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The United States Is Not a Nation: The Problem with "National Conservatism"



37 COMMENTS (/WIRE/UNITED-STATES-NOT-NATION-PROBLEM-NATIONAL-CONSERVATISM#DISQUS_THREAD)

TAGS Decentralization and Secession (/topics/decentralization-and-secession), U.S. History (/topics/us-history)

07/31/2019 • Allen Mendenhall (<https://mises.org/profile/allen-mendenhall>)

Earlier this month, prominent names in the conservative movement gathered in Washington, DC, for a conference on "National Conservatism." Speakers included such luminaries as Tucker Carlson, Peter Thiel, J.D. Vance, John Bolton, Michael Anton, Rich Lowry, Yuval Levin, and Josh Hawley. Representing the academy were F.H. Buckley, Charles Kesler, Amy Wax, and Patrick Deneen. Other conservative writers and thinkers participated in

panels. The two figures most associated with national conservatism — Yoram Hazony and R.R. Reno — spoke during the opening plenary.

What is this national conservatism all about?

The succinct answer is the marriage of nationalism to conservatism. The conference organizers defined (<https://nationalconservatism.org/about/>) nationalism as "a commitment to a world of independent nations." They presented national conservatism as "an intellectually serious alternative to the excesses of purist libertarianism, and in stark opposition to theories grounded in race." Their stated aim was "to solidify and energize national conservatives, offering them a much-needed institutional base, substantial ideas in the areas of public policy, political theory, and economics, and an extensive support network across the country."

Sounds interesting. However, neither national conservatism nor nationalism — whatever the distinctions between them — can take hold in the United States.

The Difference Between a Country and a Nation

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With the economy growing at 2.1%, unemployment at 3.6%, creating 170,000 jobs per month, and estimated underlying core inflation of 2%, no objective data justifies cutting rates that are already artificially low.

Interest Rate Increases: How Fast is "Too Fast?" (/wire/interest-rate-increases-how-fast-too-fast) **Pavel Mordasov**

Donald Trump thinks the Fed raised rates "too fast." In truth, rates have been at remarkably low rates for the past decade. And how would Trump know how fast is "too fast" anyway?

The United States Is Not a Nation: The Problem with "National Conservatism" (/wire/united-states-not-nation-problem-national-conservatism) **Allen Mendenhall**

Why? Because the United States is not, and has never been, a nation. The founding generation referred to the United States as a plural noun (i.e., "these United States") because *several* sovereigns fell under that designation. St. George Tucker called the United States a "federal compact" consisting of "several sovereign and independent states." If his view seems unrecognizable today, it is because nationalism *within* the United States is dying or dead—and *the United States killed it*.

The United States of America in the singular is a *country*, not a nation. It contains nations within it, but does not itself constitute a nation. Nations involve solidarity among people who share a common culture, language, customs, mores, ethnicity, and history. A country, by contrast, involves political arrangements and governmental territories and boundaries.

From its inception, the United States has been characterized by faction and sectionalism, cultural clashes, and competing narratives — between Indian tribes in what is now Florida and California, Wyoming and Maine, Georgia and Michigan; between the British and French and Spanish and Dutch; between Protestants and Catholics and English Dissenters and nonconformists and splintering denominations; between the Calvinism of Cotton Mather and the Enlightenment rationalism that influenced Franklin and Jefferson. The United States has experienced, as well, numerous separatist movements, including, most notably, the secession of the states that made up the Confederate States of America.

The United States is not a nation.

A nation consists of a homogenous culture of which its like-minded inhabitants are acutely aware. By contrast, the United States of America is, and has always been, culturally heterogeneous, consisting of a variety of cultures and traditions.

While the Puritans of New England developed witch anxieties, a planter gentry established itself in Virginia. While slavery spread through the South, American Quakers — banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony — preached abolition and pacifism in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania. Meanwhile, industry sprung up in Philadelphia and Boston. Around 60,000 loyalists left the United States at the close of the American Revolution.¹ In many respects, the American Revolution was the civil war before the Civil War.

While William Gilmore Simms authored novels and disquisitions regarding Southern themes and settings, grappling with the meaning of the emergent frontier in the West, New England was characterized by Romanticism and transcendentalism, by authors like Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Melville, and Hawthorne. While Walt Whitman was singing America in all its multiplicities, María Ruiz de Burton was penning fiction that reflected her Mexican background and perspective. Decades later, Langston Hughes would write that he, too, sang America.

What of the Samoans in Hawaii, the Cuban refugees in Florida, the descendants of black slaves from Africa and the Caribbean, the *Issei* and *Nesei* and *Sansei*, the Creole in New Orleans, the Orthodox Jewish communities, the Gullah in the coastal plains and Carolina Low country, the Athabaskans of Alaska, the Amish, the Puerto Ricans, the immigrants from Columbia and Peru and Guatemala and Honduras and Panama and Nicaragua? Do they have a common heritage?

Americans United by Ideology, Not Nationhood

The notion of conservative nationalists that libertarianism has dominated the Republican Party is odd in light of that party's marginalization of Ron Paul, the foreign wars orchestrated by Republicans, and the steady growth of the federal government under Republican leadership. Conservative nationalists project a caricature of libertarians that, back in 1979, Murray Rothbard thoroughly refuted (audio here (https://phillysoc.org/tps_meetings/conservatism-and-libertarianism/), text here (<https://mises.org/library/myth-and-truth-about-libertarianism>)). The libertarianism of Rothbard is compatible with nationalism, and might even be a necessary condition for nationalism. Conservative nationalists, moreover, seek to tie their program to Russell Kirk, who, in fact, warned *against* "the excesses of fanatical nationalism."

The United States is not a nation. From the very beginning it was more of a collection of various nations united by ideas of political unity and by fairly high levels of tolerance for other groups within that union. The US certainly contains nations, but it was never a single nation.

National Conservatism and Cosmopolitanism
([/wire/national-conservatism-and-cosmopolitanism](#)) **Jeff Deist**

Is "cosmopolitan" a slur?

The Fed Chairman and the Phillips Curve ([/wire/fed-chairman-and-phillips-curve](#)) **Frank Shostak**

The Fed Chairman's suggestion that the inverse correlation between inflation and unemployment has disappeared reveals that US central bank policymakers were previously employing a bankrupt theoretical framework to navigate the economy.



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Allen Mendenhall ([/profile/allen-mendenhall](#))

Allen Mendenhall is Associate Dean and Executive Director of the Blackstone Center for Law and...

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Conservative nationalism is misguided, predicated on a fallacy, namely that the United States is a nation.

But the United States is not a nation.

If the people of the United States are united at all, it is by a system of government, the Constitution, republicanism, and the concepts of liberty, checks and balances, separation of powers, and rule of law. In other words, the United States is a *country* whose people are connected, if at all, by *liberalism*. The history of the United States has been the obliteration of nationalism, not the embrace of it.

National Conservatives Are Celebrating Bigness and Homogeneity Rather than True Nationhood

Given the emphasis on sovereignty, self-governance, and self-determination that characterize nationalist movements and rhetoric, you would expect among national conservatives searing arguments for secession, perhaps for an independent Southern nation, the breaking up of California, or the independence of Texas or Vermont. Instead, the national conservatives celebrate bigness and greatness, thereby undercutting group associations and native identities based on shared cultures, customs, practices, languages, religious beliefs, and history — phenomena which exist in distinct *local* communities throughout the United States.

The United States of America — the *country* in the *singular* — is too big, the scope and scale of its government too large, to be the object of *true* nationalism. The people of the United States are not united by a common descent, ethnic solidarity, or uniform values. The United States is not a "nation of immigrants," "one nation under God," "the first new nation," or an "exceptional nation." It's not even a nation. National conservatives overlook or ignore that reality to their peril. The national conservatism they envision for the United States can lead only to the suppression of actual nationalism.

The United States is not a nation. Trying to make it so will stamp out any remaining nationalism in the United States.



(<https://mises.org/press-room>)



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1. Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles* (Random House, 2011), p. 6.

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Joseph T. Salerno (</profile/joseph-t-salerno>)

Joseph Salerno is academic vice president of the Mises Institute, professor emeritus of economics at Pace University...

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**Aziluth Fuji** • 20 hours ago • edited

Something similar happened a long time ago to Austro-Hungaria... and we all know today the disaster (and the ones it led to only 30 years later) that it ended in

Also:

> "The notion of conservative nationalists that libertarianism has dominated the Republican Party is odd in light of that party's marginalization of Ron Paul, the foreign wars orchestrated by Republicans, and the steady growth of the federal government under Republican leadership."

This is just more proof that corporatism \neq capitalism, and yet the 'conventional' left still does not want to accept this.

5 ^ | v • Reply • Share >

**Texas Chris** → Aziluth Fuji • 3 hours ago

For the left to intellectually divorce corporatism from capitalism they'd have to come to the logical conclusion that the problem with corporatism is its dependence on the monopoly of force provided by the government.

A corporation is the bastard child conceived by the adulterous fornication of business and state.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >

**Eiji Wolf** → Aziluth Fuji • 2 hours ago

Also, look to the USSR or Yugoslavia.

Czechoslovakia.

The UK.

Basque nationalists in France and Spain.

Even the EU. The more rulers push for federalization of the EU, the more nationalist parties emerge and gain support among voters.

People naturally tend to decentralization - it's only the politicians that see the benefit to themselves that push for "great" anything.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >

**Blindfolded** • 17 hours ago • edited

The United States of America in the singular is a country, not a nation. ***It contains nations within it, but does not itself***

constitute a nation. Nations involve **solidarity among people** who share a common culture, language, customs, mores, ethnicity, and history. A country, by contrast, involves political arrangements and governmental territories and boundaries.

So, if the USA is a county made up of nations within it...and if 'nations' require solidarity among people who share common culture...then pray tell, where are these 'nations' that make up the country?

IF the USA is not a 'nation' for lack of solidarity among its people...
then neither should States be consider 'nations'...
neither should counties within states be considered 'nations'...
neither should cities within counties be considered 'nations'...

Does a neighborhood within a city even have solidarity among people?
Does the Cherokee 'Nation' even have solidarity among its people?
(nevermind Elizabeth Warrens claim to be of the Cherokee Nation)

At what demographic level is there EVER solidarity among people?

IMHO, each individual is a sovereign nation. I stand in solidarity with myself...

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Texas Chris → Blindfolded • 2 hours ago

Rothbard's logic took him to the emancipation of every individual from "the state".

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Palmetto Anarchocapitalist • 21 hours ago

National Conservatism, in the end, is nothing more than the Wilsonian progressive ideals of prohibitionism, budget deficits, neo-mercantilism (fascism), and "democracy for the world" (AKA neocon warmongering), packaged with a new label.

The "left" or "democrat" or "liberal" (not classical liberal) side is there to provide balance to the Wilsonian force by promoting the omnipresent social welfare state.

In other words: business as usual.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Dwain Dibley → Palmetto Anarchocapitalist
• 10 hours ago • edited

First, there is no such thing as "National Conservatism",

it's a phony straw man.

Secondly, if you believe the conservative movement to take back and restore the Constitutional Republic and the individual liberty it represents is somehow based upon "Wilsonian progressive ideals of prohibitionism" then you are either totally misinformed or delusional. Personally, I think you are an ignorant little man using words you don't understand.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Eiji Wolf → Dwain Dibley • 2 hours ago • edited

National Conservatism is a phony straw man - and that's why an entire conference was dedicated to it; with "big-name speakers".

Thank you for educating us - now please do the same for the participants of said conference, preferably using the same words you did here.

I'd pay to watch that.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Phil Miller → Dwain Dibley • 8 hours ago

"Personally, I think you are an ignorant little man using words you don't understand."

What's the matter, Dwain? Couldn't get it up tonight?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Texas Chris → Phil Miller • 3 hours ago

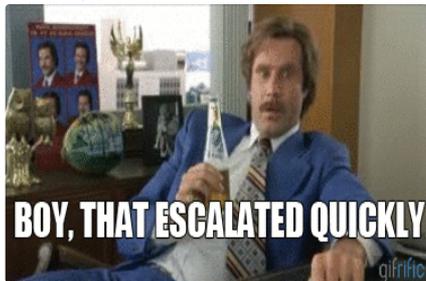
Is this the new troll?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Eiji Wolf → Texas Chris • 2 hours ago

Old one, but...



2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >

One other person is typing...



Not Sure • 11 hours ago



Could someone here dumb this down for a guy with a PhD in Finance?

If the USA is not a nation, because US citizens do not share a common culture, language, customs, mores, ethnicity, and history, then are China, France, Germany, and India nations?

In the USA, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between a native of Anchorage and a native of Key West on the telephone. Yet differences in dialect and language among the Chinese, French, Germany, and Indians are so great as to render large segments of the populations of each mutually unintelligible.

Likewise, culture, customs, and mores. Granted, Texan males have an affinity for high-heeled boots, tight jeans, and wearing hats indoors—not that there's anything wrong with that—and New Jerseyites are such bad drivers that they have concrete barriers down the middles of their roads to keep them from veering into oncoming traffic, but for the most part, Americans abroad tend to be drawn together by *precisely* their common culture, customs, and mores. (I know this from personal experience. I've lived abroad; it's full of foreigners.)

As for ethnicity, how is this different from race? How different is the DNA of, say, a Dane from a Pole, or of a Greek from a Sicilian? If ethnicity is understood to be a combination of race and language, customs, etc., then isn't including ethnicity in the definition of nation circular reasoning?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Texas Chris → Not Sure • 2 hours ago

I've lived in Texas from birth to age 44, and I can tell you that 100% of "Americans" I meet know I'm from Texas within the first 30 seconds of me talking.

"It's a whole other country" the saying goes.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Eiji Wolf → Not Sure • 2 hours ago • edited

Germany is being de-nationalized, as is France, the Netherlands, Scandinavian countries and so on.

Too many people of disparate cultures are moving in, partitioning the country into "micro-quasi-nations".

Honestly, I'm not entirely sure where to delineate between a state, a nation and a region (or smaller units, as per Blindfolded).

It's a bit of a shaky ground for me, too.

Edit: I feel that the "shared culture" is an important distinction - at least when it regards sizable portions of a population. When you have people coming in and not

population. When you have people coming in and not conforming to the prevailing culture, mores and customs, they effectively establish their own national enclaves within the territory. They are not part of the nation even though they live within the same geographic boundaries. It's a fine distinction, difficult to define. I'll keep thinking about it and maybe I'll come up with something more coherent.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Klerk → Eiji Wolf • an hour ago • edited

IMO the author is making a leap by suggesting that the US demographically hasn't changed much since the times of colonial America.

Sure there are ghettos in large urban areas which have largely survived since the late 1800's but you'd be hard pressed to find enough differences between people of various states to suggest that each is a nation in itself.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Eiji Wolf → Klerk • an hour ago

And that's the point - where is the line?

It's imo the problem of collectivism as such - collectivists can't even properly define the terms they are using and can only operate on vague, nebulous, platitudinous (is that even a word?) expressions and arguments.

Clear thinking and logic have no place in collectivist ideologies.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Klerk → Eiji Wolf • an hour ago

Well in this particular case I'd say the villains have chosen to define nation as the entire US.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



MrDane → Not Sure • 9 hours ago

A simple reading of the Organic Law documents reveals the states are nations. The Union is not.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Klerk → Not Sure • 2 hours ago

Sicilians? They were conquered by Moors. I saw it in a documentary called "True Romance".





^ | v • Reply • Share ›



noah • 11 hours ago

The conference organizers defined nationalism as "a commitment to a world of independent nations."

What this really means is a commitment to proving "our" independent nation/collective is more worthy, more deserving and more important than "your" independent nation/collective. So it doesn't matter so much if the USA is actually a nation or not, because it is certainly a politically-defined collective.

Nationalism is a commitment to a world of "us" versus "them" and a commitment to a world of "might makes right." It is a commitment to a world of short-term, zero-sum, win-lose thinking where the best way to win always seems to be to find a way to create losers out of all the "thems" rather than to search for peaceful and productive and sustainable win-win scenarios.

Nationalism is a commitment to preserving a few basic human rights so long as the humans are "us" and not "them," because nationalism allows us to disregard the individuality and humanity of all the "thems" and treat each and every one of them as mere subsidiary tools of an opposing collective rather than as actual human individuals.

Nationalism is a commitment to a world of collectivism rather than to world of individualism.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Not Sure → noah • 11 hours ago

Not just collectivism, but collectivism based in large measure on qualities that individuals are born with. In that kind of world, one is essentially a serf.

Even though a Nigerian might learn Hungarian, he'll never *be* Hungarian. Whereas, if he moved to the USA and stayed out of trouble for five years, he could become an American (likewise: Argentina, Australia, Canada, Mexico, New Zealand, etc.).

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Texas Chris → Not Sure • 2 hours ago

Nationalism is the belief that "My dirt is better than

nationalism is the belief that my dirt is better than your dirt."

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Dwain Dibley → noah • 10 hours ago

Wow, you are obviously spending way too much time listening to CNN and MSNBC leftist propoganda.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



jandr0 → Dwain Dibley • 13 minutes ago • edited

[Wow, you are obviously spending way too much time listening to CNN and MSNBC leftist propoganda.]

Hhmm. I suspect the other comment hit a nerve with Dwain, whose Freudian ego detected a "threat" and retaliated in a most primitive manner.

There, there Dwain.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



noah → Dwain Dibley • an hour ago

... said the collectivist...

The default position of a right-wing collectivist is to lump all unbelievers under the label of the competing ideological collective, because who else could there be in the world besides "us" and "them?" Anyone who fails to bow to the chosen ideology is automatically un-American.

At least at CNN and MSNBC they mostly KNOW that they are collectivists. The left-wing collectivist is also delusional, but a bit less self-delusional than the right-wing collectivist who thinks he respects individualism.

And in case you haven't noticed, a key attribute of most CNN and MSNBC-type left-wing collectivists is economic NATIONALISM. You should be able to see that even with your blinders on.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Pelopidas • 16 hours ago

Of course this was the view of many--though not all--at the time of the founding, but those days are long gone. Madison thought the Constitution was not wholly federal, not wholly national, but a mix of both. The history of the US has been a kind of dialectic, pushed on by the choices of the American people and the leadership--good or ill. The ambiguity at the founding has developed into a full nation that still calls itself federal but that iust means

...that can come from federalism but that just means decentralized for purposes of administration. We can dislike this all we want, but it doesn't change the fact. If you disagree, look at the border issue. States don't have sovereignty over their borders. It's hard to say an entity is sovereign if its not even sovereign over its borders.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Vann Boseman → Pelopidas • 4 hours ago

By the end of the Civil War, the United States government became dedicated to becoming a national government.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Texas Chris → Vann Boseman • 2 hours ago

100% agreed.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Texas Chris • 20 hours ago

Well said.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Phil Miller • 20 hours ago

"The United States is not a nation."

Repeated nine times. Argument by repetition much?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Texas Chris → Phil Miller • 20 hours ago

In today's day and age of kindergarten level understanding



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