What Is National Greatness?

Ryan P. Hanley

Lately it seems like everyone wants to make their nations great again. President Xi Jinping inspires China with fear of “national humiliation” and promise of “great revival.” President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accuses Europe of having “humiliated” Turkey and promises a “continuation” of the Ottoman Empire. President Vladimir Putin warns us that his nation hasn’t forgotten the “insult” the West inflicted on it in the 1990s, and he has long and famously cloaked himself in the image of the tsars. And of course, Donald Trump ran for president in 2016 promising to “make America great again,” and since winning the presidency has insisted he is doing just that.

But what exactly does it mean to make a nation great? And what exactly do those drawn to such promises think they’re likely to get in return for supporting them? Here the waters get murky fast. The clever and well-read have a whole host of terms at the ready to explain these promises. Calls for national greatness, they say, are expressions of nationalism, or maybe populism, or maybe plain and simple nativism. But invoking “isms” dodges the real question. For even if these or other such categories can explain why national greatness appeals to so many today, they leave still unanswered the crucial question of what exactly “national greatness” is.

Regarding that crucial question, we get little insight from those who most often invoke the term. In 2016 it was notoriously central to Trump’s campaign, for instance, but by January 2017, even before he had taken the oath of office, the president-elect had already coined his re-election slogan for 2020: “Keep America Great.” While this breathtakingly abrupt shift says much about the man, it gives little insight

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into the concept. Things don’t get much better when we turn from the politicians to the pundits. National greatness of course had a history in our country before the 2016 campaign; back in the 1990s, some will remember, David Brooks called for a “national-greatness conservatism.” But “national greatness” for Brooks was a catch-all—something that involved “grand American projects” and “global purpose” and “common mission.” Yet this too sheds little light on the concept, and we don’t get much more from Brooks’s open-ended conclusion that “[i]t almost doesn’t matter what great task government sets for itself, as long as it does some tangible thing with energy and effectiveness.”

All of this may leave us wondering where we should turn if we want to understand national greatness. In what follows, I suggest that we would do well to look to the case of France under Louis XIV. I’ll be the first to admit that 17th-century France may seem like an odd place to turn for insight into 21st-century America. But the parallels in fact are many and striking, and go well beyond some low-hanging fruit. It would be simple enough, for example, to call out their leaders’ shared vanity and penchants for erecting monuments to it; the art and architecture of Versailles far eclipse those of Mar-a-Lago, but both are born of the same place. But these kinds of parallels I’ll leave to others. My interest lies rather in what 17th-century France can teach us about the concept of national greatness itself.

**THE GREAT MAN AND THE GREAT NATION**

France under Louis XIV was a nation that was, by any measure—military, economic, literary, cultural—indisputably great. It was also ruled by a king who was self-consciously dedicated to making it great. So for all the differences distancing its absolutist divine-right monarchy from our constitutional commercial republic, there’s yet much we can learn from its example.

Three insights are particularly important. The first concerns the relationship of national greatness to personal greatness. A vanishingly thin line separated Louis XIV’s pursuit of personal greatness from his efforts to establish the greatness of France—a fact with key implications for what can and cannot be expected from a politics of national greatness. Second, the case of France under Louis XIV also makes clear how the pursuit of national greatness necessarily shapes domestic policy. Privileging national greatness as a goal requires dedicating scarce
political resources to its realization; seen thusly, national greatness necessarily comes at a cost that its buyers too often fail to account for. Third, the pursuit of national greatness is also determinative of foreign policy. This is inherent to the very nature of greatness itself. Greatness is of course a comparative as well as a zero-sum good; several nations can be jointly powerful, but only one nation can be great—and only if other nations are, by comparison, small. This fact has profound implications for the foreign policy of a nation set on greatness, specifically insofar as it constrains the courses of action available to it in both commerce and war.

To see how this works, we need particularly to consider two remarkable figures from 17th-century France who deserve the careful attention of all students of the science and art of politics. The first is Louis himself. For all the many scholarly disagreements over the nature of his absolutism, all agree that the Sun King was animated by a single-minded obsession with greatness—gloire—and that his politics and his image were self-consciously crafted around this vision. It was also a vision that he put to paper. Early in his reign, Louis conceived the project of recording for his son his lessons on political rule. The result was a series of manuscripts chronicling the trials and tribulations of the first years of his personal reign (1661-1668). Known today as the Memoirs for the Instruction of the Dauphin, they are a key source of insight into Louis's vision of greatness.

Louis is then the main character in this story, as he must be. But perhaps the more interesting and important character is his chief critic, Archbishop François Fénelon. Fénelon is almost wholly unknown today, at least to anglophone audiences. And this is a shame. For not only was Fénelon his age's preeminent voice of responsible resistance and reform, but he was also one of the preeminent political theorists of early modernity. The author of the best-selling book in all 18th-century France excepting the Bible, Fénelon was a profound influence on the Enlightenment. But for our purposes, what most matters is that Fénelon (who knew Louis and his court well from his time as tutor to Louis's grandson) was a clear-eyed critic of the lust for glory and greatness that he so clearly saw in Louis XIV. Fénelon’s insights into the dangers of glory and vanity run throughout his writings, ranging from his sermons and spiritual writings (remarkable for their insights into the inner life and deserving of the attention of all people of faith) to his moral and
political writings. But they especially come through in two texts: his 1699 *The Adventures of Telemachus* (the best-seller mentioned above) and his 1694 *Letter to Louis XIV*, one of modernity’s most noteworthy exemplars of what it means to speak truth to power.

The force of the *Letter to Louis XIV* is especially evident in the position it takes on the first of our three themes, the relationship of national greatness to personal greatness. That there is in fact a close relationship between these two concepts is evident even from the contemporary examples with which we began. Popular democracies don’t often call or clamor for national greatness; these calls tend to come from rulers driven by a desire to be seen as great themselves. In this respect, ancient Athens is the exception to the rule, and Xi, Erdogan, and Putin are the norm. But why should this be the case? In part it owes to the way in which rulers such as these understand their own relationship to their nation. And it is here that Louis can be helpful. His understanding of his relationship to the nation is famously encapsulated in his notorious claim “l’état, c’est moi”—“I am the state.” As it happens, the quotation is almost certainly apocryphal. But the line has stuck because it captures a central idea at the heart of Louis’s self-understanding. As he explained,

France is a monarchical state in every sense of the term. In France the king represents the entire nation, and each private individual represents only a single individual with regard to the king. As a result, all power, all authority, resides in the king’s hands, and this power and authority can be held by others in the realm only insofar as the king grants it. This form of government is best suited to the particular genius of the French nation, to its character, to its tastes and to its situation. The laws that form its constitution are not written, or at least the majority of them are not. The nation does not make up a body in France. It resides completely and entirely in the person of the king.

Louis makes a number of striking claims here with regard to his relationship to his nation. For our purposes, the most important is that there is no ontological distinction between the nation and the king; on Louis’s view, the king isn’t merely representative of the nation, but constitutive of it.
Students of 17th-century political philosophy may recognize this idea from Thomas Hobbes. The frontispiece of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, published in 1651, depicts the sovereign as a king composed of an amalgam of multiple discrete individual citizens; in this respect (if not others), Louis and Hobbes were on the same page in thinking that the person of the king and the body of the nation are one.

Herein lies the fundamental idea behind Louis’s thought: The king is one with the nation. This has crucial implications for his views on national greatness. For insofar as the king and the nation are one, so too the king’s greatness is necessarily one with the greatness of the nation. This idea lies at the core of Louis’s view of national greatness, and suggests what is at once so promising and so problematic in his view.

On the one hand, to believe that the greatness of the king and the greatness of the nation are inexorably bound together is to believe that what promotes one will necessarily promote the other; on this view, the king cannot but be deeply and personally invested in doing all he can to promote the well-being of his nation. Yet others might worry — indeed did worry — that this view is too clever by half. Thus Fénelon, who argued that a failure to distinguish the king’s personal interests from the nation’s interests can lead only to disaster.

In particular, Fénelon worried that this specious rhetoric of conjoined interests served as a cover for the king’s efforts to promote his personal interests at the nation’s expense. On his view, Louis’s obsession with his own personal greatness, so far from promoting the greatness of the nation, was directly inimical to any national greatness deserving of the name. It was a position made blisteringly clear in his *Letter*:

For nearly thirty years your leading ministers weakened and overturned all the time-honored maxims of state so that your authority might rise to its heights — a project to which they were amenable since your authority was in their hands. No longer were the state or the rules spoken of. One spoke only of the king and his good pleasure. Your revenues and your expenses have been pushed to the extreme. You have been raised to the heavens in order to have outshone, it was said, the greatness of all your predecessors together, that is to say, you impoverished the whole of France in order to bring to the court a monstrous and incurable luxury. They sought to raise you on the ruins of all the ranks of
Fénelon’s claim is more than just a critique of Louis’s indifference to the rule of law and his efforts to ensure personal loyalty from his subordinates—though it surely is that. Its value for us lies principally in its response to the Sun King’s understanding of national greatness. First, Fénelon insists that, far from being identical to it, the king’s greatness has been bought at the expense of the greatness and interests of the nation. Second, Fénelon suggests Louis misunderstood the foundations of greatness; greatness, he insists, lies not in an expansive authority but in the use of such authority for the promotion of the well-being of the people. And third, Fénelon insists that the personal greatness that Louis bought at such cost to the nation cannot even be called greatness, but should be called what it is: vanity.

All told then, Fénelon and Louis agree that there is a relationship between national greatness and personal greatness. But Fénelon understands the relationship in a way that is almost the direct opposite of the king’s. True personal greatness—what Fénelon himself called “true glory”—requires serving the nation and its people, even and especially when this requires that the king sacrifice his personal interests for the nation’s well-being. It is a view that he would reiterate again and again in *Telemachus*. Criticizing one especially greedy and grasping king, the character Mentor (the goddess Minerva in disguise) asks:

Is this really the path to glory? Remember that the countries in which the domination of the sovereign is the most absolute is where the sovereigns are the least strong. They take, they ruin everything. They alone possess the entirety of the state, yet the state languishes. The countryside is left fallow and almost deserted. The cities diminish each day. Commerce dries up. The king, who could not be king all alone and who is great only by his people, destroys himself little by little by the insensible destruction of the people by whom he holds his riches and strength.

Here Fénelon suggests his alternative vision of greatness. Louis, as we’ve seen, believes that personal and national greatness are necessarily conjoined, and that all that is done for one promotes the other. Fénelon,
in contrast, argues that there are in fact better and worse ways of join-
ing these. Louis’s way, he believes, is pernicious: His personal greatness
comes at the expense of the people. But this doesn’t mean that the
concept of national greatness ought to be jettisoned; on the contrary,
Fénelon aims to re-orient this concept, and to show that kings who work
to promote the genuine well-being of their peoples are alone on the path
to true glory.

**The Utility of his Subjects**

Of course, putting it this way invites an obvious question: Just how
should a king go about promoting the well-being of the people? This
brings us to the second point we need to address—namely, what sort
of domestic policy can we expect from a politics of national greatness?
Louis himself clearly understood his domestic political agenda to follow
from his understanding of his relationship to his people and the duties
that this entailed. As he explained to his son in his *Memoirs*,

> In the end, my son, we must consider the good of our subjects
even more than our own. It seems that they make a part of our-
selves, in which we are the head of a body of which they are the
limbs. It is only for their own good that we must give them laws;
and this power that we have over them must serve only to lead us
to work more effectively for their happiness. It is a beautiful thing
to earn from them the name of father alongside that of master,
and if the latter is owed to us as a matter of birthright, the other
must be the most cherished object of our ambition.

Thus Louis’s public and explicit teaching on the king’s duties to his
people: A king marks himself worthy of the title of father of his people
by showing himself at all times ready and eager to promote their inter-
est, and to desire their good even more than his own. It is a lesson that
he will reiterate more than once in the *Memoirs*, going so far as to insist
later in the text that the “surest foundation” of the king’s greatness is the
“utility of his subjects.”

Louis of course sounds a lot like Fénelon here; to identify the peo-
ple’s utility as the foundation of the king’s greatness is to speak Fénelon’s
language. But what did Louis have in mind exactly with regard to the
“utility” of the people? And how exactly did he propose to translate these
lofty sentiments into practical policy? Here things get especially interesting. When we hear the language of public utility today, we naturally think of social policies that promote public welfare: health care, education, infrastructure, and the like. But this is certainly not what Louis had in mind—and not because these weren’t needed. France in the second half of the 17th century, for all its greatness, also suffered some of the most devastating famines and financial crises in its history. Yet the Memoirs give strikingly little attention to basic questions of governance and public well-being. Instead, with regard to public utility, the people’s needs are conceived in a remarkably different manner. The people, Louis explains to his son,

are pleased by spectacles, and all things considered the goal is always to please them; and all our subjects, in general, are delighted to see that we love what they love, or at which they excel. By this we hold their minds and their hearts, sometimes perhaps more strongly than by rewards and benefits; and with regard to foreigners, in a state that appears to them to be flourishing and well-administered, expenses that might otherwise seem merely superfluous and wasteful make on them a very advantageous impression of magnificence, of strength, of wealth, and of greatness.

In Louis’s hands, the politics of public utility turns out to be a politics of public spectacle. It is a striking view for a number of reasons, not least its remarkable cynicism. But for our purposes what is especially important is the way in which Louis’s domestic policies follow from his re-imagining of the people and their wants and needs. According to Louis, the happiness of the people lies not in having basic welfare needs met; their happiness—and thus the king’s security—lies rather in the pleasure of grand spectacles.

In this sense, Louis revealed himself as a practitioner of a symbolic politics of identity, one capable not just of “pleasing” the people, but of “holding their minds and hearts” through impressive displays of wealth and power. Small wonder then that the Memoirs spend so little time on the minutiae of public health care and go into such lavish detail on the design and building of the Grand Carrousel of the Louvre, and on the stocking of the stables at Versailles. These monuments to greatness
dazzle the eye and thereby capture the popular imagination, Louis well knew, in ways more pedestrian projects — however more useful they may in fact be to the public — cannot.

As one might imagine, these magnificent luxury expenditures didn’t sit well with the king’s critics, and least of all with Fénelon. In response, Fénelon again and again made the case as clearly and as openly as he could that these sorts of expenditures diverted funds away from measures that would genuinely support the public welfare. Now, Fénelon, it has to be said, was hardly unaware of the utility of spectacle; a court aristocrat himself, he too thought the king must take pains always to maintain a “certain exterior majesty.” But the problem was that Louis had taken this entirely too far — and indeed entirely at the worst time.

Fénelon, as best we can tell, penned his Letter to Louis XIV in the winter of 1693-94. It was a tragic time; that winter’s famine is thought to have cost nearly two million lives — equal to about 10% of the entire French population. And at the same time that France’s people starved at home, French armies remained in the field across Europe, expensively fighting Louis’s wars — wars that had long been regarded as designed more to promote the personal ambitions of the king than to achieve any just political object. Thus Fénelon’s excoriation of Louis in the wake of this tragedy:

Meanwhile your people, whom you ought to love as your children, and who have been up to now so devoted to you, are dying of hunger. The cultivation of the land is almost abandoned. The towns and the countryside are being depopulated. All the arts languish and cannot feed the workers. All trade is wiped out. As a result you have destroyed half of the genuine domestic power of your state, in order to make and defend vain foreign conquests. Instead of drawing money out of these poor people, you ought to give them alms, and feed them. All of France is merely a vast hospital, desolate and without supplies.... Thus this great kingdom so flourishing under a king who is depicted to us every day as the delight of his people.

Fénelon’s lesson couldn’t be clearer: beware the king whose vanity directs his policy, as it is the people who ultimately pay the cost — in this instance, with their lives.
This tragedy was not limited to the domestic front: thus the third way in which the case of 17th-century France is revealing. Not only did Louis’s understanding of national greatness shape his domestic policy, but it also determined his foreign policy. We saw above that greatness is by definition a comparative and zero-sum good—a good that can be enjoyed only by one, and not many. Louis’s consciousness of this aspect of greatness imbued his person and his politics, as is especially evident in the motto he took for himself and had inscribed on the Carrousel: Nec Pluribus Impar—“not unequal to many.”

This idea of self-conscious superiority animated Louis in all his endeavors, and nowhere more clearly than in his foreign policy. Louis’s approach to foreign policy, and especially diplomacy and war, is well appreciated, of course. But it is worth taking special note of the ways in which they were shaped by his concerns for greatness.

We begin with commerce. Louis’s policies on foreign trade have become infamous as one of the most comprehensive instantiations of mercantilism that the world has seen. Under the guidance of his famed finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert, France under Louis embraced an extensive system of import and export tariffs in an effort to regulate trade. The idea behind this system was that it is dangerous for a nation to be on the losing end of trade with any of its bilateral partners; to import more than one exports is to send money out of the realm, and on the thought that wealth in fact consists in money, to have a negative trade balance is to impoverish the nation.

Of course, Adam Smith, in the fourth book of The Wealth of Nations, conclusively showed how fallacious this entire scheme must be. As Smith demonstrated, not only does wealth not consist in money, but the advantages of trade between bilateral partners are not zero-sum but positive-sum—not a combat between winners and losers but a system in which the two parties, in exchanging their surplus for what they lack and could not efficiently produce themselves, are each better off. This has been accepted for over two centuries, even if politicians often fail to appreciate it or for other reasons seek to deny it. But it was certainly neither understood nor appreciated by Louis and his ministers, and not because they lacked economic expertise on which to draw; late-17th-century France produced a host of able early
defenders of free trade, from Pierre Boisguilbert to Sébastien Vauban to Fénelon himself.

Louis was unable to countenance these positions because they so dramatically conflicted with his restricted view of national greatness as a zero-sum good, and commercial policy as an instrument of advancing this greatness at the expense of the claims of rival nations. But Fénelon, for his part, was as clear as he could be on the dangers of this sort of intervention, insisting that “commerce is like certain springs: if you try to redirect their course, you dry them up,” and thus, “the prince should never mix himself up in commerce, for fear of hindering it.” Above all else, he told his prince, “make sure never to hinder commerce in order to turn it to your interests.”

Yet trade policy was hardly the only—or even the most significant—instance of how Louis’s pursuit of greatness shaped his nation’s foreign policy. His reign was famously one of nearly unending war. From the Dutch Wars to the War of the Grand Alliance to the War of Spanish Succession, the half-century of Louis’s personal reign knew almost no peace. And joined with these military operations was an extensive apparatus of diplomatic institutions and practices that similarly sought to advance the king’s interests at the expense of those of his neighbors. Uniting these military and diplomatic efforts was Louis’s obsession with glory and his desire for European hegemony. Louis’s comparative understanding of national greatness as a good that could only be properly enjoyed by one nation alone led him to be continually wary of—and thus at war with—his British, Dutch, and imperial rivals.

What response could be given to all of this? Here again, Fénelon and his circle were in the forefront of the active resistance, seeking to turn France away from its aggressively militaristic stance toward its neighbors. But what is interesting in Fénelon’s position is the logic behind it. Fénelon has often been portrayed as a pacifist, largely on the thought that his approach to international relations must be the product of his faith, and especially the passive “quietism” with which his name came to be associated in religious circles. But this does him a grave disservice. Fénelon was in fact a consummate realist, and his efforts to establish a more permanent peace in Europe were the product not of a dovish pacifism but of a remarkably clear-eyed appreciation of the nature of power. Indeed, this realism led Fénelon to become, as others have noted, one of the first articulators of balance-of-power theory in early-modern
Europe. Thus, in one of his most remarkable political documents, the *Examination of Conscience* that he prepared for the Duke of Burgundy, Fénelon explained that in international relations, the best system is a balance for the sake of public security. To be in this state, and not to want to leave it out of ambition, is to be most wise and happy. You are the common arbiter, all your neighbors are your friends—or at least those who do not render themselves suspect to others by their actions. You do nothing that does not seem to be done for your neighbors as much as for your people.... It is always necessary to remember the evils that great conquests cost the state both within and without; that they are fruitless; that they are risky to undertake; finally, the vanity, futility, the short duration of grand empires, and the ravages they cause in falling.

What is remarkable here isn’t simply that Fénelon seeks to turn France from promoting war to promoting peace, but that he justifies this shift precisely on the grounds that it will be more effective at establishing the king’s and the nation’s greatness—a greatness earned not by arms but by dispensing justice and keeping the peace.

**The Stakes of Greatness**

That the pursuit of national greatness shaped the politics of 17th-century France is beyond dispute. But why exactly should we care today? To be clear, it would be silly and even dangerous to look to early-modern France for answers to contemporary American problems. Our problems are uniquely ours, and our responses to them also need to be uniquely ours. But attending to history can help us to clarify the questions we need to answer as we go about crafting our responses to these problems.

And it is here that we find the benefit in attending to the case of 17th-century France. Louis and Fénelon present us with a series of questions regarding national greatness. These include the question of where and how we ought to draw the line between national greatness rightly understood and a leader’s mere desire for personal greatness. They also include the questions of whether (and if so, how) a nation’s pursuit of greatness may be determinative of both its domestic and foreign policy.
There is also another benefit to attending to the French case. Today, it seems there are only two positions available with regard to that slogan emblazoned on those red hats: You’re either for making America great again, or you’re not. But the debate between Louis and Fénelon reminds us that there’s more to the argument, and more positions available to us as we engage in it. Their debate wasn’t over the question of whether national greatness is a good thing or a bad thing, but over two rival visions of national greatness, one comparative and zero-sum, and the other not.

Attending to that debate compels us to ask whether national greatness can be re-founded on different grounds. It is a question that remains alive for those of us today who very much desire that our country should be great but want our country to consider what its greatness should consist of.