

Speech by Federal Chancellor Dr Angela Merkel on being awarded the J. William Fulbright Prize for International Understanding in Berlin on 28 January 2019

Angela Merkel
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Berlin

Ms Schmider,
Mr Philipp,
Mr Bader,
Mr Schmidt,
Ms Amanpour,
Ambassador Grenell,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Members of the Fulbright community,
Esteemed guests,

This is a moving moment. I would like to thank you for – in some cases – making a very long journey to pay tribute to me here and thus in part also to Germany.

You have choreographed this event in a wonderful way. In Mr Pauser, someone from my constituency is here with us. Greifswald is part of this constituency. There are truly moving stories about how it is possible today that a town – admittedly, a venerable Hanseatic town, but all the same, a town in Western Pomerania – is embedded in the world. Then of course, we had the welcome from Renée Fleming, whose voice means so much to me. It is wonderful to have her here with us too. And I would also like to thank you for your kind words, my dear Ms Amanpour. We normally only see each other on television and mostly from a distance. Thank you for being here today and for explaining my political work.

The Fulbright Prize shows how important international understanding is. As one would say in mathematics, understanding alone is not enough, but it is necessary, for peaceful coexistence, on both a small and large scale. As a young scholarship student in Oxford, William Fulbright experienced for himself how empathy and trust can ultimately be created across borders and continents when people meet and listen to each other. On the basis of this experience, he launched a programme shortly after the Second World War that is one of the most successful exchange programmes we have to this day.

I think that we need to keep picturing this time shortly after the end of the Second World War. It was actually a time when we could have expected hatred and ill will to gain the upper hand. However, there were people – and we benefit from their work to this day – who made reconciliation and understanding possible in this situation, which was catastrophic for Germans because of what they had caused.

Understanding and empathy can be fostered by countries and programmes, but they cannot be prescribed. That is why we always need people who are open to others and to their views and experiences. We need school pupils, students, professors and professionals of all kinds who have the courage to be open to new things, to learn foreign languages, and to live, work and create a life for themselves in other countries. What an achievement it is when that succeeds, particularly if new acquaintances become new friends.

Such experiences have a life-long impact. They promote openness towards other cultures, affinity with other countries, and a sense of gratitude for having had the opportunity to broaden one's horizons. When you are somewhere else, you can no longer hold tight to your prejudices, but instead have to live with reality. As we all know, it is far more difficult to say certain things to someone's face than to say them from a distance. Now in particular, I think such experiences must be put back on the agenda and discussed among us, as those who are open to other countries and people are perceived there as

ambassadors who personify life in their home country. Conversely, those who return home bring with them a wealth of newly acquired experiences, which they can share with others.

This means that each and every successful exchange helps our countries to learn about and understand one another. Every contact and friendship forms a link in the chain of international relations. Senator Fulbright firmly believed in such citizen diplomacy – in the idea that it is not only politicians and diplomats who foster peace, but above all citizens who establish and maintain friendly relations with people in other countries.

It is so easy to say this. But a great cultural achievement, one that Americans and Germans in particular constantly demonstrate, is behind this open-mindedness. For example, many US citizens regard Germany as a second home. In Berlin alone, there are some 20,000 Americans. There are 10,000 German students at US universities and even more young Americans, namely 12,600 people, studying here in Germany. Americans and Germans study, research and work together. In this way, they breathe life into and renew our relations every day.

The Fulbright Program plays a crucial role in this. The exchange with Germany is particularly intensive. To date, the Fulbright Commission has awarded over 46,000 grants to Germans and Americans, thus showing the great mutual interest between the two countries. It is certainly no coincidence that the United States and Germany are united by partnership and friendship – and have been for over 70 years now.

The Fulbright Program started as far back as 1946, only a year after the end of the Second World War. That year, then US Secretary of State James Francis Byrnes gave a speech in Germany – this was in 1946 – that ended as follows and I quote: “The American people want to return the government of Germany to the German people. The American people want to help the German people to win their way back to an honourable place among the free and peace-loving nations of the world.” These words became known as the “speech of hope” – hope for a future for a country that had been destroyed by a war it had unleashed itself; hope for a country whose statehood, economy and ethical principles lay in ruins.

But why should this country, a former enemy that had caused so much suffering in the world, be helped to a better future? There was no lack of understandable concerns and doubts. But thanks to extraordinary courage and political foresight, such help was provided. Germany was to take its fate back into its own hands. It was to build up a democracy. It was to become a partner that was part of a free and flourishing European reality. Our country thus had the privilege of experiencing how important faith and trust are. That is what the United States and the other Western Allies gave Germany, in word and deed. The Fulbright Program expresses this.

I would also like to take this opportunity to recall the Marshall Plan and the many Allied soldiers who were stationed in Germany during the Cold War. Let us recall the Berlin Airlift, which brought vital supplies to the blockaded city 70 years ago and kept its hope for freedom alive. And we shall never forget the legendary show of support from US President John F. Kennedy who said “Ich bin ein Berliner.”

9 November 2019 will mark the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. We are gathered here in a symbolic venue, close to the Brandenburg Gate. This gate, which was closed for decades and has now been open for almost 30 years, is a symbol of Berlin’s freedom, German reunification, the end of the division of Europe and the fact that all this could be achieved because our US friends tirelessly supported a free Europe and made this Europe strong. We Germans will not forget this.

When I was in Washington recently for a sad occasion, the funeral of George Bush, we had an opportunity to recall that among the Western Allies, it was George Bush who, along with Helmut Kohl, was the main proponent of German unity and offered us a partnership in leadership at the time.

All of that is our past, which is also part of our present. But we also see that the transatlantic partnership does not enjoy the same level of acceptance among the young generation as it does among older people. We see that the security-policy priorities have changed – and with good reason – from the US point of view in particular. The Pacific region is just as challenging as the European region. Relations shifted after the end of the Cold War.

Naturally – and by the way, that was also the case in the past – we do not always agree as regards how we see and balance national and international interests. But allow me to point out that Germany has gradually taken on more responsibility, particularly since the end of the Cold War. Ms Amanpour just reminded us how things were when the first German troops arrived in Kosovo. At the time, I was a junior member of the Federal Government. We had tough discussions on whether to deploy ships to the Adriatic Sea to observe what was happening in the Western Balkans. Today, it is completely normal for us to serve with our allies not only in the Western Balkans, but also in Afghanistan, in order to defend the United States' interests and our own interests for the first time under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. We are in Africa, in Mali. And we know that we need to do even more. We want to take on responsibility. And we will do so. This can be seen in the increasing budgets both for security expenditure and development aid. It is our common security that we need and want to defend because we also want to protect our values.

But 80 years after the outbreak of the Second World War, the lessons from the past seem to be fading and to have lost some of their impact. We have among us fewer and fewer eye-witnesses to the inconceivable crimes that Germans committed during the Nazi period. There are now fewer and fewer survivors of the enormous avalanche of destruction that an inhuman ideology triggered.

That is why those of us in positions of responsibility today must remind people of the lessons of what the world experienced in the First and Second World Wars. We must take on responsibility to ensure that peace is preserved. We can count ourselves lucky today that we can live in peace and freedom in our countries. But we must remember that we cannot take this for granted and constantly need to work for it. We must remain vigilant – vigilant as regards social developments in and outside our countries.

We are experiencing – and this forms part of the analysis of our current time – populism and xenophobic nationalism in many countries, including here in Germany. We see that thinking in terms of national spheres of influence is on the rise and that principles of international law or human rights are being challenged as a result. We must take a resolute stance against this.

We should and must remember why the United Nations, the World Trade Organization and other international institutions were founded. They were founded because of the lessons from the horrors of Nazism, the Second World War and rampant nationalism. Working together – multilateralism – was the answer to the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century. That continues to apply in full today, at least to my mind. We need international rules in order to resolve conflicting interests peacefully.

That is why we need international institutions that are able to act. Naturally, these international institutions must also be able to respond to new challenges. They must be capable of reform and they must continue to develop, as the challenges we face as the international community also change over time. These are challenges that I firmly believe cannot be met by countries going it alone. These are challenges for which we all bear a duty and a responsibility. We cannot act – no country can – as if these challenges have nothing to do with us, and I also mean Germany here, or as if they were a matter of fate and thus something we can do nothing to change. No, globalisation, digital transformation and economic development are made by humans. Climate change, wars and crises are also caused by humans, so we can and should do everything we can as humans to truly tackle these and other common challenges together.

That is why I want people to understand that in this world of ours, which is interconnected in so many ways, it is possible to find national common good in the global common good. Naturally, every country has its own political priorities. But global necessities and national interests certainly do not have to be in opposing camps. On the contrary, I firmly believe that working on behalf of the global common good also has positive repercussions for the national common good. In my opinion, patriotism means always considering one's own interests along with those of others. That is why I will keep striving for the multilateral, values and rules-based world order to be strengthened.

Ladies and gentlemen, that also holds true for the European Union. It, too, was founded because of the lessons from the horrors of the twentieth century. One might say that Europe is also a multilateral project. Germany will only fare well in the long term if Europe fares well. I firmly believe that the idea of European integration is the best idea we have ever had on our continent.

Naturally, we have also had to face setbacks on the path to further developing the European Union. I regard the decision by the people of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union as one of these

setbacks. But this decision must be respected. That is why we will do our utmost to have good relations based on mutual trust with our neighbouring country after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. Theresa May has rightfully said that her country will remain part of Europe. We want to ensure that our relations in the business sector, between our civil societies, in the security field, the foreign-policy field and many other areas are close.

Naturally, Europe can also be a drag. I have spent enough nights dealing with that and trying to reach an outcome in negotiations. But time and again we have proved that we are able to reach compromises. In this way, we repeatedly find workable answers together to questions with which each individual country would be out of its depth on its own.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are currently talking again about matters that seem to be a matter of course. The value of compromise is one of the things we are discussing. We should hold compromises in high regard, as they are essential if people are to live together. We could say that it's too complicated for us to do something in Europe, so let's do it in Germany. But then we would realise that the federation and Länder also need nights of talks to reach agreement. And if we then said that we would only negotiate at the level of Federal Government, we would discover that coalition committee meetings would go on late into the night. If we ultimately said that we don't need any compromises whatsoever, including outside the political sphere, then we only need to think about how the average family plans its weekends and imagine what would happen. Without compromise, lunch would never get made. Without compromise, there can be no community. That means that if someone ultimately wants to be completely alone, they don't have to make compromises, unless they have a split personality. But as soon as they want to live with someone, they will have to compromise.

Ladies and gentlemen, in this world of change, Europe can only be strong and able to assert its values freely and of its own accord if it is united. And as a partner to and friend of the United States, Europe can only be as strong as it is united. The transatlantic partnership is based on a foundation of shared values – on democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms. Because that is the case, we – Germany, Europe and the United States – cannot wish for better partners. Despite all our differences, which exist in any partnership, we should not forget that. Now in particular, when there is a great need for discussion in transatlantic relations, we need to communicate and we need paths that lead to one another.

One way we want to forge such paths is through the Deutschlandjahr USA, which we are currently holding in the United States. Under the motto "Wunderbar together", our aim is to speak with as many Americans as possible. The over 1000 events are not just being held in large cities, but across the entire country.

Like Senator Fulbright, I firmly believe that people-to-people contacts are what make the countries of this world a true international community. The Fulbright Program has thus proved to be a blessing, not only for generations of scholars, but also for our international relations. That is why I can merely repeat that it is a great pleasure and honour for me to be awarded the Fulbright Prize for International Understanding. The fact that this prize was first awarded to Nelson Mandela makes it an even greater honour.

And moreover, the fact that this award ceremony is taking place in Germany means that many of you have come a long way to be here today. I would like to thank you for that. And I would also like to say that perhaps Senator Fulbright is more contemporary today than he has been in quite some time. It is good that he was with us and that we are paying tribute to him today.

Thank you very much indeed.