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A dagger in velvet

In Munich, Rubio softened the rhetoric, not the aim. Europe is still only useful if it submits

Napoleon famously derided his foreign minister, Prince Talleyrand, as '*de la merde dans un bas de soie*' (shit in a silk stocking). That quip came to mind watching Donald Trump's foreign minister, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, address this year's Munich Security Conference.

Last year, US Vice President JD Vance flew to Munich to berate Europe's leaders to their faces, attacking the European Union's immigration policies, hate-speech regulations, and efforts to keep the far right out of power. Rubio is Vance in a silk stocking. He delivered much the same message, this time swaddled in diplomatic gauze.

In 2016, Rubio called Trump 'a con artist' who could not be trusted with the nuclear codes. Now Rubio serves as Trump's chief diplomat – and he just presided, without protest, over the lapse of the last remaining agreement limiting Russian and American nuclear arms.

Rubio's self-betrayal has been so thorough that it amounts to a job qualification. In Trump's Washington, having once possessed principles and publicly discarded them is a more reliable proof of servility than never having had principles at all.

Nostalgia packaged as a goal

In Munich, Rubio saturated his speech with performative reassurance. The United States and Europe 'belong together.' Their destinies are 'intertwined.' America wants a 'reinvigorated alliance' and a 'strong Europe.' But what holds the West together, in his telling, is not shared institutions, not a common commitment to the rule of law, not the post war architecture of treaties and multilateral cooperation. It is 'shared history, Christian faith, culture, heritage, language, ancestry, and the sacrifices our forefathers made together.'

The key words here are 'Christian faith' and 'ancestry.' Rubio defined the

transatlantic bond not as a political alliance but as a civilizational bloodline — a kinship rooted in religion and consanguinity. 'We will always be a child of Europe,' he said, a formulation that casts the relationship not as a contract among sovereign equals but as a family tie — inherited, not chosen, with loyalty following from biology, not from shared principles and goals.

This is not the language of NATO. It is the language of the late Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' — the idea that the West is defined not by what it believes but by who it is; not by its principles but by its bloodlines and its faith. It is a formula that builds an imaginary wall around Christian Europe and its diaspora and leaves outside Europe's Muslim citizens, the secular traditions of the French Republic, and the multi-confessional realities of modern European life.

Rubio's promise of a future 'as proud, as sovereign, and as vital as our civilization's past' gives the game away. The future he describes is not a vision of something to be built. It is the past projected forward — nostalgia packaged as a goal.

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So, what lay beneath the silk was the same litany Vance delivered last year, now stated with somewhat better manners: Europe has outsourced its sovereignty to multilateral institutions. Europe is captive to a 'climate cult' that impoverishes its citizens. Mass immigration threatens 'civilizational erasure.'

Of course, 'civilizational erasure' is not a neutral description of demographic change. It is the vocabulary of the European far right, obsessed with the 'great replacement' of white people. In Munich, Rubio conferred the legitimacy of the world's most powerful government on a narrative that frames immigration not as a policy challenge to be managed but as an existential threat to Western civilization's survival — a framing that places it beyond the reach of compromise or democratic restraint.

Rubio's polish made the phrase more dangerous, not less: couched in the language of shared concern for Europe's future, it sounded almost solicitous, as if the Trump administration were merely trying to save its friends from a peril that they were too polite to name. But the effect is to narrow the space for pragmatic cooperation on asylum, labour mobility, and integration – the actual work European governments need to do –

while handing Europe's nationalist parties an endorsement that they could scarcely have imagined before Trump.

Only useful when submitting

Rubio's casual use of the derogatory phrase 'climate cult' also deserves attention, not for what it says about climate policy, but for what it reveals about the hollowness of Rubio's references to the glorious future his boss claims to be building. Climate policy is, by definition, an investment in the future — perhaps the most consequential one any generation can make. Calling it a cult, dismissing climate mitigation efforts as religious delusion, is a spectacular way of saying that the future habitability of the planet is not worth investing in.

Moreover, Rubio's schedule told a different story than his rhetoric. On Friday, the day before his speech, he skipped the Berlin Format meeting on Ukraine — a gathering that included Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, and the heads of the European Commission, the European Council, and NATO. After his speech, he flew to Bratislava and Budapest to visit Slovakia's Robert Fico and Hungary's Viktor Orbán — the EU's two most Russia-friendly leaders, both of whom Trump has courted as ideological allies and recently hosted at Mar-a-Lago.

So, while Rubio told his Munich audience that America wants a 'strong Europe,' he is publicly backing leaders who have made careers of attacking European institutions from within, vetoing collective action, and cultivating ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin. When pressed on Ukraine in the post-speech interview, Rubio let slip a revealing formulation: the US wants a deal that Ukraine can 'live with' and that Russia can 'accept.' The asymmetry is the point. Ukraine is expected to endure; Russia is expected to be satisfied.

The enemies Rubio identified were not authoritarian great powers but immigration, climate policy, and the multilateralism that has governed the Western alliance since 1945.

Rubio did not fly from Munich to Bratislava and Budapest to strengthen the transatlantic alliance. He went to show which Europe the US prefers: not a Europe of collective defence and shared sovereignty, but a Europe of governments that defy the EU, court the Kremlin, and call it sovereignty.

Russia and China were absent from Rubio's speech. The enemies he

identified were not authoritarian great powers but immigration, climate policy, and the multilateralism that has governed the Western alliance since 1945.

Wang Yi, China's foreign minister, happily exploited this opening, arguing that 'certain countries' undermining multilateral cooperation and reviving a Cold War mentality bear primary responsibility for today's global dysfunction — a rebuke that would have been harder to deliver had Rubio not just dismissed the post war institutional order from the same stage.

Rubio is no Talleyrand. Whereas Talleyrand served France's interests while reshaping Europe's balance of power, Rubio serves a president who mistakes demolition for strength and nostalgia for renewal. The silk stocking softened the tone and flattered the audience. But beneath it lay the same message Vance delivered bare-knuckled last year — that Europe is useful only if it submits, Western civilization is defined by exclusion, and a common future is available only on conditions that guarantee there will never be one.

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