

What Left & Right Missed in Trump's Warsaw Speech

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Commentary

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On July 6, President Trump delivered a speech in Krasiński Square in Warsaw, Poland, that provoked heated controversy in the United States. While Americans have returned their attention to familiar tempests—allegations of unlawful collusion by Trump team members with the Russians to defeat Hillary Clinton, Republicans’ bungled efforts to dismantle the Affordable Care Act, North Korean belligerency, the White House staff soap opera—the sharply divergent reactions to Trump’s defense of Western civilization exhibit dangers to the West beyond those he warned of in his remarks.

Prominent figures on the left launched an over-the-top attack on Trump for espousing what they characterized as racist, chauvinistic, and anti-democratic opinions. Leading voices on the right justly congratulated the president on his ringing endorsement of the West and the principles that constitute it.

But conservatives tended to gloss over the president's glossing over of serious tensions within Western civilization. Freedom, limited government, faith, family, and nation are, as Trump asserted in Warsaw, pillars of the West. How they fit together, however, has never been more of a puzzle—for conservatism and for the West.

Another puzzle is how willing progressives are to distort and denounce Western civilization and demonize those who defend it. As one would expect, writers at [The Huffington Post](#), [Salon](#), [Slate](#), and [Vox](#) were quick out of the gate to condemn Trump's speech for supposedly championing an alt-right, white nationalism. Knee-jerk partisans will be knee-jerk partisans.

But the case of progressive intellectuals is another matter. That they were swept away suggests the power of the current.

In *The Atlantic*—widely regarded as a premier source of refined center-left long-form journalism and deep-dive opinion pieces—national correspondent James Fallows and contributing editor Peter Beinart decried Trump's speech as if it betrayed the nation's great traditions. Fallows asserted that Trump spoke “about our ‘heritage,’ our ‘blood,’ our ‘civilization,’ our ‘ancestors’ and ‘families,’ our ‘will’ and ‘way of life’” in the manner of the Japanese nationalists and Italian fascists against whom the United States fought in World War II. In Trump's insistence that the will of the West is strong enough to overcome its adversaries, Fallows heard not the summons to defend the tradition of freedom that Trump explicitly emphasized but rather detected echoes of Leni Riefenstahl's notorious Nazi propaganda film, “Triumph of the Will.”

Purporting to expose the sinister significance of Trump's speech, Beinart offered a brief master's course in the art of tendentious interpretation. Starting from a peculiar definition of “the West” as “a racial and religious term”—rather than the name of a civilization with roots in Biblical faith and classical Greek antiquity that has been home to, and taught toleration of, men and women of all races and religions—Beinart censured Trump for “racial and religious paranoia.”

Although the modern West has typically understood liberty in universal terms, Beinart contended that Trump's touting of the West's achievements, including its devotion to liberty, implied the rejection of universal principles and aspirations. Beinart argued that Trump's alleged antipathy to democracy reflects his “hostility to Muslim immigration.”

But Trump didn't mention Muslim immigration in his speech, although he did exhort liberal democracies around the world to honor their principles by policing their borders and defeating “radical Islamic terrorism.” Similarly imputing distasteful views to the president,

Beinart charged that Trump's statement, "While we will always welcome new citizens who share our values and love our people, our borders will always be closed to terrorism and extremism of any kind" somehow "leaves out" Muslims of every persuasion. That would only be true if one assumes, as Beinart seemingly does, that Muslims cannot share Western values and love citizens of Western nations.

In Beinart's telling, "The most shocking sentence in Trump's speech—perhaps the most shocking sentence in any presidential speech delivered on foreign soil in my lifetime—was the president's claim that 'The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive.'" Beinart then asserted that "[t]he implication is that anyone in the United States who is not white and Christian may not truly be American but rather...[is] an imposter and a threat." This may not be the most egregious sophistry ever published in a reputable magazine's coverage of a presidential speech in Beinart's lifetime, but surely it is competitive.

The estimable William Galston, the center-left columnist at the Wall Street Journal, adopted a more measured tone and issued more circumspect judgments, but he still joined the progressive consensus that Trump advanced in Poland a divisive and authoritarian politics. Galston rebuked Trump because he "barely mentioned democracy," speaking "instead of the 'will to defend our civilization.'" Oddly for the author of a book titled "Liberal Purposes," Galston overlooked that the West Trump called citizens to rally around was dedicated to, the president declared, "the dignity of every human life"; "the rights of every person"; and "the hope of every soul to live in freedom."

Conservative commentators—including Rod Dreher, Marc Thiessen, Robert Merry, and Roger Kimball—dissected multiple progressive distortions. In addition, conservatives observed that Trump correctly attributed to the West the idea that tradition, faith, and fidelity to nation are complementary and integral features of a state dedicated to protecting individual liberty and respecting equality under law.

The conservatives, however, did not examine the sources within Western civilization that breed hostility to it. Progressives tend to view tradition and nation as foes of freedom and equality. In the extreme case—disproportionately represented at our universities—they contradictorily assert that the very idea of Western civilization is a recent delusive invention while insisting that the West's roots extend back to Jerusalem and Athens and its essence is bigotry, racism, and imperialism.

The hard truth is that the West's undeniable achievements in securing freedom and equality under law also foster skepticism and resentment toward the very beliefs, practices, and institutions on which the preservation of freedom and equality depends. The family, voluntary associations—very much including religious ones—and schools cultivate moral and intellectual virtues that equip citizens to prosper in liberal democracies. These associations prevent liberty from deteriorating into license and equality from mutating into the demand

that everybody think alike. But an abundance of freedom and the spread of equality excite a scorn for limits and fuel a hunger for conformity. That in turn fosters an indiscriminate disdain for authority extending to the authority of family, faith, and formal education.

The self-doubt and self-loathing evident in advanced liberal democracies around the world cannot be blinked away, shamed or bullied into silence, or disposed of by refutations. But it can be tempered, especially by an education that focuses on the history of Western civilization, including the inspiring and sobering clash of opinions—about reason and faith, liberty and tradition, the individual and community—that constitutes it.

Cultivating progressives capable of grasping the complementarity of the West's diverse elements—and, yes, conservatives more appreciative of the tensions among them—would substantially improve the United States' prospects of dealing effectively with its urgent policy challenges as well as with the greatest danger America confronts, which is the decay within of a shared understanding of, and devotion to, its highest ideals.

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