

Remarks With President Frank-Walter Steinmeier of Germany at an Order of Merit Ceremony in Berlin, Germany

October 18, 2024

President Steinmeier. Please have a seat.

Mr. President, so good to have you here.

[At this point, President Steinmeier spoke in German; no translation was provided. He then continued his remarks in English as follows.]

Of the many stereotypes about Germany—our sense of humor—[laughter]—our spontaneity, our irresistible joie de vivre—[laughter]—only one is really true: We are good at keeping records.

So, 44½ years ago, when the young Senator Joseph Biden came to Bonn, a German civil servant—*ein guter Beamter*, as we like to say—made a note—a rather extensive one, I should say—of this Senator's visit. And being Germans, you understand, we still have that note.

[Laughter]

[President Steinmeier held up a document.]

This one. Many pages.

[President Steinmeier read a portion of the document in German; no translation was provided. He then continued his remarks in English as follows.]

That's the content—the main content of report: "He is keenly interested in the Federal Republic of Germany," the note concludes. And it adds, "that this Senator might look to a," I quote again, "significant political future." [Laughter] "Significant." What a remarkable understatement.

Today, you are the 46th President of the United States. And, under your leadership, the transatlantic alliance is stronger and our partnership is closer than ever. Mr. President, you are keenly interested in Germany. That we have known for almost half a century. So it is time for you to know that Germany, in turn, is deeply grateful to you.

Let me say, in the name of my country, thank you, Mr. President. For Germany, the friendship with the United States has been, is now, and will always be existentially important—existential both for our security and our democracy.

And yet, in this friendship, there have been and always will be times of proximity and greater distance, times of agreement and times of discord. Even recently, just a handful of years ago, the distance had grown so wide that we almost lost each other.

But, ladies and gentlemen, throughout the ups and downs of time, there have been people who have stood by the transatlantic relations no matter what. And chief among those people, Mr. President, is you.

You stand with us, sir, because you know that what binds us is so much deeper than the news of the day. What binds us is freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. What binds us is the conviction that if liberal democracy is to have a future in this troubled world, we have to secure it together. And what binds us are the lessons from our past, sacred lessons that you described so hauntingly in your letter to our beloved Margot Friedländer.

Sir, when you were elected President, you restored Europe's hope in the transatlantic alliance literally overnight. And then, only a year later, came Putin's war.

When Putin invaded Ukraine, he didn't just go after one country. He attacked the very principles of peace in Europe.

Putin thought we would be weak. He thought we would be divided. But the opposite was true. NATO was stronger and more united than ever, and that is, in no small part, Mr. President, thanks to your leadership.

Mr. President, to have you in our most dangerous moment since the cold war, to have you and your administration on our side is no less than a historical stroke of good fortune. For us here in Europe, the past 2 years have shown once again, America truly is the indispensable nation. But it has also shown something else. NATO is the indispensable alliance.

So, in the months to come, I hope that Europeans remember America is indispensable for us, and I hope that Americans remember your allies are indispensable for you. We are more than just other countries in the world. We are partners. We are friends.

The choice on November the 5th is only Americans' choice to make. But we, as Europeans, have a choice too. We have the choice to do our part, to be unwavering in our support for Ukraine, to invest in our common security, to invest in our shared future, and, as you have done, sir, to stand by the transatlantic alliance no matter what.

Mr. President, when I visited you in the Oval Office a year ago on October the 6th, just a few hours before Hamas's brutal attack on Israel, we spoke about the Middle East. We spoke about Ukraine and Russia. But at the end—I will never forget that—at the end of our conversation, you went to your desk and handed me a speech of yours not on foreign policy, but on the issue that you care most about and that you worry most about—about democracy.

I quote, "Democracies don't have to die at the end of a rifle," you say in that speech. "Democracies can die when people are silent, when they are willing to give away that which is most precious to them because they feel frustrated, tired, alienated." End of the quote.

Your words, Mr. President, echoed deeply in our part of the world, and they weigh even more heavily coming from the leader of the world's oldest and most time-tested democracy.

So let me say this from the bottom of my heart. In this time when democracy is under strain all around the Western world, you, Mr. President, have been a beacon of democracy. You are a beacon not just by what you have done, but by who you are, by the example of your humility, your deep connection with the lives and hopes of hard-working people, and, if you excuse that old-fashioned word, by your decency.

Decency is maybe what we are most at risk of losing. But your decency, sir, is a light that shines very far. It certainly reached the hearts of my fellow Germans.

As U.S. President, you command the most powerful military. You lead the biggest economy in the world. But maybe the most precious service to democracy, the most joyful and reassuring thing for people, is to know that even this most powerful man in the world is, in the end, a fundamentally decent human being.

Mr. President, we all know that you love your Irish poets and that you know them well. I have heard you quote Seamus Heaney from memory, so I hope you allow me to end with a quote from his "Republic of Conscience."

I quote, "At their inauguration, public leaders must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep to atone for the presumption to hold office."

"The presumption to hold office," Mr. President. It seems that you have always had a deep sense of the inevitable presumption in holding office, including the highest office; in being elevated above others, in a society of equals.

You have transformed this presumption into a deep sense of responsibility, and you have carried that responsibility throughout your career and have now decided, in the most noble tradition of American leaders since Washington, to let democracy run its ever-changing and uncharted course.

Mr. President, on the historic occasion of your visit to Germany, my country recognizes your decades-long dedication to the transatlantic alliance, your outstanding political leadership in Europe's most dangerous moment, and your lasting moral example of service, sincerity, and decency.

It is now my great honor to bestow on you the Grand Cross special class of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany.

And, for that, Mr. President—may I say, dear Joe—congratulations.

[President Biden shook hands with President Steinmeier and joined him at the podium for the reading of the Order of Merit citation.]

President Steinmeier. I have to read the document—one second—in German.

[President Steinmeier spoke in German; no translation was provided. He then presented President Biden with the Grand Cross special class of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany.]

It's done. *[Laughter]*

President Biden. Let me begin by saying I'm overwhelmed not just by the award, but by the words, Mr. President.

Margot Friedländer, you are a voice of conscience and healing. I'm actually honored to be in your presence, for real.

This award means so much to me for what it says about us, the journey we've taken; the alliance we've strengthened; the way that we have, as two separate nations, risen together to meet our moment.

I think it's fair to say, although I know I only look like I'm 40 years old—*[laughter]*—I—I've seen a wide sweep of history.

When I was born, our countries were at war. As a young Senator, I visited West Berlin and saw what it meant to live in a divided city, country, and continent. And I forged a bond with Helmut Schmidt, your—my first relationship of candor and trust with a German Chancellor, but thankfully, not my last.

And then, in 1989, like millions of people around the world, I saw 70,000 brave souls gathered in Leipzig, crying—crying out for freedom. And the Berlin Wall came down 35 years ago this month.

It was one of the greatest advances in human dignity in my lifetime. Some feared the reunification of Germany would revive old hatreds and rivalries. But leaders of America and Germany dreamed together of a much better future.

The achievement of a Germany whole and free lives on, exceeding, I think, everyone's expectations. The dream of Europe whole and free remains the work of our time, nor is that work more urgent than a pushing back against Putin's vicious attack against Ukraine.

German leaders had the wisdom to recognize a turning point in history, an assault on a fellow democracy, and also on principles that upheld 75 years of peace and security in Europe.

Germany and the United States stood together to support the brave people of Ukraine in their fight for freedom, for democracy, for their very survival. And I want to thank every leader across Germany's Government who has worked tirelessly to ensure that Ukraine prevails and Putin fails and NATO remains strong and more united than ever.

We head into a very difficult winter——

[The President coughed.]

But we cannot let up. We cannot——

[An aide delivered a glass of water.]

Thank you so very much. That's kind of you. *[Laughter]*

We head to a very difficult winter. But we cannot let up. We must sustain our support. In my view, we must keep going until Ukraine wins a just and durable peace consistent with the U.N. Charter, until once again human dignity prevails.

Let me close with this. The times I have lived through have taught me that history does move forward and things can get better if we determine they must; that things can get better and that we should never underestimate the power of democracy, never underestimate the value of alliances.

Germany—Germany—has taught us all that change is possible and, for better or for worse, countries can and do choose their own destinies, and the choices that leaders make at critical times truly matters. I want to thank the current leaders of Germany for the choice you've made when it matters most.

I hope you'll forgive this once, but—if I forsake the great German poets and quote an Irish poet. *[Laughter]* Seamus Heaney said in "The Cure at Troy"—he said: "History teaches us not to hope on this side of the grave. But then—but then, once in a lifetime, a longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme."

When the Berlin Wall fell, hope and history rhymed. When Kyiv stood, hope and history rhymed.

Many Americans and Germans always find the wisdom and the courage. May they keep making hope and history rhyme, because we can, because nothing is beyond our capacity, in my view—nothing is beyond our capacity—when we do it together.

So thank you again for this award. I'm honored to accept. I do not deserve, but I'm honored to accept. And that, if we continue to work together, Germany has stood up in a way that is incredible.

I want to thank you again for the award. And may God bless you all, and may God protect our troops.

Thank you so very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 11:25 a.m. at the Bellevue Palace. In his remarks, he referred to Berlin, Germany, resident Margot Friedländer, a 102-year-old Holocaust survivor with dual German and U.S. citizenship, to whom the President wrote a letter thanking her for her work combating hatred; and President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Order of Merit ceremony in Berlin, Germany; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Germany, President Steinmeier.

Locations: Berlin, Germany.

Names: Friedländer, Margot; Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich; Steinmeier, Frank-Walter.

Subjects: Germany, President; Germany, President Biden's visit; Germany, relations with U.S.; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Russia, conflict in Ukraine; Russia, President; Ukraine, international military aid; Ukraine, Russian invasion and airstrikes.

DCPD Number: DCPD202400925.