



The Free Congress Commentary

The Next Conservatism # 41: Will The Next Conservatism Be Patriotic or Nationalist?

By William S. Lind

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From its outset, conservative thought has drawn an important distinction between patriotism and nationalism. Patriotism is attachment to the concrete: to one's own place, one's own farm or town or valley, and its traditions. Nationalism, in contrast, is abstract, a fanatical devotion to the idea of a country: the Fatherland, the Motherland, la Patrie. One of the most important decisions the next conservatism will need to make is whether it will return to conservative patriotism or embrace the nationalism that is now in favor with parts of the American Right.

It may help conservatives to know that nationalism originated on the Left, in the 18th Century. In his book, *THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE STATE*, the Israeli historian Martin van Creveld writes,

Even as the state was reaching maturity around the middle of the eighteenth century, however, forces were at work which were about to transform it from an instrument (to bring order) into an end and, later, a living god . . .

The man who did more than anyone else to start the Great Transformation was, perhaps, Jean-Jacques Rousseau . . .

. It was only in the years after 1789 (and the French Revolution), when some of the intellectuals came to power and when their ruminations were married to the pretensions of the state, that . . . nationalism took on an aggressive, bellicose character.

As we have seen in too many wars since, nationalism has retained that aggressive, bellicose character. It still does so today, at home as well as abroad.

In his response to the French Revolution, the man generally regarded as the founder of conservative thought defended patriotism against the nationalism of the Revolutionaries. In his REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE, Edmund Burke wrote,

It is boasted . . . that all local ideas should be sunk, and that the people should no longer be Gascons, Picards, Bretons, Normans; but Frenchmen, with one country, one heart, and one Assembly . . . No man ever was attached by a sense of pride, partiality or real affection, to a description of square measurement . . . We begin our public affections in our families. We pass on to our neighborhoods, and our habitual provincial connexions . . .

The key word here is “local.” Patriotism is local, which is what enables it to be concrete. Nationalism tries to generate an attachment to a country as a whole, which inevitably causes it to become abstract. That abstraction in turn leads to others, and soon enough nationalism becomes bound up with ideology. That has happened with the neo-conservatives and their drive for world dominion in the name of American “democratic capitalism.”

Russell Kirk, Burke's intellectual heir, had this to say about such American nationalism:

So America's contribution to the universal "democratic capitalism" of the future . . . will be just this: cheapness, the cheapest music and the cheapest comic-books and the cheapest morality that can be provided. This indeed would be the revolution of revolutions, the Gehenna of universal monotony and mediocrity. This is Cyrus P. Whittle, telling himself that not only is America the biggest thing on earth, but America soon is going to wipe out everything else; and in the dazzling delirious joy of that consummation, forgetting to ask what will happen afterward.

Seen historically, it is not too much to say that those elements of the American Right which have abandoned patriotism in exchange for nationalism have moved away from conservatism itself, toward something else, whatever it may be. Where will this move take us? It has already taken us where nationalism tends to go, to war. In 1914, nationalism took Europe to war, with catastrophic results for Western civilization. Van Creveld puts it thus:

Reveling in total war, the state demanded and obtained sacrifice on a scale which, had they been able to imagine it, would have made even the old Aztec gods blanch.

The war in Iraq and its consequences may well bring nationalism into question in America. If that happens conservatives should regard it

not as a danger but as an opportunity. It may help the next conservatism return Americans to patriotism, which is far more supportive of a republican form of government, limited state powers and domestic liberty.

“Think locally, act locally” is the conservative response to the Left’s slogan, “Think globally, act locally.” It should also be the next conservatism’s reply to nationalism.

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