

What Is Nationalism?



On October 23, 2018, President Donald Trump spoke at a rally in support of Republican Senator Ted Cruz’s reelection campaign in Houston, Texas. During his speech, the president described himself as a “nationalist.”

Trump said, “You know, they have a word . . . it’s called a nationalist, and I say, really, we’re not supposed to use that word. You know what I am? I’m a nationalist.” Only the president knows exactly what he meant when he called himself a nationalist. But his statement spurred controversy.

Nationalism is sometimes used as a synonym for patriotism. Patriotism simply means love of one’s own country. But the term nationalism originated in the 19th century to mean the view that one’s nation has interests separate from all other nations and should even dominate other nations. Historians view the fierce nationalism of European nations prior to World War I as a major cause of that war.

Because of the brutality of World War I, nationalism gained mostly negative connotations in Europe and the United States in the 20th century. It became a cause of World War II. But it has also referred to anti-colonial movements. For example, Mahatma Gandhi sought India’s independence from the British Empire and was considered an Indian nationalist.

The writer George Orwell, famous for his novels *1984* and *Animal Farm*, warned against nationalism in the wake of World War II. He described the difference between nationalism and patriotism in 1945:

Nationalism is not to be confused with patriotism. . . . By “patriotism” I mean devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life. . . . Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, *not* for himself but for the nation . . . in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality.

In Houston, President Trump called himself a “nationalist” while contrasting himself to “power-hungry globalists.” He described a globalist as someone who “wants the globe to do well, frankly, [while] not caring about our country so much.” He had only used the word “nationalism” before when describing his trade policies. The president’s former adviser Steve Bannon described the president’s tariffs (taxes on imports) and trade fights with other nations as “economic nationalism.”

The president’s former communications director Anthony Scaramucci, however, believes that the president was just trying to provoke his liberal critics. “He’s saying he’s a nationalist because he wants you to be upset about it,” Scaramucci explained, “but he’s really not a nationalist.”

Writing & Discussion

1. What is the difference between “nationalism” and “patriotism”?
2. Do you think the president was using nationalism as a synonym for patriotism? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think the president said “we’re not supposed to use” the word nationalism?