

# WSJ Print Edition

The two men's Munich speeches were similar in substance. The stylistic differences were major.



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Marco Rubio in Munich in 2026 and Vance in 2025. ACTION PRESS/ ZUMA PRESS; AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



## Rubio Plays Good Cop to Vance's Bad

### DECLARATIONS

*By Peggy Noonan*

When a major Trump administration official gives a speech in Europe to its gathered political and business elites and receives a standing ovation, you know something big happened.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio's address to the Munich Security Conference last weekend had an intellectual presence and warmth not normally seen in the statements of this administration. In this it was the opposite of Vice President JD Vance's speech to the conference last year. The difference in approach and emotional register seemed to imply something,

yet the two speeches didn't diverge in policy. Mr. Rubio's marked a continuation. Yet it had a different atmosphere, was more morally confident than Mr. Vance's, and though it carried a request and asked to be understood, it betrayed

something important: The White House thinks it has already won on the issue of Europe, and the job now is to give Europe a way to join in and agree.

Mr. Rubio framed the Europe-U.S. alliance as something epic in human history, something proven. America came from Europe, we are part of each other. In recent decades we have made grave policy mistakes— were naive about open borders and mass migration, turned climate concerns into a cultish regime, believed “ties formed by trade and commerce alone would be stronger than nationhood.” But “we made these mistakes together.” He wasn’t accusing but admitting, and inviting mutual admission.

The U.S. and Europe “ belong together. . . . We are bound to one another by the deepest bonds nations can share— forged by centuries of shared history, Christian faith, culture, heritage.”

America’s “ home may be in the Western Hemisphere, but we will always be a child of Europe.” We aren’t daddy, you are. “Our destiny is and will always be intertwined with yours.”

But you must reacquaint yourself with the truth that Western civilization exists, is admirable, changed the world and deserves your respect.

“It was here in Europe where the ideas that planted the seeds of liberty that changed the world were born.” Europe “gave the world the rule of law, the universities and the scientific revolution.” The Continent “produced the genius of Mozart and Beethoven,” and it isn’t narrow or xenophobic to feel pride in this; it is a just self-respect without which you won’t be able to continue in history. When Europe defends itself, it defends a “great and noble civilization.”

And it defends America, because we are of you: “Our story began with an Italian explorer whose adventure into the great unknown” discovered the new world. “Our first colonies were built by English settlers, to whom we owe not just the language we speak but the whole of our political and legal system. Our frontiers were shaped by Scots-Irish, that proud, hardy clan from the hills of Ulster that gave us Davy Crockett and Mark Twain. . . . Our great Midwestern heartland was built by German farmers and craftsmen who transformed empty plains. . . . Our expansion into the interior followed the footsteps of French fur traders and explorers, whose names, by the way, still adorn the street signs and towns’ names all across the Mississippi Valley. Our horses, our ranches, our rodeos—the entire romance of the cowboy archetype . . . these were born in Spain.”

This was tender and not sweet because it was anchored in a particularity the audience needed to hear. A 50-year-old European diplomat whose understanding of history was shaped by the educational apparatus of the past 40 years may never have heard these things, or known Americans actually think about them.

Mr. Rubio’s speech won’t overnight alter the political predicates of Europe’s elite, but the respect it showed gave them cover to begin to modify their views— he does have a point!— as it would lead them to wonder how much his arguments might gain some purchase among their own electorates. (The speech must have been a relief for European populists, who have been put off by President Trump’s imperialistic attitude on Greenland.)

We’ll quickly compare Mr. Vance’s speech last year. It was famously experienced by the audience as an affront. He presented himself as a callow young culture warrior prosecuting a case against Old Europe. He scolded them. Once we fought the Cold War arm in arm against “tyrannical forces” that “censored dissidents, that closed churches.” Thank God they lost. “Unfortunately, when I look at Europe today, it’s sometimes not so clear what happened to some of the Cold War’s winners.” He spoke of “EU commissars” who are leading “the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values.” They’re restricting freedom of speech and religion.

Bucking them up, he added, wanly, “I fundamentally believe that we are on the same team.” It is interesting that Mr. Vance’s banalities always sound hostile as opposed to merely boring. He is an odd one. It is true, and his own testimony, that he wasn’t born on third base in terms of his circumstances, but it is also true that in terms of natural gifts—a bright and ambitious man born in America in 1984, possessed of a hunger to rise and a means to satisfy it—hard work, meritocracy, personal social abilities that allowed him to befriend and be befriended—in that sense, and historically, he was at least born on first.

It worked out for him: He became vice president of the United States at age 40. So you'd think his primary emotional weather would consist of personal pride and deep gratitude. Instead there is always about him, in his public presentation, an air of grievance, of resentment, and a feeling of superiority— *if you were a little brighter, you'd see it my way*. It is alienating, and you wonder what it is, and whether it's genuine or just a way of publicly glomming on to the perceived grievances and resentments of his supporters.

Maybe the difference in their speeches was an extension of good cop/bad cop. A year ago, bad cop Vance made accusations and slapped the perp around. A year later, good cop Rubio sees a Europe increasing its contribution to the cost of its defense, asking for help with Ukraine, experiencing a rising populist wave. The Trump administration won, the relationship has to be managed rather than challenged, and part of managing it is to give European leaders new arguments to agree with.

Mr. Trump's policy with Europe has at this point a fully settled ideological core—a rejection of globalism and multiculturalism, restricted immigration, respect for nationalist thinking. But its relationship with its allies isn't fully settled. It's unpredictable, a rebuke this day, an embrace the next, all depending on the moment and the speaker. This is its own power flex: European leaders can never know which cop is coming.

A final point. Mr. Rubio's rhetorical sturdiness stands out as eloquent in an administration that has never given the impression it cares much about eloquence, that to do so would be sissyish and insincere.

It is interesting that they've always been enormously vain about the originality of their policy insights, their perceiving before others the rise of populism. But insights and thoughts are expressed in words. You'd think that to survive as an enduring political entity they'd want to use them better.

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