For some time, Western elites have advanced the idea that there are global norms to which all human actors ascribe. They contend that global governance is a realistic goal because the international community is the most legitimate authority in human affairs. For some, the enlargement of the international community is taken as a given, simply awaiting the assimilation of those who have yet to consider the benefits of membership. Eventual and thereafter perpetual peace through political unification will arrive when all recognize that it is in their interest to share the same view of the good. Proponents of this worldview participate in international affairs presupposing that political engagement moving forward will require little if any thoughtful regard for how particular states and citizens conduct themselves within the City of Man—and even less acknowledgement that their advance amounts to a form of cultural conquest. Thus, unaware contemporary Western crusaders play the role of both conqueror and captive as they engage in their political project.

Yet forming a universally homogeneous Western liberal political entity has not been straightforward. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the successful use of multilateral force by Western nations and their patrons in the first Persian Gulf and Balkan wars, the establishment of a new world order appeared to be within reach. But its realization was more doubtful just a decade later, as Western leaders disagreed on how to respond to the challenge of radical Islam.

Perhaps no contemporary thinker has done more to examine the establishment of a Western liberal consensus over the last twenty-five years than French political philosopher Pierre Manent. In *Democracy without Nations: The Fate of Self-Government in Europe*, Manent suggested that Tocqueville’s notion of a “sentiment of resemblance” had become two centuries later “a passion for resemblance” among Western democratic peoples and regimes. While Western democratic partisans agreed upon the need to establish a universal polity of resemblance, two models of democratic enlargement vied
with one another to determine the political complexion of Western expansion.

Cold War American interventionists sought forcefully—and, when necessary, unilaterally—to spread democracy through nation building abroad, whereas European multilateralists (following the model of the establishment and maintenance of rule prescribed in the European Union) assumed that the best means to make the world democratic was to increase bureaucratic superintendence through its members’ mutually acquiescing to its further political expansion and unification. For Manent, a consolidation of the two democratic models was as initially improbable as the prospect of either overcoming human differentiation:

Europeans and Americans are therefore separated despite sharing the same idea of the world—albeit of a different color—in important respects. The explosion of human unity makes both groups less capable of actually seeing the present state of the world. Occupied with building our twin towers of Babel, we no longer appreciate the fact that separations between and among human groups cannot be entirely overcome. Nor do we see that this fortunate impotence is the condition of human liberty and diversity.

Moreover for Manent, the events of September 11, 2001, amounted to “a catastrophe inaugurating a new epoch” by serving as a stark reminder to Westerners of the incompatibility of human interests in world affairs.

In my view, the most deeply troubling information conveyed by the event was not its climactic revelation of terrorism as a major phenomenon. Rather, it was this: present-day humanity is marked by much more profound, much more intrac-
table separations than we had thought. At a single stroke, everything we thought we knew about the dominant tendencies and the very vocation of contemporary humanity was overturned. These long term tendencies, we thought, led or even carried us irresistibly toward the unification of mankind. The fall of the Berlin Wall seemingly had placed this unification beyond doubt and even had brought it within reach. But the events of September 11, 2001, revealed the existence of another wall: the mutual impenetrability of human communities, despite the prodigious and ever-growing ease of communication.¹

As much as the event revealed the “mutual impenetrability of human communities” between the West and the Islamic world, perhaps more alarming for Western elites was that it threatened to produce a wall between Western partisans of political resemblance, bringing into question what was required to produce global unification. Americans had always been readier to go at democratic expansion alone, and Europeans had always been sensitive to those nations who choose to engage in endeavors alone. But American leaders and Americans (at least initially) viewed the attack on the United States as a personal, particular declaration of war on the American regime by one set of political actors. Americans would respond vigilantly—and alone, if necessary—all the while viewing their actions as defending a new world order. Meanwhile, Europeans who a decade earlier were willing to work multilaterally for the establishment of a new world order exhibited their disapproval of what they considered America’s strident exercise of political will, once it became politically acceptable to do so.

By 2008, the prospect for a Western end-
of-history civilizational consensus seemed bleak. Yet once again, the forces of Western consolidation would make their presence felt. Progressive American intellectual elites, who from the Cold War onward had been largely uncomfortable with the American employment of force, echoed European complaints against the American response to 9/11 and openly criticized the Bush administration for what they considered an overly zealous and moralistic invasion, occupation, and rebuilding of Iraq and Afghanistan. At the core of their rejection of American interventionism under the Bush administration was the multiculturalist rejection of unilateral political activity and the multiculturalist demand of moral equivalence among political actors.

The European Union did not suffer a similar internal dissension that threatened to reverse its course toward political homogeneity. An occasional challenge by renegade nationalists, cautious assimilators, or local groups protesting transnational demands did not threaten to change the landscape of European politics, and no prominent European national leaders dared challenge the European political model.

If a Western multicultural and multilateral political consensus in favor of transatlantic political homogeneity were to be formed, it would have to emerge from strains within American political thought challenging the American brand of liberalism that impeded the ideational consolidation of the United States and Europe. European critics of American republicanism had always possessed an ideological ally in American progressivism. They hardly could have expected that American progressives would be able to catapult a little-known progressive state senator from Illinois, Barack Obama, into the global spotlight.

Then U.S. senator and Democratic presidential candidate Obama traveled to Berlin during the general election campaign in the summer of 2008 and delivered a speech titled “A World That Stands as One” that energized the transatlantic multicultural movement. Addressing his German audience “not as a candidate for President, but as a citizen—a proud citizen of the United States, and a fellow citizen of the world,” Obama praised the partnership between the United States and Germany that helped prevent the Soviet Union from conquering Western Europe. From the Berlin Airlift to the Marshall Plan and the creation of NATO, Obama emphasized the cooperative spirit that allowed both countries to work against the material threats of starvation, poverty, and political annihilation. As Berliners had done their duty, so must peoples of the world do their duty in working together to move forward. In one fell swoop, Obama defined those forces that menace the peoples of the world:

The terrorists of September 11th plotted in Hamburg, and trained in Kandahar and Karachi, before killing thousands from all over the globe on American soil. Cars in Boston and factories in Beijing are melting the ice caps in the Arctic, shrinking coastlines in the Atlantic, and bringing drought to farms from Kansas to Kenya. And poorly secured nuclear material in the former Soviet Union, or secrets from a scientist in Pakistan could help build a bomb that detonates in Paris. The poppies in Afghanistan become the heroin in Berlin. The poverty and violence in Somalia breeds [sic] the terror of tomorrow. The genocide in Darfur shames the conscience of us all.2

Obama set global instability—caused by moral agents whose intolerance compelled them to plot, train, kill, and commit
genocide—alongside material developments that menaced the physical well-being of the planet. While not identical in nature, ideational and material threats posed an equivalent danger. Only by reorienting ourselves ideationally and materially would we be able to respond properly to global challenges. Ideationally we must tear down the walls that divide political communities, and materially we must work with one another to overcome those things that undermine our common physical well-being. To the delight of partisans of universal political homogeneity, Obama argued that human beings had no other choice but to participate together in this two-pronged plan of attack:

Partnership and cooperation among nations is not a choice; it is the one way, the only way, to protect our common security and advance our common humanity. That is why the greatest danger of all is to allow new walls to divide us from one another. The walls between old allies on either side of the Atlantic cannot stand. The walls between the countries with the most and those with the least cannot stand. The walls between races and tribes; natives and immigrants; Christian and Muslim and Jew cannot stand. These now are the walls we must tear down.3

Pragmatic progressives had for over a century argued that the “walls” of moral and philosophic certitude that produced violence were of our own political and cultural making. But in Obama, proponents of this philosophy had a candidate not simply angling to become president of the United States or leader of the free world but also bent on reshaping the American regime and American people on multicultural premises. Moreover, Obama claimed that the shift to a more materialist orientation in world affairs, by placing material and ideational threats side-by-side, would reinforce the idea of a shared human political destiny. As the walls between countries, races, tribes, and religions on one hand and the environmental degradation on the other hand were merely political artifices, they could likewise be remedied by a world that stood as one. Thus, a speech that began with an American presidential candidate announcing that he was a citizen of the world ended with his announcing to the people of Berlin that they had no choice but to become a people of the world.

In a repeat performance five years later at Germany’s Brandenburg Gate, President Obama addressed Germans as nationals at the beginning of his speech, only to address them thereafter as global citizens. Noting the gate that has “stood tall as the world around it convulsed—through the rise and fall of empires; through revolutions and republics; art and music and science that reflected the height of human endeavor, but also war and carnage that exposed the depths of man’s cruelty to man,” Obama promised a better future to the peoples of the world as long as all “cared more about things than just our own self-comfort, about our own city, about our own country.” In other words, only when men become dual citizens of their native country and the global city of man can they pursue “peace with justice.”

And what, according to President Obama, were the demands the global city made of its citizens in exchange for allowing them to share in a common destiny? Merely that they practice tolerance on all matters of moral indeterminacy (faith, human sexuality, and cultural preferences), “extend a hand” in granting others the same moral fate (in promoting self-determination), and work immediately to address all matters of material determinacy (stopping climate change,
reducing economic inequality, engaging in nuclear disarmament, developing renewable energy, promoting economic growth, fighting disease, and ending poverty). Obama artfully encouraged a greater “passion for resemblance” among the peoples of the world by suggesting that since all face the same ideational and material threats, all must work as one to secure a common peaceful future.

Perhaps no progressive leader in world history had drawn a more complete progressive picture of the world. President Obama was the one that the American and European cultural elites had been waiting for. He was the one who assumed that the world could work as they thought it should work—never mind the very real political differences that separated men, or the material conditions that helped produce human suffering, or the metaphysical considerations that more fully complicated human existence. Progressives had come upon a charismatic leader who promised, with the wind of elite American opinion at his back, to captivate his fellow citizens into believing that human advancement required mastering the beliefs, language, and manners of global citizenship.

But if the idea of a universal politically homogeneous state does not correspond to the nature of international politics, why not simply ignore such global stargazing? If the expectations of would-be citizens of the world were to be crushed by the weight of how the world works, what would it matter if Western elites traded in their stylish cosmopolitanism for global citizenship?

Beyond the moral and ideational dangers that come from the displacement of political norms, the globalist also poses a material danger to his political community, in that his dogmatic notions about human nature suggest a state of human affairs that does not correspond to political reality. A more philosophic accounting of human norms that might encourage particular improvement—one that includes an acknowledgement of the human condition on one hand, and the influences of civilization, culture, and regimes that differentiate mankind on the other—is ignored. A city held captive by globalism thus experiences all the dangers of cosmopolitanism without benefitting from the political prudence that might result from its exercise. As much as cities would do well to understand themselves and others in a manner that a philosophic accounting of international affairs sometimes produces, the global partisan endangers the livelihood of particular caves in his blind attempt to create a universal cave.
What of the possible retort that the quest for global citizenship amounts to a proper human desire to bring into alignment the City of Man and the City of God, as inspired by some influences within Western philosophy and Christian theology? Would the movement toward an earthly universal city amount to a healthy, providential departure from tribalism, barbarism, and ignorance? In other words, would we do well to celebrate the human yearning for universal political homogeneity? Tocqueville exhibited a similar generosity in welcoming the advance of the equality of conditions in his Democracy in America two centuries ago:

If long observation and sincere meditation led men in our day to recognize that the gradual and progressive development of equality is at the same time the past and the future of their history, this discovery alone would give that development the sacred character of the sovereign master’s will. To wish to stop democracy would then appear to be to struggle against God himself, and it would only remain for nations to accommodate themselves to the social state that Providence imposes on them.5

Tocqueville, in part, welcomes the “progressive development of equality”—to the degree that it promises to give more men the opportunity to exercise their intellectual and moral faculties in a democratic age than in an aristocratic age. While there were no guarantees that those liberated would employ their faculties in the energetic pursuit of philosophic truth and moral righteousness, the example of the early Americans offered hope:

Before them fall the barriers that imprisoned the society in whose bosom they were born; old opinions that have been directing the world for centuries vanish; an almost boundless course, a field without horizon, are discovered: the human mind rushes toward them; it traverses them in all directions; but, when it arrives at the limits of the political world, it halts; trembling, it leaves off the use of its most formidable faculties; it abjures doubt; it renounces the need to innovate; it even abstains from sweeping away the veil of the sanctuary; it bows with respect before truths that it accepts without discussion.6

In his portrait of early Americans, Tocqueville displays a cautious optimism that democratic peoples could actively participate in political affairs while at the same time retaining their moral and religious obligations. The coming political equality derivative of the biblical principle that men are all made in God’s image needn’t be corrupted by the belief that we believe we are His equals. Independence within the political sphere could coincide with continued adherence to God within the moral sphere.

When we apply these parameters to the idea of global citizenship, though, it is much more difficult to consider this political development as a working out of God’s providence. It is possible that a human being simultaneously could commit to the idea of participating in a global community of believers in this changing world and look forward to worshiping God as a citizen in the unchanging world of the eternal City of God. But one just as easily could misconstrue one’s adherence to political universalism (global citizenship) in a changing world as identical to an adherence to heavenly universals in an unchanging world. There is nothing in thinking of oneself as a global citizen that necessarily tempts one to “struggle against God,” but it would be tempting
to mistake temporal universals for heavenly universals.

Global citizens might also understand their political commitments in this world as a plausible moral substitute for religious commitments in the next world. Thus it is more probable that individuals who “bow with respect before the truth [of global citizenship] that [they] accept without discussion” bow before truths they understand as morally correct as drawn from their worldly nature, rather than their heavenly one. Such engagement in the global City of Man—like all earthly political projects—draws one’s attention away from citizenship in the City of God. And the purely materialist global citizen might see no need to participate in a City of God if they considered it a morally indeterminate quest about nonmaterial matters. Why trouble oneself with such things if the activity threatened to draw one toward a disheartening abyss?

Here Augustine theorizes that political diversity acts as less of a hindrance to the City of God, given that this earthly state of affairs procures a greater acknowledgement of the primacy of the “peace of heaven”:

This heavenly city, then, while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens out of all nations, and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages, not scrupling about diversities in the manners, laws, and institutions whereby earthly peace is secured and maintained, but recognizing that, however various these are, they all tend to one and the same end of earthly peace. It therefore is so far from rescinding and abolishing these diversities, that it even preserves and adopts them, so long only as no hindrance to the worship of the one supreme and true God is thus introduced. Even the heavenly city, therefore, while in its state of pilgrimage, avails itself of the peace of earth, and, so far as it can without injuring faith and godliness, desires and maintains a common agreement among men regarding the acquisition of the necessaries of life, and makes this earthly peace bear upon the peace of heaven; for this alone can be truly called and esteemed the peace of the reasonable creatures, consisting as it does in the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God and of one another in God.7

For Augustine, the City of God “preserves and adopts” the political diversity of many nations because such diversity reinforces the idea of the importance of the peace within particular political communities. Men who are in political communion with one another as fellow citizens in particular cities of men, much like other communion-producing modes of human association, have a taste as to what the perfect communion of heavenly citizenship entails.

In his introduction to Democracy in America, Tocqueville writes that he was “under the pressure of a sort of religious terror...produced by the sight of this irresistible revolution that for so many centuries has marched over all obstacles, and that one sees still advancing today amid the ruins it has made.”8 Tocqueville was fascinated by the establishment and development of the United States, an interesting outlier in a world that he thought was being overrun by democratic revolution. If, as I have suggested in this essay, Pierre Manent is correct in identifying the final stage of the democratic revolution in terms of the growing yearning within the West for universal political homogeneity, then the American citizen might be more concerned with what the establishment of a global city amounts to in
political terms, rather than in philosophical or spiritual ones. In other words, what, if anything, is gained or lost in associating in a “more perfect” global political union?

After declaring their independence from Great Britain, Americans were faced with a similar choice: what degree of political unity would best secure the way of life they preferred? The more loosely defined confederacy of states gave way to the establishment of a federal republic. Proponents of the Federal Constitution argued convincingly that the American Revolution would be short-lived if a greater degree of political unity was not established as prescribed by the Federal Constitution.

While some, like John Jay in Federalist No. 2, argued that American geographic, cultural, and political homogeneity would make the establishment of a more perfect union possible, much more of the Federalist case for unity amounted to a discourse on the ever-present dangers within popular government that derive from human differentiation and political heterogeneity, and the political necessity of accounting for self-interest—even rightly understood—within the political affairs of mankind. Whereas they might have attempted to remedy the problem of faction (in Madison’s words) by “destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence” or “in giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests,” they sought rather to establish a republic of republics that required constant tending by the American people.

Of course, they did not think there were any guarantees that the political model they constructed would work perfectly. Moreover, the anti-Federalist “Brutus” feared that compelled political consolidation would be necessary to unite a diverse American people. They had read enough of the rise and decline of regimes to know that the more perfect union they had attempted to establish might in turn become, in Lincoln’s words some sixty years later, “a house divided against itself” if it lost its republican character.

As Americans watch a venomous political debate play out in our day in the American public square, they may be enticed by the siren call of human unity to exchange our older political architecture for a modern replacement. But what would American political life look like if we decided to join formally a political association that promises global peace? The idea of globalism would crowd out cosmopolitan philosophic activity or redirect our attention away from all but the material nature of our existence—and political engagement in the global city would suffer a similar purposelessness. For ideational and moral difference disregarded would amount to waxing political in an indeterminate public square, in which a citizen was merely a citizen in name only; the questions of who rules, and to what end, would have already been predetermined for us.

The greatest danger, however, is that rulers of the global city would suggest to Americans that moral, intellectual, and political engagement that highlighted human differentiation was politically intolerable in the name of political tolerance. Here an advanced democratic American society might follow the example of a supposedly enlightened Athenian regime that found Socrates guilty of crimes against the city, or a supposedly cosmopolitan Roman regime that found Christian worship worthy of the death penalty. Americans ought not to assume that those cities that hold political universalism in high regard are willing to accept particular intellectual, moral, and political allegiances that threaten its supposedly universalist global premises. And how could we expect Americans not to desire to engage on those matters that Lincoln
reminded his audiences in his debates with Stephen Douglas naturally concern all men as men.

The American city, for all its imperfections, remains a city in which ideas are exchanged, earthly and heavenly citizenship sometimes coincide, and political choices matter. We may very well choose a regime that crowds out these human activities, given our “passion for resemblance.” But those who inherited the current American regime will have been fortunate enough to have been given a choice in the matter, which will not be said for our descendants if they are compelled to live under a globalist regime of a much different political persuasion.  

3 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 43.
7 Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 6.
8 Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 6.