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JD Vance's Trumpian Attack on Time



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It's all happening so fast. If they are not attacking some agency like the Department of Education or a cultural institution such as the Kennedy Center or Smithsonian Museum, they're launching some personal vendetta against a lawyer or law firm, imposing tariffs right and left, rounding up and deporting people with green cards or rattling on about an eventual third term. It's hard to keep track of the entirety of the shock and awe of the Trumpian assault. But every once and awhile, amidst the overwhelming noise and horrors, a phrase appears that puts everything in perspective. And JD Vance has done just that.

The Vice-President recently announced the Trumpian temporal view of where we have been, where we are, and where we are going.

This is what Vance said on March 29, 2025, at the Pituffik Space Base in Greenland:

“And, you know, one of the things I heard was, well, what about the many Danes who lost their lives in the war on terror fighting alongside the United States? Well, look, we obviously

honor the sacrifice of our Danish friends in the war on terror 20 years ago, just as, for example, the French honor the sacrifice of Americans in Normandy 80 years ago. But recognizing that there are important security partnerships in the past does not mean that we can't have disagreements with allies in the present about how to preserve our shared security for the future. And that's what this is about."

What is this about? It's much more than just Greenland. It's about the relationship between the past, present and future. Vance refers to honoring Danish friends in the war on terror 20 years ago just as the French honor American sacrifices 80 years ago. Both of those honorings are about the past. The former Appalachian hillbilly is arguing that today's discussions about Greenland are not related to the past; they are about disagreements in the present and preserving U.S. security in the future. The Yale Law School graduate sees history as irrelevant to the present and future.

Now history has different directions. One is linear with time moving in a straight line. In this timeline, the past disappears since time moves inexorably forward. What happened before has no relevance to what is happening now and what will happen in the future. Each day brings a new and different perspective.

The other historical time is circular, with time continually returning to some basic truths about human nature and how we live. The seasons come and go, the same human frustrations and joys repeat only in different forms. According to circular time, our lives have not fundamentally changed despite all the technological trappings of modernity. We reread and watch Greek plays and other classics because their stories speak to us here and now.

What does it mean for the president of the United States and those around him to have a linear sense of time? To them, nothing that has come before matters; all they accomplish is unique with no precedents. That's what makes Vance's phrase so crucial and frightening.

Who does Trump call for advice? To whom does he listen for previous knowledge? Trump and Musk have fired tens of thousands of government workers who have institutional memories. Did anyone in on the recent Signalgate scandal bother to ask experts how to securitize a conference call? Obviously not. In Trumpian linear time, everything begins with him and his administration. There is no collective, institutional memory. Trump joyfully mocks and insults his predecessors.

Nothing from the past has any relevance in Trump's world except that he is the greatest of all time. At a rally in Michigan just before the November 5, 2024, election, Trump boasted that Border Patrol agents declared him "the greatest president in history" and "better than both

Abraham Lincoln and George Washington.” He didn’t have to say it himself; he quoted others saying what he believes.

A very different example of humility is that when John F. Kennedy was elected president, one of the first things he did was to call wise men such as the former Governor of Illinois Adlai Stevenson II and Dean Acheson, the former Secretary of State under President Truman to ask their advice. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy spoke with former President Dwight Eisenhower to review the situation. Experience mattered.

In response to Vance’s comments, the Danish Foreign Minister said, “But let me be completely honest: we do not appreciate the tone in which it is being delivered. This is not how you speak to your close allies. And I still consider Denmark and the United States to be close allies.” Allies are part of circular time. Trust and confidence require experience. Trump/Vance’s linear time has no place for friendships, alliances or common experiences; it’s only about current interests. Contrary to the Danish Foreign Minister, Trump and Vance do not treat Denmark as an historic ally in their current desire for Greenland.

History and culture are intertwined. Can one imagine what kind of cultural events DJT and Melania will present at the White House and Kennedy Center, the Village People performing “Y.M.C.A.” or Queen singing “We are the champions”? Remember Pablo Casals playing in the East Room of the White House for the Kennedys or Aretha Franklin singing at Barrack Obama’s inauguration?

For the attacks on the Kennedy Center, Smithsonian Museum and universities are not just anti-intellectualism; they are brazen attacks on history and culture. There is no reason to read only dead white males, but there is certainly no reason to ignore history and culture. More bluntly, there is no reason not to read. The dismantling of the Department of Education is more than just a bureaucratic erasure of a federal department.

Trump, Vance, Musk and Company are the epitome of linearity. Their efficient, creative destruction is ahistorical. It all starts and ends with them. The Trumpian vision is that history is the last 25 seconds on some screen with him on the home page.

But what goes out comes back. There are forces that even the most modern technology cannot deny. We are witnessing a great tragedy unfolding with no Greek chorus to tell us what will happen as the play develops. The circle will come back. It always has; it always will.

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