



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck  
at the official ceremony in memory of former  
Federal Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher  
on 17 April 2016  
in Bonn**

We are gathered here today to bid farewell to Hans-Dietrich Genscher, a man who served our people and our country, the Federal Republic of Germany, in such an exceptional way.

All of us, and we sense this keenly at this moment, can scarcely imagine a Germany without Hans-Dietrich Genscher. Neither we, the contemporaries of his political life nor the younger generation which experienced him after his active service as a committed political observer and advisor who, to the very last, engaged in debates of the present – especially when they revolved around his great passion Europe.

Hans-Dietrich Genscher is the story of an exceptional political talent. Not all political talents also have the discipline, the energy and the humility to realise their full potential. And not all survive the onslaught of historical circumstances. Hans-Dietrich Genscher used his talents and proved himself worthy when it fell to him.

Hans-Dietrich Genscher shared formative experiences with his contemporaries. He was born at the end of the Weimar Republic and started school in the year that Hitler came to power, and so he experienced the Hitler Youth, labour service and deployment as an anti-aircraft auxiliary during his adolescence. And, at the end of the war, he was even conscripted as a soldier for the Wehrmacht's very last stand.

At that time, Hans-Dietrich Genscher learned to fear and hate war more than anything else. This was to become a leitmotif – perhaps the leitmotif – of his life. And back at home in central Germany, he was quick to realise that the political reality of the nascent GDR was not an alternative to the dictatorship that Germany had just experienced, but that he was living under a new form of authoritarian rule. He fled to the West, to freedom – and he spent the rest of his life in the service

of freedom. It was not before long that he chose the path of liberalism with its commitment to the freedom of the individual and the accountability of responsible citizens. It was with this conviction in mind that he became a politician – that was a gift for our country.

He was to serve as a Minister in the Federal Government for almost a quarter of a century. As the Minister of the Interior, he lived through the brutal Palestinian hostage-taking of the Israeli team during the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972, which ended in carnage also as a result of inadequate preparation on the part of the security forces. Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who had offered himself as a hostage, considered this to be his darkest hour as a politician. As was typical of his character, he immediately drew political consequences from this. He set up a counter-terrorism unit, the GSG 9, which passed its first serious test with flying colours in Mogadishu in 1977.

This example illustrates Genscher's distinguishing feature as a Minister, namely his ability to rapidly assess what needed to be done, which helped him to respond to challenges swiftly and appropriately with his calm pragmatism, determined focus on results – and an unshakable adherence to his principles. This taught him that no rule of law principle was to be infringed under his watch in the fight against international and domestic terrorism.

This combination of fidelity to principles and pragmatism, long-term strategy and his ability to work out what to do next was what also characterised his work as Foreign Minister of the Federal Republic of Germany.

He held this post for eighteen years – and when he finally stepped down from office, he was able to look back on what was an exceptionally turbulent but successful period.

As a passionate and committed proponent of the policy of détente, he left his mark on the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, whose great significance he recognised far earlier than many others, and whose principles and achievements, such as the balance of interests between East and West, steered our continent in the direction of cooperation and peace.

On another occasion, he put his party to the test and certainly weathered a wave of antipathy himself, when he, as FDP Chairman, made what he considered to be a politically necessary and ultimately successful decision to switch coalitions in order, primarily, to implement the NATO double-track decision, force the Soviet Union into negotiations with unerring consistency and, ultimately, to lay the groundwork for the disarmament of the majority of Europe's medium-range nuclear missiles.

He met all of the world's important politicians in the flesh, and the trust that he was accorded by almost all of them was also trust won by the Federal Republic.

In the dramatic weeks of the pro-democracy movement in the GDR and in East-Central Europe, he was a reliable political partner for Presidents Bush and Gorbachev, for Foreign Minister Shevardnadze and Secretary of State Baker, for the Western Allies in France and Great Britain and for the eastern partners in Berlin, Budapest, Warsaw and Prague.

I am most delighted that people with whom he worked closely in those days have come to us from many parts of the world. I especially wish to thank you, James Baker, and you, Roland Dumas, for attending this ceremony today.

And then, last but not least, Genscher was also an indispensable pillar of support for Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl when he, in what was probably the most important stage of his political career, resolutely plotted our country's course towards unity.

From the balcony of the Prague Embassy, he – in his happiest moment as a politician – was able to convince the refugees to board trains to West Germany, even though they would have to travel back through the GDR. He was only able to do this with the authority of the absolutely trustworthy, honest broker, as one whom all respected, and indeed revered, and with the credibility of one of Halle's sons, who once fled to freedom himself.

After the people had demanded and ultimately won their freedom, he devoted all of his energy to creating the necessary diplomatic, political and administrative conditions on the path towards German unification in the Two plus Four negotiations.

He became one of the architects of a new and cooperative Europe – through the everyday business of understanding, mediating and reconciling to which he devoted himself with particular passion and skill, and above all through his work on the Charter of Paris of 1990, which enshrined democracy and human rights as the fundamental maxim for all European states.

And for the overwhelming majority of Germans, his political and personal legacy stands for balancing competing interests, for resolving conflicts with patience and sound judgement, and for a policy of small steps without losing sight of the goal.

When he took his leave from the Federal Government on 18 May 1992, many Germans had the impression that "Foreign Minister" was actually the first name of a politician called Genscher.

Hans-Dietrich Genscher had – certainly owing to his own experiences of war and oppression, perhaps also owing to his constant

battle with illnesses that weighed on him from a young age and were often life-threatening – an instinctive sensitivity for things that had the potential to insult or offend others or make them feel marginalised. He therefore also knew when and how to address such feelings. Like almost no other, he had a lucid understanding of the sometimes dangerous power of emotions in politics, and so he was always at pains to demonstrate the necessary tact and appropriate respect.

Some people detected in his political method, which they dubbed “Genscherism”, a certain aptitude for deliberate ambiguity. In reality, tact and consideration, balance and the willingness to compromise never stopped him from consistently following his inner compass. He did not always say what he wanted deep down. That is part and parcel of the business of diplomacy. But when he did speak out, then he did so with the requisite clarity with respect to both friend and foe.

A now almost forgotten controversy within the Western Alliance erupted in 1988 and 1989 over the so-called modernisation of short-range nuclear missiles in Europe, especially in the Federal Republic. Hans-Dietrich Genscher was strongly opposed to this arms programme, and was initially also at loggerheads with his own coalition partner and the western allies, especially because changes and reform steps had long since been making themselves felt in the countries of the Warsaw Pact.

In his customary tenacious and persevering way, he was ultimately able to convince almost everyone with his arguments. He justified his position publicly in the Bundestag on 27 April 1989. This speech shows in a nutshell the politician Hans-Dietrich Genscher’s significant driving forces:

He starts by quoting the oath that he as a Minister had sworn to serve the well-being of the German people, and continues thus: “The obligation deriving from that oath does not stop at the border cutting through Germany. The responsibility before the nation established by that oath does not exclude my native region, the town where I was born, nor the people in the GDR. How serious we are about the German nation [...] is demonstrated by our efforts, day in, day out, to strengthen peace and stability and enhance human rights in Europe, and by our efforts to promote cooperation and disarmament. The requirement of our Basic Law to promote peace applies to our relations with all European nations.”

Here we can see the national interest that Genscher tirelessly defended, which at the same time also included German unity and peace throughout Europe. For him, these were two sides of the same coin. And so he was to become a politician who, until literally his very last breath, warned against putting at risk what has been achieved in Europe so happily and peacefully.

Hans-Dietrich Genscher was a rare case. Only very seldom do politicians find out that they were right during their own lifetime and, even more rarely, while still in office. Hans-Dietrich Genscher was one such politician. And we Germans, and indeed we Europeans, can count ourselves lucky that Hans-Dietrich Genscher got it right.

Those who have to shoulder such a burden are also grateful when they themselves are given support. While we are remembering Hans-Dietrich Genscher, we therefore also think of his wife Barbara, who was at his side for so many years. She was a reliable pillar of support and a steadfast partner for him. Mrs Genscher, you also made your own contribution to your husband's life's work.

What is the legacy of this German patriot and passionate European who served our country for so long here in this government district of Bonn? It would be in keeping with his philosophy not, indeed never, to take for granted that which is in fact never a given. But it would be in keeping with his philosophy – with passion and patience, a clear compass and all due circumspection – to work to safeguard, preserve and strengthen the things that endow us all with security and prosperity:

Peace, freedom and the unity of our fatherland;

Peace, freedom and the unity of Europe.

And so it is with sadness, deep respect and profound gratitude that we bid farewell to Hans-Dietrich Genscher.