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A Look Backward and a Look Ahead: Germany, Europe, and the Transatlantic Relationship
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Shortly before the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Chancellor Angela Merkel reflected on the role of the United States in postwar Germany and in German unification. She emphasized the necessity of cooperation between Europe and the U.S. in solving far-reaching global problems.

Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel before the United States Congress

Madam Speaker,
Mr. Vice President,
Distinguished Members of Congress,

I would like to thank you for the great honor and privilege to address you today, shortly before the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

I am the second German Chancellor on whom this honor has been bestowed. The first was Konrad Adenauer when he addressed both Houses of Congress in 1957, albeit one after the other.

Our lives could not have been more different. In 1957 I was just a small child of three years. I lived with my parents in Brandenburg, a region that belonged to the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the part of Germany that was not free. My father was a Protestant pastor. My mother, who had studied English and Latin to become a teacher, was not allowed to work in her chosen profession in the GDR.

In 1957 Konrad Adenauer was already 81 years old. He had lived through the German Empire, the First World War, the Weimar Republic and the Second World War. The National Socialists ousted him from his position as mayor of the city of Cologne. After the war, he was among the men and women who helped build up the free, democratic Federal Republic of Germany.

Nothing is more symbolic of the Federal Republic of Germany than its constitution, the Basic Law, or “Grundgesetz”. It was adopted exactly 60 years ago. Article 1 of the Grundgesetz proclaims, and I quote, “Human dignity shall be inviolable”. This short, simple sentence –

“Human dignity shall be inviolable” – was the answer to the catastrophe that was the Second World War, to the murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust, to the hate, destruction and annihilation that Germany brought upon Europe and the world.

November 9th is just a few days away. It was on November 9, 1989 that the Berlin Wall fell and it was also on November 9 in 1938 that an indelible mark was branded into Germany’s memory and Europe’s history. On that day the National Socialists destroyed synagogues, setting them on fire, and murdered countless people. It was the beginning of what led to the break with civilization, the Shoah. I cannot stand before you today without remembering the victims of this day and of the Shoah.

And I cannot stand before you today without mentioning how grateful I am for the presence of one guest, who personally experienced the horror of National Socialism in Germany and whom I recently met personally: Professor Fritz Stern. He was born in 1926 in what was then the German city of Breslau and today is the Polish city of Wrocław. He and his family were able to escape the Nazi regime in 1938 and flee to the United States. In his autobiography, published in 2006 under the title “Five Germanys I Have Known”, Fritz Stern describes the moment of his arrival in New York’s harbor in 1938, a haven of freedom and security.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is wonderful that history willed that we should both – the twelve-year-old boy who was driven out of Germany and me, the Chancellor of reunited Germany who was born in the GDR – be here in this distinguished House. This fills me with great joy and deep gratitude.

Not even in my wildest dreams could I have imagined, twenty years ago before the Wall fell, that this would happen. It was beyond imagination then to even think about traveling to the United States of America let alone standing here today.

The land of unlimited opportunity – for a long time it was impossible for me to reach. The Wall, barbed wire and the order to shoot those who tried to leave limited my access to the free world. So I had to create my own picture of the United States from films and books, some of which were smuggled in from the West by relatives.

What did I see and what did I read? What was I passionate about?

I was passionate about the American dream – the opportunity for everyone to be successful, to make it in life through their own personal effort.

I, like many other teenagers, was passionate about a certain brand of jeans that were not available in the GDR and which my aunt in West Germany regularly sent to me.

I was passionate about the vast American landscape which seemed to breathe the very spirit of freedom and independence. Immediately in 1990 my husband and I traveled for the first time in

our lives to America, to California. We will never forget our first glimpse of the Pacific Ocean. It was simply gorgeous.

I was passionate about all of these things and much more, even though until 1989 America was simply out of reach for me. And then, on November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. The border that for decades had divided a nation into two worlds was now open.

And that is why for me today is, first of all, the time to say thank you.

I thank the American and Allied pilots who heard and heeded the desperate call of Berlin's mayor Ernst Reuter as he said "People of the world, ... look upon this city." For months, these pilots delivered food by airlift and saved Berlin from starvation. Many of these soldiers risked their lives doing this. Dozens lost their lives. We will remember and honor them forever.

I thank the 16 million Americans who have been stationed in Germany over the past decades. Without their support as soldiers, diplomats and generally as facilitators it never would have been possible to overcome the division of Europe. We are happy to have American soldiers in Germany, today and in the future. They are ambassadors of their country in our country, just as many Americans with German roots today act as ambassadors of my country here.

I think of John F. Kennedy, who won the hearts of despairing Berliners during his 1961 visit after the construction of the Berlin Wall when he called out to them: "Ich bin ein Berliner."

Ronald Reagan far earlier than others saw and recognized the sign of the times when, standing before the Brandenburg Gate in 1987, he demanded: "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate ... Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." This appeal is something that will never be forgotten.

I thank George Herbert Walker Bush for placing his trust in Germany and then Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl and presenting us Germans with an offer of immeasurable value in May 1989: "Partnership in leadership." What a generous offer, 40 years after the end of World War II. Just last Saturday we saw each other again in Berlin, along with Mikhail Gorbachev. We also owe him a debt of gratitude.

Ladies and gentlemen, to sum it up in one sentence: I know, we Germans know, how much we owe to you, our American friends. We as a nation, and I personally, will never forget that.

All over Europe the common quest for freedom released an incredible power: in the trade union Solidarność in Poland, amongst the reformers surrounding Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia, at the first opening of the Iron Curtain in Hungary and at the demonstrations that took place every Monday in the GDR.

Where there was once only a dark wall, a door suddenly opened and we all walked through it: onto the streets, into the churches, across the borders. Everyone was given the chance to build something new, to make a difference, to venture a new beginning.

I also started anew. I left my job as a physicist at the Academy of Sciences in East Berlin behind me and went into politics. Because I finally had the chance to make a difference. Because I had the impression that now it was possible to change things. It was possible for me to do something.

Ladies and gentlemen, twenty years have passed since we were given this incredible gift of freedom. But there is still nothing that inspires me more, nothing that spurs me on more, nothing that fills me more with positive feelings than the power of freedom.

A person who has experienced such a positive surprise in life believes that much is possible. Or, to put it in the words of Bill Clinton in Berlin in 1994: "Nothing will stop us. All things are possible."

Yes, all things are possible. Like the fact that a woman like me can stand before you today. That a man like Arnold Vaatz, who spent time in prison because he was a dissident during the GDR regime in Dresden, can be here today as a member of the German Bundestag and of my delegation.

All things are possible, also in the 21st century, in the age of globalization. We back home in Germany know just as well as you do in America that many people are afraid of globalization. We do not just brush these concerns aside. We recognize the difficulties. And yet it is our duty to convince people that globalization is an immense global opportunity, for each and every continent, because it forces us to act together with others.

The alternative to globalization would be shutting ourselves off from others, but this is not a viable alternative. It would lead only to isolation and therefore misery. Thinking in terms of alliances and partnerships on the other hand, is what will take us into a good future.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is true that America and Europe have had their share of disagreements. One may feel the other is sometimes too hesitant and fearful, or from the opposite perspective, too headstrong and pushy. And nevertheless, I am deeply convinced that there is no better partner for Europe than America and no better partner for America than Europe.

Because what brings Europeans and Americans together and keeps them together is not just a shared history. What brings and keeps Europeans and Americans together are not just shared interests and the common global challenges that all regions of the world face. That alone would not be sufficient to explain the very special partnership between Europe and America and make it last. It is more than that.

That which brings Europeans and Americans closer together and keeps them close is a common basis of shared values. It is a common idea of the individual and his inviolable dignity. It is a common understanding of freedom in responsibility. This is what we stand for in the unique transatlantic partnership and in the community of shared values that is NATO. This is what fills "Partnership in Leadership" with life, ladies and gentlemen. This basis of values was what ended the Cold War, and it is this basis of values that will enable us to stand the tests of our times – and these tests we must stand.

Germany is united, Europe is united. That is what we have achieved. Now, today, our political generation must prove that it is able to meet the challenges of the 21st century, and that in a sense it is able to tear down today's walls.

What does that mean? First it means building peace and security, second, achieving prosperity and justice, and third, protecting our planet. Here, too, America and Europe are called upon in a very special way.

Even after the end of the Cold War we are thus faced with the task of tearing down the walls between different concepts of life, in other words the walls in people's minds that make it difficult time and again to understand one another in this world of ours. This is why the ability to show tolerance is so important. While, for us, our way of life is the best possible way, others do not necessarily feel that way. There are different ways to create peaceful coexistence. Tolerance means showing respect for other people's history, traditions, religion and cultural identity.

But let there be no misunderstanding: Tolerance does not mean "anything goes". There must be zero tolerance towards all those who show no respect for the inalienable rights of the individual and who violate human rights. Zero tolerance must also be shown if, for example, weapons of mass destruction fall into the hands of Iran and possibly threaten our security! Iran must be aware of this. Iran knows our offer, but Iran also knows where we draw the line: A nuclear bomb in the hands of an Iranian president who denies the Holocaust, threatens Israel and denies Israel the right to exist, is not acceptable!

For me, Israel's security will never be open to negotiation. Not only Israel is threatened but the entire free world. Whoever threatens Israel also threatens us! This is why the free world meets this threat head on, if necessary with tough economic sanctions. Ladies and gentlemen, Germany will therefore provide staunch support to the peace process with the aim of realizing a two-state solution, a Jewish State of Israel and a Palestinian state.

We also stand up to the threat of international terrorism. We are aware that no country, no matter how strong, can do this alone. We all need partners. We are only strong if we are part of a community of partners.

Since we shared the view of the then President George W. Bush, after 9/11, that we had to do everything we could to prevent Afghanistan from ever again harboring a threat to security,

Germany has since 2002 been present on the ground with the third-largest troop contingent. We want to make the concept of networked security successful. This means that civilian and military engagement are inextricably linked.

The international community's commitment in Afghanistan is undoubtedly a tough one. It places great demands on all of us, and it must be taken into the next phase as soon as the new Afghan government is in office. Our objective must be to develop a strategy to transfer responsibility, which we want to do early next year at a joint UN conference. We will be successful if, as we have done up to now, we continue travel this road together in the Alliance, every step of the way. Germany is ready to shoulder that responsibility.

There is no doubt that NATO is and will continue to be the crucial corner-stone of our collective defense. Its Security Concept is being constantly developed and adapted to new challenges. Its foundation and clear compass for peace and freedom will, however, remain unchanged.

It is my firm belief that we Europeans can contribute even more in the future. For we Europeans are currently working towards giving our European Union a new contractual basis. The final signature has just been added. This will make the EU stronger and more capable of action, and thus make it a strong and reliable partner for the United States.

On this basis we can build stable partnerships with others, first and foremost with Russia, China and India. This is because our world is freer and more networked than ever. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the revolution in information and communication technology, the rise of China, India and other countries to become dynamic economies – all this has made the 21st century world a different place from the world we knew in the 20th century. That's a good thing, because freedom is the very essence of our economy and society. Without freedom the human mind is prevented from unleashing its creative force.

But what is also clear is that this freedom does not stand alone. It is freedom in responsibility and freedom to exercise responsibility. For that reason the world needs order. The near-collapse of the international financial markets showed what happens when there is no such order.

If there is one lesson the world has learned from last year's financial crisis, it is that there is no alternative to a global framework for a globalized economy. Without universally-binding rules for transparency and supervision there can be no greater freedom but rather we risk the abuse of freedom and thus instability. In a way this is a second wall that has to fall: A wall standing in the way of a truly global economic order, a wall of regional and exclusively national thinking.

The key to cooperation between the major industrialized countries and emerging economies lies in the G20. Here again cooperation between America and Europe is a crucial corner-stone. It is a cooperation that is not exclusive but rather inclusive.

The G20 has shown that it can take action. We need to resist the pressure of those who almost led the nations of this world into the abyss. That means no more and no less than that international economic policy must become more sustainable. This crisis was also an expression of too much short-term thinking. Millions of people all over the world might lose their jobs or even suffer poverty and starvation because of this. To achieve prosperity and justice we must do all we can to prevent such a crisis in the future.

That also means not giving in to the temptation of protectionism. This is why the WTO Doha negotiations are so important. The success of the Doha Round would send a valuable message of the openness of the world economy, particularly in the current crisis.

Equally, the Transatlantic Economic Council can also fulfill an important task. We can use it to prevent competing subsidies and give incentives to reduce trade barriers between Europe and America. I appeal to you: Let us jointly work towards a world economic order which is in the interests of both America and Europe!

Ladies and gentlemen, the fact that global challenges can only be met by comprehensive international cooperation is also shown by a third great challenge of the 21st century, by a wall, so to speak, separating the present from the future. That wall prevents us from seeing the needs of future generations, it prevents us from taking the measures urgently needed to protect the very basis of our life and climate.

We can already see where this wasteful attitude towards our future leads: In the Arctic icebergs are melting, in Africa people are becoming refugees due to environmental damage, and global sea levels are rising. I am pleased that you in your work together with President Obama attach such significance to protecting our climate. For we all know: We have no time to lose! We need an agreement at the climate conference in Copenhagen in December. We have to agree on one objective – global warming must not exceed two degrees Celsius.

To achieve this we need the readiness of all nations to assume internationally binding obligations. We cannot afford failure with regard to achieving the climate protection objectives scientists tell us are crucial. That would not only be irresponsible from an ecological point of view, but would also be technologically short-sighted, for the development of new technologies in the energy sector offers major opportunities for growth and jobs in the future.

No doubt about it – in December the world will look to us, to Europe and America. It is true that there can be no agreement without China and India accepting obligations, but I am convinced that if we in Europe and America show that we are ready to accept binding obligations, we will also be able to persuade China and India to join in. And then, in Copenhagen, we will be able to tear down the wall between the present and the future – in the interests of our children and grandchildren and of sustainable development worldwide.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am convinced that, just as we found the strength in the 20th century to tear down a wall made of barbed wire and concrete, today we have the strength to overcome the walls of the 21st century, walls in our minds, walls of shortsighted self-interest, walls between the present and the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, my confidence is inspired by a very special sound – that of the Freedom Bell in the Schöneberg Town Hall in Berlin. Since 1950 a copy of the original American Liberty Bell has hung there. A gift from American citizens, it is a symbol of the promise of freedom, a promise that has been fulfilled. On October 3, 1990 the Freedom Bell rang to mark the reunification of Germany, the greatest moment of joy for the German people. On September 13, 2001, two days after 9/11, it tolled again, to mark America's darkest hour.

The Freedom Bell in Berlin is, like the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, a symbol which reminds us that freedom does not come about of itself. It must be struggled for and then defended anew every day of our lives. In this endeavor Germany and Europe will also in future remain strong and dependable partners for America. That I promise you. Thank you very much.

Source: Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel before the United States Congress, November 3, 2009,
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