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Burke & Trump

by Conrad Black

Remarks by this year's recipient of the Edmund Burke Award.

Editors' note: The following is an edited version of remarks that were to have been delivered at The New Criterion*'s gala on April 30, 2020, honoring Conrad Black with the eighth Edmund Burke Award for Service to Culture and Society.*

It is a great honor to receive the Edmund Burke Award from the publishers of this magazine. Because the general overreaction to the coronavirus made the intended holding of the annual dinner for the award impractical, even illegal, I have been asked, in lieu of inflicting a speech on paying guests, to write an essay for The New Criterion generally considering some connection between Burke and the incumbent president of the United States. At first, this seems like an entry in a Guinness Book of World Records contest for absurd historical associations, like Joseph Stalin and Minnie Mouse, or René Descartes and Kanye West. But after extensively refreshing my knowledge of Burke, I believe that the title of this essay, like Mark Twain's description of Richard Wagner's music (quoting the humorist Bill Nye), will prove "better than it sounds."

The most obvious point of agreement between Burke and Trump is in their respect for Americans. Burke warned successive British governments that war in America would be a disaster. Although the phrase was not in use in the eighteenth century, Burke identified the Revolutionary War as a guerrilla operation and held that as long as the English did not meddle excessively in American affairs, and bound the two halves of the English-speaking world together by trade, America, as it grew, would look upon England and the British Isles as a natural ally, because of language, commerce, ethnicity, and love of liberty. At that time, France could not claim any status as a champion of freedom and was shambling stertorously through its last days as an absolute monarchy. Richelieu had seen the difficulties of Louis XIII's brother-in-law, Charles I, and concluded, in the one gigantic error of his immensely successful eighteen years as France's chief minister, that any democracy would become impossible and was in any measure a source of weakness to the state. As the gifted young favorite of Marie de' Medici, the Queen Mother and regent, Richelieu dismissed the Estates General (monarchical France's one trivial gesture to parliamentary government) in 1614 with such finality that it did not have the effrontery to

reconvene until 175 years later, in Burke's time, and to his well-founded misgivings, as it launched the French Revolution.

Britain was thus the only major power in the world that had any real respect for legislative government and a fairly serious concept of the rights of all men. There was some democracy in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Scandinavia, but these forms were not elaborately articulated, and were the relatively inaccessible activity of small and ungalvanizing states. What happened politically in Britain and America was assured the attention of the world. We will never know, but at the time of the American Revolution, Burke may have been correct that if America had simply been allowed to legislate for and tax itself, a close bond with Britain would have developed and continued. Burke's casual acquaintance Benjamin Franklin made a similar case to the British. To his American countrymen he predicted that, by the 1840s, the American colonies would surpass England in population, which proved accurate, and that in less than a century, the new nation could essentially be governing the entire English-speaking world, including India, Canada, and the developing British interests in Africa and Australasia. These were prescient visions, but they were not realized because lesser minds prevailed in the formulation of British policy in the Americas.

In cautioning against trying to impose taxes on the Americans, Burke described the colonists as "acute, inquisitive, dextrous, prompt in attack, ready in defence, and full of resources." Donald Trump would not demur from that description, and to some extent fits it himself. And he generally reciprocates flattering opinions of the British. In an under-noticed statement at the end of his first meeting with a British prime minister (Theresa May) after his election, Trump stated, as a matter of United States policy, that "a strong and independent Britain is a blessing to the world." This was effectively an endorsement of Britain's departure from Europe. Trump was the first president since Reagan to recognize Europe as a substantially anti-American institution. While the Cold War was in progress, the European Community and Union could be looked upon as a bulwark against Soviet ambitions, but once the Soviet Union began to disintegrate and that rivalry was over, the European central government increasingly held itself out as an alternative pole of influence to the United States. Donald Trump is not well-versed in history or geography, the usual requisites for international strategic insight, but he has a well-developed sense of the natural interests and ambitions of those he deals with, especially leaders of prominent countries. He has redefined the American national interest as benign nationalism in which the United States will join with other countries in pursuit of common goals, but will not be a guard dog or baggage animal that does the work and takes the risks while lesser countries give the orders. Trump knew when he came to office that this was essentially how the European Union commissioners and much of the nato bureaucracy in Brussels saw the relationship, and he perceived that there was a competition for the heart and mind of Britain,

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between Euro-integration and the world that has always beckoned to Britain across the blue ocean. The President would not have formulated it in these terms, but Britain had to make the same choice three times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The pro-French policy of the late Stuarts returning from exile after Cromwell, in 1660, was ultimately rejected when the two future Stuart queens, Mary II and her sister Queen Anne, evicted their father, James II, in favor of Mary's husband and cousin, the arch-Protestant William of Orange, and a coterie of avaricious Dutch bankers. This has been sold to posterity by Macaulay and other talented utilitarian Whig myth-makers as "The Glorious Revolution," but that interpretation is subject to dispute. Britain had less receptivity to the prim, desperately bourgeois Dutch than they had had to the eminently cultured but somewhat louche and self-indulgent French influence, and when the Stuart–Orange line ran out with Queen Anne (despite her stout production, with her game Danish husband, of seventeen children, none of whom lived past eleven years), the British vested their highly constitutionalized monarchy in distant Hanoverian cousins of the Stuarts. Britain gradually withdrew from German and European affairs, and under the elder Pitt radically expanded the British Empire, particularly in Canada and India (Pittsburgh was named after him).

Obviously, President Trump is not a European history specialist, but he was aware, like any observer of international events, that a battle was underway, with centuries of British history as its prelude, for the national vocation of the United Kingdom: Europe or the world, in which primacy in Britain's thoughts would be given its fellow advanced English-speaking democracies, namely the United States and the old Commonwealth, especially Canada and Australia. Burke, like the elder Pitt, favored granting autonomy to the Americans and enabling them to impose their own taxes. Britain had effectively doubled its national debt in the Seven Years' War (a genius investment given what it acquired), and it was logical that the Americans, the wealthiest British of all, should pay something, as chief beneficiaries of the removal of the French threat to New England. But Pitt realized that it would be hazardous to impose a tax on them now, as it might be impossible to collect. Britain could not afford the troops to occupy America and extort the tax by martial law. Any such commitment of ground forces would either denude the navy of manpower, a potential catastrophe for the island nation that had not seen the campfires of an invader for seven hundred years, or require the use of mercenaries, who, as Machiavelli noted, are never committed to the cause and can always be induced to defect. Burke called the use of Hessians against Washington's Continental Army "a Germanic king employing German boors and vassals to destroy English liberties of British colonists."

Burke's advice was that Britain should send representatives at once to America, abandon the Stamp Tax, establish an autonomous assembly of the American colonies with power to tax, combine with America in defense and foreign policy matters, embrace it in trade on a highly preferential reciprocal basis, maintain Canada as a potential carrot for the Americans, and henceforth not commit to great expenses on behalf of the Americans without an American commitment to help pay for it. Admitting that it is a tenuous comparison, I believe there is some parallel to Burke's American policy in Trump's gentle admonition to Theresa May that she could

not leave Europe and remain in it at the same time, which is what she was attempting. The parallel is stronger when Burke's ambition for a financially savvy reconciliation with America, and skepticism about the French Revolution, are compared to Trump's requirement that America's allies pay their way, and that America's allies be fewer but stronger and more reliable (e.g., Britain and Israel). Burke would have approved of cutting loose hypocritical states like Pakistan. He would certainly have approved of the end of the appeasement of China, and intensified pressure for that country to accommodate the greater economic, military, political, and cultural strength of America.

Trump is thus elaborating a foreign policy that Burke would certainly cheer. It consists in asserting America's strategic superiority gradually and not confrontationally, and its ability to outbid any other country for the good will of third parties, and thus to reinforce natural alliances. Trump avoids unnecessary conflicts when local forces can be assisted to do the fighting; asserts nuclear non-proliferation in the case of irresponsible states (Iran and North Korea); responds to provocations with disproportionate force as the surest deterrent (e.g., the execution of the Iranian terrorism director Qasem Soleimani); and avoids driving potential rivals into each other's arms. This last point is the kernel of the Trump policy to Russia that has been so hideously complicated because of the fraudulent Democratic preoccupation with Trump's relations with the Russian leader, Vladimir Putin. The only danger Russia now poses to America is that it could be faced down so humiliatingly that it is driven into the arms of China. If China exported fifty million surplus people to extract resources from Siberia for royalties paid to the Kremlin, the West would face a Eurasian land mass whose northern and eastern territory would lie in the hands of an instantly more competitive rival than Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia were. The nearest parallel to the challenge of China in Burke's career was his advocacy from 1793 to 1797 (when he died) of collective security against France. This opposed the policy of Charles James Fox, who advocated reconciliation with France. It might have been possible after Burke died, with Napoleon leading, but not with the revolutionary and corrupt regimes that preceded him. At the outset, in 1789, Burke correctly predicted that France would descend into tyranny and terror—"The spirit is impossible not to admire, but the old Parisian violence has broken out in a shocking manner."

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Beyond Anglo-American cooperation and like-minded ideas of how to deal with other states, Burke and Trump are both unambiguous capitalists. Burke astutely predicted in 1769 that France was headed for financial disaster, an event that did occur twenty years later (partly because Franklin, in one of the greatest triumphs of diplomacy in all history, persuaded the French monarchy to support democracy, republicanism, and secession in America). Burke was a believer in free trade between equivalently advanced countries and in the desirability of economic growth.

In one of the great controversies of British politics between 1760 and 1860, one that ultimately split the Tory (Conservative) Party, Burke favored an unregulated price of wheat (which the British, in their perversity, called corn). Burke favored "a natural price in a universal market," and bravely told his electors in the great port city of Bristol that they must accept free trade with Ireland as it was within the same kingdom. He opposed restrictions and monopoly and told Bristol that if it yielded on unit price, it could expect increased revenue on sale. Adam Smith declared himself in complete agreement with Burke's economic views, and on this subject, Burke and Trump would be in full accord. Trump's pursuit of tariffs, held against him by some "free traders," has been conducted explicitly on the grounds that natural prices are impossible in our current market, whereby trading partners like China play by a very different set of rules.

More complicated are some differences between Burke and Trump about the nature of liberty. Burke held that British freedoms were derived from pre-Norman, Anglo-Saxon customs, made more precise by Magna Carta, that were not handed down by monarchs, but were the ancient birthright of the British, including the British of America. Burke rejected the Rousseauvian concept of universal liberty, believing it certain to lead, as it had in France, to "excesses of an irrational, unprincipled, proscribing, confiscating, plundering, ferocious, bloody, and tyrannical democracy." He opposed abstract, metaphysical human rights, and supported national tradition. Analyzed carefully, Burke's notion of rights can be seen as based on being English. Britain and America were indeed the only large countries that could claim much respect for human rights. The attempt to enact Rousseauvian principles in France had been a disaster, culminating in the Reign of Terror and the accession of one of the most corrupt and licentious regimes in the history of major Western nationalities (the Directory). And so Burke rightly thought respect for human rights a British characteristic, not a phenomenon that could be considered universal.

The Declaration of Independence held that (a deistic version of) God created all men as equal and endowed them with certain "inalienable rights," and, given the policies that provoked their revolution, the American revolutionary leaders could scarcely be expected to endorse Britain as the font of their concepts of liberty. The whole ethos of the United States has been to attract people from all over the world to participate in its popular democracy, one neither class-riven nor divided by sect or ethnicity. Burke himself was the protégé of the Marquess of Rockingham and holder of a pocket borough in parliament (one with an artificially small electorate). He considered the majority of people to be insufficiently intelligent to elect governments sensibly, susceptible to having their "dangerous and angry passions" exploited by demagogues, which could threaten private property and religious practice, and he believed unpopular minorities would be persecuted without the protection of the upper classes. These were not outlandish views at the time, but one suspects that in any age Donald Trump would have trusted the bourgeoisie, the farmers, and the working class more than the patriciate, as he does now. His ancestry is half German and half Scottish, and two of his three wives have been Roman Catholic Slavs; his elder daughter and son-in law are Jews. This level of diversity would have astounded Burke, but this is a vastly different era, and the contemporary United States is a vastly different society. Burke's religiosity was largely based on

social stability and resistance to secular demagogy. Trump had a religious upbringing under a family friend, Norman Vincent Peale, and he rejects the implicit atheism of Clinton–Obama Democrats, but much of his religious deference appears to be an appeal to his followers. This is not a great schism between the two men. Part of Burke's flag-waving British nationalism arose from his status as an Irishman, albeit a Protestant, though his mother and sister were Roman Catholics, and he supported Catholic Emancipation.

In fact, American democracy is derived from the non-monarchical institutions and statutes of the British, uplifted by the intellectual populist *élan* and bravura of the French: the choir of Westminster Abbey singing a translation of *La Marseillaise*. Trump, I suspect, would quietly endorse the principle, hard to dispute, that the Americans and British, of the world's major nationalities, have by far the most consistent and durable aptitude for taking human rights seriously. Only Canada (kindred to Britain and the United States) among large countries has also had stable democratic institutions for over 150 years; France in that time has had an empire, three republics, two provisional governments, Nazi occupation and a collaborationist dictatorship, and a government in exile. The grace of conversion to democracy in Germany, Italy, and Japan is of relatively recent date, and in China and Russia it remains elusive, to say the least.

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In other specific matters, Burke and Trump have resemblances. Burke regarded capital punishment as "butchery" and condemned the pillory as a penalty for sodomy. Trump at least only approves of the death penalty in extreme cases that admit of no doubt and is a clear supporter of gay rights. Where Burke was a passionate and nationalistic Briton, extending to Ireland, America, and Canada, he was a fierce enemy of much of British colonialism and was severely critical of its policy in India, where he persecuted a distinguished governor, Warren Hastings. Comparatively genteel though Burke was, he slung invective around about as vehemently, if more stylishly, than Trump. He called Hastings a "captain-general of iniquity" and a "spider of hell" and a "ravenous vulture devouring the carcasses of the dead," with "a heart gangrened to the core." This was an outrageous slandering of Hastings, beside which Trump's inveighing against "fake news" and the "enemies of the people" sounds very tepid. And Burke could be flamboyant: in the midst of the French Revolution, after the revolutionaries had ordered three thousand daggers from British suppliers, Burke demanded that the order not be filled and dramatically exclaimed, "This is what you are to gain from an alliance with France," throwing a dagger on the floor of the House of Commons. (The distinguished writer and wit Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who was also an M.P. and a social friend of Burke, vitiated the melodrama by loudly asking, "Where is the fork?")

Trump's outer-borough New York mannerisms and his life as an audacious developer, not overly scrupulous casino-operator, reality television producer and star, and mass

entertainment impresario give him a carnival air that is clangorous in comparison with Edmund Burke, essayist, parliamentarian, and public orator. But as nationalists and believers in the defense of rights in their own countries, as capitalists and as relatively broad-minded men in social matters and respecters of Christianity, they have distinct similarities. The longest step between Burkean Toryism and Trump's popular conservatism was taken by Benjamin Disraeli, an ethnic Jew, a dandy, the author of some quasi-salacious novels, but also an immense wit, twice prime minister and thrice chancellor, and leader or co-leader of the Conservative Party for thirty-two years. The authoritarian conservative historian Thomas Carlyle dismissed him as "a superlative Hebraic conjurer," but Disraeli popularized the Empire, expanded the franchise, and extended the appeal of the Conservative Party to the working class. He, like Trump but in different fields, had a career that astounded the world; "Das ist der Mann," said Bismarck at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, where Disraeli's adroitness produced "peace with honor." (In entire coincidence, Burke was offered the honor of Earl of Beaconsfield by George III, whose gratitude for Burke's stance on the French Revolution superseded their differences over America. As his only son had died, Burke declined, but that title was conferred on Disraeli by Queen Victoria ninety years later.) Today, Boris Johnson and Donald Trump have an excellent likelihood, and the declared ambition, to revive the greatest days of the Anglo-American Alliance. Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill saved Western civilization in World War II, and Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher led the West to bloodless victory in the Cold War. No one should discount what Trump and Johnson (a knowledgeable Burke admirer) may achieve.

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