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The murder-suicide of the West

Trump forcefully caps off years of deterioration in European-American ties

Read this article in German.

When C.S. Lewis was a boy, his mother died. 'With my mother's death,' he wrote, 'all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life. There was to be much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of Joy; but no more of the old security. It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis.'

It may seem melodramatic, but that passage comes to mind when I think of the death of America's relationship with Europe, and Donald Trump's betrayal Monday of the democratic values that were the basis for that relationship.

Europe is America's mother continent. Our foundational institutions were inherited from Europe. Our democracy is Greek and British. Our universities are German. The etiquette book George Washington read to improve himself was translated from French, and so were Thomas Jefferson's ideals.

The American century

Europe represented a path to progress; America saw itself embracing that path and surpassing it. After the revolution, as historian Joseph Ellis has written, Americans were sure a new generation of Shakespeares, Dantes and Ciceros would arise on North American soil.

As a young adult nation, we took what Europe had and started democratising it for our own purposes. The luxury hotel is a European palace turned into a commercial enterprise. Frederick Law Olmsted visited England in 1850, marveled at the gardens of the aristocracy, came back to America and turned what he saw into great public parks — Central Park, the US Capitol grounds and many more.

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Then as a mature nation, we became our parent's partner. After World War II, a reforged, US-led West stabilised itself. There were fights and rivalries, but underneath, there was an unspoken awareness — these are our kin.

This trans-Atlantic partnership was a vast historical accomplishment, a stumbling and imperfect effort to extend democracy, extend rights, extend freedom and build a world ordered by justice and not force. Since 1945 it is the thing we have all taken for granted.

Ripping the EURO-American relationship apart

Over the weekend, Trump ripped the partnership to threads. He said the European Union is our 'foe.' On Monday, Trump essentially sided with Vladimir Putin, who has become the biggest moral and political enemy of the Euro-American relationship. Trump essentially dropped a project that has oriented US culture and policy for centuries. He pointed us to a world in which the central ethos is that might makes right.

But remember, Donald Trump exists only to put a capstone on every poisonous trend that preceded him. It took many hands to kill the Euro-American bond.

Right-wing politicians and commentators began to use Europe as a stand-in for American liberals. It's a bunch of godless socialists, just like those heretics in Berkeley and Cambridge. Euro-bashing became a unifying conservative trope.

Progressives fell into the poisonous trap of racialism. They looked at the glories of Aristotle, Shakespeare and Mozart, and the most interesting thing they had to say about them was that they were dead white males. Future historians will marvel at how sophisticated people wilfully made themselves so simple-minded. Eurocentrism became a code word for colonialism, oppression and privilege, taking a piece of European history for the whole of it.

Europeans didn't help. In the wake of the Cold War, they have dedicated themselves to a post-nationalist project that is too top-down and technocratic and is now crumbling.

The world remade

The Euro-American political project is now nearing end times. George W. Bush feuded with Europe over the Iraq War. Barack Obama pivoted away. Now, as Robert Kagan writes in The Washington Post, Trump is taking a sledgehammer to the Atlantic alliance.

Today, Europe and America face common perils and common problems — including the rise of ravenous strongmen who want to remake the world order.

Trump could have gone to last week's NATO summit and taken credit only for increased European military spending. Instead, he moved the goal posts, humiliated the Europeans, reasserted his trade war talk and made it impossible for European leaders to do anything that might seem to support him. These are the actions of a man who wants the alliance to fail.

His embrace of Putin on Monday was a victory dance on the Euro-American tomb.

'This is not just another family quarrel,' Kagan writes. 'The democratic alliance that has been the bedrock of the American-led liberal world order is unraveling. At some point, and probably sooner than we expect, the global peace that that alliance and that order undergirded will unravel, too. Despite our human desire to hope for the best, things will not be okay.'

Kagan was writing before Monday's news conference, and now his core point is doubly true. If you thought we could ride the Trump storm and then return to normal, you can surely see now this view is mistaken. The fundamental arrangements of our world are being remade.

Today, Europe and America face common perils and common problems — including the rise of ravenous strongmen who want to remake the world order. We've lost the bonds that might enable us to fight them together. Worse, the wolves are not only in the henhouse; they are in the Executive Mansion.

Beware what happens when you walk away from your lineage.

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David Brooks

New York City

David Brooks is a New York Times columnist since 2003. He also works as a commentator at NBC's *Meet the Press*, as well as for the broadcasters NPR and PBS.

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