



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the Fritz Stern Lecture 2019**

“Is democracy running short on reason?”

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I am delighted to be back here at the American Academy as your guest once again – and also to pay tribute to a man whom we Germans and transatlantic relations owe such a great deal, namely Fritz Stern. Thank you very much for inviting me.

At the same time, I am sure that Fritz Stern would have also considered it to be a particular challenge, particularly at the height of the Carnival season, to speak about “reason.” However, I gladly accepted your invitation nonetheless since people in the U.S. are not familiar with the clownish Carnival season... or so they say at any rate!

But seriously, tomorrow is Ash Wednesday, which is precisely the right time to seek the correct balance between passion and sober reason – a balance that Fritz Stern endeavored to strike his whole life long. Few passages in his large output are more touching than the scene detailing the tenth anniversary of the assassination attempt made on Hitler in which he describes how his aversion to, indeed his hatred of, “the Germans” was transformed during his encounter with the descendants of the executed conspirators of July 20. Stern, who left, or indeed who was forced to leave, Germany in October 1938, and who found a new home in New York, not only became one of the greatest historians of our age. Stern, an American Jew who was born in Germany, became literally a “companion” for the very same Germany that had driven him out, a companion like almost no other. I mention this also because, for all of the sharpness of his intellect and his judgement, Fritz Stern was not one to disparage emotions. More than this, he knew that you must never underestimate them.

And yet the loss of reason was the key focus of his first great work “The Politics of Cultural Despair.” How was it possible for the Germany of his forbears, for the democratic Germany that followed the German Empire, to sink into the mire of irrationality and barbarism and

to drag large parts of the world with it into an abyss of violence and crime? That was the big, the towering question that he tackled as a young Ph.D. student at Columbia University.

He ends this book, which marks his ascent as a historian, sharp-witted intellectual, and brilliant stylist, with a rhetorical question: "But, we must ask, could there have been any other "Third Reich?" Was there a safe stopping place in this wild leap from political reality? Can one abjure reason, glorify force, prophesy the age of the imperial dictator, and condemn all existing institutions without preparing the triumph of irresponsibility? The Germanic critics did all that, thereby demonstrating the terrible dangers of the politics of cultural despair."

For Fritz Stern, this outcome of his research was never merely an insight into the causes and origins of a past catastrophe. His argumentation, his advocacy, his passionate appeal for a policy of reason were underpinned by a deeply held conviction that democracy and freedom themselves were also at stake with the loss of reason.

And today? We can be forgiven for saying that reason is not exactly in vogue. Moreover, democracy is also under pressure.

When I had the honor of inaugurating the Thomas Mann House in Los Angeles as a new forum for the transatlantic debate last June, I came across a remark by Thomas Mann about the obscuring of reality in the late 1920s with the mystical and irrational, a remark that Fritz Stern also quoted: "Obscurantism," writes Thomas Mann, is "sentimental barbarism, seeking to hide its brutish and unintelligent features 'beneath the imposing mask' of feeling, perhaps of good German loyalty."

"Sentimental barbarism" appears to me to be a fitting description for an all too topical phenomenon that we are able to observe in the political dialogue in our own country, and also on the other side of the Atlantic as well as in many societies around the world today.

We observe and deplore this trend. That is not enough, however. We must try to understand what it is that is feeding this rampant loss of reason. What is driving this angry yearning to identify scapegoats? Why does this appeal to our lowest instincts rather than our best instincts enjoy so much attention? We no longer have Fritz Stern's intellect to guide us today and answer these questions. We must therefore endeavor to do this without him, ever mindful of his reminder not to make things too easy for ourselves in our search for the underlying causes.

I believe that we face four major, interlinked challenges. Challenges of our age with echoes of dangers past. Firstly, the sheer overwhelmed state of the human mind and emotion in the face of the objectively growing complexity of our interconnected world. Secondly,

the challenge that lies in finding new responses to the economic and social upheavals which globalization has caused in many of our societies in recent decades. Thirdly, the communicative challenge of explaining in a convincing manner the political actions of a policy founded on democratic principles in this confusing environment. Actions that must come to grips with contradictions and ambiguity while others proffer radically simple answers. Fourthly and lastly, the challenge of a dramatically evolving appropriation of information and knowledge in our digitalised world, in the course of which evidence and reason become one option among many.

Let us begin with the first challenge. Growing complexity and connectivity are an oft-described phenomenon. Connectivity is not just about exchange, more choices and greater prosperity. It also means that political crises are rarely limited in time or region, but increasingly interact, merge, and even mutually reinforce one another. Navigating these crises – from Brexit to Kashmir to Venezuela – is an enormous challenge in itself. However, how much more difficult is it to maintain a clear overview of the things that are not only urgently needed in the present, but are also important in the long term? By this, I not only mean investing in good relations between countries, such as we just did successfully in the form of the Treaty of Aachen between Germany and France, but also promoting innovation for the day after tomorrow, harnessing the opportunities of the digital transformation, but also regulating its risks in an intelligent manner.

This complexity is not only a challenge for our intellects, but also for our capacity to show empathy. People's expectations have risen enormously through having a direct insight into other worlds – both here in Germany and in far-distant countries. Our capacity to empathize with other realities and perceptions is barely able to keep pace with this. We often find ourselves emotionally overwhelmed. This feeling of being overwhelmed produces counter-reactions: fear of a loss of identity; a retreat to what feels familiar, and a return to national, ethnic, religious, or regional notions. A feeling of home and belonging is vital for us humans. It is not a secondary need. If anything, the erosion of borders and the uncontrollable nature of our globalized world have made it ever more important. But when such feelings retreat into isolation, exclusion, and rejection of others, and in particular when they retreat into fear of the future and are reduced to the notion of an imagined and supposedly glorious past, then they become dangerous. With the loss of openness, a society also loses its perception of reality, and potentially also the capacity for peaceful reconciliation. It loses the confidence in the future which inspires the ability and will to make a difference.

Let me touch on the second underlying cause. There is no doubt that our country, Germany, is one of the winners of globalization. There can be no doubt about that. We owe our prosperity and our

security to our global interconnectedness as well as to our partners and allies. But this must not remain an abstract argument in the face of growing inequality and widespread concerns about the loss of cultural heritage and identity. What may be true for the big picture has left behind many, too many, losers when considered at the level of detail. Herein lies one of the causes of the social polarization that we are observing here in this country, and also in many other societies. We must get better at steering social, economic, and technological change in a humane direction and cushioning the shocks they may entail. Making globalization humane remains the political challenge of our time. And the challenge on this side of the Atlantic is no smaller than the one on the other side.

Alongside the cognitive and political challenge of our ever more complex world, there is also a communicative challenge whose evolution I have observed and experienced first hand over the decades of my political career. And if it takes a huge effort for us to work through, intellectually and politically, the complexity of future developments that we face, then it is certainly more difficult for us to communicate this complexity in our societies in a convincing way.

How does the notion that we are living today in the best of all possible worlds – objectively speaking – sit with the subjective feeling that the world is out of joint and that one crisis follows hot on the heels of another? How am I supposed to bear the horrific images from the Middle East or parts of Africa every day and yet acknowledge the undeniable progress in education, health, and poverty reduction in many countries around the world? What is the value of the Paris Climate Agreement for the future of our children in view of the often unsustainable consumption of resources and the devastation caused by an ocean of plastic waste in our seas around the world?

How, at the end of the day, can I reconcile the different traditions, interests, and perceptions of many societies – and their governments – with the standards of our open society that we would like to see become a reality all over the world as soon as possible?

In our open society, foreign policymakers in particular are fundamentally dependent on the public in their countries understanding the need for diplomacy and grasping what it can offer, but also where its limits lie. We need people to understand that it is not a matter of all or nothing, but rather of striking a balance between conflicting interests; that differentiated viewpoints and compromises do not necessarily mean abandoning our own standards, but rather accepting the impossibility of achieving them across the board and in the here and now; and that every crisis does not mean our own policies have failed. The challenge of not merely grasping the complexity of our world and coming to grips with it politically, but also of helping the general public understand its contradictions and

ambivalences, is greater than ever today. The world is not just will and representation, and also not simply black or white. A realistic depiction of reality must also acknowledge that conflicts can exist in one's own policies and between the political aims that we pursue: peace, human rights, security, economic prosperity, Alliance solidarity and disarmament. If our aim is not merely to negotiate rational solutions, but also to be able to count on broad-based support for them in society, then we must manage to credibly communicate both the conflicts that are inherent in our aims and the respective conclusions that should be drawn in this regard.

This brings us to the fourth challenge, that is, the rapid transformation of our forms of communication and the way in which we deal with information. The internet provides us with access to an unprecedented wealth of information from a vast range of sources. More than that, it gives hundreds of millions of people direct access to information that previously they were cut off from. That is tremendous progress. In his book "World Order," Henry Kissinger made the point that we must by no means confuse this inundation of information with knowledge – and we must certainly not confuse it with wisdom. Knowledge requires verifiable facts and proven connections. Wisdom requires experience and sound judgement. But the information machine of the internet provides exactly the opposite, particularly in the form many social media take. The constant influx of information chips away at crucial standards of objectivity. At least that's what appears to be happening.

The key aspect of a debate is not the extent to which we can personally relate to the respective issue. Individual personal experience is one argument – but by no means the whole truth. If you confuse these two things, then you will also believe that a newspaper is lying when what it reports is inconsistent with your personal experience. And often enough this leads to daily vitriol on social media. The heckling, hatred, and harshness of many online comments have an impact on our society – even though they represent only a small share of communication on the internet and are spread only by a minority. They lead at first to the radicalization of speech – but after a while, because we grow accustomed to them, these comments radicalize both our thinking and our democracies.

On top of this, we have the phenomenon of a debate manipulated by technical means or from the outside. So-called internet trolls who spread misinformation on behalf of foreign governments, or automated "social bots" programmed to influence public opinion, are the exact opposite of the openness that the pioneers of the World Wide Web hoped to achieve, which was supposed to make the medium a source of enlightenment. They intentionally disrupt public democratic discourse, which aims to use individuals' own understanding, their keen sense of reason, to find the best solutions. We must never allow

our democratic discourse and the clear-minded struggle for solutions to be co-opted!

The digital revolution is creating endless opportunity and will bring about new forms of work and economic activity. To safeguard the tremendous benefits of public access to information, we must re-establish the quality and integrity of public debate. Simply reflecting and amplifying sentiments – be this from a personal desire or motivated by manipulative political interests – is a genuine danger we face in our digital age. The price for this is high – too high. The corrosion of reason marks the start of the corrosion of democracy. 20th century history, especially our own, holds plenty of proof of this. We have learned from history. We cannot allow what we have learned to be destroyed – neither by trolls nor by tweets every minute.

The digital revolution still holds the promise of historic progress for civilization the world over, by helping to unleash creative potential and solve social and environmental problems. The power of reason, and the conviction that, in order to achieve a more just, peaceful, and better world, we must try time and again to harness new political potential, and not only put on a short-lived show – that is precisely what has united us across the Atlantic for so long and what will hopefully continue to unite us in the future. That makes a place like the American Academy in Berlin so important – not only today, but especially also with a view to our common future. Germany needs the transatlantic partnership, and Germany wants this partnership. A partnership that is characterised by close dialogue and that certainly includes passionate debate and is built on mutual trust.

The reach of these four challenges – on a global scale, in our own societies, and for each and every one of us – intensifies the feeling that our present has become “fragile,” as Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht put it. Optimistic visions of the future and expectations that we would witness a process of convergence, views that were common during and after the fall of the Wall, have evaporated. The primacy of national interest is again on the rise. A new fascination with authoritarianism is becoming widespread. We must firmly resolve to not yield to this temptation – while bearing the teachings and the great legacy of Fritz Stern in mind.

Thinking about this leads us with Fritz Stern to the question of what the future holds for the power of reason in the digital age. I am convinced that the answer to this question is also the answer to the question of the future of democracy – and the question of the democracy of the future. We should not, I believe, have too static a view of our form of government. Everything around us is changing – including political systems. If we want to preserve democracy, then we must also consider what form it will take in the future.

Conversely, if nationalism is being heralded today as a model for the future, then our sense of reason can figure out what this means. We can deduct what dynamics will be unleashed if every country thinks only of itself and national interests are pursued regardless of and at the expense of others, through short-sighted and narrow-minded policies.

It is true that politics are, of course, determined not only by reason, but also by emotions, passions, arguments on ideas, and battles to win a majority. Fritz Stern knew how fragile peace is, and that human kind is certainly not exclusively driven by reason. However, legitimate, and indeed necessary, political and emotional debate must not abandon reason as a benchmark. Such arguments need the willingness to doubt, verify, and question. There is no shortage of topics for this debate. What should a united Europe look like? What different visions for our continent will be on the ballot at the European elections at the end of May? Can we renew our promise for a brighter future for a Europe that is at peace and provides security and prosperity also for the younger generation? What design can we propose for a digital future that we can embark on with confidence – so that people will not look back to a past that exists only in their imagination? How will participation and representation work with regard to democracy in the digital age?

I recall the warning that George Shultz, the wise elder statesman, articulated last year at a discussion with me and American researchers at Stanford. After many visions of the future had been enthusiastically presented by the young researchers, he plainly pointed out at the end of the debate that all new technologies must be subjected to close scrutiny to determine whether they can facilitate political interaction of the members of society as well as democracy. A sentence, spoken softly – with the authority of age and political experience, which was entirely at odds with the rest of the discussions. Many who were present at the discussion held the view that deliberative democracy as we know it is too slow and cumbersome – like a Galapagos turtle. It is nevertheless true that we must not lose patience with democracy. It may be slow and deliberative – but it is also a sustainable form of government, and perhaps the only one, that both enables and protects freedom.

With the increasing complexity that we are facing, we must make a conscious effort to invest in our critical judgement. That applies to each individual and to society as a whole. The fact that education is crucial if democracy is to flourish was possibly one of the most important observations made by Alexis de Tocqueville in his studies on democracy in America, which date back nearly 200 years. Education needs to provide options and opportunities – but it also requires individuals to be willing to make the necessary effort in this regard. One of the main temptations in the modern world is to replace one's

lack of expertise with radical opinions. But political judgement and intellectual endeavor necessarily go hand in hand in our complicated world. Otherwise, we are at risk of veering off course. A keen sense of judgement is the best insurance against manipulation and susceptibility to being manipulated.

The media also form part of the institutions that play a crucial role in the productiveness of our debates in society and in the quality of our ability to make judgements. The media landscape is being dramatically transformed. But independent, professional journalism bears a great responsibility for upholding the power of reason in our society. By this, I do not mean those media that fabricate and put on a show with their own news, but journalism that strengthens the political judgement of our societies through objective, contextualized, and far-sighted reporting.

The disdain for reason that Fritz Stern was fearful of and which we observe in many parts of the world today, and also in this country, is a warning signal. Such nationalist thinking, which our historical memory still recalls, claimed that the time for talking was over. I would call that a denial of dialogue. Critics were only seen as representatives of a "hostile system." Then, there is only one's own truth and other people's lies. In a uniquely perceptive way, the great historian Fritz Stern laid bare the fateful connection between contempt for reason, indeed a deliberate irrationality that many downright celebrated, and the collapse of German democracy in the 1930s. We are reminded of this on occasion today when we hear the prophets of the short-sighted but enthusiastic fight against the so-called "establishment". Only those who know nothing about the catastrophe of wrong turns taken in our authoritarian past can think that such paths might work in the future.

Belief in a better world can move mountains – but only reason can protect us from dangerous detours and wrong turns. What we need is not cultural despair, but rather curiosity and creativity. We need confidence and courage. We need a precise and scrutinizing perspective that understands the power of reason in order to keep on shaping anew a democratic future in our overloaded world. Based on many people that I have spoken to and met, I am confident that we – and the coming generation – will find good answers to these questions. That is why I think we can confidently set off into this uncharted future.

I would like to conclude by quoting Fritz Stern once again, who wrote the following: "The generous faith in rationality and the possibilities of human progress [...] seems discredited today, and yet the deepening of our historical experiences need not lead to its abandonment, but perhaps to a stronger sense of the precariousness of human freedom and to a still greater dedication to it." He wrote

these words in the introduction to his book "The Varieties of History" over 60 years ago when recalling the disasters of the 20th century.

That is all the more reason, I believe, for us to not lose heart today.

Thank you very much.