

Jerusalem Letters

The Nationalist Spirit of 2016: A Conservative Spring?

By David Brog and Yoram Hazony, December 7, 2016

A version of this essay appeared in National Review on December 7, 2016. You can read it [here](#). This essay touches on themes that will be discussed at the conference on “Christian-Jewish Alliance: Reclaiming and Rebuilding Conservatism” that David Brog and I, together with Mark Tooley, are convening in Glen Cove, New York, December 18-22. Read the conference announcement [here](#).

Many conservatives are in mourning over Donald Trump’s electoral success. We’re not. Whatever one may think of Trump, and of the dramatic British vote for independence from Europe a few months ago, these events have opened the door to a rebirth of conservatism — and to a conservative movement that is both more authentic to its intellectual traditions and more politically relevant.

The chief conservative complaint about both Trump and Brexit is that they elevate nationalism, a focus on your own nation and people, at the expense of a more global agenda. They see this new nationalism as a betrayal of conservative ideology. We see it as a return.

Conservatives have been nationalists since the days Disraeli was writing novels in London. For Irving Kristol, for example, nationalism was at the center of conservatism. As he saw it, “the three pillars of modern conservatism are religion, nationalism, and economic growth.”

This is another way of saying that Kristol did not confuse conservatism with liberalism. He was firmly committed to entrepreneurship and free markets as the only road to economic prosperity. But he was also relentless in warning that, if left unchecked, liberal individualism and the profit motive would destroy the bonds of national unity, the family, and civility in public life.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Kristol renewed these concerns about the dangers of an unrestrained liberalism, proposing that religious revival and a renascent nationalism had to be “the very core of an emerging American conservatism.” Along these lines, he argued against the continuation of “liberal internationalism” (or “humanitarian imperialism”) in foreign affairs. He insisted that American energies instead had to be turned to meet the challenge of a fraying polity

and of a society of isolated individuals set adrift by “secular, nonjudgmental education, bereft of moral guidance.”

This is a broad conservative outlook that both of us strongly identified with at the time. And we know we weren't the only ones. But over the years, much of this vision was quietly dropped from the conservative agenda, and we found that we were nationalists in a movement that had somehow tilted global. We found ourselves astonished as friends talked of how America and Britain were going to bring democracy to Iraq, Egypt, and Libya. And while we continued to give two cheers for capitalism, we watched in dismay as an awareness that the Bible has to be at the center of any conservative politics was replaced by a cult of liberal individualism that sounded more like Ayn Rand than like William Buckley.

What the vote for British independence and Trump's election have in common is one big idea: the idea that a country isn't just a heap of isolated atoms. That you can't just sweep everyone into a borderless international marketplace as the be-all and end-all of their lives.

Another way of saying this is that America and Britain are still nations. Many people in these countries still believe that there's something unique and important about their history and traditions. Something that binds them to their ancestors and to untold future generations. And it isn't the disgusting white racism that some in the media want us to believe American and British conservatives are now all about, either. It's something fundamentally decent and good that the great majority of Americans and Brits believe these countries stand for and that those who cast a nationalist ballot in 2016 hope to see awakened again.

The American and British turn against liberal internationalism is an opening. It's just possible that the kind of conservative spring Irving Kristol and so many others hoped for after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 may begin to come together now. For the first time in decades, there is a real chance of reclaiming and rebuilding conservatism to speak to these core ideals and popular sentiments.

What would this renewed conservatism look like?

In the first place, such a conservatism will be *nationalist*. That is, it will take pride in the history of English, Dutch, and American nationalism, which fought universal empire and royal absolutism to create the world of free nations we now live in. This was no “white nationalism” but a set of constitutional traditions and ideas that gave both Britain and America their independence from Europe and ultimately set the world free.

Second, such a conservatism will be *biblical*. The Bible is much more than a narrow clutch of “social issues.” Both believers and non-believers can benefit from recognizing the Bible, and especially the Hebrew Bible (or “Old Testament”), as the foundation of our nationalism, our

rights and our liberties. America and Britain are historically Protestant nations, but today an alliance of Old Testament–aware Protestants together with nationalist Catholics, Jews, and others holds out the possibility of an unprecedented cultural renewal amid diversity and tolerance.

Third, such a conservatism will recognize personal *freedom* as a precious, crucial, and cherished value, but not as the only value. While individual citizens must have the right to choose their own path, the Western heritage is also one of vigilance in the long-term preservation of national independence and of the well-being of each nation as a unique community.

Finally, such a conservatism will be *realist* about entering into foreign entanglements. Western nations will always exhibit concern for the betterment of humanity. But independent government entails an especial concern for the lives of one's own sons and daughters, and requires humanitarianism abroad to be coupled with a clear-eyed understanding of the limits of what is feasible.

We do not know what will be the ultimate results of the nationalist spirit of 2016. The future is open, and both good and ill consequences may lie ahead. But we do know that a shakeup in conservative politics and philosophy is long overdue. A rejuvenated conservative ideal may be just the energizing influence that Western nations and the broader world need right now.