

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Former Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Germany April 20, 1999

The President. Secretary Cohen, Mr. Berger, distinguished Ambassadors, Senator Roth, Congressman Pickett, other Members of the Congress, retired Members of Congress, present and former members of the diplomatic corps, and to our German and American exchange students who are here: Welcome to the White House.

Today it is my privilege to confer America's highest civilian honor on a great statesman of the 20th century, the Federal Republic of Germany's longest serving Chancellor, Helmut Kohl.

President Kennedy first saw the design for the Medal of Freedom on July 3, 1963, just a week after he had gone to Berlin and challenged a new generation of Germans to forge a future of freedom and unity, of European integration and American partnership. No one did more to fulfill the hopes that President Kennedy expressed on that trip than Helmut Kohl.

Very few non-Americans have received the Medal of Freedom. The last year a foreign leader was honored was 1991, when President Bush presented the award to Margaret Thatcher. That day we celebrated a partnership among nations and leaders that helped to end the cold war with a victory for freedom.

Today we honor a partnership dedicated to building a 21st century Europe that can preserve the freedom and peace and find genuine unity for the first time. Today we honor the leader whose values and vision have made that possible.

In 1991 the world was very different. The Berlin Wall had come down, but a profound gulf separated the eastern half of Europe from its more affluent neighbors to the West. Everyone agreed that something had to be done to bring Europe together, but not everyone had a clear idea of what that something should be.

Some people thought NATO should go the way of the Warsaw Pact, and that in its place we had to build something new, untested, unproven, a community that embraced everyone but imposed no true obligations on anyone. Others felt that our challenges in Eastern Germany and Eastern Europe consisted simply of sending assistance and plenty of advice. They were in no hurry to open our institutions to nations and people they thought of as distant and foreign.

But Helmut Kohl understood that we needed a bold vision, backed by a practical blueprint, grounded in the institutions that had served us so well for so long. He said, "We are all called upon to construct a new architecture for the European house, a permanent and just peace order for our continent."

Consider the splendid house that has risen since then. Germany is united. Europe has achieved economic and monetary union. NATO has three new members. The European Union soon will embrace nations from the Baltics to the Balkans. What a remarkable few years it has been.

The story of Helmut Kohl is the story of 20th century Germany. He was born in 1930 in Ludwigshafen, a small city on the Rhine. He saw firsthand the ravages of nazism. His brother, Walter, perished in the war that tore Europe apart. But the young man, then called "*der Lange*," "the tall one," was quick to see the possibilities of hope and rebirth in the postwar world.

Through the Marshall plan, he saw firsthand what Europeans and Americans could do together to spread good will and support for democracy among young people.

When he was only 16, he was one of the very first people to join the Christian Democratic Union. Indeed, his membership number was 00246. And 50 years ago, at the age of 19, he and his friends were actually briefly detained at the French border for causing what must be the friendliest border incident in history: they tried to remove some of the barriers between the countries and carried banners in support of Franco-German friendship and European unity. "*Der Lange*" was not your everyday teenager.

As Helmut Kohl's political star rose, he never wavered from those convictions. He believed young people were crucial to the future. He still believes that. And we thank him, and we thank the young Germans and Americans who are here to honor him.

He championed the Franco-German friendship as the linchpin of the new Europe, a

friendship crystallized in the unforgettable moment he and Francois Mitterrand clasped hands at Verdun. He always maintained that the new architecture of Europe must be built on the foundation of transatlantic partnership. And he reached out to Russia, to Ukraine, to the other former Communist countries, to make them a part of 21st century Europe.

He served as Chancellor for 16 years. Future historians will say Europe's 21st century began on his watch. In the months that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, he conceived a generous vision for Germany's unification and for a new partnership between the West and a democratic Russia. He saw the imperative of Europe's unification, politically and economically. He saw the need to embrace other nations into Europe's family, putting Germany in the center, not on the edge any longer, of a united, democratic Europe, a Europe where borders do not limit possibilities and where nationhood is a source of pride, not a crucible of conflict.

It is to protect that vision that the NATO allies are in Kosovo today, to defeat the cynical vision embodied by Mr. Milosevic in which the most primitive hatreds and brutal oppression are more important than mutual respect and common progress.

Anyone who respects the legacy of Helmut Kohl knows that for peace to survive in Europe, our alliance of democracies must stand, and stand together, against dictators who exploit human differences to extend power. And we must stay true to our vision long after we achieve military goals. Germany was buoyed by hope through the Marshall plan; Greece and Turkey, rescued by the Truman doctrine; central Europe, helped by the West in this decade, after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Those were wise investments. We must be equally farsighted toward southeastern Europe.

Among all the success stories of the late 20th century, none is more dramatic or instructive than the rebirth of Germany as a free and democratic nation. Germany's story has taught the world two profound truths: first, that it is possible for a people who love light and laughter to descend into the blackest darkness; and second, that it is also possible for a people to return to the light and lead others by their example.

Germany is proof that war and ethnic hatred are not inevitable; that they do not represent a permanent aspect of the human condition; that

the unacceptable is not written by fate into our destiny. But we can and must remain willing to act, because the work of building a new world never ends. That is the lesson of America, the lesson of Germany, the lesson of the 20th century.

In 3 days the leaders of NATO and its partner nations will gather in Washington to mark the 50th anniversary of our alliance and to chart NATO's future path. The challenge we face in Kosovo has demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that America and Europe need an alliance that combines our strength to protect our values and project stability eastward in Europe; an alliance ready to meet new challenges to our security, with allies able to contribute to the effort; an alliance open to new democracies making the right choices; an alliance that continues to work with Russia despite tensions that arise when we disagree.

As Helmut understood so well, our vision of a Europe whole and free will not succeed unless it embraces a partnership with democratic Russia. And it will not succeed unless it is embraced by Russia. That is the kind of alliance that must and will emerge from the Washington summit.

I can think of no better way to begin this week of allied solidarity than by honoring Helmut Kohl. When I was elected President, Helmut had been Chancellor for a decade. Seven years later, I find myself the senior leader of the G-8. In countless ways, I learned from him. In Bonn, I once told an audience that my opinion on most issues could be summed up in four words, "I agree with Helmut." [Laughter] Those words have never failed me.

After our first meeting in 1993, he summed it up when he said, "The chemistry is right." Well, the chemistry was right every time we met, right when we planned NATO enlargement, right when we discussed our shared hopes for Russia, right when we talked about multilateral issues over a multicourse dinner at Helmut's favorite Washington restaurant, Filomena's—[laughter]—even right when he made me eat *saumagen*—[laughter]—and in spite of that—[laughter]—I hope our dinners continue far into the new century.

With the 21st century breaking over the horizon, we can look back on the 20th century, with its grave threats to our common humanity and its great leaders, Churchill, Roosevelt, de Gaulle. For unifying Germany and Europe, for

strengthening the Western alliance and extending the hand of friendship to Russia, Helmut Kohl ranks with them. His place in history is unassailable. And he has been a true friend of the United States.

In 1989, the year of Germany's rebirth, we heard Beethoven's ninth symphony as if for the first time, with Schiller's "Ode to Joy" capturing the feeling of a world coming together. In that same poem, ironically written just after the American Revolution, Schiller wrote that the circle of universal freedom begins very simply with the friendship linking two people.

Helmut, President Kennedy stirred the world at the Berlin Wall when he said, along with freedom-loving people everywhere, "*Ich bin ein Berliner*." Today a grateful United States says to you, "*Du bist ein Amerikaner*."

In countless ways you have been an American. It is my honor to award you the Medal of Freedom.

Commander, read the citation.

[At this point, Comdr. Michael M. Gilday, USN, Navy Aide to the President, read the citation, and the President presented the medal. Chancellor Kohl then made brief remarks.]

The President. I would like to invite all of you to join us in the State Dining Room for a reception in honor of Chancellor Kohl.

Thank you very much, and we're adjourned.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:37 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom; and President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro).

Remarks Following a Meeting With the Economic Team

April 20, 1999

Attack in Littleton, Colorado

Thank you very much, please be seated. Ladies and gentlemen, let me begin by saying that we all know there has been a terrible shooting at a high school in Littleton, Colorado. Because the situation, as I left to come out here, apparently is ongoing, I think it would be inappropriate for me to say anything other than I hope the American people will be praying for the students, the parents, and the teachers. And we'll wait for events to unfold, and then there'll be more to say.

Domestic and International Economy

I have just met with my economic team to discuss the steps that we will be taking in the weeks and months ahead to continue to advance our prosperity at home and abroad. As you know, the economy continues to grow in ways that benefit ordinary citizens that are virtually unprecedented. This is happening thanks in no small measure to policies we instituted in 1993 to help to change America to meet the changing challenges of the new economy.

We recognized that the new economy demanded fiscal discipline, so we balanced the

budget. Now we're working to use the surpluses to strengthen Social Security and Medicare. The new economy requires and rewards greater skills, so even as we reduce spending in many areas, we have almost doubled the National Government's investment in education and training.

In the new economy, we are linked to all the nations of the world in a web of commerce and communications. So we have worked to expand and to build—to expand trade and to build a 21st century trading and financial system that will benefit ordinary citizens in our country and throughout the world.

The financial crisis that began in Asia in 1997 put our progress at risk and presented a very severe test to the global system that we have worked so hard to build. Though our economy has continued to grow, we have been affected by the Asian financial crisis, as you can see by the trade figures, by what has happened in steel, and by the loss of markets by our farmers.

It's clear to me that we had to do something to contain the crisis, to restore growth, to prevent such crises from happening in the future. In September I went to the Council on Foreign