

They Used to Rule the World. What Happened?

di Ferdinand Mount

The British Conservative Party has long boasted of being the most successful political party on the planet. The unimaginable scale of its defeat on July 4, when it won the fewest seats in its history, looks like the downfall of moderate conservatism. It appears to be the final straw for the center-right parties offering pragmatism, prosperity and opportunity that have dominated Western politics since World War II. Almost everywhere conservatism's brash rival, nationalist populism, is on the march: already in power with its colorful leaders in Hungary, Italy and Argentina; on the brink of it in the United States and France; and eroding the old-style conservatives in Germany, the Netherlands and now Britain. The rivalry on the right is in danger of becoming a rout, with the senior, steadier force swallowed by its insurgent challenger.

These shocks to our established ways of thinking are so violent that we immediately assume that this must be a unique apocalypse, the product of unprecedented social and economic forces. This, I think, is a temptation to be resisted. The reality is that something similar has often happened or nearly happened before, at different times and in different places. Nationalist populism, my umbrella term for the smorgasbord of hard-right forces, always sings the same song. The circumstances that gain it a sympathetic hearing are usually much the same, too: decline of old industries and loss of well-paid jobs for men, undercutting by rising nations and, of course, fresh waves of immigrants from new places. It's when mainstream conservatism visibly flounders in dealing with the challenge — as it has so clearly done in recent years — that such movements can hope to surge.

The upshot is both concerning and consoling. Conservatism has been here before — and it can get through it again.

Nationalist populism is not a weird deviation from the natural flow of history. Since the dawn of the nation-state, it has been an ever-present threat, sometimes lurking in

the shadows, sometimes derided as a throwback, but never quite disappearing from view. The possibilities for its success are often visible well in advance to keen observers, at times when most people are thinking about something else. In 1922, when the rest of Europe was convulsed by the threat of Bolshevism and Adolf Hitler was still a nonentity, the German chancellor declared “There is no doubt about it: The enemy is on the right.” In 1994, when all of Europe was still celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of history, Edward Luttwak foresaw a “space that remains wide open for a product-improved fascist party.”

It’s in the United States where the most stunning example of something like that has taken place. But the Trump phenomenon did not come out of a calm blue sky. Donald Trump’s discarded guru Steve Bannon saw in his master echoes of earlier populist orators, such as William Jennings Bryan, who could rage against bankers to rural audiences for hours on end. Mr. Bannon prepped Mr. Trump for his inauguration by telling him tales of his predecessor Andrew Jackson, whose inauguration had drawn to Washington thousands of obstreperous supporters who drank the capital dry and outstayed their welcome — echoing what was to come four years later, on a more violent and terrifying scale.

Mr. Trump’s critics, and his fans too, preferred to think of him as a unique irruption into American history. But Mr. Bannon was right in thinking that most of his instincts and his policies have roots going way back. Before the aviator Charles Lindbergh helped lead the America First Committee to keep the United States out of World War II, Woodrow Wilson had used the slogan “America First” in his doomed 1916 pledge to keep America out of World War I. The press baron William Randolph Hearst used it in his campaigns almost as often as he played up the threat of Chinese immigration. (Orson Welles’s “Citizen Kane,” based on Mr. Hearst, is Mr. Trump’s favorite film.) In the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan took up the slogan, and as recently as 2016, David Duke, a former leader of the Klan, ran for a Louisiana Senate seat as an “America First” candidate.

For Mr. Trump, “America First” meant withdrawing from pretty much every international organization. At one time or another as president, he demanded that the United States withdraw from NATO, the North American Free Trade Agreement, the World Health Organization, the Paris climate accords and the World Trade

Organization. He was equally hostile to bilateral agreements, with nations such as South Korea and Iran. This isolationism also has plenty of precedents, going back to the failure of the Senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 and join the League of Nations the year after, under the influence of such implacable America-aloners as Senator William Borah of Idaho.

Isolationism is closely connected with nativism, which goes back to the early days of the Republic and the limitations on immigration imposed by the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. “Native American” parties did pretty well in the 1840s and 1850s — “Native” here meaning descendants of the original colonists not American Indians, who did not enter the political equation at all. The Know-Nothing Party, or American Party, of the 1850s was especially hostile to the immigration of Irish Catholics. The former President Millard Fillmore accepted the nomination of the Know-Nothings for the 1856 election and finished third. Former President Trump has no need to stoop to such an undignified resort, retaining as he does such an iron grip on the Republican Party.

Mr. Trump’s instincts, in lots of ways, are in line with traditional right-wing attitudes. Like many Republicans before him, he runs against Washington and the bureaucrats who ruin the lives of ordinary hard-working Americans. It was Ronald Reagan who first promised “to drain the swamp”; it was Richard Nixon who claimed to be speaking for “the great silent majority” — Calvin Coolidge’s campaign for the 1920 presidential election even used the phrase. But it was Mr. Trump who first took such slogans seriously, being the only president ever to come into office with zero experience of public service in any field, civil, political or military. It turned out that his interest in the processes and institutions of government was pretty near zero, too.

The threat of nationalist populism, as Mr. Trump and his precursors show, is perennial. How and when does it break through? So much depends on the authorities of the day, their diligence or their negligence. In November and December 2020, for example, the insistence by election officials in close-fought states that Joe Biden had been legitimately elected undermined Mr. Trump’s claim to have won (although millions of Trumpers went on believing otherwise). The more meticulously officials carry out their duties, the quicker an attempt at populist takeover will become an ugly memory rather than a present danger. The political class has the power to hold the nationalists at bay.

There is no sharper proof of that than the conduct of two modern European monarchs when faced with an extreme political challenge. When Mussolini's Blackshirts marched on Rome in 1922, the prime minister, Luigi Facta, declared a state of siege — but the king, Victor Emmanuel III, refused to sign the order. The next day, the king appointed Mussolini as his prime minister, ushering in a brutal regime that lasted more than two decades. Yet in the general election the year before, Mussolini's National Fascist Party had secured only 35 out of 535 seats. There had been fewer than 30,000 men on Mussolini's march. Although his Blackshirts had been kicking up trouble all over the country, it should still have been possible to declare martial law and crush the uprising. Untold evil followed from the king's capitulation, for which the word "abject" is too mild.

The contrast with Spain nearly 60 years later could not be more striking, or tragic. There, it was the decisive action of King Juan Carlos that quashed a fascist coup led by Antonio Tejero Molina, a lieutenant colonel. In February 1981, a gang of civil guards burst into the Congress of Deputies chamber and held its members hostage, shouting abuse and firing wildly. The king, however, refused to receive any of the coup leaders and a few hours later appeared on television in his uniform as captain general of the Armed Forces to denounce the coup in superbly forthright terms. The coup fizzled instantly. That was lawfulness and diligence in action. No doubt Mussolini would have been a tougher nut to crack than the somewhat deranged lieutenant colonel. But the king of Italy should have made the effort, as the king of Spain was to do.

In Hitler's case, there was no mystery about his intention to destroy German democracy. His former disillusioned ally Gen. Erich Ludendorff, who had taken part in the Beer Hall Putsch in 1923, sent a scorching missive to President Paul von Hindenburg after the president had reluctantly appointed Hitler chancellor in January 1933. "I solemnly prophesy that this accursed man will cast our Reich into the abyss and bring our nation to inconceivable misery," Ludendorff wrote. "Future generations will damn you in your grave for what you have done." The Weimar Republic folded with scarcely a murmur.

In Britain, by contrast, Oswald Mosley's fascist Blackshirts got nowhere. Before and after the general strike of 1926, the much-underrated government of Stanley Baldwin embarked on a far-reaching program of public housing and welfare and reached out to

political opponents. This response was dwarfed by the amazing radicalism of the New Deal in the United States, which comprehensively forestalled any Depression-era reaction. Infrastructure and employment programs like the Works Progress Administration, banking reforms like the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933 and huge income taxes on the rich — there has been nothing so ambitious attempted in a liberal democracy before or since.

Here was an object lesson in how to halt the rise of national populists, stripping them of their potency by ensuring economic growth and social peace, rather than simply stopping a breakthrough once they'd risen. It was learned by postwar governments on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, Eisenhower Republicans seamlessly adopted international leadership, free trade and most of the New Deal when they took over from the Democrats. In Western Europe, Christian Democrats and Conservatives adopted full employment as a key goal and promised that the poorest would share in rising living standards. In Britain, the Tories regained respectability after being tarnished as the party of mass unemployment and appeasement. Conservatism was back in control.

But this did not mean that the national populists disappeared. It is often forgotten how quickly fascism bobbed up again on the continent after the war. The Italian Social Movement was formed in 1946 by Mussolini loyalists. While the rest of Europe was breathing sighs of relief to see the moderate Christian Democrats in charge, the party worked its way back to respectability, partly by giving informal support to the Christian Democrats in a common anti-Communist front. There were years of relative eclipse and several changes of name, but the neo-fascists kept plugging away until, in their latest guise of the Brothers of Italy, they became the largest party in government in 2022, led by the telegenic [Giorgia Meloni](#). Now just 47 years old, Ms. Meloni had joined the youth section of the Italian Social Movement way back in 1992.

In France, too, fascism was far from vanquished. Jean-Marie Le Pen, an antisemitic deputy who directed a far-right presidential campaign in 1965, founded the Front National along with former members of the Vichy regime in 1972. The torch eventually passed, rather fractiously, to one of his daughters, the presentable Marine, who has busily given the impression of cleaning up the party's act. But the actual content of her 2022 presidential campaign tells a rather different story. She claimed that her party —

renamed the National Rally — was offering a softer, more open approach than the one her father led. Yet her key proposal was to hold a referendum on “citizenship, identity and immigration” that would enshrine discrimination in the Constitution of France, conferring “national priority” on French citizens in employment, social benefits and public housing.

The same referendum would establish the primacy of French law over international treaties, to allow France “to solve the problem of mass, uncontrolled immigration, so the French choose who comes, who stays, who leaves” — her words in a televised debate with President Emmanuel Macron. This of course would undercut the freedom of movement inherent in European Union membership and, if followed literally, would make it impossible for France to continue in the union at all. This is the language of a modern Caesar, and you can pick up echoes of it from Viktor Orban of Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and Vladimir Putin of Russia.

The bullet points of all these movements echo Trumpism on every front: hostility to immigrants, protectionism, distrust of judges, refusal to stay in or to join international organizations and, above all else, worship of the nation. It is important to understand that these movements often also claim to represent “true” or “traditional” conservatism. None more so than National Conservatism, or NatCon, the movement that has gained quite a bit of traction on both sides of the Atlantic, drawing prominent Republicans and British Conservatives to its well-financed conferences.

Its [statement of principles](#) is a roll-call of contemporary hard-right obsessions. There is little or no mention of welfare services, social security, protection of the weak, protection of the environment or climate change. If this is conservatism, it is certainly not the conservatism of Benjamin Disraeli and Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill and Theodore Roosevelt, Harold Macmillan and Dwight Eisenhower, or even Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. There is an underlying harshness here, of the sort that led ministers in Britain’s previous Conservative government to denounce sleeping on [the streets](#) and the resort to [food banks](#) as “lifestyle choices.”

What we cannot deny is the agility and chutzpah of these NatCons and NatPops. They are so light on their feet, changing their names and their electoral tactics at a moment’s notice, without a backward glance. Nigel Farage has been a leading light for 30 years now, in the U.K. Independence Party, the Brexit Party and now [Reform U.K.](#) When the

2024 general election was called, he wasn't even a parliamentary candidate. He ended up in Parliament leading a party with a clutch of lawmakers and the third-largest tally of votes. These ingenious insurrectionist movements can themselves be outmaneuvered, as the National Rally was by electoral pacts in the second round of France's election in July, coming third rather than first. But they are not going to go away.

Those who call themselves moderate Republicans or compassionate Conservatives or responsible Christian Democrats are going to have to think harder if they are to regain their former dominance on the center right. It is an error to imagine that the Tories got flung out in Britain, for example, just because they were so crass and corrupt. The conservative commentator Matthew Parris hit the nail on the head when [he wrote](#), in the aftermath of the election, that “what voters really cannot forgive, despite what they tell even themselves, is the fact that Conservative government hasn't made us richer.”

Mainstream conservative parties all over Europe recovered their reputations after 1945 by delivering higher living standards, public health and welfare services and, most of the time, low unemployment. There were blips and hiccups, but the public remained largely convinced that conservative parties would do their best to restore the damage. That trust has vanished. Nothing was more pathetic than the constant bleating from former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak of Britain and his ministers that they were “focused on delivering for the British people.” Everyone could see that nothing was working: Their wages were as stagnant as the sewage-choked chalk streams, their jobs as insecure as the trains were late. As for immigration, the futile promise to “stop the boats” ignored the influx of hundreds of thousands of entirely legal and mostly much-needed foreign workers every year to staff the country's hospitals and care homes and fruit farms. A delivery driver who delivered as little as Mr. Sunak's government wouldn't last the week.

Where do we go from here? What I say derives from my sense of the situation in Britain — the cradle of conservatism, after all, where its future can be most clearly divined — and my overwhelming impression of the recent election campaign. It was dismal beyond belief. There were scarcely any posters or billboards. The turnout was one of the lowest ever. Everyone, even the politicians and the journalists, seemed lacking in combative zest. When it was all over, there was so little jubilation, even among those

on the winning side. I was reminded of Anthony Powell's description in "A Dance to the Music of Time" of the Thanksgiving service in St. Paul's Cathedral at the end of World War II. "The sense of being present at a Great Occasion," he wrote, was entirely absent. "Perhaps that was because everyone was by now so tired. The country, there could be no doubt, was absolutely worn out."

Our parents and grandparents had to grope their way through that postwar fatigue. The Conservatives then were especially aware that they had to begin afresh, to attend closely to the world as it was and not cling to outworn ideology. They worked to become relevant again, humbler, readier to listen. Today, that must include learning from the example of Keir Starmer and his patient remaking of the Labour Party, his professionalism and his attention to detail. The next Tory leader will need to be someone in that mold. In Europe, conservative parties must reposition themselves not as handmaidens of the far right — with whom they have developed an unfortunate habit of collaboration — but as guarantors of prosperity and social order.

In the United States, too, moderate Republicans should be quietly regrouping and rethinking a program for the future. The situation frankly is a bad one, given the Trumpists' grip on the party, but renewal is not impossible. A path to a more thoughtful and sociable politics can be cleared by those who want a responsible, common-sense alternative to the Democrats. I cannot pretend that it will be easy. The election campaign, with the two assassination attempts on Mr. Trump and the replacement of Mr. Biden with Kamala Harris, has been a roller coaster of emotion. Debate is far from sober, and hysteria and hostility abound. Yet in the end, nations calm down, because they have to. At that point, sensible conservatives should be on hand to pick up the pieces — as they have so many times in the past — and start again.