

*Transcript of JD Vance's speech, "Challenges at Home," at Teneo Network conference, September 2021*

JD VANCE: I guess I'll throw out the standard campaign speech. It's one of the crazy things about running for office is you give the same speech many, many times, and actually just try to level with you guys about what I do see is the big — a few big problems that are in our country right now. And I'll talk a little bit about more, or some of them in greater detail, but I only have about 10 minutes. So, I don't want to take up too much time.

So, first is, look, I think that for all of us, we're all part of the conservative movement in one form or another. I think we're leaders in business, in politics, in government and bureaucracy. Wherever we actually find ourselves working, this is our movement.

And one of the very brute facts that we all have to confront is that we have lost every institution in American society. This is the first big challenge.

So, if you look at, for example, the list of the Fortune 10 CEOs in 1990, I believe every single one of them was a Republican, a Republican donor, at least mildly affiliated with the right. And in 2021, if you look at that same list of people, it's a different group of people. And I think every single one of them is a major Democrat donor.

So, we've not just lost the academy, which we've lost for a long time; we haven't just lost the media, which has been on the side of the left for a long time; we now find ourselves in a situation where our biggest multinational corporations are active participants in the culture war on the other side. I believe Vivek Ramaswamy, a friend of mine from law school, actually is going to be here later. And I think Vivek has written the most comprehensive set of — the most comprehensive statement about the fusion between socially progressive ideology and our big corporations. So, I won't talk too much about this. I think all of you, if you can, should listen to him, him speak about it.

Because, you know, for a long time, I'd like to say a lot of us have been talking about this problem. But it's really been a few of us over the past few years who have recognized that the big corporations have really turned against conservatives in a very big and powerful way. And we see this in a number of different ways.

One is recently this Texas abortion law. Okay, Texas tries to pass a law that protects the right of the born to live their lives. And set aside the legal technicalities about whether that law is ultimately going to survive legal challenges. I don't know; I went to law school, but I went to Yale Law School so I'm not a very good lawyer. But the fundamental problem revealed itself because virtually every major big corporation in this country felt the need to issue a statement in support of not the unborn babies, but in support of people who might want to abort them. A few major corporations actually put a lot of money behind the effort to make it easier to achieve an abortion. And the one CEO that I'm aware of, a medium-

sized tech company who actually spoke up on behalf of the unborn, was fired three days later after he issued a statement.

If we're unwilling to make companies that are taking the side of the left in the culture wars feel real economic pain, then we're not serious about winning the culture war. And, that is, that is challenge number one.

So, challenge number two is just basic truth-telling. We live in a society that is terrified to tell the truth. And it takes a number of different forms. On the left, people are terrified to actually point out the obvious — that men and women are different, that they want different things at least as an average matter, and that there are real biological, cultural, religious, spiritual distinctions between men and women. I think that's what the whole transgender thing is about, is like fundamentally denying basic reality. That's a problem, that you can't speak the truth.

But it actually takes a different form on the right, which is, I think, those of us in this room, especially people who have been trained in conservative institutions as part of the conservative movement, we've like lost our ability to even think about some of the big challenges. Because, you know, we sort of want to speak in this like politician or bureaucratic gobbledygook, instead of being very honest about what's really going on.

So like a couple of examples of this. Recently, of course, we have this terrible disaster in Afghanistan. And I understand that I myself have participated in this movement to blame the Biden administration for the terrible chaos in Afghanistan. But too few conservatives are willing to admit or even acknowledge that, three months ago, it wasn't just Biden. It was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was some of our military leaders that were talking about white rage in the military, the terrible scourge of white rage in the military, even as they were presiding over a massive disaster in Afghanistan.

I served in the Marine Corps. I was an enlisted guy and so I didn't talk to the top-level brass that often. But one of the most consistent things you would hear when you met like a real Marines-Marine colonel, when you met a guy that the troops, the enlisted guys, really loved is people would say, "Well, he'll never become a four-star because he's not political enough."

Well, why is our bureaucracy so broken that some of our best military leaders are actually prevented from becoming four-star generals instead of encouraged to become four-star generals? There is something broken, not just about the Biden administration's foreign policy — yes, it is broken; yes, we should talk about it — but the entire Pentagon bureaucracy is itself broken.

I talked to a doctor at Ohio — I'm running for Senate, so I talk to a lot of people in Ohio — and I talked to a doctor a few weeks ago, who is terrified that if he speaks out against gender reassignment therapies at his hospital, he's gonna get fired. Right?

Speaking the truth, saying the obvious things, is really important in this moment, and we all have to do that. We have to do it in our businesses, in our personal lives. Just being honest. Don't fall for the consultant lines. Don't fall for the gobbledygook. Actually just speak in direct truth. We have a society that's terrified of it. And that's why we need more people to actually do it.

The third challenge I want to talk about is we're horrified in this country. And I see it on both the left and the right. We're horrified of unconventional people who say and believe unconventional things. I got myself into a little hot water last week, because I made what seemed to me a plainly obvious observation that Alex Jones, the Infowars guy, is a better source of information than Rachel Maddow, the MSNBC gal.

Now, some people said, 'Well, JD, you're just trolling.' Well, yeah, of course, I was just trolling. But that doesn't mean what I said is in any way untrue. Look, I think there's a not terrible chance that one of you is going to be sharing cellblock 12A in Premier Harris's prison detention camp in a few years. If we're going to all end up in that place, we might as well have a little fun while we get there. It's okay to troll when you when you make and speak fundamental truths. But look, I do think that — I do think what I said was correct. Yeah, I was trolling; I was also speaking a truth.

Because look, if you listen to Rachel Maddow every night, the basic worldview that you have, is that MAGA grandmas who have family dinners on Sunday and bake apple pies for their family are about to start a violent insurrection against this country. But if you listen to Alex Jones every day, you would believe that a transnational financial elite controls things in our country, that they hate our society, and oh, by the way, a lot of them are probably sex perverts too. Sorry, ladies and gentlemen, that's actually a hell of a lot more true than Rachel Maddow's view of society.

But then the second criticism that I get is, well, he's a crazy conspiracist, right? He doesn't believe that 9/11 actually happened or he believed 9/11 was an inside job. And look, I understand this desire to not be called terrible names. It's like, yeah, okay, this person believes crazy things. But I bet if you're being honest with yourself, every single person in this room believes at least something that's a little crazy, right? I believe the devil is real and that he works terrible things in our society. That's a crazy conspiracy theory to a lot of very well-educated people in this country right now. Even though, of course, they participate in it without knowing about it. But that's a separate, a separate matter.

But ladies and gentlemen, the most important truths often come from people who are crazy 60% of the time, but they're right 40% of time. I don't know Elon Musk very well. I know him a little bit. I've had a couple of private conversations with him. Elon Musk believes some crazy stuff. I'm very close friends with Peter Thiel. I think Peter Thiel is one of the most important sources of non-conventional truth in our society. Peter Thiel believes some things that are considered crazy by opinion makers. We have to get away from this

weird tension that we feel in our chest when somebody says, “This person believes something crazy. Therefore, you must denounce them.”

One of the weirdest things that happened — I'm in Ohio. It's funny, because I think we're in her district right now. But I'm regularly asked by donors in Ohio whether I'd be willing to denounce MTG, Marjorie Taylor Greene, the congressman from if not this part of Georgia, at least close to close by. And I say, “Why? Why do you want me to denounce this person?” “Well, she believes these crazy things.” “Who cares?”

Believing crazy things is not the mark of whether somebody should be rejected. Believing important truths should be the mark of whether we accept somebody, and if they believe some crazy things on the side, that's fine. We need to be okay with non-conventional people. This is a big problem for you in this room.

This is the last point that I'll make. We are trained among elite circles. If you go to elite institutions, if you study at elite places, we are trained to reject anything that falls out of a very narrow Overton window. But if we've just learned anything in the last year and a half, I mean, a year ago, it was a pretty crazy truth the idea that maybe the coronavirus came from a Wuhan lab, not from like some random dude's bat soup, right? Turns out that was probably true.

A lot of the things that are ultimately gonna get revealed as truths are going to be advocated originally by crazy people. Doesn't mean you have to be best friends with them. Doesn't mean you have to defend their craziest views. But by all means, if this movement is going to survive, we need to speak for truth. And that means standing up for non-conventional people, even when they sometimes say things that we disagree with.

The final point that I'll make is, look, we have very real challenges in this country. And it's easy to get pessimistic about what's going on. It's easy to feel a certain lack of hope about the future. But if this movement is going to survive, it's going to require leaders like the type of people who exist in this room. And so, I thank you all for being here. I thank you all for having me.

And importantly, the last, and very final, actual final point that I'll leave you with, is that we are part of a movement. Okay? Many of you in this room either currently do or will sit at the head of the movement. You'll serve in the organizations and the think tanks and the businesses and the governments that actually enact the policy of this movement.

But don't forget that there are a lot of people out there who may not agree with us on every issue. Who may not agree with you on every issue. Who may not always talk the way that you talk about issues, but they are part of our movement. Right after the 2008 financial crisis, I saw a poll that a large segment of the Democratic base believed that [makes air quotes] the Jews caused the financial crisis. The media did not demand that the leaders of

the Democratic Party reject every single member of the Democratic base because a lot of them believed the Jews caused the financial crisis.

Don't take the bait that disconnects us from our own voters and our own people. Just because you don't always agree with them, just because they don't talk the way that you talk, they are our people. And if this movement exists for any reason, it's to defend them, to advance their interest, and to make it sure that they can live a good life in this country too. Thank you.

EVAN BAEHR, TENEQ PRESIDENT:

My big takeaway, you can be a truth teller and a troll. That's awesome.

VANCE:

You have to be.

BAEHR:

We've got a quick little chat here. I want to dive right into something that might be a little bit hard. I want to read a passage from an article and how do you kind of respond to —

VANCE:

Oh God.

BAEHR:

You guys may have seen this. This morning is about "in the arena" guys. And we talked about last night when you're in the arena, it's in some cases literal, some cases metaphorical blood and sweat. How about this blood and sweat? This is a passage, guys, millions of people read this. Opening paragraph: "What do we call a man who turns on everything he once claimed to believe? For a practitioner of petty and self-serving duplicity, we use sell-out or backstabber. For grand betrayals of weightier loyalties, country and faith, we invoke the moral, the more solemn terms of traitor or apostate."

That's the opening paragraph, The Atlantic, two months ago, Tom Nichols, on a piece called "The Moral Collapse of JD Vance." Take us to where did you first learn about that article and just talk about that. People have said crazy things about you. What is it like that to read stuff like that?

VANCE:

Yeah, well, first of all, a lot of it I don't read. And one of the, when I was thinking about running for Senate, one of the first people that I actually had my wife talked to was Tucker Carlson. Tucker, I think, is one of the most important leaders in our movement. And one of the things that Tucker told my wife is "If you read everything that they write about him, and you try to assume that it's in good faith, it's going to destroy your life."

And if that's true for my wife, and it's definitely true for me, right. And so, I certainly heard about that article, because so many people have shared it. And if I hadn't heard about it, I guess you just told me about it right now.

BAEHR:

Sorry, sorry.

VANCE:

But I guess that, you know, the thing that bothers me about this is, look, I've clearly — I changed my mind on things, right? And I changed my mind on Donald Trump. I did not like Donald Trump in 2016. I pretty enthusiastically supported him in 2020, both with my vote but also going out on there on TV and defending certain parts of his policy agenda.

And I think that what is true about Tom Nichols, and true about a lot of anti-Trump conservatives or liberals and their criticism of me, is that it's not offered in good faith. They don't actually care about the arguments that I'm making. They don't actually care if I maybe really did change my mind. They don't care about the fact that, you know, if you paid attention what I was saying three years ago, it's pretty obvious where I was coming down on a lot of these things. They just see it as opportunity to deploy a powerful argument against the political enemy.

And I unfortunately think there's something to learn about this. I don't think that we want to take all of the bait of the left or follow their tactics all the time. But I think about this a lot with the accusation of racism that gets thrown around. Obviously, racism is out there and it's bad. I really don't like judging people based on the color of their skin. I think we should reject it. But if you look at how frequently progressives deploy the term racist against just normal conservatives, right, you start to realize they don't give a damn about minorities or ethnic groups of any particular part. They realize that the American people are compassionate. And they want to use that compassion as a rhetorical weapon against arguments that will reduce their power. That's what's really going on.

I think that's true for a lot of arguments that our opposition makes is they don't actually believe the same things that they say they believe. They know that we often do. And they're trying to use our good faith against us. I try not to let them.

BAEHR:

Well, I hope I didn't break that news story to you. It would get a little awkward.

VANCE:

You did not, trust me. I am well aware that Tom Nichols is not a fan of me.

BAEHR:

Okay, let's go back a little bit. So, you have in some sense, earlier in your career trajectory, some similarity to some Teneans. You go to Yale Law School, you're working for Peter Thiel,

you're kind of at a hedge fund, then you choose to write a book, and then you're starting your own venture capital firm, and you choose to run for office. I think a lot of us here might be in kind of more traditional careers in the marketplace, investing or running a company and sort of think like, how should I get in the arena? And just to be clear, running a company can totally be in the arena.

VANCE:  
Absolutely.

BAEHR:  
One is not better than the other. But just wrestle through that a little bit. You and your wife processing that, you kind of started down this path, you chose — how did you process that?

VANCE:  
A lot of it is just the opportunities that are presented. And so, I really knew I didn't want to be a corporate lawyer. And right at the time that I was thinking I didn't want to be a corporate lawyer, I got introduced to Peter Thiel. So, Peter Thiel offered me a job.

So then I'm in Silicon Valley. The book comes out. I was sort of working on the book part-time, really; it was never something that I did full time. The book took off like crazy. There was sort of opportunities to launch my own fund. And so, I did that, right. And that's kind of how that happened.

A lot of it is just the opportunities that present themselves. I've been talking a lot about politics and public policy the last five years, and then a senator in my home state decides to retire, leaving open what is increasingly a red-state Senate seat in the state of Ohio. So, like a lot of things, it's just the opportunities present themselves. And I think you have to be willing to walk through the door.

But if we're trying to translate that into useful advice, because obviously different opportunities open for different people at different times, I really do think that, you know, in the business world, especially, we need more passionate conservatives, people who actually have the courage of their convictions.

There are all of these things that I'm very hopeful about. But one of the things that really does worry me is that we have very few oligarchs on our side. And I don't mean just rich people. I mean people who are smart about deploying their resources in a way that advances the cause. Maybe only Peter Thiel, on our side, I think. Maybe a few others.

BAEHR:  
Right.

VANCE:

The left has a lot of oligarchs. They have Bloomberg, they have Soros, they have Gates. They have very wealthy people who aren't just rich; they're very smart about accomplishing their objectives with their resources. We need a lot of that. We need a lot of it so that young conservatives have places to work where they can actually speak their values. But we also just need resources to fund the institutions that will be necessary, so the next time we really get a chance at governing, we really take advantage of that shot, because the left has shown over the past couple of months that they really don't want to give us that shot ever again. And I don't think that that impulse is going to change.

BAEHR:

Hey, my team just let me know breakout 107 is now "Becoming an Oligarch." So, if you guys want to check out. There's a how-to guide.

Hey, about a month ago, we had a fun chance. I called JD. I said, "Hey, I'm driving to Ohio with my son on a road trip. And we got to walk with you in a July 4th parade."

VANCE:

Was fun.

BAEHR:

Which was a really cool opportunity. There was a line from a woman who was there for the parade that I want to get your feedback on that I appreciated. She said, "JD, I love your book, and I hate your party."

Talk a little bit about, when your book came out, tens of millions of people read it. It just spoke to the situation of working-class Americans, of hollowed-out small towns, and I think in a lot of ways set off a lot of these more some would say populist conversations in the movement. A lot of those people are trying to figure out are they Republicans. Or react to that line: when someone says I love you and the book, but not the party?

VANCE:

Yeah, I remember that woman very well. And the problem is, that woman can have two viewpoints and because we were literally still marching in the parade — it was towards the end, right?

BAEHR:

Yeah.

VANCE:

Like I like run off and keep on going. But she could have been one of two types. She could have been like a moderate Democrat. And this is in Lebanon — there aren't a lot of Democrats left in Lebanon. So, I don't think she was this type. She could have been a moderate Democrat who maybe liked the book for one reason or another, but just really



hates the party. Those people: tough to reach. You know, you gotta try. I definitely want to be a candidate for as many people as possible.

But very often what I find in that is, she really loved the book. She doesn't watch mainstream news. She doesn't even watch like Fox News or Newsmax. Her main source of news is Steve Bannon's War Room. And she hates the party. But she loves the movement. She loves the ideas. She really cares about our country.

And I think that we have to accept that that is one issue that exists in our movement right now is a relatively disconnected, very discouraged group of people who feel burnt out after 2020 and they don't see a path forward. They don't see leaders actually offering solutions to their problems, like, Oh, my God, this guy who defended this Texas abortion bill just got fired. What do we do about that? And so, I do think that a lot of our people, a real concern that I have is they feel discouraged. And we've got to energize and provide folks a little bit of hope, because the energy is there, we just have to actually marshal it and send it in the right direction.

BAEHR:

On the policy front, you've given some talks lately, they're fantastic, I highly recommend listening to everything JD has to say. You talk a lot about a real interest of yours is that a middle-income family, a middle-income family on one income, can have an easy, comfortable, reasonable life. And in some sense, like, Duh, haven't Republicans been saying that for a long time? But some might look at the eight years of George W. Bush and say, you know, W is probably saying some of the same things. But we get into Iraq, we get into Afghanistan, we grow the size of the federal government. So, when you talk about the flourishing of this middle-class family, what are the levers here? What are the things you'd actually materially change to make that life more possible?

VANCE:

Yeah, it's interesting, somebody sent me — was it yesterday or the day before — this sort of policy briefing from the Family Research Council, Tony Perkins' group in the late '90s. And I was looking at it and it was so crazy to me how similar that is to a lot of the issues that those of us on sort of the populist right are talking about.

It was anti-normalization of trade relations with China. It was anti-free trade. It was pro-family policy. It was super-hard-restrictionist on immigration. There's a lot of interesting stuff in there. And it made me realize that I think maybe George W. Bush was a really big missed opportunity, because a lot of these ideas were percolating in the movement, and it just didn't really ultimately materialize.

So, I guess I think that, you know, look, the basic principle of we want normal people to be able to live a good life in this country. We want people to be able to support themselves on a single middle-class wage. I mean, it actually includes a lot of stuff that's unspoken, right? Okay, a single middle-class wage means we need really good jobs for middle class people.

It also means that we need people who can speak their mind at their workplace without getting fired. That's an important cultural concept to I think economic stability.

I think it means that we need something like traditional families. And I've got a dear friend who's a very socially conservative guy; he's a stay-at-home dad, his wife works. I'm not saying it's always going to be the man working, the woman not working. But you really do need a two-parent household if the single-income model is going to work out really well.

So, there's a lot built into that assumption, a lot of policy levers that I think we can push and pull on to make it more possible to happen. But I think that should be our guiding light. And so many normie Republicans hear folks like us. Probably, I assume very well-educated room, a lot of fancy credentials. We love to talk about Locke, and Montesquieu and Hayek and Friedman; we love to talk about these big ideas and abstract principles. But most people deal with politics at the level of "I really love my country, and I want to be able to live a good life here."

BAEHR:

You've given me glimpses of this. I want you to share with the crew the experience around you write this book, and you get this call about during the movie. Would you take us to that dinner with your family where you guys were meeting the cast?

VANCE:

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So, got a lot of calls from producers. I didn't want to do a movie out of the book. I just felt a little bit worried that you give it off to somebody and it becomes something that you don't control anymore. And it's funny because I start talking to my family about it. My family that was sort of pretty apprehensive about the book and a lot of difficult conversations, as people who've read the book can probably appreciate. They're all just like, "Are you kidding me? We should definitely do a movie."

BAEHR:

Real quick, we're marching in the parade. JD's family was there, and it's your sister from California?

VANCE:

That's my cousin. She's like my sister, but yeah, she's your cousin.

BAEHR:

So, she comes over? She says, "You remember the cousin from California in the book? That was me. They were awesome. JD's mom was there.

JD Vance 24:42

Yeah, they're now in rural Texas, which is so funny. Basically, what we what we try to mean, you know — I had this conversation with Ron Howard and I really liked him. I didn't like most of the producers that I talked about. He just you know, he's like, I really want to tell a

story about normal Americans who are struggling in the post-industrial era. I don't feel like many stories have been told on the big screen about families like that. He was really into the idea really was into the relationship between my mom and my grandma, which is, I think, a very perceptive way to read the book. That it's really about the interaction between my mom and my grandma in a lot of ways.

And so anyway, so the family loved him. We ended up sort of talking to him a lot. He came and visited us in Eastern Kentucky and southern Ohio, and did all this stuff. And so finally, we're doing this movie. But yeah, the cast wants to meet my family. And so they all fly in to do what, in hindsight, was actually research on the way that my family acts and the way my grandma held her cigarette and what her glasses looked like and all this crazy stuff. And it was just a lot of fun for my family to sit down and talk with these actors and actresses about like what was mamma like, and what were some of the crazy things she said.

My cousin Rachel told Glenn Close that one of my grandma's favorite sayings was, "Grab a straw." And I won't even repeat it here. But if you're interested afterwards, I'll tell you. But it's just incredibly vulgar. And I guess like people have told me that Glenn Close will sometimes say to people, "Grab a straw," because she thought that's just the most hilarious thing that she had ever heard anybody say. So anyway, it was a cool experience in a lot of ways. I am waiting for the point at which the entire cast and crew of *Hillbilly Elegy* the movie issues a denouncement of me personally. I'm sure it's coming. But I think when it happens, that's when I'll know I'm about to win the Senate race.

BAEHR:

In our final minute or two, a lot of Teneans, I feel this way, it's a nice set of people. It's a very pleasant, cordial. We want to have dinner conversations. You have been criticized by the *Dispatch* and some other parts of the conservative movement about taking a more aggressive approach or maybe using tools of the left or levers that traditionally conservatives would not use. Would you just talk a little bit about how you think about what tools you have in your toolkit? Have conservatives been too unwilling to take out tools that the left might be willing to use? And just encourage us how we think about picking up the right tools for this fight.

VANCE:

Yeah, absolutely. So, first of all, rhetorically, there's nothing wrong with dinner conversations. There's nothing wrong with discussing abstract principles. I think it is important for us to be a philosophically rooted movement. And that's an important thing. So, I encourage everybody to do that.

I think there's also a time and a place for it. And when we're sort of dealing with Nancy Pelosi, this \$3.5 trillion package with an amnesty bill built into it, it's probably not the time for dinner conversations. And so different approaches for different seasons is an important principle for us to keep in mind.

But I guess just one thought on this. So, Republicans believe in lower taxes. That's a basic Republican principle. I believe in lower taxes. I think it's good for economic growth. I think it's important for people to keep more of their own money.

But one of the things I've noticed in the tax conversations is we assume that Democrats believe in higher taxes. If you actually look, they believe in higher taxes for their enemies and lower taxes for their friends. So, the Harvard University endowment: Democrats aren't trying to raise their taxes. The biggest foundations in our country, the Ford Foundation, so forth, which by the way, one of the reasons capital has gone so woke is because the deployers of capital — big foundations, big endowments, hundreds of billions of dollars in money — are increasingly putting left-wing pressure on these institutions. Foreign direct investment. All allies of the left, all pay effectively no tax, right? The biggest tech companies in Silicon Valley, all allies of the left. Amazon, Google, Apple, Facebook pay a lower tax rate than like a midsize manufacturer in Middletown, Ohio.

So, I think that one of the things we have to realize is the left isn't playing the game we think that they're playing. The left is playing a game of rewarding friends and punishing enemies. We need to be willing to actually defend our friends. And the old slogans aren't going to work anymore. So, maybe we should be raising the tax to the Harvard University endowment. In fact, I think we should be. Things like that, that require a new approach and a new way of thinking. Yes, occasionally, the *Dispatch* and folks like that don't like it. But as I say, look, if they're bringing a bazooka to a fight, we can't bring a wet noodle. We have to bring something bigger and better.

BAEHR:

Yeah. Say no to wet noodle. Round of applause. Thanks for JD Vance. Thank you, guys. Thanks.