

J.D. Vance's "Unacceptable" Speech

By Bruce Bawer

It was on March 5, 1946, at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, that Winston Churchill, who the previous year had been unceremoniously dumped as prime minister after triumphantly steering the United Kingdom through World War II, gave a speech that would echo down the generations. The United States, he told his audience, stood now "at the pinnacle of world power," a role that placed upon its shoulders "an awe-inspiring accountability to the future." The question now was: "What then is the overall strategic concept which we should inscribe today?" The nations of the West, newly freed from the horror of Nazism, now faced two formidable threats: "war and tyranny." For the immediate future, the atom bomb would protect the free world from the former; but as to the latter, Churchill warned that "[f]rom Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent." The "ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe" were now under the control of "police governments" that were puppets of the Kremlin. This, Churchill emphasized, was not "the Liberated Europe we fought to build up." And the only way to address it was for the still-free countries of the West, with America and Britain in the lead, to maintain their military strength as well as their solid alliance.



The importance of Churchill's speech was instantly recognized around the world. So was the [speech](#) given last Friday by Vice President J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference. Like

Churchill, Vance brought to the moment a background as a military veteran, a political leader, and a gifted author. Like Churchill, Vance took the occasion not to flatter his audience of European politicians and military officials for their past achievements but to challenge them with some difficult words about the future. And like Churchill, Vance ruffled some feathers. Less than a year after V-E and V-J Day, many ordinary people on both sides of the Atlantic were war-weary, eager to put conflict behind them; the last thing they wanted was to be told that they had to remain vigilant, bolster their armed forces, and look upon their erstwhile Russian allies as adversaries; many diplomats, too, saw in the newly established United Nations an opportunity for the Western allies and the Soviet bloc to work together in the long term as friends. Churchill's speech was a wake-up call, and would be recognized as such in the decades to come, but at the time it was, for many, an unwelcome provocation.

And Vance? His speech, which clocked in at just under twenty minutes, was also a wake-up call – *and* an unwelcome provocation. Like Churchill, he, too, spoke about security. In passing, he expressed hope for a “reasonable settlement between Russia and Ukraine.” But he went on to say that the threat he worries about the most, where Europe is concerned, is “the threat from within.” He mentioned “the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values, values shared with the United States of America” – a retreat exemplified by the “former European Commissioner” who was “delighted” when

Romania “annulled an entire election” and who said that the same might happen in Germany; by the European Union’s plans “to shut down social media” if they don’t censor “hateful content”; by the German government’s raids on the homes of “antifeminists”; by the conviction in Sweden of a Christian activist who burned a Koran; by the British veteran found guilty of praying silently near an abortion clinic; and by the Scottish government’s warning to its people that, in certain circumstances, private prayers in their home can violate the law.

Vance acknowledged that this sort of activity is also a problem in the U.S., where, for example, the Biden administration bullied social media firms to silence the truth about the origins of COVID-19. But he added that under Trump, the opposite approach will be taken. “We may disagree with your views,” he said, “but we will fight to defend your right to offer them in the public square.” It was right out of Voltaire. It was a declaration that a gathering of leaders of free countries would have applauded lustily a few decades ago. This time, however, Vance’s statement received just a pathetic smattering of applause. Vance proceeded to note that the Munich conference itself had banned the participation of some parties of both the left and right. He criticized this decision, maintaining that political leaders must be in dialogue with people who represent real constituencies. Yes, he conceded, it’s important to talk about defense spending and such; but if we’re concerned about our nations’ security, it’s also important to know “what it is we are defending in the first place.” What, he asked, “is the positive vision that animates this shared security compact?” There *is* no security, he insisted, “if you are afraid of the voices, the opinions, and the conscience that guide your very own people.”

At which point he raised the subject of mass immigration. Only the day before, a 24-year-old Afghan asylum seeker had driven a car into a crowd in central Munich. He reportedly shouted

“Allahu akbar.” There were at least thirty injuries. Both Europe and America, said Vance, have experienced all too many such atrocities, which, he stated, were the result of “conscious decisions made by politicians.” Not a single voter on the European continent, Vance contended, had ever gone to the ballot box “to open the floodgates to millions of unvetted immigrants.” Indeed, they had never been asked their opinions about the wisdom of such policies. The Davos crowd considered the opinions of the masses on such a topic undeserving of attention. Alluding to Elon Musk’s support of the Alternative for Germany Party – which has gained widespread public support even as the leaders of other parties have labored to deny it a voice in the Bundestag – Vance said: “If American democracy can survive ten years of Greta Thunberg’s scolding, you guys can survive a few months of Elon Musk.” It was a joke. Vance sold it as a joke. But there was *no* laughter – none.

It was a speech for the ages by a man who may be the most impressive of all of the members of Trump’s dream team. But the audience of European political, media, and military elites was a nightmare. These people didn’t want to hear about Islamic terrorism. They didn’t want to hear about immigration. They didn’t want to hear about freedom of speech. Like Democratic leaders in Washington, they like to talk incessantly about the importance of defending “our democracy” even as they do their best to transform democracy into rule by elites – by themselves. Watching the speech, and taking in the audience’s lack of enthusiasm, I was reminded, not for the first time, of an occasion many years ago, in Washington, D.C., when I spoke to a gathering of diplomats from the U.S. and various American allies. It was a conference about the future of Europe, a topic on which everyone there was gung-ho – indeed, they saw Europe’s future as being much brighter than America’s. I was the only exception, warning at length about the continent’s Islamization and what it portended. I got the same response that Vance did: deadly silence. Unlike Vance, I took questions. Most of them weren’t really questions – they

were attacks. And they were brutal. The theme was consistent: who the hell was I to spoil the party? The many incidents that I had held up as reasons for concern were dismissed out of hand by these smug, supercilious know-it-alls as nothing but anecdotal evidence.

Oh, well. I was right. They were wrong. Same here. Among the poobahs who sat quietly through Vance's talk was EU Foreign Minister Kaja Kallas, who [lamented](#) that the U.S. was out "to pick a fight with us and we don't want to pick a fight with our friends." The Western allies, she said, should focus on larger threats than the ones Vance cited, such as Russian aggression. The Germans in the audience were especially vocal in their fury. Boris Pistorius, Germany's Defense Minister, thundered in his own Munich speech that it was "unacceptable" for Vance to describe any European countries as authoritarian. Unlike anything in Vance's speech, Pistorius's use of the word "unacceptable" received a huge wave of applause. As a number of pro-Trump observers commented, Pistorius, by ruling Vance's remarks "unacceptable," was himself providing a perfect example of the kind of intolerance for a diversity of views that Vance had been talking about. German Chancellor Olav Scholz, also speaking at the conference, [reserved](#) for his government the right to ban "hate speech" by the "far right." In short: we the elites will define liberty and the limits of free speech. And on Germany's DW News, a reporter in Munich described Vance's comments about immigration as "conspiracy ideology" ("there is no such thing," she asserted, "as mass unchecked immigration into the European continent") and said that many of the conference participants with whom she had spoken saw Vance's speech as both an intrusion by the U.S. into domestic European affairs as well as an attempt to impose American politics upon the people of Europe.

Meanwhile, in France, *Le Monde* [wrote](#) that there were now "two key dates in the history of the Munich Security Conference: 2007 and 2025." In 2007, Putin "stunned the West with a highly

aggressive speech against the United States”; this time around, America “turned against its partners, fracturing the West” with “a virulent diatribe against European democracies.” *Le Figaro* [agreed](#): “It was as if in the space of a month, the alliance forged by the Western victors of the Second World War, strengthened during the forty years of the Cold War, had been shattered.” In Spain, *El Mundo* [complained](#) that Vance had used his “sermon” to “compare the EU to the USSR, defend far-right parties, and downplay Russia as a threat,” while *El Pais* [described](#) Vance as demanding that Europeans listen more to the far right. In the Netherlands, *De Trouw* also [compared](#) Vance’s “fiery indictment of Western democracies” to Putin’s.

In Norway, Zofia Paszkiewicz, a correspondent for the reliably left-wing state TV network, NRK, [called](#) Vance’s speech, bafflingly, “very religious.” On an NRK roundtable, foreign editor Sigurd Falkenberg Mikkelsen described it as “reactionary” and compared it to an American campaign speech; Conservative Party leader and former Prime Minister Erna Solberg charged that Vance and Trump represent “the more extreme elements of the Republican Party”; Anders Romarheim, a professor of political science, sneered at both Vance and Trump for daring to lecture anyone about the nature of democracy and said that Vance had exhibited *maktarroganse* (“arrogant and self-willed behavior associated with a position of power”) and brutally imposed an American political debate on the European public, thereby putting “the transatlantic community...in a crisis.” NRK’s host wondered aloud whether Vance’s speech was yet another sign that America is heading into a non-democratic future. In the UK, the *Guardian*’s diplomatic editor, Patrick Wintour, called Vance’s speech “blistering and confrontational,” a “brutal ideological assault,” saying that it was “met with shock” by audience members who saw it as reflective of a “societal rupture” between the U.S. and Europe “about values and the nature of democracy.”

These outrageous responses, by turns tone-deaf and mendacious, to a few minutes of straight talk from an American vice president about the nature of freedom were pretty galling, given the patronizing way in which these politicians, journalists, and academics routinely speak about the American people and their leaders even as they take our security guarantee for granted. These are people who carefully tiptoe around Muslim leaders and who, yes, routinely silence the criticism of Islam, putting their own citizens in prison for speaking their minds while letting Muslims off the hook for violent felonies. That these European leaders could characterize Vance's speech as religious, or as a threat to withdraw U.S. support for NATO, or as an inappropriate attempt to bring American political debates to Europe, or a sign that Trump's America is abandoning freedom – rather than standing up for it – only goes to show just how great a gulf there is between the mentality of left-leaning European elites and that of the American electorate.

It's important, though, to keep in mind that while America's people and its president are once again, thankfully, in sync with each other, the elites who rule Europe are increasingly at ideological odds with their own people – as witnessed by the alternative media on which, over the weekend, a great many Europeans who applaud the Trump agenda voiced vigorous support for Vance's speech. In Britain, Ben Habib, co-leader of the Reform Party, [gave](#) it his thumbs-up; Westminster media veteran Gawain Towler [said](#) that Vance was right, despite the German outrage, just as Trump was right, in his first term, when he warned Germans (who responded with mockery) not to rely on Russia for electricity; and in Norway, Ole Asbjørn Ness, editor of the alternative news website *iNyheter*, praised Vance for giving a "sensible, intelligent speech" about Europe's ongoing self-destruction through censorship and mass immigration and condemned NRK's talking heads for their severe misrepresentations of his urgently important message – misrepresentations which, he noted, served only to the

asservations in Vance's speech, which Ness ventured, "will go down in the history books." Hear, hear. Bottom line: what's clearer than ever after Friday's debacle in Munich is that, even more than Americans need Trump, the people of Western Europe desperately need to hustle their own Trump counterparts into the drivers' seats before the clown cars fly off the cliff.

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