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Do We Need Our Country Anymore?

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered on December 7, 2018, at Hillsdale College's Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship in Washington, D.C.

As we reach the end of this turbulent year, the uproar of the hour is against the nation-state, and not for the first time. "World leaders" are now accustomed to call for the subordination of the nation to the good of the globe. This call is amplified by the media and intellectual elites, who march in lockstep. If the call is right, the peoples of the world will enter a new age of global peace, prosperity, and cooperation. If it is wrong, the free nations of the world will lose the remnants of democratic accountability that have kept them free.

The occasion for the latest outburst of transnationalist enthusiasm was a grim anniversary, the 100th Armistice Day, the annual remembrance of November 11, 1918, the end of the First World War. The losses in Europe in that war were staggering: 8.5 million soldiers were killed, including 900,000 from the British Empire and

Commonwealth and 1.36 million French. By comparison, the number of British military killed in the Second World War, a much costlier war overall in terms of life and treasure, was just under 400,000; that of French military killed, France's army having been defeated quickly, 210,000. Such horrors had never been seen, and their scars are still visible all over Europe: lists of the dead on the walls of colleges, statues in town squares, national gatherings of solemn dignity.

Modern eyes see these wars as the result of the nation-state and proof that nationalism cannot be sustained. But this is precisely a half-truth. It leaves out the distinction that matters more than any: what *kind* of nations do we mean?

With world leaders gathered in Paris in what was to be an atmosphere of unity, President Macron of France was the keynote speaker at the Armistice Day ceremony, and his speech made a sensation in the press. He delivered it standing before the Arc de Triomphe, a monument to the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars that formed modern France. Beneath the Arc is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier from World War I. As much as any place on earth, it is hallowed civic ground—a curious place to launch an attack upon the civic.

Nationalism, Macron argued, is the cause of war. Nationalism is the reason so many died in the twentieth century. The cure is to rid ourselves of nationalism. Macron spoke beautifully of the sacrifices of the soldiers who perished in World War I, of the misery in which they fought, of the lives they might have had. But as he mourned and honored them, he also conscripted them into the cause of transnationalism, for which he says they fought.

Here is the key passage that made the news:

> In those dark hours, that vision of France as a generous nation, of France as a project, of France promoting universal values, was the exact opposite of the egotism of a people who look after only their interests, because patriotism is the exact opposite of nationalism: nationalism is a betrayal of it.

What can it possibly mean to say that patriotism is the opposite of nationalism? Think of the meaning of the words. "Nation" comes from the Latin word *natus*, which means "birth" or "to be born." In its root, nation is the place where one is born. *Natus* is also the root of the word "nature," which means how and what a thing comes to be and therefore what it is. Nature and nation are connected terms. One might say it is the nature of man to have a nation. The classical philosophers, and for that matter the greatest French philosophers, say that very thing. Take Montesquieu, who like many of the best thinkers sought for a law or standard of behavior among nations that would avoid perpetual war. He did not propose, however, that the nation should pass away. To the contrary, he wrote: "Laws should be so appropriate to the people for whom they are made that it is very unlikely that the laws of one nation can suit another."

"Patriotism" is also an interesting word.

Imprimis (im-pri-mis), [Latin]: in the first place

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It comes from the Latin root *pater*. The *pater* is the father, thus for example "paternity" and "patriarchy." The related Latin word *patria* means "fatherland." One is born to a mother and a father. One's nation is the land of one's mother and father. Of course, this is not the only way one can have a nation, but it is the usual way or the natural way.

So for Macron to say that patriotism is the opposite of nationalism is just a bit of silly wordplay. Did he mean that for a person to love his father he must despise the place where his father and mother brought him to life? In the distant past our fathers founded our nation. Are we to love them and despise their work? Are we to imagine that the patriotic founders of nations, and nations' patriotic defenders in war, despised their nations, and that we can emulate them only by doing the same?

Macron distorts the meaning of nationalism in order to condemn it. He calls it the "egotism of a people who look after only their interests." *Only* is a cheat word: who claims that any nation, or for that matter any individual, should look after *only* its own interest? Even Donald Trump, who is hardly acceptable in the polite company of "world leaders" and who Macron was setting himself against in his attack on nationalism, says the opposite frequently. To have a moral duty to look after one's children is not to have a duty to look after *only* them: that duty must come first, but it entails others.

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According to Macron, "the spirit of revenge and the economic and moral crisis [following World War I] fueled the rise of nationalism and totalitarianism." This in turn produced World War II. This is true, but only part of the truth. The whole truth reveals that nationalism is both stubborn and, rightly conceived, necessary to many things, including the *prevention* of war. Nationalism is older than the people of France or of any country. It did not only result from the First World War, it also caused that war. But just as much, it caused the defeat of the aggressors. It is in fact the highest expression of human nature in community.

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France had reason to provoke the First World War, but it did not. France had been defeated by Germany in the Franco-Prussian War, launched by Germany to help unite German provinces into one nation. France was stripped of two provinces. Modern Germany was drawn up in the Palace of Versailles, the home of Louis XIV. The establishment of modern Germany was therefore also a humiliation of France. Despite this, France did not begin the next war. Neither did Belgium or Luxembourg, both places that had suffered at the hands of Germany and would do so again. It was the Germans who were again the aggressors.

From this history we learn that it is not the nation-state, but the *kinds* of nation-states that matter. From the birth of political philosophy in ancient Athens, it has been understood in the West that the difference between good and bad regimes, just as between lives lived well and lives lived badly, is all-important.

This difference between good and bad regimes was at stake in the First World War as much as in any war in history. The war began with an act of raw aggression: the Germans with their allies the Austrians launched an attack in August 1914 upon Belgium and France in the north and Serbia in the

south. The trouble had started in Serbia, where the heir to the Austrian throne was assassinated. Germany supported Austria by attacking two nations that had nothing to do with the trouble in Serbia and lay in the opposite direction.

The German plan for victory in 1914 was almost as ambitious as that of Hitler in 1939. It was drawn up by scholar and diplomat Kurt Riezler for German Prime Minister Bethmann-Hollweg, and its aims were draconian. France would cede northern territory, pay a war indemnity of ten billion German marks, and pay off all of Germany's existing national debt, making the French economy dependent upon the German. France would demolish its northern forts, and Belgium and Luxembourg would be annexed or become vassal states. The Belgian port of Antwerp would be annexed. In the east, Poland would be placed under German sovereignty "for all time."

This might be called the first modern plan for the international governance of Europe. And when it was overcome, it was not overcome by principles alone. Britain and France were devoted to the idea of the rights of man, but here in this war they chiefly saved the rights of the small powers—not to mention their own—through a mighty effort.

If France had lost the First World War, its people might have suffered earlier much of what they suffered after its defeat in the Second World War. French citizens were rounded up and shot, and French officials were compelled by threats to their families to participate in this. Following the surrender of France to Nazi Germany in 1940, of course, French officials were also compelled to help round up Jews for transport to the death camps. This might have been the fate of the French people for decades if not for the sacrifices of others—Russians, British, and Americans especially—to liberate them.

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Macron's account of the two World Wars as a proof against nationalism includes a quote from the greatest Frenchman of his time, George Clemenceau, who served as the prime minister of France during the later years of World War I. In his victory speech of November 11, 1918, Clemenceau said that France had fought "for what

is right and for freedom, [and] would always and forever be a soldier of ideals." Clemenceau surely believed this, but it is not all he believed.

At the outbreak of the war in 1914, issuing a call to arms, Clemenceau said:

> It is for the Latin cause, for the independence of nationalities in Europe, that we are going to fight, for the greatest ideas that have honored the thought of mankind, ideas that have come to us from Athens and Rome and of which we have made the crowning work of that civilization which the Germany of Arminius pretends to monopolize, like those barbarians who melted into ingots the marvels of ancient art after the pillaging of Rome in order to make savage ornaments out of them.

The "Latin cause" is the cause of Rome, of which France is one of the first and chief successors. Arminius was a commander of the Germanic tribes who destroyed many Roman legions. According to Clemenceau, the lessons that come from Rome and Athens concern "mankind" and give rise to a civilization that inspires many nations. One precept of that civilization is the "independence of nationalities," and for that, he said, "we are going to fight."

It seems then that Clemenceau believed both in the nation-state and in the rights of man. We can find in Winston Churchill, who knew and adored Clemenceau, the clearest explanation of how the nation-state and the rights of man can be reconciled and why they must be reconciled.

In 1938, as Hitler loomed, Churchill gave the commencement address at the University of Bristol, of which he is still its longest serving chancellor. His speech presented a microcosm of his thinking of a lifetime. He began: "There are few words which are used more loosely than the word 'Civilization.' What does it mean? It means a society based upon the opinion of civilians."

To our ears that definition might seem too narrow. Doesn't civilization include painting and poetry? What about prosperity, technology, and progress? What we must understand is that Churchill begins not with a narrow but a *literal* definition. The word "civilization" is cognate with the word for *citizen*—that is, with the word for the member of a nation. When we speak of the civilization of Europe, we are speaking perforce of the nations that make up Europe.

To base a society "upon the opinions of civilians" is a decisive step. Civilians are to be distinguished not only from foreigners, but also from the military. The military is necessarily the strongest force, if one means physical force, in a nation. Relative to the military, civilians are weak. Societies ruled by force are always ruled by, or in alliance with, the military. Civilization, a society based upon "the opinions of civilians," is a society that has found a way to induce the strong to serve the common good and therefore to protect the weak.

Churchill continued: "The central principle of Civilization is the subordination of the ruling authority to the settled customs of the people and to their will as expressed through the Constitution." There must be "a people," and they must have "customs" and a "Constitution." Customs are what we develop as a people when we live together in common life. Customs vary from people to people, but they are called savage when a people are ruled by force. Civilization, on the other hand, "continually [grows] freedom, comfort, and culture." Civilization affords "a wider and less harassed life . . . to the masses of the people." It cherishes "the traditions of the past." The "inheritance bequeathed to us by former wise or valiant men becomes a rich estate to be enjoyed and used by all."

Civilization also requires a constitution, which establishes "parliaments where laws are made, and independent courts of justice in which over long periods those laws are maintained." In the myriad places where Churchill speaks

of constitutionalism, a favorite theme, he adds that the people must have the right and power

> by constitutional action, by free unfettered elections, with secret ballot, to choose or change the character or form of government under which they dwell; that freedom of speech and thought should reign; that courts of justice, independent of the executive, unbiased by any party, should administer laws which have received the broad assent of large majorities or are consecrated by time and custom.

Churchill calls these things the "title deeds of freedom which should lie in every cottage home." And by "every" he means in every nation.

Churchill spent much of his life trying to avoid the horrors of modern war and trying to erect structures to prevent them. But he did not seek to overturn the laws of nature or the sovereignty of nations. These cannot be rightfully overturned, and only disaster can come from the attempt.

Churchill often points out that "parliament" means government by talking. To parley is to talk. The alternative to government by talking is government by force. It is not practical in any way to believe that a world-state, made up of people who cannot speak to each other, who do not live in the same way or have the same customs, could be anything but a despotism. The city, writes Aristotle, grows from our capacity for reason and speech. And so it must be.

In the European Union, to cite an example of a transnational form of government, the peoples of the member states cannot speak to each other, at least not in their familiar language, except through intermediaries. Any British subject can speak with any other, and the French can speak with the French, but those peoples cannot by themselves exercise decisive influence on the politics and policy of the European Union. On this theme one might read Václav Klaus, the former president of the Czech Republic. He lived some of his life under Nazi domination and most of it under Soviet domination in the Warsaw Pact. He helped lead his country to freedom, and he rejoiced and still rejoices that at last he has a country, in which fellow citizens are able to talk and make decisions together. And he is loath to surrender Czech sovereignty to the EU.

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At the same time Churchill believed in the nation as the first element of civilization, he was also one of the inventors of the European Union. He had believed in collective security for decades. In 1946 he gave a speech in Zürich in which he called for a "United States of Europe." This speech is one of the building blocks of European unity, and he is counted as one of its heroes today. Churchill however kept a clear distinction between the collective institutions formed by nations and the nations themselves. In December 1948 he said:

> We are not seeking in the European movement . . . to usurp the functions of Government. I have tried to make this plain, again and again, to the heads of the Government. We ask for a European assembly without executive power. We hope that sentiment and culture, the forgetting of old feuds, the lowering and melting down of barriers of all kinds between countries, the growing sense of being "a good European"—we hope that all these will be the final, eventual and irresistible solvents of the difficulties which

> now condemn Europe to misery. The structure of constitutions, the settlement of economic problems, the military aspects—these belong to governments. We do not trespass upon their sphere.

Churchill spent much of his life trying to avoid the horrors of modern war and trying to erect structures to prevent them. But he did not seek to overturn the laws of nature or the sovereignty of nations. These cannot be rightfully overturned, and only disaster can come from the attempt.

Toward the end of his Armistice Day speech, President Macron called upon the political leaders of the world, on behalf of their peoples, to "take the United Nations' oath to place peace higher than anything." Higher than freedom? Higher than justice? Higher than the lives of our children? Must we abandon "Give me liberty or give me death"? For the sake of peace, should the French have surrendered in 1914 or 1939?

This radical statement of Macron gets near the heart of the movement toward transnationalism. The evils of the world, especially war, require that *anything* is justified to remove those evils—including the subordination of the nation-state, the only kind of community that can effectively represent the people.

President Trump, much derided everywhere as unfashionable, particularly in Europe, often speaks about the importance of the nation and the duty of government to serve the will and the interest of its citizens. This idea is unacceptable in our supposedly enlightened age. But Trump is often clear that he wishes well to other nations and thinks that respect for nationhood is key to good relations. Speaking at the United Nations in September, he said:

> We believe that when nations respect the rights of their neighbors, and defend the interests of their people, they can better work together to secure the blessings of safety, prosperity, and peace.

On this point Trump and Churchill are agreed, and Macron is wrong. To have consent of the governed, there must be a people to give consent. Indeed, that is the first principle derived from human nature in the Declaration of Independence, and it is essential to distinguishing good government from bad. ■