

LECTURE

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A World of Independent Nations

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Sovereignty is not the enemy of Western unity; it is the foundation of meaningful cooperation among democratic nations.

Europe is not synonymous with the European Union, and American policy should distinguish between the continent's nations and Brussels' institutions.

A renewed transatlantic conservatism should link sovereign actors directly on speech, borders, family, faith, energy, economic freedom, and defense.

Introduction

It is a great pleasure to be here in Jerusalem, and it is especially fitting to discuss “A World of Independent Nations” here in Israel. If any nation understands the importance of sovereignty, national survival, secure borders, and the sometimes inconvenient necessity of putting its own people first, it is Israel.

I come here as an American conservative, as someone who has spent much of his career working on Europe, and I should probably confess at the outset, as an unreconstructed Euroskeptic. I realize that admitting you are a Euroskeptic at NatCon is not exactly an act of great personal courage. It is rather like announcing at Heritage that you have reservations about socialism or Islamism.

But I want to make a broader argument today.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1353>

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National sovereignty and transatlantic cooperation are not opposites. They are not even in tension. Properly understood, national sovereignty is the basis for meaningful transatlantic cooperation.

For far too long, the foreign policy establishment on both sides of the Atlantic has presented us with a false choice. Either you believe in an ever more integrated West, governed by international institutions and supra-national bureaucracies, or you retreat into isolationism. Either Brussels runs Europe, or Europe falls apart. Either Washington manages its allies, or America abandons them.

I reject that choice. There is another model. It is a world of sovereign nations that know who they are, control their own borders, govern themselves, defend themselves, and cooperate when their interests and values coincide—in other words, exactly the sort of international order conservatives should be trying to build.

The Nation-State Is Not the Problem

For the past several decades, nationalism has been treated in much of polite Western society almost as a pathology. Europe in particular was told that its terrible 20th-century history proved that the nation-state itself had failed.

The answer was integration. Then, more integration. Then, when integration produced problems, the answer was invariably still more integration. It reminds me a little of the old joke about socialism: The reason it has never worked is apparently because nobody has ever tried quite enough of it.

The European project originally presented itself as cooperation among sovereign countries. But over time, political authority moved steadily away from national governments and toward institutions increasingly removed from national electorates. As I argued in “U.S. First Principles vs. European Bureaucratic Overreach,” the European Union has increasingly transferred authority away from sovereign nations and into distant institutions with limited democratic accountability.¹

This matters because democracy requires a **Demos**. Someone has to be able to answer the simplest political question there is: *Who governs?* And if you dislike the answer: *How do you get rid of them?*

That is easy to understand in a nation-state. It becomes considerably less clear when authority is dispersed among commissioners, courts, councils, agencies, treaties, and qualified-majority voting. It is difficult enough getting rid of a bad congressman. Try voting out the European Commission.

Europe Is Not the European Union

This leads to a distinction that American policymakers repeatedly fail to make: Europe is not the European Union. Europe is a civilization. Europe is a collection of ancient nations. Europe is Britain and France, Poland and Hungary, Italy and Greece, the Baltic States and the Nordic countries, and many others, each with its own history, traditions, loyalties, interests, and democratic institutions. The European Union is an institution.

The two are not synonymous. In fact, one of the most damaging habits in American foreign policy has been to confuse support for Europe with support for European integration. An America First foreign policy should stop doing that.

As I argued recently after Iceland rejected renewed EU accession talks in “Iceland Puts the Freeze on Brussels’ ‘Ever Closer Union,’” Washington should deal with Europe as it actually exists: as a continent of nations. America benefits when democratic allies control their own resources and interests and cooperate voluntarily, including through NATO.²

That is not anti-European. It is profoundly pro-European. It says that the Czech Republic belongs to the Czechs. Poland belongs to the Poles. Hungary belongs to the Hungarians. Britain belongs to the British. And the United States belongs to Americans.

Perhaps this is considered radical these days. I prefer to call it self-government.

America First Does Not Mean America Alone

This brings me to America First.

America First is sometimes caricatured, particularly in Europe, as a doctrine of withdrawal. I think that completely misunderstands it. America First does not mean America alone. It means that American foreign policy should advance American interests.

And we should expect our friends to do exactly the same thing for their countries. America does not want European governments that obediently ask Washington what to do. America wants strong allies. America wants European countries capable of securing their borders, growing their economies, and defending their territory. America wants European NATO members capable of bearing a much larger share of the burden of defending Europe. America wants allies, not dependencies.

That is why sovereignty actually strengthens transatlanticism. America does not ultimately form alliances with regulatory systems. It

forms alliances with nations capable of making decisions and honoring commitments.

A weak country that has surrendered responsibility for vital decisions is not made stronger merely because it sits inside a larger bureaucracy. A self-confident nation that can defend itself, control its territory, and act politically is a much more useful ally.

Where Conservatives Must Cooperate

But this cannot mean conservatives retreating behind their own borders and ignoring one another. Quite the opposite: Each nation must decide questions of free speech, border control, family, faith, energy, economic freedom, and defense for itself—but those debates increasingly reach across the Atlantic.

We should be candid. President Trump's style can sometimes unsettle even our European conservative friends who agree with him on borders, sovereignty, and burden-sharing. That is no reason to abandon cooperation. European conservatives need not become Trumpists. Friends can disagree over tactics, trade, Ukraine, or NATO and still work together where their interests and principles coincide.

So, what should cooperation look like? It should begin with permanent working relationships among think tanks, lawmakers, legal groups, and campaigners. It should be built around particular battles, not a single manifesto. We can cooperate on free speech without agreeing on every foreign policy question.

And it should connect sovereign actors directly: Congress with national parliaments, attorneys general with legal advocates, and governments with governments—not everything mediated through Brussels.

The agenda is clear: speech, borders, family, faith, energy, economic freedom, and defense.

The test is simple. Cooperation should make each nation more capable of governing itself, not less.

A Practical Framework: A Transatlantic Conservative Compact

I propose a Transatlantic Conservative Compact. Not a treaty. Not a bureaucracy. And certainly not a conservative Brussels.

It would be a voluntary network linking conservative governments, lawmakers, think tanks, and legal groups around specific projects. Small

working groups could share model laws, legal briefs, and campaign lessons on speech, borders, family, energy, and defense. Members could join one project and decline another.

That is the model. Not uniformity: cooperation.

Free speech is the obvious place to begin because rules written in Brussels or London can govern American platforms and affect what American users see.

The EU's Digital Services Act can fine the largest platforms according to global turnover.³ In 2024, EU Commissioner Thierry Breton even warned Elon Musk before his interview with Donald Trump—an American political event.⁴ Britain's Online Safety Act can likewise reach services based abroad and impose enormous fines.⁵ Faced with that risk, platforms will often censor first and ask questions later.

American and European conservatives should expose these demands, challenge them in court, and defend clear legal protections for political and religious speech. Alliance Defending Freedom, among others, is doing stellar work in this area.

In "European Democracy Shield: A Threat to Free Speech and Democratic Accountability," I argued that American and European conservatives need to work more closely together to protect freedom of speech and conscience.⁶

Border control and mass migration are another such issue. Individual nations must decide whom they admit, who is entitled to remain, and what obligations newcomers owe to the society receiving them. That responsibility cannot simply be outsourced upward.

Borders are not an embarrassing leftover from an unenlightened past. They mark the territory within which democratic government operates. If a government cannot determine who enters its country or effectively enforce its immigration law, we should ask in what meaningful sense it remains sovereign.

Here, American and European conservatives have a great deal to learn from each other. The objective should not be identical policies imposed from above. It should be the exchange of ideas among sovereign governments pursuing the interests of their own citizens.

That also means confronting Islamification directly. Religious liberty must be protected, but political Islam and parallel societies must not be tolerated. Newcomers who wish to live in Western nations must accept our laws, our civic order, and our civilizational inheritance. They need to integrate—or leave.

A Transatlantic Conservative Compact would also involve working together on issues like energy security, economic freedom, family

policy, religious liberty, and the defense of Western civilization—and, of course, defense.

The transatlantic alliance remains important, but NATO should be an alliance of sovereign countries accepting reciprocal obligations, not a mechanism for permanently transferring responsibility for European security to the American taxpayer. If European nations are sovereign, then sovereignty comes with responsibilities. One of them is paying for your own defense.

I suspect even my European friends will concede that this particular American enthusiasm for national sovereignty is unlikely to disappear.

Europe Beyond the EU

At Heritage's Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, this is increasingly becoming a central part of our work.

Heritage is organizing a major event in Washington called "Europe Beyond the EU." Its starting point is deliberately provocative: What if the future of Europe is not deeper integration? What if the real intellectual challenge is to imagine European cooperation after the age of centralization? In this tenth-anniversary year of the Brexit referendum, our December 8, 2026, conference will open that conversation, exploring what a European order rooted in sovereign nation-states might look like and how American conservatives can support it.

And we intend to go much further. Our planned Transatlantic Sovereignty Initiative will develop practical alternatives to centralized control over democracy, speech, trade, energy, economic policy, borders, and security. The purpose is not simply to criticize Brussels. It is to develop a positive conservative architecture for cooperation among self-governing nations.

That distinction matters. Euroskepticism cannot simply mean saying "No." Eventually, we have to explain what we are saying "Yes" to. The answer is a flexible Europe.

- NATO for collective defense.
- Bilateral and multilateral agreements where they make sense.
- Trade among free nations.
- Voluntary arrangements on security and migration.
- Cooperation without political absorption.

- Partnership without permanent centralization.

I have called this elsewhere a functional Europe: sovereign nations using the institution appropriate to the task rather than assuming every problem requires transferring yet another power upward.⁷ That principle works beyond Europe as well.

Conservative Solidarity Without Conservative Globalism

There is, however, a trap here for our own movement. Conservatives rightly criticize globalism. We should therefore be rather careful not to invent a conservative globalism of our own. Our purpose cannot be to replace one transnational ideological establishment with another.

A Hungarian conservative will naturally put Hungary first. A Polish conservative should put Poland first. An Israeli conservative should—and most definitely *does*—put Israel first. And I make no apology for saying that an American conservative should put America first.

The miracle is not that our interests will always be identical. They won't. The opportunity is that sovereign nations which possess civilizational confidence can nevertheless recognize enormous areas of common interest.

We can defend the freedom to speak.

We can defend religious liberty.

We can defend the family.

We can secure our borders.

We can resist unelected bureaucracies claiming powers voters never willingly surrendered.

We can defend the inheritance of Western civilization without demanding that every Western nation become politically identical.

And we can maintain a strong Atlantic alliance without asking either Americans or Europeans to surrender their independence.

That is my idea of transatlantic conservative solidarity. Not bland uniformity: solidarity. Not supranational government: cooperation. Not a homogenized West administered from Washington, Brussels, Davos, or anywhere else: a West of free nations.

Conclusion

For most of my professional life, the dominant assumption has been that history was moving relentlessly away from the nation-state. National loyalties were supposedly becoming obsolete. Borders would matter less.

Supranational institutions would inevitably become stronger. Politics would become increasingly managerial. And ordinary voters would eventually learn to accept all of this.

I am increasingly convinced that precisely the opposite is happening. The nation has returned because it never really went away.

People want government close enough to control. They want borders that mean something. They want political leaders who are accountable to them. They want to preserve what makes their country their country. And they are increasingly impatient with institutions that tell them these desires are somehow illegitimate.

This is not a crisis for democracy. It is democracy reasserting itself. The challenge for conservatives is to turn that democratic revolt into a durable political order.

A world of independent nations need not be a world of isolation. It can be a world of vigorous cooperation precisely because that cooperation is voluntary.

A confident America should want confident allies. A sovereign Europe can be a better American partner than an increasingly centralized European Union. And nations secure in their own identity are better able to cooperate because they do not fear that cooperation requires their disappearance.

So my argument today is ultimately very simple: Sovereignty is not the enemy of Western unity. It is the foundation of it.

The future of transatlanticism should not be ever closer union. It should be ever stronger nations: independent, democratic, self-confident, able to disagree, able to cooperate, able to defend themselves, and willing, when our principles and interests align, to stand together.

That is the transatlantic alliance worth defending, and that is a world of independent nations worth building.

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Endnotes

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7. McCarthy, "Iceland Puts the Freeze on Brussels' 'Ever Closer Union.'"