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**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the presentation of the Order of Merit of the Federal
Republic of Germany to Professor Aleida Assmann,
Professor Jan Assmann, Sir Christopher Clark, Professor
Klaus Hasselmann and Professor Benjamin List
on 2 September 2022
at Schloss Bellevue**

Guests of honour,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I want today to take you on a journey through time, from Ancient Egypt to the future. "Back to the Future" and Star Trek – you are probably thinking of these science fiction classics right now. Whether, beyond the realm of film sets, such time travel is physically or logically possible, is the subject of a great deal of speculation; there is, however, as we know, no empirical evidence whatsoever that it is.

However, the fact that our journey through time today is possible, in our minds and in our imagination, is thanks to your science, to your research into the past, present and future. You open our eyes to faraway worlds, you bring us closer to unimaginable things and you explain their significance for us in the here and now.

Sharpening our perceptions and expanding our horizons is the very essence of science. Research can shed light on questions that appear, at first sight, to be intractable or far too complex.

Science is called upon especially in times of crisis and change. The COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, economic uncertainty, climate change – many people in our country find all of these things unsettling. Science can offer orientation here and can point the way in turbulent times.

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The pandemic in particular has reminded us of how important such orientation is. After all, we have witnessed how quickly disinformation and conspiracy theories spread. Standing up to this in political and social debates and drawing on scientific findings as the basis of our arguments – we must agree on this foundation of reason as a society.

But science cannot offer solutions to challenges in times of crisis at the drop of a hat and cannot improve our lives overnight. Alongside the necessary resources, time and patience are also key factors. The fact that this patience pays dividends is demonstrated not least by the discoveries that all of you who are here today have made.

I am most delighted to be paying tribute to five cutting-edge researchers today. All of you have devoted such a great amount of time and patience, and also dedication and commitment, in the service of explaining phenomena and creating innovations. I would like to bid you all a very warm welcome to Schloss Bellevue.

Esteemed guests of honour, you have delved deep into the past, present and future in your various disciplines. Allow me, as I mentioned earlier, to present the Orders of Merit as a journey through time – which is why I would like to start with you, Mr Assmann.

Your research as an Egyptologist naturally stretches back far into the past. Ancient Egypt is at the heart of your thinking, but with aspects of cultural studies, your findings are significant far beyond the realm of Egyptology. As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht said in his citation at the award ceremony for the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 2018, you have not contented yourself with “historical reconstructions”. Rather, you have also researched the reception of Egypt in European intellectual history and examined the interactions between society and religion. You have become known to a wider audience not least with your research on monotheism and its claim to absolute truth.

You have triggered controversial debates – and have not shied away from them, but are always ready to engage in dialogue and discussion. You get actively involved in the scientific discussion and also shape it with your impressive publishing work. Your long list of publications begins with your dissertation “Liturgical Songs to the Sun God” and your post-doctoral qualification on the tomb of a civil servant in the Theban Necropolis. People’s awareness of their finality runs through your work. You argue in your book “Der Tod als Thema der Kulturtheorie” (death as a topic of cultural theory) that getting to grips with transience is the starting point of every culture. Your more recent publications also include musicological treatises and an annotated edition of Thomas Mann’s Joseph novels. Your impressive list of publications, which I can only reproduce in the smallest of excerpts, shows us that you take an interdisciplinary approach and are something of a “jack-of-all-trades”.

Together with your wife Aleida Assmann, you have developed the concept of cultural memory and researched Germany's culture of remembrance. You have received a wide range of honours for this together, including the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 2018. In your "two-voice work", as the German Publishers and Booksellers Association puts it, you consistently contribute your perspective from antiquity.

Mr Assmann, you have rendered outstanding services to the culture of remembrance in our country in diverse ways and have shaped our understanding of the civilisation and culture of ancient Egypt. I am pleased to award you the Knight Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany – and may I now ask you to join me up here.

The next stop on our journey through time is Prussia. Sir Christopher Clark, you were born in Sydney and are a researcher in Cambridge – even if we take your two years at university in Berlin, it is not necessarily a given that you say that Germany is the field that you know best.

But perhaps precisely this is a stroke of good fortune, affording you the analytical perspective of the historian, never arbitrary, but nevertheless largely exempt from the charge of national emotion. You had long been a world-renowned and respected historian as well as a successful author when you presented a new and thorough analysis of the factors leading to the First World War with your work "The Sleepwalkers". For a historical publication, this book sparked an almost unbelievable level of interest among readers, and is one of the most frequently cited works on the European history of international relations prior to 1914. Furthermore, the book – least of all to your surprise – has also sparked controversial debates, especially your thesis that Imperial Germany was not solely responsible for the outbreak of war.

But the fact that you do not read this as an exculpation of Wilhelm II's foreign policy, and the fact that there can be no unbiased view of the German Empire is something that we discussed together in this room last year, when we marked the 150th anniversary of the founding of the German Empire. You were only able to join us in a digital capacity at the time, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. And so I am all the more delighted that you are with us in the flesh today! We were even able to work together twice last year when you contributed a wonderful portrait of Robert Blum for the book "Wegbereiter der deutschen Demokratie" (pioneers of German democracy), which I had the honour of publishing.

You are publishing a book next year that I am very much looking forward to, to mark the 175th anniversary of the revolution of 1848. The memory of this truly European Springtime of the Peoples shows us that democracy and solidarity in Europe – despite all setbacks – have a long, common tradition.

An exceptionally broad audience benefits from your enduring fascination with historiography. Your books are bestsellers even beyond specialist circles, and you have made your way into many more living rooms in Germany via television. The fact that you explain history and its interrelationships in a wonderfully comprehensible, yet not simplistic or idealising way, makes you an admired communicator of history.

Sir Christopher Clark, permit me to thank you for your detailed research on the history of Germany and for your commitment to teaching history – and so it gives me great pleasure to present to you the Knight Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Our journey through time now takes us to the transition between the past and the present. Ms Assmann, with your research into the culture of remembrance, you are working on this temporal nexus. To put it in your own words, "the future starts with remembrance".

This is a shared task for us – and I quoted this sentence of yours in my citation for Margot Friedländer on receiving the Walther Rathenau Award back in July. A few weeks earlier, you had also spoken to Margot Friedländer when she received an honorary doctorate from the Freie Universität Berlin.

While your husband brought the viewpoint of antiquity to your joint research, you contributed the perspective of modern times and the present. Your concept of cultural memory stands in contrast to subjective individual remembrance and complements the fact-based study of sources. You describe cultural memory as an officially institutionalised and constructed form of collective remembrance that keeps us together as a society.

Shaping the "national we" and forming a "European we" is what you advocate in your book "The European Vision". You offer us four lessons from history: peacekeeping, democracy and the rule of law, the culture of remembrance and the rediscovery of human rights. To your mind, however, these foundations must not stop at declarations, but must be experienced and implemented in everyday life.

Our responsibility to shape the culture of remembrance and to cultivate cultural memory is based on the assumption that collective memory is socially constructed – especially at a time when historical facts are sometimes deliberately distorted and forgetfulness of history is rampant.

All Federal Presidents contribute to this cultural memory with their work. Your call for state acts of remembrance in particular not to degenerate into empty rituals and commemorative imperatives is therefore important advice also as far as my own work is concerned.

It goes without saying that we in Germany have a special responsibility to commemorate the monstrous crimes of our history. Ms

Assmann, you are a tireless advocate of awareness-raising and remembrance. And you are also dedicated to the question of how we must rethink our culture of remembrance when the generation of contemporary witnesses of the Holocaust is no longer there to give personal accounts.

Symbols and days of remembrance are part of this collective memory. Today, I am also awarding you a symbol, a medal from our society, for your outstanding research on the politics of history and the culture of remembrance in our country. Ms Assmann, I am pleased to present you with the Knight Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany.

We continue our journey through time and arrive at the present. Mr List, you describe the experiment with which you discovered organic catalysis as follows: "It took me five minutes to mix everything together in the evening."

That seems absurdly short. The ripples made by your experiment lasted incomparably longer, of course – culminating as they did in being awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2021. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences' citation also states the following: "The fact is that many people have wondered why we didn't think of it earlier. [...] Simple ideas are often the most difficult to imagine."

Your idea was to use organic substances as catalysts – instead of the catalysts commonly used up until that point, which require expensive metal compounds and are often harmful to health and the environment. Your discovery thus contributes to more sustainable and resource-efficient chemistry. Organic catalysis is now used in many ways, especially in the production of medicines and – as is your hope – perhaps also in the next generation of vaccines.

What you found exciting about chemistry as a young person was the cohesion of molecules. You experienced human cohesion and human suffering in a most personal way when you survived the 2004 tsunami in Thailand with your family. Shortly afterwards, you took over as Director of the Max Planck Institute for Coal Research.

Your fascination for chemistry and catalysis is intoxicating – for example, when you relate how, as a teenager, you made black powder in the cellar of a Frankfurt apartment building, which fortunately did not explode. Or when you argue that there is no technology more important than catalysis because so many products are based on it and much less energy is needed for reactions.

You want to bring your research to bear to make the world a better place – and, as a chemist, you are seeking to do your part to put the brakes on global warming. You describe the idea of artificial photosynthesis as a "dream reaction".

I am presenting you with the Knight Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany today for the research that you have already done – and as an incentive to continue researching your courageous ideas! I would now like to ask you to join me up here.

The last stop on our journey through time takes us far into the future: "I always go so far as to calculate up to the year 3000", as you, Mr Hasselmann, put it back in 1999. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences awarded you the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2021 for your calculations and for your "reliable prediction of global warming".

After a stint in California, you worked in Hamburg, were founding Director of the Max Planck Institute for Meteorology and Scientific Director at the German Climate Computation Centre. You have developed climate models with your work on mainframe computers processing an incredible amount of data. With the help of this technology, you are capable of predicting reliable scenarios, despite the fact that individual weather events are often chaotic.

As early as 1979, you published a study that is now considered one of the milestones of climate research. You addressed the question of whether humans are changing the climate or whether this is a result of natural climate fluctuations. With your modelling, you provided proof that the rise in temperature in the atmosphere is due to our human carbon dioxide emissions. This turned man-made warming "from an – albeit very plausible! – hypothesis to a fact", as current Director of the Max Planck Institute for Meteorology Jochem Marotzke put it.

I don't need to tell you all what huge political ramifications this discovery has had. The physical models show us what devastating consequences humans and the environment will face if we fail to meet our climate targets.

Your research, Mr Hasselmann, urges us all to limit global warming and thus ensure that our planet remains habitable. You are essentially always at the table when it comes to negotiations on climate agreements or laws on climate protection, and you are, in spirit, at the side of those who are fighting for greater climate protection in Germany.

Your thirst for knowledge remains undimmed. You yourself said the following about this: "For me, the search for the world formula is still my life's work." Mr Hasselmann, I fear that if you were to discover this world formula, then there would be no appropriate medal for this. I am therefore all the more delighted to present you with the Knight Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany today for your services in the field of climate research.