



THE TOCQUEVILLE CONVERSATIONS
7th edition, 27–28 June 2025

Françoise MÉLONIO

The Château de Tocqueville hosted, on 27 and 28 June, the seventh Tocqueville Conversations organized by the Tocqueville Foundation and Laure Mandeville of *Le Figaro*, with support from local authorities (the Normandy Region, the Manche Department, the Cotentin conurbation) and various private patrons. As in previous years, the event brought together American and European statesmen and elected officials, business leaders, military officers, figures from the associative and cultural worlds, and a broad audience of all ages. The rural setting, far from the din of the world, lent itself to acrimony-free debates about an international situation that inspires in everyone—whatever their partisan choices—as much anxiety as astonishment.

EUROPE’S HOUR

The first Conversations focused on transatlantic closeness and on the internal threats facing democracies (individualism, “wokism,” etc.). From 2024 onward, international tensions changed the order of priorities: the tragedy of the heroic Ukrainian nation led speakers to urge European citizens to wake up before it was too late. The year 2025 marks a growing awareness of the urgency of a collective European surge, abandoned by America. The U.S. has never been a fully reliable support, no doubt, but nothing foreshadowed the brutality shown toward its former allies. It has not become an adversary, and its guarantee still appears indispensable to many Europeans. All the same, Europe must become autonomous—without breaking, if possible, with America. Is this Europe’s hour? The program laid out by Laure Mandeville started from a series of broadly shared observations: the weakening of the transatlantic bond, whose consequences are still hard to gauge; the destabilization of Europe driven by Putin—Russia’s invasion of Ukraine being only the first step; the collapse of the international order born after the Second World War; the emergence of illiberal democracies on both sides of the Atlantic.

The event alternated keynote addresses and roundtables—too dense to recount in full here; readers can consult them on the Tocqueville Foundation website (Tocquevillefoundation.org). On 27 June, under the banner “Europe Facing a New World,” there were five sessions:

1. Europe and the end of the *Pax Americana*;
2. Where is Trump taking America?;
3. Putin, Xi, and the threats bearing down on Europe;
4. Musk, the tech oligarchy, and its impact on Europe;
5. The future of European security and international law: the Ukrainian test.

On 28 June, under the title “Europe: The Urgency of Action,” four sessions:

1. What Europe do we want? The question of power and values;
2. Europe’s necessary industrial and technological awakening;
3. Rearming Europe: Building a European defense industry in a time of economic crisis;
4. What future for European conservatism?

Thus the two days moved from stocktaking to projection, from diagnosis to therapy. The two perspectives proved inseparable and brought out shared questions: geopolitically, what to do when the bond between the American “imperial republic” and the European continent loosens; strategically, how to build European industrial, technological, and military power; ethically, for which European values are we prepared to fight?

I – GEOPOLITICS: WHEN EUROPE AWAKENS...

The United States, which was broadly a principle of order in the world, has become a factor of uncertainty (Dominique Moïsi). It is a return to the nineteenth century. That Trump claims as predecessors Andrew Jackson—despoiler of Native Americans—and William McKinley is telling: under McKinley, by the Treaty of Paris (1898), Spain transferred control of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines to the U.S.; and the independent Republic of Hawaii joined the United States as a territory. The same McKinley had, in 1890, presented to Congress a Tariff Act imposing protectionist duties...

Trump is calling alliances into question to the point of treating old allies worse than adversaries, not without contradictions: renouncing the world’s policeman role, America urges Europe to take charge of its own security (by buying American equipment...), while scolding old Europe for its supposed moral decadence (Vance). A miscalculation, notes Hervé Morin, who as former defense minister gauged the weight of American domination: “it was a great advantage for the United States to cement its dominance over a continent as rich as Europe.”

Faced with America’s “very aggressive about-face” (Nicolas Baverez), we must return to Raymond Aron’s *Imperial Republic: The United States in the World (1945–1972)*[1]: might American isolationism actually serve Europe? Perhaps American brutality offers Europe the chance to break its dependence on Russia for energy and on the United States for technology. Europe has major assets: its savings, the rule of law that favors capital inflows, military equipment. The question, says Baverez, is what we want to do and with whom. “Should we award Trump the Charlemagne Prize for European of the Year?” asks Benjamin Haddad, France’s minister for European affairs, sarcastically. Calling for European autonomy, Aron voiced a doubt still current: “Do Europeans not prefer equality in dependence to the inequality that would arise if some among them possessed weapons deemed decisive?” And if there is U.S. disengagement, isn’t there a contradiction between economic interdependence and politico-military separation? Aron’s prescience deserves praise. The very title “imperial republic” speaks both to the survival (for how long?) of an American “republic” and to the imposition of hegemony by means other than military ones—what today we would call “deals.”

Hence the double question: is the imperial America still a republic? Does Europe have the will for autonomy?

America, or “paternal” domination?

The program foresaw an examination of the risk of an illiberal democracy emerging across the Atlantic, with an analysis of the long-term causes that led to Trump's return in 2025. The Atlantic rift has widened so much that the Americans present did not seem to share the Europeans' (mostly disapproving) astonishment at the U.S. administration. American speakers hardly addressed either the U.S. role in the collapse of international law or Trump's strange attraction to dictators—Russian, North Korean, or Hungarian. Their questions focused mainly on the causes and duration of this new political experiment.

Donna Brazile, the first African American woman to run a presidential campaign (Al Gore's) and a prominent media figure, pondered the meaning of the Trump vote among African Americans; she attributes it to a feeling of exclusion but, despite the Democratic Party's current decrepitude, sees this Trumpian moment as transitory. Christopher Caldwell, essayist and author of a book tracing America's social transformations since the 1960s[2], likewise believes the Trump administration will be short-lived; its success resulted from elite estrangement from the American people: a portion of the elites seized power thanks to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which opened a generalized process of extending rights to minorities; Trump voters want a democracy grounded in the vote, not in regulation. But they were duped: in his second term Trump is not fighting the power-hoarders; he mobilizes power for himself by exploiting popular dissatisfaction—with great talent, yes, but on a fragile base of only 20–25% supporters. The part played by the American left's societal turn in Trump's election is also at the heart of political scientist Joshua Mitchell's analysis: Democrats' strength traditionally lay in the middle classes; the party abandoned them to champion particular identities, sexual confusion, abolishing distinctions between citizens and immigrants, and undermining paternal authority and masculinity. Thus Trump appears to his supporters as the restorer of lost normality. Moreover, Trump truly seduces younger generations because, like them, he cares little for institutions; he is the "sinless man," attractive to a society tired of being accused of the sins of slavery and racism... He glorifies a risk-taking society. For my part, I would say he is above all the man of a narrow, mythical past; his inaugural speech was revealing: it contained not the obligatory praise of the Founding Fathers, but that of pioneers seeking territory. Is he really the man of risk? Pascal Bruckner chokes at the notion, noting that what is most striking in the U.S. is less the taste for risk than the return of deference: people "kiss Trump's slippers" (he would say, rather crudely, "kiss his ass!"). As Philippe Gélie (*Le Figaro* deputy editor) notes, there is a clear divergence between Europeans and the American guests of the Conversations, who seemed to normalize Trump. Is it deference on their part, the restraint expected abroad, or the desire to explain the popular base of an unexpected president? More likely it reflects a judicious invitation policy at the Château de Tocqueville, selecting speakers capable of courteous dialogue—something increasingly difficult on American soil. In any case, the Americans present (speakers and students alike) must have been struck by the growth of European distrust toward the U.S. administration.

Distrustful as they are, are Europeans determined to emerge from their tutelary state—what President Mattarella called "happy vassalage"? Dominique Moïsi is scathing about European leaders' behavior at the NATO summit in The Hague on 25 June 2025: they pledged to raise defense spending to 5% of GDP (with what money?), yet how not to be stung by the NATO Secretary General's sycophancy in calling Trump "daddy" for his international role and by leaders' pusillanimity, petrified at the thought of angering the (switch-wielding!) father. In The Hague, Europe—like the choruses of ancient tragedies—contented itself with commenting rather than acting; a consequence, Moïsi notes, of intra-European divisions, echoing Timothy Garton Ash's analyses. In a recent article[3] he observed that since the 1954 failure of the European Defence Community, felled by Gaullists and Communists alike, NATO has been the only powerful organization. How to Europeanize defense when nations have different historical concepts, specific defense budgets, heterogeneous weapons systems (170 in

Europe versus about thirty in the U.S.), and when the promised billions must be spent on a debt-laden, aging continent with rising social needs?

For autonomy, Europeans must craft a common economic and military strategy.

II – STRATEGY: THE MILITARY DIMENSION

Europe's fate is likely being decided in Ukraine—Europe, the smallest of continents, a peninsula, but rich in a civilization and its principles (liberty, equality, the rule of law). How can we avoid a new Yalta in which the three protagonists would be the American, Russian, and Chinese empires?

From the outset, Hervé Morin framed the discussion. Defense minister under President Nicolas Sarkozy from 2007 to 2010, he paints a bleak picture of Europe's situation. Since 1945 Europe believed in soft power and the rules of international law. Result: it renounced hard power without acquiring soft power. GDP in decline, regulatory fragmentation, lagging R&D and higher education... Yet the situation is not hopeless. Morin does not believe in a Russian attack on France (others were less confident) and judges that what we lack is less resources—despite weaknesses in satellites—than will and strategy: he argues for a joint effort among a few willing countries, a European general staff—positions in line with his record as minister[4].

The difficulty of this strategy lies in urgency: NATO's guarantee is no longer assured and Europeans suddenly face a turning point in U.S. policy—predictable perhaps, but long refused. Two Americans commented on this turn.

Dan Twining, president since 2017 of the International Republican Institute (800 experts, mostly close to Republicans), contested—without truly convincing—the idea of a grand American retreat. He pointed to increased U.S. forces in Europe and the Trump administration's hyperactive commercial and diplomatic posture, which he says enjoys broad support, citing a recent poll according to which two-thirds of Americans believe the United States must become more involved in world affairs and assume leadership; 85% of MAGA voters themselves would, he says, support an interventionist policy benefiting the U.S. and democracy. What is unfolding, according to Twining, is not withdrawal but a change in the order of priorities: American opinion is focused on Asia and does not want to keep bankrolling, as Biden did, an endless war in Ukraine with no prospect of victory—especially while Europe continues to buy Russian energy.

One might object that the price of eggs likely matters more to the MAGA base than policy toward distant Europe. Only a fool would rely blindly on volatile opinion. Despite some constants—notably voters' desire to be involved in international affairs, as Twining notes—we can question the reality of support for Trump's foreign policy: an Ipsos/Reuters poll of 21–23 April shows a gap between Trump and the electorate, including Republicans. Overwhelmingly, Americans distrust Putin (see the Pew Research Center poll of January/April 2025)[5]. For now, the American electorate is far from massively approving the administration's withdrawal from Europe.

Still, we are witnessing a tectonic shift in U.S. policy, emphasizes Douglas Lute, retired three-star general and former deputy national security adviser under George W. Bush and then Barack Obama for Iraq and Afghanistan, later U.S. ambassador to NATO (2013–2017). The world has tipped: “the West” no longer exists. The United States and China are the great powers of tomorrow; Russia and Europe perhaps not. European leaders may plan 5% defense spending, but this long-term horizon clashes with economic realities and is not accompanied by reflection on how to use the funds or on the values to be defended: NATO's values (democracy, individual freedom, rule of law) are contested by populist governments in Hungary, Turkey, and the United States.

Twining and Lute, each in his own way, depict a world in flux. Trump's policy is a paradigm shift analyzed by Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier, researcher at the French Institute of Geopolitics (Université Paris-VIII) and affiliated with the Naval Higher Education Center[6]. After the Cold War, the United States was the world's "reluctant sheriff"[7]; the disappearance of the Russian enemy (remember the "end of history") generated instability that made it urgent to define a new strategy: the U.S. did not want to be the world's hegemonic policeman, nor to isolate itself, nor to embrace Wilsonian economism or humanitarianism. It crafted a new, realist policy concerned with national interests, acting as a sheriff through informal coalitions.

Mongrenier shows how the Euro-Atlantic space has been reshaped by the high-intensity war striking Europe. Europe is not a global political actor; it lacks the means. For a long time, collective defense will remain NATO's prerogative, as it grapples with difficult issues like Ukraine's candidacy, Turkey's reliability, and the Chinese threat[8]. NATO is thus neither "obsolete" (Trump, 2017) nor "brain-dead" (Macron, 2019): it is the politico-military form of a geo-historical whole whose cohesion is reinforced by the Russian threat and China's rise. In a 2023 article, Mongrenier concluded: "Without NATO, Europe would lose its geostrategic depth and become provincialized; it would turn into a little cape of Asia."

What is to be done to ensure Europe's security in this new world? Europeans are divided over how tightly to maintain the NATO link but agree on the need to increase Europe's defense autonomy. The most skeptical about doing without NATO—and also the most concerned for effective defense because they are on the front line—are countries in Eastern Europe.

Rajmund Andrzejczak, Chief of the General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces (2018–2023), recalls Poland's experience of Russian aggressiveness and that the road runs directly from Moscow to Paris. Strategy is far from obvious. Poland spends heavily on defense but at the expense of its economy; European allies lack clarity of aims: divided over immigration, energy, and NATO, they have not defined what "victory" might be (knowing it can only be provisional—Russia will try to return). There is ample reason for pessimism: in 2008, Europeans' only reaction to the invasion of Georgia was to continue building Nord Stream 1 (2005–2011); Europe is always behind!

Andrius Kubilius, European Commissioner for Defense and Space since December 2024, member of the Lithuanian parliament (1992–2019), twice prime minister, and MEP (2019–2024), likewise judges the probability of a Russian attack on Europe to be very high—several European intelligence services foresee it in the near term. Americans are pivoting to Asia, risking favoring Putin. He therefore calls for a European army and institutional strengthening so that—pace Kissinger—someone finally answers the phone in Europe. But he harbors no illusions: since defense will long remain national, fragmentation must be avoided (see the Draghi report); funds must be allocated to innovation to fill gaps in defense systems; Europe must seek a defense union as it did a union for space exploration—and above all, it must will it. Kajsa Ollongren, Dutch defense minister (2022–2024), responds that European defense is not an electoral theme; if she herself advocated a common policy, her position was not shared in her own country. The EU suffers a structural handicap because it is democratic: autocratic Russia can decide quickly; Europe needs time for joint deliberation—yet there is urgent need to raise funds for Ukraine.

The French are the quickest to declare the alliance with the Americans obsolete and to demand a European defense policy. The most vehement is Bernard Émié, former French ambassador to Jordan, Turkey, the U.K., and Algeria, and director of the DGSE (external intelligence) from 2017 to 2024, where he saw in full daylight destabilization strategies targeting France. For him, we are at war with three empires: Russian, Chinese, and American. The U.S. colonizes us technologically (not shying from

betrayal, as shown by the cynical shredding of the French-Australian submarine deal) and has abandoned Europe since Obama; Russia multiplies cyberattacks and predation in Africa at France's expense; China contests France in the South Pacific... Faced with this triple threat, Europeans have already managed to organize intelligence sharing.

Michel Barnier and Benjamin Haddad were no less eloquent about the need for European defense: they agree on the shift in the U.S. administration, the perception of the Russian danger, the necessary rise in military spending and investment in innovation in Europe (goal of the SAFE program—Supporting at-risk researchers with fellowships in Europe—launched in September 2024), and also—very French point—on the urgency of a European preference in military procurement. Europe long outsourced its security to the Americans; it has had major successes: it delivered on the initial 1957 promise of peace; it more or less managed the 2007 financial crisis, migration and the pandemic, and today Ukraine and climate. Its citizens are often disenchanted, but they should recognize Europe's power of attraction. There is a French taste for self-denigration that Jacques Rupnik combats in turn, recalling Javier Solana's enthusiasm when, from 1999 to 2009, he served as the EU's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy. In 1999 Solana urged Europe to ensure economic prosperity, active internal and external solidarity, and to balance the world by becoming a full-fledged political actor[9]. The achievement is still incomplete, but the ground covered is considerable.

Still, we can question Europeans' willingness to shoulder the consequences of the desired autonomy. Bernard Cazeneuve notes that while we aspire to a powerful Europe, we are not taking the necessary financial measures—such as a community preference in procurement and consolidation of the European defense industry. To this must be added, as two British speakers (Brigadier General Robert Boyd and former RAF officer Edward Stringer) stress, the need to forgo some expenditures in favor of the defense budget and to seek pension and private funds to top up that inevitably limited budget, which will have to be spent wisely. We will not escape painful sacrifices (what Timothy Garton Ash calls the Churchill–de Gaulle world). Vincent Montagne recalls Bismarck's famous line: "Diplomacy without arms is music without instruments," and invokes René Girard[10]: procrastination only postpones and magnifies violence. More time would have been welcome to delve into Rajmund Andrzejczak's question about defining victory, as Ukraine is exhausting itself and Europe risks growing weary. We should also have addressed reconstruction and the reintegration of refugees in Ukraine, but it is likely too early...

Linked to rearmament is the question of technological development, addressed in two panels: "Musk, the tech oligarchy, and its impact on Europe" and "Europe's necessary industrial and technological awakening."

Europeans look with astonishment at the role of the technologist oligarchy around D. Trump—their hubris, their disdain for the MAGA base. Joel Kotkin, professor at Chapman University, sketches a grim picture of a new feudalism in America, where concentration of wealth and power reduces the people en masse to a new Third Estate and undermines democracy and freedom of thought[11]. This tech dominance predates the current U.S. administration: the Big Tech firms, formerly more Democratic-leaning, rallied to Trump in opposition to Biden—but this is no ideological conversion: the conquistadors of technology are driven by two passions only: the spirit of exploration and the will to imperial power—Musk even named his last son Romulus! This appetite for conquering the future, pushed to adventurism, is not new (Tocqueville already said it: the American motto is "I will try") and pits the U.S. against Europe, which harbors a deep-seated distrust of technology. Matthias Risse, professor at Harvard, recalls the pessimism of Heidegger and of Ellul, who denounced men's alienation by technique escaping individual control[12]; Pascal Bruckner likewise contrasts European

prudence with American boldness: Europe is built on the precautionary principle, which has hobbled the development of mRNA, genetic engineering, and nanotechnologies; nothing better illustrates the clash between these two worlds than Vance's indignation at Europe's desire to regulate Big Tech.

The panel on Europe's necessary industrial and technological awakening developed the analysis of European—especially French—risk aversion, which has produced our economic lag highlighted by the Draghi report. Yet we French should not think ourselves exceptional, even in our delays: as Pierre-André de Chalendar (former CEO of Saint-Gobain) notes, France's lag in Europe is narrowing while Germany is now lagging in turn. Germany owed its prosperity to Russian gas, the benefits of globalization, and the peace dividend—all now in jeopardy. All of Europe must invest more—Europe's current innovation level, says Chalendar, is that of South Korea. Speakers proposed various strategies: a leading group of a few countries should launch into innovation, and each country should have freedom in technological choices (Chalendar); deregulation (Declan Ganley, entrepreneur and broadband pioneer); creating a powerful European financial center, a strengthened economic and monetary union, European financial solidarity, and debt unification (Augustin de Romanet, chairman of Paris Europlace). All agree on the urgency of loosening the regulatory straitjacket and encouraging audacity—there was too little time to debate, given the evident gulf between a massively pro-deregulation Ganley and de Romanet, who raises the question of the acceptable deficit to finance growth. A crucial issue, just as France struggles to agree on a budget. Should we abandon the prudence of the housewife and view the deficit as enabling growth[13]? Truthfully, France's budgets have hardly excelled in housewifely thrift... and Europe lacks the dollar's privilege to let the deficit run without damage—a deficit that is becoming worrying even in the U.S.

This reflection on strategy is inseparable from that on European identity—on the values we want to preserve. Here the Conversations returned to history, to the opposition between autocratic empires and democracies.

III – WHAT VALUES FOR EUROPE?

Since the end of the Cold War, Europe had forgotten the Russian threat. Jacques Rupnik recalls that as early as 2007, in a lecture at the Canadian Embassy in Washington[14], Pierre Hassner denounced the illusions of those—above all Americans—who believe that democracy and the market can be established virtually overnight. They are mistaken: already in 2007 Russia was not evolving toward democracy but toward greater authoritarianism and hostility to the West and its close neighbors—Estonia, Georgia, and other former Soviet and even Warsaw Pact countries (such as Poland). There was little resistance to this policy of aggression, either from the Russian population or from the West. Today, Putin is approaching a fascist model: cult of the leader, rising xenophobia, youth organizations... Rupnik relays a common phrase among Russian analysts: "Russia rising, America declining, and Europe on the sidelines." Russia is up because of oil prices; America down due to the consequences of the Iraq adventure; Europe on the sidelines owing to the rejection of the European Constitution project, its failure to adopt a common policy on energy, and the influence of new member states (like Poland and the Baltic republics), whom Russia views with contempt and seeks to punish for their desire for independence. Add today the countries of the "color revolutions," which Russia wants to draw back into its orbit. This hostility to the West is reinforced by post-imperial humiliation that does not favor evolution toward democracy. Hassner's conclusion, taken up by Rupnik, could serve as the Conversations' epigraph: "The French philosopher Henri Bergson advanced a thesis that seems as true as it is shocking: liberal democracy is the least natural regime on earth. What is natural is the rule of the strongest. Democracy can come into existence only through a difficult struggle requiring courage and perseverance and aiming at a profound change in attitudes and institutions."

This analysis of Russia's hostility to the West is shared by Oleg Dunda, member of the Ukrainian parliament and of the parliamentary association "For the Decolonization of Russia": the Kremlin's discourse explicitly aims to challenge the outcomes of the Cold War by confronting the West. Russia is not simply waging a colonial war against Ukraine; it seeks revenge, supported by its population. To understand the choice of Ukraine as the first target, one need only think historically: in 1940 Germany concentrated its early attacks on a single point; today Russia first strikes Ukraine, but the threat extends to Moldova, the Baltic states, Poland... What is at stake is the difficulty of drawing a boundary between the European Union, which countries join by the will of their peoples, and a Russian Federation with shifting limits. The problem with Russia, as Václav Havel already said, is that it has no borders; the nation-state cannot be distinguished from the empire, which throughout history has alternately expanded and contracted.

Europe is not threatened only by a frontal military attack: Anne-Marie Brady, a New Zealand specialist on the Chinese Communist Party, shows a united front of Russia and China against the United States and Europe. Both regimes practice the same population control and communication manipulation. They strive to rally some of their adversaries in order to divide them—already Lenin's tactic in his 1921 "Remarks to the Theses on a United Front."

Faced with these autocracies, what values do Europe and its open societies want to defend? The answer is not simple. Europeans are condemned to hypocrisy to preserve their link with the United States. They cannot say what separates them from it, so Europe seems to be only a large market—at the risk of moral collapse.

The temptation of nihilism

The risk of collapse is indeed great; Nobel Peace laureate Oleksandra Matviichuk notes that for too many Europeans, "never again" now means: we will no longer pay for freedom—business as usual... In fact, Europeans have forgotten for decades the necessity of self-defense. As Nicolas Baverez observes, they thought they lived in the world of Locke, Kant, and Ricardo, and now wake up in the world of Hobbes, where man is a wolf to man; in Weber's world, where the gods clash; or in Marx's world of class struggle: the world of permanent conflict. For Baverez, we must return to Husserl's great lecture of 5 May 1935 in Vienna, "The Crisis of European Humanity and Philosophy," a tragic text since Husserl, a Jew, could neither teach nor speak in Nazi Germany: "The crisis of European existence has only two outcomes: either the decline of Europe becoming alien to its own vital and rational sense, falling into hostility to the spirit and barbarism; or the rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy, through the heroism of reason (...) The greatest danger for Europe is weariness." Europe in this sense (Husserl included the United States) is a spiritual more than a geographical entity, called upon to resist the temptation of nihilism or irrationality[15]. As Vincent Montagne (president of the French Publishers Association since 2012) shows, Europe's rebirth hinges on the search for meaning in the face of the proliferation of fake news and stereotyped language—soon to be multiplied by artificial intelligence.

Whence could rebirth come? What is worth fighting for? The answer is both ethical and legal.

Ethical, that of peace articulated with democracy and freedom of thought, as Andrius Kubilius vigorously argues—recalling Tocqueville's joint defense of liberty and democracy—and as Bernard Cazeneuve insists. The latter reminds us that European peace is bound up with the devolution of power through universal suffrage, respect for individual freedoms, and the rule of law; he lists the dangers we face: (1) a war of invasion in contempt of peoples' right to self-determination; (2) some countries' drift away from the *acquis communautaire* they pledged to respect; (3) distancing from America as it tramples the principles of international law.

This analysis is not consensual among the Europeans present. For Konrad Szymański, former Polish foreign minister and member of the conservative Law and Justice party (PiS), peoples do not accept the full European “package.” And yet, replies Cazeneuve, freedom of thought within the limits of respect for others as defined by law is indeed a fundamental European achievement—and one that separates us from the United States. In 2015, as Interior Minister, he had to travel to California to persuade—only with difficulty—the Big Tech companies to remove hateful content from social networks at a time when attacks risked fracturing France; twenty years later, little has changed...

Two conceptions of freedom of thought emerge from this debate. American-style freedom is a freedom without constraints—in French eyes, the fox’s freedom in the henhouse. Lacordaire, Tocqueville’s contemporary, said as much: it is freedom that oppresses and the law that liberates. European freedom is, by contrast, a freedom within the limits of law.

We could have devoted the entire Conversations to the rule of law, so necessary a guarantee of Europe’s resurgence and so threatened in our world where force prevails. The choice to open the Conversations with Mirjana Spoljaric, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, was thus judicious. She reminded us that Europe is the cradle of international treaties, the rule of law, and the protection of people—even in wartime. Spoljaric fears a return of states to the state of nature; international humanitarian law is threatened daily in Ukraine, the Middle East, and Sudan, in contempt of the Geneva Conventions ratified in 1949, which set the rules applicable in armed conflict[16]. Charged with protecting victims, the Red Cross president travels the world to rally as many states as possible to the global initiative on international humanitarian law launched in 2024 to reaffirm these conventions. There is urgency—not only for victims but for all humanity: those who attack prisoners, hospitals, and schools endanger the protection of their own citizens; those who resort to double standards and selective indignation are wrong to think one life is worth less than another—say, a Sudanese or a Palestinian less than a Ukrainian.

This alarm is echoed by Andrea Bianchi, professor of international law in Geneva, who worries about the decline of legal vocabulary in international relations. He discerns several causes: the double standard that discredits the West’s legal discourse in the eyes of the rest of the world—human rights appear merely as a means for the West to justify its domination; the charge of terrorism used to justify restricting fundamental rights (the case of Israel was alluded to by several speakers, though this highly non-consensual point was not addressed); and finally the absence of empathy—contempt for law correlates with forgetting our common humanity. Literature helps him restore the importance of the other’s face. He cites John Donne: “Each man’s death diminishes me / For I am involved in mankind. / Therefore, send not to know / For whom the bell tolls, / it tolls for thee.” And Elie Wiesel: “To forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time. And if, the killers and their accomplices excepted, no one is responsible for their first death, we are responsible for the second.” (*Night*, 2007).

Even so, Andrea Bianchi does not minimize the International Criminal Court’s (ICC) difficulty in enforcing international law[17]. The first ICC arrest warrant for a sitting head of state concerned Sudan’s al-Bashir—whereas Milošević and Charles Taylor were charged only after losing power. The ICC initiative had unhappy consequences: it prompted the expulsion of NGOs from Sudan and triggered African protests against double standards—the fact being that the countries under ICC investigation are in Africa (Sudan, Uganda, DRC). Is it better to punish perpetrators in the name of justice or prioritize political negotiation to end a crisis? The question arises today about sanctions against Putin or Netanyahu. If one chooses the judicial route, states must cooperate, for law cannot be exercised without political will and a society pushing governments to act.

This is no theoretical matter, as Ukrainian speakers show. For the ICC to be able to prosecute, crimes must be documented. That is the mission Oleksandra Matviichuk, Nobel Peace laureate and director of Ukraine's Center for Civil Liberties, has set for herself. By gathering interviews, she is building a database on war crimes and crimes against humanity; thereby she restores victims' faces and dignity. Law is not disembodied.

Kenneth Roth[18], who led Human Rights Watch for thirty years (an organization awarded the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for its contribution to the fight against antipersonnel mines), also insists on the necessary pressure of society in defense of law. He shows that even in the darkest situations, public opinion can fight despots by circulating information—through a strategy of “name and shame.” Virtually all despots claim to respect rights; even Putin fears “color revolutions” and dreads democracy's appeal (a fear that drove him to invade Ukraine). Roth remains optimistic and believes it is possible to protect human rights without U.S. support—the U.S., by a presidential decree of 4 February 2025, having withdrawn from the UN Human Rights Council, where since Trump's first term it had only observer status. One may doubt “name and shame” in an era when fake news rules reputations. But after all, why not dream that Trump might bend his policy out of a desire to obtain the Nobel Peace Prize?

The final panel was titled “What Future for European Conservatism?” It suffered from the absence of a prior definition of “conservative,” too often confused with immobility or defense of vested interests[19]. France does not, like England, have a “Conservative” (Tory) party, and in our history the term has been claimed both by the party of “resistance” to change (as in Guizot's time) and by men who argue for prudent innovation—like Tocqueville, who regretted “the absence of a true conservative party” in France, or Jules Ferry declaring himself “deeply republican and resolutely conservative.” Conservatism in this sense is defined by the virtue of prudence; it is linked to the Conversations' theme, since the question is what values to defend—what testament to draw from our heritage to move toward the future. It is regrettable that Jean Yarbrough, an excellent historian of the American Founders, could not explain further how Tocqueville's innovative conservatism drew on his American experience of local democracy and checks and balances. As sociologist Jean-Pierre Le Goff noted, Hamilton's “conservatism” has nothing to do with Trump's politics, which are defined by scorched earth and the hyperbole of rupture.

France, as Le Goff shows, failed to conserve its heritage in the 1960s. Europe was built on the market, not on history and culture; the cultural revolution of 1968 made transmission impossible and promoted individualism. Le Goff speaks from experience: like Marcel Gauchet, he studied under Claude Lefort in Caen and was for a time tempted by far-left activism; he recounted his turbulent youth in his sharp autobiographical essay *La France d'hier. Récit d'un monde adolescent des années 1950 à Mai 68* (Flammarion, 2019).

From this break in transmission arose in many French a self-deprecation coupled with a sense of collective decline. This partly explains why Russian attacks were not anticipated. The anti-American left projected onto Putin the idea that he offered a remedy to decadence (we might note that we remember hearing Mathieu Bock-Côté voice the same moral indictments of Europe; the left has never had a monopoly—nor even primacy—on the penitential discourse). Societies deprived of a past are societies where an unmoored individualism triumphs—distrustful of the state yet calling for the welfare state; a “breakdown,” an individualism of unraveling that targets the educational and social fabric, family and school.

What then could French conservatism be? Not reaction; it is illusory to dream of a return to a largely fantasized golden state. Conservatism consists in determining what, in the heritage we have received,

is worth preserving—which requires sorting, and avoiding wallowing in lamentation about present ills and turpitudes. A difficult sorting, as Jean Yarbrough notes, since in both France and the U.S., the descendants of colonized peoples or slaves do not share the same heritage as their former dominators. To which one might answer that it is precisely the crafting of a grand common narrative that built Europe's peace among formerly hostile nations.

These very rich Conversations covered too many subjects, too hastily, not to engender some frustration. They invite us to continue through reflection and reading. Among the gaps, one may cite the scant attention paid to elsewhere: Africa, Asia, South America; Dominique Moïsi rightly observed that our values are no longer perceived as universal and that Westerners must learn modesty.

Frustrating, too, was the limited historical perspective despite the presence of excellent historians. Though placed under Tocqueville's patronage, the Conversations do not escape the stupefaction before the mad rush of an unpredictable world. Yet there is a resurgence of the nineteenth century in this brutish world we inhabit. Trump's America reconnects with that of Andrew Jackson and William McKinley—predatory, populist, far from the artful institutional balance intended by the Founders; isolationist and expansionist at once, haunted by the fear of the "great replacement": expansionist toward Canada (Thomas Jefferson already dreamed of driving the English from the American continent by marching to Quebec[20]); isolationist by radicalizing Washington's Farewell Address of 19 September 1796:

Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence therefore it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities. [...] Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor, or caprice?

An America also haunted by the threat of the foreigner, of the immigrant—by the fear of a "great replacement" that already obsessed nineteenth-century America[21].

As for Russia, there is nothing new in its contempt for treaties—a constant since the eighteenth century—nor in its expansion, westward but also eastward since the great oligarchs of Ivan IV, driven by greed and the desire to establish their hold over a vast territory[22].

Our time is no longer Tocqueville's—it is more globalized—but it is its heir, and Tocqueville's politics give us food for thought. Not so much because he foresaw the rivalry between Russians and Americans—hardly an original insight; the French had not forgotten the Cossacks' parade in Paris in 1815. Rather because Tocqueville, as foreign minister in 1849, had to defend the principles of the law of nations and ideas of humanity protecting political refugees against the great powers—the "old things," as he called the autocratic regimes of the Tsarist Empire and the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Relying on "the opinion of the whole civilized world," he made the Tsar back down, saving Kossuth and the Central European refugees: it was an early form of "name and shame." In doing so, he affirmed that defending liberal principles was inseparable from a policy of French independence—without grandstanding, since France "remained proud even as it ceased to be preponderant; it feared to act and wanted to speak loudly, and it also demanded that its government be proud, without allowing it the risks such a role entails"[23]. The Conversations illustrated Europeans' oscillation between indignation and inaction.

NOTES

- [1] Calmann-Lévy, 1973; excerpted in *Commentaire*, no. 190, Summer 2025.
- [2] *The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties*, Simon and Schuster, 2020. French readers will find many of his articles in *Le Figaro* and *Commentaire*.
- [3] *Commentaire*, Summer 2025, no. 190 (article published by *The Guardian*, 15 March 2025): “Long live Churchill-Gaullism.”
- [4] He helped implement the London Treaties of 2 November 2010 by Nicolas Sarkozy and U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron to strengthen Franco-British defense cooperation. The year prior, he supported France’s return to NATO’s integrated command.
- [5] See Gérard Grunberg’s detailed analysis, “Les Américains et la politique extérieure de Donald Trump,” *Telos-eu.com*, 7 July 2025. For comparison, see by the same author “Les Européens, l’UE et le soutien à l’Ukraine” (commentary on the latest Eurobarometer, May 2025, *Telos*, 25 June 2005).
- [6] Author of numerous works in geopolitics, notably *Géopolitique de la Russie* (Que sais-je, PUF, 2016), *Géopolitique de l’Europe* (Que sais-je, PUF, 2020), *Le monde vu d’Istanbul* (PUF, 2023).
- [7] Mongrenier draws here on Richard N. Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff: The United States After the Cold War*, Brookings Institution Press, 1997.
- [8] See among many accessible writings “La guerre d’Ukraine, l’Otan et l’Europe de la défense,” *Hérodote*, 2023, and “Signification et perspectives de l’Otan,” *Diplomatie*, no. 121 (May–June 2023), pp. 54–57.
- [9] “Réussir l’Europe: une nécessité permanente,” *Politique étrangère*, 4/1999, 64th year, pp. 883–888.
- [10] *Achever Clausewitz. Entretiens avec Benoît Chantre*, Paris, Carnets Nord, 2007.
- [11] See his book *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class*, Encounter Books, 2020.
- [12] See Mathias Risse, *Political Theory of the Digital Age*, Cambridge University Press, 2023.
- [13] Augustin de Romanet cites as an example of a defense of deficits Stephanie Kelton’s *The Deficit Myth: Modern Monetary Theory and How to Build a Better Economy*, John Murray, June 2020 (French translation *Le mythe du déficit*, Les liens qui libèrent, 2021). Larry Summers labeled this “voodoo economics.”
- [14] See its republication in *Commentaire* (2024/1) and the original English version, April 2008: <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/gratis/Hassner-19-2.pdf>
- [15] Nicolas Baverez reprises here a reflection developed in several books, notably *Démocraties contre empires autoritaires*, Éditions de l’Observatoire, 2023.
- [16] The 1864 convention signed by sixteen nations on the protection of wounded and sick soldiers and medical and religious personnel; the second (1949) on the protection of wounded or sick military personnel and shipwreck survivors; the third on conditions of captivity for prisoners of war; the fourth on the protection of civilians, notably in occupied territory.
- [17] For French-speaking readers, see his freely accessible articles in *Telos*, online journal, 15 April 2008 on Tibet and 29 March 2009 on the 4 March 2009 indictment of Sudan’s al-Bashir (again indicted 12 July 2010 and still not arrested...).
- [18] See his recent book *Righting Wrongs: Three Decades on the Frontlines Battling Abusive Governments*, Knopf, February 2025, and his interview in *Le Monde*, 3 May 2025.
- [19] See Laetitia Strauch-Bonart, *Vous avez dit conservateur ?*, Éditions du Cerf, 2016 (drawing on the English Burkean tradition), and more recently Armand Rouvier, *Peut-on encore être conservateur ? Histoire d’une idée incomprise en France*, Buchet-Chastel, 2023.
- [20] See his letter from Monticello, 4 August 1812, to William Duane (quoted text), *The Papers of*

Thomas Jefferson, Retirement Series, vol. 5, Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 293–294.

[21] See Denis Lacorne, *De la race en Amérique*, Gallimard, 2025, pp. 147–151.

[22] Éric Hoesli, *L'épopée sibérienne. La Russie à la conquête de la Sibérie et du Grand Nord*, Éditions Paulsen, Geneva-Paris, 2018.

[23] *Souvenirs, Œuvres*, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, vol. III, p. 932.