



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the swearing-in ceremony on the 65th anniversary of
the foundation of the Bundeswehr
at Schloss Bellevue
on 12 November 2020**

Today is a special day for you. You already have your uniforms, commanding officers, handbooks and barracks. But now you are standing here in Schloss Bellevue Park to be sworn in. Today, on the 65th anniversary of its foundation, you are taking the most important step to joining the Bundeswehr.

You have chosen to serve in the armed forces. Being a soldier is a job and profession like no other. You are making a solemn vow today to serve our democracy loyally and to defend with courage the rights and freedom of us all. On behalf of the Federal Republic of Germany, allow me to express my gratitude and appreciation for this.

Being a soldier, becoming a soldier – this is still something one needs to explain more in Germany than in other countries and armies, still something that sparks more questions than it does elsewhere. Perhaps you have experienced this in your own circle of friends and acquaintances.

The very foundation of the Bundeswehr 65 years ago sparked heated debates. It was the first tough political test of the fledgling Federal Republic of Germany. On the one side was the heavy burden of our history with the fatal role played by German militarism, on the other the existential threat as a country on the front line of the Cold War. These were the two poles in the defence-policy dispute on rearmament. However, the mutual pledge that the Bundeswehr and society must never be allowed to grow apart in our democracy posed an equally great challenge. Never again were the armed forces to be a state within a state. The idea of the “citizen in uniform” was the new guiding principle.

As such, as citizens, you are standing here before us today in your new uniforms. Although we cannot celebrate your swearing-in

ceremony with a large number of guests, and above all with your families, that does not change the fact that you – when you become a soldier – naturally remain part of society. And although you cannot make your solemn vow as planned in front of the seat of the German Bundestag, that does not change the fact that the Bundeswehr has been a parliamentary army since its foundation.

You are making your vow at a difficult time. A tiny virus has the huge world on tenterhooks. This disease is dangerous. It requires us to demonstrate solidarity and it is a test of our humanity, as every single person's conduct counts and can even save lives. It is a test of our society. Each and every person has a responsibility for others. At this time, it is good to know that we can count to such a great extent on the Bundeswehr's support in the health authorities, logistics, neighbourhood assistance and the delivery of supplies by the Medical Corps. This week alone, over 6,500 soldiers are involved in efforts to fight the pandemic.

I am certain that we will defeat this virus! It is crucial that we do not only take on responsibility for ourselves and our own families, but also for others. Soldiers have a word for that – comradeship. Comrades take care of one another, support one another and defend one another. We all need to be good comrades at the moment.

Our armed forces are playing their part and making a valuable contribution. We all know that their role in fighting the pandemic is important, but not their main task. The Bundeswehr defends our security, democracy and freedom. It expresses our will to defend ourselves and is an important instrument in our ability to do so. Despite all the changes over the past decades, the Bundeswehr will remain essential for our country in the future.

Never before has the Bundeswehr had to shoulder such wide-ranging responsibility as it does today. This takes the form of solidarity with our allies in Central and Eastern Europe; overseas deployments from the Balkans to Afghanistan and Mali and from Iraq to the Indian Ocean; defence, including in cyberspace; and support in national crises, as is the case now in the pandemic. To put it briefly, we can count on our Bundeswehr! It does a great job! We can be proud of that!

People are behind these achievements – people like you, my dear recruits; people who take on responsibility and have vowed to do so; people who are willing to give it their all and even to make the ultimate sacrifice. That is what makes your profession so special. And that is what makes it particularly difficult at times. However, this can also make it very gratifying. What is demanded of you – the willingness to serve, dedication, courage and fortitude – is not something you find in the usual types of job description.

At the same time, the Bundeswehr is a force like no other – and in view of our history, nor can it be. Our constitution's values provide its unalterable foundation. The members of our armed forces are not merely guided by their vow to follow orders and obey, but also by their duty to listen to their own conscience and by civic and moral values. We can also be proud of this tradition, indeed proud of it in particular.

Your service is important for our country, for freedom and democracy. But do citizens who do not wear a uniform know this? It seems paradoxical. The Bundeswehr is now taking on more responsibility than ever before, but for the vast majority of Germans, it has become virtually invisible in their minds and daily lives.

In its early years and during the following decades, everyone in the old Federal Republic was aware of the Bundeswehr. There were far more bases than there are today. Hundreds of thousands of young men did compulsory military service. Almost every family in the country was involved with the armed forces in one way or another. Not only did acrimonious debates on peace and security policy shape German domestic policy, they also influenced the public's perception of soldiers. Some servicemen experienced hostility from members of the public.

But much changed with the great good fortune of German unity. The fading of the existential threat from daily awareness also greatly reduced interest in the Bundeswehr. Since the suspension of compulsory military service, our society knows less about today's Bundeswehr than it did before. And knowledge would be important, as much has changed.

The force is now significantly smaller and more diverse than it used to be. Changed tasks and demographic developments have played a part in that. It is now a given that women serve in the Bundeswehr. Diversity is no longer a matter of principle, but of practice – the Bundeswehr now includes a growing number of people whose parents or grandparents came to Germany from other countries. At long last, there are now Jewish military chaplains once again, and allow me to add that we cannot expect our Muslim soldiers to do without pastoral care.

At the same time, the Bundeswehr has become more professional. Our volunteer force does not only defend us at the Land and federal level, but also protects our freedom and security in dangerous missions overseas.

But how much of this reality do Germans actually perceive? Who hears about this reality? Who is interested in it? There is a risk of friendly disinterest, an indifference that is not conducive to the trust between the Bundeswehr and society.

And nor is that the only challenge. War, combat, courage, injuries, trauma, death, armed Germans, let alone Germans fighting in other countries – we are all too happy to sweep such topics under the carpet. We do not like to talk about these things, and when we do talk about them, we are usually critical. This does not make it easy for Bundeswehr soldiers. I know how hard it is for many soldiers to speak about defining moments from their deployments, when such missions are now a reality for the Bundeswehr today. “No one wants to hear about it,” some of them tell me. Or “only people who have experienced something like that themselves can understand”. This is a challenge for many military families. It is a challenge for the Bundeswehr leadership. However, this lack of communication also poses the risk of a mutual lack of understanding between soldiers and society. We cannot simply accept this state of affairs – and nor may we or will we accept it because the maxim of the newly founded Bundeswehr 65 years ago must continue to apply for us, namely that the armed forces and society must never be allowed to grow apart in a democracy!

This aspiration entails a mutual undertaking.

In 2008, former Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt promised that “this state will never misuse you.” And today, I, as Federal President, reiterate that. This state will never misuse you. The Bundeswehr is a parliamentary army. The state’s democratic institutions and the armed forces trust one another. What a stroke of good fortune that alone is! What an achievement! Even in the Weimar Republic, the armed forces were more a state within a state than a part of democracy.

Many of the military elite were happy to serve the National Socialists. The Wehrmacht committed unimaginable crimes in the war of annihilation and behind the front. The systematic genocide of Europe’s Jews was planned and carried out with the protection, and often direct involvement, of German soldiers.

The Bundeswehr does not form part of this tradition. Instead, the Bundeswehr’s foundations of freedom and democracy are defined by civic and moral values and the ideal of the “citizen in uniform”, based on the values of the Basic Law. This republic can trust the Bundeswehr!

Every day, when you serve, do justice to this trust! Be brave and stand up against those who oppose or despise democracy, including right-wing extremists in your own ranks! Those who hate democracy cannot serve it.

In our country, a soldier’s honour can only mean free and democratic honour. However, you soldiers also can and should trust this republic!

When crises are far away and one’s own country is surrounded by friends, we feel safe. This is our great good fortune, one that we

Germans did not expect to experience. But this good fortune cannot be taken for granted and nor can the prerequisites for it be a matter of indifference to us.

A few days ago, I spoke with soldiers who had served in combat, where they were wounded physically or psychologically. The places where they experienced these things may be far away, but these people are close to us. They live in our country as our neighbours, friends, colleagues and relatives. They live next door to one another in their barracks. Even if it is uncomfortable to feel this, their experiences form part of our experiences. Their battles are our battles, even if, indeed because peace prevails here in Germany. This is not merely something we can expect of our society – it should also be important to our society. Society owes you this empathy and interest.

Some people can no longer tell us about their battles. Matthias Standfuß. Michael Diebel. Michael Neumann. I never met any of these three men, but I bowed my head before their coffins in Kunduz, where two of their comrades stood guard of honour.

I will never forget that day in early summer. It was my second visit to Afghanistan as Foreign Minister. In this role, I was involved in government decisions, and I thus personally share responsibility for these men's deployment. I think about that to this day. Captain Standfuß, Sergeant Diebel and Sergeant Neumann made the ultimate sacrifice in May 2007, over 13 years ago. They died far away, but they died for us. They were fathers, sons, brothers, partners, friends, people, comrades. They never came back. Others shared the same fate. It is the duty of us all to remember them with respect and gratitude.

The Members of the German Bundestag and the members of the German Government sent these men to serve abroad. Those who take on political responsibility or run for election know this can mean having to deploy soldiers to missions in the future. These are difficult decisions! They must and should be one of the most difficult decisions for those who hold political responsibility.

Soldiers have a right to expect this important decision to be weighed up carefully in each and every case.

And they have a right to be equipped with the best-possible kit this country can provide them, equipment that gives them the best-possible protection and enables them to fulfil their mission.

Those who show the state and society that they are willing to risk their lives for our security, democracy and freedom are certainly entitled to a convincing answer to the questions "Why do we need the Bundeswehr? Why do I serve?"

Parliament and policymakers have a duty to provide soldiers with an answer to these questions. In this way, they ensure that we do not

grow apart. For many years, I myself co-drafted deployment mandates and presented them to the German Bundestag, and that is why I know from my own experience that a decision by the German Bundestag following a brief debate is not enough on its own.

Fundamentally, however, the answer is clear. We need the Bundeswehr because Germany must assume responsibility for its own security; because we have taken on responsibility for our neighbours and allies, just as they take on responsibility for our security; because the world around us is changing, and not always in the way we would like.

We need the Bundeswehr because our support for a logic of cooperation in the world and for a strong and just international order cannot be achieved from a position of weakness.

To sum up, we need the Bundeswehr because “the determination to promote world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe”, as stated in our Basic Law, will amount to nothing without a strong Bundeswehr.

We now have reason to hope for a renewal of a transatlantic alliance that has guaranteed our security for the past 70 years. But even under President Biden, Europe will not be as important to the US as it was 30, 40 or 50 years ago. With regard to security policy, I see our country as having a dual responsibility. For Germany, the development of an EU capable of taking action in defence policy is as pressing as the expansion of the European pillar of NATO. We Germans must understand that a strong Europe is our investment in a transatlantic relationship. This is the only way to give our partnership with the US a common strategic direction once again, one that will be able to withstand differences between us. That is why it is so important that we Germans do everything in our power to strengthen Europe. If we invest in Europe, then other Europeans will follow our lead. It will cost us more, but it should be worth more to us than money alone, particularly when it comes to security and defence policy. But despite notable progress, it will be a long time before the European Union will be able to guarantee all its members’ security on its own. Counting solely and merely on the EU would mean driving a wedge through Europe. We will continue to urgently need the strongest and largest partner in the Alliance. But only a Europe with the desire and ability to protect itself credibly will have the best chances of keeping the United States in NATO. And that must be the goal.

The Bundeswehr can support both the EU and NATO – and it already does. Since its foundation, it has been a force that serves as part of an alliance. You will see for yourselves in the line of duty that NATO is what defines the Bundeswehr. In all of its deployments, the Bundeswehr stands side by side with its partners. It has obtained the trust of our neighbours and allies over a period of decades. A few

weeks ago, I visited the 1st German Netherlands Corps. Two entire Netherlands brigades are now part of German army divisions. The German Sea Battalion will be integrated into the Royal Netherlands Navy and a German air-defence battalion is subordinate to a Netherlands regiment. In Europe, we can certainly say with confidence that no one does more with others than we do.

The future of the Bundeswehr lies in this cooperation and integration. And a positive future for our country lies in Germany's integration in Europe and NATO.

A democratic Germany in a united Europe, serving together to promote peace in the world – that is what German policy stands for, that is what German society stands for, and that is what this Bundeswehr stands for! That is why you, our citizens in uniform, serve. That is why you take on personal responsibility and why you will affirm this choice today when you make your vow to serve as good comrades and reliable alliance partners, as a respected and recognised part of our society, and as defenders of freedom and democracy.

I wish you all the luck a soldier needs for your service in the Bundeswehr.