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Richard von Weizsäcker on the Meaning of Unification (October 3, 1990)

During the Berlin unification celebrations, Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker delivered a speech in which he praised the realization of external unity while calling for further efforts to achieve internal unity. His remarks were published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* the following day.

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### **Serving World Peace in a United Europe**

*The speech given by the Federal President on the occasion of the official state celebration of the Day of German Unity on October 3, 1990, in Berlin*

The preamble to our constitution, which applies to all Germans from this day on, includes the decisive words that move us today:

In free self-determination, we realize the unity and freedom of Germany. We hope to serve world peace in a united Europe. In our tasks, we are aware of our responsibility before God and humanity.

From the bottom of our hearts, we feel gratitude and joy – and at the same time a great, serious obligation. The history of Europe and Germany now offers us a chance that never existed before. We are experiencing one of the very rare historical periods in which things can truly be changed for the better. Let us not forget for a moment what this means to us.

There are pressing concerns here and abroad; we will not ignore this. We take our neighbors' reservations seriously. We also sense how difficult it will be to live up to the expectations that are coming from all directions. But we do not want to, and will not, be steered by fear and doubt, but instead by confidence. What is decisive here is our firm resolve to recognize our tasks with clarity and to tackle them together. This resolve gives us the strength to bring our everyday problems into proper relationship with our past and future in Europe.

For the first time, we Germans are not a point of contention on the European agenda. Our unity was not forced, but peacefully negotiated. It is part of a historical, pan-European process that

aims to achieve the freedom of all peoples and a new, peaceful order on our continent. We Germans hope to serve this goal. Our unity is dedicated to it.

We now have a state that we no longer consider provisional and whose identity and integrity are no longer disputed by our neighbors.

On this day, the united German nation takes its acknowledged place in Europe. [ . . . ]

Over the last forty years, fate divided us in the middle of our European neighborhood. It favored the one and burdened the other. But it was and remains our common German fate. History and a responsibility for its consequences is part to this, too. The SED had tried to decree division. It was of the opinion that proclaiming itself as a socialist society for the future was enough to free itself from the burden of history.

But in the GDR, people experienced and perceived this very differently. The war took a much heavier toll on them than on their compatriots in the West. And they always felt that remembering the past in responsible manner was an essential source of strength for liberation in the future. The forced official language had barely vanished when they began openly engaging with the questions of history. With great respect, the world registered the sincerity with which the free forces and above all the youth of the GDR saw it as their task to make up for the refusal of the old regime to acknowledge a shared historical responsibility. When the presidents of both freely elected German parliaments visited Israel a few months ago to commemorate the Holocaust, it made a deep impression there. It symbolized the unity of the Germans in their historical responsibility. National Socialist tyranny and the war that resulted from it inflicted immeasurable injustice and suffering upon peoples throughout almost all of Europe and here at home as well. We will always remain mindful of the victims. And we are grateful for the growing signs of reconciliation between peoples and nations.

The hope for freedom and for overcoming the division of Europe, Germany, and above all Berlin was never lost in the postwar period. And yet no one possessed the strength of imagination to foresee the course of events. So we experience this day as recipients of a gift. History has been kind to us Germans this time. So we have all the more reason for conscientious self-reflection. [ . . . ]

The form of unity has been found. Now it must be filled with substance and life. Parliaments, governments, and parties must help with this. But unity can be carried out only by the sovereign people, in the hearts and minds of the people themselves. Each of us senses how much remains to be done. It would be neither sincere nor helpful at this hour to conceal how much continues to separate us from each other.

The external coercion of division did not achieve its goal of alienating us. As inhumane as the Wall and the barbed wire were, they simply deepened our resolve to come together. We felt this most strongly in Berlin, this city of such central importance in the past and for the future. Seeing

and feeling the Wall every day made us continue to believe in, and hope for, the other side. Now the Wall is gone; that is the most important thing. But now that we have freedom, we have to learn to live with it. We recognize more clearly than before the consequences of our different paths of development. The first to come to mind is the material gap. Even though the people of the GDR were confronted with an economy of shortages every day, made the best of it, and worked hard, the full extent of the problem – and thus the distance from the West – has become completely clear only in recent months. If we are to succeed in overcoming this gap quickly, we not only need mutual assistance, but above all mutual respect.

For Germans in the former GDR, unification is an existential adjustment process that affects them directly and personally on a daily basis. It often puts superhuman demands on them. A woman wrote me to say that she was deeply grateful for freedom but hadn't realized that the change would hit such a raw nerve – that it would literally demand that she bid herself farewell. She wanted nothing more than to be rid of her regime. But to simultaneously replace – from one day to the next – almost every element of one's own life with something new and unfamiliar exceeds human capabilities.

For the people of the West, joy at the fall of the Wall was infinite. But the fact that unification will affect their personal lives in some way has not become clear to many, or is even highly unwelcome.

It cannot remain this way. We must first of all come to understand each other better. We will only be on the right track when we truly realize that both sides have amassed valuable experiences and important qualities worth preserving in unity. [ . . . ]

On this day, we are founding a common state. No government treaty, constitution, or legislative decision can determine how well unity will succeed on a human level. It depends on the behavior of each one of us, on our own openness to one another. It is “the plebiscite of every single day” (Renan) from which the character of our polity will emerge.

I am certain that we will succeed in overcoming old and new divisions. We can combine the constitutional patriotism that evolved on one side with the human solidarity that was lived on the other to form a powerful whole. We have the common resolve to fulfill the great tasks our neighbors expect of us. We know how much more difficult the situation is for other peoples on this earth right now. The more convincingly we, in a united Germany, manage to live up to our responsibility for peace in Europe and the world, the better it will be for our future at home. History is giving us the chance. We will take advantage of it with confidence and trust.

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