



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the dinner in honour of Henry A. Kissinger on the  
occasion of his 95th birthday  
Schloss Bellevue, 12 June 2018**

We have come together to honour Henry Kissinger, the great thinker and architect of global policy. Most of you here in this room will be aware that the Federal President invites outstanding individuals to Schloss Bellevue from time to time to pay tribute to them and their achievements. Today, it is almost the other way around. We, and indeed our country, are honoured, dear Mr Kissinger, that you have come to be with us this evening! After all, when Heinz Alfred Kissinger, the Jewish boy from Fürth, had to leave Germany with his parents in 1938 at the age of 15, it was absolutely unimaginable that he would one day do a German Head of State the honour of receiving him here on his 95th birthday.

Back then, just a few hundred metres from here, the man who aimed to destroy European Jews was at the helm. A topography of terror unfolded in this city and all across Europe.

A massive endeavour by the allied States ultimately brought an end to this heinous insanity. Here at the heart of Berlin where we have gathered this evening, the final battles were played out. And I know one needs to be careful with such lofty words, but, my friend Henry Kissinger, I feel our gathering here this evening is truly a historic moment. After all, we are honouring a friend of Germany. Being able to say this was not something that could be taken for granted 70 years ago and this speaks volumes about our country's good fortune and about the long journey that we have embarked upon since those dark days.

You returned to Germany for the first time on 25 November 1944 wearing the very uniform that other Germans such as Klaus Mann or Marlene Dietrich wore in the fight against National Socialism. You were pleased when on this day you were able to write to your parents from "Somewhere in Germany": "So I am back where I wanted to be. I think

of the cruelty and the barbarism those people showed out there in the ruins when they were on top. And then I feel proud and happy to be able to enter here as a free American soldier."

You went on to live the rest of your life serving the United States of America to whom you owed your life and your freedom. You continued to live the ideals in whose name the Nazis had been fought: the fight for freedom and democracy and the fight for a world order based on the peaceful balancing-out of interests.

Initially, you did so in almost "old European" fashion, namely as a scholar. Your experience in the formative years was motivation enough to place the geopolitical thinking and action of leading statesmen at the heart of your research. One book was dedicated to the problem of peace at the Congress of Vienna, that defining moment of world diplomacy. The volume you penned truly set new standards. Its title "A world restored" is one that could also be used to cover everything you went on to do. After all, your life's work is defined by the conviction that history really can be shaped, that the world can be set to rights and so maintained by responsible leaders but just as easily destroyed by the irresponsible.

Unlike you, Leo Tolstoy believed statesmen remain without any real influence on history. Nevertheless, he wrote one of the greatest novels world literature has to offer about the period leading up to the Congress of Vienna giving it the simplest yet most universal title: War and Peace. That is indeed ultimately what is at stake time and again in international politics.

War and peace: there are but a few other scholars who took such trouble to analyse the meaning of this fundamental dichotomy. You examined war and peace from the historical perspective and distilled the lessons of the past for the present. And like but a few others you stood with government responsibility on your shoulders and faced the very real task, what is more not only once, of taking or preparing decisions about war and peace.

I know of no other thinker of our time who plunged so deeply into the daily grind of politics. And I know of no other political office-bearer of our time who, with such capacity for reflection and analytical clarity, explored the opportunities, constraints but also limits of foreign policy action. Who in the midst of day-to-day challenges always had his eye on the bigger picture. Who was able to put himself in the position of his opposite number, to recognise his angle on reality and see the limits which even the strongest have to respect if unavoidable conflicts are to remain manageable and not spiral out of control.

An intellectual yourself, you cherished time with other critical intellectuals, for example the publisher Siegfried Unseld. He came one

day to the White House with the Swiss writer Max Frisch where you were working as national security advisor to President Nixon.

Shortly afterwards, Max Frisch published his thoughts in a report showing both his fascination and his reservation. He wrote inter alia: "Those taking decisions or advising on decisions affecting millions of people cannot afford subsequent doubts about whether the decision was the right one; the decision is taken, you have to wait it out. [...] I understand more and more why Henry A. Kissinger has his hands in his trouser pockets as much as possible; the responsibility he shoulders bears no relation to the person who wears a suit like us."

And then, as Frisch recalls, Kissinger says he prefers responsibility to paralysis.

What a sentence! And one so rarely heard from those who consider any form of power to be suspect and who consider staying out of things to be a laudable moral quality.

Those assuming responsibility cannot expect to do everything right. Those taking action are exposed to risks, make mistakes. They cannot expect to be applauded by all.

That was always especially true for the leading nation of the western Alliance: for the United States. What is certain is that, even under Henry Kissinger, America was neither willing nor able to solve the problems of the world single-handedly. But to this day it also holds true that the world will not solve its problems without America and most probably also not against America.

Particularly this realisation makes it so difficult to give a reasonable and responsible reaction from our side of the Atlantic to the turmoil emerging at this time from Washington. After all, it is not a matter, as it was on occasion in the past, of differences of opinion on political matters - albeit also on important political matters. Rather, and this is something we all sense, something quite fundamental is at stake.

And I fear that while America no longer sees an intrinsic link between a cooperative international order and its own legitimate interests, while the United States sees the world more as an arena where it is "every man for himself", the world is not going to move closer to peace, and while this situation persists, doubt is cast on the alliance of the West. After all, the West is only more than a compass point if the world is more than a boxing ring.

And even though, Henry Kissinger, you were and remain the great realist amongst foreign-policy makers, the cool analyst of diverging interests, for me there was one element you, despite all the challenges and contradictions, have always embodied: namely, the unique "normative project of the West". It is my ardent hope that

enough people on both sides of the Atlantic keep hold of this aspiration.

Nevertheless, in our disquiet, we cannot simply languish in lamentation. We need to invest in this connection reaching across the Atlantic - especially now. On Sunday, I will fly to Los Angeles to open the Thomas Mann House. A new venue for transatlantic debate, for exchange, for working on the foundations of what keeps the West together: namely, the future of democracy. And where would be better suited than the house from which Thomas Mann campaigned so passionately both for Germany's democratic rebirth and for the partnership with America?

There is no such thing as an inescapable necessity in history. We politicians always have the freedom to act, to change the run of things or at least to wield influence. That, my dear Henry, is and always has been your firm conviction. You once said: "there is a margin between necessity and accident, in which the statesman by perseverance and intuition must choose and thereby shape the destiny of his people".

With your vast knowledge of the world and its history, you are also able to use your sound judgement to provide orientation when new problems appear on the horizon. I myself, you can be sure, Henry, benefited time and again - in countless meetings and talks which we had or from the many essays and books of yours which I was fortunate enough to read. What they expressed was always twofold: your immense power of judgement and your practical good sense. And, I am certain, the two have influenced generations of politicians active in foreign affairs and shown them the way forward.

However, you never stood still, never hunkered down in the trenches of old ideological axioms. And what applies first and foremost to your experienced foreign policy angle on the world, also holds true for all that is new.

As the most recent example of your inexhaustible curiosity, I discovered an article you have just published in "Atlantic": "How the Enlightenment Ends".

There you consider the possible impact of the most recent advances in artificial intelligence, that is, their impact on society and politics. As ever, you place even the very latest developments in their historical context. This essay once again shows just how much your thinking owes to the values of the Enlightenment.

You insist that the voices of philosophers and ethicists urgently need to be heard when it comes to artificial intelligence technology. Otherwise, you fear the moral and intellectual achievements of the Enlightenment could be squandered. And this wonderful new essay closes with a typical Kissinger sentence which expresses American pragmatism in old European dialectics: "This much is certain: If we do

not start this effort soon, before long we shall discover that we started too late.”

I must draw to a close. On 29 January 1973, your friend Siegfried Unseld sent you a telegram to congratulate you on concluding the peace negotiations in Paris: “My warm congratulations on your immense contribution to peace– Stop – Don’t give up – Stop – History will use the words of Shakespeare: This was a man.”

I couldn't put it better myself. He is a man. And what a man.

Happy Birthday!