was speaking only of illegal immigrants, it is worth noting that *legal* immigration has declined during his two years in office as he has made it increasingly more difficult to obtain visas of all sorts and that he has endorsed legislation to cut in half the number of legal immigrants the country admits going forward. Trump is perfectly comfortable with a notion of nationalism based on blood as well as soil. He has no problem with immigrants from northern Europe, even falsely claiming on three recent occasions that his father was born in Germany. (His mother was indeed an immigrant from Scotland, but his father was born in New York, though his grandfather came from Germany.) The progeny of Germans apparently can become good Americans but not Mexicans (for example, Indiana-born Judge Curial, whom Trump derided during the campaign for his supposed dual loyalty with Mexico) or even Puerto Ricans, citizens by birth but not entitled to his empathy or federal government help on a par with other victims of national disasters.

DeMuth has several suggestions for additional reading on the topic of nationalism. I’d like to make one as well, George Orwell’s “Notes on Nationalism.” Though the essay was written in the shadow of World War II and the Holocaust, much of its analysis is still relevant. “*Nationalism is not to be*

*confused with patriotism,*” he writes (italics in the original), making clear patriotism isn’t the problem. “Every nationalist is haunted by the belief that the past can be altered. He spends part of his time in a fantasy world in which things happen as they should,” Orwell warns. “Indifference to objective truth is encouraged by the sealing-off of one part of the world from another, which makes it harder and harder to discover what is actually happening.... One has no way of verifying the facts, one is not even fully certain that they have happened, and one is always presented with totally different interpretations from different sources.” Orwell could have been writing of the White House press operation, or the propaganda machine on Fox News, or talk radio, or the words that come out of the president’s own mouth. Would that *CRB* spent as much time analyzing the threat posed by Donald Trump, who has usurped Congress’s role, exploded the deficit, fractured civility, and promoted racialism as it does decrying global elites.

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### **Christopher DeMuth replies to Henry Olsen and Linda Chavez**

I agree with Henry Olsen that there is an important moral dimension to the political divides described in more practical terms in my essay.

Claiming the moral high ground is a venerable technique of political rhetoric, aimed at connecting one’s immediate interest to the interests of others or to universal values of justice and fairness. Moral appeals sometimes stand on their own and endure as revealed truth—Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is a good example. More often—say, in paeans to the beneficence of farm subsidies or the Jones Act—they are efforts to impassion one’s allies and convert the undecided as a prelude to brass-tacks bargaining with one’s opponents.

But in today’s politics, claiming the moral high ground has evolved from a method of democratic debate to a means of suppressing debate. It aims to cast one’s opponents as politically illegitimate misfits, and oneself as deserving of special deference and authority. Anti-establishment nationalists and their Somewhere supporters are not immune from moral one-upmanship. It is, however, a specialty of established elites and progressive Anywheres intent on maintaining their prerogatives. Coupling moral self-assurance with material self-interest, they portray the transition from representative government to declarative government (to use the terminology of my essay) as salutary and irreproachable—settled science. A great advantage of the representative legislature is that moral high grounds are ephemeral. Appeals must be made in the immediate presence of differing and conflicting appeals, and the pose of superior virtue must eventually give way to the necessity of compromise.

I also agree with Olsen that libertarianism can go to anti-democratic extremes. But I think it is much less inclined to “aristocratic morality” than is socialism, because it is grounded in individual self-interest and the worthiness of accommodating differing interests and values. In my view, libertarianism is critical to the success of conservative nationalism—especially in regulatory

policy—as a source of non-moralistic opposition to government favoritism toward special-interest groups. Legislatures naturally accede to persistent, exploitative interests. Libertarianism is the philosophy best suited to this frailty.

Linda Chavez’s letter recites several of President Trump’s statements and actions as evidence that he is a “blood” nationalist—anti-immigrant, anti-Mexican, a promoter of racialism; for good measure, she says that he is unintelligent and much wealthier than his constituents. She omits the president’s innumerable statements and actions lauding immigrants, Mexicans, and African Americans, and his incessant, obviously heartfelt bragging that black, Latino, and Asian unemployment rates have reached historic lows during his administration. Her skewed narrative is designed to discredit my essay by association (DeMuth “seems willfully to ignore” the dangers of Trumpian nationalism). On a recent CNN talk show, Chavez accused me and the “heretofore respectable” *CRB* of being crypto-white nationalists and proponents of the “nation as defined by blood and soil,” this in harmony with the panel’s messaging points on the ghoulis slaughter of 50 Muslim worshippers in New Zealand. She has privately apologized for this slander, and is more circumspect in her letter, yet has the temerity to complain of “the propaganda machine on Fox News.”

My own take on President Trump is that he is not a racist or white nationalist but something nearly the opposite—a New Yorker of the Queens persuasion, happily at home in multiethnic and other diversity, blunt spoken, heedless of political correctness, a wise guy. In sum a sort of latter-day Mort Sahl (“is there anyone here I haven’t offended?”). Now, a head of state who carries on as an improv entertainer and political provocateur is going to leave himself open to misrepresentation, and the spectacle is going to unsettle traditionalists like myself. But I must say that his pugnacity has effectively defanged the “white nationalist” line of moral high-grounding that has become a favorite of his adversaries. When Hillary Clinton seizes on a political trope, one can be sure that it has lost its power to wound or persuade.

Stripped of its moral positioning, Chavez’s letter comes down to saying that nationalism risks promoting racial and ethnic antagonisms. She’s right, but the problems are hardly unique to nationalism—they afflict internationalism and imperialism as well. They have, moreover, been earnestly considered by the best writers on nationalism, pro and con, including the contemporary scholars mentioned in my essay and also those, such as Lord Acton and Ernest Renan, who wrote in the 19th century when the modern nation-state was being forged, often in strife and bloodshed. I should have thought it obvious that a central purpose of my essay was to suggest institutional and policy steps for countering our divisive preoccupations with racial and ethnic identity, and for rekindling a sense of American unity that celebrates, incorporates, and transcends racial, ethnic, and other particular loyalties (a hat trick to be sure).

Chavez’s recommendation of George Orwell’s “Notes on Nationalism” is strikingly inapposite to the argument she is trying to make. Orwell was indeed writing in the shadow of World War II,

when many Europeans blamed the horrors they had just experienced on German and Japanese nationalism. I believe they were largely (not entirely) mistaken—Nazism was a satanic-messianic ideology with little relation to German heritage, and invaded other nations not for historical rectification but rather for conquest and subjugation en route to world domination. Yet Orwell's position is closer to my view than to those then prevailing. He begins by explaining that he is using "nationalism" in an idiosyncratic way that will be unfamiliar to his readers. Nationalism, he says, is "power-hunger tempered by self-deception," attached to a "power unit" that may or may not be a nation and may or may not actually exist. Read the essay (available online) and you will see that the closest modern approximations to his "nationalism" are "ideology" or "fanaticism." His primary example of "nationalism" is the high-brow British Communist!—"Among the [British] intelligentsia, it hardly needs saying that the dominant form of nationalism is Communism." Other targets are political Catholicism, Zionism, anti-Semitism, Trotskyism, and pacifism. The nationalism expounded in my essay, and by others of my ilk, is the opposite of most of these, and aims to draw political affections from the abstract and universalist back to one's living natural home.

It is my firm policy always to be on Orwell's side, as I properly understand that side. So I accept his point, emphasized by Chavez, that nationalism and patriotism are different things, but must give it my own interpretation. Patriotism is fine but is easy and subjective, and thereby a potential refuge for scoundrels. Nicolás Maduro and Xi Jinping are patriots on their own say-so; Emmanuel Macron says that patriotism requires the French to direct their political loyalties elsewhere, which is *ipse dixit* from a head of state intent on relinquishing his nation's sovereignty. Nationalism is harder and impersonal—a matter of statecraft and political order. The nationalist leader takes moral responsibility for the fate of his people, respects the sovereignty of other nations, and promotes an international order that encourages others to do likewise.