



 Atlantic Council

# THE FREE WORLD

What it achieved, what went wrong,  
and how to make it right

## Foreword

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The values and principles underpinning the Free World are at risk. As globalization has opened our societies, it simultaneously has alienated some citizens. Some have felt lost in this process and have looked to their group identities—national, ethnic, cultural, or religious. Patriotism is a positive force, but history has taught us that militant nationalism can be dangerous. Advances in technology have generated unprecedented wealth, but its disruption also brings disaggregated voices. Disaggregated voices lead to disaggregated politics. At the same time, as more people are able to participate in politics and institutions, faith in those institutions is eroding.

**“[This essay] reminds us that the Free World did not emerge spontaneously and should not be taken for granted.”**

in Europe, and challenging our resolve in the Middle East and Ukraine. China speaks too often in terms of raw power, and nationalist voices across Europe and America are making old, discredited arguments with new, potentially dangerous energy.

This Atlantic Council essay, authored by one of America’s most respected diplomats, Ambassador Dan Fried, calls us back to ourselves. It reminds us that the Free World did not emerge spontaneously and should not be taken for granted. It took the work of individuals who believed in the power

Today’s international order is thus under new pressure. In this historic moment, leadership from the United States, Europe, and democratic forces around the world is critical. When the United States disengages, or speaks merely of interests and power, we leave a vacuum, and our adversaries, seeking to undermine our shared values, step into the void. Putin’s Russia seeks to weaken the West by exploiting disorganizing trends, supporting nationalist movements

of ideas to build a system of global governance rooted in those ideas. Today, those ideas are under attack from within and without. This essay is a call to action. It outlines a path of re-engagement with our allies, re-commitment to our values, and resistance to rising authoritarianism. In our increasingly interdependent yet disaggregated world, ideas have power to unite or divide. It is time for democratic forces to declare again our principles and rally our forces. To this end, we are delighted that Secretary Madeleine Albright will lead the Atlantic Council's bipartisan effort to sustain US partnership with a Europe that is united and empowered to act as a global leader.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fred Kempe'.

**Frederick Kempe**  
*President and CEO*  
Atlantic Council



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Damon Wilson'.

**Damon Wilson**  
*Executive Vice President*  
Atlantic Council

The Atlantic Council's Future Europe Initiative works to sustain US partnership with a Europe that is united and empowered to act as a global leader. As Europe's home in Washington, the initiative galvanizes attention to the crucial importance of Europe alongside its North American allies to shape the global future. Honorary Board Director Secretary Madeleine Albright leads the Council's bipartisan effort to cultivate a network of current and future transatlantic leaders to advance the strategies and values upon which peace, prosperity, and freedom of our peoples stand.

## Essay

by *Ambassador Daniel Fried*

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Ideas have power, not all ideas and not under all circumstances, but the idea of a liberal world order demonstrated its power at two turning points: the resurrection of the West after World War II and the expansion of the West after the fall of Communism in Europe in 1989. The phrase “liberal world order” sounds like the invention of a political science seminar. It may be better to call it the Free World Order, as the Free World—its values, institutions, and purposes—remains the best organizing framework for humanity in the twenty-first century.

**“We understood  
that our nation  
would prosper best  
when other nations  
did as well”**

The principles behind the Free World have deep roots on both sides of the Atlantic. As the United States emerged as a world power at the end of the nineteenth century, it developed America’s Grand Strategy, which opposed the prevailing European spheres of influence and closed empires. In contrast, the United States sought a rules-based world, open beyond

Europe to all nations, which would be more just and simultaneously play to our commercial advantage; in our massive self-confidence, we believed that our Yankee ingenuity would naturally prevail in fair competition. We came to associate democracy and the rule of law with our interests. We understood that our nation would prosper best when other nations did as well; we believed we could build a better world and get rich in the process. We thus defined our national interest in broad, not narrow, terms and benefited accordingly. As it unfolded in the twentieth century, America’s Grand Strategy made us exceptional among the Great Powers, an object first of astonished frustration and later admiration among them.

Europe established the Free World’s intellectual foundations, but its road was darker. The notion of a just international order rooted in transnational values is at least as old as Erasmus; Kant developed a theory of perpetual peace between states committed to the rule of law and republican values.

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US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright with the foreign ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland in Independence, Missouri on March 12, 1999, to mark the expansion of NATO to these three countries. *Photo credit: NATO.*

But, Europe's Great Power rivalries led to one world war; the subsequent rise of two aggressive, anti-democratic ideologies generated a second. By 1945, with continental Europe in ruins and Stalinist power seemingly on the rise, Europe and America set out to build the Free World.

Though we now take them for granted, the results deserve review: the Soviet Union was contained at the line of 1945; Western Europe was secured and then grew prosperous, its politics stabilized; and Europe's national fratricide gave way to transnational cooperation through the creation of NATO and what became the European Union (EU). The achievement of the democratic West inspired the dissidents in Soviet-controlled Europe; when Communism fell in 1989, the self-liberated nations of Central and Eastern Europe clamored to join the West's Free World. The West responded, and its great institutions, NATO and the EU, grew to embrace another 100 million Europeans. For all the shortcomings, blunders, inconsistencies, and failures of the Free World—and America had its share—the West has enjoyed its longest period of general peace since Roman times, and the greatest ever period of mass prosperity and democratic governance.

On June 5, 1947, in response to the devastation of World War II, George Marshall announced an unprecedented American commitment to help rebuild the economies and spirits of Europe. That speech became known as the Marshall Plan: a US strategy to promote European cohesion and prevent another world war. It was based on an understanding that American security and prosperity were sustainable only if shared; the United States and Europe would stand, or fall, together. June 5, 2017, marks the seventieth anniversary of the Marshall Plan and offers an opportunity to reflect on the successes of the Marshall Plan in catalyzing Europe's economic recovery, the formation of the North Atlantic alliance and eventually the European Union, and over seventy years of general peace and prosperity in the West. The Council's team views this seventieth anniversary as an opportunity for the transatlantic community to recommit to the values and the spirit captured by George Marshall and America's broad vision of our interests.

## What went wrong?

But if it was so good, why the present self-doubt? What explains Brexit and the rise of nationalist politics in Europe and America? What has gone wrong?

As was the case in the 1930s—another period of Western demoralization—economic distortion generates a political counterpart. We might have expected a political reaction after years of slow growth and high unemployment in Europe, especially youth unemployment, following the panic of 2008. We should not have been surprised by so many Americans recoiling in the face of hard times and gilded-age levels of income inequality. The perceived failures of government—European and American—to address these issues has led to political alienation and bitterness. In the United States and perhaps the United Kingdom, the Iraq War also fed this sense. Add to this challenges of national identity in the face of high immigration—Latino in the United States, Middle Eastern and North African in Europe, Eastern European in some parts of the UK—which historically has generated nativist hostility.

In response, the United States and EU seem to have fallen short. In Washington, “faction,” the Founders’ term for partisanship, has paralyzed

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critical aspects of governance. In Europe, the EU has failed to establish a connection with Europeans; for many, “Europe” remains an abstraction. There are EU institutions with real power, with proven capacity to think and act in strategic terms. But there is no real Europe-wide political constituency. Rather than functioning as a polity with a democratic mandate, the EU often feels more like a multilateral organization whose leaders are chosen by inside brokering. Europe and America thus suffer from different forms of democratic deficit: Europe because of institutions that seem unlinked to democratic politics and are weaker for it, and the United States due to institutions captive to partisanship that sometimes barely function.

In addition, Russia is again acting as a corrosive political spoiler, malign by intention, using propoganda, corrupt funding, and other active measures updated for the cyber age. Its objective is the same as in the Soviet period: to weaken the West’s institutions and discredit Western values, thus shielding Moscow’s despotic system from liberal influence and easing Russia’s domination of its neighbors.



An honor guard opens the door as Russian President Vladimir Putin enters a hall to attend a meeting with members of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia. *Photo credit: Reuters.*

Protesters wave European Union and Ukrainian flags during a rally of the Ukrainian opposition on December 14, 2013, on Independence Square in Kiev.  
*Photo credit: Getty.*





## The nationalist temptation

In these circumstances, nationalist political options have grown stronger than at any other time since 1945. While different in detail, they espouse a narrow, often ethnic-based, view of the nation and a constricted, short-term view of the national interest. This new nationalism—sometimes echoed by a parallel rise of extreme left options—rejects in principle the objective of an open, rules-based world, with the world's great democracies working in concert to set the global agenda. Its advocates seem to regard values as an indulgence and prefer a return to power politics and zero-sum bilateral relations. The new nationalism shows skepticism about alliances and international norms in general and loathes the European Union and the cosmopolitan values it represents.

The nationalist idea has power. But consider the consequences of a return to great power politics, bereft of norms and values. The Free World-based global order would vanish. In the resulting vacuum, each power would feel free, and compelled, to carve out its own sphere of influence. Russia and China would lead the way, seeking even more to dominate their neighbors through intimidation and violence, creating and expanding closed economic empires. Other powers would follow. Events on the ground would get uglier, fast. But on what basis could we then object, having abandoned our own Free World system? Having compromised our values and broader goals, America would diminish to being just another power, grasping for our cut and abandoning those who look to us with hope. And if trade policy seems difficult now, in a sphere-of-influence world we would face far less favorable trade terms as our rivals carved off larger and larger parts of the globe, to our detriment.

Such a system would be neither peaceful nor stable: those dominated by their powerful neighbors would periodically rise in rebellion only to be crushed; the great powers would argue over the size of their respective spheres and then resort to war, as great powers always have in such circumstances. A spheres-of-influence system could benefit Russia and perhaps China, in the short run. Those in the West who would advocate a return, in effect, to pre-1914 Europe or 1930s Asia risk throwing away the lessons it cost millions of lives to learn.

## What then must we do?

The Free World model, like democracy itself, is either the best or the best bad model we have. If the Free World is not functioning well enough, we must defend and fix it. To that end, the West needs to address immediate outside threats, which may prove the easy part, as well as deeper economic, cultural, and political challenges.

**Turn back Russian aggression.** Russia did not cause the West's current problems, but it seeks to exploit them. Yet, we possess tools to deal with this.

- *Defend Ukraine.* We must not allow Putin to succeed in a war of territorial aggression in Europe, the first since 1945. We did not fight two world wars and the Cold War for nothing. The West needs to maintain its sanctions while pressing Russia to settle the conflict in accordance with the Minsk framework—that is, a return to Ukrainian control of the Donbas and its eastern international border. If Russia will not comply with the Minsk framework, or if it escalates the conflict, the West must intensify those sanctions as part of a broader strategy of pressure.
- *Resist Russian infiltration and leverage.* Europe and the United States have done much to reduce Russian energy leverage over the EU, and we should continue to do so. We need similar determination to reduce vulnerability to Russian cyber aggression, propaganda, and exported corruption. The cyber hacking and still-unfolding stories of questionable Russian money in US and European politics is generating a reaction that may prevent similar violations in the future. The United States and Europe together must improve defenses and other safeguards, legal and political, to expose and block malign Russian action. Through ongoing deployments in Central and Eastern Europe, NATO and the United States have already started reducing Russian military leverage. We should be prepared to sustain and, as needed, increase our presence, to show that the Russians will gain little through military intimidation.
- *Engage Russia and the Russians.* The US administration may seek, as did its predecessors, a positive agenda with the Russian government. This can be useful, if we do not expect too much and avoid paying the



Then French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron gestures during his campaign's last rally in Albi, southwestern France, on May 4, 2017.  
*Photo credit: Reuters.*

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Russians extra for cooperation. But it was not the Nixonian policy of practical agreements with the Soviets that ended the Cold War. Long-term support of our values had the more profound impact on the USSR and its empire in Europe. The Free World stood for democracy then and should do so now.

**Advance a Transatlantic growth and jobs agenda.** The Free World needs to deliver economically for its people and for the world. The United States and EU need to increase growth and employment, and conclude or negotiate a successor to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. With interest rates low, now is the best time in a generation for the EU and United States to implement public investment and other policies to combat weak or uneven growth. Pro-growth policies in the United States—infrastructure investment and some version of tax reform—may emerge. In Europe, many recognize the opportunity of post-Brexit Europe to advance integration in selected areas, e.g., services, energy, and capital markets. Growth is indivisible, nowhere more than on both sides of the Atlantic. The Trump administration must set aside the indulgence of anti-EU rhetoric, but can use a growth and expansion agenda, if one emerges, as a core around which to build a productive economic agenda with Europe.

**Challenge the New Nationalism with a New Patriotism.** The nation-state will remain a fundamental political unit. Americans will not give it up; the Central and East Europeans who have regained sovereignty will defend it, and so, as it turns out, will many in Western Europe. As we should: the nation is the community in which most people find their identity. But the nation-state is not an ultimate end, and its interests and sovereignty not an ultimate good. In the Western tradition, tyrannical and aggressive states lose legitimacy, and states gain it as they act in accordance with universal principles. Nations, and rulers, are answerable to these principles. Thus, we embrace the France of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” and find compelling the slogan of the Polish freedom fighters, “For Your Freedom and Ours.” The West should not try to suppress, but rather make room for patriotism in liberal form, bound to higher principles.

That also means, given twenty-first century demographic reality, that the nation-state must define itself along cultural and linguistic, not ethnic-tribal, terms. America’s example has something to offer: our nation is based on a principle—that all men are created equal—and, for immigrants,

becoming American is an act and a commitment to US values. The more open American definition of nationality is not unique; many European nations have also found ways to open themselves. “British” identity is in principle cultural and transnational, as is the French civic definition of nationality; the old Polish Commonwealth defined the nation in political, not ethnic terms, and some of that tradition remains.

It is not easy, as America’s own painful history shows. But a dynamic definition of the nation is critical, if Europe and the United States are to integrate newcomers and thus survive as democracies. And active integration is needed, not just passive

tolerance of communities living in parallel isolation. That requires government efforts, willing partners among minority communities, and social acceptance all around that, for example, a Danish-speaking Muslim of North African origin who qualifies for Danish citizenship and wants to be a Dane, is a full member of the Danish nation. Nationalists in Europe and the United States may claim otherwise, but their use of “national culture” is exclusionary, and meant to be. Abraham Lincoln, who redefined

American identity along lines we accept today, made the alternative case in a July 4, 1858, speech: immigrants to America, unconnected by blood to the Anglo-Saxon founders of the nation, are, as they commit to American principles, “blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh” of those founders. This American civic definition of nationhood still has something to offer.

We must challenge this century’s new nationalism, a cheap remake of the twentieth century original, with a better patriotism, a love of country rooted in higher values, and a commitment to our nations, which are open and growing.

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## Re-committing to the Free World

The Free World's agenda is long: grappling with climate change; confronting Bashar al-Assad's atrocities, ISIS, and terrorism; dealing with North Korea's belligerence; managing the rise of China; and more. Nonetheless, the Free World must lead. We need to provide NATO with the resources it needs. We need to invest in long-term reform in the broader Middle East. The list goes on.

But beyond the policy tasks, we who believe in the Free World must help it out of its defensive crouch. Faced with nationalist challenges at home and Russia's targeted attacks, we must make the Free World's case. We must convince our societies and leaders that:

- our interests are best served as our values advance;
- these values include the rule of law at home and a rules-based world, human rights and democracy, and the prosperity they generate;
- nations' interests advance, or decline, together; America's success depends on the success of others;

The term "free world" came into use during World War II to describe the nations fighting Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. The freedoms it referred to were those laid out in the Atlantic Charter of 1941, signed by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill, including the right of peoples to choose their government and to live in freedom from fear and want; the right of nations to live in peace within their borders; and an open, global trading system. Initially, the free world included China and after 1945 democratic Japan, so it was never confined to Europe and North America. During the Cold War, the free world came to mean those nations aligned against communism in the name of democracy, and was associated with the US-led alliance system and the emerging European Union. After 1989, the self-liberated peoples of Eastern Europe clamored to join this community, which they associated with human rights, prosperity, and the rule of law; Ukraine, Georgia, and other nations seek this still. Today, the free world means the world's democracies, large and small, who share basic principles and aspirations.

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- the nation-state, and even the Free World, are not ends in themselves, but earn legitimacy as they serve these higher purposes; and
- the world's great democracies must lead together to these ends.

Many Americans have expressed skepticism about, or even hostility to, such an agenda. But the Free World vision is deeply embedded in American values. It is revealing that in dealing with Syria, appeals to America's Grand Strategy reemerged under this administration, maybe despite itself, in its: reference to international norms, including multilateral legal norms; humanitarian impulses linked to US interests; and efforts to rally democratic allies against Syria's autocratic Russian patron.

So, it may not prove impossible after all to rally political support behind a renewed Free World-based foreign policy. Hard, yes. But, in the United States, no more difficult an endeavor than was making that case to war-weary America after 1945. In Europe, the task is similar, and requires renewed commitment to an outward-looking Europe and strong EU, growing and confident, by way of the nation-state properly conceived, and connected to Europeans.



Anas Modamani, now 19, fled Syria for Germany in 2015 and took a selfie with Chancellor Angela Merkel outside a refugee camp in Berlin. *Photo credit: Reuters.*

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Ideas have power. The Free World order was built on centuries of the best Western ideas. It is being attacked from without and within, sometimes in the name of the worst Western ideas. We who believe in it have agency and responsibility commensurate with that agency. It is our task to rediscover our faith in the West at its best, and to act to preserve, defend, and extend this legacy.



Ambassador Daniel Fried is a distinguished fellow at the Atlantic Council's Future Europe Initiative and Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Center. In the course of his forty-year Foreign Service career, he played a key role in designing and implementing American policy in Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union. As special assistant and NSC senior director for Presidents Clinton and Bush, ambassador to Poland, and assistant secretary of state for Europe (2005–09), Ambassador Fried crafted the policy of NATO enlargement to Central European nations and, in parallel, NATO-Russia relations, thus advancing the goal of Europe whole, free, and at peace. During those years, the West's community of democracy and security grew in Europe. Ambassador Fried helped lead the West's response to Moscow's aggression against Ukraine starting in 2014: as State Department coordinator for sanctions policy, he crafted US sanctions against Russia, the largest US sanctions program to date, and negotiated the imposition of similar sanctions by Europe, Canada, Japan, and Australia.



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