



BUNDESPRÄSIDENTIALAMT

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**Federal President-elect Frank-Walter Steinmeier
following his election by the Federal Convention
in Berlin
on 12 February 2017**

“You give me courage!”

This reassuring statement made to me by a young woman two years ago is something I have often recalled. Today, I would like to share it with you. I express wholehearted thanks to you as members of this Federal Convention for the encouragement you have given me today in bestowing on me the highest office in our state. I am overjoyed that you have chosen me and I maintain my great respect for this office.

My respect is made even greater by the fact that Joachim Gauck is present here today; a Federal President who has done this office good – and who, let me add, has done our country good – a President who champions the cause of freedom and himself embodies the felicity of freedom with every fibre of his being. I am most deeply grateful to you, Federal President, as, I am sure, we all are.

I thank all those who elected me for the trust they placed in me. And I make a pledge to all those who did not support me: I will work to win your trust, too, with equal respect for all democratic parties, for Government and Opposition, and with respect for the myriad of voices in our democracy.

Because I realise that we are living in turbulent times. Many people in our country feel unsettled. As some of you may have heard me say more than once: the world appears to be “out of joint”. Yet many people also ask: just what is the cement that holds our society together? And above all, will this cement still hold firm in the future? Others ask: if the world is becoming increasingly insecure and if our country is so closely interwoven with this world, what does that mean for our security, for our future? These are concerns I am also aware of in our country, and which I take seriously.

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Yet, in my position as Foreign Minister over the last few years, I have also experienced something different – this “You give me courage!”

It was a young woman in Tunisia who said this to me – an activist working to foster democracy and human rights in her home country. When she made this statement, she didn’t mean me, or indeed my delegation. Her “You give me courage!” referred to our country. She meant Germany. “You Germans give me courage,” was what she meant.

Is it not surprising, is it not wonderful that this Germany, “our difficult fatherland”, as former President Gustav Heinemann once called it, is it not wonderful that this country has become an anchor of hope for many in the world?

We give other people courage, not because everything is good in our country, but because we have shown that things can get better, that peace can evolve in the aftermath of war, that division can be followed by reconciliation and the mania of ideologies can be replaced by some kind of political reason, and that we have succeeded in so many ways in our country.

We are reminded of all this on this day, the day of the Federal Convention.

When Theodor Heuss addressed the first Federal Convention, the people of Germany were still clearing away the rubble of war and dictatorship; they were building the Federal Republic stone by stone, a democracy which at the time could only be firmly grounded on the foundation of the West. And whenever this foundation becomes shaky elsewhere, we must stand up for it all the more firmly.

When Roman Herzog later spoke to the Federal Convention, German unification was in its early days and a wind of change was blowing through the country – but there were also fears about this new future. Yet our society was able to overcome the calls of those who fanned the flames of xenophobia and resentment at that time and I am confident that we will do so again today.

When Johannes Rau stood here, reunified Germany was facing difficult decisions in the field of foreign policy due to the military mission in the Balkans; it had a new responsibility in the world, which has since grown continuously and which we have accepted.

Together we have tackled so many challenges, and times were not always easy. A glance at the world, particularly Europe, makes clear that the current times are also not easy. Yet they are our times. We bear the responsibility.

And if we want to lend courage to others, then we must have courage ourselves.

We need the courage to say what is fact – and what is not fact. We must ourselves take on the task of distinguishing between facts and lies. Trust in one's own judgement is the privilege of every citizen and is vital for every democracy.

We need the courage to listen to each other, the readiness not to put our own interests above all else, not to perceive the wrangling over solutions in a democracy as a sign of weakness, not to deny reality, but rather to seek to improve that reality.

And we need the courage to preserve what we have. Freedom and democracy in a united Europe – we intend to, and must, work together to defend this foundation. It is not wholly unshakeable, yet I am convinced that it is sound.

No, we do not live in a remote Elysium. We are part of one world, with its risks, and there are risks in our country too. And yet, there are few places in the world with as many opportunities as we have here. And who can have more cause than us to be optimistic?

So I say to you, fellow countrymen and countrywomen, let us be courageous! If we are, then I will not be worried about the future.

Thank you very much.