WHY YOU SHOULD BE A NATIONALIST

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Britain votes to leave the European Union. The United States elects a president who says he'll put "America First."

Around the world, nationalism is winning elections. Many see this nationalist revival as the great danger of our time, fearing that nationalism will take us back to a more primitive and racist past.

But it wasn't long ago that great political figures such as Woodrow Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt, David Ben-Gurion and Mahatma Gandhi, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher recognized what I call the virtue of nationalism.

So, what is this virtue?

A nationalist believes that the world is governed best when nations are free to chart their own independent course, cultivating their traditions and pursuing their interests without interference. Nationalism is not about racism. All nations are internally diverse. And it isn't about isolationism.

Of course, nations can a pursue a variety of different policies in diplomacy and trade. Nationalism is the opposite of imperialism—or globalism or transnationalism—which are all names for the attempt to bring peace and prosperity to the world by uniting mankind under a single political authority.

The debate between nationalists and globalists, then, is over whether we should aspire to a world of many independent nations—or to be one unified super-state, like the enlightened "Federation" of the Star Trek movies. A case can be made for both sides of the argument. But for the last 30 years—really, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Soviet Union—the "one world" side has been dominant.

Today, this is changing. Maybe not among elites, but among ordinary citizens—or, as they are known in America, "the deplorables." It turns out that a lot of people still think good borders make good neighbors.

It's hardly surprising that people want to preserve the way of life they and their ancestors built up over centuries, the way of life they believe is best. It's human nature. Our strongest loyalties are to those who are closest to us: to our family; then the larger community or "tribe", and finally, to the nation.

Long ago, it was discovered that the key to human freedom is to build political life out of this natural loyalty. By putting decision-making in the hands of the family, the community, and the independent nation, you could get people to cooperate with one another, join in the common defense and willingly obey laws. The only alternative to this kind of community and nation-based politics is to use force—to coerce obedience. In the 20th century, communism and Nazism both sought to impose a universal vision at gunpoint. Both the communists and the Nazis were imperialists: They wanted to eliminate the independent nations of the world.

Nationalism holds that borders are crucial: The border is where each nation's ambitions should stop. This idea first appears in the Bible, where Moses gives borders to Israel and tells the Jews they'll be punished if they trouble their neighbors.

True to its biblical roots, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century made the independent nation-state the political cornerstone of the modern world. When Henry VIII declared that England would no longer obey dictates from Rome, he became Europe's first true nationalist.

Soon, additional nations declared their independence: the Dutch from Spain, and America from Britain, to cite just two examples. The competition among these newly independent peoples led to an explosion of innovation, bringing unprecedented progress in science, industry and government.

For nearly four hundred years, the principle of national independence served as the foundation for a better, freer world. But World War I and World War II changed everything. Traumatized by these catastrophic conflicts, many now seek comfort in a simplistic narrative, ceaselessly repeated: that "nationalism caused two world wars and the Holocaust." But this is one of the great untruths of our time. Adolph Hitler was no nationalist. He was an imperialist. If his ambitions had been limited to ruling Germans, it would have been terrible for Germany, but the French, the British, the Russians, and everyone else would have been spared a world war.

Sadly, European elites learned the wrong lesson, believing that independent nations are inherently dangerous. Better, they reasoned, that all countries should live under one government.

In 1992, this vision gave birth to the European Union. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher hated the idea. She didn't want the bureaucrats in Brussels making decisions for Brits in Birmingham. But in the utopian 1990s, Britain thought it was better to dump Thatcher and go with Brussels. It's the spirit of Margaret Thatcher and, indeed, of Henry VIII, that reasserted itself in Britain's vote for independence from Europe in June 2016. Donald Trump tapped into the same spirit of nationalism five months later, in November 2016.

Nationalism is making a comeback. If you care about freedom, you should hope it succeeds.

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