

## » Leaving your comfort zone and the value of personal exchanges«



A close encounter back in 1991/92: Anne von Fallois right next to Barbara and George H.W. Bush, the then US-First Lady and President—if only as cardboard figures.



Anne von Fallois in conversation with Dr. Oliver Schmidt, the Executive Director of Fulbright Germany in her office in Berlin.

Anne von Fallois looks back on her Fulbright year and discusses the way in which it still impacts her life today.

Political scientist Anne von Fallois spent the 1991/92 academic year on a Fulbright scholarship in Washington, D.C. After many years working in the Office of the German Federal President, she serves today as the Kienbaum Group's ambassador to the capital, a liaison with politicians, scientists, associations, and foundations. She lives with her husband and two children in Berlin.

**It's been quite some time since you were a Fulbright scholar at George Washington University. What still sticks out in your mind about the experience?**

I remember a lively university with approachable professors—and my amazing roommate, with whom I'm still in touch. The 90s were an exciting time to have a Chinese-American background. It was the age of hyphenated heritages. There was a great deal of intellectual debate surrounding the significance of having more than one cultural background. Even then, American society was divided over this issue.

**Did studying abroad give you a leg up in your career or influence your trajectory?**

Generally speaking, studying abroad gave me a more global perspective. More specifically, I gained valuable practical experience in writing policy papers: concise, four-page analyses that placed more value on independent thinking than on qualifying every thought with a precise footnote.

**After 20 years of working in the presidential administration, why did you switch gears to become an adviser at Kienbaum?**

Because I lost my job. It was bad timing: shortly after I returned to my post in the presidential administration following some temporary work on the Futurium project, the German Federal President stepped down. The entire management team was replaced, one member at a time. It's not unusual for something like that to happen. Having a revolving door policy is common in the U.S., and we would do well to embrace it more in Germany as well. For me, the switch from working in politics to working in the economic sector was key.

**As a headhunter, how do you see the current job market in Germany? How important is having an international education or doing an exchange?**

International experiences are important in and of themselves, and not just in relation to the job market. We live in a world where the other side of the globe is just a click away. But there's a big difference between being friends with someone on Facebook and sharing a fridge.

Actual experiences can't be replaced by virtual reality. We should be doing our utmost to open up new living and working environments for young people to foster skills that are desirable in the workplace, like speaking multiple languages and having first-hand experience of another culture. What I also look for in applicants is whether they're capable of getting out of their comfort zone, whether they can empathize with people who are different. These are soft skills that can be built up by spending a year abroad.

**What would you want to pass on to young Fulbrighters?**

Really see yourselves as Fulbrighters! Being a Fulbright scholar means going abroad with the support of an organization that has a mission. It means a lot more than simply studying in another country. Fulbrighters should see themselves as public

## 9 personal questions for Anne von Fallois

**Where do you call home?**

First comes Münsterland. And second? Bonn. Third? Washington, D.C. Is there a fourth? Berlin. All these places are home? Yes, home is like a layer cake.

**What's your favorite American sport?**

I played softball, but was never all that good at it. I really love watching synchronized swimming.

**What's your favorite TV show?**

House of Cards. That's a no-brainer for a political scientist.

**What would you have missed out on if you hadn't gone to the U.S.?**

I would never have experienced the pleasure of going to a museum just to look at a single painting. In Washington, I had the chance to do that because many of the museums were free.

**What could you have done without during your stay in the U.S.?**

Too much bad beer. And eggnog.

**What was the hardest thing about coming back to Germany?**

Finding people who wanted to engage with my enthusiasm. I came back with a wealth of new experiences and ideas, whereas the people I'd left behind were still living the same lives. I didn't have "reverse culture shock," but my heart was so full of what I'd just experienced.

**Let's say you're about to spend a long weekend in a cabin in Alaska. Which three Americans would you like to take with you?**

Political scientist Ann-Mary Slaughter, Condoleezza Rice and Meryl Streep. I just realized I chose all women. If that doesn't work, I'll invite Snoopy too.

**If you could, would you go back to the U.S. for a year right now?**

I certainly would, because I believe it's important to understand what's happening there – in society and with the people.

**What would you call this second U.S. stay?**

"Expedition into the known unknown." We think everything that's going on right now is ridiculous and that we can pass judgment from afar. But we haven't made an effort to understand the social mechanisms behind it.

diplomats in transatlantic relations. These days, that's a difficult but very important role.

**You're talking about the current political climate. What issue do you find particularly pressing?**

Nothing less than the question of how we can unite as a society. How do we deal with the challenges we face—the effects of which are making themselves felt in our elections. How do we strengthen our democracy? How do we become engaged participants in it?

**Is this rift in society something you feel personally?**

In private spheres, I'm seeing how forms of communication that should be bringing us together are becoming increasingly strained. It's not just that online debates quickly go on the offensive, but even small-talk often veers into terse territory. It's happening on both micro and macro levels. I don't think we can just put it down to having new means of communication. It also has something to do with us not establishing communication rules.

**Can you see it playing out in a career context, too?**

Hierarchies in the working world are disappearing, or at least it seems that way. People sit in open plan offices and address each other casually. As a result, communication has become more obtrusive. I frequently ask myself: How are we talking to one another? Are we talking past each other? We have to start investing time in either resolving our differences or accepting them. And that takes practice.

**Accepting differences—do you see this as a key skill in today's world?**

Absolutely! Think about all those young people going abroad.

They'll meet people there who don't share their world views, but will have to find a way to deal with that constructively. Further down the line, they'll face similar situations in their careers. When I'm looking to fill a leadership position, I look for people who've been shaped by a wealth of diverse experiences and can inspire others. They're the people who've consistently looked beyond their own horizons in their careers and have shown that they're committed to things bigger than themselves. I see that as a crucial skill. I look for it in my employees, my interns and even my kids.

For the German version of this interview, download **Fulbright Germany's annual report 2017/18** at [www.fulbright.de](http://www.fulbright.de)