

„The relationship of the US and Europe under President Obama“

Remarks by Consul General Edward Alford
at event by the George-Marshall-Gesellschaft - Feb 10, 2010, Landratsamt Hofheim

I am pleased to have been given the honor of speaking to you all this evening. I welcome the association's diverse activities which help to develop German-American relations, including the co-operation with Loudoun County in Virginia. Friendship and co-operation on a „grass roots“ level provide an essential base for relations between our countries, irrespective of who has their term in the White House office or in the Federal Chancellery. I am especially happy that these activities are now also being encouraged by the newly founded George Marshall association.

The choice of George Marshall as a patron for your association was an excellent one because George C. Marshall is more than just a historical figure who significantly influenced Europe's history after the Second World War. I would now like to talk briefly in English about his thoughts and actions which exhibit an unbowed topicality. (*Note: The first two paragraphs of the speech were originally given in German.*)

There is no doubt that the Marshall Plan played a decisive role in the economic and political development of Western Europe after World War II. The European Recovery Act, as it was officially called, helped bring about the recovery. It was a quick and lasting recovery, so much so that in Germany one talked about the "economic miracle" – the "Wirtschaftswunder." The Marshall Plan created the economic and political strength in Western Europe that led us to prevail in the Cold War.

The Marshall Plan was implemented in a unique historical situation. It is not a blueprint that can be easily applied to any time and space. This is not to say that the Marshall Plan has no relevance for us today. On the contrary, its legacy and vision is something to remember when facing new challenges that are often more complex than those of the bi-polar Cold War era.

When we look at the disastrous earthquake in Haiti we are looking at a natural catastrophe. There is a tremendous national and international effort to deal with the immediate consequences. With the agreement of the Haitian government, the U.S. is coordinating America's relief efforts with the United Nations and more than 30 nations and hundreds of NGOs to deliver food and water quickly throughout the country. US military personnel are playing an indispensable role in supporting this humanitarian effort by making the logistics chain possible and distributing life-saving assistance. Civilian Aid workers are working around the clock to deliver more aid quickly and effectively to people in need. The German government, German NGOs and the people of Germany have contributed generously to the relief efforts in Haiti. All of these efforts are laudable and indispensable. The results of our efforts will only be sustainable if we recognize the earthquake as a natural disaster that could only achieve such tragic dimensions because of the poverty and underdevelopment in Haiti.

On a larger scale, we need to look at climate change from a different perspective. Last month I had the pleasure of conferring with Boston University Professor Adil Najam, author of the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was collectively awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. Both at a luncheon at my house and at a public event at the Rhineland-Palatinate State Chancellery, Prof. Najam not only offered an assessment of the results of the recent conference on climate change policy in Copenhagen, but he also emphasized that we must look at climate change issues as development issues. Economically and technologically underdeveloped countries contribute increasingly to global warming. They are the ones who are least prepared to deal with the consequences of global warming.

In states and countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, development is more obvious as a key issue. The global financial and economic crisis has proven that even the developed world is not a safe haven. We were at the brink of collapse. And while some nations got away with huge amounts of debt and budget deficits, others went practically bankrupt. Decades of financial aid have not produced the desired results. Some critics, such as William Easterly whom the U.S. Consulate presented at a public lecture in Frankfurt not too

long ago, have even argued that much of the financial help given by developed countries has been counterproductive.

Ethnic and tribal conflicts, different cultural traditions and values, as well as dysfunctional social, economic and political institutions, have created situations different from those in post-World War II Western Europe. That forces us to come up with very different approaches and concepts based on studies of specific conditions rooted in unique historical developments.

Today's challenges cannot be geographically contained and have effects far beyond national borders. What we have been seeing is another process of globalization beyond the realm of global systems like our climate and international trade and financial markets. Today, news of catastrophic events travels around the world within minutes – and demands immediate responses and long-term attention. We are witnessing the beginning of a new era of international politics, as President Obama says, because of the nature of the challenges that face us. When a financial system weakens in one country, prosperity is hurt elsewhere. When violent extremists operate in one stretch of mountains, people are endangered across an ocean. When one nation pursues nuclear weapons, the risk of nuclear attack rises for all nations. When political, economic and natural disaster hits, refugees will cross national borders and involve neighboring and even far-away countries.

Whereas the Marshall Plan was conceived by one country, today's complex and global challenges require cooperation, coordination and burden-sharing among many partners. We need strong partners – and nowhere are there better or more committed partners than in Europe. Germany is the centerpiece of the European Union. Our transatlantic relations and shared values are the anchor of a joint worldwide engagement. Within the past year, we have seen this engagement pay off in long-term multilateral solutions.

Twelve months ago, nobody thought that the global economy would start reviving so quickly in spite of frequent set-backs. The financial crisis made us acknowledge that our regulatory systems were imperfect, enforcement was often lax. In some cases, there was also massive fraud. Now, the challenge is to consider effective long-term incentives and to implement effective regulation without choking off investment. President Obama made specific proposals for financial reform which were quickly taken up by European leaders. Needless to say that without a stabilization of the international financial markets, there will be no hope for improvement in the developing countries.

The Marshall Plan stood at the beginning of a successful transatlantic partnership predicated on the philosophy that more is to be gained when countries cooperate than when they collide.

Twenty five years ago, no one dreamed that the Wall that divided a city, a country, a continent, and the world, would in a few short years come down; that a peaceful revolution powered by a belief in the values of freedom and democracy would put an end to the Cold War; that many of the Eastern European countries which had not been allowed to benefit from the Marshall Plan would now be part of NATO and the European Union. The objective of all Presidents since World War II, both Democratic and Republican, has been to work with Europe to realize a joint vision of a Europe undivided, free, prosperous, and at peace. None of this has changed under President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

In response to many new challenges, we must continue the legacy of our post-World-War II partnership. We must instill in the hearts and minds of the younger generation the recognition of our common values and of our common goals.

Governments cannot do this alone. We depend on the active participation of civil society at the grass roots level. Activities like yours in the George-Marshall-Gesellschaft are a vital part of this effort. I applaud and thank you for your sustained commitment to the German-American partnership and wish you continued success in your ongoing endeavors.