



## Fukuyama 25 years after 'The End of History'—what is this 'History'?

By David Sterman

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The question of "what is History?" loomed over the Cato Institute's June 6 retrospective on Francis Fukuyama's famous essay "The End of History," an event featuring Fukuyama himself and a group of other panelists.

As Adam Garfinkle, the founding editor of the *American Interest*, noted, Fukuyama's essay is perhaps "the most vulgarized" essay ever written, with many of its critics simply failing to understand the meaning of the Hegelian capital "H" history to which Fukuyama refers. Indeed, Fukuyama noted, citing an official Cuban meeting on his essay, that the most perceptive critics of his essay when it originally came out were Marxists, who had long drawn from the Hegelian dialectic and its definition of History as something grander and distinct from the progression of day-to-day events. Fukuyama even stated his agreement with Walter Russell Mead's thesis about "The "Return of Geopolitics."

Yet for some of Fukuyama's interlocutors on the two panels, the Hegelian view of "History" with its particular European lineage constituted too limited a view of the existing ideological challenges to liberal democracy. Garfinkle noted that the Hegelian definition, being formed out of European debates on modernization, may miss the ideological challenge from non-western societies and others who seek to avoid modernization. Paul Pillar, a senior fellow at Brookings and former deputy chief of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center, prefaced his remarks by saying that while many misunderstand the "History" Fukuyama refers to, not being students of Hegelian philosophy, they could be forgiven for insisting that day-to-day events and competition still matters. Pillar also argued that while it is not often phrased as such, political polarization within Western society over the role of government and the willingness to hold the government's functioning hostage in debt ceiling negotiations is a crisis rooted in ideology. As he put it, something does not need to begin with a capital letter and end with an -ism to be a competing ideology of historical import, and there is some capital H history going on in the United States.

Fukuyama for his part argued the suggested threats to liberal democratic order are exaggerated. Though he did nod to the dangers of a failure of governance in established liberal

democracies saying that his future work will focus on that issue, he warned that a foreign policy community rewarded for pessimistic analyses and criticized for optimistic ones influences the perception of threats as Historical when they may not be.