



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
on the occasion of the dinner in honour of Horst Köhler
Schloss Bellevue,
8 March 2018**

I am delighted that we have come together this evening to celebrate your 75th birthday, President Köhler. This distinguished gathering of high-ranking figures shows in what high regard you are held in our country, indeed throughout the world. Everyone has come to honour you, Mr Köhler, and – within the constraints of protocol – to celebrate with you in style.

First of all, however, I would like to extend a special welcome to your wife Eva Luise. When we think back to your term of office, we cannot imagine you without your wife by your side. We cannot imagine you without your joint work as a couple, or without the priorities which you, Mrs Köhler, set in the sphere of youth work, education or health – most especially the research into and treatment of rare diseases. And there was something else which people often noticed and which deeply moved them: your close bond. I have heard that following the television broadcast of Pope Benedict's first arrival on German soil, some viewers commented that they were especially impressed by your evidently close relationship when they saw you standing waiting hand in hand for the Alitalia aircraft to land. Clearly, it is often the small things which people notice, which they find special and which they perhaps sometimes even remember longer than the ceremony or our speeches. On that note, a very warm welcome to you both, Mr and Mrs Köhler!

The search for candidates for the highest office in the land always gives rise to lively public discussions, speculations and in more recent times – this was my own personal experience – even to interactive online polls. Back in 2004, however, your nomination was a surprise to most people, even though you had long since undertaken very important tasks in the course of your career – as State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Finance and later as the strong voice of German savings banks. You played a key role in crucial decisions of the utmost

importance to our country. Let me just mention the Maastricht Treaty or the negotiations on the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Germany.

Furthermore, at the time of your candidacy, you were one of the very few Germans in a key international post. Most Germans only gradually realised that their new Federal President was already held in high regard internationally due to his work at the IMF and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. You brought international experience to your new role, as well as an awareness of the considerable and, above all, growing responsibility which an economically strong, politically stable and globally respected country like Germany shouldered – and had to accept – in an increasingly complex world. There was no place for provincialism or German navel-gazing during your term of office.

But there was place for ideas for Germany. Although people were quick to try and pigeonhole you as a “man of business”, you subsequently focused on very different themes in your inaugural speech. Firstly, you highlighted how important it is for our country that good ideas are conceived here and that these good ideas can then be realised. By “good ideas” you not only meant outstanding engineering feats but also social ideas such as, for example, new initiatives by the Berliner Stadtmission. You said that you wanted Germany to become a “land of ideas” and the slogan “Germany – Land of Ideas” was then taken up in a joint initiative by the German Government and German industry and remains a vibrant and much cited trademark of our country to this very day.

You also stated in your very first speech that this country, indeed the free and prosperous part of this world as a whole, had to assume responsibility for poorer regions. At this early stage, your passionate commitment to Africa was already evident. Even today, many remember this remarkable sentence from your inaugural speech: “The humanity of our world can be measured against the fate of Africa”.

The fateful relationship between Europe and Africa was at the centre of your thinking, your pronouncements and work. You said that we had to focus much more on our neighbouring continent, on its opportunities and its dangers – and this was long before the growing migration flows entered into our daily discussions as a perceived threat. You have called on us in the West to form a genuine partnership with Africa – and you have called on, and encouraged, the African partners to assume responsibility for their own affairs in this partnership. In many parts of Africa, you have thus become a widely known and respected representative of both Germany and Europe and it is therefore fortunate that you are now working as a UN Envoy to find a peaceful resolution to the Western Sahara conflict. It is very clear that the intensive and friendly relations with Africa which you

built up as Federal President have lasted to the present day – I can see that when I look around this hall today.

In connection with Africa, one of the focuses of your Presidency, you asked us Germans a question which is perhaps one of the most difficult of all: “Why should the suffering of others concern us?” You challenged us with this question long before it became unavoidable in the face of advancing globalisation, the erosion of borders and, ultimately, the hundreds of thousands of refugees. And you asked this question before it became highly controversial politically. “Why should others concern us?”

That was the title of the speech you made in Tübingen in 2004 at the invitation of the Global Ethic Foundation. In the first part, you explained how the Christian faith, to which you are committed, and the idea of loving your neighbour go beyond our own lives and encompass others. To you, the biblical figure of the Good Samaritan – who helped a man who had been attacked by thieves – is an enduring ethical aspiration. The Samaritan answered the question: “why should others concern us?” by helping a complete stranger with whom he actually was not connected in any way. For this Samaritan did not subscribe to the sentiment “Samaritans first”. On the contrary, he believed he had a responsibility to help anyone in need.

In the second part of this speech – and I believe that this very much corresponds to your penchant for practical politics – you do not content yourself with ethical reflections. Rather, you spell out from the big picture right down to the details what an ethical stance in which others in need are regarded as partners could mean for Africa. Directly after the speech you stopped off in nearby Herrenberg to meet old friends and fellow activists in the Third World store, as we still called them in those days, which you had helped to set up decades before. Then you set off on your first major trip to Africa, taking with you concrete political and economic ideas. A distinctive feature of your term of office thus became apparent. Namely, that ethical maxims and practical politics belong together and are compatible.

Horst Köhler, I developed great respect thanks to our meetings and points of contact during your term of office. I developed great respect for the special role of this office within the structure of the Federal Republic as well as respect for the stances taken by those who have held it. It is often said, and sometimes lamented, that in some ways this office stands above politics, certainly above the politics of parties, government or opposition. At the same time, however, this office is deeply embedded in politics. It brings with it responsibility for the integrity of our democracy – all the more so when action is required.

In 2005, you had to make a decision about the dissolution of the German Bundestag. I well remember sitting opposite you with

Chancellor Schröder over in the Office of the Federal President, where you were based while Schloss Bellevue was still being renovated. I also remember – without going into the details – how intensive the conversation was. Anyone – not only those of us who sat opposite you – could sense how conscientiously you faced up to the gravity, sometimes the burden, of your responsibility. You weighed matters up carefully and frequently provided advice.

You were also guided by your conscience when you rejected the Government's plan to move the Day of German Unity from 3 October to the first Sunday in October in order to gain an extra working day. Köhler the economist made it clear that regardless of balance sheets and budgets there are experiences, memories and values which have to be protected and defended and which are not up for discussion in day-to-day politics. That, too, is something I learned back then: I believe that all members of the Government at that time would admit today that it was a good thing that the Federal President expressed his opinion back then.

Finally, your decision to stand down as Federal President – which surprised everyone – was also the result of intensive self-reflection. The vast majority of Germans very much regretted that. You were popular and highly respected. People have always sensed that, despite the high offices you have held, you have never forgotten where you came from. You engaged with people without a superior attitude and took them seriously: not only the German Pope elected during your term of office, not only stateswomen and statesmen, of whom some are here today, but also people with severe disabilities in Bethel or the scouts who were permitted to set up a large camp here in the park of Schloss Bellevue to mark the centenary of the international scout movement. Your empathy went out to the movers and shakers, as well as to those with no influence.

Not least, also many artists. When I read the in memoriam notice by the friends of Christoph Schlingensief in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung following his death in August 2010, I spotted the name Horst Köhler among all the artists, theatre directors and filmmakers. Your academic title was not mentioned, nor your status as a former Federal President. You were simply listed alphabetically as a friend.

The first thing which Germans noticed as they saw you more and more in the public eye was your infectious laugh when engaging with others. Some called it a "Kennedy laugh". However, you did not bring this laugh back from America, nor did you adopt it for PR reasons. Rather, it comes from the heart. Despite the responsibilities you shoulder, you have kept it to this very day.

May I now invite you to raise your glasses and join me in a toast. We say to you, Mr Köhler: ad multos annos. Please continue to inspire us with your equally heartening and active faith in the future. On

behalf of everyone here, allow me to wish you a happy birthday, Mr Köhler! We are looking forward to this evening with you. To your health!