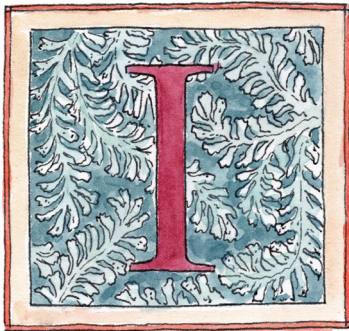


ROGER ZAKHEIM

# Saving Conservatism from Nationalism

*America is not like other countries,  
and shouldn't try to be*



IN THE LEAD-UP to the Trump administration's military strike against Iran's nuclear weapons program in June 2025, Tucker Carlson posted on social media that "anyone advocating for conflict with Iran is not an ally of the United States, but an enemy." It was a nonsensical assertion considering that the two countries had then been in conflict for 46 years and also obtuse considering that Iran has placed that conflict at the center of its political messaging since 1979. When the first Ayatollah came to power, he did so amid chants of "death to America!," holding Americans in Iran hostage for 444 days. Neither the chants nor the violent anti-American actions to back them have abated since.

The primary targets of Carlson's rhetoric last year weren't his usual

opponents on the political Left who attribute to him, at least in part, the rise of their least favorite president ever. No, that day and throughout the military confrontation that followed, Carlson's attack was directed at other Republicans. In case you haven't noticed, while the Democratic Party has been roiled by internal power struggles between its left flank and its more moderate center, the Republican Party has been undergoing an internal ideological battle of its own, between traditional conservatives and neoconservatives (neocons) on one side and the new national conservatives (natcons) on the other.

The natcons are an intellectual movement aligned with MAGA conservatives who have long rejected the GOP's Reaganite conservative internationalism, strong national defense, free markets, and limited government. They favor a "restrained" foreign policy, largely oppose military intervention overseas, and embrace protectionist economic policies. Tucker Carlson was an early adopter of foreign policy positions after a 2003 trip to Iraq that would, a decade and a half later, come to be regarded as pillars of national conservatism in America. "Seeing Iraq up close was a formative change in my thinking," he said. His complete shift toward national conservatism in the years since has reflected a broader trend in the conservative movement and also affirmed his position at the movement's helm. Watching the transformation of the rural town in Maine where he lives into "something different and diminished, not just poor but degraded"—thanks to the effects of drugs, alcohol, unemployment, welfare, and illegitimacy—cemented Carlson's conversion to full natcon-hood. By 2019, Michael Anton, a founding leader of the natcons and a veteran of the first Trump administration (and now the second), declared Carlson the "de facto leader of the conservative movement."

The future of American conservatism hinges on whether national conservatism will continue to outpace its ideological predecessors: traditional conservatism, neoconservatism, and Reaganism. At present,

it is attracting a young and energetic following and getting far more of the podcast airtime. And when it comes to policy positions, there is not a single one more contested in this battle over the future of conservatism than U.S. support for Israel, with the traditional conservatives and neocons holding a firm “yea,” but a growing number of influential natcons, including Carlson, pushing “nay.” What makes this most ironic is where national conservatism began: Israel.



The origins of national conservatism reside with the right-wing Zionist political theorist Yoram Hazony. A former aide to Benjamin Netanyahu in the 1990s, Hazony retreated from the world of Israeli politics to embark on an intellectual project dedicated to legitimating the Jewish state. The problem facing Israel, as he and many conservatives saw it then, was not Israel’s external enemies but the threat from within. A new generation of Israeli elites had come to reject Herzl’s Zionism in favor of a secular liberalism that saw Israel as a civic state like other liberal democracies and de-emphasized the country’s Jewish character. Hazony’s book *The Jewish State* (2000), titled as a nod to Herzl, argued that Israelis should once again embrace the essence of Zionism: a Jewish nation committed to its history, religion, and culture. If Israeli leaders in the Knesset did not believe in Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish nation-state, how could Israel expect to be received seriously in the United Nations General Assembly?

By 2018, Hazony had transformed his work on behalf of Zionism into support of a larger cause. The liberal disease undermining Israel, Hazony concluded, was afflicting all Western nation-states. Liberalism had run amok and threatened the Westphalian nation-state system that was built to protect and preserve the freedom and culture of nations. Hazony’s *The Virtue of Nationalism*, published

that year, became a core text for conservatives across the world. *The New English Review* called it “the book many conservative readers in the West have been waiting for.” The book launched national conservatism as an international movement, and 2018 was the year Hazony’s theory of nationalism, first formulated specifically for Israel, went abroad.

In Hazony’s mind, saving nationalism everywhere would rescue Zionism. In attempting to legitimize the Zionist state, he intended to build a global movement that advanced nationalism. Much of the thinking that has come to define the natcon movement today, most notably its Statement of Principles in 2022, can be traced to Hazony’s early work seeking to restore the soul of Israel.

The tragic irony is that as Hazony’s natcons have helped catalyze nationalism in the West, his original goal of legitimating the Zionist state has backfired.

The nationalist strand promoted by natcons is inspired by biblical Israel. Natcons emphasize its strong nationalist identity bound by a common religion, language, culture, and history—a non-expansionist nation that was content to remain within its borders. For natcons, empires are the antithesis of nationalism: Rome in ancient times and supranational bodies, such as the United Nations and the European Union, today. According to natcons, liberalism of the late-20th and early-21st centuries seeks to subvert and replace national identities with a godless, globalist, woke ideology. It advances open borders and concentrates power in unaccountable elites disconnected from their fellow citizens. In the natcon view, the autocrat, dictator, or monarch dedicated to protecting the realm is a lesser evil than woke liberalism, which would undermine the foundations of the nation’s existence.

It’s not hard to see how natcons are the natural intellectual companions of MAGA Republicans. Natcons believe that unrestrained lib-

eralism in the United States delivered a globalism that undermined American sovereignty by rejecting its founding (see The 1619 Project) and its Judeo-Christian creed while embracing open borders, woke-ness, and supranational bodies. Post–Cold War liberalism harnessed American power and wealth to preserve a faceless “rules-based international order” that led to “forever wars.” It embraced free-trade policies that favored multinational corporations over American manufacturing jobs and indulged “free riding” allies—most notably NATO. If this sounds like the politics of Vice President JD Vance, it is: Vance is one of a number of younger GOP politicians who have embraced national conservatism.

Hazony has argued urgently for America’s embrace of his project, as he explicitly said in his 2022 book, *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*: “In fact, with the collapse of liberal hegemony in America, nationalist conservatism offers the best hope for restoration of political stability and health.”



Applying nationalism to the United States, whether it is of a Russian, Chinese, Hungarian, or Zionist variety, is a tricky and somewhat fraught exercise. While natcons draw inspiration from the books of Joshua and Judges, and from Samuel’s description of how the 12 tribes settled ancient Israel, they downplay the part of the Bible that most inspired America’s Founding Fathers. Franklin, Washington, and Adams drew from the book of Exodus; America’s revolutionaries saw themselves as a second Israel escaping the bondage of their contemporary Egypt, the British Crown. The liberty enshrined in America’s Declaration of Independence was inspired by the story of ancient Israel’s independence, *not* the resettlement of its homeland.

Unlike other nations, ancient Israel and America were built on a shared set of values and beliefs before they had common borders. While the natcons emphasize the sovereignty of free nations, America's founding was dedicated to the preeminence of free peoples. For the Founders, the power and authority of government was drawn from "We the People," not "We the Colonies." In the mold of ancient Israel at Mt. Sinai, the American people made a covenant committing to a set of ideals and a specific form of government enshrined in its Declaration and Constitution. This was the essence of American nationalism. As Ronald Reagan reminded Americans in his last speech as president:

I think it's fitting to leave one final thought, an observation about a country which I love. It was stated best in a letter I received not long ago. A man wrote me and said: "You can go to live in France, but you cannot become a Frenchman. You can go to live in Germany or Turkey or Japan, but you cannot become a German, a Turk, or a Japanese. But anyone, from any corner of the Earth, can come to live in America and become an American."

Like the Founders before him, Reagan understood that the American creed made American nationalism exceptional. It distinguished it from all other nations. The American democratic republic, according to Reaganites, traditional conservatives, and neocons, is not one nation among many but a chosen nation, chosen not by God but by its own citizens.

The battle over American conservatism is fundamentally the same battle that these dueling versions of American nationalism, drawn from two different facets of biblical Israel, are fighting. To put it in more Trump-era terms, the battle over MAGA is a battle over what

makes America great. Is it the same thing that makes any nation worth its salt? Or is it something different, unique to the American experiment? Where the conservative movement decides to stand on this question will inform the role and purpose of the American project at home and abroad.

Historically speaking, it's plain to see the fact of America's difference from the other (mostly European) countries where national conservatism has found a foothold. But there is also a more philosophical argument against natcon's importation to American politics. The greatest weakness of national conservatism's creed is its disregard for the excesses and dangers of nationalism, most notably Nazism. In the natcon view, the racism, expansionism, and genocide of the Nazi era were a bug, not a feature, of nationalism. The natcon statement of principles condemns "the use of state and private institutions to discriminate" and promotes a "decent nationalism" that protects minorities. For Reaganites, reliance on "decency" is an entirely inadequate defense against tyranny and fails to learn the lessons of the 20th century.

On the 40th anniversary of D-Day, in 1984, Ronald Reagan reminded Americans, "There is a profound, moral difference between the use of force for liberation and the use of force for conquest." From the beaches of Normandy, Reagan ushered in a new American epoch in the middle of the Cold War. He believed that after two world wars and during a struggle with a nuclear-armed totalitarian regime, perpetuating the American Republic necessitated a United States that advanced freedom beyond its sovereign borders. To preserve American liberty within the United States, Reagan believed, America would have to project its creed across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans: "Isolationism never was and never will be an acceptable response to tyrannical governments with an expansionist intent."

Reagan warned against the impulse “to take blind shelter across the sea, rushing to respond only after freedom is lost.”

This is the heart of Reagan’s conservative internationalism. It embraces morality in foreign policy by advancing individual freedom and aligning with democracies. As America entered its third century after its birth, Reagan advanced the spirit of the Founding globally, the exact opposite of what American natcons endeavor to do today, which is to bring the spirit of European nationalism to America. Reagan’s vision was attractive to Democrat and Republican Cold Warriors alike. His policy was rooted in the politics of addition—building a durable bipartisan coalition with a noble vision of America’s place in the world. He succeeded. America defeated the Soviet Union, won the Cold War, and ushered in an unprecedented era of American peace and prosperity, liberating half of Europe in the process. It also defined the outlook of a generation of conservatives.



For today’s natcons, many of whom were praising Reagan not long ago, Reaganism’s promotion of liberal idealism corrupted conservatism because it allowed the excesses of liberalism to penetrate the conservative movement. The reckoning is a recent phenomenon, one made possible more by America’s response to direct attacks on its soil than by the idealism and sense of purpose underlying the American story. To be sure, a critique of the conservative project after the Cold War is warranted—for our post-9/11 wars and our passive responses to the “Great Awakening.” Where natcons go too far is recasting our identity in the image of Old World nations whose citizens fled to America. The exceptionalism of the American democratic experiment is what distinguishes the United States from every European state—and the natcons’ mistake amounts to a fundamental repudiation of the American idea.

Thus, when the Trump administration deliberated in the spring of 2025 and then again in the winter of 2026 on whether it should join Israel in striking Iran, natcons found themselves divided. For pro-Israel natcons such as Hazony, a U.S. strike against Iran was an acceptable form of American intervention, though it might strain or contradict the principles of the movement. But his acolytes, natcon purists uncommitted to the Jewish nationalism for which the project was forged, viewed Operations Midnight Hammer and Epic Fury as an abandonment of the movement's core beliefs: restraint and suspicion of interventionism. Carlson and other anti-Zionists went a step further, using natcon ideas to sow suspicion of Jews, true to Old World form. Suddenly, it seemed that Hazony had created a monster. The nationalist project he championed, all but invented, to protect the Zionist project was now being used as a sword against it.

For his own part, Hazony has failed to acknowledge what he has wrought and has not even seen the connection between his project and Carlson's crusade. "On February 3, Tucker wrote to me asking if he could speak at the first Israeli National Conservatism Conference (NatCon), which is scheduled to be held in Jerusalem on June 8-10. I was taken aback that he would ask for something like that, given the content of our conversation two days earlier," Hazony posted on X on February 21, 2026. In that conversation, Hazony had been trying to explain to America's foremost surrogate of national conservatism why so many Jews view him as antisemitic, to no avail.

With conservatives like these, who needs Marxists?



But things might not be as gloomy as they seem. For all the natcon podcastery bluster and social media theater, committed MAGA

Republican voters, including the president, appear not to be buying what the natcons are selling, at least when it comes to foreign policy. President Trump's interventions in Iran, Venezuela, Syria, and Nigeria, and his focus on resolving conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, demonstrate that the founder of MAGA is not an isolationist who favors the natcon doctrine of restraint. While not necessarily driven by a Reaganesque commitment to freedom and liberty, the president clearly sees America's special role in the world as instrumental for serving America's interests.

And his base is with him. Recent polls show support for Operation Epic Fury among more than 90 percent of MAGA voters, which only reinforces the polls that consistently show that MAGA Republicans overwhelmingly favor the United States being engaged in the world. Elsewhere, by contrast, national conservatism has taken several high-profile hits, most notably Viktor Orbán's loss to a center-Right opponent in Hungary. As Ukraine continues to withstand Russian aggression, in defiance of the yearslong natcon predictions of defeat, it appears that the sun might be setting on the political promise of national conservatism, both at home and abroad.

Traditional conservatives should turn these successes into a program of action.

First, they need to count and communicate these wins as wins. The conceit advanced by the mainstream media and far-Right podcasters is that the defanged and denuded Islamic Republic has won the fight against the United States and Israel. This not only gives aid and comfort to the enemy; it perpetuates the natcon narrative that foreign interventions against tyranny weaken American security and sovereignty.

Second, traditional Republicans (that is, conservatives, neoconservatives, and Reaganites alike) need to engage elected Republicans at the state and federal level on the fissure between MAGA

Republicans and natcons. While natcons host their conference in Jerusalem in June, attempting to repair a movement riddled with antisemitism, traditional Republicans should work in the United States to engage grassroots conservative confabs like CPAC and to have a presence at Turning Point USA events. Some, such as Ben Shapiro, have already done this to great effect. The traditional conservatives must, as Theodore Roosevelt urged a century ago, remain in the arena and challenge the natcons who keep trying to grab the microphone.

Last, and certainly not least, traditional Republicans need to prioritize running traditional candidates in local elections.

On February 22, 1861, Abraham Lincoln addressed Independence Hall in Philadelphia, the birthplace of our nation. Drawing from Proverbs 25:11 — “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” — he likened the Declaration of Independence to an “apple of gold,” and the Constitution was the “setting of silver.” The apple of gold, the heart of the Republic, was protected by its silver setting. Conserving both the golden apple and silver setting has been the principal preoccupation of Republicans since Lincoln’s presidency. The question of how best to conserve them is at the heart of the fight within the American Right today. The national conservatives have their own theory, but to me they are treating the gold apple like all others. The task before traditional conservatives is to present a hopeful, regenerative vision, calling on Americans to shoulder the responsibilities of liberty at home and abroad rather than retreat into grievance, cynicism, and self-endangering restraint. \*

---

ROGER ZAKHEIM is the director of the Ronald Reagan Institute in Washington, D.C., and author of *Peace Through Strength: How Reagan’s Military Buildup Won the Cold War*, forthcoming in November.