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This House believes that (THBT) the US-led, rules-based world order is irreparably broken.

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‘The powerful have their power. We have the capacity to stop pretending’

Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada, speech at the World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland, As reprinted in The Guardian, Wed 21 Jan 2026

Mark Carney is prime minister of Canada and was governor of the Bank of England 2013-2020

‘The powerful have their power. We have the capacity to stop pretending’: the Canadian PM’s call to action at Davos. In a rousing speech, Mark Carney made the case for unity in the face of Donald Trump’s new world order. We reproduce it here

Today I will talk about a rupture in the world order, the end of a pleasant fiction and the beginning of a harsh reality, where geopolitics – where the large, main power, geopolitics – is submitted to no limits, no constraints.

On the other hand, I would like to tell you that the other countries, especially intermediate powers like Canada, are not powerless. They have the capacity to build a new order that encompasses our values, such as respect for human rights, sustainable development, solidarity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the various states.

The power of the less powerful starts with honesty.

It seems that every day we’re reminded that we live in an era of great-power rivalry, that the rules-based order is fading, that the strong can do what they can, and the weak must suffer what they must. This aphorism of Thucydides is presented as inevitable, as the natural logic of international relations reasserting itself. And faced with this logic, there is a strong tendency for countries to go along to get along, to accommodate, to avoid trouble, to hope that compliance will buy safety.

Well, it won’t. So, what are our options?

In 1978, the Czech dissident Václav Havel, later president, wrote an essay called The Power of the Powerless, and in it, he asked a simple question: how did the communist system sustain itself?

And his answer began with a greengrocer.

Every morning, this shopkeeper places a sign in his window: “Workers of the world unite.” He doesn’t believe it – no one does – but he places a sign anyway to avoid trouble, to signal compliance, to get along. And because every shopkeeper on every street does the same, the system persists – not through violence alone, but through the participation of ordinary people in rituals they privately know to be false.

Havel called this “living within a lie”.

The system’s power comes not from its truth, but from everyone’s willingness to perform as if it were true, and its fragility comes from the same source. When even one person stops performing, when the greengrocer removes his sign, the illusion begins to crack. Friends, it is time for companies and countries to take their signs down.

For decades, countries like Canada prospered under what we called the rules-based international order. We joined its institutions, we praised its principles, we benefited from its predictability. And because of that, we could pursue values-based foreign policies under its protection.

We knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false, that the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient, that trade rules were enforced asymmetrically. And we knew that international law applied with varying rigour, depending on the identity of the accused or the victim. This fiction was useful, and American hegemony, in particular, helped provide public goods, open sea lanes, a stable financial system, collective security and support for frameworks for resolving disputes. So we placed the sign in the window. We participated in the rituals, and we largely avoided calling out the gaps between rhetoric and reality. This bargain no longer works. Let me be direct. We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition. Over the past two decades, a series of crises in finance, health, energy and geopolitics have laid bare the risks of extreme global integration. But more recently, great powers have begun using economic integration as weapons, tariffs as leverage, financial infrastructure as coercion, supply chains as vulnerabilities to be exploited. You cannot live within the lie of mutual benefit through integration, when integration becomes the source of your subordination. The multilateral institutions on which the middle powers have relied – the WTO, the UN, the Cop,¹ the architecture, the very architecture of collective problem-solving – are under threat. And as a result, many countries are drawing the same conclusions that they must develop greater strategic autonomy, in energy, food, critical minerals, in finance and supply chains. And this impulse is understandable. A country that can't feed itself, fuel itself or defend itself, has few options. When the rules no longer protect you, you must protect yourself. But let's be clear-eyed about where this leads. A world of fortresses will be poorer, more fragile and less sustainable. And there is another truth. If great powers abandon even the pretence of rules and values for the unhindered pursuit of their power and interests, the gains from transactionalism will become harder to replicate. Hegemons cannot continually monetise their relationships. Allies will diversify to hedge against uncertainty. They'll buy insurance, increase options in order to rebuild sovereignty – sovereignty that was once grounded in rules, but will increasingly be anchored in the ability to withstand pressure. This room knows this is classic risk management. Risk management comes at a price, but that cost of strategic autonomy, of sovereignty can also be shared. Collective investments in resilience are cheaper than everyone building their own fortresses. Shared standards reduce fragmentations. Complementarities are positive-sum. And the question for middle powers like Canada is not whether to adapt to the new reality – we must. The question is whether we adapt by simply building higher walls, or whether we can do something more ambitious. Now Canada was among the first to hear the wake-up call, leading us to fundamentally shift our strategic posture. Canadians know that our old comfortable assumptions that our geography and alliance memberships automatically conferred prosperity and security – that assumption is no longer valid. And our new approach rests on what Alexander Stubb, the president of Finland, has termed “value-based realism”. Or, to put another way, we aim to be both principled and pragmatic – principled in our commitment to fundamental values, sovereignty, territorial integrity, the prohibition of the use of force (except when consistent with the UN charter), and respect for human rights; and pragmatic and recognising that progress is often incremental, that interests diverge, that not every partner will share all of our values. So, we're engaging broadly, strategically with open eyes. We actively take on the world as it is, not wait around for a world we wish to be. We are calibrating our relationships, so their depth reflects our values, and we're prioritising broad engagement to maximise our influence, and given the fluidity of the world at the moment, the risks that this poses and the stakes for what comes next. And we are no longer just relying on the strength of our values, but also the value of our strength. We are building that strength at home. Since my government took office, we have cut taxes on incomes, on capital gains and business investment. We have removed all federal barriers to interprovincial trade. We are fast-tracking a trillion dollars of investments in energy, AI, critical minerals, new trade corridors and beyond. We're doubling our defence spending by the end of this decade, and we're doing so in ways that build our domestic industries. And we are rapidly diversifying abroad. We have agreed a comprehensive strategic partnership with the EU, including joining Safe, the European defence procurement arrangements. We have signed 12 other trade and security deals on four continents in six months. The past few days, we've concluded new strategic partnerships with China and Qatar. We're negotiating free-trade pacts with India, Asean, Thailand, the Philippines and Mercosur. We're doing something else. To help solve global problems, we're pursuing variable geometry – in other words, different coalitions for different issues based on common values and interests. So, on Ukraine, we're a core member of the coalition of the willing and one of the largest per capita contributors to its defence and security. On Arctic sovereignty, we stand firmly with Greenland and Denmark, and fully support their unique right to determine Greenland's future.

¹ “WTO” is the World Trade Organization, “UN” is the United Nations, “COP” is the Conference of the Parties, the annual meeting on climate change.

Our commitment to Nato's article 5 is unwavering, so we're working with our Nato allies, including the Nordic-Baltic eight, to further secure the alliance's northern and western flanks, including through Canada's unprecedented investments in over-the-horizon radar, in submarines, in aircraft and boots on the ground, boots on the ice. Canada strongly opposes tariffs over Greenland and calls for focused talks to achieve our shared objectives of security and prosperity in the Arctic.

On plurilateral trade, we're championing efforts to build a bridge between the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the EU, which would create a new trading bloc of 1.5 billion people. On critical minerals, we're forming buyers' clubs anchored in the G7, so the world can diversify away from concentrated supply. And on AI, we're cooperating with like-minded democracies to ensure that we won't ultimately be forced to choose between hegemony and hyper-scalers.

This is not naive multilateralism, nor is it relying on their institutions. It's building coalitions that work – issues by issue, with partners who share enough common ground to act together. In some cases, this will be the vast majority of nations. What it's doing is creating a dense web of connections across trade, investment, culture, on which we can draw for future challenges and opportunities.

The middle powers must act together, because if we're not at the table, we're on the menu. But I'd also say that great powers, great powers can afford, for now, to go it alone. They have the market size, the military capacity and the leverage to dictate terms. Middle powers do not.

But when we only negotiate bilaterally with a hegemon, we negotiate from weakness. We accept what's offered. We compete with each other to be the most accommodating. This is not sovereignty. It's the performance of sovereignty while accepting subordination. In a world of great power rivalry, the countries in between have a choice – compete with each other for favour, or combine to create a third path with impact.

We shouldn't allow the rise of hard power to blind us to the fact that the power of legitimacy, integrity and rules will remain strong, if we choose to wield them together – which brings me back to Havel.

What does it mean for middle powers to live the truth?

First, it means naming reality. Stop invoking a rules-based international order as though it still functions as advertised. Call it what it is – a system of intensifying great power rivalry, where the most powerful pursue their interests, using economic integration as coercion.

It means acting consistently, applying the same standards to allies and rivals. When middle powers criticise economic intimidation from one direction, but stay silent when it comes from another, we are keeping the sign in the window.

It means building what we claim to believe in, rather than waiting for the old order to be restored. It means creating institutions and agreements that function as described. And it means reducing the leverage that enables coercion – that's building a strong domestic economy. It should be every government's immediate priority.

And diversification internationally is not just economic prudence, it's a material foundation for honest foreign policy, because countries earn the right to principled stands by reducing their vulnerability to retaliation.

So – Canada. Canada has what the world wants. We are an energy superpower. We hold vast reserves of critical minerals. We have the most educated population in the world. Our pension funds are among the world's largest and most sophisticated investors. In other words, we have capital, talent ... we also have a government with immense fiscal capacity to act decisively. And we have the values to which many others aspire.

Canada is a pluralistic society that works. Our public square is loud, diverse and free. Canadians remain committed to sustainability. We are a stable and reliable partner in a world that is anything but. A partner that builds and values relationships for the long term.

And we have something else. We have a recognition of what's happening and a determination to act accordingly.

We understand that this rupture calls for more than adaptation. It calls for honesty about the world as it is.

We are taking the sign out of the window. We know the old order is not coming back. We shouldn't mourn it.

Nostalgia is not a strategy, but we believe that from the fracture, we can build something bigger, better, stronger, more just. This is the task of the middle powers, the countries that have the most to lose from a world of fortresses and most to gain from genuine cooperation.

The powerful have their power. But we have something, too – the capacity to stop pretending, to name reality, to build our strength at home and to act together.

That is Canada's path. We choose it openly and confidently, and it is a path wide open to any country willing to take it with us.

Lagarde Isn't on 'the Same Page' as Carney Over Ruptured World

Bloomberg News, January 23, 2026, By Craig Stirling and Jana Randow

Mark Carney's bleak view of a disintegrating world met pushback from global economic chiefs in Davos who emphasized how mutual reliance in international affairs can't be ignored.

European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, director general of the World Trade Organization, pointed to the world's ability to weather storms and the importance of mutual reliance.

Global economic leaders, including Lagarde and Okonjo-Iweala, emphasized the need for global cooperation and trust, with Lagarde stating that "trust and truth go well together" and that there is a duty to rebuild eroded trust. Mark Carney's bleak view of a disintegrating world met pushback from global economic chiefs in Davos who emphasized how mutual reliance in international affairs can't be ignored.

European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde said she's "not exactly on the same page" as the Canadian premier and doesn't see "rupture," while Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, director general of the World Trade Organization, pointed to how the world is weathering the storm unleashed by US President Donald Trump's attempts to rewire commerce and acquire more territory.

"From an economic and from a business point of view, we depend on each other," Lagarde told the final panel of the World Economic Forum. "We have these very strong links and binds. Suppliers sometimes are in a position of strength. If I look at supply and demand, we have also a position of strength, and I think that all directions have to be explored."

Despite the transatlantic spat over Trump's desire to annex Greenland, followed by his prolonged speech to the forum on Wednesday where he appeared to dial down threats over the Arctic island, it was Carney's address the prior day that got much of Davos talking this week.

The Canadian described how the "rules-based order is fading" and how "the strong can do what they can, and the weak must suffer what they must." He delivered a call to action to his "middle power" peers to act in tandem because "if we're not at the table, we're on the menu."

Against that backdrop, Okonjo-Iweala, echoing Lagarde's call to "distinguish the signals from the noise," was also keen to emphasize the positives.

"What is happening is that in spite of all the disruptions, there is some resiliency built into the system," she said. "Trade has suffered the biggest disruption in 80 years, global trade, there is absolutely no doubt about that. Global trade rules have been undermined. But I think the system has been put together in such a way that is quite strong and it will take a lot to destroy."

Sitting alongside them, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva — whose organization this week raised its outlook for global growth but it warned about a possible artificial intelligence bubble as well as trade and geopolitical tensions — appeared less sanguine.

"There is no question that the world is changing — it has been changing for quite some time," she said. "We are in a more shock prone world. We get surprised by geopolitics, by technology, by climate, and we are not so accustomed to be in that kind of fast changing environment."

Saudi Arabian Finance Minister Mohammed Al-Jadaan, meanwhile, offered the perspective from someone viewing the world from the Middle East rather than Washington, Geneva or Frankfurt. Carney's view, to him, isn't that new. The Saudis "have actually been living in a different world order for decades," he said. "Just the West is starting to experience it, and that's why they say we. But we've been living it actually for some time."

When the conversation moved on to AI, Okonjo-Iweala used that as another example of how the global system established in the postwar period still has its uses.

"I know everybody thinks multilateralism is dead and we're all on our own, but there are certain problems we just cannot solve in this world alone, and no one country or even one region can be responsible for regulating or putting the guardrails on AI," Okonjo-Iweala said. So should we not be looking to global cooperation on this issue, even though that's becoming a little bit of a dirty word?"

Lagarde got the last word on the panel — and tried to chart a way forward after a tumultuous few days for Europe, and one of the most momentous Davos meetings in years.

"Trust and truth go well together, and what I take away from this week is that we have a duty of truth," Lagarde said. "Trust has been eroded a little bit, maybe a lot. But our duty in the spirit of dialog is definitely to rebuild what could have been eroded."

A post-Trump restoration is still possible

Financial Times, Feb. 9, 2026, by GIDEON RACHMAN

His presidency may eventually be seen as an aberration rather than a permanent shift

"It's only four years," groaned a senior British official — shortly after Donald Trump won the 2024 presidential election. The thought process was clear. America's allies had to hold their breath for the duration of the second Trump presidency. Eventually, the old America would return.

A year later and the mood has shifted dramatically. In his now famous Davos speech, Mark Carney, the prime minister of Canada, asserted: "We know the old order is not coming back." That take is increasingly common. The new conventional wisdom is that the Trump presidency is not a temporary aberration. On the contrary, Trump represents profound forces in America that will not disappear when he leaves the White House. There will be no going back to the status quo ante — either in the international arena or in the US itself.

But, like any conventional wisdom, this new view deserves scrutiny. As Trump's behaviour becomes more and more indefensible, both at home and abroad, a genuine backlash is finally under way. That backlash could gather force — and eventually culminate in a wholesale repudiation of the *Maga* movement.

America's allies are beginning to find their voices and to rediscover their courage. Carney's speech was one example. So was Sir Keir Starmer's condemnation of Trump's denigration of the sacrifices made by British and allied troops in Afghanistan. Last week, the speaker of the Polish parliament refused to sign a petition calling for Trump to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize; another Polish MP noted pointedly that: "The times when Nero, under threat of punishment, demanded recognition for his musical talents have been regarded as the beginning of the decline of the Roman empire."

The backlash that will really matter has to take place in the US itself. And here too, there is finally some momentum. Ordinary Americans took to the streets of Minneapolis in their thousands to protest against the violent tactics of ICE, which saw two citizens pay with their lives. Senior members of the president's own party have spoken out against events in Minnesota and repudiated Trump's threats to Greenland.

Many Republicans were openly horrified by the racist meme that the president posted about the Obamas — and the White House was forced to take it down. Leading businessmen are also beginning to find their voices. Last week, Ken Griffin of Citadel, a Republican donor and hedge fund manager, pointed out that Trump administration decisions have been "very, very enriching" for his own family.

None of this will matter much if the American people continue to vote for Trump and his acolytes. But recent special elections have gone badly for *Maga* Republicans — even in traditional strongholds such as Texas, Louisiana and Florida. Senior figures in Trump's party worry aloud that the Republicans could lose both the House and the Senate in November's midterm elections.

The gathering backlash against Trump is steadily increasing the chance that his presidency will ultimately be seen as a grotesque aberration — rather than a lasting shift.

The idea that the US will never be able to return to the politics and policies of the pre-Trump era sounds worldly and realistic. But countries can turn the clock back. Greece restored its democracy in 1975, after seven years of rule by the colonels. India lived under a state of emergency for 21 months in the 1970s — with widespread violations of civil liberties — until the ruling Congress Party was decisively defeated at the next elections. Going a little further back, England went through a civil war and an eleven-year republic, before restoring the monarchy in 1660. Why dismiss the idea of an American restoration?

If that sounds over-optimistic consider the Kennedy Center — now renamed the Trump-Kennedy Center by the president's minions. Who really believes that Washington's leading centre for the arts will be called the Trump-Kennedy Center in perpetuity? At some point in the future, Trump's name will be removed from the side of the building — and the whole embarrassing episode will be consigned to the past.

But there is a twist. When it became apparent that both artists and audiences were boycotting the new Trump-Kennedy Center, the administration announced that it will be closed for two years for "renovations". Judging from the fate of the White House's East Wing, who knows what the building will look like in 2028? Trump has three years left in office and can still do a lot of damage — to the Kennedy Center and, more importantly, to the US itself. The president's anti-democratic instincts are the biggest danger. America may decide to repudiate Trump — but he is unlikely to accept that verdict. Trump demonstrated his inability to tolerate defeat after losing the 2020 election. He will not go quietly. He is now surrounded by loyal acolytes and seems to have a hard core of support of up to 40 per cent of the country. That suggests there could be more violence and civil disorder before an American restoration can truly take place.

Given all these uncertainties, it makes sense for countries to reduce their reliance on America. But, even as they diversify their relationships and hedge their long-standing bets on the US, America's allies should keep an open mind. Nations, like people, can sometimes repudiate their mistakes and restore their fortunes. After Trump, the old America could make a comeback.

Always beware a declining superpower

Financial Times, Jan. 21, 2026, by JANAN GANESH

Even under normal leadership, a status-anxious US would be lashing out

Seventy years ago, Britain and France, partners in decline, tried to take the Suez Canal by force. The odd thing is that neither country was led by an obvious jingo. Anthony Eden, a scholar of Arabic and Persian, stands out as the most cultivated occupant of 10 Downing Street in the postwar era. It is just that status anxiety makes sensible people do rash things. France would fight a hopeless war in Algeria and Britain would stay out of a euro-federalist project that it thought had no future: misjudgments that affect both nations even now.

America's decline is not as sharp as theirs back then, of course. It remains the strongest country on Earth, if by a reduced margin. But in another sense American decline is worse. Britain could always console itself that it was handing over to a democratic, anglophone and mostly white superpower. In contrast, the US has lost ground to China, with which it shares none of those characteristics. And so the deterioration of its status, though objectively

much less steep than Britain's, might be subjectively more harrowing. It rather matters which country you are declining against.

Throw into this equation someone of Donald Trump's obsession with rank — his almost geological sense of strata — and you get the mistreatment of Greenland, the gunboat diplomacy in the Caribbean and other Suez-style attempts to recover lost prestige. (Only more successful, perhaps.)

But even under a normal president, the US might be behaving badly around about now. Status-anxious countries have to puff themselves up. It is a rare superpower that takes decline well.

For proof that more is going on here than Trump, remember that America under George W Bush was already chafing at the "rules-based liberal order", as almost no one called it at the time. Even aside from the Iraq invasion, Bush held the International Criminal Court in extreme disregard. This isn't a complaint against him. There was and is a lot of global flummery that is more leftwing than strictly liberal. Bush, who was pro-western to his core, was right to mistrust some of it. The larger point is that America's disaffection with the legalistic world order predates Trump. There must be something structural going on that has been nagging the US, and that thing might be decline. Because the performance of the US this century has been so awesome in absolute terms — economically, technologically — the nation's relative decline can be hard to visualise. But it is there, in the limited effectiveness of US sanctions over recent years, in the struggle to stay ahead on artificial intelligence, and in the strategic assets that China dares to own in the western hemisphere. The military gap over China is not what it was at the turn of the millennium. Even a garden variety Republican president would be lashing out in these circumstances, if not quite as recklessly as Trump.

Always beware the downwardly mobile. Those of us who live a better life than we were born into cannot begin to understand the trauma of going in the opposite direction. A small drop in status can unhinge people, even if their absolute position remains good. It was the Weimar middle class, inflated out of their savings during the slump, who turned to the National Socialists in elections, not necessarily the worst-off. In geopolitics, the same process plays out on the largest scale. What is Russia's war in Ukraine if not a protest at its reduced status since the Soviet collapse? The individual matters, no doubt. In fact, Trump has won me over to the Great Man theory of history. But some patterns seem to hold across time, person and place. If there has ever been a declining power that did not behave erratically as it settled into its new status, I don't know it. Trump's behaviour is an extreme version of something that might be happening anyway, has happened in the recent past and is liable to happen after him.

The line from Thucydides, "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must", is getting quite the airing of late. You are meant to nod gravely along to it, as though it expresses a bitter but universal truth about international relations.

Does it, though? The phrase implies that a country becomes more aggressive as it grows more powerful. Well, the US was never mightier than it was around the time of Trump's birth in 1946, when it made half of the manufactured goods in the world and had a nuclear monopoly too. With all this power, the US didn't "do what it could" to the weak. Instead, it set up the Marshall Plan and Nato, those masterpieces of enlightened self-interest. It rebuilt Japan and Germany as pacifist democracies. The belligerent turn in American behaviour has in fact come during its relative decline.

Leadership explains some of this, in that Harry Truman was "better" than Trump, but only some. The rest is structural. It is easier for a nation to be magnanimous from a great height. Paranoia and aggression set in when that position slips. As such, we should expect a volatile US until it gets used to the role of being a, not the, superpower. Britain and France got there in the end, despite having to fall much further.

No one ever quotes the other bit of the famous Dylan Thomas poem about decline. After nagging the reader to "rage against the dying of the light", he concedes that giving up makes more sense: "wise men at their end know dark is right."

Trump prefers the rage, but then so would other leaders in his place.

Middle powers may miss the global order more than they think

Financial Times, Jan. 25, 2026, by MARTIN SANDBU

Even if you are not interested in the superpowers, they will sooner or later be interested in you

Václav Havel's essay "The Power of the Powerless" is probably not a set text in many, if any, high schools around Europe. It should be. A study of the importance of truth and reason in the face of reality-denying forces, it is a buttress to the edifice of Europe's Enlightenment tradition. It is also a powerful reminder of half-forgotten political memories of those who lived behind the Iron Curtain and whose role in enriching Europe's politics has yet to be given its due.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Canadian prime minister Mark Carney invoked Havel's parable of the greengrocer who displays a "Workers of the world, unite!" sign in his shop window — not because he believes in its political message, but to live a "tranquil life". Havel's point is that when everybody pretends to consent, they give reality to the system that oppresses them. This is the case for dissent: to make the system vulnerable like a little boy does a naked emperor.

Many have applauded Carney's plea "for companies and countries to take their signs down" — that is, to stop the pretence. But we are likely to see very different interpretations of what this entails. In rich countries, it will be to admit that they and the US are no longer on the same team, and must find ways to protect liberal democratic values without America.

For much of the so-called global south, however, and in particular for emerging middle powers, no longer "living within the lie" may mean something quite different. Many of them have long chafed against a "rules-based" order they felt made some countries more equal than others. There were good reasons to feel that way, from the rich world's early devil-take-the-hindmost approach to Covid vaccine distribution to the wildly inconsistent application of international law to different conflicts.

From this perspective, ending the pretence means dropping one's restraints. In addition to relief at the end of hypocrisy, some countries may welcome an amoral take on the global order. Rather than pushing for the rules to be applied with truly equal force to all, they will be tempted by the immediate freedom that comes with unashamedly pursuing one's national interests.

This is understandable. But they risk finding that that freedom is worth little if another, stronger country has views about how they should exercise it. In the absence of a hegemon to co-ordinate or enforce the rules of the game — however selectively — the naked pursuit of national self-interest is at best inefficient, at worst a recipe for conflict or subjugation. Even if you are not interested in the superpowers, they will sooner or later be interested in you. Without even the veneer of rules to appeal to, all that is left is power.

Canada itself illustrates the difficulty. Carney's Havelian appeal came the week after he signed a partnership with China. There are good reasons to have one. But in the context of China's support for Russia against Ukraine, it is hardly "calibrating our relationships so their depths reflect our values", as he put it in Davos.

Disorder or superpower dominance are both likelier outcomes than a "spontaneous order" of middle powers organised by occasional and varying overlaps of interest — unless such coalitions can be firmed up by institutional arrangements and a strong community of values. Only these make long-term relationships so obviously beneficial as to overcome the yearning for seemingly unfettered sovereignty — the flames of which the Trump administration is energetically fanning.

Such an alternative — a reconstructed but still liberal and rules-based order — can only be offered by the EU. It alone is big enough to be a pole of attraction. It still cares for the values the old order aspired to, at least in name. It embodies the order in how its members share their sovereignty.

But it will never serve as such a global anchor until it takes seriously the effort that this would entail. It means offering more tightly integrated relationships with countries that still think a liberal rules-based order — one that works — is their best hope.

Instead, the EU itself is tempted to give up the pretence without taking responsibility for the system. Just in the past week, the European parliament triggered a judicial review to delay a new trade deal with South American countries, and the commission suggested it would abandon the most-favoured-nation principle at the core of the world trading system.

The point of telling the truth is not to throw real values out with the pretence, but to start taking them seriously again. Havel, who became his country's post-communist president, knew that dissent is essential but only the start.

Western Civ Can Save Us — Again

The New York Times, by Bret Stephens, Feb. 17, 2026

Marco Rubio gave a speech Saturday to the Munich Security Conference in which he extolled an ideal that's supposedly long out of fashion.

"We are part of one civilization: Western civilization," the U.S. secretary of state told his largely European audience. "We are bound to one another by the deepest bonds that nations could share, forged by centuries of shared history, Christian faith, culture, heritage, language, ancestry and the sacrifices our forefathers made together for the common civilization to which we have fallen heir."

The speech got, and deserved, a standing ovation.

What, exactly, is Western civilization? Americans younger than 50 might be excused for hardly knowing. A 2011 report from the National Association of Scholars found that not one of America's top colleges and universities had a required survey course in Western civ and only 32 percent even offered it as an elective. In 1964, 80 percent of these institutions had some form of introduction to Western civ.

What many universities do offer (even more so now than when the N.A.S. issued its report) is what amounts to an education in anti-Western civ: the examination of all the ways in which Western civilization is, purportedly, an extended act of imperialism and colonialism, human exploitation and environmental despoliation, misogyny and white supremacy and phobias of every kind.

This pedagogy in civilizational self-loathing — some of it justified and overdue, much of it distorted by factual fudging and decontextualized historical judgments — has done three kinds of damage.

First, it helped spawn a generation of self-certain progressives, notably the pro-Hamas demonstrators on college campuses during the Gaza war, who only dimly seem to recognize that they are the very people they are being taught to hate. Who, after all, is more of a settler-colonialist — a Protestant, white, English-speaking undergrad in Los Angeles or a Jewish, Mizrahi, Hebrew-speaking one in Jerusalem? And does a typical Hamas militant despise a fervent Christian evangelical any more than he despises an anti-Zionist trans activist?

Second, it fueled a reactionary conservatism on both sides of the Atlantic. I have in mind people like Alexander Gauland, a founder of Germany's fascist-leaning Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, who dismissed the Holocaust as a "just bird shit in more than 1,000 years of successful German history." I'm also thinking of JD Vance, our cynical vice president, who last year met with an AfD leader after scolding an audience in Munich for refusing to respect free speech or accept the results of an election.

But the worst damage is to normal citizens in modern democracies who, unless they've sought it out for themselves, lack a clear idea of what the West stands for: It's what Robert Maynard Hutchins called, in 1952, "The Great Conversation."

It's the conversation between Plato and Aristotle, Locke and Rousseau, Keynes and Hayek. It's the tension between — and uneasy synthesis of — revelation and reason, theory and observation, the ancient and the modern, the familiar and the foreign. It's the tradition that seeks a deeper understanding of the world through a continuous upending of its own methods, beliefs and aspirations. It's a civilization that, at its best, values questions more than answers and the freedom to question more than life itself.

Like virtually every other civilization, the West is guilty of centuries of terrible cruelty. Unlike other civilizations — most of which are also guilty of equal cruelty — the West is responsible for an outsize share of the blessings of modern society: lifesaving science, life-easing technology, civil and human rights, democracy and tolerance for nonconformity, an impressive capacity for historical remorse. Though it's now impolite to say this, that simply isn't true of the world's other civilizations. Where in China is the state monument to the millions murdered by Mao in the Great Famine?

This is not an argument that Westerners, as people, are in any way better than other people. We aren't. Much less is it an argument that we should sugarcoat our past, as the Trump administration seeks to do. We mustn't.

But it's an argument that the West, as that 3,000-year conversation that Hutchins described and in which anyone can participate by honoring its inherently open-ended nature, offers a superior way of life — superior especially to civilizations that treat disagreement as heresy and respond to mass demonstrations with mass murder. To confront them, whether they're centered in Moscow or Tehran or Beijing, it's necessary to have two things: pride in who we are and a serious understanding of what we're all about.

Today we lack both. The woke left that condemns Western civilization as an instrument of white supremacy is as clueless as the alt-right that extols Western civilization as an instrument of white supremacy.

That's why, I think, Rubio's speech got such an enthusiastic reception, even if the messenger hails from an obnoxious administration. It wasn't simply its diplomatic tone and emollient spirit.

It was the recognition that the politics that increasingly divide Europe and the United States are secondary to the values of the civilization that still broadly unite us — and distinguish us from our enemies. The West is not some make-believe concept devised to oppress others. It is the only civilization worth defending not just for the sake of those already in it but for everyone. The least we can do is to explain to our children what it's all about.

Isn't that what college used to be for?
