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Serving Peace (July 1, 1969)

In his inaugural speech, newly elected federal president Gustav Heinemann declares peace a top political priority and appeals to the younger generation, in particular, to gradually effect positive social change. He warns listeners against the frivolous abuse of liberties, including the right to refuse military service.

Peace is the Emergency

[. . .]

As Federal President, I am not required to deliver a government policy statement. I have left the federal government and the German Bundestag; I have resigned from all my positions in the Social Democratic Party of Germany. According to the will of the Basic Law, from now on I will stand by those entrusted with carrying out and answering for political decisions. But at this hour, certainly, the Federal President might be permitted a personal word.

Ladies and gentlemen, I take office at a time in which the world is living in extreme contradictions. Mankind is on the verge of walking on the moon, and yet it still has not driven war and hunger and injustice from this earth. Mankind lays more claim to maturity than ever before, and yet it still has no answer to an abundance of questions. Insecurity and resignation mingle with the hope for a better order. Will such hopes finally be fulfilled? This is a question for all of us, especially those of us here who, by virtue of the mandates conferred on us, bear responsibility for our fellow citizens.

The first thing I see is the obligation to serve peace. War is not the quintessential emergency in which man has to prove himself, as my generation learned at its school desks in the days of the Kaiser; rather, peace is the emergency in which we all have to prove ourselves. Beyond peace, there is no longer any existence possible.

Twenty-four years after the Second World War, we still face the task of reaching an understanding with our eastern neighbors. The time has come – and must come – for multilateral conversations about a secure peace in all of Europe. I know that I am at one with the German people, the German Bundestag, and the federal government in the will to peace. I appeal to the responsibility of the blocs and the major powers, not to seek security in the arms race, but rather in a meeting for joint disarmament and arms limitations. *[Applause]* Disarmament requires trust. Trust cannot be commanded; and yet it is also correct that the only one who earns trust is the one who is prepared to grant trust.

One of our most noble political tasks is to open up trust. All means of exercising power – civilian and military – should be subordinated to this task. [. . .]

Ladies and gentlemen, we are just at the beginning of the first really free period of our history. Liberal democracy must finally become the vital element of our society. Only if this succeeds will we face the contradictions of our time, which I believe relate to the following: that the realm of what the individual can fashion is becoming narrower at the same time that the individual's self-determination is gaining in scope. What I mean is this: in a tempo never experienced heretofore, humanity has acquired dominion over creation, down to the depths of outer space. But the individual is becoming ever more powerless. The consolidation of business continues apace. The already large bureaucracies grow even larger. What – I ask – will become of the individual's space for free existence? His share of the mechanism for producing and consuming keeps getting ever more untraceable, ever more impersonal, ever more alienated.

At the same time, however, is it also not the case that we are experiencing a new wave of change in the centuries-old alienation of man and moving toward a responsible, individual self-determination? Such a transformation has been long in the making, since the end of the Middle Ages. But only now is it coming to a head with such breadth and intensity.

Everywhere, authority and tradition have to justify themselves in the face of questions. Neither the Christian churches with their creeds and rules, nor the state with its constitutional institutions, such as parliaments, nor custom and morality (either as such, or in their relationship to the penal code or family law), nor the different social rules – especially in the areas of marriage and family, of property or work – are exempt from penetrating critical questions today.

[. . .]

In this life of ours we remain directed toward the relative utopia of a better world, and sensibly this can be the only model for our action. [*Applause*] The secret of big and revolutionary actions also consists in discovering the tiny step that is simultaneously a strategic step, insofar as it entails additional steps in the direction of a better reality. Therefore it does not help to sneer at the imperfection of today's reality or to preach absolutes as a daily agenda. Let us, instead, change conditions step by step through criticism and cooperation!

I understand the indignation about the sluggishness of human society, which also extends deep into the churches. All my life I have been an impatient person myself. I still am. This may, incidentally, be one of the reasons that I have a tendency toward unpunctuality and am fond of showing up at appointments too early. [*Laughter*] Because of my own impatience, I even understand the radical groups of restless youth. But, speaking out of my own impatience, they are just the ones I can call upon to reinforce those who have already lined up ahead of them to undertake the long march of reforms, and who are resolved to keep it going. [*Applause*]

Some groups of young people, for example, have come up with the idea of using conscientious objection as a special means to rattle the Bundeswehr. Everyone knows that, over the last several years (up to and including my time as Federal Justice Minister, in church discussions, as well as here in the Bundestag), I have supported a fair and practical arrangement for conscientious objection on the grounds of religion or conscience. Therefore, I deplore it when this right is abused. [*Applause*] Every frivolous treatment of the elementary freedoms of our order should be renounced by those very opposition groups who, after all, want to (and should) partake in the protection of these freedoms. [*Applause*] [. . .]

Ladies and gentlemen, on the occasion of my election I received many letters from people representing all segments of the population and all professions, especially from the younger generation, linking my inauguration with great – far too great – expectations. I take these expectations seriously. To the extent that they refer to personal matters, they are cries for help from the manifold distresses of daily life, from hardship and sickness, concerns about housing, incarceration, and from loneliness and the experience of injustice. Such hardships are apparently greater than our affluent society generally assumes. In many letters, though, one also hears a voice of anxiety about the future, concern about jobs, fear of growing old.

In the last twenty-four years, much has been achieved and accomplished; yet yesterday's accomplishments will stop counting as soon as tomorrow. Even yesterday these accomplishments weren't sufficient, and they won't be tomorrow if we don't keep accelerating them. Social change continues apace. Therefore, all of us are called upon to realize, with increasing effort, the demands of the Basic Law for extending social democracy. We have to recognize that the freedom of the individual has to be protected not only from the power of the state, but even more so from economic and societal power. The influence of organized interest groups and their lobbyists, often enough, stands in contradiction to our order, in which legal privileges may have been abolished, but continue to exist in social reality.

We have to develop ourselves within an achievement-, promotion- and education-oriented society in which the vision of freedom for all can be realized by having everyone receive his concrete and personal opportunity. Not less, but more democracy – that is the demand, that is the great goal that we have to prescribe for ourselves, and especially for our youth.

Some fatherlands are difficult. Germany is one of them. But it is our fatherland. Here is where we live and work. Therefore we want to make our contribution to the one mankind with, and through, this country of ours. It is in this sense that, from this place as well, I extend greetings to all German citizens. [*Lively applause*]

Source: Gustav Heinemann, „Der Frieden ist der Ernstfall“ [“Peace is the Emergency”], July 1, 1969, *Verhandlungen des Deutschen Bundestages* [*Proceedings of the German Bundestag*] 1969, vol. 70, p.13664 ff; original German speech reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann, ed., *Zwei Staaten, eine Nation. Deutsche Geschichte 1955-1970* [*Two States, One Nation. German History 1955-1970*]. Göttingen, 1988, pp. 548-50.

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