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Why are we ruled by barbarians?

BY NOAH SMITH • NOAHPINION • 18 OCTOBER 2026



Painting by Edouard Manet via Wikimedia Commons

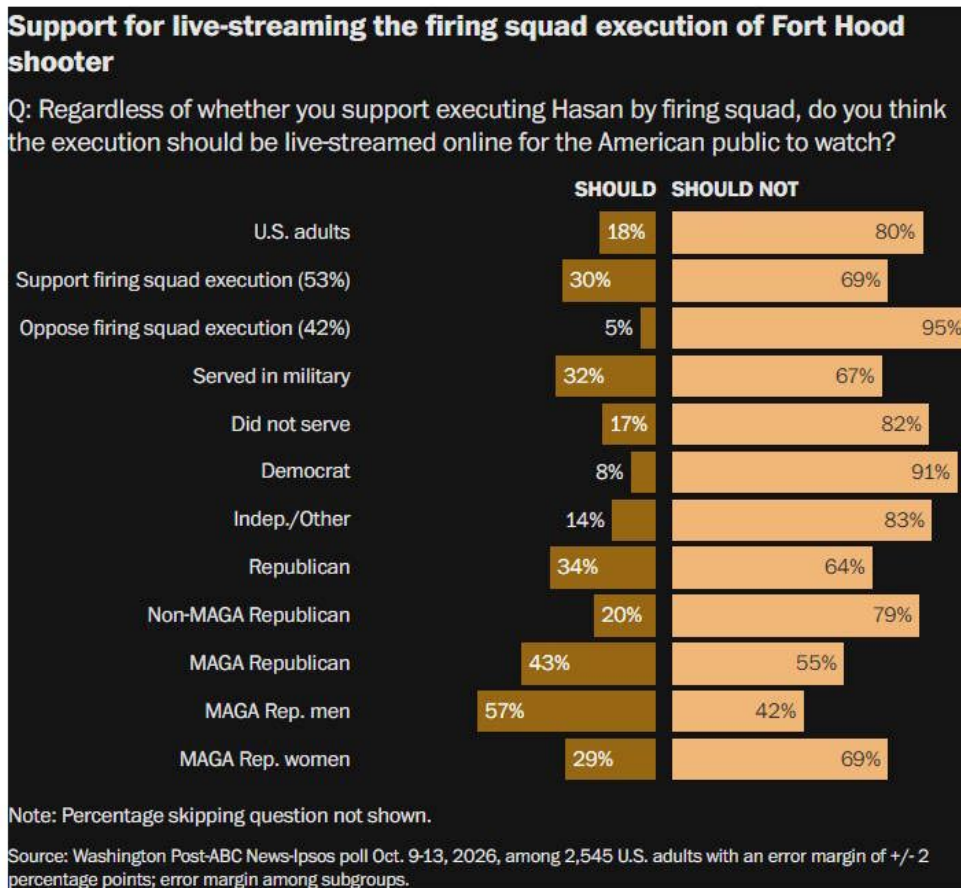
“Something old and wild and blind at war with man and the works of man” — Poul Anderson

Years ago, I thought it was valuable for me to understand the depth of the human capacity for atrocity, so I made myself look at photos and videos of some of the worst things people had done to each other. So in

2015, I made myself watch the full, unedited video of ISIS burning a man alive in a cage. However horrifying that sounds, it was worse. The man stood in the cage and hung his head while masked ISIS fighters all around him sang grim chants. No scripted scene in *Game of Thrones* could have approached the raw, atavistic horror of that real-life execution. It was like something out of the ancient world — a human sacrifice on the steps of a temple built to gods long forgotten.

I thought of that video when I heard about the Trump administration's plan to stage a public televised execution by firing squad. The condemned man, the 2009 Fort Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hasan, certainly deserves death, and a firing squad is a relatively humane way to kill a man. But to televise this event to the nation seemed like an act of barbarism — the kind of spectacle that was already a disgusting relic when Britain abolished it in 1868 (for the U.S., it took more than 60 more years).

I was not alone in this opinion. Except for MAGA Republican men — a slice of a slice of the right-wing base — every segment of American society deeply opposed the idea of shooting Hasan on live TV:



Source: Washington Post

Seemingly swayed by the bad polling, Trump cancelled the idea, declaring that the execution wouldn't be livestreamed. But the episode has revealed something important about the nature of the men who now rule America. Their values and their worldview are not the same as those of the average American. They are, in many ways, premodern and barbaric.

Public executions actually aren't a new idea on the right — Charlie Kirk was calling for them years ago. Now everyone knows that this wasn't just empty rhetoric.

It is very important that we understand the New Right. Donald Trump himself is currently in command of the New Right, but not for much longer — he is old, older than Biden was at the same point in his presidency, and already visibly declining. What's more, Trump is a singular figure — a charismatic but spectacularly corrupt mafia type with authoritarian tendencies and a worldview mashed together from early-1990s CNN and half-remembered stories of America's pre-WW2 glory days.

There are many reasons Trump is amenable to the New Right, and became their beloved leader and standard-bearer, but he is fundamentally not of them, and when he is gone, it is that ideology, rather than another charismatic figure, which will flow into the vacuum his exit creates. Like MAGA now, it will rule through factional politics — the strategy by which a small minority becomes the majority-of-a-majority-of-a-majority. The New Right will lack Trump's charisma, but it will also lack the baggage of his corruption and (possibly) the lingering stink of his policy blunders. So it is important that we understand this ideology — not simply because it rules us now, but because we may find a purer version of it ruling us sometime in the not-so-distant future.

The New Right, Western Civilization, and the Europe obsession

I already wrote a post about the New Right, in early 2025:

A slightly abridged version was later published in *The Free Press*.

In that post, I argued that the key to understanding the New Right was its conception of “Western Civilization” under siege:

To a large-ish number of Americans, [the New Right] told a coherent story about who they were, where they came from, and what commonalities tied them together. The story it told was about “Western civilization”.

When I say “Western civilization”, I don't mean it in the Cold War sense of “the free world”. It doesn't include Japan or Latin America, and it very much does include Russia. The Western Civilization that the New Right believes in is defined by three things: 1) European racial descent, 2) Christian heritage, and 3) veneration of the previous two things.

The third of these is absolutely the key. European descent and Christian heritage define “Western” for the New Right, but respect for those things defines “civilization”. If you created an all-white country, and it was full of blue-haired genderqueer atheist decolonial-leftist white people, that would be *anathema* to the New Right...Nor are the New Right typically pious or born-again Christians...[Christianity is] more of a source of shared heritage, and a boundary that demarcates historical Europe from the rest of the world. It's less about Christ than about *Christendom*.

This concept explains why the New Right cares so much about Europe. It's important to realize that this is *new*. The Old Old Right — the right wing of 1910 or 1935 — was explicitly isolationist toward Europe. Not only did they vigorously advocate against U.S. involvement in European wars, but they viewed the waves of South and East European immigration as fundamentally alien — a threat to the cultural and racial purity of America. Francis Walker called those immigrants “beaten men from beaten races”, and most of the restrictionism of the period — especially the famous immigration law of 1924 — was explicitly aimed at choking off the flow of people from places like Poland, Italy, and Greece.

You can see faint echoes of that old anti-European sentiment in Trump's desire to withdraw from NATO. But overall, the New Right cares much *more* about Europe than any incarnation of the Right in American history ever has before. They view America and Europe as fundamentally unified — belonging to a single civilization with a single common heritage, ethos, and culture. Here's Marco Rubio in February at the Munich Security Conference:

For the United States and Europe, we belong together. America was founded 250 years ago, but the roots began here on this continent long before. The man who settled and built the nation of my birth arrived on our shores carrying the memories and the traditions and the Christian faith of their ancestors as a sacred inheritance, an unbreakable link between the old world and the new...We are part of one civilization – Western civilization. We are bound to one another by the deepest bonds that nations could share, forged by centuries of shared history, Christian faith, culture, heritage, language, ancestry, and the sacrifices our forefathers made together for the common civilization to which we have fallen heir.

Rubio restated similar sentiments at a recent speech in Athens.

The Trump administration and the MAGA movement are obsessed with the idea that immigration — primarily from Muslim countries — is destroying the birthplace of Western Civilization, aided and abetted by leftist ideology among the European elite. This is from a Hegseth speech in June, commemorating the Normandy landings:

Sadly, today, different European beaches are stormed by different dangerous ideologies...Beaches in Spain, in Italy, in Greece, and Bulgaria. Boats and men arrive. When will European capitals do something about that invasion, or is it too late?

And this is from Rubio's February speech:

[I]n a pursuit of a world without borders, we opened our doors to an unprecedented wave of mass migration that threatens the cohesion of our societies, the continuity of our culture, and the future of our people. We made these mistakes together, and now, together, we owe it to our people to face those facts and to move forward, to rebuild...Mass migration...was and continues to be a crisis which is transforming and destabilizing societies all across the West.

And here's JD Vance back in 2025:

Of all the pressing challenges that the nations represented here face, I believe there is nothing more urgent than mass migration... How many times must we suffer these appalling setbacks before we change course and take our shared civilization in a new direction?... No voter on this continent went to the ballot box to open the floodgates to millions of unvetted immigrants.

The core belief of the New Right, in other words, is that Western Civilization is *being invaded by barbarians* — people from non-Western civilizations, who come to the West under the guise of immigration and then proceed to try to overthrow the West from within, with the aid of local leftists and progressive elites.

This worldview has been reinforced by a constant stream of news from Europe, which American rightists follow assiduously and comment on constantly. Islamist terror attacks in Europe are rarer than far-right extremist attacks, but cause far more deaths. Migrants from Muslim countries are responsible for a very disproportionate number of sexual assaults in countries like Sweden. And there are periodic riots in France, often initiated by students, leftists, and various unaffiliated angry folks, but disproportionately joined by poor people from immigrant backgrounds living in ghetto-like areas. The most recent round of such disturbances is currently gripping the nation and generating a bunch of apocalyptic videos:

Incidents like this have steadily increased support for the European right, which promises mass deportations and has explicitly positioned itself as the defender of Western civilization:

America's New Right views itself as closely allied with the European right — perhaps even one and the same. Elon Musk does everything he can to support Germany's AfD, and JD Vance has met with them. JD Vance campaigned (unsuccessfully) for Hungary's Viktor Orban. Trump has often voiced support for France's Le Pen, and so on. It's a regular Western Civilization Internationale.

The European right has been ambivalent about this support; Trump's extreme unpopularity in Europe means that his embrace is often detrimental to the European right's electoral prospects. Nor is there much evidence that Americans link Europe's immigration problems with the immigration issue in the United States — pro-immigrant attitudes have surged in America since Trump returned to power, and the President is underwater on the issue.

Regular Americans simply do not see Europe and America as a single, unified civilizational entity. They do not view riots on the streets of Paris as a dark portent of riots on the streets of Houston. They do not see their Guatemalan housecleaners as rapists or terrorists. They are not invested in the political fortunes of Alternative für Deutschland or Marine Le Pen or Restore Britain. These are fringe beliefs, core to the worldview of the New Right but utterly peripheral and irrelevant to the typical resident of Michigan or North Carolina.

And these fringe beliefs help explain why the New Right has embraced a savage, atavistic morality that's deeply at odds with the decency of regular Americans.

Why the New Right embraces savagery

The New Right's embrace of savagery did not begin with the proposed livestreaming of Nidal Malik Hasan's execution. For many years, I have been watching commentators in this movement claim that the American right needs to become tougher, more vicious, and more brutal — and that conservatism has been hamstrung by excessive niceness and tolerance in the past. For example, here was Jesse Kelly in 2022:

You communists simply got way too comfortable with the 'live and let live' Right. You're gonna have a tough time adjusting to The New Right. Your names and accusations mean nothing to us. You can't use our values against us. We're enemies. Game on," posted Kelly on social media...I'm not a Republican. I'm not 'better than that'. I'm a monster. I believe in hitting people who hit me.

In 2021, Donald Trump Jr. told a gathering of evangelical Christians:

We've turned the other cheek, and I understand, sort of, the biblical reference — I understand the mentality — but it's gotten us nothing. OK? It's gotten us nothing while we've ceded ground in every major institution in our country.

In his famous essay "The Flight 93 Election", widely viewed as a founding manifesto of the New Right, Michael Anton says conservatives have been meeker than "fearful, beaten dogs", and declares that they "bend over backward to play by the self-sabotaging rules the Left sets for them". Less elegantly written screeds by Kurt Schlichter, Glenn Ellmers, and others all make the same argument.

American rightists have also begun to heap praise on historical rightist leaders whom they view as having achieved effectiveness through savagery. The two they typically cite are Spain's Francisco Franco and Chile's Augusto Pinochet. Recently, though, we've started to see another name creep back into rightist discourse:



One would think that the disastrous results Adolf Hitler produced for Germany, Western Civilization, and the European Right would make American rightists wary of carrying out apologetics on his behalf. But no:

Whether American rightists believe in Hitler's ideology or want to emulate his policies is beside the point here. The real lesson is that by invoking Hitler, rightists can paint themselves as tough, savage, and ruthless.

A pattern should begin to emerge here. Leftists are famously obsessed with ideological purity; when Democrats lose, leftists always claim that it was because they were too moderate, or compromised their principles, or failed to energize the working class by promising real change, etc. Rightists, on the other hand, are obsessed with toughness. If Republicans lose, it was because they were too meek, too bound by liberal norms. Repeated failures, to rightists, are nothing but an infinite regress of boxing gloves that they were too afraid to take off.

This explains the proposed televised execution of Nidal Malik Hasan. Rightists view Hasan — a Palestinian American who served in the U.S. military but murdered his fellow servicemembers because he was angry about America killing Muslims in Afghanistan — as typical of the invading anti-Western barbarian horde. By executing him on live TV, they probably thought they could demonstrate that the West can be equally savage in its own defense.

It also explains Pete Hegseth's constant performative toughness:

Physical toughness and traditional masculinity are not the same thing as brutality, obviously, but these antics demonstrate the same general obsession with showing that the Men of the West are no weaklings.

And of course, the rightist obsession with toughness explains part of the romance between Trump and Russia.

There are many reasons that Trump has chosen to shift America's allegiance from Europe to Russia, of course. Given the President's stupendous, unprecedented corruption, I would be very surprised if there were not some financial ties involved. But rightists also tend to see Putin's

Russia as the living instantiation of Western toughness — savage, untrained, unconcerned with humanitarian softness or the rules of war.

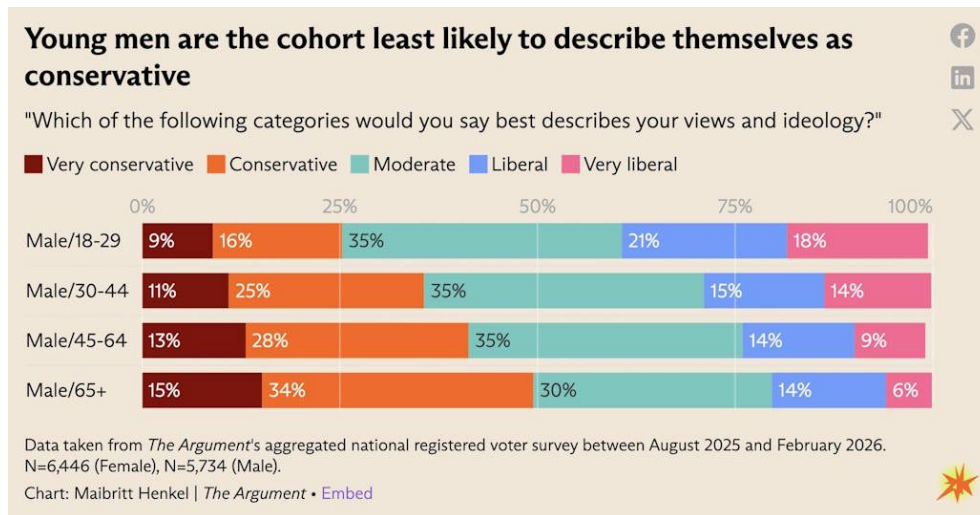
Republicans have been oohing and ahing over Russia's hypermasculine military recruitment ads for years, despite the fact that the Ukrainians inflict many more casualties on the Russians than vice versa. Push-ups and big biceps don't win wars — nor do massacres and war crimes — but they comfort American rightists with the knowledge that somewhere out there are White, culturally Christian men who can match the hordes of the Middle East in savagery.

If you wonder why Trump is canceling Congressionally mandated sanctions on Russia, urging Europe to buy more Russian gas, ordering the military to cut off Starshield satellite communications for the Ukrainians defending their homes from Russian drones, and discussing various joint economic projects with Russia...well, this is the reason.

It's probably not the only reason. But if it were purely a matter of Trump's personal corruption, his team would not be so eager to go along with all this pro-Russia stuff, especially given how unpopular it is with the American people. The MAGA ideology views Russia as a civilizational ally against the true enemy — an EU they believe to be captured by leftists and bent on destroying Western Civilization through mass importation of anti-Western immigrants. And Russia's savagery and attitude of toughness both on and off the battlefield provide America's rightists with an ideal to aspire to.

This Russian propagandist basically summed up how the rightists see the world right now:

The rightists' embrace of savagery, of course, is not just about aesthetics, or about psyching themselves up to do the horrible things that deep down they suspect must be done. It's also a way to give them confidence in the face of their own unpopularity. Rightist figures are deeply unpopular in America. Their main policy idea — remaking American policy to ethnically reengineer the American populace — has very little purchase. Everyone in America still thinks Hitler was the worst. The obsession with Europe, and with their idea of Western Civilization, is a niche, alien thing. And they're losing the young generation of men:



Source: Maibritt Henkel

The only way for rightists to sustain the illusion that they would have the upper hand in a post-democratic America — that they would triumph in the climactic civil war that suffuses their perfervid daydreams — is to imagine themselves as a diamond-hard vanguard, a small fist of ruthless men who can defeat any number of effeminate, emasculated enemies, the “three percent” who are willing to pick up a gun and kill.

That fantasy is a dangerous one. You can end up doing some very stupid things if you think you’re the only wolf in a world full of sheep. A successful movement needs broad popular appeal, not just the willingness to out-barbarize the enemy. But the New Right appears set on pursuing the strategy it has laid out for itself, and all we the rest of us can do is to understand how they think, and prepare for their next mistake.

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It’s interesting that Hegseth says that “today...European beaches are stormed by different dangerous ideologies”. What dangerous ideologies did he think were storming the beaches of Normandy in 1944?