

The Weekend Essay Life & Arts

For Europe, America was the future. Now what?

Mark Mazower on the long history and troubled present of the

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From President Donald Trump's on-off tariff war with the EU to homeland security secretary Kristi Noem's extraordinary [intervention](#) on Tuesday in the Polish presidential elections, the signs are that this US administration not only converses very differently with its European partners from any before but thinks of them differently too. This is not the pivot-to-Asia cool of the Obama years; it is something more [hectoring](#). Washington's new approach is prompting concern across the ocean, where many may be excused for wondering if the transatlanticism they grew up with is a thing of the past.

What is at stake for Europe goes beyond the issues of the moment: the rift poses an unprecedented challenge to the way its peoples imagine themselves and their future. Dating back more than two centuries, the interconnection between Europe and the US is as durable as one will find in international relations. And as intimate too: each partner owes much to the other and each is accustomed to using the other as a foil to think about its own identity and its values. There have been ups and downs over the years and shifts in the balance of power between them. But it is the sheer density of this shared history that makes the present moment seem so exceptional.

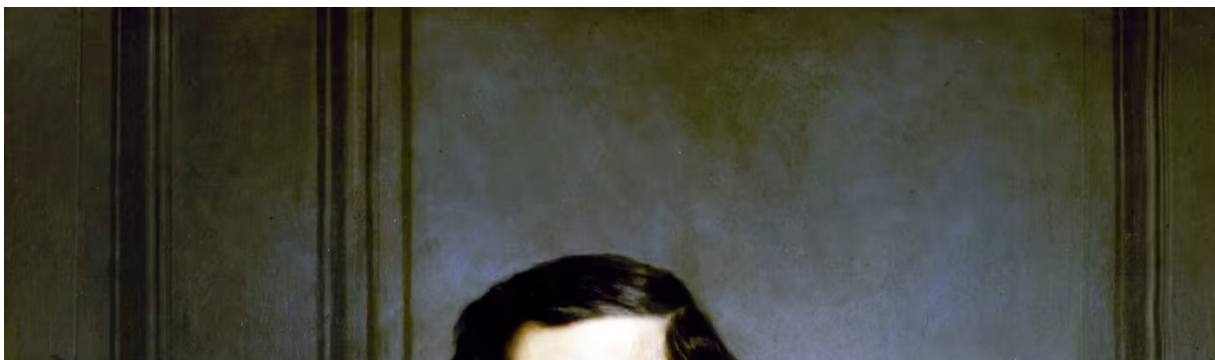




Kristi Noem, the US homeland security secretary, at the airport after addressing the May 27 Conservative Political Action Conference in Rzeszow, Poland © Getty Images

There were centuries when Americans knew nothing of Europe. But that ended once the first colonists arrived: as a political entity, the United States emerged out of the European imagination. The Americans who forged a new polity after 1776 were, after all, mostly European by descent and the institutions they created to govern themselves paid homage to European habits of thought even when they rejected them.

The US constitution's debt to the Enlightenment of the Old World is hard to miss, while the first American naturalisation laws were based on British colonial precedent, adjusted only to allow for the explicit racial preference for whites that would henceforward become as central a feature of the country's politics as slavery. Independence was itself a byproduct of the long-standing conflict between three great European powers: England, France and Spain. Nor was victory instantaneous, for European colonial influence in North America lasted into the 19th century, enduring until places such as Florida, Oregon and Alaska were absorbed within the US.





French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, in an 1850 portrait by Théodore Chassériau © Pictures from History/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

As the century progressed, America shook off Europe's tutelage, and it became the model rather than the copy. According to the greatest of all the European analysts of the American experiment, Alexis de Tocqueville, nowhere in the world offered "more instructive lessons". Conservatives in Europe saw the American civil war as a reminder of the perils of representative democracy; liberals hailed the outcome as the march of freedom. America was more than simply a kind of laboratory of political possibilities: it was a glimpse of destiny itself. The Victorian constitutionalist Walter Bagehot described the Americans as "a truly modern people". America turned into Europe's way of thinking about its future and it has played this role pretty much ever since

SINCE.

The idea of an Old and a New World is of some antiquity and goes back at least to the European arrival in the Americas: by the 17th century the terms had become commonly accepted among cartographers. Only when the North Americans embarked upon their struggle for freedom against the British crown, however, did they turn a geographical distinction into an ideological one. For many of them, the antiquity of Europe's institutions was a sign that it was on the wrong side of history. "Europe is grown old in folly, corruption and tyranny," wrote the lexicographer Noah Webster in 1778. Thomas Jefferson's four years as American minister in France led him to a similar conclusion: the people of Europe were "loaded with misery", he wrote, associating the constitutional experiment of the US with the path to human happiness.

As the US grew in power and wealth, modernity turned into a shared story of transatlantic crossings in ideas, technology and, above all, in people

With the independence of South American republics in the early decades of the 19th century, Europeans themselves began to note the political contrast. At home they saw their own continent unified under the rule of conservative monarchs and emperors who opposed the French Revolution and its Napoleonic legacy. Looking across the Atlantic, they discerned a vast haven of

republican liberty, the western hemisphere.

Enshrining the idea that the Atlantic Ocean defended American freedom from reactionary despots, the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 was a keep-out warning to European royalists: leave the Americas to Americans. The streets of New York welcomed political refugees from European tyranny; no fewer than three North American cities put up statues to Lajos Kossuth, the fighter for Hungarian independence. The Italian Giuseppe Garibaldi, later one of the heroes of his country's unification, saw the American people as "the only intrepid bulwark against European despotism".

Eventually, the monarchs of the Old World gave up the idea of wiping out revolution across the Atlantic, and as the US grew in power and wealth, modernity turned into a shared story of transatlantic crossings in ideas, technology and, above all, in people. Mass migration allowed the US to extend its sway from the Atlantic to the Pacific: never before or since had immigrants been such a large proportion of the US population as they were in the final decades of the 19th century. European values shaped the taste and achievements of the American elite, providing a template for the country's architecture, museums and research universities.



Crowds gather at the statue of Hungarian reformer Lajos Kossuth at its unveiling in New York in the late 1920s © Corbis/VCG/Getty Images





The statue of Christopher Columbus in Genoa where President Woodrow Wilson laid a wreath in 1919 © Alamy
But the role of the US as the guarantor of the world's republican future was far from over; if anything, it was only in the 20th century that it emerged in earnest. In the aftermath of the first world war, America seized the opportunity to remake the Old World in the image of the New. Arriving in Europe, one of the first things President Woodrow Wilson did in 1919 was to pay a visit to the Italian port city of Genoa.

This was the home of Christopher Columbus; but the American president had really gone to pay homage to another of its sons: Giuseppe Mazzini, the theorist of nationalism. Mazzini had spent his life struggling vainly against the forces of European autocracy; Wilson saw himself as completing Mazzini's work. At the [Paris Peace Conference](#), royal houses that had lasted centuries were toppled; republics, constitutions and the rule of law were enshrined. The US really did seem to have brought the future to Europe.

The land of Henry Ford, mass consumption, Hollywood and jazz struck many Europeans between the two world wars as the embodiment of an excitingly novel vision of society and culture. But there were European sceptics too, and a vein of snobbish cultural condescension that has never entirely vanished.

The Nazis feared it for different reasons. Hitler saw the US as an impediment to his own vision of an authoritarian Europe under German sway, though he predicted that in the struggle between America's racism, which his regime admired, and its melting-pot ideal, the US would inevitably be weakened and degenerate. At the same time he mourned the loss of the millions of German migrants who had left Europe to settle across the Atlantic.

One of them, a Hessian called Johannes Eisenhauer, arrived in Philadelphia in 1741. Two centuries later one of his descendants became an architect of the Allied invasion of Europe and later US president. Dwight Eisenhower was thus, through his own family story, a kind of American riposte to the Nazi dream of racial purity.

It was during the cold war that the Americans reshaped Europe perhaps most profoundly. The presence of American troops in peacetime was an unprecedented marker of an abiding US interest in European freedom. American lawyers helped run war crimes trials and draft European constitutions. Diplomats came up with new rules of international co-operation; experts from Washington reshaped everything from industrial relations to advertising and urban planning. But American influence was even more pervasive than this. Film, music and fashion entered European homes. Taste itself was Americanised and so in the process were European hopes and ideas.





American jazz pianist/composer Duke Ellington and promoter Jules Borkon stepping off the train on arrival in Paris in July 1948 © Agence France-Presse/Getty Images





Young people in a London restaurant in the 1960s watching Elvis Presley on a Scopitone (a sort of jukebox that played short film clips) © Gamma-Keystone/Getty Images

This was not a one-way street: like waves of jazz musicians before them, Black American bluesmen toured Europe and found in the clubs of Paris and London the acclaim that helped their music reach audiences back home across the colour bar imposed by a largely segregated record industry. They too were part of the appeal of America and its energy.

In the 1950s and '60s, America felt almost within reach for ordinary Europeans: as consumer incomes grew, the US embodied a future they dreamt of, the source of the latest trends in art, music and plastics. America, said David Bowie, “became a myth land for me”. The Soviet alternative was heavy-handed and could not compete in the cold war market of taste. Supraphon recordings of Tchaikovsky were first-rate but lacked the appeal of Elvis.

Film captured the unequal competition. In Ken Russell’s 1967 *Billion Dollar Brain*, Michael Caine (reprising his cooler-than-James Bond role as Harry Palmer) infiltrates Soviet Latvia and stumbles into a hayloft where he is bewildered to find a party in full swing: the military parades on TV are drowned out by the sound of The Beatles singing “A Hard Day’s Night” on a bootleg LP.

Could the European-US partnership merely be entering a new phase that is rooted in a shared sense not of liberalism but of a rightwing crusade?

And there was to be one more chapter in the Americanisation of Europe. Even before the emergence of a unipolar world in the 1990s, another round of Washington-led norm-making reshaped European capitalism almost as extensively as victory after 1945 had reshaped its political institutions. The watchwords this time were trade liberalisation and financialisation; equally

driven from Washington was a new international politics of human rights. The American security guarantee in Nato was reaffirmed: eastern Europe, liberated from Soviet rule, looked to Washington just as ardently as the west had done after 1945.

As a result, the end of the century saw the emergence of a transatlantic partnership that appeared to be stronger and more extensive than ever and stretched to the borders of Russia itself. “These shared standards and beliefs tie us to Europe today,” stated President Reagan in 1988. “They are the essence of the community of free nations to which we belong.”

The shock that Europeans are experiencing today reflects what feels like the sudden souring of this long and intimate association. To be sure, it has been questioned in the past from both sides and there were plenty of warnings during the first Trump presidency. Europeans are not unused to what are after all largely justified American complaints about unfair burden-sharing in Nato. As for arguments over tariffs, these go back to the very foundation of the Common Market. Europeans have long appreciated too that the collapse of Eurocentrism reflects a global shift that has been under way for generations now. And it goes without saying that, for all their basic affection for their American allies, they have always retained mental reservations of one kind or another about them.

Their shock, though, is at the sense of ideological disdain that emanates from this administration. Realpolitik is one thing: Henry Kissinger had espoused that, talking an essentially 19th-century language that Europeans understood. But this is something else — the expression of a rightwing culture war with distinctively American roots that implies a reversal of the values Europeans thought the US was preaching and a challenge to the view of the past they thought they shared.

Members of the Trump administration may talk the language of western civilisation and free speech, but this is not the rhetorical pabulum of the past but something more extreme. And while a quasi-fascist salute may be a headline-grabbing bit of fun for bad boys inside the Beltway, it is a more serious matter in Europe, as the instant reaction of France's rightwing leader Jordan Bardella showed when he cancelled his US Conservative Political Action Conference speech back in February in protest at Steve Bannon's stage gesture, which the latter insisted was a "wave".

Structural shifts certainly help to explain the downturn in US-European relations. The EU has now emerged as a serious economic rival to Washington, with extensive powers in areas such as health regulation, food safety and data privacy that challenge core concerns of major American lobbies and industries. Its commitment to international law is part of its DNA; its complex coalition-led policy process contrasts starkly with the stream of executive orders emanating from the Oval Office.

Yet rivalry is one thing; enmity quite another. Back in 2018, Trump said he saw the EU as a "foe". His new administration has run with this message and the consequence is that fewer and fewer in Europe see the US as an ally any longer.

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Polls suggest that most Americans do in fact still view Europeans as friends. But the fact that disdain for Europe is less the product of a shift in public opinion than it is of the culture warriors running the show in Washington is scant comfort for Europe itself. Mainstream America may not share the obsessions of conservative think-tanks, but neither does it really dissent: the attack on the EU is simply one part of the larger anti-elitist mood that powers this administration. Bashing allies is another way of targeting the coastal globalists who are its real bogeymen.

We are thus confronted with an irony of history: two centuries on, the tables have been turned. It is Europe that now cleaves closer to the Enlightenment values of secular reason, [mistrust of organised faith](#) and commitment to deliberation; the US that is in the hands of social conservatives dreaming of a return to traditional values.

Could America nonetheless continue to offer a glimpse of Europe's future? Could the European-US partnership merely be entering a new phase that is rooted in a shared sense not of liberalism but of a rightwing crusade to defend western civilisation from

its supposed enemies within and beyond?



US vice-president JD Vance meeting Giorgia Meloni, Italy's prime minister, in Rome in April this year © Kenny Holston/New York Times/Redux/Eyevine

The divergence of historical experience suggests impediments. Europe's far right may welcome Washington's attention. When an American vice-president sides openly with extremist candidates in Europe's domestic politics, the favoured party is not going to complain — even when this risks a “Canada effect”, in which American praise boomerangs. But the important question is what is likely to happen when rightwing parties in Europe actually gain power.

Giorgia Meloni, Italy's prime minister, already feels the tug of competing allegiances; any future rightwing leader of France will feel them still more. Viktor Orbán can play the spoiler only as long as Hungary remains within the EU. And EU interests will always reflect a history and a geopolitical position in the world quite distinct from those of the US.

Commentators make much of Trump's supposed liking for the deal. But deals need to stick, and which European politician — of left or right — can trust an administration

with a propensity for flip-flops and a taste for public humiliation? In short, the current policy of Capitalism in One Country leaves little room for the partnerships of the past.

After two centuries of intimate coexistence, Europe and the US find themselves at a point of estrangement. It goes without saying that neither has much to gain from an actual break — nor is that break likely to occur, given the dense web of associations and shared interests they retain. Yet whatever their future may be together, it is likely to look very different from anything we have seen until now. Divorce may never be declared but the separation is under way.

For the US, the cost will be counted in terms of diminished soft power, whose intangible but real benefits today's Washington is so quick to discount. For Europe, the challenge lies elsewhere. America no longer stands for a future that most Europeans seek to emulate: its values, historical memories and institutions look increasingly alien, its society irrevocably and undesirably polarised.

“Let us look to America,” Tocqueville wrote, “not in order to make a servile copy of the institutions that she has established but to gain a clearer view of the polity which will be best for us.” Europeans now have to figure out the future they want for themselves.

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