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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Opinion

Sunday Forum: The fall of The Wall

Germany and the rest of Europe have moved beyond the us-vs.-them Cold War view of the world, which Americans don't quite get, according to Chatham professor ALLYSON LOWE

Sunday, September 16, 2007

As university students dig into their fall classes in Pittsburgh and across the country, we professors wonder what our students really know about the world. One of the startling facts about the class of 2011 is that the Berlin Wall fell before most of them were born.

Ask any first-year student what comes to mind when you say "The Wall" and you'll get Pink Floyd, China or maybe the Israel/Palestinian barrier. Ask about Germany and the only things they may remember from high school civics courses or The History Channel are the world wars and the Holocaust. The more socially inclined may conjure an image of bratwurst and beer from their hometown Oktoberfest.

A recent trip to Germany highlighted for me how daunting this generational shift is for American academics, as they try to convey a sense of contemporary Germany to their students, and to our German colleagues working in political, academic and diplomatic circles for whom German-American relations seem trapped in the moment that The Wall came down. They, too, find it hard to believe that a generation of young people has come of political age not knowing The Wall as a metaphor for a divided Germany or the front line of the Cold War. We found ourselves looking for a common understanding of our contemporary history and role in the world.

Today, our relations with Europe's most powerful economic and political engine are more important and perhaps more complicated than at any time since The Wall's collapse. Here are some things that Americans should know about German-American relations and what's happening in Germany today.

- The United States still needs allies in "Old Europe":

The ongoing relationship between Germany and the United States is essential to both countries, but it has changed. The United States still has a significant, if declining, military presence in Germany. Germany may no longer be as relevant to the United States in its relations with a communist east, but it cannot be ignored when America seeks coalitions of the willing in international affairs. Germany now has to be asked to participate, and it can choose whether or not it will be involved. America's persuasive power in Germany diplomatically is more important than its military presence.

- Americans and Germans think differently about domestic politics and foreign policy:

Americans still give precedence to the war on terror but a recent survey showed that 70 percent of Germans rank climate change as their leading policy concern, while terrorism, which they have suffered on their home soil, comes in fourth. As a result, Germany and the United States are often at odds on international climate-change policies. Germany has become

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the global green leader.

- We have many challenges in common:

It would surprise many Americans to hear the immigration debate raging in Germany, in its case about a significant Turkish minority that has long been invited into the country to work, if not always made welcome. German concerns sound similar to the ones that confront us here, having to do with jobs, education, access to services and the legal status of recent arrivals. The push and pull of immigration and integration challenge both countries.

- We both must harness the power of trade:

As global economic leaders, our two countries help shape the debate about world trade. We are among each other's largest trading partners. Germany is deeply involved in southwest Pennsylvania, where it has invested in major corporations and partnerships. Germany leads the world in trade negotiations and green technologies that enhance trade for both the European Union and the United States.

- We agree more than we disagree:

For all the rhetoric of "us v. them" and about how "anti-Americanism" is running rampant across Europe, the values held by the United States and Germany are remarkably similar. Surveys show considerable agreement on everything from the nature of our common threats to how we wish to respond to them. Many Germans distinguish between their disagreements with American foreign policy and their admiration and respect for the American people and their accomplishments. Most importantly, as long-standing and robust democracies with strong economies, we have more to work on together than separately.

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To be sure, every generation looks at the next and says "if only they knew" about important aspects of a bygone era, such as the Berlin Wall. But as we contemplate foreign policy in the world today, both the United States and Germany must shift perceptions from the days of the Cold War.

We used to look over The Wall and see the East as a dangerous place. The Wall was symbolic of the Cold War standoff between Western civilization and the Communist East. Today the United States looks across the world with a similar view, and sees a dangerous place in which it now is engaged in what it calls a War on Terror.

Our German allies have looked across the contemporary landscape and tell us that they see the world as a more complicated place. Our posture is defensive, theirs is one of reaching out and seeking diplomatic engagement. They view the fight against terror, unlike the Cold War, as a battle and not as a war. So where does that leave our two countries?

The United States has remained in the Cold War habit of acting unilaterally when it can and multilaterally only when it must. Germany and the rest of Europe have formed new habits -- out of necessity and out of political preference -- choosing instead to act multilaterally on most occasions and unilaterally only in the most pressing of circumstances. Old Europe has developed new ways while it seems we have not.

If we are to confront a world that is both dangerous and complicated, we must seek new allies and new relationships with old allies, recognizing multilateralism as the best way forward.

First published on September 16, 2007 at 12:00 am