The
VIRTUE
of
NATIONALISM
Introduction

A RETURN TO NATIONALISM

Politics in Britain and America have taken a turn toward nationalism. This has been troubling to many, especially in educated circles, where global integration has long been viewed as a requirement of sound policy and moral decency. From this perspective, Britain’s vote to leave the European Union and the “America first” rhetoric coming out of Washington seem to herald a reversion to a more primitive stage in history, when war-mongering and racism were voiced openly and permitted to set the political agenda of nations. Fearing the worst, public figures, journalists, and academics have deplored the return of nationalism to American and British public life in the harshest terms.

But nationalism was not always understood to be the evil that current public discourse suggests. Until only a few decades ago, a nationalist politics was commonly associated with broad-mindedness and a generous spirit. Progressives regarded Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points and the Atlantic Charter of Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill as beacons of hope for mankind—and this precisely because they were considered
expressions of nationalism, promising national independence and self-determination to enslaved peoples around the world. Conservatives from Teddy Roosevelt to Dwight Eisenhower likewise spoke of nationalism as a positive good, and in their day Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were welcomed by conservatives for the “new nationalism” they brought to political life. In other lands, statesmen from Mahatma Gandhi to David Ben-Gurion led nationalist political movements that won widespread admiration and esteem as they steered their peoples to freedom.¹

Surely, the many statesmen and intellectuals who embraced nationalism a few generations ago knew something about this subject, and were not simply trying to drag us back to a more primitive stage in our history, to war-mongering and racism. What, then, did they see in nationalism? There have been surprisingly few attempts, whether in the public sphere or in academia, to answer this question.

My own background allows me some insight into the subject. I have been a Jewish nationalist, a Zionist, all my life.² Like most Israelis, I inherited this political outlook from my parents and grandparents. My family came to Jewish Palestine in the 1920s and early 1930s with the aim of establishing an independent Jewish state there. They succeeded, and I have lived most of my life in a country that was established by nationalists, and has been governed largely by nationalists to this day. Over the years, I have known a great many nationalists, including public figures and intellectuals both from Israel and from other countries. And while not everyone among them has been to my taste, on the whole these are people I deeply admire—for their loyalty and courage, their good sense, and their moral decency. Among them, nationalism is not some unfathomable political

illness that periodically takes over countries for no good reason and to no good end, as many in America and Britain seem to think these days. It is instead a familiar political theory on which they were raised, a theory of how the political world should be ordered.

What is this nationalist political theory about? The nationalism I grew up with is a principled standpoint that regards the world as governed best when nations are able to chart their own independent course, cultivating their own traditions and pursuing their own interests without interference. This is opposed to imperialism, which seeks to bring peace and prosperity to the world by uniting mankind, as much as possible, under a single political regime. I do not suppose that the case for nationalism is unequivocal. Considerations can be mustered in favor of each of these theories. But what cannot be done without obfuscation is to avoid choosing between the two positions:

Either you support in principle, the ideal of an international government or regime that imposes its will on subject nations when its officials regard this as necessary; or you believe that nations should be free to set their own course in the absence of such an international government or regime.³

This debate between nationalism and imperialism became acutely relevant again with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. At that time, the struggle against Communism ended, and the minds of Western leaders became preoccupied with two great imperialist projects: the European Union, which has progressively relieved member nations of many of the powers usually associated with political independence; and the project of establishing an American “world order,” in which nations that do not abide by international law will be coerced into doing so, principally by means of American military might. These
are imperialist projects, even though their proponents do not like to call them that, for two reasons: First, their purpose is to remove decision-making from the hands of independent national governments and place it in the hands of international governments or bodies. And second, as you can immediately see from the literature produced by the individuals and institutions supporting these endeavors, they are consciously part of an imperialist political tradition, drawing their historical inspiration from the Roman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the British Empire. For example, Charles Krauthammer’s argument for American “Universal Dominion,” written at the dawn of the post–Cold War period, calls for America to create a “super-sovereign,” which will preside over the permanent “depreciation . . . of the notion of sovereignty” for all nations on earth. Krauthammer adopts the Latin term pax Americana to describe this vision, invoking the image of the United States as the new Rome: Just as the Roman Empire supposedly established a pax Romana (or “Roman peace”) that obtained security and quiet for all of Europe, so America would now provide security and quiet for the entire world.4

This flowering of imperialist political ideals and projects in the last generation should have sparked a rigorous debate between nationalists and imperialists over how the political world should be organized. But until very recently, a discussion of this kind was largely avoided. Since 1990, when Margaret Thatcher was deposed by her own party for expressing doubts about the European Union, virtually no one in a position of influence in either America or Europe has showed much interest in picking a fight with the broad vision at the heart of these twin empire-building projects.5 This uncanny unanimity allowed both the European Union and American “world order” to move forward without triggering an explosive public debate.

At the same time, political and intellectual spokesmen for these projects remained keenly aware that Europeans might not relish the prospect of a renewed “German empire,” even one that was nominally governed from Brussels. They were mindful, too, that Americans have often balked at the idea of an “American empire.” As a result, almost all public discussion of these efforts was conducted in a murky newspeak riddled with euphemisms such as “new world order,” “ever-closer union,” “openness,” “globalization,” “global governance,” “pooled sovereignty,” “rules-based order,” “universal jurisdiction,” “international community,” “liberal internationalism,” “transnationalism,” “American leadership,” “American century,” “unipolar world,” “indispensable nation,” “hegemon,” “subsidiarity,” “play by the rules,” “the right side of history,” “the end of history,” and so on.6 All of this endured for a generation—until finally the meaning of these phrases began to become clear to a broad public, with the results that we see before us.

Whether the outpouring of nationalist sentiment in Britain and America will, in the end, be for the best, remains to be seen. But perhaps we can all agree on this: The time for vacuous talk is past.7 The debate between nationalism and imperialism is upon us. Imperialism and nationalism are formidable and opposed ideals that have contended with one another in the past, and they have resumed their old conflict in our day. Each of these points of view deserves to be thought about carefully and with due respect, which includes speaking about them in straightforward, unambiguous terms so we can all understand what we are talking about. Let us hope that this debate, so long
overdue, is conducted in a manner that is at once frank, reasoned, and clear.

I have written this book so that we have a statement of the reasons for being a nationalist. In the interest of contributing to a discussion that is as clear and comprehensible as possible, I will understand "globalism" for what it obviously is—a version of the old imperialism. And in the same way, I will not waste time trying to make nationalism prettier by calling it "patriotism," as many do today in circles where nationalism is considered something unseemly. Normally, patriotism refers to the love or loyalty of an individual for his or her own independent nation. The term nationalism can be used in much this way as well, as when we speak of Mazzini as an Italian nationalist or of Gandhi as an Indian nationalist. But nationalism can also be something more than this. There is, as I have said, a long tradition of using this term to refer to a theory of the best political order—that is, to an anti-imperialist theory that seeks to establish a world of free and independent nations. That is how I will be using it in this book.

Once events are seen in light of this long-standing confrontation between two irreconcilably opposed ways of thinking about political order, the entire subject becomes much easier to understand, and a more intelligent conversation can emerge.

My argument will be as follows:

In Part One of the book, "Nationalism and Western Freedom," I offer a basic historical framework for understanding the confrontation between imperialism and nationalism as it has developed among the Western nations. I introduce the distinction between a political order based on the national state, which seeks to rule over one nation alone; and one whose purpose is to bring peace and prosperity by uniting mankind under a single political regime, which is an imperial state. This distinction is central to the political thought of the Hebrew Bible (or "Old Testament"), and in the wake of the Reformation it inspired the renunciation of the authority of the Holy Roman Empire by national states such as England, the Netherlands, and France. Thus began a period of four centuries during which the peoples of Western Europe and America lived under a new Protestant construction of the political world, in which national independence and self-determination came to be regarded as foundational principles. Indeed, these things came to be viewed as among the most precious human possessions and the basis for all our freedoms. An order of independent nations would permit diverse forms of self-government, religion, and culture in a "world of experiments" that would benefit all mankind.

As late as the Second World War, many still believed that the principle of national freedom was the key to a just, diverse, and relatively peaceful world. But Hitler changed all that, and today we live in the aftermath, in which a simplistic narrative, ceaselessly repeated, asserts that "nationalism caused two world wars and the Holocaust." And who, in fact, would want to be a nationalist if nationalism means supporting racism and bloodshed on an unimaginable scale?

With nationalism thus tarred as having caused the greatest evils of our age, it is not surprising that the old intuitions favoring national independence have been gradually attenuated and finally even discredited. Today, many have come to regard an intense personal loyalty to the national state and its independence as something not only unnecessary but morally suspect. They no longer regard national loyalties and traditions as providing a sound basis for determining the laws we live by, for
regulating the economy and making decisions about defense and security, for establishing public norms concerning religion and education, or for deciding who gets to live in what part of the world. The new world they envision is one in which liberal theories of the rule of law, the market economy, and individual rights—all of which evolved in the domestic context of national states such as Britain, the Netherlands, and America—are regarded as universal truths and considered the appropriate basis for an international regime that will make the independence of the national state unnecessary. What is being proposed, in other words, is a new "liberal empire" that will replace the old Protestant order based on independent national states. It is empire that is supposed to save us from the evils of nationalism.

But have supporters of the new imperialism correctly described what nationalism is and where it comes from? Are they right in attributing to nationalism the greatest evils of the last century? And is a renewed imperialism really the solution?

In my view, all these things appear exceedingly doubtful. And in Part Two, "The Case for the National State," I argue for regarding a world based on independent national states as the best political order, in the process showing why we should reject the imperialism that is now so much in fashion. This part of the book offers a philosophy of political order based on a comparison of the three rival ways of organizing the political world that are known to us from experience: the order of tribes and clans that is found in virtually all pre-state societies; an international order under an imperial state; and an order of independent national states.

Most recent attempts to compare a "globalist" political order with a world of national states have been focused on the proposed economic and security advantages of a unified legal regime for the entire world. But according to the view I defend here, arguments based on economics and security are too narrow to provide an adequate answer to the question of the best political order. In reality, much of what takes place in political life is motivated by concerns arising from our membership in collectives such as families, tribes, and nations. Human beings are born into such collectives or adopt them later in life, and are tied to them by powerful bonds of mutual loyalty among their members. In fact, we come to regard these collectives as an integral part of ourselves. Many, if not most, political aims are derived from responsibilities or duties that we feel we have, not to ourselves as individuals, but to an extended "self" that incorporates our family, tribe, or nation. These include a concern for the lives and property of members of the collective to which we are loyal. But we are also powerfully motivated by shared concerns that are not physical in this way: the need to maintain the internal cohesiveness of the family, tribe, or nation, and the need to strengthen its unique cultural inheritance and pass it on to the next generation.

We cannot accurately describe these dimensions of human political motivation in terms of the individual's desire to protect his life, personal freedom, and property. Each of us in fact wants and needs something else in addition, which I suggest we call collective self-determination: the freedom of the family, tribe, or nation. This is the freedom that we feel when the collective to which we are loyal gains in strength, and develops those special qualities and characteristics that give it unique significance in our eyes.

In the liberal political tradition, the desire and need for such collective self-determination tends to be regarded as primitive and dispensable. It is assumed that with the advent of modernity,
individuals free themselves from motivations of this kind. But I will argue that nothing like this actually happens. British and American concepts of individual liberty are not universals that can be immediately understood and desired by everyone, as is often claimed. They are themselves the cultural inheritance of certain tribes and nations. Americans or British who seek the extension of these concepts around the world continue to give voice to the age-old desire for collective self-determination, which moves them to want to see their own cultural inheritance grow in strength and influence—even if it means destroying the inheritance of others who may see things differently.

My argument points to a number of decisive advantages of organizing the political world around independent national states. Among others, I suggest that the order of national states offers the greatest possibility of collective self-determination; that it inculcates an aversion to the conquest of foreign nations, and opens the door to a tolerance of diverse ways of life; and that it establishes a life of astonishingly productive competition among nations as each strives to attain the maximal development of its abilities and those of its individual members. In addition, I find that the powerful mutual loyalties that are at the heart of the national state give us the only known foundation for the development of free institutions and individual liberties.

These and other considerations suggest that a world of independent national states is the best political order to which we can aspire. This does not mean, however, that we should endorse a universal right to self-determination, as Woodrow Wilson proposed. Not all of the thousands of stateless peoples in the world can or will have political independence, so what place should the principle of national independence have in the affairs of nations? I conclude Part Two by considering what can be the relevance of the order of national states for a real-world international arena in which political independence cannot be applied always and everywhere.

The argument most commonly made against a nationalist politics is that it encourages hatred and bigotry. And there is certainly some truth in this: In every nationalist movement, one finds individuals who are haters and bigots. But what conclusion should we draw from this fact? To my mind, its significance is weakened by the realization that universal political ideals—of the kind that are so prominent, for example, in the European Union—seem invariably to generate hatred and bigotry to at least the same degree as nationalist movements. In Part Three, “Anti-Nationalism and Hate,” I investigate this phenomenon, comparing the hatred between rival national or tribal groups that feel threatened by one another, with the hatred that proponents of imperialist or universalist ideologies feel toward national or tribal groups that refuse to accept their claim to be bringing salvation and peace to the world. The most famous example of the hatred generated by imperialist or universalist ideologies is perhaps Christian anti-Semitism. But Islam, Marxism, and liberalism have proved themselves quite capable of inflaming similarly vicious hatreds against groups that are determined to resist the universal doctrines they propose. In fact, I suggest that liberal-imperialist political ideals have become among the most powerful agents fomenting intolerance and hate in the Western world today. This is not itself a recommendation for nationalism. But it does suggest that hatred may be endemic to political movements in general, and that the dispute between nationalism and imperialism should be decided on other grounds.
In the Conclusion, “The Virtue of Nationalism,” I offer some brief remarks on the relationship between nationalism and personal character. All my life, I have heard it said that nationalism corrupts the human personality. This is an opinion I have heard from Christians and Muslims, liberals and Marxists, all of whom consider nationalism to be a vice because it seeks to raise barriers among people, when we should be tearing them down. My own understanding is different. In my father’s house I was taught that to be a nationalist is a virtue. I explain how this can be so, showing that an orientation toward an order of independent nations can pave the way for certain positive traits of character that are more difficult, if not impossible, to attain so long as one remains committed to the dream of empire.

Much remains uncertain about the exact course that the revived nationalism in Britain, America, and other nations will take. But whatever direction the political winds may yet turn, it is certain that the fault line that has been uncovered at the heart of Western public life is not going away. The politics of nations are rearranging themselves along this fault, dividing those who wish to retain the old nationalist foundations of our political world from educated elites who have, to one degree or another, become committed to a future under an imperial order. At this time, then, there can hardly be a subject more worthy of careful attention than that of nationalism and imperialism.

In addressing this subject, I will employ and develop political concepts such as nation, empire, independence, national freedom, self-determination, loyalty, tribe, tradition, and toleration. Many of these terms have a somewhat antiquated feel to them, but I ask the reader’s patience in this regard. It is true that these and related concepts have been largely sidelined in recent years in favor of a discourse that seeks to understand political problems almost entirely in terms of the state, equality, personal freedom, rights, consent, and race. But this constriction in our political vision is itself one of the principal difficulties facing us today. The political world cannot be reduced to these terms, and the attempt to do so induces blindness in crucial areas—blindness, followed by disorientation when we begin colliding with things that are still quite real, even if we cannot see them any longer. A broader range of political concepts, updated for use at this time, can do much to restore the full range of our vision and dispel the confusion that has overtaken us. Once we can see the roads clearly, deciding which way to go becomes easier as well.
Part One

NATIONALISM AND WESTERN FREEDOM
I: Two Visions of World Order

For centuries, the politics of Western nations have been characterized by a struggle between two antithetical visions of world order: an order of free and independent nations, each pursuing the political good in accordance with its own traditions and understanding; and an order of peoples united under a single regime of law, promulgated and maintained by a single supranational authority. In recent generations, the first vision has been represented by nations such as India, Israel, Japan, Norway, South Korea, Switzerland—and of course by Britain, in the wake of its turn toward independence. The second vision is held by much of the leadership of the European Union, which reaffirmed its commitment to the concept of an “ever closer union” of peoples in the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, and has proceeded since then to introduce EU laws and currency into most member nations, as well as requiring the free movement of populations among most member states. The United States, committed from its founding to the ideal of an independent national state, was for the most part able to maintain this character until the Second World War. But in the face of competition with the Soviet Union, and especially after the end of the Cold War, it has deviated from this model of national independence and has increasingly sought the establishment of a worldwide regime of law that would be enforced upon all nations by means of American power.

The conflict between these two visions of the best political order is as old as the West itself. The idea that the political order should be based on independent nations was an important feature of ancient Israelite thought as reflected in the Hebrew Bible (or “Old Testament”). And although Western civilization, for most of its history, has been dominated by dreams of universal empire, the presence of the Bible at the heart of this civilization has ensured that the idea of the self-determining, independent nation would be revived time and again.

Why is the Bible so concerned with the independence of nations? The world of Israel’s prophets was dominated by a succession of imperial powers: Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, and Persia, each giving way to the next. Despite their differences, each of these empires sought to impose a universal political order on mankind as a whole, the gods having sent them to suppress needless disputes among peoples and to create a unified international realm in which men could live together in peace and prosperity. “None hungered in my years or thirsted in them,” Pharaoh Amenemhet I wrote a few centuries before Abraham. “Men dwelled in peace through that which I wrought.” And this was no idle boast. By ending warfare in vast regions and harnessing their populations to productive agricultural work, imperial powers were in fact able to bring to millions a relatively reliable peace and an end to the threat of starvation. No wonder, then, that the imperial rulers of the ancient world saw it as their task, in the words of the Babylonian king Hammurabi, to “bring the four quarters of the world to obedience.” That obedience was what made salvation from war, disease, and starvation possible.

Yet despite the obvious economic advantages of an Egyptian or Babylonian peace that would unify humanity, the Bible
was born out of a deep-seated opposition to this very aim. To Israel’s prophets, Egypt was “the house of bondage,” and they spared no words in deploving the bloodshed and cruelty involved in imperial conquest and in the imperial manner of governing, its recourse to slavery and murder and its expropriation of women and property. All of this, the Israelite prophets argued, stemmed from Egypt’s idolatry—from its submission to gods who would justify any sacrifice so long as it advanced the extension of the imperial realm of peace and kept the production of grain running at maximum capacity.

Was there a viable alternative to universal empire? The ancient Near East had much experience with localized political power in the form of city-states. But for the most part, these were helpless before imperial armies and the ideology of universal empire that motivated them. It is in the Bible that we find the first sustained presentation of a different possibility: a political order based on the independence of a nation living within limited borders alongside other independent nations.

By nation, I mean a number of tribes with a common language or religion, and a past history of acting as a body for the common defense and other large-scale enterprises. The Bible systematically promotes the idea that the members of a nation should regard one another as “brothers” and Mosaic law offered the Israelites a constitution that would bring them together in what would today be called a national state. The king of such a state would be drawn “from among your brothers.” Its prophets, too, would be “from among you, from among your brothers.” And so would its priests, appointed to guard the traditional laws of the nation and teach them to the king “so that his thoughts should not be lifted above his brothers.” Moreover, Moses sets boundaries for Israel, instructing his people to keep their hands off the lands of neighboring kingdoms like Moav, Edom, and Ammon, which deserve their own independence. As he tells them in God’s name:

Take good heed of yourselves therefore. Meddle not with [the children of Esau], for I will not give you of their land. No, not so much a foot’s breadth. Because I have given Mt. Seir to Esau for a possession. . . . Do not harass Moav, nor contend with them in battle, for I will not give you of their land for a possession, because I have given Ar to the children of Lot for a possession. . . . And when you come near, opposite the children of Ammon, harass them not, nor contend with them, for I will not give you of the land of the children of Ammon any possession, for I have given it to the children of Lot for a possession.11

Nor are these passages unique. Throughout the Bible, we find that the political aspiration of the prophets of Israel is not empire but a free and unified nation living in justice and peace amid other free nations.12

The Bible thus puts a new political conception on the table: a state of a single nation that is united, self-governing, and uninterested in bringing its neighbors under its rule. This state is governed not by foreigners responsible to a ruler in a distant land but by kings and governors, priests and prophets drawn from the ranks of the nation itself—individuals who are, for just this reason, thought to be better able to stay in touch with the needs of their own people, their “brothers,” including the less fortunate among them.

In addition, because the Israelite king is one of the people, and not the representative of some abstract universal ambition,
his powers can be circumscribed to prevent abuse. Unlike the kings of Egypt or Babylonia, the Israelite king under the Mosaic constitution is not empowered to make the laws, which are the heritage of his nation and not subject to his whim. Nor does he have the power to appoint the priesthood, thereby making law and religion subservient to him. Moreover, the Mosaic law limits the king’s right to tax and enslave the people, just as the limitations on Israel’s borders prevent the king from embracing the dream of universal conquest.\[^{15}\]

It is important to notice that the Israelites’ conception of the nation has nothing to do with biology, or what we call race.\[^{14}\] For biblical nations, everything depends on a shared understanding of history, language, and religion that is passed from parents to children, but which outsiders can join as well. Thus the book of Exodus teaches that there were many Egyptians who attached themselves to the Hebrew slaves in fleeing Egypt, and that they received the Ten Commandments (more accurately translated as the “Ten Precepts”) at Sinai with the rest of Israel. Similarly, Moses invites the Midianite sheikh Jethro to join the Jewish people. And Ruth the Moabite becomes part of Israel when she is ready to tell Naomi “your people is my people and your God is my God,” her son being the forefather of King David himself. But the ability of Israel to bring these foreign-born individuals into its ranks depends on their willingness to accept Israel’s God, laws, and understanding of history. Without embracing these central aspects of Israelite tradition, they will not become a part of the Israeli nation.\[^{15}\]

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II: The Roman Church and Its Vision of Empire

The Jews were not the only people to recognize the potential of a national form of political organization as a bulwark against the tyranny of universal empire. The Greek historian Polybius blamed the Greek city-states for not having acted as a unified nation in their lost struggle with Rome. A Greek national state had never existed in history. But Polybius had before him the examples of the Armenians and the Jews under the Maccabees—two nations that, in his lifetime, revolted successfully against the Seleucid-Greek empire and established themselves as independent national states—and he apparently hoped for a united Greece one day as well.\[^{16}\]

Throughout much of the history of Western peoples, however, the ideal of national independence remained largely in abeyance. Christianity eventually succeeded in establishing itself as the state religion of Rome. In the process, it adopted the Roman dream of universal empire, and the project of Roman law, which aspired to provide a single framework for a pax Romana (“Roman peace”) extending to all nations.\[^{17}\] For more than a thousand years, Christianity thus aligned itself, not with the ideal of setting the nations free as had been proposed by the Israelite prophets, but with much the same aspiration that had given rise to imperial Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia: the aspiration of establishing a universal empire of peace and prosperity.\[^{18}\]

Regarding itself as the “Catholic” or universal church, the Roman church was allied, in theory and often in practice as well, with the German Holy Roman emperors, who were entrusted
with establishing the universal Christian empire. In this, Roman Catholic political thought paralleled that of the Muslim caliphs and the Chinese emperors, who likewise believed they had been charged with bringing peace and prosperity to the world under the rule of a universal empire of their own.  

But Christian political thought differed from that of Islam or China in at least one crucial respect: Christianity had the Hebrew Bible, with its vision of the justice of a world of independent nations. This vision never ceased to cause trouble for the idea of a universal Catholic empire, even if many Christian thinkers were hesitant to embrace the Old Testament too closely. It was the presence of the Hebrew Bible in the Christian canon that shaped the peculiar history of French Catholicism, which took on a national character modeled on the biblical Davidic kingdom and stubbornly resisted the control of popes and emperors. It shaped, as well, the unique national-religious traditions of the English, Poles, and Czechs well before the Reformation.

Thus when Protestantism emerged in the sixteenth century, along with the invention of the printing press and the widespread circulation of the Bible translated into the languages of the nations, the new call for freedom to interpret Scripture without the authority of the Catholic Church did not affect religious doctrine alone. Especially under the influence of Old Testament–oriented thinkers such as Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, Protestantism embraced and quickly became tied to the unique national traditions of peoples chafing against ideas and institutions that they regarded as foreign to them. In 1534, Henry VIII asserted the independence of an English-Anglican nation, a status that achieved finality with the defeat of a Spanish-Catholic invasion fleet by his daughter Elizabeth in 1588. The revolt of the Dutch against their Spanish overlords likewise pitted a Calvinist insurrection against Catholic empire, culminating in the Dutch declaring themselves an independent nation in 1581. The Scottish national covenants of the same time, modeled on the Jewish national covenants of the Bible, were similarly motivated. The self-image of these Protestant peoples as rightfully independent in the face of imperial opposition was often explicitly modeled on biblical Israel’s effort to wrest its national and religious freedom from the dictates of Egyptian and Babylonian universal empire.

The Thirty Years’ War, ending in the peace of Westphalia in 1648, is often said to have been a “war of religion” fought between Protestants and Catholics. But this is not quite right. The war actually pitted the emerging national states of France, the Netherlands, and Sweden (nations that were, respectively, Catholic, Calvinist, and Lutheran) against German and Spanish armies devoted to the idea that universal empire reflected God’s will, and that such empire alone could bring true well-being to mankind. It was in the Thirty Years’ War that the concept of a universal Christian empire, which had held sway over the West’s political imagination for thirteen centuries, was decisively defeated.

III: The Protestant Construction of the West

The period between the English Act of Supremacy and the Westphalia treaties gave a new, Protestant construction to the West. By the middle of the seventeenth century, a ring of independent national states on the Western rim of
Europe—England, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, Sweden, and Denmark—had given what later came to be known as the Westphalian political order its distinctive form. Although the settlement was not officially accepted by the Catholic Church (Pope Innocent X said that it “was, is and forever will be, null, void, invalid, iniquitous, unjust, damnable, repugnate, inane, and entirely devoid of effect”)[25], in practice it refounded the entire political order in accordance with the theory of the independent national state that had been advanced by English and Dutch Protestantism during the preceding century.[26] Under this Protestant construction, the political life of Europe was rebuilt upon two principles, both of them having their origins in the Old Testament:

1. The Moral Minimum Required for Legitimate Government. First, the king or ruler, in order to rule by right, had to devote himself to the protection of his people in their life, family, and property, to justice in the courts, to the maintenance of the sabbath, and to the public recognition of the one God—roughly, the biblical Ten Precepts given at Sinai, which both Luther and Calvin regarded as a natural law that could be recognized by all men. These precepts were seen as providing the minimum requirements for a life of personal freedom and dignity for all. A government incapable of maintaining this moral minimum was one that had failed in its most basic obligations to the well-being of its people.[27]

2. The Right of National Self-Determination. Second, nations that were cohesive and strong enough to secure their political independence would henceforth be regarded as possessing what later came to be called a right of self-determination, by which was meant the right to govern themselves under their own national constitutions and churches without interference from foreign powers. Thus, while it was accepted that there exist natural minimum requirements for maintaining a civilized society, and that, in line with the first principle, these were binding upon all governments, it was not expected that all nations would become as one in their thoughts, laws, or way of life.[28]

The two principles of the Protestant construction were not entirely new. The idea that a ruler must serve as the protector of his people had existed in various forms throughout the history of Christendom. This had already been articulated explicitly in the twelfth century by Catholic political theorists such as Honorius of Augsburg and John of Salisbury, relying on the Mosaic law in Deuteronomy and the descriptions of the Israelite kingdoms in the books of Samuel and Kings.[29]

But the second principle—permitting each nation to determine for itself what constitutes a legitimate ruler, a legitimate church, and appropriate laws and liberties—brought the Christian world directly into dialogue with the biblical vision of an order of independent nations. And it was this principle that set the world free. In the context of post-Westphalian Europe, this meant that some nations would be monarchies while others would be republics.[It meant that different nations would have different forms of national religion, as well as varying provisions for the protection of minority religions. It also meant that different nations would manifest different degrees of personal freedom in various areas. An outstanding example of such variety was the English constitution, which, as John Fortescue’s In Praise of the Laws of England (published c. 1543) emphasized, diverged dramatically from that of the French and Germans, following
biblical precedent in removing the determination of the laws from the hands of the king—a crucial characteristic of limited government that was later known as the "separation of powers." The Dutch Republic, as well, offered an exceptional degree of personal freedom of expression, with the result that science, trade, and publishing flowed to Amsterdam from other nations more skeptical of the value of such openness. What made these innovations possible, however, was not a doctrine enumerating a list of "universal rights." Rather, it was the "ancient customs and privileges" of the English and Dutch nations.

In works of Protestant political theory such as John Selden's *On Natural Law and National Law* (1640), the two principles of the Protestant construction are understood as reinforcing one another. This is an intuition drawn from Hebrew Scripture, which emphasizes that a nation whose rulers will protect their people and pursue their well-being will establish mutual loyalty and gain cohesiveness in the face of hardship. Internal brotherhood and justice, the prophets believed, is the necessary prerequisite for national longevity and for the capacity to resist foreign encroachment.

Yet these two principles also stand in tension with each other. On the one hand, the idea that there are natural standards of legitimacy higher than the dictates of any particular government means that nations cannot rightly do whatever they please. They are always subject to judgment by God and man, and this necessarily makes government conditional. On the other hand, the principle of national freedom strengthens and protects the unique institutions, traditions, laws, and ideals of a given nation against the claim that they must be overturned in the name of doctrines being promoted by the advocates of a universal church or empire. While the existence of a moral minimum is recognized, interpreting how this minimum will be expressed is taken to be a right of every independent nation, each approaching the issue from a perspective rooted in its own historical circumstances, experience, and insight.

The tension inherent in maintaining both principles of the Protestant construction imparted a unique dynamism to the nations of Europe, releasing a storm of dormant energies and fostering a stunning degree of experiment and innovation in government and theology, economics, and science. By permitting a diversity of constitutional and religious arrangements within different countries, the Protestant order also provided national laboratories for developing and testing the institutions and freedoms we now associate with the Western world. And the contest among rival national perspectives went far beyond political theory and theology. English empirical science was fueled by outrage over the deductive character of the Cartesian method, which the French, in turn, insisted was the only truly "rational" way to advance science. German philosophy likewise thrived on the belief that British empiricism was a grand catastrophe, and that Immanuel Kant's idealism would save us all. The same could be said for virtually any field in which European civilization made significant advances, including finance, industry, medicine, philosophy, music, and art. In each case, rival points of view, recognized at the time as being distinctly national in character, were proposed as being best for mankind as a whole, spurring others to imitate what they saw as successful, even as they incited renewed efforts to rebuild defeated approaches more intelligently so that they might fight another day.

None of this is to say that post-Westphalian Europe was some kind of idyll. The Christian national states were constantly
resorting to war over territories and trade, a habit that cannot but strike us as a willingness to accept gratuitous bloodshed. Moreover, even as the English, Dutch, and French insisted upon the Westphalian principle of national independence and self-determination within the European context, they were all too ready to devise reasons for maintaining colonial empires based on the conquest and subjugation of foreign peoples in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. These states—and later the United States as well—also long maintained unconscionable racialist arrangements and institutions, and placed a variety of barriers before the participation of Jews in national life. One could easily add to the list of practices from that period that we would and should find objectionable.

Yet for all its evident shortcomings, the argument for the international order introduced into Europe in early modernity remains: As an order based on the principle of national freedom, it imparted a remarkably beneficial political and religious form to the Western nations—a form that provided a basis for the eventual remediation of many of its deficiencies. In time, the Protestant principle of national freedom did put an end to Europe’s overseas empires. And in so doing, it brought about the founding of new national states around the world, among them the United States of America and a restored Jewish state of Israel.

IV: John Locke and the Liberal Construction

In August 1941, several months before America’s entry into the Second World War, Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill signed what became known as the Atlantic Charter, which reaffirmed the principle of national freedom ("the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live") as the very heart of the Western powers’ vision for the postwar world. Both leaders continued to speak of their nations as committed to what Roosevelt called "the old ideals of Christianity," which they understood as undergirding the freedom of their own nations, no less than that of other nations. At this critical juncture, the Protestant construction remained the basis for the political order in the West. The great challenge was to defeat the Nazis and the Soviets in their efforts to overthrow this order.  

But the defeat of the Nazis, and ultimately also of the Soviets, did not bring about the restoration of the Protestant construction of the West. In fact, in the years since the end of the Second World War, the future of this political order has only grown increasingly uncertain. We can see this in the progressive abandonment of the view that family, sabbath, and public recognition of God are institutions upheld by legitimate government and minimum requirements of a just society (i.e., the first principle). And we can see it in the sharp decline of concern for safeguarding the political independence of nations as the most effective barriers to the tyranny of universal empire, culminating in the reconstitution of Europe under a
multinational regime, and the increasing tendency to identify American power with a new world order that will supersede the independence of nations (i.e., the second principle).

This crisis in the Protestant political order is being driven by pressure from an emerging alternative to it—an alternative that can be called the liberal construction of the West. Although its ultimate triumph is by no means assured, the rise of this new liberal order, to the point that it has succeeded in putting the entire Protestant order in jeopardy, is the most significant political development of our time.

What is this liberal construction? I will touch on a few of its most important characteristics, some more familiar than others.

Unlike the Protestant construction, which thrived on the tension between the two biblically derived principles of national freedom and the moral minimum for legitimate rule, the liberal construction of the West assumes that there is only one principle at the base of legitimate political order: individual freedom. A classical and still influential source for this idea is modernity’s most famous liberal manifesto, John Locke’s Second Treatise of Government. Published in 1689, it opens with the assertion that all human individuals are born in “perfect freedom” and “perfect equality,” and goes on to describe them as pursuing life, liberty, and property in a world of transactions based on consent. From this basis, Locke builds his model of political life and theory of government.

Locke himself was a product of the Protestant construction, and his work was intended to strengthen it, not to undermine it. Nevertheless, in fashioning his theory, Locke downplayed or entirely omitted essential aspects of human nature and motivation without which no political philosophy can make sense. Every theory involves a reduction or simplification of its material, of course. But a well-framed theory will capture the most consequential features of the domain being studied, while a poorly framed one will let crucial elements slip away unnoticed. And so it is with the Second Treatise, which offers a rationalist view of human political life that has abstracted away every bond that ties human beings to one another other than consent. In speaking of “consent,” Locke means that the individual becomes a member of a human collective only because he has agreed to it, and has obligations toward such collectives only if he has accepted them. This is flattering to the individual, since it makes it seem as though the important choices are almost always his to decide. However, it is painfully lacking as a description of the empirical political world, in which mutual loyalties bind human beings into families, tribes, and nations, and each of us receives a certain religious and cultural inheritance as a consequence of being born into such collectives. It ignores the responsibilities that are intrinsic to both inherited and adopted membership in collectives of this kind, establishing demands on individuals that do not arise as a result of consent and do not disappear if consent is withheld. And it is oblivious to the effects of a common adversity, which brings inevitable challenges and hardships to families, tribes, and nations, reinforcing the responsibilities to the collective and turning them into the most acutely felt, and often immovable, features of the moral and political landscape. No intelligent account of politics, or of political obligation, can be devised that does not give great weight to these factors. And Locke’s account, which elides them, is in effect a far-reaching depreciation of the most basic bonds that hold society together.
Consider the family as an example. Most of us suppose that brothers and sisters born to the same parents have a special responsibility to help one another in a time of need that takes precedence over other obligations. In the same way, we would suppose that grandparents have obligations toward their grandchildren, and that grandchildren have obligations toward their grandparents. But none of these family relationships are the result of consent: One does not choose one’s brothers or one’s grandchildren. And so these obligations must derive from other sources. Locke’s model, however, which seeks to found the family on free choice and consent, generates no such obligations. This is to say that anyone embracing the premises of the Second Treatise would be unable even to understand, much less justify, the existence of the family as we know it and the ties of responsibility that give it shape.38

Much the same can be said of Locke’s theory of the state. The state that is brought into being in the Second Treatise is the product of consent alone: Individuals feel that their life and property are insufficiently secure, so they choose to form a pact to defend those interests.39 But this pact in defense of one’s property bears little resemblance to the national states that we know from experience. In real life, nations are communities bound together by bonds of mutual loyalty, carrying forward particular traditions from one generation to the next. They possess common historical memories, language and texts, rites and boundaries, imparting to their members a powerful identification with their forefathers and a concern for what will be the fate of future generations. I am thinking, for instance, of the way in which Fortescue’s belief in the superiority of the laws of England resounded through the centuries of his heirs, or of the way in which England’s historic dread of domination by Catholic Spain gave life to the institutions and wars in that land over generations. Attachments and dispositions such as these move the individual to serve his or her country, not only for the sake of their lives and property, but even at the cost of sacrificing these very things. Yet in most cases, they are instilled in us in childhood, and are no more freely chosen than the identity of one’s brothers and sisters or one’s grandparents. A Lockean theory of the state does not enable us to understand, much less justify, the existence of the national state and the ties of obligation that give it shape.

In reducing political life to the individual’s pursuit of life and property, Locke did not merely offer an impoverished and unsuccessful account of human motivation and action. His political theory summoned into being a dream-world, a utopian vision, in which the political institutions of the Jewish and Christian world—the national state, community, family, and religious tradition—appear to have no reason to exist. All of these are institutions that result from and impart bonds of loyalty and common purpose to human collectives, creating borders and boundaries between one group and another, establishing ties to future and past generations, and offering a glimpse beyond the present to something higher. An individual who has no motives other than to preserve his life and expand his property, and who is under no obligations other than those to which he has consented, will have little need for any of these things. Without intending to, the dream-world offered by Locke’s Second Treatise rendered most of the Protestant order senseless and superfluous.

Locke’s first readers were deeply troubled by this. It moved the great British statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke, for example, to declare on the floor of Parliament that of all
books ever written, the Second Treatise was “one of the worst.”\textsuperscript{40}
But the radical deficiency of Locke’s account has gradually ceased to be recognized as a problem. Western intellectuals have come to delight in it, until today we are inundated with follow-up works—from Rousseau’s On the Social Contract (1762) and Kant’s Perpetual Peace (1795) to Ayn Rand’s Atlas Shrugged (1957) and John Rawls’s A Theory of Justice (1972)—tirelessly elaborating this dream-world, working and reworking the vision of free and equal human beings, pursuing life and property and living under obligations that arise from their own free consent. A theory or program that is committed to this nationalist framework is what I will call a liberal theory or program.\textsuperscript{41}

It is worth paying particular attention to the inability of liberal political theories to account for the existence of borders between nations. Protestant political theory followed Hebrew Scripture in considering national boundaries to be no less important for the peace and well-being of mankind than property boundaries. Locke’s attempt to derive the existence of the state from the consent of an arbitrary group of property owners, however, eliminates this understanding of the nation as an intrinsically bounded entity living in a more or less determinate territory. In the Second Treatise, there is no in-principle limit to the size of state or the number of people whose property it can propose to protect, and the state is in fact eerily without boundaries or borders of any kind. According to the law of nature, Locke writes, “mankind are one community.” The existence of political boundaries among men is, as far as he is concerned, nothing but a product of human “corruption and viciousness.”\textsuperscript{42} Since the law of nature is for Locke identical with universal reason, this means that men guided by reason, and therefore neither corrupt nor vicious, will have no need for national boundaries at all.

As long as liberal political theories were being promoted in a context still under the sway of strong Calvinist or Anglican Old Testament traditions, the inability of these liberal theories to provide any sense of the nation as a bounded community was of little consequence. Statesmen and philosophers raised on the Bible just assumed that their own nation was, like ancient Israel, a bounded entity that sought freedom and independence from other nations. But as liberalism has detached itself from its biblical and Protestant origins, its non-nationalist character has become ever more pronounced. Since all men are equally in need of having their lives and property protected, a politics based on liberalism alone—without any supplement from biblical tradition—means that the persistence of independent national states will be, at best, a matter of indifference.\textsuperscript{43} And if the independence and internal cohesion of nations are expected to exact a cost in lives or property, then even this indifference quickly disperses, leaving liberals with an inclination to do without the independent national state entirely.\textsuperscript{44} Thus by the early twentieth century, Ludwig von Mises’s Liberalism in the Classical Tradition openly advocated dispensing with national states in favor of a “world super-state.”\textsuperscript{45} Friedrich Hayek, the most important theoretician of liberalism of the last century, likewise argued that a consistent application of “the liberal point of view” leads to an international federal state without significant boundaries between nations—an aspiration that he strongly endorsed.\textsuperscript{46}

Not long ago, such conclusions still sounded outlandish. But things have changed. In recent decades, liberal political
and economic theories and conceptions of international law have succeeded in driving out more conservative and realistic accounts of the political order, becoming the virtually unquestioned framework for what an educated person needs to know about the political world. With a few exceptions, the most widely discussed debates among competing views in political theory, economics, and jurisprudence are now almost entirely internal to the Lockean paradigm, which is often taught and discussed as though there are no meaningful alternatives to it. University-educated political and intellectual elites in America and Europe are for the most part now sequestered within this liberal frame, regardless of their party affiliation. One need only ask a thoughtful person trained in the fields of politics or economics or law to mount a defense of the institution of the national state, or of the family, or of public recognition of God’s kingship, to immediately see how unfamiliar these things have become, and how foreign they are to the terms in which members of our elites are accustomed to conceptualizing the world. This isn’t just a matter of disagreeing with the proposition that such things are vital to maintaining a civilized political order. It is rather a matter of being so immersed in the political framework of the liberal construction as to be unable even to imagine what a non-Lockean view of reality might look like.

Having been initiated into this liberal paradigm, educated men and women can now find employment within a vast array of projects that assume a liberal construction of the world is coming: the political program of European unification; the expansion of unfettered free trade and the free immigration of populations; the transitioning of business enterprises into “multinational” corporations that serve the global economy rather than any particular national interest; the subjugation of nations to an ever-expanding body of international law; the agitation for a universal regime of human rights through nongovernmental organizations, UN bodies, and international courts; the homogenization of the world’s universities by way of a system of international standards and peer review. All these things are pursued as a matter of course by university-trained Lockeans, hardly aware that there might be intelligent and decent persons whose estimation of the worth of such enterprises is very different from their own. It is simply assumed that one can either be “on the right side of history” or “on the wrong side of history,” and that when you are working at building up the new liberal order, you are on the right side.

But despite the great success these enterprises have had in altering the face of our world, and their genuine worth in some fields, the Lockean account remains what it was: a utopian view of human nature and motivations, and a radically insufficient basis for understanding political reality. Those factors in human political and social life that have no place in the liberal paradigm have not been eliminated, as I will argue at greater length in Part Two of this book. They have only been denied and suppressed. And like Marxists before them, liberals will discover that while denial is easy, suppression comes at an escalating cost.

V: Nationalism Discredited

Until not very long ago, support for the independence and self-determination of nations was an indication of a progressive politics and a generous spirit. Not only did Americans celebrate