

GERMAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS SINCE 1980

From 2005 to 2009 I was posted to Budapest, Hungary. There, I had my first contacts with Hungarian Germans. I had no idea about their way of life before, but when I went home again, I made friends with many of them and broadened my horizons. And I am a bit ashamed I know so few about German Americans, apart from some keywords as Steuben, Pennsylvania Dutch, or the “Forty-Eighters.”

I have been asked to talk to you about relations between the U.S. and Germany starting with the 1980s. Good coincidence, for I could hardly tell you anything about the time before—I was six years old in 1980, and my memory about anything “political” starts about there.

A young boy’s life in West Germany had some links to America. Playing Cowboys and Indians, watching Star Trek on one of the three TV networks we had at that time, and, of course, begging and quarreling until our parents finally agreed to allow a birthday party at McDonald’s.

In my case, America meant a bit more—even at that age. Here’s why, and now I have to go back a bit from the 80s:

In the mid-60s, my mother had spent one year as an exchange student in a small town not far from Detroit. She often told me many stories from her experiences during that time in that far-away country. One day, I asked her why this one single year within her so very long lifetime (from my perspective at that time) meant so much to her that she talked more about it than any other period. And she told me how America had changed her life, her world outlook. She said: “When I was in America, for the first time in my life I had the feeling I could breathe freely.”

Don’t get me—or her—wrong: She was the beloved child of loving and caring parents. Born in the early days of the German *Wirtschaftswunder*, she did not suffer from material need. But I learned there was a big gap between West Germany roughly twenty years after the war and the United States. Compared with American “liberty,” German “Freiheit” had little to do with a self-determined life, with questioning society’s leaders, let alone your parents’ authority. Only a few years later, in 1968, a kind of a cultural revolution radically changed the social climate in the country; and to the extent to which this change has been successful and constructive is still being discussed.

When my mother came back to Germany, she was absolutely determined to finish school and then to emigrate to the States forever. But, as we put it in German, “life came between that”—which I find good, for otherwise I would not be able to speak to you now. Marriage, profession, child—she never saw America again. But she will—in six days, when she comes over with my Dad to visit me, my wife and her three grandchildren. And that’s now really enough from my little private story about my personal links to America.

Let’s now time-travel to America in the 1980s—you couldn’t make a movie out of it, for it would seem too clichéd: An actor taking office as President, surviving an assassination attack, boosting the economy by a policy named after him—“Reagonomics”—demanding the Soviet leader in a speech in front of the Berlin Brandenburg Gate to “tear down” the Berlin Wall, which then comes true in the final days of this ten-year period. As a producer, would you buy such a script? As a teenager, I learned two things from those days: Hollywood makes the best movies, but the really incredible stories are written by life; and, though I may not have been able to put it this way, realpolitik is something useful, pragmatic and sometimes necessary, but it must never lead its protagonists to give up visions, hopes and dreams. No wall, be it protected by thousands of nuclear weapons and an unscrupulous intelligence organization, can in the long term stand against the will of the people it incarcerates.

The fall of the Berlin Wall put the “German question” back on the agenda. The circumstances were not too bad: The Soviet Union desperately needed money, money the rich West Germans had; West Germany had proven its democratic stability for more than forty years after the end of World War II; and the East Germans had just impressively shown their commitment to, or their longing for, freedom and democracy. Any obstacles in sight?

It turned out that four and a half decades had not been enough to overcome fears and sorrows about a united Germany—and these feelings appeared stronger in our direct neighborhood than, say, in Soviet Russia. In Britain, historians were quoted predicting that some ten years after reunification you would see Adolf Hitler statues in all German cities. I have Margaret Thatcher’s autobiography at home and would recommend them to anybody interested in diplomacy behind closed doors—a remark-

ably candid document of strong and organized resistance against a project her country had repeatedly vowed to support in the past (“but we did not believe it would come true,” Mrs. Thatcher openly said).

Don’t get me wrong here: I know from my own family that time heals wounds very slowly. And I recall how rapidly events unfolded those days between fall 1989 and fall 1990. Politicians don’t like—and should not like—it when things proceed beyond any reasonable control. Their nervousness was understandable. And, after all: After two horrible experiences with a united Germany in that century, who should give the Germans a leap of faith? Answer: The Americans did. It was President George H. W. Bush who decided to support Chancellor Kohl’s path—or should I say—race to unity.

How did he and his government do that? Let me recommend to you the excellent book *Germany United and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft*, published in Germany under the title: *Sternstunden der Diplomatie* or “Magic Moments of Diplomacy,” written by two young staffers from President Bush’s National Security Council named Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice.

True, the American decision to support the unification process was not an emotional one, but one founded on strategic interests and a comprehensive analysis of the developing situation in Europe. Still, all of this would not have been sufficient without the most important thing: trust.

Half a year before the wall fell, President Bush had offered the (West) Germans during an official visit a “partnership in leadership.” It was the visible result of decades of confidence-building and close cooperation in the Cold War world. Looking back, it also seems like the final approval for Germany to enter decisively on the path to unification, which, I can assure you, hardly any German was even dreaming of in spring 1989. In Washington, however, files from those days show that some people there actually were! Perhaps it did not only have to do with intelligence reports, but also a bit with the old wisdom that your best friends sometimes know you better than you do yourself.

The united Germany became, with the exception of Eurasian Russia, the most populous and economically most powerful country in Europe. In the 1990s, however, it still had to find its place in the continent and, so to

speak, to find to itself. The expectations from outside changed rapidly—very rapidly, indeed: By spring 1990, worries about a “Fourth Reich” were openly discussed in Western newspapers. Then, in August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait; now, the same papers in their op-eds criticized Germany for not even thinking about sharing the burden of a military operation to free the small Arab country. I remember a caricature in a German news magazine: an artist drawing simultaneously two versions of the German “Michel”: one a giant wearing a German spiked helmet and big boots, one boot holding the terrestrial globe down, lighting a cigar *with burning Deutschmark*-banknotes; and the other a small white rabbit shivering in fear, using his Deutschmark banknotes as a loincloth while facing the spectator. What the heck was the world expecting us to do or to be?

I remember how quickly we had to grow into a more challenging role. The old days of an economic giant and a political dwarf were gone forever. In 1991, I learned in the early morning of one January day that the war to liberate Kuwait had begun; the news speaker in the radio burst out in tears, but no German troops were part of the Allied forces (with the exception of some stand-by air force units in Turkey to protect the country from an Iraqi attack that never came). In 1993, German soldiers took part in the UNISOM mission in Somalia. That mission had nothing to do with the heavy battles that also killed American soldiers later; it was a purely humanitarian mission, but it caused a political thunderstorm in the Federal Republic. Only six years later, Germany now being governed by a coalition of Social Democrats and the Green Party, the German Air Force took part in air strikes against Belgrade, helping to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. Of course it was highly controversial, especially within the governing parties—but at least my feeling was it was not the same as the Somali case, where it was more about the principle.

I had to outline this a bit to give you a feeling of the change in climate in Germany in the 1990s. Looking back, I feel even more how lucky we were that transatlantic ties between the U.S. and Germany were so tight throughout the entire time.

Chancellor Kohl was eight years in office when the country was united, and he stayed eight more years. While he then focused on the second main project widely connected with his government, European inte-

gration, his personal relations both with President Bush Sr. and with his successor, President Clinton, were trustful and amicable. Both sides had got what they wanted: A united, democratic Germany, integrated in Western structures by conviction, a close partner and ally of the United States.

For many, the cooperation between both countries in the efforts to resolve the Balkan conflicts between 1991 and 1999 serves as impressive proof of this partnership. At second glance, however, it becomes clear that it took some time to bring the partners together.

When Germany made an advance to recognize Slovenia's and Croatia's independence, it was widely and often sharply criticized for that step—also from parts of the U.S. administration. Yugoslavia had enjoyed some sympathies in Washington as a country that, despite of its “socialist” character, openly rejected Soviet leadership. The declarations of independence came against the clearly articulated will of Secretary Baker, who did not want to “reward” the Croats or Slovenes for their unilateral steps. But Washington was also, so to speak, uninvited by its European allies, who saw the Balkan crisis as a litmus test for the continent to settle local conflicts on its own now that the Cold War days were over. As one European minister put it self-confidently: “The U.S. is being informed, but not consulted.”

Both sides needed time to adjust to the new situation, and the tragedy is that any delay in times of war is paid with human lives. In March 1992, Secretary Baker for the first time openly supported recognition of their independence, not without repeating his criticism of the “violent” path the Slovenes and Croats had chosen. In Congress and in the media, the issue remained highly controversial.

The killing, the “ethnic cleansing,” pictures of obviously malnourished POWs and civilians in prisoner camps (some media referred to them as “concentration camps”), later in Bosnia-Herzegovina the siege of Sarajevo and the massacre of Srebrenica—it became brutally clear that Europe was not about to solve this conflict without its American partners. And, indeed, they finally were settled together with the U.S., be it in Dayton or later in Kosovo.

And then: 9/11. The world came to a standstill, and so did Germany. Three days after, 200,000 Germans came together at Brandenburg Gate in a gesture of solidarity to the country that had protected and defended freedom in that city when it was divided. In the Bundestag, the chairman of the Christian-Democratic parliamentary group said: “We would not be sitting here today if the Americans had not shown solidarity with us Germans 50 years ago. Nobody in the world has as much reason to show solidarity with America now as we do.” And his Social Democratic counterparts added: “Today, we are all Americans.” For the first time in history, NATO invoked Article V, declaring an attack on one of its members is an attack on all. And for the first time in German history after World War II, there was no serious resistance among the main political forces in the country to send troops to war, the war in Afghanistan against al-Qaida and the Taliban.

“Excuse me, I’m not convinced!” Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor Joschka Fischer shouted out these words in perfect English in a public session of the annual Munich Security Conference in 2003, addressing then-Defense Secretary Rumsfeld. He, Rumsfeld, had made clear that the U.S. saw no alternative but to go to war with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq again, and he asked the European allies to join America. But Iraq, not only in the eyes of the German government, was something different compared with Afghanistan.

Fischer’s words were seen, on both sides of the Atlantic, as a symbol of a deep rift and growing alienation between the U.S. and Germany; or, you all know this Rumsfeld quote, the U.S. and “old Europe.”

But this perception was strongly influenced by the emotions of those days, not only in Europe and America. From today’s view, I would rather call it the expression of a severe difference of opinion on an important issue. And the question still appears to be an issue today: Can a strong partnership exist and endure if there are severe differences on important issues?

“Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus,” Robert Kagan wrote—ten years ago, even before the (last) Iraq War. If that is true, it can be considered as an enormous American success story—at least when it comes to Germany.

Think of it: Imagine President Truman sitting in the Oval Office a year or two after the end of World War II. He has to decide whether Germany should really be given the chance to rejoin the family of free and democratic nations, maybe with the prospect of becoming a “partner in leadership” one day. Now imagine one of his advisers taking the floor and saying: “Mr. President, we should definitely not take the Germans in again. I tell you, we will have a lot of problems with them. Sure, they will change, because they have to if they want anybody to shake hands with them again one day. But what will be the outcome? They will insist on using multilateral conflict resolution structures; they will be among the strongest advocates of the United Nations; they will ask for very good reasons if we want them to go to war with us, which will be difficult enough, because they will have turned into a nation of war-haters and pacifists. This is way too a big risk for us.”

And now, finally, imagine President Truman’s facial expression before asking his adviser what on earth he thinks America wanted the Germans to be. Did America not want the Germans to be a bit more Venusians?

The decision to go to war or not is the most serious question imaginable. It is about sending some of the country’s sons and daughters off to fight, maybe to kill, maybe to die. The U.S. and Germany are, together with their European partners and Canada, united in the most powerful military alliance the world has ever seen. Part and core of this alliance is the commitment to fight shoulder to shoulder, should one side be attacked from the outside.

But our alliance remains different from other military and political associations such as the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. We are free countries, free societies. If we do not agree on an issue, even though it may be a most important one, it does not and cannot call into question the basis of our friendship, its strength and its capability to voice opposition.

Two different conclusions can be drawn from the story of German-American relations in the last 30 years. A contemplative one, and an optimistic one; a happy ending as we know it from Hollywood or an unfinished ending as we know it from German four-hour, complex, black-and-white art movies with a lot of confusing dialogue. I told you in the beginning about my affection for Hollywood, but you decide for yourself.

But seriously, I think this is one of the rare cases in life where the optimistic analysis also is the realistic one. Americans and Europeans, Americans and Germans may be disappointed about each other from time to time. But they can express it openly, they can discuss it in a frank atmosphere, they meet on equal footing, even though the one is of course much more powerful than the other. And though the one may be from Mars and the other one from Venus, they both know pretty well that life is best on Earth; that Heaven and Hell can exist on that small blue planet; and that they share the conviction that the men, women, and children living on it deserve no less than a life in dignity, freedom, and justice. Friendship makes it easier to achieve this goal for us and for our children; for, as Abraham Lincoln said: "The better part of one's life consists of his friendships."

— David Bartels
Washington, D.C.