



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
on 31 October 2019 at the reopening of the  
Goethe-Institut Boston**

This is my second trip to the United States as German Federal President, and it takes place at a time when day-to-day transatlantic relations are unfortunately much more dominated by what separates us than by what unites us and the focus is far less on how we are "Wunderbar Together".

I have come here as Federal President to raise our sights away from the day-to-day emphasis on tweets and tirades and beyond the indignation that is often both predictable and ineffective. I want to expand our horizons so that we can look back on our shared history and at things that will hopefully connect us in the future – things for which we need one another.

So, when I raise my sights, my eyes inevitably come to rest – at least in my own experience – on the great question of our day, namely the fight to uphold democracy and freedom.

There can be no democracy without America. Looking back, this most certainly holds true for German history. However, I believe it also holds true for the future.

"I shall use the words America and democracy as convertible terms," Walt Whitman wrote in 1871 – a sentence that Thomas Mann enthusiastically underlined twice when he read it in exile in California.

Democracy did not come easily to us Germans. After the disasters in our history, we relearned it with and thanks to America.

My own image of America is also shaped by the milestones of democracy, and I would like to share with you a few pictures that come to my mind when I think of this great country.

They are old images – of redcoats, muskets and minutemen. This morning's historical re-enactment in Lexington truly brought to life the struggle of these early freedom fighters.

I am thinking here of images from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of the great ocean liners I saw in Bremerhaven, and of the generations of emigrants, including from my native region of Westphalia, of all the "poor and huddled masses yearning to breathe free".

I see yellowed photographs of great intellectuals who found refuge here from Hitler's tyranny. I see portraits of Adorno, Brecht, Döblin, Feuchtwanger, Zuckmayer, Hannah Arendt, Marlene Dietrich, Max Reinhardt, Heinrich Mann and many more. I think of Walter Gropius, whose house we visited this morning, and of Arnold Schönberg, whose "Transfigured Night" we will hear this evening.

I see flickering and shaky footage of GIs who crossed the Rhine in 1945 and blew up the swastika at the Nuremberg parade grounds.

I think of the Berlin Airlift and see thousands of small handkerchief parachutes in the sky above Berlin, carrying chocolate and chewing gum.

I see what were still black-and-white images of John F. Kennedy in front of Schöneberg Town Hall. "Ich bin ein Berliner," he said, shortly after the Wall had been built. And then I see, now in colour, images of Ronald Reagan speaking in front of the Brandenburg Gate, shortly before the Wall fell, and I hear him say "tear down this wall!"

This America opened the world's eyes to the indomitable power of freedom. This America trusted us to live in democracy once again. And it is to this America that Germany owes its unity in freedom. It is to this America that we are – and will remain – profoundly connected. And that is why I say with great conviction, thank you, America!

Another thing also comes to my mind. A united Europe was always a serious and personal concern for this America. This America wanted a real partnership and friendship with mutual respect. Today, it seems that much of this is no longer a matter of course.

In my view, this means that, yes, Europe must become stronger and more self-confident. But Europe should not be strong without the US – let alone against it. I firmly believe that we need each other if democracy and freedom are to have a future in this world of rivalry and conflicts and if the West is to remain more than merely a point on the compass. We need the transatlantic partnership for this.

When we raise our sights beyond our everyday lives, we see that throughout history the fight for democracy has also always been more than a one-way street. Our history of democracy always progressed in both directions.

German figures of the Enlightenment had already influenced the thinking of American revolutionaries, and German immigrants helped the young republic thrive in very practical ways. They cleared strips of

land, printed newspapers, built pianos, opened the first kindergarten, and one of them invented blue jeans.

Germans who had participated in the revolutions of 1848 remained ardent defenders of democracy after they had fled to the United States – people like Carl Schurz; Mathilde Anneke, an early campaigner for women's rights; and Franz Sigel, who served Abraham Lincoln as a cavalry officer.

Decades later, many of the exiled Germans I have already mentioned stood shoulder to shoulder with Franklin D. Roosevelt in the resistance against Nazi terror. From San Remo Drive in Pacific Palisades, Thomas Mann made his famous radio broadcasts that were transmitted to his native country, into the raging World War. Last summer, we stood in his study and inaugurated the Thomas Mann House as a space for a new and necessary debate across the Atlantic.

These are only a few snapshots from my personal transatlantic photo album. Recently, thanks to the Deutschlandjahr USA, many people in our two countries have added thousands of new snapshots depicting this friendship – pictures that were taken pretty much every second at more than 2000 events in all 50 states, thanks to digital cameras and smartphones.

So now, the Deutschlandjahr is over, we've used up our digital storage, and that's the end of it? No, this Goethe-Institut is a guarantee in stone that this is not the end!

Not only are these wonderful, newly refurbished rooms the place where many here in New England will encounter the German language for the first time, the Goethe-Institut also provides a forum for people to meet, learn, and forge personal connections. We need forums like this more than ever today.

It is my hope that this building will be a lively venue for discussion and dialogue on what unites and divides us. I hope that it will be a place where people – bearing in mind the great history of US-German relations – will work on our planet's common future.

Especially at a time when politics are dominated by what divides us, we are all the more in need of cultural, academic, and civil-society ties. And we need cultural ambassadors like Sibel Kekilli and the academics who have accompanied me here to Boston. We need people who are curious about the other country. And so let us make these ties stronger than ever!

In particular, my hopes concern exchange between young people in our two countries, whom I can only encourage to swap classrooms, university lecture halls and vocational training programmes – no matter who holds office in the White House or what coalition governs in Berlin! I am pleased that a few young adults from bilateral exchange

programmes are accompanying me on this trip. I want to say a special word of welcome to all of you.

These days, we are experiencing various risks and threats to democracy – and certainly not only in far-flung regions of the world, but in our very midst, here in the United States, in Europe and in Germany. And that is why I believe that the great transatlantic task I described today – the future of liberal democracy based on freedom – does not begin with us lecturing others. Instead, it begins with us defending – and renewing – this democracy at home! That is our task, but it is no less a task here in the United States.

Nobody has described this task more powerfully – and in fewer words – than the 16<sup>th</sup> President: “That government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Please note, he didn’t just say “perish from this country”. He said “from the earth”.

Liberal democracy itself is our task, and it truly is a great task. A task that is bigger than ourselves. And most importantly, a task for which we both need partners.

So if we still believe in the great task of democracy, we should still believe in this transatlantic partnership.

I do.