



"Two Great Peoples—the People of Poland and Hungary"

The Joint Presence of Hungary and Poland in American Political Thought, 1776–1989

Introduction

In 2026, the United States celebrates the 250th anniversary of its founding. The occasion offers the Hungarian-Polish Freedom Institute a good opportunity to examine the American connections of the Hungarian and Polish traditions of liberty.

"We are nearing the end of a year that future generations will remember as a watershed, a year when the human spirit was lifted and spurred on by the bold and courageous actions of two great peoples—the people of Poland and Hungary." With these words, President George H. W. Bush signed the Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act into law on November 28, 1989.¹ The act was intended to support Hungary's and Poland's political and economic transitions to democracy, and it consistently named the two countries together.

The SEED Act clearly illustrates that the Hungarian-Polish bond exists not only in the historical memory of the two nations. It is also a recurring feature of American political thought, which has repeatedly interpreted the Hungarian and Polish causes as manifestations of the same aspiration to liberty and self-determination on which the United States' own political order was founded.

Although the SEED Act's final title referred generally to democratic transformation in Eastern Europe, the bill had initially focused explicitly on the two countries: its original title was the "Polish and Hungarian Democracy Initiative of 1989." This Hungarian and Polish focus also remained in the final act.² Congress did more than identify two states in need of support: it created a common legal framework for two countries whose transformation it regarded as significant for the region as a whole.

The immediate political antecedent of the SEED Act was Bush's July 1989 visit to Warsaw and Budapest. From there, the president traveled to the G7 economic summit in Paris, where, among other things, he proposed coordinated Western support for reform in the two countries. The itinerary itself made clear that Washington regarded the Hungarian and Polish transitions as processes of shared regional significance.

The Hungarian and Polish struggles for liberty and self-determination did not first appear together in American political thought in 1989. At decisive historical moments, the

¹ George H. W. Bush, "Statement on Signing the Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act of 1989," November 28, 1989, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed July 11, 2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-signing-the-support-for-east-european-democracy-seed-act-1989>.

² U.S. Congress, *Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act of 1989*, Pub. L. No. 101-179, 103 Stat. 1298 (November 28, 1989), accessed July 11, 2026, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-13908/pdf/COMPS-13908.pdf>. The act's full title stated that its purpose was "to promote political democracy and economic pluralism in Poland and Hungary."



causes of the two nations repeatedly stood side by side at the center of American attention. In 1956, Dwight D. Eisenhower discussed the Polish October and the Hungarian Revolution together, identifying their common essence as national independence and the right to choose one's own government. In the nineteenth century, the Polish Uprising of 1830–1831 and the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–1849 elicited comparable American sympathy.

One historical source of that sympathy was the participation of Polish and Hungarian officers—men who would later become famous—in the struggle for American independence. More important, however, was the young American republic's particular attention to European struggles in which a political community asserted its self-determination and constitutional liberty against oppressive or foreign rule—the same values on which the United States' own political system rested.

This study offers a concise survey of this recurring American interpretive pattern. The causes of the two countries came jointly to the fore in the United States when Hungary and Poland acted in defense of their liberty, national self-determination, and constitutional institutions. The study does not seek to catalogue every manifestation of this tradition; rather, it examines the most prominent historical junctures at which the causes of Hungarian and Polish liberty appeared together in American political thought. The SEED Act was one of the clearest legal and institutional expressions of this political tradition.

I. The SEED Act: Hungary and Poland as a Common Political Category

The SEED Act, passed by the United States Congress in the fall of 1989, went beyond a conventional aid program. In addition to financial assistance, it supported the consolidation of democratic institutions and political pluralism; the creation of a representative system based on free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, and a free press; and the transition to a market economy through privatization, private property, entrepreneurship, and free trade. To these ends, it provided for debt-management, agricultural, and technical programs; professional training; trade preferences; educational and cultural exchanges; and media programs.³

For the Polish-American and Hungarian-American enterprise funds established to develop the private sector, the act authorized a total of \$300 million: \$240 million for the Polish fund and \$60 million for the Hungarian fund.⁴ The act's distinctive feature, however, lay less in the scale of the assistance than in the legislature's treatment of Poland and Hungary as two leading actors in the same historical process. This perspective had been evident from the beginning of the legislative process. The bill introduced in the House of Representatives was still expressly titled the "Polish and Hungarian Democracy Initiative of

³ U.S. Congress, *Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act of 1989*, Pub. L. No. 101-179, 103 Stat. 1298 (November 28, 1989), accessed July 13, 2026, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-13908/pdf/COMPS-13908.pdf>.

⁴ U.S. Congress, *Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act of 1989*, secs. 201-203, accessed July 13, 2026, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-13908/pdf/COMPS-13908.pdf>.



1989.”⁵ Rather than referring to democratization in Eastern Europe in general, Congress singled out two countries and constructed a common legal framework for them. The bill sought “to promote political democracy and economic pluralism in Poland and Hungary,” to assist both nations “during a critical period of transition,” and to advance the private sector, labor-market reform, and democratic institutions.

Although the final title became the Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act of 1989, the change did not represent a substantive shift. The conference report of the House and Senate preserved both the two-country structure and the original statement of purpose.⁶ Nearly all of the act’s major programs used the same pairing:

- “Structural Adjustment in Poland and Hungary”
- “Enterprise Funds for Poland and Hungary”
- “Labor Market Transition in Poland and Hungary”
- “Peace Corps Programs in Poland and Hungary”
- “Educational Exchanges with Poland and Hungary”
- “Poland-Hungary Scholarship Partnership”
- “Export-Import Bank for Poland and Hungary”

This consistent pairing of Poland and Hungary was not a matter of legislative necessity. Congress could have issued a general authorization to support the states of East-Central Europe or enacted separate laws. Instead, it made the two countries the beneficiaries of the same provisions and linked them to the same institutions, programs, and democratic objectives. The original text enacted in 1989 mentioned other states only in passing or in a general regional context.⁷ The most immediate explanation is that, in 1989, Poland and Hungary had advanced furthest along the path toward peaceful regime change. At the same time, treating them together accorded with an older American tradition of historical and political interpretation. Bush’s visits to Warsaw and Budapest were the act’s direct precursor, framing support for the two countries as a joint American program even before the SEED Act was adopted.

II. George H. W. Bush’s 1989 Visits to Warsaw and Budapest

At a July 6, 1989, news conference held in preparation for the Paris economic summit, George H. W. Bush again spoke consistently of Poland and Hungary together:

⁵ H.R. 3402, 101st Cong., “Polish and Hungarian Democracy Initiative of 1989,” introduced September 21, 1989, Congress.gov, accessed July 13, 2026, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/house-bill/3402>.

⁶ U.S. Senate Committee on Finance, *Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act of 1989*, Conference Report 101-377 (November 17, 1989), accessed July 17, 2026, <https://www.finance.senate.gov/download/1989/11/17/support-for-east-european-democracy-seed-act-of-1989-report-101-377>.

⁷ U.S. Congress, *Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act of 1989*, accessed July 13, 2026, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-103/pdf/STATUTE-103-Pg1298.pdf>.



"Our efforts during the economic summit in Paris are just as critical [...], and that's why we will propose ways to work together to assist economic recovery and democratic change in Poland and Hungary."⁸

The American president did not regard democratic transformation as a task for governments alone. Before departing, he invited representatives of American business, labor unions, educational institutions, and foundations to the White House and asked them to support Hungarian and Polish reform through commercial, investment, educational, and civic ties.⁹

Bush arrived in Poland on July 9, traveled onward to Budapest on July 11, and flew from Hungary to the Paris summit on July 13.¹⁰ The itinerary itself carried a political message: among the states of East-Central Europe, he visited the two countries in which political and economic transformation had progressed furthest within the framework of the communist system.

On July 10, Bush addressed the Polish National Assembly formed after the partially free elections. He connected democratic transformation to Poland's long constitutional tradition and drew a direct parallel between the Polish Constitution of May 3, 1791, and the U.S. Constitution:

"Poland and the United States are bound, it is often said, by ties of kinship and culture. But our peoples are linked by more than ties of sentiment. The May 3d Constitution of 1791 set Poland ahead of her peers, ahead of her time, in the pursuit of freedom and democratic ideas, just as our Constitution, the American Constitution of 1787, set new standards for protection of the rights of the individual."¹¹

Bush thus presented Poland's regime change as the continuation of a centuries-old constitutional history. The democratic transition meant not only dismantling the communist system but also restoring a Polish political tradition founded on representative institutions and the will of the people.

The president traveled from Warsaw to Budapest, becoming the first sitting U.S. president to visit Hungary. In a memorable gesture amid pouring rain, he tore up his prepared speech and addressed the crowd gathered in Kossuth Square extemporaneously. Another enduring moment in Hungarian collective memory was his placing his coat around a rain-soaked

⁸ George H. W. Bush, "The President's News Conference with Journalists from the Economic Summit Countries," July 6, 1989, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed July 20, 2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsba.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-with-journalists-from-the-economic-summit-countries>.

⁹ George H. W. Bush, "Remarks at a White House Symposium on Eastern Europe," July 6, 1989, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed July 26, 2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsba.edu/documents/remarks-white-house-symposium-eastern-europe>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Travels of President George H. W. Bush," accessed July 23, 2026, <https://history.state.gov/departments/history/travels/president/bush-george-h-w>. Bush was in Poland July 9-11, Hungary July 11-13, and France July 13-17, 1989.

¹¹ George H. W. Bush, "Remarks to the Polish National Assembly in Warsaw," July 10, 1989, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed July 26, 2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsba.edu/documents/remarks-the-polish-national-assembly-warsaw>.



elderly woman.¹² The next day, July 12, he delivered a wide-ranging address at Karl Marx University of Economics. He interpreted the reburial of Imre Nagy and the changes under way in Hungary not as temporary concessions but as the country's return to its European political tradition:

"There's also no mistaking the fact that Hungary is at the threshold of great and historic change. You're writing a real constitution, and you're moving toward democratic, multiparty elections. [...] Hungarian leaders are going to show the ultimate political courage: the courage to submit to the choice of the people in free elections."¹³

For Bush, constitution-making, political pluralism, and free elections were mutually reinforcing. He viewed Hungary not as a fully formed democracy but as a country that had embarked on constitutional transformation and could therefore count on the support of the United States.

At the Paris summit, Bush proposed coordinated Western action on behalf of Poland and Hungary. At his post-summit news conference, he was able to report that the participants had agreed on concerted support for the reform process in the two countries:

"America brought to this summit our determination to support the reform movement in Hungary and Poland. [...] [W]e were able to agree to meet soon to discuss concerted action that will help Poland and Hungary."¹⁴

The visits to Warsaw and Budapest thus prepared the political ground for the Hungarian-Polish approach that took legal form in the SEED Act several months later. That approach, however, also drew on an earlier tradition that had already appeared clearly in 1956.

III. 1956: Liberty and Self-Determination in American Political Thought

By 1989, American political language connected the Hungarian and Polish transformations to the institutions of modern democracy—constitutional government, multiparty elections, and political pluralism. In 1956, the same relationship was expressed in more fundamental terms. Dwight D. Eisenhower and his administration placed liberty and self-determination at the heart of both nations' aspirations. They articulated these principles through the concepts of national independence, self-determination, personal liberty, and the right to a freely chosen government.

¹² George H. W. Bush, "Remarks at the Welcoming Ceremony in Budapest," July 11, 1989, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, accessed July 28, 2026, <https://www.bush41library.gov/digital-research-room/finding-aid/public-papers/remarks-welcoming-ceremony-budapest>. The official transcript records that Bush spoke extemporaneously to the crowd in Kossuth Square in pouring rain. On the coat, see "Next Stop: Hungary," *The Washington Post*, July 12, 1989, accessed July 28, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1989/07/12/next-stop-hungary/5f62792c-b929-4aa7-a7a6-a8f37b3fa3db/>.

¹³ George H. W. Bush, "Remarks to Students and Faculty at Karl Marx University in Budapest," July 12, 1989, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed July 28, 2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-students-and-faculty-karl-marx-university-budapest>.

¹⁴ George H. W. Bush, "The President's News Conference in Paris," July 16, 1989, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed August 3, 2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-paris>.



The outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution itself also justified linking the Polish and Hungarian events of 1956. The Budapest demonstration of October 23 began as an expression of solidarity with the Polish people, and the demonstrators marched to the statue of Józef Bem. They demanded Hungarian independence, the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the restoration of political liberties, and the formation of a new government. A report sent by the American legation in Budapest that same day recorded both sympathy for developments in Poland and the demand for national independence.¹⁵

On October 23, before events in Budapest had fully unfolded, Eisenhower spoke about the changes in Poland. "A people, like the Poles, who have once known freedom cannot be for always deprived of their national independence and of their personal liberty," he declared. He added that the same truth applied to every people in Eastern Europe that had experienced independence and freedom. From this he derived a general principle: all peoples capable of self-government had the right to an independent government of their own full and free choice.¹⁶

Once the protest in Hungary had developed into a revolution, Eisenhower consistently mentioned the two countries together. On October 29, he said: "We look today across the seas, and we see Poland and Hungary—we see people so dedicated to the idea of man's rights, to man's dignity, to his freedom, his liberty, that they are willing to die."¹⁷

In his radio and television address of October 31, Eisenhower presented the two events as distinct manifestations of the same historical process. In Poland, the people's "proud and deathless devotion to freedom" had compelled a peaceful transition to a government that, it was hoped, would genuinely serve the Polish people. In Hungary, people had offered their lives to secure independence from foreign masters and "full and free nationhood." He summarized the American objective as follows: "Our one concern is that they be free—for their sake, and for freedom's sake."¹⁸

The Hungarian-Polish pairing appeared most succinctly in Eisenhower's November 1 address in Philadelphia:

¹⁵ "Telegram from the Legation in Hungary to the Department of State," Budapest, October 23, 1956, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Eastern Europe*, vol. 25, doc. 98, U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v25/d98>.

¹⁶ Dwight D. Eisenhower, address to the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, Washington, DC, October 23, 1956, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Eastern Europe*, vol. 25, doc. 99, U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v25/d99>.

¹⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Address at the Imeson Field Airport, Jacksonville, Florida," October 29, 1956, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-imeson-field-airport-jacksonville-florida>.

¹⁸ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Developments in Eastern Europe and the Middle East," October 31, 1956, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-and-television-report-the-american-people-the-developments-eastern-europe-and-the>.



"In Eastern Europe, we have seen the spirit of freedom—swift and strong—strike through the darkness. The peoples of Poland and Hungary, brave as ever through all their history, have offered their lives to live in liberty."¹⁹

The United States thus treated the liberty of both peoples as a value worthy of protection in itself. It understood Polish and Hungarian action not as two isolated cases but as a common East European manifestation of the desire for freedom.

This interpretation also appeared elsewhere. The very title of a National Security Council paper adopted on November 19 treated the two countries together: "Interim U.S. Policy on Developments in Poland and Hungary." It defined the objective of American policy as supporting a process leading to the "eventual full national independence and freedom" of the East European states. It regarded Poland's limited, negotiated move toward autonomy and the Hungarian reform movement, which grew into a revolution after Soviet intervention, as different paths but parts of the same aspiration to self-determination.²⁰

After the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution, Eisenhower also had to clarify the meaning of the American "liberation policy." At his November 14 news conference, he rejected the suggestion that the United States had encouraged militarily defenseless peoples to undertake armed revolt. He defined the essence of the policy as insisting on "the right of all people to be free to live under governments of their own choosing."²¹ Supporting liberty and self-determination did not entail military intervention, but it did mean that Washington did not regard the region's permanent subjection to Soviet rule as legitimate.

The Hungarian-Polish parallel also appeared in American public discourse. Time's January 7, 1957, profile naming the Hungarian Freedom Fighter its Man of the Year compared the Hungarian revolutionaries with their Polish counterparts. It depicted the Polish path as a partially controlled departure from communist rule from within the system's institutions, and the Hungarian path as the spontaneous and armed expression of the same desire for freedom.²²

A clear conceptual kinship thus emerges between the American interpretations of 1956 and 1989. Eisenhower linked the two series of events through the language of liberty and self-determination; three decades later, Bush expressed the same principles in terms of constitutional government, free elections, and democratic institutions. The SEED Act may

¹⁹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Address in Convention Hall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania," November 1, 1956, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-convention-hall-philadelphia-pennsylvania>.

²⁰ National Security Council, "Interim U.S. Policy on Developments in Poland and Hungary," NSC 5616/2, November 19, 1956, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Eastern Europe*, vol. 25, doc. 196, U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v25/d196>.

²¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "The President's News Conference," November 14, 1956, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed August 4, 2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-318>.

²² "Hungary: Freedom's Choice," *Time*, January 7, 1957, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://time.com/archive/6611223/hungary-freedoms-choice/>.



therefore also be understood as the later institutional expression of an established political outlook.

IV. 1848–1849: The Hungarian Cause of Constitutional Liberty in the United States

Participants in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 consciously invoked the memory of 1848–1849: they recited Sándor Petőfi's "National Song," marched to the statue of Józef Bem, and demanded that March 15 be declared a national holiday, October 6 a national day of mourning, and the Kossuth coat of arms be restored. In both its political objectives and its symbols, the 1956 Revolution defined itself as the heir to the tradition of 1848–1849.

Just as the memory of 1848–1849 came alive for Hungarians in 1956, a connection forged a century earlier reappeared in American attention. During the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–1849 and its aftermath, the American government and public had already shown exceptional interest in the cause of Hungarian independence. That interest centered on responsible and representative government, national independence, and the people's right to shape their own political institutions.

American diplomatic attention turned toward Hungary in the fall of 1848. Acting on approaches from the circles of Lajos Kossuth and Ferenc Pulszky, William H. Stiles, the U.S. chargé d'affaires in Vienna, offered his good offices to the Austrian authorities in an effort to suspend hostilities. Washington later approved his conduct.²³

After Hungary declared independence in April 1849, attention developed into diplomatic action. On June 18, Secretary of State John M. Clayton sent A. Dudley Mann to Europe as a special and confidential agent to obtain reliable information on conditions in Hungary and the likely outcome of the war. His instructions stated that the president sought information with a view to the early recognition of Hungarian independence and the establishment of commercial relations. Recognition was conditional upon the new government proving firm and durable and capable of maintaining its declared independence.²⁴

The United States ultimately did not recognize independent Hungary, but it seriously considered and diplomatically prepared for that possibility. Mann reached no farther than Vienna before superior Russian and Austrian forces ended the war of independence. American activity nevertheless prompted an official Austrian protest.

The response issued in December 1850 by Clayton's successor, Secretary of State Daniel Webster, became one of the most important contemporary documents of American policy toward Hungary. Webster not only defended the legality of the Mann mission but also explained why the Hungarian cause had elicited exceptional sympathy. European events could command the support of the American people in proportion as they arose from "those

²³ Daniel Webster, "The Secretary of State to Mr. Hülsemann," December 21, 1850, 31st Cong., 2nd sess., S. Exec. Doc. 9, accessed August 2, 2026, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-00589_00_00-003-0009-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-00589_00_00-003-0009-0000.pdf.

²⁴ Daniel Webster, "The Secretary of State to Mr. Hülsemann," December 21, 1850, 31st Cong., 2nd sess., S. Exec. Doc. 9, accessed August 2, 2026, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-00589_00_00-003-0009-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-00589_00_00-003-0009-0000.pdf. Mann's instructions stated that the president sought information "with a view to an early recognition of her independence and the formation of commercial relations with her." See also U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "The United States and Hungarian Independence, 1849," accessed August 2, 2026, <https://history.state.gov/countries/hungary/summary/1000>.



great ideas of responsible and popular governments on which the American constitutions themselves are wholly founded." The United States did not intervene militarily, but it could not remain indifferent to "the fortunes of nations struggling for institutions like their own."²⁵

Webster also drew a direct parallel between the American Revolution and the Hungarian struggle for independence. The Austrian government had objected that the American instructions described Kossuth in honorific terms. Webster replied that the British government had regarded George Washington as a rebel chief even as Europe considered him an illustrious hero. Similarly, the United States was not obliged to withhold from Kossuth a distinction that much of the world deemed him worthy of merely because his own government regarded him as a rebel.²⁶

After the defeat of the revolution, the United States helped secure freedom of movement for Kossuth and his companions, who had fled to the Ottoman Empire. With congressional authorization and on the president's instructions, the USS *Mississippi* took the leader of the Hungarian émigrés aboard. Kossuth arrived in New York on December 5, 1851, and spent more than six months touring the country. Cities, state legislatures, civic organizations, and crowds celebrated him as the representative of Hungarian liberty and self-determination.²⁷ Kossuth's official reception sparked debate in Congress. Some politicians feared that honoring him would signify the abandonment of the traditional policy of nonintervention. The majority, however, judged that the cause of Hungarian liberty deserved public recognition by the American nation. In a speech supporting the resolution, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts called Kossuth "the early, constant, and incorruptible champion of the Liberal Cause in Hungary" and emphasized his political program of representation without distinction of rank or birth and equality before the law.²⁸ On January 7, 1852, the House of Representatives formally received the leader of the Hungarian struggle for independence. After the Marquis de Lafayette, he was the second foreign person permitted to address the House from its chamber. He expressed gratitude that the American legislature had bestowed its highest honor on a "persecuted exile," known not for glory or success but for having fought for a "just cause."²⁹

For the American political elite, that just cause meant Hungarian national self-determination. At a congressional banquet in Washington honoring Kossuth, Webster summarized

²⁵ Daniel Webster, "The Secretary of State to Mr. Hülsemann," December 21, 1850, 31st Cong., 2nd sess., S. Exec. Doc. 9, accessed August 2, 2026, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-00589_00_00-003-0009-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-00589_00_00-003-0009-0000.pdf.

²⁶ Daniel Webster, "The Secretary of State to Mr. Hülsemann," December 21, 1850, accessed August 2, 2026, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-00589_00_00-003-0009-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-00589_00_00-003-0009-0000.pdf.

²⁷ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Hungary," accessed August 3, 2026, <https://history.state.gov/countries/hungary/summary/1000>. See also Charles Sumner, "Welcome to Kossuth," December 10, 1851, Project Gutenberg, accessed August 6, 2026, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45637/45637-h/45637-h.htm>.

²⁸ Charles Sumner, "Welcome to Kossuth," U.S. Senate, December 10, 1851, Project Gutenberg, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45637/45637-h/45637-h.htm>.

²⁹ History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, "A House Reception for Lajos Kossuth of Hungary," January 7, 1852, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://history.house.gov/HistoricalHighlight/Detail/36507227929>.



his own aspiration in three points: "Hungarian independence; Hungarian control of her own destinies; and Hungary as a distinct nationality among the nations of Europe."³⁰

American sympathy therefore resulted neither in military intervention nor in diplomatic recognition of an independent Hungarian state. Yet the Mann mission, Webster's intervention, Kossuth's tour, and his congressional reception demonstrate that Hungarian liberty and self-determination already occupied a prominent place in American political thought by the mid-nineteenth century. Eisenhower's language in 1956 and Bush's in 1989 thus belonged to a conceptual tradition established much earlier.

V. 1830–1831: The Polish Cause of Constitutional Liberty in the United States

In American political thought, the Polish Uprising of 1830–1831 occupied a place comparable to that of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence two decades later. In both cases, American attention centered on the struggle of a Central European nation seeking to defend its constitutional rights and national self-determination against a power attempting to revoke them.

The Polish Uprising, which broke out on November 29, 1830, grew out of a crisis in the constitutional order of the Kingdom of Poland established in 1815. United with the Russian tsar through a personal union, the kingdom had its own constitution, parliament, administration, and army, but the monarch and his viceroys subjected these institutions to ever tighter restrictions. The Sejm's decision of January 25, 1831, to depose the tsar transformed the conflict into an open struggle for independence and self-determination.

News of the events in Poland quickly reached the United States. American newspapers carried detailed European reports, portraying the insurgents as courageous patriots and their struggle as a cause of political liberty and national independence. Polish resistance appeared as a morally justified struggle for freedom analogous to the American Revolution, even though its prospects of military success were regarded as slight.³¹

The Polish cause also attracted the attention of the political elite. In February 1831, Representative James Buchanan of Pennsylvania interpreted events in Europe as a struggle between constitutional liberty and arbitrary rule and expressed the hope that the peoples of Europe would not lay down their arms until constitutional charters had secured their liberties.³²

John Randolph, the United States minister to Russia, wrote from London to President Andrew Jackson that "the brave Poles are performing prodigies of valor which ought to mantle

³⁰ Daniel Webster, speech at the congressional banquet honoring Kossuth, Washington, DC, January 15, 1852, in Lajos Kossuth, *Select Speeches of Kossuth*, Project Gutenberg, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10691/pg10691-images.html>.

³¹ Joseph W. Wiczerzak, "The Polish Insurrection of 1830-1831 in the American Press," *Polish American Studies* 18, no. 1 (1961): 3-20, JSTOR, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25776341>.

³² James Buchanan, "Remarks on a Motion to Strike from the General Appropriation Bill the Appropriation for the Salary of the Minister to Russia," February 8, 1831, in John Bassett Moore, ed., *The Works of James Buchanan*, vol. 2, 1830-1836 (Philadelphia and London: J. B. Lippincott, 1908), 163-65, Internet Archive, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://archive.org/details/worksofjamesbuch02buch>.



the cheek of Europe with shame."³³ American public discourse frequently contrasted Polish heroism with the inaction of the European powers. American sympathy also took institutional form in civic movements. Pro-Polish committees were established both in the United States and among Americans living in Europe; they raised funds and sought to organize political support. In Paris, James Fenimore Cooper headed the American-Polish Committee, in whose work the Marquis de Lafayette also participated. The committee understood the Polish cause as a continuation of the principles on which the American national tradition rested.³⁴

Supporters could also invoke the memory of Tadeusz Kościuszko and Kazimierz Pułaski. Through these two Polish heroes of the American Revolutionary War, Poland had entered the historical memory of the United States long before 1830. Many therefore understood support for the Poles not as occasional sympathy for a distant people but as a historical debt: Polish soldiers had earlier fought for American self-determination, and the American nation owed Poland at least moral support in its comparable struggle.

The breadth of public support is well illustrated by the young Edgar Allan Poe's request that an American colonel help him join the Polish army through Lafayette's intercession. His plan never materialized, but the letter reveals the uprising's powerful emotional effect on American public opinion.³⁵

Despite widespread sympathy, the American government neither recognized the insurgent Polish government nor provided direct political or military assistance. The Jackson administration adhered to nonintervention and was simultaneously pursuing an important commercial agreement with Russia.³⁶ The suppression of the uprising, however, did not diminish American interest. The press reported on reprisals, the dismantling of Polish institutions, and the fate of the political émigrés. Polish refugees arriving in the United States were welcomed as heroic freedom fighters who had fought in their homeland for the same principles that the American republic regarded as the foundation of its own existence.³⁷

³³ John Randolph to Andrew Jackson, London, 1831, quoted in Blake McGready, "James Buchanan's 1832 Mission to the Tsar," *Age of Revolutions*, March 6, 2023, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://ageofrevolutions.com/2023/03/06/james-buchanans-1832-mission-to-the-tsar-the-plight-of-poland-and-the-limits-of-americas-revolutionary-legacy-in-jacksonian-foreign-policy/>.

³⁴ Ethel R. Lenz, "James Fenimore Cooper's Polish Cause," James Fenimore Cooper Society, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://jfcoopersociety.org/content/04-crit/articles/suny/2017suny-lenz.htm>. See also Cornell University Library, "Freedom Everywhere!—Poland, 1831-33," accessed August 6, 2026, <https://exhibits.library.cornell.edu/lafayette/feature/freedom-everywhere>.

³⁵ Edgar Allan Poe to Sylvanus Thayer, New York, March 10, 1831, Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p3103100.htm>.

³⁶ Blake McGready, "James Buchanan's 1832 Mission to the Tsar, the Plight of Poland, and the Limits of America's Revolutionary Legacy in Jacksonian Foreign Policy," *Age of Revolutions*, March 6, 2023, accessed August 4, 2026, <https://ageofrevolutions.com/2023/03/06/james-buchanans-1832-mission-to-the-tsar-the-plight-of-poland-and-the-limits-of-americas-revolutionary-legacy-in-jacksonian-foreign-policy/>.

³⁷ Jerzy Jan Lerski, *A Polish Chapter in Jacksonian America: The United States and the Polish Exiles of 1831* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958), Google Books, accessed August 4, 2026, <https://books.google.com/books?id=DACiAAAAMAAJ>.



VI. The Beginnings: Polish and Hungarian Participation in the American Revolutionary War

American interest in the Polish and Hungarian struggles for freedom also derived in significant part from the United States' own founding narrative. The young state's political identity rested on independence won from imperial rule, the self-determination of the people, and the principle that the legitimacy of political power derives from the consent of the governed. According to the Declaration of Independence, the people have the right to alter or abolish a government that has become destructive of fundamental rights and to institute a new government in its place.³⁸

American independence therefore became not merely a successful process of separation but a defining interpretive framework of American political thought. American public opinion readily recognized parallels to its own historical experience in the struggles for liberty waged by other nations. This did not translate automatically into political support, but liberty and self-determination provided standards against which the aspirations of other peoples could be assessed.

Moreover, it was not only a similarity of principles that connected the Polish and Hungarian causes to the American founding. The Polish officers Tadeusz Kościuszko and Kazimierz Pułaski and the Hungarian officer Michael Kováts all took part in the war for the liberty and self-determination of the American colonies.

Kościuszko arrived in America in 1776, and the Continental Congress appointed him a colonel of engineers. The defensive system he designed during the Saratoga campaign contributed to one of the decisive American victories of the war; he later supervised the construction of the fortifications at West Point. After returning home, he fought for Polish independence, first in defense of the Constitution of May 3, 1791, and later as leader of the 1794 uprising. In his person, the American and Polish struggles for freedom were already joined in the era of the early republic.³⁹

Pułaski likewise came to America from a struggle for the liberty of his homeland. He had been one of the military leaders of the Bar Confederation, which opposed Russian influence over the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and was forced into exile after the confederation's defeat. Following his distinguished service at the Battle of Brandywine, Congress appointed him brigadier general and placed him in command of the Continental cavalry.⁴⁰

Pułaski's American service was closely intertwined with that of the Hungarian Michael Kováts, and the two soldiers also became friends. Born in Karcag, the Hungarian hussar officer had gained experience in several European armies before offering his services to the cause of American independence. On January 13, 1777, he wrote a letter in Latin from Bordeaux to Benjamin Franklin, identifying himself as a Hungarian, describing his military career, and

³⁸ Second Continental Congress, "The Declaration of Independence," July 4, 1776, National Archives, accessed August 4, 2026, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

³⁹ National Park Service, "Thaddeus Kosciuszko," accessed August 4, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/thko/learn/historyculture/kosciuszkobio.htm>.

⁴⁰ National Park Service, "Casimir Pulaski," accessed August 6, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/people/casimir-pulaski.htm>.



offering his services to the Continental Congress. He closed with the formula *Fidelissimus ad mortem*—"most faithful unto death."⁴¹

Kováts joined the American revolutionaries on his own initiative. His military training was especially valuable to an army whose cavalry was still being organized. Pułaski recognized the importance of his experience, brought him into his service, and recommended him to George Washington.

Their most important joint achievement was the organization of Pulaski's Legion. In March 1778, the Continental Congress authorized the formation of this independent unit of cavalry and light infantry. Pułaski became its commander, and Kováts was appointed colonel commandant on April 18. The Hungarian officer was responsible for organizing and training the cavalry and adapting European light-cavalry tactics to American conditions. The U.S. Army's institutional memory also commemorates their joint achievement:

"General Casimir Pulaski and Kovats are together known as the 'Founding Fathers of the U.S. Cavalry.'"

In other words, Kazimierz Pułaski and Michael Kováts are jointly remembered as the "Founding Fathers of the U.S. Cavalry" because together they helped create a more organized, better-trained cavalry unit capable of independent operations.⁴² Kováts was killed on May 11, 1779, while defending Charleston at the head of the cavalry he had trained. Several months later, Pułaski was mortally wounded during the siege of Savannah and died on October 11. A Polish general and a Hungarian colonel gave their lives for American independence in the same year.⁴³ The extent to which American thought and memory sometimes treated Hungarians and Poles as a single group is illustrated by the fact that Kováts was long remembered as Polish in the United States. The Society of the Cincinnati commemorated him as one of twelve officers of Polish origin who had served under Washington and recognized him as Hungarian only in 1955.⁴⁴

The roles in this historical relationship were later reversed. Polish and Hungarian soldiers had helped the American nation win its liberty and self-determination in the Revolutionary War; from the nineteenth century onward, American public opinion turned sympathetically toward the Polish and Hungarian struggles for freedom. This shared founding narrative

⁴¹ Michaël Kóváts de Fabricy to Benjamin Franklin, Bordeaux, January 13, 1777, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Founders Online, National Archives, accessed August 6, 2026, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-23-02-0100>.

⁴² U.S. Army Europe and Africa, "Michael Kováts de Fabriczy (1724-1779)," accessed August 6, 2026, <https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/Who-We-Are/Mission-History/Heroes-of-Two-Nations/Army-250-Biography-view-page/Article/4124526/michael-kovts-de-fabriczy-1724-1779/>.

⁴³ U.S. Army Europe and Africa, "Michael Kováts de Fabriczy (1724-1779)"; National Park Service, "Casimir Pulaski," accessed August 6, 2026, <https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/Who-We-Are/Mission-History/Heroes-of-Two-Nations/Army-250-Biography-view-page/Article/4124526/michael-kovts-de-fabriczy-1724-1779/>; <https://www.nps.gov/people/casimir-pulaski.htm>.

⁴⁴ István Kovács, "A bari konföderáció óceánokon túl elesett hősei: Kazimierz Pułaski, Kováts Mihály, Benyovszky Móric," *Hitel* 34, no. 9 (September 2021): 63-79, esp. 63, accessed August 4, 2026, https://www.hitel-folyoirat.hu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Hitel2021_9-beliv.pdf.



contributed to the political sensitivity with which American public discourse and political thought later approached the two nations' struggles for liberty.

VII. Three Traditions of Constitutional Liberty

The joint mention of Hungary and Poland in the periods discussed above resulted not only from the fact that similar struggles for freedom repeatedly unfolded at the same time in Polish and Hungarian history. These aspirations were also readily intelligible to the American public because the limitation of power, political representation, and the community's right to shape its own institutions occupied important places in the American, Polish, and Hungarian political traditions alike. These traditions developed under different historical circumstances, on different social foundations, and through different institutional forms, yet they shared important elements: all three connected liberty to constitutional order and to the self-determination of the political community.

American constitutional thought grew partly out of the English historical constitution, the idea of limited government, and the doctrine of natural rights. The Revolutionary War, however, gave these principles new meaning. The Declaration of Independence derived the just powers of government from "the consent of the governed" and declared the people's right to alter or abolish a government that violated fundamental rights. The Constitution of 1787 institutionalized this principle. The phrase "We the People of the United States" identified the people themselves as the source of constitutional authority, while the separation of powers and checks and balances constrained even public authority derived from the people.⁴⁵ The American concept of liberty thus encompassed both the self-determination of the political community and the protection of the individual against the state.

The Polish constitutional tradition developed in a very different historical setting. In the noble republic of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, royal power was limited by elective monarchy, the Sejm, local assemblies, and the historic rights of the nobility. Within the estate-based order, this system fostered a strong consciousness of liberty, although political rights belonged to the nobility. Over time, some of its institutions—above all, the *liberum veto*—ceased to protect liberty and instead endangered the functioning of the state. The Constitution of May 3, 1791, sought to resolve precisely this contradiction. It did not simply aim to abolish the old Polish tradition of liberty, but to preserve its values within a more effective state order. It declared that all authority derives from the will of the people and divided public power into legislative, executive, and judicial branches. It abolished the *liberum veto*, strengthened the central government, and defined deputies not as delegates bound by the instructions of their own constituencies but as representatives of the nation as a whole.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ József Petrétai, "Az alkotmányozó hatalom és az alkotmányosság," in *Alkotmányozás és alkotmányjogi változások Európában és Magyarországon*, ed. Fruzsina Gárdos-Orosz and Zoltán Sente (Budapest: Nemzeti Közzolgálati Egyetem, 2014), 49-50.

⁴⁶ Anna Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Konstytucja 3 maja 1791. Na podstawie tekstu Ustawy Rządowej z Archiwum Sejmu Czteroletniego* (Warsaw: Muzeum Łazienki Królewskie-Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych, 2018),



The constitution did not establish democracy in the modern sense, but it attempted to combine historic liberties, representation, and limitations on power within a more modern state structure. After the partitions of Poland, the Constitution of May 3 therefore became not only the memory of a short-lived reform but also a symbol of lost statehood and national self-determination.

The Hungarian constitutional tradition was likewise the product of a long historical development. It was not based on a single written fundamental law but consisted of statutes and rules rooted in customary law. The Golden Bull of 1222 primarily codified the rights of the royal servants and other privileged groups, but its significance lay in refusing to treat royal power as unlimited and in containing a clause authorizing resistance if its provisions were violated. Later Hungarian public-law thought—as summarized in István Werbőczy's *Tripartitum*—continued to embrace the view that laws could be enacted only with the agreement of the monarch and the country's political community.

The April Laws of 1848 transformed this historical constitution into a civil and representative system. The thirty-one acts adopted by the Diet of the Estates and sanctioned by Ferdinand V established a Hungarian government responsible to parliament, a legislature meeting annually, and elected popular representation. They abolished serfdom and the nobility's tax exemption, introduced equality of taxation, and guaranteed freedom of the press. Hungary's transformation was at once radical and legally continuous: through the existing constitutional procedure, it dismantled the foundations of the estate-based state and created a constitutional monarchy based on responsible government.

A common feature of all three traditions was the emergence of the ideas of limited power, political representation, and the gradual extension of rights. This alone helps explain why the American public could relate the Polish and Hungarian struggles for liberty to its own historical experience. Yet the Hungarian and Polish causes became intelligible to American political thought not only separately; they repeatedly appeared side by side as two manifestations of the same aspiration to liberty and self-determination. When Americans spoke of the two nations' constitutional rights, representative government, and self-determination, they were not merely projecting American institutions onto foreign historical situations. They recognized two political traditions that, under different circumstances, sought answers to similar questions: What is the source of governmental authority? What rights belong to the political community? How can arbitrary government be prevented? This conceptual affinity also contributed to the repeated association of the Hungarian and Polish causes in American political thought.

In the SEED Act, these old questions appeared in the political language of the late twentieth century. Liberty now meant political democracy, free elections, and independent institutions; self-determination meant government legitimized by the people; and economic freedom meant private property, entrepreneurship, and economic pluralism. In the act, the United States interpreted the transformations of Hungary and Poland in 1989 as aspirations consonant with its own understanding of liberty and constitutional government.

18-19; see also arts. V-VI of the *Ustawa Rządowa*, 66-69, accessed August 4, 2026, https://agad.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Konstytucja-3-maja_PL-v4.pdf.



VIII. Conclusions

The Hungarian-Polish structure of the SEED Act followed directly from the political circumstances of 1989. Hungary and Poland led the peaceful dismantling of the communist system and the preparation for democratic transition. Bush's visits to Warsaw and Budapest, followed by his elevation of the two countries' cause to the level of the Paris economic summit, politically prepared the common American approach.

This pairing, however, was by no means solely the product of the particular circumstances of 1989. In different eras, American political thought interpreted the actions of the two nations within the same conceptual framework. A recurring interpretive tradition emerges—one that recognized the core values of American political identity in Hungarian and Polish national aspirations.

Liberty and self-determination stood at the center of this tradition. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they meant above all independence from imperial rule, the defense of historic and constitutional rights, and the right to one's own political institutions. In 1956, they appeared in the demand for liberation from Soviet rule and for a freely elected government. In 1989, they became an institutional program of representative democracy, political pluralism, the rule of law, and the market economy.

The significance of the SEED Act lies in its having given legal and institutional form to what had previously appeared primarily as political sympathy, moral support, or historical analogy. In 1989, the United States not only recognized the legitimacy of Hungary's and Poland's aspirations to liberty and self-determination but also committed concrete instruments to the success of their democratic and economic transformation.

From the early history of the United States onward, the causes of Hungarian and Polish liberty and self-determination repeatedly became intelligible through the concepts of the American political tradition. This outlook can also be discerned, in a broader regional form, in later American strategic thought. The U.S. National Security Strategy published in 2025 lists among American priorities in Europe the objective of "building up the healthy nations of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe" through commercial ties,⁴⁷ weapons sales, political collaboration, and cultural and educational exchanges. The formulation no longer singles out Hungary and Poland, but it indicates that the states of Central Europe continue to occupy a place in American strategic thinking about Europe.

⁴⁷ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (November 2025), 27, accessed August 4, 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.