**The Rise of the West Circa 1963**

The year 1963 witnessed an intriguing concordance of academic and political ideas. In the summer of that year, John F. Kennedy went famously to West Berlin and pronounced his allegiance to the city. The same year, William H. McNeill, a historian at the University of Chicago, published a book destined for long life. Titled *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*, it was an affirmative answer to Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, which the First World War had fashioned into an unforgettably named volume, if not necessarily into a book that was carefully read and assimilated by many of its readers. Spengler published the first part of *The Decline of the West* in 1918; an English-language translation came out in 1926. Eighteen years after the end of the Second World War, West Berlin’s prosperity and its freedom from tyranny showcased the rise of the West, of the “Atlantic Community,” as Kennedy was fond of putting it, hewn from the rubble of war.[[1]](#footnote-1) William McNeill, who has been a soldier in World War II, was playing off similar themes in the pages of his book, though *The Rise of the West* had been long in the making and was anything but a referendum on the political landscape of 1963.

In this paper, I will detail some of the connections between Kennedy’s speech in West Berlin and McNeill’s eighty-hundred-page magnum opus. These connections culminate in the phrase, *civus romanus sum*, which JFK used in West Berlin before updating it to something more salient for the summer of 1963, before he pronounced the German words, *ich bin ein Berliner*. These academic-political connections point to a specifically American vision of the West, in which emphasis falls on technology and cultural borrowing, on the West as a modernizing process that is accessible (in theory) to anyone who is willing to embrace it, although by definition the West implies cultural continuity with Europe and with the *long durée* of European civilization. In this paper, I will shift from a meeting of academic and political ideas to the anomalous nature of the Kennedy-McNeill concordance circa 1963. Kennedy would never return to Berlin after June 1963. The Vietnam War that was perceptible at the margins of Kennedy’s visit to the Federal Republic of Germany would forever alter the attitude of Germans toward American foreign policy. Never again would a Democratic president rhapsodize so grandly about the West in Germany or anywhere else. What was seamless in 1963 was no longer seamless in 1968. Likewise, American academia after 1963 would radically question McNeill’s easy affiliation with the West and his belief in the validity of its rise. The story of McNeill and Kennedy in 1963 illuminates the fading away of “the West” as an organizing principle of American academic life, coupled with the attenuation of the West in American foreign policy – ever less bi-partisan in its constituencies, ever less progressive in valence, ever less the keystone of an optimistic geopolitical narrative. President Trump’s July 2017 speech in Warsaw inverted the McNeill and the Kennedy narrative. It would have been very coldly received in Berlin, had he been unwise enough to give it there, reverting as it does almost to Spengler’s original anguish over a decadent and declining West. I will conclude this paper with some reflections on President Trump’s Warsaw speech.

**1.**

William McNeill was born in Vancouver in 1917. His Presbyterian father taught church history. As a child, William McNeill was brought to Chicago where he would spend many of his student years and much of his adult life. Early exposure to the University of Chicago would prove fateful for the author of *The Rise of the West*. The “Western Civilization” curriculum had been pioneered at Columbia University around the time of the First World War, and from Columbia it would spread across American academia in the middle decades of the twentieth century; but nowhere would it find such a receptive home as at the University of Chicago. An undergraduate at the University of Chicago, McNeill took a humanities course, “History of Western Civilization,” in academic year 1933-1934. In his autobiography, *The Pursuit of Truth*, McNeill describes the class as a conversion experience. (He has lost his Christian faith in high school.) At Chicago, “week after week, readings and other experiences incidental to the course had revelatory force for me, since I had been strictly raised with a rather narrow canon of Scottish Presbyterian propriety,” McNeill recalled in *The Pursuit of Truth*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

McNeill was a convert to the ideal of Western Civilization, but he was not an unquestioning one. He absorbed the overall narrative resulting from his teachers’ concentration of “attention on ancient Athens and Sparta, then on Rome, Western Europe, and its American offshoot.” He was less convinced than many of his teachers that this was really a heroic narrative. Theirs was “the liberal nineteenth-century idea that personal freedom and self-government, reflected in the nineteenth century with republican legislatures and limited magistracy, was what gave meaning to history.” Liberty was the vehicle of power, and power the vehicle of liberty in this self-celebratory scheme. McNeill was open to other influences. From Spengler and from Arnold Toynbee, whose massive *A Study of History* began to appear in 1934, McNeill adopted a cyclical rather than a linear view of history. From coursework in anthropology he became convinced of the permeability of culture, and from simply reading the news in the 1930s McNeill learned that civilization is “liable to breakdown,” that power and influence are not the rewards for political liberty. They are aspects of a far more anarchic process. That which rises can also fall; that which rises is likely to fall.[[3]](#footnote-3)

McNeill finished up at Chicago in 1938. He began his graduate work at Cornell University in 1939, went off to spend several years in the army, and completed his dissertation in time to return to the University of Chicago in 1947. There he was tasked with teaching “a new course known as the History of Western Civilization… the most long-lived and successful of the courses the Hutchins college ever offered,” McNeill later wrote, referring to Robert Maynard Hutchins who was the president of the University of Chicago from 1929 to 1945.[[4]](#footnote-4) It was under Hutchins’s aegis that the University of Chicago became a vehicle of “Western Civilization” pedagogy. With civilizational meta-narratives in fashion – Toynbee appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1947 – McNeill published *The Handbook of Western Civilization* in 1949, so that his course could be adapted to other universities, which it was. McNeill submitted *The Rise of the West* to the University of Chicago Press in 1962. Once published, the book won the National Book Award and was a best seller, and its author was a famous man. Read by a non-academic audience, *The Rise of the West* would also grow into a staple of classroom teaching. McNeill had been adamant about it being one book rather than multiple volumes. This made it into a dense and ambitious textbook. McNeill would go on to publish many other books – on disease in history, on world history, on the role of technology in historical change.

In *The Pursuit of Truth*, McNeill takes a relatively detached view of what was by far his best-known book. Inspired in part by Fernand Braudel, whose sweeping study of the Mediterranean had come out in 1949, McNeill chose to make separate civilizations the “principle actors on the world historical scene,” although he could see in retrospect that his writing “retained more than a whiff of Eurocentrism.” In his own eyes, the accent on “interconnecting civilizations” was a repudiation of “ethnically based and biased historiography.” Nor was the book intended to place the crown of ultimate progress and leadership on the United States. To the contrary, “my Canadian past provoked me to resist conversion to belief in American uniqueness and superiority.” Asked to serve on the Christopher Columbus Quincentennary Jubilee Committee, which met from 1985 to 1992, McNeill was surprised by “the storm of criticism the quincentennary provoked,” the growth of conflict and contestation around themes and narratives that had been uncontroversial in the 1950s and early 1960s. McNeill did not join ranks with the critics of Christopher Columbus; but neither did he cling to his earlier work. “More and more,” he admitted, “*The Rise of the West* began to seem archaic and inadequately conceived.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The times had certainly changed since 1963. So too had the foundations of historical knowledge. In the twilight of his career, McNeill was glad to pass the torch to younger practitioners of world history, to Ernest Gellner, David Landes, Paul Kennedy and others.

In 1963, *The Rise of the West* offered its American readers an explanation of world history, of civilization, of civilizational variety, of Western civilization and of America’s place in these various grand narratives. *The Rise of the West* traces a heritage of political liberty from the Greeks to the present. It ends on a distinctively non-Spenglerian note, a note of jubilation, which echoes in the speech Kennedy gave to his West Berlin audience. It is clearly a document of the early Cold War, though the Soviet Union too is an offshoot of the West, in his view, and the democratic alternative to the Soviet Union, the American-led West of 1963, enjoys no historically-grounded promise of inevitable triumph, no Victorian dispensation for political cultures conceived in liberty. Whatever has been achieved in politics, he writes in his conclusion, will have to be consistently earned: the countless declines and falls of empires and of civilizations can only be a cautionary tale.

McNeill dedicated his book to the University of Chicago between the years of 1933 and 1963. It was the self-evident product of his studying and teaching there.

McNeill’s historical canvas could not have been bigger. It is divided into three sections: a phase of Middle Eastern dominance when civilization was born around the various great rivers of the Middle East, lasting until 500 BCE; a period of Eurasian balance, running from 500 BCE to 1500 CE, in which various civilizations co-existed across East and West; and a phase of Western dominance, starting in 1500 BCE, during which the West pulled ahead of “the rest.” Civilization has multiple meanings for McNeill. He pays great attention to agriculture and to the rise of cities and of governing bureaucracies that agricultural surplus enables; these conditions also enable the elaboration of religion and philosophy and high art, which, together with military competition, can stimulate technical development. Manipulation of the environment merged with the advance of military power, and the advance of military power allowed civilization to be projected where previously there had been only “barbarism” or “savagery” or, less pejoratively, the conditions of a hunter-gatherer economy and culture. For this reason, the spread of the civilization involves interaction – sometimes humane, sometimes violent, sometimes voluntary, sometimes coerced. “The history of civilization is a history of the expansion of particularly attractive cultural and social patterns through conversion of barbarians to modes of life they found superior to their own,” McNeill contends.[[6]](#footnote-6) By 500 BCE, for example, four major civilizations had crystallized in the Mediterranean basin, in the Middle East, in China and in India.

The Mediterranean basin would give rise to the Western civilization that came into its own after 1500 CE. The small size and notable affluence of the Greek polis fostered citizens who were “free as men can be from subjection to any alien will; yet this life was rigorously bound by law.” This would be one bequest to Greece’s civilizational children. The other bequest, very much in evidence at Robert Maynard Hutchins’s University of Chicago from 1933 to 1963, was Greek culture: “Greek thought, art, literature, and institutions have always remained a sort of norm for Western civilization,” as if to say that excellence in art follows from the individual freedoms enshrined in the polis. Greek influence expanded in all directions, but it was to the West and to the North that it would prove most lasting. The Romans lionized Greek culture, and with the Greek example in mind they dedicated themselves to “the concept of an objective law applicable to human affairs, yet operating in accord with Nature and Reason and apart both from divine revelation and from human whim and passion.” Reverence for this concept “was peculiar to Rome and societies descended from Rome.” In the fifth and sixth centuries CE, the Rhine river became “the axis of a German-Roman cultural amalgam from which Western civilization later developed.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

From 500 CE to 1500 CE, Chinese, Indian and Muslim civilizations were more robust than Western civilization or than the proto-Western civilization visible in the “German-Roman cultural amalgam” in Central Europe. Yet each of the three major non-Western civilizations ossified over time or fell victim to internal divisions and outside enemies. McNeill refers to “the languid and ultimately disastrous immobility that has characterized subsequent Islamic thought until almost our town” – subsequent to the medieval grandeur of Islamic civilization. McNeill does not employ the idea of Asiatic despotism, but he does seem to endorse a theory of early-modern Asiatic torpor. Meanwhile, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, overlapping revolutions created the West and created it in a spirit of world-changing ambition. Revolutions in science and technological capacity mirrored revolutions in thought and in economic exchange. There was no set pattern and only modest deference to the past. There was instead a mess of “Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian inheritance,” which unleashed the destabilizing energies of the Renaissance and the Reformation. For McNeill, self-transformation is the marker of the West, of “a society remarkably open to innovation… sure of itself, interested in the wonders of the civilized world, and eager to seize wealth, fame, and learning wherever they could be found.” If the West was bound to dominate, it was because “no other civilized society has ever approached such restless instability, nor exerted such drastic influence upon its fellows all over the world.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

A will to power, to knowledge, to technological innovation and to war would ultimately doom Western Europe. (McNeill had lived through World War II as a soldier after all.) The cataclysm of total war on European soil pushed forward two countries on the periphery of the traditional West, the United States and Soviet Russia. Both were heirs to the scientific and industrial revolutions; both were fruits from the Western tree; but of the two the United States was more indigenously Western. “Russians had first to cast off much of their peculiar heritage,” McNeill argued, “before they could embrace the West.” Their embrace carried with it a tinge of resentment and anger toward the West, which would be given voice in the many isolationist periods in Russian and Soviet history. By contrast, the New England and mid-Atlantic colonies of Great Britain expressed “the most thoroughgoing translation of European-type society to new ground to be found anywhere in the world.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Written by an American scholar, written primarily for an American audience, published by an American university press, *The Rise of the West* was a book that was minimally American-focused; the United States figures in it as a small actor on a massive stage; yet it is a book meant to help Americans understand who they are, why they are the way that they are, and why it is that they find themselves within the narrative of an ascendant West. The rise of the West is our story for McNeill. No doubt, for the American readers who made it into a best seller, the equivalence of the American and the Western narratives contributed to the feeling that McNeill’s *The Rise of the West* was required reading.

Readers who made it to the conclusion were left with validation and with trepidation. The trepidation may have stemmed from McNeill’s Canadian skepticism or from an intuition of disaster where other historians might have unthinkingly waved the flag. After a few paragraphs comparing the United States and the Soviet Union, McNeill arrives at a dilemma of democratic government which “arises from the fact that techniques for appealing to subrational and even to subconscious levels of human motivation are still in their infancy when applied to politics… The prospects of a royal road to power through clever and unscrupulous exploitation of the non-rational elements of human nature are far too bright to permit a facile optimism as to the future of democracy.” The American undoing, when it comes, will come from within; it will come in the name of democracy. Until that unhappy day, the rise of a culture insatiable in its hunger for knowledge and change should be appreciated for its achievements, for sponsoring “a golden age of unparalleled technical, institutional, and perhaps even of artistic creativity.” One senses, though, that the protagonist of McNeill’s giant book is less the West as such than the movement of civilization from peak to peak amid a rocky landscape. “Life in Demosthenes’ Athens, in Confucius’ China, and in Mohammed’s Arabia was violent, risky, and uncertain; hopes struggled with fears; greatness teetered on the brim of disaster,” McNeill continues. “We belong in this high company and should count ourselves fortunate to live in one of the great ages of the world.”[[10]](#footnote-10) These are the book’s final words. In one of the great ages of the world, Chicago – its university and its professors – were fortunate not to be at the periphery. They were at the center. If Hyde Park was not quite Athens, it was not far removed.

**2.**

Traveling through Germany in June 1963, John F. Kennedy also had Athens on his mind. His speech at the Schöneberg *Rathaus* in West Berlin echoed several core theses from McNeill’s *The Rise of the West*: that there was a seed of political liberty, planted in Greco-Roman antiquity, from which modern European and American politics had grown; that the West harbors not just certain political freedoms but a will to move forward, less a static tradition than a vital claim on the future; and that the United States has a natural home in the West, being an inheritor of its ideals and a party to the conflict of ideals known as the Cold War. Kennedy was also speaking in Germany where recent political history was a minefield of negative associations. An added advantage of a Western frame, for the speech in Berlin, was that it lifted U.S.-German relations up to the heady plane of abstraction, blissfully distant from the two world wars the United States and Germany had fought against one another. For the Warsaw Pact nations, the Soviet Union had the international language of revolution, the goal of communist fraternity in which all proletarians would eventually unite. To shore up the NATO alliance, the United States could not use the language of American nationhood: there is little that is rousing about mere hegemony. A more exalted language was necessary to communicate the value of NATO to Western Europeans, a bond that did not run through nation and a bond that had nothing to do with German nationalism, from which Europe was still reeling in 1963. A romantic image of the West solved this particular problem, and no American president deployed this image with such grace and economy of expression – or to such obvious rhetorical effect – as Kennedy did in Berlin.

Berlin had of course been the capital of the Third Reich. It had been extensively bombed by the British and the Americans. By the very end of the war, it was the city in which Hitler was entombed in his bunker, only eighteen years before Kennedy made his pilgrimage to West Berlin. In countless ways, Germany in general and Berlin in particular represented continuity with a terrible past. There was little open repentance for the Holocaust, and across the German government many who had once been Nazis had transformed themselves into loyal servants of the Federal Republic. German universities were full of previously Nazi professors. Many German companies that had proudly boosted the German war machine and availed themselves of slave labor were operating under the same name in the postwar economy. Indeed, many of these companies were booming in the postwar economy. German culture maintained many of the hierarchies, rigidities and attitudes that had been formed between 1933 and 1945, the habits against which a radical generation would rebel in 1968 and afterwards. The American occupation of Germany mapped perfectly onto the Cold War chessboard, but this was an ex post facto reality. The Allied occupation of Germany, including Berlin, had been set up to prevent the recrudescence of fascism, to inhibit the Germans from once again gathering into Europe’s military juggernaut and drawing the world into war. To Germans, this could easily be a humiliating fact of life. To Americans, it could easily be a regrettable one, a drain on resources that might have been better spent at home, a reminder of all the harm Germany had inflicted on American soldiers less than a generation ago.

Because of the Cold War, the American occupation was obligated to translate Berlin from a symbol of Nazism to a symbol of Western resolve. This project had been begun long before 1963. In 1948, the Free University of Berlin was founded with substantial American support, its name a repudiation of the corrupted Nazi universities and of the unfreedom imputed to East Berlin. A latter-day Athens had to have its academy. In 1950, the “Freedom Bell” was dedicated at the Schöneberg *Rathaus*, a replica of the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia and inscribed with the words of Abraham Lincoln. Herbert Hoover came to West Berlin in 1954, anticipating Kennedy’s speech in phrases that were less felicitously combined: “Thanks to the spirit and courage of men under the leadership of two great mayors, you can, like the men of ancient Athens, hold your heads high and say: ‘I am a Berliner.’” Robert Kennedy picked up on this motif in a speech he gave in West Berlin. “You are our brothers,” this Kennedy proclaimed in February 1962.[[11]](#footnote-11) Kennedy was not misreading his own population. According to a July 1961 Gallup poll, some 85% of Americans favored keeping American troops in Berlin, even at the risk of war.[[12]](#footnote-12) When the Berlin Wall was erected in August 1961, Berlin’s pre-existing status as a martyred city was confirmed. Nowhere was the East-West divide both as metaphysical and as tangible as it was in Berlin. In 1950, the diplomat and historian George Kennan had observed that the Soviets are “the greatest single enemy of Western civilization… since the Turks were at the walls of Vienna.”[[13]](#footnote-13) What the walls of Vienna represented was, after 1961, what the Berlin Wall represented. Americans may have had interests in Berlin, and they had something better than interests. They had a cause.

Prior to arriving in Berlin, President Kennedy had been rehearsing for the role of defender of the West. The role suited Kennedy well. He was a politician who liked to strike the high notes, to be a statesman rather than a technocrat, and to align the rough-and-tumble of everyday politics with the long arcs of culture and civilization. (This aspect of Kennedy’s political style would be commemorated in Washington, DC’s Kennedy Center.) Kennedy was fond of intellectuals and aspired to be a man of ideas. His education had consisted of European travel and European-oriented studies at Choate and Harvard – to the extent that he played the interventionist in World War II to his isolationist father. High-minded citations and references, an aura of educated civility, brought gravitas to the presidency, confirming a common Cold War mood. The competition for civilizational influence that was especially intense in the early years of the Cold War. At a speech in New Orleans, in May 1962, President Kennedy floated two striking phrases: *pax Americana*, the twentieth century’s version of the *pax romana*; and *civus romanus sum*.[[14]](#footnote-14) The latter phrase had been coined by Cicero, and it invoked the pride felt in belonging to the Roman body politic, in the rights such belonging conferred. Rome could promise rights, and it could promise protection or peace to those lucky enough to live within its sway. Kennedy had found an analogy to the present in Roman history. The analogy was not at its most acute in the state of Louisiana. There Kennedy was speaking to American citizens. The analogy was best applied overseas as a justification for an American military presence and an explanation of the high purpose to which the United States was committed, the provision of rights and of peace. The analogy was indeed perfect – at least rhetorically – for West Berlin.

In 1963, Kennedy was buoyed in Europe by three politicians. Konrad Adenauer was Germany’s Chancellor and Willie Brandt the mayor of West Berlin. Neither had ever been a Nazi. Adenauer had entered political exile during the Nazi period, while Brandt was literally in exile. Brandt occupied the Atlanticist wing of the Social Democratic Party, which facilitated ties between the anti-communist elements of the American labor movement (part of Kennedy’s constituency) and their opposite numbers in Germany. Like Kennedy, Brandt was young and charismatic: together they were a credible face for the European and the American future. Adenauer was elderly and a German traditionalist. He brought other qualities to the picture. Adenauer is supposed to have said that Asia begins on the East bank of the Rhine: he thrived on the iconography of Western civilization. Like Kennedy, he was a Catholic. The conservative Adenauer’s task was to bring Germany into the West after more than a decade of Nazi barbarism and in doing so to forge the rudiments of a new Europe. His partner in this was France’s President, Charles de Gaulle, yet another Catholic. In the friendship between Adenauer and de Gaulle the historian Andreas Daum sees two avatars of “a Christian occident.” De Gaulle was often an irritant to Kennedy, and with the Élysée Treaty of January 1963 de Gaulle may have been trying to pull West Germany away from the United States and toward France, to provide a Western European counterweight to the American-dominated NATO alliance. Nevertheless, de Gaulle and Adenauer were building an anti-Soviet European West that strengthened the Euro-Atlantic West of Kennedy’s imagination. De Gaulle had already visited West Berlin in September 1962. In President Kennedy’s 1963 trip to Berlin Adenauer and Brandt vied to be his hosts. They appeared everywhere with him.

In his speech, President Kennedy found the origins for a rising West in Rome. “Two thousand years ago,” he stated in a departure from the text his National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy had helped him to prepare, “the proudest boast was ‘civis Romanus sum.’ Today, in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is ‘Ich bin ein Berliner.’” President Kennedy could have spoken differently. He could have begun with the Freedom Bell above him at the Schöneberg *Rathaus* and started to wax lyrical about the spirit of Philadelphia, the shot heard round the world, the bravery and acumen of the Founding Fathers who had lodged liberty at the heart of modern history. He could have made the speech about transfer of liberty from the United States to postwar Germany. Not only would this have been tactless, a redirection of attention to Kennedy’s home country and away from Berlin, it would have deprived the speech he actually gave of its most powerful message. The free city of Berlin symbolized Germany’s heritage, its place within the West, so that the figurative meaning of *Ich bin ein Berliner* is the same as *civis romanus sum*; it was, as William McNeill might have put it, a German-Roman amalgam. History itself had decreed that Germany was a Western country: this was an elegantly polemical Cold War argument, to which American history would have been a distraction; and it was a subtly provocative claim for Kennedy’s Soviet audience to digest. The rise of the West theme also bypassed the whole Nazi horror, to which Kennedy made no allusion in his Berlin speech. Ancient history made the Germans indelibly liberty-loving. This was a debatable assumption in 1963, but it was an excellent way to convince a German audience of what Kennedy wanted them to believe. Their status as a civilized people was assured, and it was assured because an American president had said so, for it was Kennedy up there above the crowd forming these combinations of Latin and German words. It was he who was forging the narrative, and they were consenting to it.

Proportionally, Kennedy devoted more of his speech to the future than to the past. The West was the West because it was on the move. Had he served as a consultant, McNeill could have supplied Kennedy with this material. The octogenarian Chancellor Adenauer has “committed Germany to… progress.” This is political boilerplate, but it leads to more resonant sentences: “There are some who say that communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin.” At issue is less the failure of communism than the success of West Berlin. “I know of no town, no city, that has been besieged for 18 years that still lives with the vitality and the force, and the hope and the determination of the city of West Berlin.” Perhaps the wall had been built more to contain the vitality and force of West Berlin than to prevent East Berliners from leaving: if McNeill was right about the dynamism of the West, it would not prove easy to contain. The West was a relentless and world-historical modernizer. Kennedy did not mention Vietnam in Berlin. Nor did he delve into what he would have termed the Third World; but the modernizing thrust of his advisor W.W. Rostow’s thinking was audible in the Berlin speech; Rostow had published his non-communist manifesto, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, in 1960. Kennedy’s project was “the advance of freedom everywhere, beyond the wall to the day of peace with justice, beyond yourselves and ourselves to all mankind.” The goal was “this great Continent of Europe in a peaceful and hopeful globe.” Kennedy presented himself as a true believer in this utopian goal.

The final concordance between McNeill’s and Kennedy’s rise of the West was the proximity of Europe to the United States and of the United States to Europe. McNeill had been taught to think of the United States as an offshoot of European history. In *The Rise of the West*, he had characterized the British settlement of the Eastern seaboard as the clearest export of Western civilization from Europe to the outside world. The restless, unruly energy McNeill attributed to the West could as easily be deemed a stereotypical element of American culture. The cultural contradictions of the early-modern West and its relative impatience with past precedent – innovation as a synonym for the West – were projected onto American life, in McNeill’s view. One could also identify the United States as the disrupting dervish of modern history, and one that was busily engaged after World War II in the coco-colonization of Europe.[[15]](#footnote-15) President Kennedy was no less prone to making a collage of Euro-Atlantic history, to merging the German and the American storylines, skipping over the differences for the sake of uncovering the commonalities. Or the difference is invoked to reinforce the commonality. “I want to say, on behalf of my countrymen, who live many miles away on the other side of the Atlantic, who are far distant from you, that they take the greatest pride that they have been able to share with you, even from a distance, the story of the last 18 years.” They could share this story because they shared the story of the last two thousand years.

After Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* summed up these commonalities as a matter not of politics but of education. “While a student at Harvard,” it read, “he [John F. Kennedy] became a European.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

No German newspaper could have called Franklin Roosevelt or Harry Truman or Dwight Eisenhower a European. All three presidents had prosecuted the war against Germany. Nor were Roosevelt, Truman or Eisenhower prone to the lyrical appeals to the West that Kennedy wove into his Berlin speech. Lyndon Johnson could not have pulled off the Latin and the German phrases. His accent and dress made him an archetypal American, a Texan, a bit of a cowboy, a man who – as Johnson knew better than anyone – had never been a student at Harvard. However unique Kennedy’s status in Europe may have been, presidential trips to Berlin were legion after his death: Nixon in 1969, Carter in 1978, Reagan in 1982 and 1987, George Bush Sr. in 1989, Bill Clinton in 1998, George W. Bush in 2002, Barack Obama as candidate in 2008 and then many times as president. Yet, with the possible exception of candidate Obama’s visit, later presidential visits only highlighted the singularity of Kennedy’s speech, which was rapturously received by the German public. Reagan in 1987 needed “the largest police deployment in West Berlin since 1945,” Andreas Daum points out.[[17]](#footnote-17) George W. Bush visited Berlin before he began the Iraq War. Had he gone after 2003 his visit would have been overwhelmed by protestors. Reagan, who consistently used a vocabulary of Western liberty and whose foreign policy rested on a rise-of-the-West narrative, had no trouble finding an enthusiastic American audience; but outside of conservative circles in Britain he did not have a European following, and he had many European detractors. Either the West was becoming embarrassingly old-fashioned for younger Europeans in the 1980s or it was being detached from the United States. It was not Reagan in Berlin who outlined the rise of the West. It was the coalescing of the European Union in Brussels.

In a parallel development, American academia did not remain in thrall to McNeill’s book forever. Civilizational discourse fell from vogue, especially civilizational discourse that drew on military, diplomatic and political history. By the time Samuel Huntington published *The Clash of Civilizations* in 1997, he was self-consciously operating as renegade within academia, as an outlier reminding the historians and the political scientists of what they might prefer to forget – of civilization as an analytical category. More importantly, the West acquired many new definitions in the 1970s and beyond. McNeill had struggled to learn about non-Western civilizations; he was direct, if not fulsome in his descriptions of colonialism and imperialism, of slavery and racism, within Western culture; but he was still content to identify personally with the West, to find much that was good in it and to connect its rise with one of history’s golden ages, as he did in the final sentences of *The Rise of the West*. The challenge to his position was extraordinary in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Edward Said did not single-handedly remake the humanities when he published *Orientalism* in 1978, but it is a book with a before and after attached to it. *Orientalism* dovetailed with a post-Vietnam reckoning with American foreign policy, and it legitimated non-Western and at times anti-Western voices in American academia. “Pro-Western” voices did not entirely vanish. They tended, however, to cluster around conservative enclaves within American academia – several of them in Hyde Park – or to move outside the academy to the think tanks of Washington, DC and New York. There is no part of William McNeill’s *The Rise of the West* that would be out of place at a Council on Foreign Relations symposium in 2017. There are not many of its parts that would comfortably fit into a twenty-first-century American Historical Association panel or symposium.

**3.**

President Trump spoke in Warsaw on July 6, 2017. Much longer than Kennedy’s, his speech was a kind of homage. “We can have the largest economies and the most lethal weapons anywhere on Earth,” Trump contends, “but if we do not have strong families and strong values, then we will be weak and we will not survive.” This is the wind-up for a direct paraphrase of the Kennedy speech: “if anyone forgets the critical importance of these things, let them come to one country that never has. Let them come to Poland. And let them come here, to Warsaw… “ There are also a few lines on liberty and innovation that reprise the modernity both Kennedy and McNeill detected in the rise of the West: “Americans, Poles, and the nations of Europe value individual freedom and sovereignty… We write symphonies. We pursue innovation. We… always seek to explore and discover brand-new frontiers. We reward brilliance.” These are hardly memorable turns of phrase. The speech’s one memorable paragraph runs in another direction entirely. It points to encircling dangers and implies a crisis of will in the West, not the steps of ascent but a less than hypothetical road to descent. “The fundamental question of our time,” Trump says, “is whether the West has the will to survive. Do we have the confidence in our values to defend them at any cost? Do we have enough respect for our citizens to protect our borders? Do we have the courage to preserve our civilization in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it?” The answer could well be no.

Trump’s speech feints toward Russia as an enemy of Western civilization. The genuine enemy is, as the Trump administration would prefer to call it, radical Islamic terrorism. Mention of undefended borders evokes Trump’s most basic campaign promise, to build a wall between the United States and Mexico. In context, though, it refers to the walls Poland or Hungary or any other European nation might erect to keep out migrants and refugees from North African and the Middle East. The speech’s many references to religion elucidate Trump’s operative idea of the West: contiguous with the nation state, under threat from those seeking to subvert and destroy it, and preyed upon by a secular elite which is eating away at Western civilization from within. However Kennedy-esque the speech pretends to be, the only political hero whom Trump mentions is Ronald Reagan. By comparison, Kennedy’s West was optimistic and optimistic because it was on the rise. It was not the plaything of party politics, and it conveyed no tacit dismissal of Republicans. It could be cheered on, in 1963, by Brandt’s SPD or by Adenauer’s Christian Democrats. Trump’s speech could appeal only to portions of the GOP and to the populist Right in Europe, which happens to be in power in Poland. Elsewhere in Europe and on the political spectrum such attitudes toward the West would be mostly strange and unwelcome or strange and unwelcome because they are coming from an American President. Trump’s speech shadows no academic study the way Kennedy’s speech shadows McNeill’s book. Here for better or worse the parting of the ways is absolute. Broadly construed, American universities would come to regret their support for Kennedy and his war in Vietnam: they would not look back at 1963 as the centerpiece of a golden age. Broadly construed, American universities loathe Trump, and he loathes them. If the answer is no to Trump’s worried questions about the survival of the West, then academics will bear some of the blame – academics with their hatred of borders, their euphemisms about terrorism and their distance from God. Their affection for the writing of symphonies will not suffice.

Kennedy’s celebrated speech in Berlin synthesized a generation’s thinking on civilization, on the West and on the forces in international affairs that were ascendant and the forces that were unlikely to triumph. This political-academic synthesis was perishingly brief. Kennedy’s was a speech for a Cold War’s summer afternoon, and by autumn 1963 it was already an emblem of the past. Trump’s speech, fifty-four years later in the Warsaw summer, may be no more enduring than Kennedy’s, and it is hard evidence of how little of Kennedy’s speech has endured.

1. On John F. Kennedy and the “Atlantic community” see Adreas Daum, *Kennedy in Berlin*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. William McNeill, *The Pursuit of Truth*, 10. Allan Bloom recorded a somewhat similar conversation experience, undone on the University of Chicago campus, in *The Closing of the American Mind*. “When I was fifteen years old I saw the University of Chicago for the first time and somehow sensed that I had discovered my life. I had never before seen, or at least not noticed, buildings that were evidently devoted to a higher purpose, not to necessity or utility, not merely to shelter or manufacture or trade, but to something that might be an end in itself. The Middle West was not known for the splendor of its houses of worship or its monuments to political glory. There was little visible reminiscence of the spiritual heights with which to solicit the imagination or the admiration of young people. The longing for I knew not what suddenly found a response in the world outside.” Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Soul’s of Today’s Students*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Truth: A Historian’s Memoir* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 24, 24, 39. Interestingly, McNeill himself felt that the rising and falling of civilizations, as chronicled in *The Rise of the West*, served as “a secular substitute for a Christian worldview” – that is, the worldview he had abandoned in high school. *The Pursuit of Truth*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Pursuit of Truth*, 58-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *The Pursuit of Truth*, 68, 74, 93-96, 124, 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human* Community (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 391. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *The Rise of the West*, 215, 217, 355, 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *The Rise of the West*, 505, 539, 539. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *The Rise of the West*, 665, 668. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *The Rise of the West*, 801, 807. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Herbert Hoover quoted in *Kennedy in Berlin*, 49; Robert Kennedy quoted in *Kennedy in Berlin*, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This statistic is cited in *Kennedy in Berlin*, 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. George Kennan quoted in David Fogelsong, *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For a description of this speech see *Kennedy in Berlin*, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Reinhold Wagnleiter, *Coco- Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Quoted in *Kennedy in Berlin*, 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Kennedy in Berlin*, 209-210. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)