

Polishing the Nationalist Brand in the Trump Era

Conservative thinkers are trying to bring intellectual coherence to the Trumpian moment under the banner of nationalism. But can it be cleansed of its darker currents?

The Fox News host Tucker Carlson speaking on July 14 at the National Conservatism Conference in Washington, which aimed to unite the fractured conservative intellectual establishment under the banner of nationalism. Credit Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times



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By Jennifer Schuessler

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WASHINGTON — Ever since Donald J. Trump laid waste to its ideological shibboleths with his victory at the polls, the conservative intellectual class has been scrambling to keep up with him.

And earlier this week, at the first major gathering dedicated to wresting a coherent ideology out of the chaos of the Trumpist moment, the president was upending their efforts again.

On Sunday evening, some 500 policy thinkers, theorists, journalists and students gathered in a ballroom at the Ritz-Carlton here for the start of the [National Conservatism Conference](#), a three-day event dedicated to charting a new path for conservatism under the banner of nationalism.

And not the kind associated with tiki torches and Nazi salutes, the conference was at pains to make clear.

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“We are nationalists, not white nationalists,” David Brog, one of the organizers, said in his welcoming remarks, calling any equation of the two “a slander.” He then pointed to the door and invited anyone who “defines our American nation in terms of race” who had slipped through the conference’s careful screening to leave.

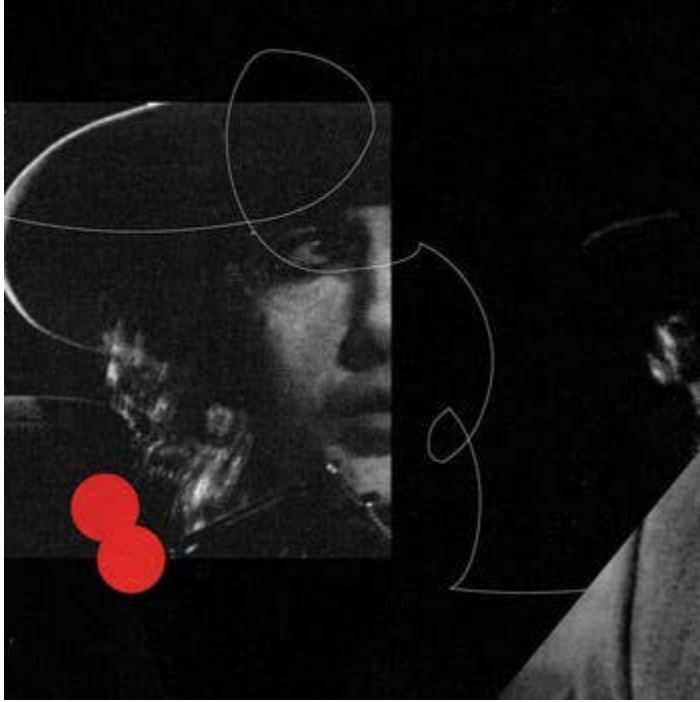
But inconveniently, just a few hours earlier, President Trump had let loose with tweets calling for four freshman congresswomen of color to “[go back](#)” to the “broken and crime infested” countries they came from, throwing an awkward wrench into the messaging.

Not that Mr. Trump’s name was mentioned in the program or the [mission statement](#) for the event, which was organized by the Edmund Burke Foundation, a newly formed public affairs institute. It featured headlining speeches by Tucker Carlson, John Bolton and Peter Thiel, as well as some three dozen speakers on panels covering topics like immigration, foreign policy and economic nationalism. The names of Burke and Lincoln may have been uttered as much as the president’s.

Conservatives have always prided themselves on being driven by ideas, and the big idea here was that nationalism — shorn of its darker associations — could provide an intellectual banner now that the conservatism based on free trade, libertarian economics and military interventionism that held sway for decades has run out of gas.

“Today is our independence day,” Yoram Hazony, an Israeli political theorist, author of the recent book “[The Virtue of Nationalism](#)” and the conference’s intellectual prime mover, declared in his fiery opening remarks. “We declare independence from

neoconservatism. We declare independence from neoliberalism, from libertarianism, from what they call classical liberalism.”
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“There is something that unites everyone in this room,” he continued. “We are national conservatives.”

Those in attendance may not have all agreed. They included [reform conservatives](#) and religious traditionalists, ardent Trumpists and former Never-Trumpers, and more than a few unconverted free-marketeers and others who were keeping a skeptical eye on the proceedings.

Geoffrey Kabaservice, a [historian of conservatism](#) and director of political studies at the Niskanen Center, described the gathering as part of an ongoing effort by conservatives to unite “under an ideological banner that Trump himself doesn’t carry.”

“They are trying to find a way to retroactively justify their support of Trumpism under a broader conservative movement,” he said. “But that’s a tricky assignment.”

Detoxifying nationalism

Just how tricky was suggested by those tweets from the president, and the muted response to them at the conference.

In the hotel bar, the national uproar over the tweets unspooled continuously on the television (at least until it was switched to Fox News). But in the conference sessions, there was virtually no reference to them, and little appetite among those chattering in the halls to offer more than tepid criticism, if that.

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“They were bad,” Rich Lowry, the editor of National Review (and a recovering Never-Trumper), said a bit grimly, when asked about the tweets. “His trolling at its worst. Unproductive. Indefensible.”

Mr. Hazony, caught in the hallway between sessions, waved the question away. “It’s a great honor to be running the intellectual part of political conservatism,” he said. “We just don’t have to deal with that stuff.”

Helen Andrews, the managing editor of The Washington Examiner and [a contributor](#) to various conservative publications, looked puzzled when asked on Monday about the tweets, and said she hadn’t seen them.

As for nationalism, she said she saw “no downside” to embracing it. “I don’t think it’s a word that needs to be detoxified, even as the term conservatism sometimes needs to get detoxified,” she said.

Organizers of the three-day conference argue that nationalism, cleansed of its darker associations, can provide a new direction for conservatism, whose old dogmas were shattered by the election of Donald Trump. Credit Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times



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But some others expressed reservations about the new political brand being road-tested.

Yuval Levin, the editor of National Affairs and a speaker at the conference, said that the label “national conservatism” captured some of his own interest in a conservatism that focuses on social health, rather than just the market.

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“But I don’t think we can just go around saying nationalism is the answer to our problems,” he said. He added, “People are not crazy to worry when they hear that term.”

Soil, but not blood

When it came to defining who belonged to the nation, there was lots of talk of soil and rootedness, alongside repeated disavowals of blood, or its modern equivalent, DNA.

In a talk called “Why America Is Not an Idea,” Mr. Lowry, the author of the forthcoming book [“The Case for Nationalism.”](#) took aim at “one of our most honored clichés”: that the essence of Americanism lies only in its ideals.

The problem with this “overintellectualized understanding of America,” he said, is “it slights the absolutely indispensable influence of culture.”

Even the phrase “city on a hill,” an emblem of American universalism, he said, comes from East Anglia, and is rooted in “a particular soil, a particular place, a particular way of thinking.”

We should insist, Mr. Lowry said, “on the assimilation of immigrants into a common culture.” A panel on immigration happening simultaneously echoed that theme of culture, but with a much harder, racially exclusionary edge. Amy Wax, a law professor at the University of Pennsylvania who was removed from teaching first-year students last year [after writing an article](#) questioning the abilities of black students, offered what she called “the cultural case” for reduced immigration.

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She defended [President Trump’s vulgar comment](#) last year disparaging immigration from certain countries, to laughter and applause. And she dismissed the idea that immigrants somehow became American simply by living here, which Ms. Wax (borrowing a term used by white nationalists and self-described “race realists”) mocked as the “magic dirt” argument.

There’s no reason that “people who come here will quickly come to think, live and act just like us.” she said. Immigration policy, she said, should take into account “cultural compatibility.”

“In effect,” she said, this “means taking the position that our country will be better off with more whites and fewer nonwhites.”

Vote for Tucker?

The conference was full of attacks on identity politics and “wokeness,” and culture-war chestnuts tended to get the biggest applause. But the most electric response was for Mr. Carlson, who since delivering a blistering on-air monologue in January denouncing the “priorities of the ruling class” has become the [de facto intellectual leader](#) of Trumpist economic populism.

The title was “Big Business Hates Your Family,” and the antic Mr. Carlson — who, by the way, raised then dismissed the idea that he might run for president — hit the theme hard.

The most electric response at the conference was for Mr. Tucker. Credit Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times



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“The main threat to your ability to live your life as you choose, does not come from the government, it comes from the private sector,” he declared. “I can’t believe I’m saying that!” He took a fresh whack at Representative Ilhan Omar, one of the four Democratic congresswomen targeted in Mr. Trump’s tweets, whom Mr. Carlson, a few days before the conference, attacked on air as “living proof that the way we practice immigration has become dangerous to this country.”

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An audience member asked if he saw Sen. Elizabeth A. Warren, whose economic plan Mr. Carlson has praised, as a “potential ally for national conservatism.” He called her “a human tragedy” and a “joke,” but said her 2003 book, “The Two-Income Trap,” was “one of the best books I’ve ever read on economic policy.”

“The single biggest change to our society, and it got almost no press, was the moment where it became impossible for the average person to support a family on one income,” he said.

Questioning the market

The once-heretical notion that the free market may not be conservatism’s friend was discussed with less shouting, and more wonkish detail, in other sessions.

In a mock-parliamentary debate on Monday evening, Mr. Hazony called “the House of Conservatism” to order to consider the proposition “America needs an industrial policy.” “There is something that unites everyone in this room,” Yoram Hazony, one of the organizers, said. “You are all national conservatives.” Credit Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times



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