

Thumos (θυμός, the Spirited Soul) and the America First Merchant State: Reflections on Secretary Rubio's Athens Address (The Pnyx, 7 October 2026)

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Abstract

This essay considers Secretary of State Marco Rubio's address at the Pnyx (Athens, 7 October 2026) as a possible second foundation for the conceptual architecture of America First. Where the Munich address of February 2026 appeared to anchor the project in the baseline of 1963 and a narrative of betrayal, the Athens remarks seem to reach further back, to 480 BCE, and to recast the vocabulary of trade, borders, and sovereignty in the older vocabulary of thumos (θυμός), the spirited soul. The essay proceeds in three movements. It first summarizes the address movement by movement, since its argument appears to be carried as much by sequence as by assertion. It then asks what the address might hint at, expand, redirect, and amplify within America First, suggesting among other things a drift from institutions to character, from rights to duty, and from the deal to the debt. Finally, it reads the address through the lens of phenomenological semiotics, in which object, signification, and interpretation turn recursively, and in which logos, thumos, and epithumia might be understood not as faculties of a soul but as registers of signification whose flows among and between one another may produce the dialectics through which political and normative ideology constructs states and other forms of political agency. Read this way, the address may be understood to relocate thumos from the mediating position it held in the Platonic triad to something closer to the generative force of a civilizational self, one that harnesses reason and appetite rather than being governed by them. Plutarch's method of parallel lives, the Tang emperor Taizong's three mirrors, and the figure of the buried ruin are offered as interpretive keys. The essay suggests, tentatively, that the address reverses Taizong's third mirror, offering the United States as the image in which Europe is invited to see its own shortcomings, and that whether the mythic and operational registers of the address can remain coupled is a question its interpretive communities, rather than its speaker, are likely to resolve.

以銅為鏡，可以正衣冠；以古為鏡，可以知興替；以人為鏡，可以明得失。

With bronze as a mirror, one can straighten one's robe and cap; with antiquity as a mirror, one can know the rise and fall of regimes; with another person as a mirror, one can see one's own achievements and shortcomings. Emperor Taizong of Tang (Li Shimin; r. 626-649), on the death of his chief minister and critic Wei Zheng (643), as recorded in the Tang histories.

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. [Address Secretary Rubio delivered at the Pnyx](#) on 7 October 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Since the start of President Trump's second term, Marco Rubio has been an important participant in shaping the conceptual basis of America First. One gets a sense of that project through the Secretary of State's key speeches and remarks. These are usually delivered abroad, and they seem intended to project

the structures, norms, and driving presumptions of America First coherently to foreign audiences who are often not well disposed toward them. That project continues. Among the best known of these remarks is the speech delivered at the Munich Security Conference. With a fascinating set of remarks delivered at the Athenian Pnyx on 7 October 2026, the Secretary now adds another stratum to the layered labor of cognitive coherence that America First is meant to be.

This essay considers the Athens remarks in the context of the layers that came before them and on which they are grounded. The remarks present a remarkable tapestry that weaves together the triadic relationships within America First. They may be clearer when viewed not in themselves but as reflected in ancient tropes from the civilizations to which the Secretary alludes. Among these is the centrality of *thumos* (spiritedness) within the triad that Plato presented to the ancient world as an intermeshing of *logos* (reason), *epithumia* (appetite), and *thumos*. Other triads also help in understanding the matrices that, in the aggregate, make up America First. The first is drawn from the three mirrors of the Tang Dynasty Emperor Taizong: the mirror of oneself, the mirror of time, and the mirror of our reflection in others. The second is semiotic. One might understand America First, and its cognitive starting point in the transactional sensibilities of the Merchant, as moving from the object, to the signification that invests that object with meaning, and then to the interpretation that turns a single act of signification into a collective projection of meaning, through which a coherent and rationalized space can be organized.

These triads are then structured by the discursive device through which the Secretary turns underlying norms into textual performance. That device is the parallel layering of historical figures, which carries the past into the future and presents the future as iterative mimesis. To that end the Secretary offers his audience the layered parallelism of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. These lives, each signifying its time, were foundational to the constitution of the American Republic. They also represented a mimetic iteration of the earlier Greek and Roman cycle, within which the United States and Europe now choose pathways that offer hope, or ruin. And it is perhaps in that layered parallelism that America First and its significations may be found.

The essay begins where the Secretary starts his remarks, with the living ruin of the Acropolis. It follows the address through its twelve movements until it comes to rest with Webster's testimony of debt in 1824, on the view that the order of the speech is itself part of its argument. With that sequence in hand, the essay asks what the address might do to the America First project. It listens first for what the speech only hints at: Persia shading into Iran, China present only as an unnamed rival, the hemisphere, and the long Ottoman shadow. It then considers how the speech expands the project, moving its baseline from 1963 to 480 BCE and recasting national security as something closer to a theory of civilization. That expansion seems to carry a series of redirections, from institutions to character, from rights to duty, and from the deal to the debt, in which the scholar-warrior the Merchant once defined himself against reappears as an honored ancestor. Alongside these redirections the speech amplifies familiar themes, among them the politics of naming, sovereignty as the protected value of alliance, and a candid admission of empire, while the transactional machinery of the Merchant continues to run quietly beneath the myth.

From there the essay turns to object, signification, and interpretation in motion. It suggests that the mythic and operational currents of the speech wind around one another like a helix, each lending the other legitimacy or content, and that each interpretation the speech stabilizes becomes the object of the next. Along the way it pauses over Apollo on the moon, Plutarch's discipline of parallel without identity,

the buried ruin beneath the Parthenon, and the vessel into which a civilization deposits its belief in itself. These threads gradually draw together into the triad of logos, thumos, and epithumia. Read now not as faculties of a soul but as registers of signification, their flows among and between one another may help explain how political and normative ideology constructs states and other forms of political agency. The essay then asks, tentatively, whether Taizong's three mirrors and the Homeric-Platonic soul might be two articulations of a single psycho-semiotic structure. If they are, the Secretary's reversal of the third mirror would take place in the register of thumos. In that reversal the United States is offered as the image in which Europe is invited to see its own shortcomings, and those shortcomings are to be felt as shame and answered with pride rather than recognized as error and corrected. A brief closing note leaves open whether Europe will recognize itself in that mirror or read the glass instead, which may be the question on which the next turn of the helix depends.

The essay is offered as a reading rather than a verdict, and readers are warmly invited to take it up in full and to carry the conversation forward.

Introduction

The [address Secretary Rubio delivered at the Pnyx](#) on 7 October 2026 might usefully be understood as a second foundation laid beneath a structure that was already standing. *The Conceptual Architecture of America First* described that structure as a transition from an order organized around institutions and their techno-bureaucratic managers (the Bureaucrat, 士) to one organized around transactions and the people who make them ([the Merchant](#), 商). It also suggested a weakness in that transition: every system appears to need a narrative, and a politics of the deal may not, by itself, supply the cognitive baseline from which a political line draws its authority. The Secretary's Munich address of February 2026, against which the current remarks are considered, supplied one baseline, the year 1963 and the binary of communism and freedom, from which the betrayal of 1989 could be narrated (*Reflections on Friendship, the Power of National Self-Actualization, and the Defining Baseline of 1963 in and as America First--Text of Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference*). Athens may supply a deeper one. It appears to move the starting point from 1963 to 480 BCE, from a quarrel among allies to a genealogy of a civilization, and from the vocabulary of trade, sovereignty, and borders to the vocabulary of ego, glory, and honor—spiritedness (thumos or thymos, θυμός), what has been suggested to be, from its Homeric origins, something at the foundation of every internal manifestation, whether cognitive or intellectual, emotional, or physical (Caroline P. Caswell, *A Study of Thumos in Early Greek Epic* (Leiden: Brill, 1990)).

The analysis proceeds in three steps, each building on what the prior one leaves unresolved. Section 1 summarizes the speech movement by movement, since its argument appears to be carried as much by sequence as by assertion. Section 2 then asks what the speech might do to the America First project: what it hints at, expands, redirects, and amplifies. Section 3 reads the speech through the phenomenological semiotics developed in my earlier work: object, signification, and interpretation as a recursive motion in which each interpretive matrix becomes the object of the next turn. The speech seems unusually well suited to that reading. It begins with a physical object (the Acropolis, standing behind the speaker), it narrates a ruin that was buried and became a foundation, it cites a precedent that cites a precedent (Webster, the Founders, Plutarch), and it moves between two registers, the mythic and the operational, in alternating rhythm. Read as text it is a sequence. Read as sign in motion it may be closer to a helix, and Section 3 tries to suggest what that might mean. One might also suspect that the speech's central device is its method, and that the method is Plutarch's: Rubio layers parallel lives and parallel moments

(Athens and Rome, Alexander and Caesar, Webster and himself) into crystalline matrices that suggest connection and iterative mimesis, but never identity. Running through all three sections is thumos itself, which, it will be suggested, may serve less as a theme of the address than as the semiotic force that animates it.

The epigraph suggests the cognitive forms of the semiotics that follows. The maxim attributed to the Tang Dynasty Emperor Taizong speaks of three mirrors: the mirror of the appearance of the self, the mirror of what came before and what might come next, and the mirror of the “other” through which one might better “see” the self. Secretary Rubio may be read as using all three. He gazes into the bronze mirror and sees in it America First; he gazes into the past to see the present and the future; and he appears to reverse the gaze of the third, inviting Europe to see itself in the mirror that is the U.S. The bronze mirror reveals the U.S. straightening its outward garments; antiquity shows the West what it was and could become; and for Europe, the United States are offered (the plural, common before the U.S. Civil War, is used deliberately but to different ends) as the image in which Europe might see its own successes and now its contemporary shortcomings. That inversion, if it is one, is the essay’s central suggestion, developed further at Section 3.6.

A note on method and sources. The reading is stereoscopic, an effort at a three dimensional rendering, if only illusory, of two dimensional imagery reflecting the flatness of the imaginaries depicted. I make no attempt to judge whether Rubio’s historical claims are true; the essay considers claims, normative and factual assertions, as signs, and asks what interpretive communities might make of them. Quotations from the address are taken from the published text of the remarks.

1. The Speech: A Comprehensive Summary

The address has twelve movements. They are summarized here in order, because the order is part of the argument.

I. The living ruin. Rubio opens by distinguishing the Acropolis from the world’s other ruins, which are places where history seems to have exhausted itself. The Acropolis, he says, still calls the Western imagination back. He tells the story of 480 BCE: Xerxes’ armies burn Athens; most Athenians evacuate by ship; a handful barricade themselves on the Acropolis and hurl stones on the invaders; they are overwhelmed and the temples razed. When the Athenians return they gather the broken remains of the old Acropolis and bury them in the hill, and decades later, under Pericles, they raise the Parthenon. It has stood twenty-five centuries, and the sons of Athens and Rome have carried the civilization it represents to the ends of the earth. (“The Persians plundered the temples, burned the shrines, and razed the Acropolis to the ground but when the Athenians returned, they gathered the broken remains of the old Acropolis and buried them in the hill where it had stood. And decades later, under Pericles, they raised the Parthenon.” [Rubio Remarks](#)) One might glimpse here something of the cyclicity of a civilization that repeats but is never quite the same as it was before.

II. The debt. Rubio introduces himself as Secretary of State of a republic two and a half centuries old and the great-grandson of settlers from Spain, and says he has come to testify to a debt that time and distance cannot extinguish (“I stand here today as the Secretary of State of that republic, and a great-grandson of settlers who arrived in the new world from Spain – I stand here to testify to a debt that no lapse of time, no distance of space can ever extinguish.” [Rubio Remarks](#)). He catalogs the Greek fingerprints on American government: columns, domes, the name Philadelphia. He asserts that the most commonly cited author in the Federalist Papers was Plutarch, not an Enlightenment theorist. He then concedes the familiar inheritance (democracy, philosophy, law, the vocabulary of politics) and says it is true but shallow.

III. The deeper inheritance. What the West owes Athens, he argues, are not institutions but qualities that cannot be reduced to any political system: fierce individuality and ambition, daring exploration, a hunger for risk and

glory, an impatience with limits. These belong to a people, not a school. He adds that the Greeks looked outward where other cultures looked inward, so that they gave the West history itself, and that they bequeathed the conviction that the unknown can be known because the cosmos has a rational order. That conviction is the foundation of Western math, science, and medicine, and it prepared the soil for the gospel and for the theology of Augustine, Aquinas, and natural law. The result is a civilization with a common anthropology, a shared view of man and his place in the universe.

IV. Excellence, contest, and thumos. The Greeks organized civic life around contest, in art, war, athletics, and statecraft. Though everyone today has a sense of what that means, some senses more informed than others, one might be tempted to understand a (never “the”) consequence this way: the polis (πόλις), understood as the urban center and the humans who constituted it, bound together with its chora (χώρα), so that this space and these humans might together be understood as an arena in which great men proved themselves. The alignment with modern sensibilities suggests both the connection to the old notions and their attenuation over centuries. That gap is perhaps what Secretary Rubio considers. He contrasts an age that builds downward, designing standards so that no one loses and holding the exceptional hostage to the average, with the Parthenon’s builders, who built upward. *Thumos*, the fire of passion, strength, courage, and pride, or perhaps more precisely ego, glory, and honor, is for him the heart of great civilization, and without it nations lose the will to fight, strive, and survive. Rubio holds up the mirror of bronze and seems to see the raiment of Greek (Western) civilization that remains at once unchanged and changed (“But the things we owe to this place – as Americans, and as Westerners – are actually far far deeper. These institutions and ideas – these institutions and ideas were the outward expression of more fundamental qualities we see in the ancient Greeks – qualities that can’t be reduced to any particular political system or theory. . . To know them is to know ourselves.” [Rubio Remarks](#)).

V. The diagnosis. The contemporary West has forgotten thumos. (“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.” [Rubio Remarks](#)). It grew ashamed of what made it exceptional, made nationalism a dirty word, tore down monuments, taught children to be ashamed of their countries, opened borders, outsourced industry, let militaries decay, and transferred sovereignty to global bureaucracies. Others filled the vacuum.

It is here that the embrace of thumos becomes interesting, and interesting in two ways. The first is its apparent detachment of thumos from the Platonic triad, in which the soul is a composite of *logos*, *thumos*, and *epithumia*—reason, spiritedness, and the appetites. In the *Timaeus*, Plato places the rational part in the head, the spirited part in the chest near the heart, and the appetitive part below the midriff. The second is the address’s implicit distance from much of what post modernity has done to thumos (again detached from, or connected in distinctive ways to, *logos* and *epithumia*). The Secretary might be heard to foreground the heart over the head and the gut. The reason may be fairly clear, though its politics are contested. One might wonder whether the Secretary was suggesting that several centuries of Enlightenment, in which *logos* was foregrounded, produced tremendous systems, structures, and technologies that were nonetheless soulless; a soullessness that could produce the Industrial Revolution and, at its extreme, the capacity of collectives to kill millions subject only to the end point of logical sequencing. Likewise the gut, hysteria as well as the bodily passions, might be thought to produce chaos; yet it also produces life. The antidote to chaos has often been thought to reside in *logos* alone, which may in turn have stripped the body of life. Thumos, the address might be thought to remind its listeners, could represent a more classically balanced intermediary between reason without life and life without reason, the place where both might be mediated. And it is perhaps that centering which the speech suggests has been lost, its vestiges visible in

Enlightenment extremism on one side and populist chaos on the other. If both logos and epithumia tend at their end points toward death, then thumos might be read as life in the mediation between the extremes. This is not quite Plato, of course, who in the *Phaedrus* made reason the charioteer driving the two horses of spirit and appetite. The Secretary seems instead to suggest thumos propelling humanity by harnessing the combustion of logos and epithumia. That move may carry the Secretary from the ancients toward the post moderns. In the context of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, there is an implication worth considering (perhaps unconsciously put forward through the remarks) that in modernity something of epithumia has been transformed into the resentment of slave morality, against which thumos, though rarely named as such by Nietzsche, might be read as a more pronounced mediating force, expressed through the *sublimation of base* drives (cruelty, domination) into something that embeds reason in desire. One might go further, with some caution, and read Deleuze and Guattari's "desiring-machines" (*Anti-Oedipus*) as a later reworking of desire that some readers might set alongside thumos, though neither author frames it that way. All of this lies well beyond what the Secretary said, but perhaps not beyond the capacity of his audience to hear, whether subliminally or otherwise.

VI. The crossroads and the choice. The Secretary does, however, suggest where the diagnosis leads: the next decade will write the next century: the West either keeps its place at the head of the world or sinks into atrophy and servitude. "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." ([Rubio Remarks](#)). Under President Trump, the United States has chosen the unapologetic pursuit of national power: control of critical supply chains, reindustrialization, rebuilt defense, dominance in the technologies of the future. It chooses new frontiers, named as advanced manufacturing and super intelligence, drones, weapons and warfare, chips, minerals, cyber, energy, a return to the moon, and a new age of space exploration.

VII. Greek statecraft. The ancient Greeks, for all their ideals, were not naive. They understood national interests, the need for prudence and diplomacy, and the need to wield force when those fail. Power requires the credibility that one is willing to use it. This classical understanding is what the Trump Administration hopes to reclaim, for the whole civilization.

VIII. Europe, Greece, and the ledger of alliance. Europe can awaken from its long slumber, and there are signs: higher defense spending, new partnerships and programs, expanded production, following the commitments at The Hague last year. Greece is a model ally on energy, migration, and defense, and Rubio hopes Europe will follow. Passions have strained transatlantic bonds but must not break them. The alliance should not be zero-sum; the proof offered is the agreement among the United States, Denmark, and Greenland last month, which he says reshapes the Arctic and in which all three partners emerged victorious. "We want to win together. We must win together."

IX. Loyalty and the hero. Rubio rejects the fashionable view that enlightened foreign policy ranks the global community above one's own people. The Greeks saw nothing selfish in loyalty to one's nation. Their ideal was the great man who wins immortality through striving and sacrifice for something larger than himself, as in Socrates, the three hundred Spartans, and Achilles choosing glory at Troy. The line runs through the Christian martyr, Thomas More, the Alamo, and the pledge of lives, fortunes, and sacred honor in the Declaration of Independence. This is the West's sense of duty, and he contrasts it with the "radical mullahs of Iran," whose "cult of death" celebrates martyrdom as an end in itself. Western heroes do not worship death; they honor those who give life up rather than betray principle. These qualities, he insists, are not universal. They are the product of a distinct character that arose in Greece, and the civilization that carries them must be defended with the passion of the forefathers.

X. The lineage. Athens passes to the builders of European cathedrals (Milan, Cologne, Florence), to Michelangelo, and to Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and Newton. The hunger for knowledge produces Magellan, Columbus, and Apollo 11. The spirit that drove Alexander reappears in Caesar, Charlemagne, and Cortes. In America the tradition rediscovers itself on an open and wild land, where the Greek aspiration for new horizons becomes the frontier spirit and Athens and Rome transform a seaboard republic into a continental empire. The greatest Americans are "born in Athens, formed by Rome, baptized in Christendom, hardened in the furnace of medieval Europe, endowed with the English genius for liberty," and reborn in the new world.

XI. The inflection point. The threats are as real as in antiquity. National interests did not vanish in the face of international institutions, and war did not disappear because the West preferred peace. Institutions and alliances must be rebuilt so that they defend the sovereignty of their members rather than abolish it, and nations need not abandon their identities to recognize common interests. Greece is a working model, in defense, energy, technology, and the shared ambition to secure Europe's borders against mass migration.

XII. Webster and the mirror. Rubio recalls the Greek rising of 1821 and Daniel Webster's address to Congress three years later, which pointed to the columns and the assembly around him as evidence that Americans are Greece's debtors. Those words, he says, are as true today. The history of Greece does not merely show institutions in embryo; it shows an image of ourselves. The West should be intensely proud of what he calls the greatest story ever known to man, and from the first men and women of the West it can rediscover the virtues, the courage, and the strength to face the dangers of its own time.

2. The Speech and the America First Project: What It Hints At, Expands, Redirects, and Amplifies

2.1 What it hints at

Several of the speech's most consequential signs are never stated. They might, however, be partly reconstructed by considering Secretary Rubio's earlier remarks delivered at the Munich Security Conference. The two sets of remarks might be considered bookends of a theorization of America First, at least from the perspective of the Secretary of State.

The first is **Persia**, now bound up in some way with Iran—Greece and Persia; the U.S. and Iran. The opening story gives the West's founding trauma an invader, the greatest empire of the age, and the three hundred Spartans in movement IX again face "the vast armies of Persia." Shortly afterward the only named present-day adversary is Iran, and its leaders are cast as the antithesis of the Western hero. The speech never says that Iran is Persia returned. Perhaps it does not need to. The sequence seems to invite the listener to complete the equation, and my earlier work has considered how the Iran conflict of 2026 sits inside the America First narrative. A binary may thereby be rebuilt: Munich had the communism/freedom line of 1963 as its foundational binary, and Athens might be read as offering a replacement in the West's heroic duty against what the speech calls a cult of death.

The second is **China**, present only as the "adversaries and rivals" who built wealth and power "in our stead." A civilizational address that names no civilizational rival other than Iran leaves the most important comparison to inference, and my suggestion elsewhere that the American and Chinese models may be converging in function while diverging in rhetoric is perhaps made more visible by the omission. Both appear to frame national security as the ordering premise; both invoke a rejuvenation narrative; and here the United States seems to give its own narrative an antiquity that matches the Chinese appeal to civilizational continuity. The implication, never spoken, may be that they meet as equals, or perhaps as *primi inter pares*.

The third is **the hemisphere and Cuba**. The Penn State article reads the Western Hemisphere as the near periphery, the wall around the apex sovereign, and Cuba as the test case of transactional ideology. None of that appears in Athens. What appears instead is the speaker's own origin: he is the great-grandson of settlers "from Spain." It would be a mistake to read much into the choice of Spain over Cuba. Rubio's Munich address ran a similar ancestry litany (Italian, English, Scots-Irish, German, French, Spanish, and Dutch contributions, and Rubio's own Italian and Spanish forebears), and the device there, as here, is rhetorical: it signals connection to the audience rather than delivering a catechism of identity. The Hispanic strand enters the lineage as one more link (Cortes stands in the line of Alexander and Caesar), and the Cuban question is simply not the speech's business.

The fourth is **the Ottoman impulse**, at least from the time the Ottomans came to present themselves, in some registers, as successors to the Roman (and Greek-Roman) state, and which, like Austria after 1918, now finds itself (or at least the idea of itself) confined in a much smaller space. The Greek revolution is introduced as recovery from Ottoman rule, and Turkey, a NATO partner whose weight in the eastern Mediterranean would not be lost on a Greek audience, appears only in that past tense. A hint of an alliance system with more than one internal fault line might be heard in what is left unspoken.

2.2 What it expands

The temporal baseline. The Secretary's Munich remark's choice of 1963 as starting point frames structure and values, but also restricts the betrayal to the post-1989 interval and keeps the 1945 order as a still-honored inheritance. Athens expands the baseline by twenty-four centuries and, in doing so, relocates the betrayal. It is no longer the delusion of a single generation of elites; it is a loss of character across "too much of the West." The post-1989 order still appears, but as a late symptom.

The three rejections become three symptoms. Rubio's Munich triad (trade as politics, supranational governance, open borders) seems to return almost point for point in movement V: outsourced industry, outsourced sovereignty, opened borders. The addition is the military that was allowed to "wither," and the diagnosis, which now appears to read these as expressions of shame rather than error. The policy critique may thus have acquired a psychology, and it is a thumotic one: shame is the wound of a spirited soul that has lost its sense of honor. That would be an expansion in a sense the earlier analysis might recognize: the cognitive cage acquires a floor.

National security becomes a theory of civilization. In the Munich remarks, armies fight for "a people," not abstractions. In Athens the people have a trait, and the trait has an ancestry. The ordering premise of national security that I have previously identified as transforming in part and displacing in part human-rights convergence appears now to have acquired anthropology (*["Between the Eagle, the Bear, and the Dragon: Canadian Business and Human Rights Through the Lens of National Security," Remarks delivered at the Canadian Forum for Business and Human Rights Inaugural Conference, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada, 14 November 2025](#)*). Rubio moves here from the more conventional discussion of what states need, to one more precisely centering on but what kind of beings the citizens of such states are supposed to be.

Self-actualization becomes civilizational. The article reads Munich's "restore to us a clearer sense of ourselves" as national self-actualization. Athens adds the instrument of recognition: the history of Greece "shows us an image of ourselves," and "to know them is to know ourselves." Self-actualization is now achieved by looking into an ancestral mirror.

The frontier. The speech extends the political line into technology and space with a specificity not found in the Munich remark's frame: super intelligence, drones, chips, minerals, cyber, the moon. These are cast as the

contemporary form of the Greek yearning to chart the unknown. The Merchant's "pathways" (the American Silk Roads of the 100 Days analysis) are here recoded as an exploratory impulse in the blood. ([*The Conceptual Architecture of America First—Ideological Transactionalism and the Case of Cuba*](#)).

2.3 What it redirects

From institutions to character. The article's central claim is that America First subordinates, without abolishing, the institution-building impulse to the transaction-building one. The speech performs the subordination at the site where the institution was born. Standing at the Pnyx, where the Athenian assembly met, Rubio concedes that Athens gave us democracy and law, then says these were only the "outward expression" of more fundamental qualities that "can't be reduced to any particular political system." The institutional inheritance is demoted to epiphenomenon.

From rights to duty. The words "human rights" do not occur. The moral grammar is honor, loyalty, sacrifice, duty, and a code. The universal individual claim-holder of the post-1945 order is replaced by a particular civilization's hero, and the speech says outright that heroism, honor, and duty are not universal. This is the normative shift I had suggested was emerging at the structural level (from convergence and rights toward sovereign solidarity and security; "[*Between the Eagle, the Bear, and the Dragon*](#)"), now stated at the level of moral psychology.

From universal human nature to a particular civilization. In June 2025 Rubio grounded America First in the claim that human nature does not change and that the desire to belong, expressed in nationhood, is part of it; the author read that as a return to a "natural" condition in which individuals are human by belonging. In March 2025 he said of China that it grew rich but did not become "just like us," a rejection of convergence. Athens carries the second thought further than the first. Heroism, honor, and duty are not universal, Rubio says; they belong to a distinct character that arose in Greece. The belonging once said to be natural to all humans has become a lineage owned by one civilization, and the theory of human nature behind the 2025 remarks gives way to a theory of inheritance.

From the deal to the debt. The Merchant's vocabulary is the deal, reciprocity, and value for effort. The speech opens instead with a debt that no lapse of time can extinguish and ends with Webster's "greatly her debtors." A ledger term has migrated into the language of civilizational obligation, and it flows in a direction the Merchant would not ordinarily accept: toward the ancestor rather than toward the counterparty. ([*The "Merchant" \(商\), the "Bureaucrat" \(士\) and the "Tariff War"--The Cognitive Cages of the New Apex Post-Global and the Condition of the U.S. and China in their Folie à Deux*](#)).

From the scholar-warrior as antagonist to the scholar-warrior as ancestor. This may be among the more significant redirections. The typology I have developed places the warrior/scholar (士) with the institutional bureaucrat as the Merchant's opposite. The speech's heroes are Socrates, Achilles, and the Spartans, together with the Greek philosophers who stand behind the "common anthropology": scholar and warrior types of the highest prestige. One might suggest that America First has taken the moral capital of the type it had defined itself against and housed it in the Merchant's state, while the techno-bureaucrat of "global bureaucracies" is left as the only villain of the type. Put in the terms of the Platonic triad, the speech appears to graft thumos onto a Merchant whose native register is closer to epithumia, the appetite for gain, while leaving the Bureaucrat to stand for a logos without spirit.

From partnership to inheritance. Munich offered Europe a family relationship, quarrelsome and bound by faith and history. Athens offers a hierarchy of lineage: Europe is the sleeper who should awaken and rekindle a fire first lit in a place that Americans, as heirs, now remember better. The invitation to "win together" sits beside the claim that Europe has forgotten itself.

2.4 What it amplifies

Naming. I have suggested the ways that the Trump Administration treats naming as dominion (*ming*, 明名), as with the Gulf of America and the executive order that replaces "artificial intelligence" with "Super Intelligence." (*Brief Reflections on President Trump's Executive Order, "Inaugurating the Era of Super Intelligence" (29 Sept 2026) and the Naming of the Humans Who will Serve in and as the Super Intelligence Force*). The address is saturated with naming acts. "Nationalism" is rehabilitated from a dirty word. *Thumos* is retrieved in Greek and defined. "The West" is repeated until it behaves as a subject with a character, a conscience, and a destiny. And Secretary Rubio himself uses "super intelligence," [in the new nomenclature](#), in a list of frontiers: the State Department's most formal civilizational speech carries the administration's lexical reform into foreign policy. The etymology the author traced ("super" as above, beyond) fits the speech's own architectural contrast between building downward and building upward.

Sovereignty as the protected value of alliance. Institutions and alliances exist "to defend" sovereignty, "not to abolish" it. This is Munich's "putting the State back in the state system," sharpened.

The honest admission of empire. Munich's candor about expansion and conquest ("not candy coated") reappears with a name: the seaboard republic became a "continental empire." The word is offered as inheritance, not accusation.

Decline as choice. The address intensifies the Munich claim that weakness is a choice: the crossroads is stark (act now or lose the choice), and the alternative is "atrophy and servitude."

Operational transactionalism preserved. The Greek mythology does not displace the ledger. Greece is praised as a model ally because of its performance on energy, migration, and defense, and the Arctic agreement is reported in the language of a deal in which all parties "emerged victorious." The Merchant is still running the operations. The author's reading of the March 2025 Hewitt interview described America First as an accumulation of win-win relationships and named Greenland and the Panama Canal as the apex borderlands; the Arctic agreement is the speech's evidence that the model has produced a deal. The speech's novelty is that he now does so under a heroic iconography.

Parallel construction. The Munich address already built its case from paired nodes: the 1963 binary and its 1989 sequel, a litany of ancestries, the old order and the order to be rebuilt. Athens seems to make the method itself the argument, as Section 3.5 suggests.

3. Object, Signification, Interpretation in Motion: The Helix of the Athens Address

3.1 The object that starts the circle

The address begins with a deictic gesture: "what stands behind me." The Acropolis is an object in the speaker's literal field of vision, and every later sign in the speech seems staged against it. In the framework I have been developing, the object is not inert. It bears significations deposited over time, and the speaker's act is to select among them. The Acropolis could signify the birthplace of democratic assembly, the monument of an imperial city, a tourist site, a ruin. Rubio appears to select one signification, the continuity of a living character, by contrasting it

with ruins in which history has "exhausted itself." That selection might be understood as the first turn of the circle, the moment an object becomes a sign. And the character so selected is, one begins to suspect, thumotic before it is anything else.

3.2 Two waves in alternating phase

Read as a sequence, the speech might be mistaken for a linear argument that moves from past to present to policy. Read for its subtextual meaning, it may behave more like two currents that rise and fall against each other. The first is the mythic-genealogical current: ruin, debt, qualities, heroes, lineage. The second is the operational-transactional current: supply chains, defense budgets, The Hague, the Arctic agreement, migration, alliances to be "rebuilt." When one swells, the other tends to recede, and it is perhaps at each point of passage between them that one draws its authority from the other.

Movement	Mythic-genealogical current	Operational-transactional current	What the meeting of the currents may produce
I-II	Crest: Xerxes, the buried ruin, Plutarch, Philadelphia	Near zero	The Acropolis becomes a sign of continuity
III-IV	Crest: thumos, agon, building upward	Near zero	A character is defined that can be lost
V	Falling: shame, forgetting	Rising: borders, industry, sovereignty, arms	The loss of character is read through policy failures
VI	Near zero	Crest: "we choose" national power, super intelligence, chips, the moon	The policy list is read as the recovery of character
VII	Rising: the Greeks were not naive	Falling	Classical authority is lent to credible force
VIII	Low	Crest: The Hague, Greece, the Arctic deal, "win together"	The ancestor's authority is cashed in as alliance terms
IX	Crest: Socrates, the Spartans, Achilles, the Declaration	Low, but carrying a premise (loyalty to nation)	The duty of the hero becomes the duty of the citizen
X	Crest: the lineage from Athens to Apollo 11	Rising: the frontier	The technological program is read as ancestral inheritance

Movement	Mythic-genealogical current	Operational-transactional current	What the meeting of the currents may produce
XI	Falling	Crest: threats, rebuilt institutions, Greece as model	The inheritance is translated into institutional design
XII	Crest: Webster, the mirror	Near zero	The speaker closes the loop on the object

The suggestion is not that the two voices alternate, which any speech does, but that each may be the other's shadow, displaced in time. The mythic current might be where the operational finds its legitimacy; the operational might be where the mythic finds its content. The two seem interwoven, like mating snakes: a double helix that is sequentially linear on the page and spatially dense in the listener's interpretive field. Or perhaps, given the context, the caduceus of Hermes, the rod of Asclepius, or the staff of Moses. The serpent also carries a warning into the symbolism of the American founding: the rattlesnake of the Gadsden flag of 1775, with its yellow field and its "Don't Tread on Me," which retains its power in contemporary America. Its Greek resonance might take us back to Tiresias, who, Ovid writes (*Metamorphoses* III), came upon two snakes mating, struck them with his staff, and was transformed into a woman; seven years later, striking the snakes again, he was turned back into a man (some later retellings have him kill one of the pair). Asked to settle an argument between Zeus and Hera over which sex experienced greater pleasure in love, Tiresias said it was woman and was struck blind by Hera; Zeus, in compensation, gave him the gift of prophecy. The figure of the seer blinded for seeing too much may not be an idle one for a speech about mirrors.

3.3 The recursive turns

The speech's signs seem to cascade in a pattern the framework would anticipate: an interpretation, once stabilized, becomes the object of the next signification.

Turn one. Object: the Acropolis. Signification: a ruin that did not die. Interpretation: Greece is the origin of the West.

Turn two. "The West" is now the object, with attributes attached (exploration, rational cosmos, agon). Signification: a character, thumos. Interpretation: civilizations have a fire that can be kept or lost.

Turn three. The loss of the fire is now the object. Signification: shame, outsourcing, open borders, global bureaucracies. Interpretation: a crossroads, at which decision appears as the only thing that matters.

Turn four. The decision is the object. Signification: the Trump Administration's "choice." Interpretation: reindustrialization, rearmament, super intelligence, space. These policy items are themselves now signs of recovered thumos.

Turn five. The frontier is the object, and its signification is the Greek yearning to chart the unknown. Interpretation: Apollo 11 and the return to the moon belong to the same line as Alexander and Magellan. (The speech does not remark that Apollo was a Greek god; the sign carries a Greek name to the moon without the speaker having to say so. That observation is mine, not the speech's; see 3.4.) The circle returns to turn one: the lunar frontier is the new Acropolis, a place where a civilization proves itself against the unknown.

Each turn covers different ground. The helix does not retrace the circle. The Acropolis at the end of the speech is not the one at the beginning, because it now carries the sedimented meanings of four turns, including a policy program that the first turn did not contain.

3.4 Digression: Apollo on the Moon

The sign that closes turn five may reward a longer look, because it seems a small instance of the whole semiotic movement. Rubio mentions Apollo 11 once, in a list, between Columbus and the policy of returning astronauts to the moon. Consider what the name carries.

Apollo is a Greek god, and one of the few whose name Rome kept unchanged, so he needs no Roman twin of the kind Plutarch pairs. He is also the god of Delphi, where tradition places the maxims "know thyself" and "nothing in excess." The first is the speech's own mirror trope ("to know them is to know ourselves"). The second sits uneasily with a speech that praises "chafing at all boundaries and limits." The god of measure lends his name to the frontier of limitless striving, and the irony is worth holding in view: the lineage of boundary-breaking is signified by the figure of the boundary.

The program took the name in 1960 (its namer is reported to have been struck by the image of Apollo's chariot carrying the sun), and the July 1969 mission layered further signs on the first. Its lunar module was called Eagle, an emblem both Roman and American. Its command module was called Columbia, the poetic name of America and a derivative of Columbus. One mission thus held a Greek god, a Roman standard, and a Genoese navigator, which might be read as the speech's genealogy in miniature: Athens, Rome, and the voyage to the new world. The current lunar program is named Artemis, for Apollo's twin. The speech does not use the name, but a listener who knows it might hear the sister follow the brother, a Plutarchan pair of the kind the speech builds by hand elsewhere.

Seen as signification in motion, the object (a lunar landing) acquires a Greek name, which becomes a Delphic maxim, which becomes the speech's own mirror, which closes the circle at the Acropolis: the speech goes to the moon and finds Delphi. What it does not carry along is the god's other maxim. The question the semiotics poses is whether a civilization whose heroes strain at every limit can be signified by the deity of limits without the sign being read against itself, and whether the speech's audience will supply that reading. That observation is mine, not the speaker's.

3.5 Parallel lives and mimetic matrices: Plutarch, Webster, and the mirror

The speech's governing device is Plutarch's, and the point deserves emphasis. Rubio's invocation of Plutarch as the most widely cited author of the *Federalist* is more than an appeal to authority; it supplies his method. Plutarch's *Lives* pair a famous Greek with a famous Roman (Alexander with Caesar, Demosthenes with Cicero, Theseus with Romulus) and close each pair with a formal comparison. From these nodes Plutarch constructs a set of parallels that aligns the arc of Greek development with that of Roman. The parallel suggests connection and recurrence, not identity: the comparison is as likely to mark where two lives differ as where they rhyme. Even the *Federalist*'s pen-name belongs to the method, since Publius is Plutarch's Publicola, whom he paired with Solon.

Rubio builds his own parallels in the same way. His line from Alexander to Caesar is Plutarch's pair, extended forward through Charlemagne and Cortes. The Parthenon's builders are paired with the builders of Milan, Cologne, and Florence; the Greek sculptors with Michelangelo; the Greek students of the cosmos with Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and Newton; Socrates, the Spartans, and Achilles with the Christian martyr, Thomas

More, and the Alamo. Each pairing is a node, and the nodes are cross-linked into a matrix whose rows are domains of excellence and whose columns are relays of a civilization.

Domain	Greek origin	European relay	American iteration
Form and craft	The Parthenon; the sculptors' quest to perfect the human form	Cathedrals of Milan, Cologne, and Florence; Michelangelo	Greek columns and domes carved into the architecture of government
The cosmos and knowledge	The search for the structure of the universe	Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton	Apollo 11; the return to the moon; super intelligence
Exploration	Greek historians and explorers looking outward	Magellan, Columbus	The frontier spirit; "new frontiers"
Conquest and empire	Alexander	Caesar, Charlemagne, Cortes	The seaboard republic become a continental empire
Sacrifice and duty	Socrates, the Spartans, Achilles	The Christian martyr, Thomas More	The Alamo; the pledge of lives, fortunes, and sacred honor
Testimony	Plutarch's <i>Lives</i>	Plutarch cited by the Founders	Webster in 1824; Rubio at the Pnyx in 2026

The matrix appears iterative rather than identical. Each cell reads as an echo of its neighbors and never as a copy: the Alamo is not Thermopylae, and Apollo 11 is not Copernicus. That may be the Plutarchan discipline, and it lets the speech claim inheritance without claiming identity. My Munich essay proposed that the intensity and character of mimesis between one iteration and the next might reveal the premises of the collective that produces it.

Considered that way, the movement from Munich to Athens seems to be a shift from lateral matrices to a vertical one. Munich's litany was plural, a table of peoples who made America and for whom Europe is the parent. Athens gives a single line of descent, "born in Athens, formed by Rome, baptized in Christendom," and a hierarchy of ancestors in place of a family of cousins.

The closing gesture seems to follow the same logic. Rubio quotes Webster's 1824 address to Congress, which pointed to the columns and the assembly around the speakers as proof of a Greek debt. Speaking at the site of the Greek assembly, Rubio repeats the figure: a representative of the American republic points to the architecture around him to testify to a debt. Behind Webster stand the Founders, who cited Plutarch, and behind Plutarch stand the Greeks and Romans whose lives he paired. Each speaker imitates the one before, and each imitation shifts the meaning slightly: Webster's debt is to institutions (the free form of government, public discussion), whereas Rubio's appears to be to character. The mimetic chain may thus carry a drift, and part of what the speech does is perhaps to veil that drift behind the continuity of the gesture, so that a change in what is owed appears as a repetition of what was always owed. One might add that what drifts is precisely the passage from *logos* (Webster's "contest of mind with mind") to *thumos*.

My earlier work has invoked mimetic posthumanism and the iterative, inductive logic of systems in which the movement of meaning becomes its own interpretive ground. The Athens address may illustrate the point at the scale of a single speech. Its signs seem to generate a current that supplies the premises for its own next increment; the speech is perhaps both product and instrument of the cognitive cage it elaborates. One might think of history here as a simultaneity that pulses and then streams out as sequence, and the table in 3.2 as one way of watching a sequence stream out of a simultaneity.

3.6 Reverse Mimetics: Backward Aspiration and the Tang Mirror

A method the author uses elsewhere is to read contemporary leaders through the reverse mimetics of their backward-looking aspiration: to ask which past a leader's self-presentation reaches for, and then to read the present as that past's attempted iteration. Applied to leaders whose declared ambitions look back to Ottoman or Sassanian precedents, the method asks what is being iterated and what is left out. Applied to Rubio, it sharpens a contrast and exposes a layer of the speech's Persian figure. The Persia of Rubio's opening is Xerxes' Achaemenid empire, the foil against which Athens defines itself. A Sassanian reference in an adversary's rhetoric would be a different Persia altogether, and the Persia that the speech confronts may not be one its adversary claims.

The structural difference is the direction of the claim. Ottoman or Sassanian aspiration typically reaches for restoration of an earlier polity, a continuity project of the same state across time. Rubio's genealogy makes no claim to restore Athens. It claims succession by relay: Athens to Rome to Christendom to America, each a different polity and each an echo of the last. The parallel is offered as connection, not identity, and no one is asked to become Greek.

Closer in style, though not in ideology, may be the iterative mimetics I associate with Tang-era Chinese discourse, in which an argument is built by laying present figures alongside earlier ones and letting the allusion do the work. A maxim attributed to the Tang emperor Taizong states the method: with antiquity as a mirror one can know the rise and fall of regimes (以古為鏡，可以知興替), the second of the three mirrors in the epigraph to this essay. Rubio's Athens might be read as a mirror in this sense. The history of Greece, he says, "shows us an image of ourselves." The maxim has a third mirror, and the occasion matters: Taizong spoke it in grief at the death of Wei Zheng, the minister whose criticism he had valued, so that the person as mirror is the one who shows the ruler his errors. What may be most remarkable in the speech's echo of the maxim is that it appears to reverse the third mirror. Rubio and the United States seem cast as the person in whose image Europe is invited to see its own contemporary flaws, with Greece offered as a second human mirror, the model ally whose example the rest of Europe is urged to follow. The roles would then be inverted from Taizong's scene: the critic is not the minister who tells a ruler his faults but the ally who tells a continent, and what the critic shows is not the ruler's error but the image of a character, a thumos, that the continent may have let slip. Antiquity shows the West what it was; America, the speech implies, shows Europe what it has become. This is a reading, not a claim about the speaker's intent. Contemporary Chinese leaders deploy something like the style as well. The resemblance should not be overread. In Chinese practice the mirror tends to reflect the continuity of one political body under the leadership of a vanguard party, and its parallels tend to be canonical and cumulative. In Rubio's, the mirror seems to reflect a civilizational character carried by a series of polities, and its parallels are rhetorical and open. The Chinese layering tends to serve an institution, the Party-State's claim to continuity and its historical teleology; Rubio's appears to serve a type, the hero-merchant. The convergence I have noted at the functional level, that the United States and China both seem to rest on national security as the ordering premise while diverging in rhetoric, may thus have a stylistic counterpart: both now appear to govern in part by iterative allusion to a deep past.

3.7 Vessels, the *ding*, and the buried ruin

Perhaps the most striking figure in the speech is also its smallest. When the Athenians returned, they did not clear the debris of the old Acropolis; they buried it in the hill, and the Parthenon rose over it. The detail seems to take the shape of two ideas I have explored in recent work.

The first is the Bolognese analogy from my essay [*Reconstructing Legality in Cuba--Structure, First Principles, Methodology, and Pathways to Reform \(Action Plan and Quality Checklist\)*](#): reconstruction is never from a blank slate, and a new order is built from the materials of the one it replaces, carrying their marks. The speech offers its own reconstruction story, with a significant ambiguity. The institutional order of 1945 and 1989 could be the Persian ruin (destroyed by an external enemy and cleared away) or the old Acropolis (buried and built upon). Rubio says the institutions must be rebuilt, not abolished. The institutionalist listener will hear the buried foundation; the convinced America Firster may hear the cleared rubble. The sign supports both, and that capacity is what makes it useful.

The second is the vessel logic of my Magnifica Humanitas draft: a community deposits its belief in an object that becomes authoritative, the *ding*, and the contest is over who is authorized to read the vessel. The Parthenon, in the speech, might be read as such a vessel, into which a collective deposits its belief that it is exceptional, rational, and brave. The speech's wager seems to be that it can reopen the vessel and read it for the present. Tacitus supplies a counterpoint: Pompey enters the Jerusalem temple and finds no image, the sanctuary being, in the Roman account, empty. The Greek vessel is full of an image (the achievement of form, the human perfected) and the Judean vessel, to the Roman eye, is empty. Rubio's genealogy runs Athens to Rome to Christendom, and Jerusalem enters only as "the gospel" finding "fertile soil." What the genealogy takes from the empty vessel, and what it leaves, is a further question worth posing.

The vessel logic also bears on the frontier list. The author's analysis of the Super Intelligence order argues that naming is an instrument of cognitive framing: to call the technology "super" is to invite embrace rather than caution. The Athens address provides the vessel for that naming. If super intelligence is the new frontier and the frontier is the Greek inheritance, then the machine is deposited into the same vessel as the Parthenon: a thing that a civilization makes in its own image and then reads as proof of its character.

3.8 Naming, *ming* and *shi*

In the Guiguzi tradition (English, *Guiguzi, China's First Treatise on Rhetoric* (Hui Wu (trans), 2016)), I have on more than one occasion invoked *ming* (the name) and *shi* (the actuality) as concepts in tension. One of the many insights that tension yields is that a ruler's skill may lie in aligning *ming* and *shi*. The speech seems to work by naming a thing, thumos, whose actuality is then inferred from the success of the naming. The decline of the West is likewise inferred from the absence of the name: "nationalism" became a "dirty word" and so the thing was lost; restore the word and, the speech implies, the thing returns. This may be a powerful semiotic strategy, and also an exposed one, because the same operation can be run in the opposite direction by readers who supply other names for the same facts. A Greek listener may hear thumos and think of the Greek civil wars; a European listener may hear "slumber" and think of the welfare state; a Chinese reader may hear a rejuvenation narrative with a different antiquity. The helix, it seems, does not close on the speaker's terms alone.

3.9 Interpretive communities and the limits of the helix

I have long observed that common understanding is not possible without a common language, but that a common language also hides the lack of common understanding behind the use of common language to different communities with different understanding of the meaning and deployment of words (see, e.g., [here](#), and [here](#)). For

readers inside the post-1945 institutional cage, the speech will be read through its omissions (rights, law, the weight of Greek disunity, the Peloponnesian War that ended Athenian hegemony) and its celebration of agon. The Melian Dialogue in Thucydides, which I have used to describe the limited options of states in the middle, is the obvious counter-text: Athens as the hegemon that tells the weak what they must accept. The speech installs America as Athens's heir, and middle states such as Canada and Colombia may be tempted to hear the heir's voice as the envoy's. The speech does not intend that reading, but its genealogy invites it.

For readers inside the America First cage, the speech may complete what my earlier analysis suggested was missing: a cognitive baseline that is not merely negative. It seems to give the Merchant a founding myth, the Warrior-Scholar an honorable place, and the Bureaucrat a clear opposite. What the framework suggests watching is whether the two currents stay coupled. If the mythic runs ahead of the operational (a thumotic language that no deal can satisfy), the speech's own standard of credibility and willingness to use power may become the standard against which it is measured. If the operational runs ahead (deals that no myth can dignify), the Merchant may again be exposed as a Merchant, appetite without spirit. The Athens address might be read as an attempt to hold the two in balance. Whether it can is perhaps a question about the interpretive communities that will take up its signs, and about the objects they, in turn, will make of them.

3.10 Logos, thumos, and epithumia as a psycho-semiotic triad

It may now be possible to gather the threads that thumos has drawn through the preceding pages, and to ask what happens when the Platonic triad is lifted out of the psychology of the soul and set down within the logic of phenomenological semiotics. In that move, logos, thumos, and epithumia cease, perhaps, to be faculties housed in head, chest, and belly. They might instead be understood as registers of signification, each with its own objectivity, that is, its own way of constituting the objects it then reads. Logos would be the register in which objects are constituted as ordered, measurable, and knowable: the rational cosmos the speech attributes to the Greeks, the standard, the rule, the institution. Epithumia would be the register in which objects are constituted as things to be possessed, consumed, or exchanged: the appetite for prosperity, supply chains, minerals, markets, the deal. Thumos would be the register in which objects are constituted as bearers of honor or shame: the monument that may be torn down or raised, the word "nationalism" that may be dirtied or restored, the ally who may be trusted or betrayed.

Something may be gained by recalling that the triad did not begin with Plato. In the Homeric poems, thumos appears less as one part among three than as a field within which feeling, deliberation, and impulse are not yet clearly sorted: a hero takes counsel with his thumos, is stirred in it, and is moved by it to act. Plato's tripartite soul might then be read as a later act of differentiation, one that cuts logos and epithumia out of a thumotic whole and assigns thumos the narrower office of the spirited part. If that genealogy is roughly right, the triad might be understood as psycho-semiotic in a double sense. It is psychological, in that it describes the composition of a self; and it is semiotic, in that each of its terms names a distinct way in which objects come to mean something to that self. The Athens address may be read as quietly undoing the Platonic cut, returning thumos to something closer to its Homeric amplitude, the ground from which knowing and wanting are drawn rather than a mediator placed between them. That would help explain why, in the speech, the rational cosmos and the supply chain alike seem to be reached through honor and shame, rather than the other way around.

If that is so, then the significance of thumos may lie less in any one register than in the flows among and between them. A sign constituted in one register seems capable of passing into another and being re-signified there. Supply chains, an object of epithumia, become in the address an object of thumos once their loss is narrated as shame; the rational cosmos, an object of logos, becomes an object of thumos once it is claimed as an inheritance to be proud

of; the Arctic agreement, an object of *epithumia*, is offered back to *logos* as evidence of a sound alliance design. Each passage might be thought of as one turn of the helix described above, and the interpretive matrix produced by each turn becomes the object of the next. One begins to suspect that the dialectic here is psycho-cognitive rather than merely logical: it is the movement by which a collective comes to feel, know, and want the same objects at once, and by which that convergence of feeling, knowing, and wanting is then read back as identity.

This may help explain how such flows participate in the construction of states and other forms of political agency. A state, read this way, might be understood as a relatively stable configuration of the three registers: an ordering *logos* (its law and institutions), a disciplined *epithumia* (its economy and its interests), and a *thumos* that binds the two to a self worth defending. Political and normative ideology would then be the grammar that governs the passage of signs among the registers and authorizes some passages while forbidding others. The post-1945 order, on this reading, may have privileged *logos* and channeled *epithumia* through it, treating *thumos* as a danger to be contained; the speech's complaint that "nationalism" became a "dirty word" might be heard as the protest of a register that was denied its objects. America First, in turn, seems to have begun with *epithumia*, the Merchant and the deal, and the Athens address appears to supply the *thumos* that the deal could not supply for itself. Whether the resulting configuration can also hold *logos* within it, or whether *logos* is left to the techno-bureaucrat as the speech's only villain, is perhaps the question on which the coherence of the project may depend. The same lens might suggest why the speech's inversion of Taizong's third mirror matters: to show Europe its shortcomings in the register of *thumos* rather than *logos* is to ask Europe to feel shame rather than to recognize error, and the response such an invitation elicits is unlikely to be the same.

3.11 Two triads: Taizong's mirrors and the Homeric-Platonic soul

The essay has so far carried two triads side by side without asking whether they speak to each other: the three mirrors attributed to Taizong, which open the essay, and the triad of *logos*, *thumos*, and *epithumia*, which has gradually come to organize it. It may be worth considering, tentatively, whether they might be read as two articulations of a single psycho-semiotic structure, one framed through the practice of seeing and the other through the composition of the soul. The correspondence is not exact, and it should not be pressed into identity; Plutarch's discipline of parallel without sameness seems the right one here as well.

The bronze mirror, in which one straightens robe and cap, might be read as the mirror of *epithumia*. It returns the self as surface and possession: the garment, the appearance, the body as it presents itself to be seen. In the speech it would be the mirror in which the United States inspects its outward goods, the reindustrialized economy, the rebuilt defense, the supply chains recovered. The mirror of antiquity, in which one knows the rise and fall of regimes, might be read as the mirror of *logos*. It returns the self as an instance of an order, a pattern that can be known because it recurs; this is the mirror the speech holds up when it claims that the Greeks bequeathed a rational cosmos and that their history "shows us an image of ourselves." The mirror of the other person, in which one sees one's achievements and shortcomings, might be read as the mirror of *thumos*. Unlike the other two, it does not return an object or a pattern but a judgment, the regard of another in whose eyes one is honored or shamed. It may be no accident that Taizong spoke the maxim in grief for the minister whose criticism he valued: the *thumotic* mirror is the one that wounds, and it is the one whose loss he felt most keenly.

If the correspondence holds even loosely, it may sharpen the reading of the speech's central move. To reverse the third mirror would then be to act in the register of *thumos*. The United States does not offer Europe an inventory (the bronze mirror) or a lesson of history (the mirror of antiquity) so much as a regard, an image in which Europe is invited to feel what it has lost. One begins to see why the address might be heard so differently on the two sides of the Atlantic. A reader formed within the post-1945 order may expect the conversation of allies to take place in the

mirror of logos, where error is recognized and corrected through common rules. The speech seems instead to hold up the mirror of thumos, where shortcomings are felt as shame and answered, if at all, by a recovery of pride. The two mirrors may show the same face, but they ask for different responses.

The comparison might also illuminate where the two traditions part. In Taizong's sequence, the mirrors seem ordered toward governance: one tidies the self, studies the past, and then submits to the judgment of a trusted other, so that the thumotic mirror disciplines the ruler rather than exalts him. In Plato's ordering, logos governs, and thumos is its ally against appetite. The Athens address appears to differ from both. It seems to place the thumotic mirror first, to read antiquity through it, and to inspect the bronze surface of national goods as proof of a recovered spirit. Whether such an ordering can hold, or whether, as both Taizong and Plato might have suspected, a thumos unmoored from the counsel of logos and the discipline of the critic turns toward excess, is a question the speech leaves open. It may also be the point at which the two mirrors of the essay's epigraph and its argument finally meet: the god of Delphi, who counsels both self-knowledge and measure, seems to stand behind each.

Closing note

If Secretary Rubio's address in Munich gave America First a time of rupture (1963) grounded in betrayal, the Secretary's Athens remarks might be read as giving America First a place and a self. If the Munich remarks focused on fracture, the Athens remarks seem to remind one that rupture occurs within matrices of connective cultural tissue. The speech appears to move a political line from the layer of discourse and argument to the sphere of ancestry, and to do so with an unusual economy: one standing object, one buried ruin, one chain of imitated speakers. In the vocabulary of this project, the Athens address may be understood as object-signification-interpretation in motion that knows it is in motion, and uses the motion as its argument. Thumos, on this reading, may be less the subject of the speech than the register through which its other signs are made to move. The epigraph suggests where that motion might come to rest. Embedded as well is a more universal overtone—one that reaches from Athens and Rome (and ultimately the United States) to Tang dynasty China (and ultimately the People's Republic of China). Of Taizong's three mirrors, the speech seems to take the second (antiquity, in which the West is to see what it was) and to reverse the third. If the three mirrors may be read alongside the triad of epithumia, logos, and thumos, that reversal takes place in the thumotic register: the person who serves as mirror is no longer a minister showing a ruler his faults; it is Rubio, and through him the United States, held up as the image in which Europe is invited to feel, and not merely to recognize, its own contemporary flaws. Greece, the model ally, is offered as a companion image of what Europe might again become. The Plutarchan matrix of parallels without identity may be the apparatus that makes the reversal possible: because the parallel never claims sameness, America can stand to Europe as Athens stood to its descendants, as the critic and the exemplar at once, without having to say that it is Athens. Whether Europe will recognize itself in that mirror, or will read the glass instead, is perhaps the question the speech leaves to its interpreters, and the one on which the next turn of the helix may depend.