

America and Europe can revive the spirit of ancient Greece and make all our nations great again.



Marco Rubio speaks in Athens, Oct. 7. MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/ ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Birth and Rebirth of Western Civilization

The following are excerpts from a speech Secretary of State Marco Rubio delivered in Athens on Oct. 7:

Here, in Athens, we found the first full realization of all the essential traits that would come to define the West: fierce individuality and relentless ambition; daring exploration and invention; a yearning for discovery, for adventure, risk and glory. An insatiable curiosity about the world and the principles by which it operates, a hunger to know the mysteries of nature and grasp the secrets of the cosmos. An impatience with the notion of impossibility, chafing at all boundaries and limits, straining to peer into the depths of the unknown. . . .

This was the foundation of the Western mind: our math, our science, our medicine. Our philosophy, ethics and religion. It paved the way for the gospel of Jesus Christ to find fertile soil in Europe and flourish into the empire of Christendom. It was the foundation of the riches of Christian theology—of Augustine and Aquinas and the whole tradition of natural law. . . .

I know that to modern ears, what I just described, this way of life, may sound odd; it may even sound cruel. The ideal of many ideologies in our time has, frankly, become a world of perfect safety, devoid of risk or failure, with neither the glory of victory nor the shame of defeat. Too often these days, we build downwards. We design our standards to ensure no one will lose; we preoccupy ourselves more with the comfort of the worst than the potential of the best. We hold the most exceptional things among us hostage to the average, the ordinary, the mediocre.

The men who made the Parthenon, they built upwards. They held that the highest and most noble aspiration in life was to surpass all others, to strive to be the best in all things. The ancient Greek city-states were filled. They were filled with intense passion and rivalry and faction and conflict. But from that constant struggle for distinction— from that came the great flowering of art and philosophy and political and intellectual energy that would transform a collective of Mediterranean cities into the birthplace of the greatest civilization in the world.

The *thumos*, as the ancient Greeks called it—the fire of passion, strength, courage, pride—is the heart of great civilization. And without it? Without it, nations lose their will to fight, the will to strive, the will to survive.

Today, too much of the West has forgotten this quality. Over time, we in the West came to feel ashamed of the very things that made us exceptional. We felt embarrassed that our achievements set us apart from the rest of the world. Our prosperity somehow became a source of guilt. We no longer believed we deserved and had earned our greatness.

The word “nationalism” became a dirty word. And so we tore down our monuments; we condemned our own history. And in too many places, we taught our children to be ashamed of the countries they would inherit. In the process, we opened our borders and outsourced our industry, and allowed our militaries to wither and to decay.

And with every passing year, we seemed to outsource more of our sovereignty, transferring our decisions to global bureaucracies far beyond the reach of our control. . . .

Others were all too happy to fill the vacuum that we left—the vacuum left behind by our weakness. And as the West’s confidence faltered, its adversaries and its rivals only grew more assertive, building up their own wealth and their own power in our stead.

And now, today, we find ourselves at a crossroads. Because the next decade and the decisions we make will write the story of the next century. The course we take will determine whether the West maintains its place at the head of the world or resigns itself to a future of atrophy and servitude and decline. We will either choose to act now or lose the choice to act at all.

Under President Trump, the United States has made its choice. We choose the unapologetic pursuit of national power: to take back control of our critical supply chains, to reindustrialize our economy, to rebuild our defense, to fight for dominance of the technologies and industries of the future.

We choose to reach for new frontiers: in advanced manufacturing and superintelligence; in drones, weapons and warfare; in chips, minerals, cyber and every other domain of human possibility. To unleash our energy, to rebuild our factories, to return our astronauts to the moon and launch a new age of exploration in space. . . .

We believe that Europe can awaken from its long slumber and rekindle the fire that was lit here millennia ago. There are already signs.

Across this Continent, we are witnessing what we hope will be the beginnings of a generational shift: sky--rocketing defense spending, a flurry of new partnerships and programs, expanded manufacturing and production, following on the historic defense commitments made last year in The Hague.

Greece has been at the center of this shift. The people of this nation have proved themselves once again to be an indispensable friend to Europe and to the United States alike, on everything from energy to migration to defense, where Greece has been a model ally.

And it’s our sincerest hope that all of Europe will follow your example.

Though passions may, at times, have strained the bonds of affection between the United States and Europe, it must not be allowed to break them. Together, we must strengthen an alliance capable of confronting threats of our age.

And we can. Because we do not believe the trans-Atlantic friendship should be zero-sum. Quite the opposite: Our vision is of an alliance whose strength is greater than the sum of its parts. It is a vision we saw in action just last month, in an unprecedented new agreement between the United States, Denmark and Greenland—an agreement that will reshape the Arctic and bolster the security of all of NATO. All three partners in that deal emerged victorious. All of Europe—and NATO and the United States—emerged safer, stronger, and more secure. . . . We are at an inflection point—an inflection point not only in the history of my nation, but an inflection point in the whole of our civilization. The threats we face today are every bit as real as they were on the dramatic stage of antiquity. National interests did not vanish in the face of international institutions. War did not disappear simply because we preferred peace. Other states continued to arm, to seek influence, to compete for territory, and technology, and resources, and markets, and energy, and power. And now, there is war again.

There is new competition between great powers again. There is vulnerability, aggression, terrorism, a whole universe of new threats and attacks again.

And so we must rebuild our institutions and our alliances to face these threats together—understanding that the purpose of these things is not to abolish the sovereignty of the nations that constitute them; it is to defend them. And that nations need not abandon their distinct identities in order to recognize their common interests. . . .

The history of Greece does not just offer us a glimpse of our institutions in their earliest forms. The history of Greece shows us an image of ourselves.

It shows us that ours is the inheritance of great heroes, and that we should be proud—that we should be intensely proud—of where we come from. We should marvel at what our forefathers carved out of this countryside. The story of our civilization is the greatest story ever known to man. And it began here, with the first men and women of the West. From them we can rediscover the virtues, the courage, and the strength to confront the dangers that we face in our time.

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