



BUNDESPRÄSIDENTIALAMT

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**Federal President Joachim Gauck
at a reception in the German Embassy
to mark the 25th anniversary of German unity
on 6 October 2015
in Washington, DC**

I have not travelled here alone to mark the anniversary of reunification, but am accompanied on my trip by a delegation of people who are committed to close and trusting ties with America. These are people from Germany whose achievements in cultural life, science, civil society and politics have brought them to prominence and who are committed not only to supporting relations within the scope of official policy but who work to establish additional links between our two countries. Allow me to name Marianne Birthler, Professor Michael Göring, Professor Ulrich Haltern, Professor Paul Nolte, Professor Ferdi Schüth, Jan Schütte and Professor Margret Wintermantel. They, along with the members of the German Bundestag and the European Parliament also in the delegation, are looking forward to meeting and talking with you shortly.

This evening I think back to the demonstrations for freedom and democracy in 1989, which ultimately led to the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. This was followed by the first free elections in East Germany, in March 1990, and finally by the Day of German Unity, 3 October 1990. Since then, the divided country has once again become one country. These were very important historic events which we will never forget. For me, but not only for me, these were events and experiences which fundamentally changed our lives. This new departure, first groping for and then grasping freedom and responsibility, was like a fresh spring in autumn. It was the most cheering time of my life.

In the night of 2/3 October 1990, when the Flag of Unity was hoisted before the Reichstag, Berlin's Liberty Bell rang out from Schöneberg Town Hall. Many of you probably know that this bell, a replica of your Liberty Bell, was a gift from the American people. When the bell rang out to welcome unity, I was standing on the steps in front

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of the Reichstag building, a member of East Germany's first freely-elected parliament, and now a member of the pan-German parliament. And in Philadelphia yesterday, a quarter of a century later, standing in front of the original Liberty Bell, I not only looked at it, I also had to touch it. For someone like me, who experienced first-hand for decades what it meant for the promise of freedom to be denied, standing in the Liberty Bell Pavilion was a very moving experience.

I thought of the hundreds of thousands of people at home in East Germany in 1989 who shouted out "We are the people!" These people had discovered for themselves the message which has characterised the United States Constitution and American national identity for over 200 years: "We the People".

In Philadelphia, at the National Constitution Center and Independence Hall, we saw the great documents of America's history of freedom. In the evening, I suddenly had a little gift in my hand, the Constitution of the United States. This brought to mind a story from the past, which I would like to tell you now. I encountered the United States Constitution once before, back in 1989, in that turbulent autumn which became the Peaceful Revolution. I come from the city of Rostock, on the Baltic coast, and I was spokesperson of the grassroots movement there. Back in 1989, the people were trying to reinvent democracy. They thought about what schools should be like under democracy, or the police force, the military, the public administration. They set up working groups to decide how things should be run under a democracy. And some of these citizens said: "But we also need a new constitution." Then the members of the working group thought about what they could take as a model. And, suddenly, someone actually laid a copy of the United States Constitution on the table! A miniature edition which a citizen of Rostock had kept all through the years of SED rule. I do not know whether the group's discussions produced a draft text. Everything happened very quickly after that. But I do remember the inspiration the US Constitution can provide: "We the People".

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to share another memory with you. It, too, relates to the Constitution of the United States. I first visited the United States in the early 1990s, at the invitation of USIA (United States Information Agency), which invited people from Europe to get to know America. So I came to the States, and one of the places I visited was the National Archives. I knew that was where the original Constitution of the United States was kept, and I wanted to see it. So I went to the room where the Constitution lies in a shrine, and the first thing I saw was a long line of people. That in itself was an experience! All those people – young, old, people with every colour of skin, foreigners, but primarily Americans, from Texas, or Missouri, or Oklahoma – were standing there in line. They were there on a perfectly ordinary working day because they identified with the United States

Constitution and its fundamental principles, and because the original document therefore meant something to them. They were all doubtless responding to the power of that phrase "We the People". I remember I was speaking German with my escort officer, Dean Claussen. The young boy, about 11 years old, standing in front of me in the line immediately turned round and asked: "Where are you from?" "Germany," I replied, "Berlin." "Oh, great!" he said. So then I asked him "And where are you from?" He told me he came from a small town in Texas. "And what are you doing here?" I asked. "I'm visiting my Constitution." Wow! I had encountered an America I had previously known nothing about. I began to daydream: one day I want to have an encounter exactly like that in Germany. To be on familiar terms with one's own constitution, with one's own country – quite simply, quite naturally.

This means being profoundly convinced that the people are the sovereign. It was because of this fundamental conviction that the United States took a positive view of German unity and expressed its support as a matter of fact, firmly and early on. In particular, I thank the US President who became something akin to the patron of German unity, George H. W. Bush. He personally was instrumental in driving reunification. And from the outset President Bush also thought in terms of Europe. "A Europe Whole and Free", the title of his pathbreaking speech in Mainz in May 1989, perfectly sums up the goal to which we remain committed today.

You all know that Europe is facing difficult tasks, problems which touch on its awareness of values and on its identity and which at the same time go far beyond European borders, as the refugee crisis depressingly shows. It is all the more important, at this time, that we join together and use the energies inherent in our transatlantic partnership and in the German-American friendship.

Let us remember that German unity and the end of the Soviet dictatorship in Eastern Europe show what a willingness to get involved politically can achieve. However, we need a clear picture of a better future, and this we need to arrive at together. We will not succeed if those in positions of political responsibility show no courage. Equally, though, we need the citizens to display courage and commitment as well.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am coming towards the end of my speech.

In the course of the Peaceful Revolution, we East Germans discovered for ourselves the self-evident, natural civic mindset which has so markedly characterised America from the outset. And now, as Federal President, I am delighted to see how strongly the sense of bearing responsibility for society has become anchored in the German population. My wish for the future is that we focus on our strengths,

including those that derive from our transatlantic partnership and from our German-American friendship. This confidence in our own ability to shape the future is, to my mind, the message at the heart of the phrase "We the People".