



# BUNDESPRÄSIDENTIALAMT

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**Federal President Joachim Gauck  
at the official ceremony to mourn  
Richard von Weizsäcker  
on 11 February 2015  
in Berlin**

We have gathered here today in profound sorrow to honour Richard von Weizsäcker, a great German and an outstanding President. He stood as a symbol of our country like few others have done, and he had rare levels of success gaining our country the world's respect and good feelings.

German history helped shape the person he was – and he has certainly helped shape our country's history. Throughout the long years of his working life, Richard von Weizsäcker was a source of inspiration and guidance.

We were used to hearing his views on important issues regardless of the advancing years. Over the decades of his life, his voice, the way he thought and spoke, became as familiar to us as those of a fatherly friend. He was what used to be called a Pater Patriae (father of the nation). We knew him, and we trusted him.

Even if not everyone always agreed with what he had to say, we always knew that his words were the fruit of a good deal of life experience, great independence of mind and thorough interrogation of his own conscience. He wasn't one for a crowd-pleasing soundbite; he was for thinking things through properly. He relied on the strength of an argument, not on quick persuasion tactics. And he assumed others were motivated by the same thing which drove him, namely the will to let his actions be guided by morality. All of these elements added to his credibility.

Nowhere does the Basic Law say that a Federal President has to be a moral authority. Nor does it stipulate that he should be intelligent, guided by good sense and able to give profound, convincing speeches. But Richard von Weizsäcker had all those faculties and used them well, with composure and a friendly, natural ease. He set a high standard for his successors to live up to. I refer to his much-admired ability to

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exude dignity and composure in practically any circumstances. He most particularly inspired confidence because his office and his personality fitted hand in glove, and because his words and his actions – his independent manner altogether – were such a perfect match for what the German people looked for in a head of state.

And it wasn't just the Germans of the Bonn Republic who saw him that way. For us GDR Germans, he was a unifying figure. Like innumerable others in the GDR, I wished he could be our President too. Luckily for all of us, he later became the first Federal President of the reunified Germany. When Mikhail Gorbachev wanted nothing to do with any "open German question" in 1987, it was Richard von Weizsäcker who told him, "The German question is open as long as the Brandenburg Gate is closed."

A person can only appear that composed outwardly if his composure is founded in inner strength.

Where this man got his inner strength is a mystery in the end, just like with anyone. But we can assume that his upbringing played a part – in a family where serving one's country, in high and extremely high offices, had been the norm for generations.

What he experienced with his father also taught him what difficult moral questions one can find oneself facing in such service. His father must have been on his mind throughout his whole life – the man who had been a State Secretary in Nazi Germany and whom the son always defended, not only at the Nuremberg Trials but at all times.

His first-hand experience of the Second World War will certainly have shaped him as well. He had to be there from the very first day of the war, when the Wehrmacht invaded Poland. On the second day, his brother was fatally wounded only a few hundred yards from where he stood. Von Weizsäcker the soldier saw many things, lived through many things, and had a lot to work through afterwards. He never spoke much about it. Throughout his life, however, he always had an eye for the course of history, for the ruptures and the continuities of his own time. That meant he not only bore witness to the times in which he lived, he also grew skilled at reading the signs of the times.

It is certain that his early experiences made him a staunch democrat. He also knew that a democracy had to be strong and able to defend itself, a lesson from the collapse of the Weimar Republic that he would never forget.

Richard von Weizsäcker fully understood that politics in a democracy governed by the rule of law was shaped by parties. He joined the Christian Democratic Union in 1954 and couldn't at the time have gained any political office without that membership. But his willing involvement with party politics did not prevent him later

warning of the temptation parties can face to prioritise their own hold on power over the interests of the greater good.

For Richard von Weizsäcker, liberal beliefs and democratic convictions did not mean always running with the majority. In 1972, he opposed the overwhelming majority of his party in the German Bundestag and announced his intention to vote in favour of the Ostverträge, the 'eastern treaties' with the Soviet Union, Poland and Czechoslovakia. Thanks to his political efforts, most Bundestag Members from his party and its sister party abstained from the vote. In so doing, he helped ratify those treaties and, with them, the historic legacy achieved by Willy Brandt.

Without ever calling West Germany's firm place in the Atlantic Alliance into question, he continued his own long and passionate commitment to reconciliation with Germany's eastern neighbours. Richard von Weizsäcker was involved in drafting the Ostdenkschrift, a memorandum by the Protestant Church in Germany which outlined the way forwards for eastward relations. He used his many contacts to establish bonds of trust that proved durable and would later turn out to be immensely important when it came to overcoming the division of Europe. It is easy to understand why such a great many messages of sympathy have come from Poland following the news of his death.

It was not always easy to convince the members of his own party that this was the right road. Many people in conservative circles were sceptical about the relaxed attitude he took towards the protest movements of the 1980s, and even towards the squatters during his tenure as Berlin Mayor. But his approach did help to cement the idea of the democratic state in the hearts and minds of even the strongest critics. In this way, too, Richard von Weizsäcker became one of the most credible representatives of this Republic, particularly for the younger generation.

One of the central factors underlying his inner strength and clear sense of direction was his Christian faith. In the case of Richard von Weizsäcker, word and deed were recognisably those of a committed Christian. His role as President of the Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag (German Protestant Convention), a position he held for many years, was well suited to him.

A most vital element was the strength he drew from his family, and especially from the love between him and his wife Marianne over many decades.

Dear Mrs von Weizsäcker,

We were all able to see how much the two of you meant to each other. For this reason we are also grateful to you for the support you gave to this significant Presidency. And we have a deeply felt need to stand by you in your pain during these days of parting. If Richard von

Weizsäcker's death is such a great loss even for us, the citizens of this country, how much more deeply must it affect his family, his children, his grandchildren and his friends. Our thoughts are with you all.

Richard von Weizsäcker lived to a veritably Biblical age. He bore witness to the century in which he lived. In his life story we encounter a person who was exposed to very different influences from those we know today. When he was born at the New Palace in Stuttgart, only two years had passed since the overthrowing of the Württemberg monarchy his grandfather had served.

As a native Swabian he belonged to a German empire which stretched from Aachen to Königsberg, now Kaliningrad. When he became Federal President, the state he represented no longer even included Erfurt and Weimar, Leipzig and Dresden, not even the avenue Unter den Linden in Berlin or the Wilhelmstrasse where, forty years earlier, the Foreign Office in which his father served had had its headquarters. None of these places belonged to the Germany he became President of.

Richard von Weizsäcker did not only have an intellectual understanding of what Germany had lost through dictatorship, genocide and war. He also experienced it, as it were, through his own life and his family history. Maybe that was why he was – let us dare to use the word – called to help us as Germans to ultimately see the war and its consequences from a clear perspective.

Everyone has moments in their lives where everything that happens seems to converge on that one instant, moments in which a person embraces the role that is destined for them alone, and no one else. For the politician Richard von Weizsäcker, this moment was undoubtedly his speech of 8 May 1985.

With this speech Richard von Weizsäcker performed an outstanding service to his country. It was not as if he said something that nobody was aware of at the time. Rather, he put into words something which by 1985 everyone had to have known, but which some people even in 1985 still did not want to know. In long and intensive preparations for this speech, he not only picked up threads left by previous Federal Presidents, not only acknowledged the voices and moods of the eventful years in the wake of 1968, but imbued all this with his own experiences. And as someone who lived through that bloody century, it was his own inner acknowledgement that led him to a realisation that the people understood as a confession – that indeed was a confession.

The essence of the speech focused on the realisation that the terrible suffering experienced by the Germans themselves at the end of the war was not something that had befallen us through no fault of our own. "We must not regard the end of the war as the cause of flight,

expulsion and deprivation of freedom. The cause goes back to the start of the tyranny that brought about war. We must not separate 8 May 1945 from 30 January 1933." Those were his words.

When, with the authority of his position as head of state, he described 8 May as a day of liberation, he did not forget those for whom, with the dawning of this day, the worst was by no means over or was even still to come. But he helped many people to stop trying to worm their way out of their responsibility, allowing them more freedom to face the past and look to the future. Over the course of time support for this speech grew also among those who were initially unable to applaud.

And what is more, with this speech and his attitude Richard von Weizsäcker encouraged people not to be afraid of truthfulness. He himself put this truthfulness into practice on this occasion. This speech vividly expressed the idea that people, that we ourselves, could, by drawing on our own strength and reaching our own conclusions, formulate insights that give us the freedom to define a new perception of ourselves. This speech and – let's not forget – the policies of Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl were instrumental in fostering trust in a truly transformed Germany throughout the world, a trust which was enormously beneficial to the process of German unification.

We therefore look back with thankfulness. We see Richard von Weizsäcker, the man who lived through and was shaped by history – and precisely because of this was remarkably open to the questions posed by the present; a man who knew the meaning of pragmatic governance – and who was for that very reason so averse to politics which lacked a foundation of shared values; an eminently political President, who did not shy away from controversy when necessary – and yet nonetheless strove to achieve consensus; a man who made use of discussion to consider all sides of an issue, who was familiar with the ambivalence and paradoxes inherent in politics – while being able to be crystal clear on fundamental issues.

Most Germans regarded him, Richard von Weizsäcker, as the embodiment of a good President. This was instrumental in helping the Germans to develop an affinity with their country, their democracy. We could put it more simply: by liking him, the Germans learned to like themselves. He introduced a healing element into political life. For only someone who has confidence in himself will discover that others, too, put their confidence in him.

With great and heartfelt thankfulness we now carry him to his grave here in Berlin, the city which, in part through his passionate commitment, has become the capital of a united Germany.

We pay humble tribute to Richard von Weizsäcker, a great Federal President, who, when his hour had come, said and did what was right.