

AMERICA'S NATIONALIST AWAKENING

Christopher DeMuth

National Conservatism Conference , Washington, D.C., July 14–16, 2019

A version of this address was published in [The Wall Street Journal](#) on July 20, 2019

No one saw it coming—that the next big thing of the twenty-first century would be the nation-state, an artifact from the seventeenth. Yet it has suddenly become a global phenomenon—a driving force of politics in the United States and around the world and the subject of intense intellectual debate and a profusion of newspaper articles and op-eds. *The Washington Post* recently ran a “list” feature with forty 2019 books on American national identity.

The news has even come to Harvard, where a professor of history (Jill Lepore) is actually writing about American political history and nationhood, and a professor of international political economy (Dani Rodrik) says that “there is something special about the nation-state—it creates reciprocal obligations that don’t exist across national borders.”

There is, to be sure, a resistance. One salvo against the organizers of this week’s National Conservatism Conference (by Gabriel Schoenfeld) accuses us of injecting “a malignant form of nationalism . . . into the American body politic” and says we “need to be mercilessly defeated on the battlefield of ideas as if September 1, 1939”—the day Germany invaded Poland—“were approaching.”

But in general, the mood has moved through the stages of grief from denial to anger to acceptance—acceptance that the nation-state is a living idea with momentum, not a dying relic easily dispatched by global progressivism. To wit:

- The race card and the Nazi card have been played so promiscuously against nationalism proponents that they have lost most of their power to wound or persuade. The accusers keep flailing away, but at this point they are only complicating efforts to isolate and condemn the actual white supremacists and anti-Semites in our midst.

- Some liberals acknowledge, or even insist, that fraternal affections and group loyalties are natural and often worthy. Some show hints of recognizing that social customs and national traditions are a firmer foundation for political order than the ideology of atomized, free-floating individual autonomy.

- Beyond the world of political activists and intellectuals, these propositions have wide appeal, grounded in everyday experience. Even in the midst of all the scare talk, pollster Scott Rasmussen reports that a substantial majority of Americans—even suburban women!—have a favorable view of “nationalism” and “America nationalism.”

So we political conservatives, who have been aroused in our own way by the nationalist awakening, have a great opportunity to recast, enlarge, and proselytize our ideas. Following the first round of arguments of recent years, it is time to move beyond dueling litanies of the nation-state’s past glories on the one hand and horrors on the other.

Let me draw an analogy from earlier awakenings—the religious Great Awakenings that swept over America (and touched Great Britain and Europe as well) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the American colonies and early United States, the new religious impulses were much more populist, participatory, and enthusiastic than what had come before, and posited a new relationship between God and his people and among his people. It might have been said, and indeed was said, that the awakenings were dangerous and divisive, that they threatened to rekindle the old intolerant religious hatreds and bloodshed that had brought so many to the New World in the first place.

Yet as it turned out, the secular consequences of the awakenings were unifying and enlarging, galvanizing the American nation. For one thing, they brought many women and black Americans to Christian practice and belief. Beginning in the 1730s, the First Great Awakening—with its emphasis on personal responsibility and self-rule—was an important antecedent to the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution. The nineteenth-century Second Great Awakening, with its emphasis on moral obligation and social justice, was a vital impetus to the abolition of slavery.

I am not suggesting a direct lineage from those awakenings to today’s. The 2010s are no more similar to the 1730s and 1830s than to the 1930s. There are, however, two important parallels.

First, both religion and nation are neither menaces nor panaceas but something more fundamental. They are central arenas of human endeavor—institutional embodiments of human understanding and aspiration, of human excellence and

folly. To oppose them is to oppose forces of nature. To say that the nationalist hatreds of the past oblige us to reject a political order of independent nations is akin to saying that the Crusades and Wars of Religion make atheism the only viable belief system.

Some people do say these things, including some very smart people, but they are making empty debaters' points. They ignore the intrinsic claims of nationalism and religion and the circumstances of human existence that give rise to them. The circumstances that gave rise to today's nationalist awakening, at least in the West, have nothing to do with suppressing minorities or invading foreign lands. Instead, the new nationalism is a revolt against the failures and weaknesses of modern nation-states. It is not intolerant or triumphalist but rather is defensive, grounded in well-justified apprehensions of political and institutional decline.

In America, the nationalist claim is that the federal government has abdicated basic responsibilities and broken trust with large numbers of citizens:

- It has failed to secure the national borders and provide regular procedures for immigration and assimilation.
- It has delegated lawmaking to foreign and international bodies, and domestic bureaucracies, that have scant regard for the interests and values of many of our fellow citizens.
- It has acquiesced in, or actively promoted, the splintering of the nation into contending racial, religious, and other groups and has favored some at the expense of others.
- It has neglected core American principles and traditions—separation of powers, due process, the presumption of innocence, local prerogative, freedom of association—allowing them to atrophy or be subjected to political conditions.

Now, these claims are closely aligned with traditional conservative precepts, although conservative politicians and activists have not always adhered to them in recent decades. That is why the nationalist awakening is a conservative awakening, too, and presents distinct opportunities for those of our persuasion.

Which brings me to the second parallel with the Great Awakenings. Adamant revivalist energies, while unruly and disruptive in the moment, may be precursors to social enlargement and a new sense of collective purpose. I am choosing my

words carefully and did not say “national unity” and “cohesion”—that has never been the American Way, outside of wars and similar crises, and it never could be. All we need is a serviceable consensus on the essentials of American identity and character, sufficiently broad and representative for the tasks of cultural and political reform.

The national conservatism we are developing is going to have some hard edges and provoke some clever counterattacks and dismissals. The rancor proves the seriousness of the challenge we face. As the Danish physicist-poet Piet Hein wrote: “Problems worthy of attack / Prove their worth by fighting back.”

But the American nation is not only vast, heterogeneous, and fractious but also tough, resilient, and practical. Our movement has broad transcultural potential. Modern progressivism has turned against essential precepts of the American liberal tradition, such as equal opportunity and freedom of inquiry, religion, and enterprise. We are assimilating them into national conservatism, and old-fashioned liberals cannot help but notice.

An important virtue of the nation-state, and one that is decidedly conservative, is that it is a constraint. The contemporary peaceable nation takes what it is given—its borders and territory and resources, its citizens and tribes, its affinities and antagonisms, its history and traditions and ways of getting along—and makes the most of them. The order of independent nation-states addresses international problems by working with the positions and interests of individual nations as they are. Many idealists would prefer to avoid these constraints by operating through single-minded political structures that are free of the obligations of statecraft and democrat consent.

One of the most arresting features of modern life in the rich democracies is the pervasive rejection of the idea of natural constraint. One sees this throughout culture high and low, social relations, and politics and government. Where a boundary exists, it is there to be transgressed. Where a hardship exists, it must be because of an injustice which we can remedy if only we have the will. Today’s recipe for success and happiness is not to manage within limits and accommodate constraints, but rather to aim for perfect self-expression and keep one’s options open. The newest frontier is the notion that even your sex is an option, and the sooner young children are informed of this, the better.

I do not know where this impulse came from. Perhaps wealth and technology have relieved so many age-old constraints that we have come to imagine we can live with no constraints at all. Whatever the cause, it is a revolt against reality. Resources are limited. Lasting achievement is possible only within a structure. My own favorite field, economics, is out of favor these days, but it has at least one profound truth, that of opportunity cost: Everything we do necessarily involves not doing something else.

The illusion of unlimited optionality has been especially damaging in government and politics. A dramatic recent instance came in the Democrats' presidential primary debates, where many candidates favored both open borders and free health care for everyone who shows up. That would plainly amount to the abolition of the United States. Still, the proponents would say in all earnestness that they have ingenious plans to make it work.

That is an extreme instance of the phenomenon that every social problem or inconvenience summons forth costly new spending or regulatory solutions, with hardly a care to where the resources will come from or what other problems will be slighted as a result. It is a bipartisan delusion, and it has left us with a massively indebted government that spends trillions of borrowed dollars on our immediate needs, with the bills kited to future generations.

The American nation-state is rich and powerful and less constrained than any other, yet it is much more constrained than we have led ourselves to believe. Thinking of ourselves as a nation-state is, as Peter Thiel has observed, a means to unromantic self-knowledge. National conservatism, by directing our attention to our nation as it is—warts, wonders, and all—is a means of reminding ourselves of our dependence on one another in the here and now, and of accepting the constraints that are the sources of productive freedom.