

## Keynote Remarks of Chair Jeff Bleich

### Berlin Fulbright Seminar on Courage

17 March 2019

It is a great honor to be back here in Berlin to give the Fulbright Berlin lecture.

I was born in Germany on a U.S. Army base. It was the year that John F. Kennedy took office as President. I was just a kid in my parents' arms when they stood and cheered President Kennedy's declaration -- "Ich bin ein Berliner." And I was here, 5 months later, being consoled by fellow Berliners when President Kennedy was assassinated. So before I could even speak, I witnessed in this nation a moment of great human courage and of great compassion. And I witnessed the terrible cost it can exact. I grew up with stories of courageous people who perished seeking freedom beyond the Berlin wall. These were my lessons from Germany. And even my departure from Germany resulted from an act of courage. In 1965, my father gave up his commission in the U.S. Army and moved his family, because he opposed the U.S. build-up in Vietnam.

Each of these acts of courage, and my parents' reflections on them, have shaped my days since.

So it feels right, being with you all tonight in Berlin, these many decades later, to speak about courage.

Tonight, I'd like to tell you a few stories of courage that I've witnessed or experienced, and moments recently where I have felt the absence of courage.

But first, I have to define courage, so that we are all on the same page.

In the United States, bravery is part of our creed. It is in our national anthem. We call ourselves the "land of the free and the home of the brave."

But bravery is not the same thing as courage.

Bravery is doing something dangerous without fear. But courage is acting despite that fear. We demonstrate courage when, even though we are afraid and every instinct tells us to avoid danger, we force ourselves to run towards it anyway. Courage is a conscious thing. It's a decision that however great your fear is now, there is something you fear

even worse if you don't act. You fear a lifetime of knowing you could have done something, and you didn't act. Courage is the voice that tells you — against all of your survival instincts — that there are some things more important than survival. Courage is an act of conscience.

My first story doesn't concern a great act of courage. It's a small act. But it's a situation that is familiar to most of us, and it's a reminder that courage is a skill we can develop, that we can practice, by listening to our conscience.

Many years ago I was with three other law school grads having a drink. One of the guys got up to go to the bathroom, and another guy said something snarky about him. I don't even remember what it was. I did what we usually do. I nodded and smiled and said something like “yeah.” But the fourth person looked at both of us and said “He's a good guy. We don't need to bag on him. We're better than that.” The guy who said that was Barack Obama.

And in the moment he said it, I realized: I wished I'd said that. Rather than going along, fitting in, ignoring an insult; I could have done the right thing. And that feeling stayed with me. With just a few words, it had an impact that has made me strive to be better — to take a stand even when it is unpopular. Even when the person you're standing up for will never know.

Each one of us can change someone's life each day through simple acts of courage, acts that have no physical risk. But they make us, and those around us, better.

The next story concerns my great-grandparents. Their courage was different, and it was not instinctive. Their story is the immigrants' story. My great-grandparents faced persecution and poverty here in Eastern Europe for years. They waited, and hesitated. My mother's family suffered pogroms in Russia. My father's family endured poverty in Weimar, Germany. They did not know if there was a better life out there, and so they resisted. But at some point, they decided that even if their life elsewhere would be no better, they owed it to their children and grandchildren to at least try. They left behind everything they had, everyone they knew, including their loved ones. Their family members who remained, all of my ancestors in Europe, perished in the Holocaust. I do not have heirlooms, or pictures, or distant cousins I can find on Facebook. The only place our family exists is in America. It was the one nation that let my great-grandparents in, and gave them a chance. So when I represented the U.S. as an Ambassador, and when I lead our Fulbright exchanges in 160 different nations today, I know this: I would not be alive today were it not for the courage of my ancestors, and the courage of people from a distant land who were willing to take them in. Each day is

the gift that others' courage gave me.

We don't stand on the shoulders of giants. We stand on the shoulders of people just like us; people who struggle with these decisions and who are uncertain. But in the end, they had a choice, and they chose to take risks and sacrifice for a greater good. And all they expected from us is to do the same.

A third story. The test of courage is not what you stand to gain, but what you are prepared to lose.

The most politically courageous act I witnessed as Ambassador was the decision by President Obama to send Navy Seals on a nighttime mission into Pakistan to capture or kill Osama Bin Laden. Almost exactly 30 years earlier another Democratic President, Jimmy Carter, had authorized a similar raid to rescue American citizens being held as hostages by Islamic terrorists in Iran. Its failure was the principal reason Carter lost reelection.

At the time, President Obama had to make the same decision, he had limited information. We did not know if the person living in that compound was Osama Bin Laden. But we knew he was some type of major figure in the terror network. The politically expedient thing to do was to authorize a massive drone strike on the compound. It would reduce the risk of failure, or accountability. No one would know if we'd been wrong about Bin Laden, or able to prove we'd missed. But it would also mean that potentially innocent people in the area would die needlessly. It would mean that we'd destroy forever invaluable information that might save many more lives. It would mean potentially never being certain whether Bin Laden was alive or dead, and needlessly putting more lives at risk to prove it. In short, if President Obama wanted to ensure that Bin Laden was captured or killed, that we saved as many innocent lives as possible in the process, and that we saved even more lives with information gathered during the operation, then he needed to put his entire Presidency on the line.

And that was what he did.

He was willing to lose his Presidency to do the right thing. Too often, we measure politicians by the ruthlessness they are willing to demonstrate to gain and hold power. But brute force or ambition are not courage. There is nothing special about the will to win. Courage reveals not what people are willing to do to win. It reveals what matters to them enough, that they would be willing to lose.

The fourth story is both political and personal. It is the story of what happens when political leaders act with courage, and when they don't.

As I said, my earliest childhood memory was my parents grieving after President Kennedy was assassinated. Guns, in fact, killed all of my childhood heroes, President Kennedy, his brother Bobby, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. My world ever since was shaped by those events.

In 1999, thirteen high schools students, all younger than you, were attending their classes at Columbine High School in Colorado, when they were senselessly killed with assault weapons purchased by two of their classmates. Then-President Bill Clinton asked me to head up a youth violence commission immediately afterward to examine the causes of school shootings and youth violence, and what we could do to prevent it. That experience changed me forever. I visited the shell-shocked communities of those who had been killed. I sat with parents and saw the empty chair at their table -- the constant reminder of the child who was no longer there. I visited parents in towns you have never heard of, in Jonesboro, and Springfield, and Paducah, and towns shattered and haunted by these shootings. And the pain and bewilderment I witnessed and felt, left a scar on my heart. The question that haunted them most was "why?"

There were answers. There were things we could have done differently. In fact, every other modern nation in the world had stopped these sorts of mass shootings. So we provided that information to Congress -- about the mental health and counseling programs that could have helped, public information campaigns about warning signs, about ways other nations restricted access to assault weapons, and required background checks for all gun owners, and kept guns away from people who were dangerous to themselves or others.

We knew there might be a political cost to some candidates who supported these measures. We knew that voting to pass these laws would have meant some members of Congress would lose their re-election. It would take courage. And some members of Congress would need to sacrifice.

And this time, they didn't. In fact, they voted to make assault weapons more easily available. The number of young people killed in our schools by gun violence tripled after that happened. 2nd graders at Sandy Hook were slaughtered. 58 concert goers were killed and 851 more injured in Las Vegas. And still members of Congress who could have made a difference did nothing . . . except keep their jobs. And a generation has lost thousands of young people to senseless gun violence because of it.

But I have hope, because I have also seen political courage on this issue. When I was the U.S. Ambassador in Australia I met leaders who made a very different choice. For two decades leading up to 1996, there was a mass shooting nearly every year. But then

in 1996, there was a particularly tragic shooting where 35 tourists were killed and 23 more injured at Port Arthur. Despite the threat of losing their seats, the conservative government of the day introduced controversial legislation to ban assault weapons, to require complete background checks, and to buy back and destroy these weapons. It was controversial, and after it passed several conservative politicians lost their seats in rural districts. But there were no mass shootings in that year, or the next year, or the next 22 years.

I visited with a couple of the officials who had lost their seat in Parliament, to ask them about their decision. One of them said to me: "I knew I'd lose my seat. The proudest thing I ever did in Parliament was cast that vote that cost me my re-election. I didn't run for office so that I could stay in office. I ran for office so that I could make a positive difference in people's lives. There are hundreds of people alive today who would have lost their lives to gun violence. I would not trade that for anything. Not anything."

That is what it feels like to have courage. That is what inspires me to find courage when I am not sure and when I have been afraid.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. believed that his life would be taken from him by violence long before his time. He received constant death threats throughout his brief life. He struggled with what this would mean for his wife, for his children, for those who had placed their faith in him. But he found peace in realizing that obeying his conscience was his only option. He simply could not live with the alternatives -- cowardice, expediency, or vanity. He wrote "Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience ask the question, is it right? And there comes a time when we must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because it is right."

In my life, I've tried to live by these words. I've also received threats — death threats, anonymous letters under the door of my house, a plot against my life, a person who actually tried to drive their car through the gate of the Embassy. Fortunately, he was driving a Peugeot sedan so he didn't do much damage. And I've received violent hateful messages for positions I've taken on public matters, or simply for holding a public office. I've also missed out on some dreams. I had hoped to be a federal judge one day, and I was counseled that I would lose that chance if spoke out on issues that mattered to me. But for me, I found peace in the words of Dr. King. Would I stand for what I believed in, or would I sit in that safe office I coveted regretting for the rest of my days that I'd gone along and simply done the convenient thing.

I don't say this to suggest that I've done anything special. I didn't. I haven't done anything more than any decent person would do. And so that is my advice to

you. Listen to that voice of decency in your head. There is an impulse for justice and for freedom that exists in each of us, that is in constant battle with our fears. But the history of human progress is the history of people listening to that voice in their head. An East German man dashes toward a break in the Berlin Wall, a North Korean woman enters a minefield. An African-American sets foot on the Edmund Petrus Bridge and walks toward clubs and guns and dogs. A Chinese student steps in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square. A protester raises a sign. A soldier stands watch alone in a distant land. Courage is everywhere and it is in all people. Courage is what defines us. Courage is what sustains us.

So let me finish with words from President John F. Kennedy written a few years before he died. "A man does what he must — in spite of personal consequences, in spite of obstacles and dangers, and pressures — and that is the basis of all human morality." That morality is all I wish for each of you.