

PRESSEMITTEILUNG

13. Transatlantische Wirtschaftskonferenz

Remarks of Eric H. Holder, November 6, 2019

Confidential until 8pm

Thank you for that introduction – and thank you all for welcoming me back to Berlin.

It's always a pleasure to return to this beautiful city. And it's a special honor to be here, tonight, as a guest of the largest American Chamber of Commerce in Europe.

This organization has always symbolized – and strengthened – the deep ties that bind Germany and the United States.

Through the Great War, the Great Recession, and the turbulent century in between, this Chamber has been a venue for bilateral cooperation. A force for peace in times of conflict. An instrument of reconciliation after war.

It has also been a place where good friends can speak frankly with one another. Especially in times – like this one – when hard truths must be spoken.

Tonight, the hard truth is that we gather at a precarious moment for the American-German alliance – and, indeed, for the entire alliance structure that has been dominant since the end of the Second World War.

All around us, an order that is young, only 75 years old, and which millions sacrificed to create, is fracturing. The world is, as a result, becoming less stable.

Our elections – and even the premise of democracy itself: that a free and open society is stronger than a society controlled by the state – have come under attack by authoritarians.

It has been 30 years since the wall that divided this city came down. But tonight, there are new physical and metaphorical walls going up all around the world. And like 30 years ago, we need every citizen of the free world to help tear them down.

So in the spirit of this Transatlantic Conference, this great organization, and the alliance it represents: let me speak frankly with you this evening.

This is a time of American estrangement. And the question we face – a question everyone in this room must help to answer – is whether the period from 2016 to 2020 will be an aberration... or a new normal.

This has nothing to do with politics – with left versus right, conservative versus progressive, or Democrat versus Republican. No; this moment is testing the fundamental character of both our nations – and challenging the resolve of all free people, across the globe.

56 years ago, when President John F. Kennedy came to this city to declare that “all free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin,” he was stating not just a principle but an enduring commitment – one that binds the United States to Germany, to the rest of Europe, and to every nation with whom we share democratic ideals, interlocking interests and common values.

The world had seen what happened when America withdrew from the global stage after World War One – only to face a far greater conflict a generation later. So after the Second World War, as a new international order took shape, the United States and its German ally remained engaged and soon emerged as indispensable allies — and leaders.

This is a role America willingly played – and a commitment we upheld, at great national cost in blood and treasure – under presidents of both parties, from Truman to Obama.

But since 2016 – and for the first time in my lifetime – the United States has unwisely cast this mantle of leadership aside. We have abrogated the commitment Presidents Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy told the world was ironclad. And this has created a global vacuum – which others have been all too eager to fill.

From Moscow to Syria – from the Iranian nuclear agreement to the Paris Climate Accord – America's reckless retreat into senseless nationalism and feckless isolationism has emboldened the enemies of democracy.

Some leaders have seen the vacuum left by the United States as an opportunity to challenge the prevailing order itself – to sow conflict and instability, or to violate the rights to which all people are entitled.

Fortunately, others have stepped forward to promote stability – and to carry on the fight for democratic values. Three years ago, Angela Merkel essentially succeeded Barack Obama as the leader of the traditional Western Alliance. It may be controversial for me, as an American, to say so but this is a hard truth. I say it in the hope that American leadership, which is essential to maximizing the power of the democratic ideal, will soon be restored. But hope alone cannot change the facts.

Without American leadership, it feels increasingly like our alliance structure is being torn apart at the seams and the world is spiraling into a desired disorder.

There is still time to arrest our descent, reverse these trends, and restore an international framework that has too often been imperfect, yet essential to our security and prosperity.

But this is an hour of great peril. And it carries disturbing echoes of the 20th century – echoes our leaders, across the public and private sectors, would be wise to heed.

Once again, an ominous wave of nationalism is sweeping the globe. Inequality and economic insecurity are fueling massive upheaval. And the darkest undercurrents of our societies – the racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and other strains of intolerance that bubble just under the surface – are being weaponized by dictators and demagogues.

In ordinary times, we could rely on the strength of our institutions – the heart and soul of every open society – to bind us together and keep these forces at bay. But today, global surveys show virtually all institutions are weaker and less trusted than ever before – especially in the United States and Europe. And it is not hard to understand why. Our systems are in an asymmetric state.

In the 1950s, the average American CEO made twenty times the salary of the average employee. Today, that ratio is more than 360 to one. Here in Europe, inequality has spread more gradually, but it has been just as corrosive. And as a result, the world's richest one percent now hold 45 percent of all global wealth – along with a disproportionate share of political influence that is impossible to measure.

- No wonder more and more of our citizens feel alienated, powerless and distrustful.
- No wonder millions of people fear that the system, and maybe the entire global economy, is rigged against them.
- No wonder our societies are turning inward – and our nations are bitterly divided.
- And no wonder our adversaries are inflaming these divisions, attacking our elections, and effectively infecting social media with consequential disinformation.

Their aim is to turn the openness of our democratic societies against us; to bring the West down from the inside.

For the United States and Europe, the stakes of this fight are existential.

But this is not the first time this struggle has come to Berlin.

In 1963, on the day President Kennedy proudly called himself, and all free people, “citizens of Berlin,” this city was divided by foreign governments, fractured against itself.

But the German people endured. Their leaders – from Adenauer to Merkel – kept the faith. And the United States and our allies strengthened our shared commitment.

As a result, three decades ago, the German people and the free world – acting in common cause – reunified this city and ignited a democracy movement around the globe.

Tonight – as we face another moment of reckoning – it is the United States that has been divided by provocateurs from within and by attacks from a foreign government. We are fractured against ourselves.

I am optimistic that the American people will endure, as we have always endured. But tonight, we need every “citizen of Berlin,” figurative and literal, to stand with us – in our hour of need – just as we stood with you in yours.

- The same commitment that President Kennedy spoke about, half a century ago, must once again unite all people – all nations – that believe in a peaceful and democratic future.
- The same tools our adversaries use to divide us – on social media – must be unleashed by ordinary citizens as tools of connection... because they have unprecedented power to disrupt and democratize closed societies. Just look to Asia where so many brave women and men are fighting to seize control of their own destinies.
- And the same enduring alliance that has fueled prosperity for untold millions of Germans and Americans must impel those who benefit the most – including the leaders in this room – to stand up and speak out in this harrowing time.

After all, as President Kennedy reminded us on the eve of his inauguration, “... [O]f those to whom much is given, much is required.”

For well over a century, the American Chamber of Commerce in Germany – and the people and interests it represents – have been at the heart and soul of our remarkable alliance.

In the days before the First World War, you helped American and German leaders maintain dialogue right up to the moment conflict broke out—and then became the first organization to fly the American flag over Berlin after peace was restored.

In the ashes of World War Two, you helped bind our two war-weary nations together – and ushered in a new era of economic and political cooperation that has made this alliance one of the most vital on the planet.

And today – thanks in no small part to this organization – our economies, our geopolitical interests, our futures are intertwined as never before.

But I did not come all the way to Berlin to ask you to speculate about that future.

I am here because you have the power - and the responsibility – to shape it.

And the question I posed a few moments ago—about whether this time of estrangement will be an aberration or a new normal – is not, in any way, rhetorical.

Let us leave others to wonder about the outcome. Our challenge—and our breathtaking opportunity—is to help decide it.

Every person in this room should aspire to make this organization better, this alliance stronger. Which means, at times like this one, you have to advocate for something more important than the bottom line.

Your countries, your communities, your companies and your shareholders are counting on you to do well — but stakeholders also want you to do good: by defending and deepening the relationships that have made both our nations, and every enterprise represented here, so prosperous.

- So when you hear elected officials use bigoted language—when they fan the flames of xenophobia for their own cynical self-interest—you have a responsibility to step into that leadership vacuum: to demand better. To speak out for tolerance and diversity. To provide the moral clarity we can unfortunately no longer depend on the leadership of the United States to provide.

- When inequality touches your communities—widening economic and racial divisions and fueling global instability—you, the women and men who set the tone for private enterprise, can respond more directly than any government. Take it from Marc Benioff, the Business Roundtable, or virtually any CEO: this is a turning point for capitalism. And the companies that “win,” and define the next era, will be the ones that do right today by the people and places that have made them successful.

- Finally, when nationalism threatens to turn our respective countries away from one another and from the greater world, you can remind us of the fundamental truth that has underwritten the security and prosperity of the postwar era: that “we are stronger,” in the words of historian Jon Meacham, “the wider we open our arms.”

It is as true today as it was half a century ago: that “all free men and women” are “citizens of Berlin.”

But it’s also true that we are not fighting the Cold War anymore. And this city is no longer alone on the front lines.

Today, a new generation is writing a new chapter in the same long-running struggle. And all the world’s free people are citizens not only of Berlin, but of Kiev. Of Damascus. Of Manila. Of Istanbul. Of Caracas.

Today, our circle is wider and stronger than ever before. And our tools—for connecting with one another and, yes, for tearing down walls—have never been more powerful.

It is true that our alliance, our global order, our democracies themselves are being tested. And no outcome is guaranteed.

But to anyone who doubts our capacity for progress—

To anyone who questions our commitment, or wonders whether the world’s free people can once again turn the tide—

Allow me to say, as President Kennedy said before, “Lass' sie nach Berlin kommen.”

Let them come to Berlin.

Thank you.

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Über AmCham Germany

Die American Chamber of Commerce in Germany ist die Stimme der transatlantischen Wirtschaft.

Wir fördern die globalen Handelsbeziehungen, die auf dem starken Fundament der amerikanisch-deutschen Partnerschaft stehen. Wir unterstützen aktiv die Interessen unserer Mitglieder durch unser globales Netzwerk in Wirtschaft, Politik und den AmChams weltweit und stärken den Austausch zwischen Mitgliedern und Politik. AmCham Germany ermöglicht interkulturelles Verständnis, Zusammenarbeit und neue Investitionen. Wir stehen für einen transparenten Dialog, freien Handel und ein wettbewerbsfähiges und offenes Wirtschaftsklima.