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**“Transatlantic Dissonance:
Reporting from Both Sides of the Atlantic”**

The 2018 Garrick Utley Memorial Lecture on Global Media Issues

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Thank you for the invitation to talk about my experience as a German journalist in the United States. I should mention that I am wearing two hats at the moment. In my normal life I am the Chief Diplomatic Correspondent of *Der Tagesspiegel*, the leading daily in Berlin. Earlier I had been the U.S. Correspondent for eight years, from 2005 to 2013. At that time I happened to be the only German newspaper correspondent with a White House “Hard Pass.” After four years in Germany I have been back in DC since last October in a different capacity. I am enjoying a sabbatical from my position at *Der Tagesspiegel*. I am the Inaugural Helmut Schmidt Fellow of the German Zeit Foundation and the German Marshall Fund of the U.S. During my project I am living in Washington, DC; I got my Hard Pass back, and I regularly observe the press briefings at the White House and the visits of foreign leaders with President Trump. I still contribute columns and commentaries to *Der Tagesspiegel*. So, both roles – as a fellow and as a journalist – complement each other.

Thanks to this experience we could spend our remaining time complaining to each other about the current administration, the contempt for partnership, the impertinence in dealing with close allies, the strategic mistakes in foreign policy. And probably most of us would feel pretty good afterwards.

But that is not my approach. President Trump is just one part of the problem. The other part is the inability of Germany and other European countries to find a strategic response to the Trump administration. They should ask themselves: How do we defend our national interest – and the common European interest? And we in the media should ask: What have they done so far to achieve a sort of damage control? And to hedge for the future of the transatlantic partnership?

I am not proud of the way German media are covering President Trump and the dealings of his administration. It’s mainly complaining about Trump. Or making fun about Trump. In a lot of cases that could be considered to be justified. But it’s not a strategic response. And why are most German journalists never asking whether President Trump might be right on an issue? Or whether he has at least some good arguments? Not everything that he says has to be wrong by definition.

This has to do, of course, with the U.S. media landscape. A lot of left and center-left outlets in this country show a similar approach. That serves as an additional justification for German media to do the same. One could say: They copy the reporting of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and CNN.

In concentrating on the deficiencies of the Trump White House, the German media are missing the other part of the picture: our own deficiencies – in Germany and in Europe – which add to the unpleasant situation.

In my project as a GMF fellow, I follow a different path. I focus on the question of what Europe in general and what especially Germany could do to maintain the liberal, rules-based order in times of crisis.

I am not asking what an ideal world should look like, what the Germans would expect from their partners, and what they don’t like about the attitudes of others.

Instead I am asking: What do our partners expect from Germany – our direct neighbors France and Poland, the European Union, and the U.S.? I ask these questions here in the U.S. And I travel to Brussels, Paris, Warsaw, and Berlin – and talk to the advisors of the heads of state and government.

As you can imagine, this is also my line of thought as a journalist, columnist, and commentator.

We are living in times of manifold crises. Too many of the disruptions come from the inside of what we call the West:

- Brexit;
- U.S. President Donald Trump;

- Election successes of populist parties; and
- An inability of the EU to establish effective decision-making processes.

In addition, we have to deal with an aggressive Russia and an assertive China. Authoritarianism is on the rise – see, for example, Turkey.

But the German media coverage of the Trump administration tends to neglect the international context of our relationship. A sober assessment of our mutual interests – which are still paramount even when we disagree on a lot of issues – is often missing. That sometimes leads to opinion polls that baffle me. In some polls Germans express higher confidence in the Chinese or Russian leadership than in President Trump. With all my own reservations against his policies, it's difficult for me to justify such a reaction.

Not all news is bad. Since I wrote the proposal for my fellowship in November 2016, we saw the elections in Austria and in France. One could argue with some satisfaction that the comparative advantage of democracies is working: the ability to self-correct.

But even with the results in Austria and France the overall picture does not look nice. And Italy was certainly a backlash.

Now, instead of hoping for the self-correction of the democratic system, would it not be much better to work actively on the correction of a dangerous trajectory?

What is the task at hand – not only for politicians, but as well for the media? Four things:

- We should analyze the situation soberly.
- We should listen when partners point out our own weaknesses.
- We should describe how we are able to improve ourselves.
- And we should avoid confrontations we can't win.

I am a fan of the liberal, rules-based order, founded by the U.S. after World War II. This order was *the* key to success in Germany and in Europe. The U.S. provided the security umbrella under which democracy and the rule of law could grow over time – and the economy as well, which is the basis of our welfare state. The EU has become an economic bloc of similar importance as the U.S. But we still rely on the U.S. for our security. And we rely on the U.S. to guarantee secure trade routes around the globe for *our* exports.

Now this rules-based order is in danger. The threats come from many directions and developments. One source is unexpected: the U.S. President.

Donald Trump imposes tariffs on steel and aluminum imports under the laughable pretext that they are a threat to the national security of the U.S.

He pulls out of the Paris climate accord, out of UN agencies, out of the Iran nuclear deal. He blocks the nomination of judges in the WTO system.

In this situation the media make two mistakes: They overestimate the disruption. And they underestimate the challenge to Europe.

Trump is not negating the liberal world order entirely. He questions parts of the liberal order.

Germany and the U.S. still have lots of interests in common. To name just a few:

- Pushing China to respect free trade and intellectual property;
- Common defense against Russia;
- Energy independence of Europe;
- Nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and

- Stabilizing the Middle East and Africa.

Sometimes we do not agree on the best way to reach these goals, but we agree on the goals.

Wouldn't it be nice if the media would spell this out more forcefully?

The other danger is to underestimate the challenges to Europe. Some in Germany hope Trump will go away. Some argue this is the moment for Europe to confront the U.S. I think both are misleading and even dangerous.

Trump will stay in office. We should not expect a successful impeachment. He might be even re-elected in 2020. He will not moderate his views. His way of seeing the world and his style of campaigning will be copied by other U.S. politicians.

Let me give you an example of why I consider German media coverage of the Trump administration imbalanced – and not focused on what Germany should be concerned about: tax reform. You could find many articles on why Trump's tax reform is socially unfair and why it might not lead to the promised effects on the economy. But the German angle was underreported: What are the consequences for international investment flows – and therefore the effects on investment and jobs in Germany?

While looking for examples around the globe of how to deal with the challenges posed by Trump, Japan caught my eye. Trump announced early that he would pull out of TPP, the transpacific trade deal. And he did. It took Japan less than a year to organize TPP-11 – a trade deal without the U.S. but with all other partners. Japan believes in TPP to contain China and to enforce basic rules.

If I may idealize the lesson learned: The liberal, rules-based order will not be doomed just because the U.S. stops supporting parts of this order. The order will be able to survive if there are other leaders who defend it.

The two questions to Germany and to Europe: Is Germany or is the EU able to pull off something similar?

And would Germany and Europe agree with Japan that Trump is not an adversary and that we should not see ourselves as an alternative to the U.S.? Japan is stepping in when the U.S. is not delivering on an issue of importance to Japan. This is an emancipation *inside* the alliance with the U.S., not an emancipation *against* the U.S.

However, this is not the approach to Trump coverage in most of the German media. The tone is emotional, angry, arrogant. A sober analysis of our mutual interests with the U.S., our interdependencies, and the limits of our own capabilities is often missing.

There are fields in today's world where the EU has leverage. I would highlight two.

Trade deals: The EU shapes the future trade and investment rules at a time when the U.S. sits on the sidelines. The EU has finalized or is negotiating agreements with Canada and Mexico, with Japan and South Korea, with many states in Africa, with Mercosur.

In a similar way the EU shapes the rules on how to use and how to protect data with its General Data Protection Regulation. We all felt the consequences here in the U.S. in the days leading up to the May 25th deadline. U.S. organizations asked us to agree to receive further emails under the GDPR.

But there are other examples where the EU doesn't have much leverage. One challenge: EU member states do not share the same views. And again, this part of the picture is underreported in the German media.

When I ask in Berlin, in Warsaw, and in Paris about their view of Trump, the differences are striking. Germans are up in arms. They see him as an embarrassment. The Polish government, however, asks:

Where is the problem? We have good relations. The French say: It's not the first time we have had to deal with a difficult U.S. President.

In a similar way I get different answers when I ask what should be the center of transatlantic relations. Poles say: security. Germans: trade and investment. The French: to maintain the multilateral order.

We can't agree on principal questions in Europe.

Another challenge comes from the experience that the EU is able to create rules and agreements but is not good at enforcing them.

Look at the Iran deal. Europe would like to save the deal but is not able to shield companies ready to do business with Iran from secondary U.S. sanctions.

Democracy and the rule of law: The EU has no effective enforcement when two member states, Poland and Hungary, raise doubts at the same time about whether they respect core values.

Currency union: The euro crisis is a consequence of non-enforcement of rules. Germany and France were the first to break the rules while expecting that there would be no consequences. Then we had Greece. And now Italy.

Migration crisis: There were rules for how to deal with an influx of migrants or asylum seekers, but they were ignored. And now the governing coalition in Berlin is in deep crisis because they can't even agree to return to respecting the law and the rules.

When do we start to take rules seriously? No exceptions!

We all know that there are no easy fixes. Should it not be part of the media coverage to admit these limitations? There will not be a new European treaty in the foreseeable future shifting more competences from the member states to the EU. Progress depends on the willingness of national governments to enhance intergovernmental cooperation.

If Europe wants to avoid a shrinking of its relevance, it has to deliver more. This is especially true for everything connected to security.

EU citizens expect protection – protection from domestic threats, from external threats, from threats to their economic and social safety.

This is to a large degree compatible with the expectations of the U.S.: Europe should accept more responsibility for its own security.

But, do German media take European and transatlantic security policy more seriously? No.

Germany and Europe have a sad history of overpromising and underachieving. Remember the Balkan Wars 20 years ago? Europe was not able to stop the fighting until the U.S. stepped in. Remember the promises that we would get our act together? And, is Germany, is Europe better prepared today? I don't think so.

I tend to believe that my country, Germany, is at the center of the problem. We sign commitments and don't follow through. We don't meet the 2 percent goal of NATO – with the excuse that it's so difficult to convince *peace*-loving Germans to spend more on defense.

Then we sign PESCO – the acronym for permanent and structured security cooperation in the EU – and some hope that it would be easier to convince *Europe*-loving Germans to spend more on European defense. And then we look at the coalition agreement and the federal budget. Where is the money for PESCO?

The time for this sort of lip service without deeds is over. Here as well, President Trump has a point. But we should not do more in order to make President Trump happy. We should do more for our own betterment. I feel especially strongly about that after my talks in Paris and Warsaw. In Paris you can feel a sense of urgency. Not in Berlin. Germans say: We are doing fine. The disruptions are happening somewhere else. Why should we change?

In the German media coverage of these questions we sometimes find an absurd reversal of logic. The fact that President Trump demands more defense spending from Germany is used as an excuse for why we should not do it.

Behind closed doors, politicians and high-level civil servants in Germany would acknowledge that we have to do more. But who will share the unwelcome news with the voters? Here, again, the media are not doing their job.

Our partners – in Europe and in the U.S. – are no longer willing to accept German excuses. They are right.

Personally I am pretty sure that it is not so difficult to convince the German public. I took part in many debates all over Germany in the last four years. The people are willing to listen. We have a problem with leadership. In politics and in the media.

I can only ask all of you here at the ACG not to be too polite with your partners in Germany – whether in politics, in the business world, or in the media. Challenge them. Germany has to change. With wealth and influence comes responsibility.

The fates of Germany, of Europe, and the U.S. remain intertwined. Or we learn to deliver. Or our relevance will shrink over time. The media are part of this challenge. I would love to see less emotion and more reason.

Thank you.

