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THE BERLIN WALL'S POWER TO UNIFY

by Annette Heuser

Twenty-five years have passed since the Berlin Wall fell, and a new era for Europe and the United States began. We live today in a starkly different world, one that was formed – in part, at least – by the dramatic events in central Europe in 1989. So strong was the impact of that year that even today there are lessons to be learned from it. These lessons are all the more important given the recent estrangement between Washington and Berlin that has coincided with the emergence of threats that challenge the West as a whole.

The intervening quarter-century has certainly seen ups and downs for the German-American relationship. Differences over managing the eurozone crisis, American anger with German opposition to the war in Iraq, Berlin's horror at the NSA's hacking of Chancellor Angela Merkel's mobile phone and, despite all that, unified approaches to dealing with Iran and Russia are a few of the highlights. We've been through a lot together, and our common values ensure we'll go through a lot more.

As German, American and, in fact, all trans-Atlantic leaders look towards the future, they would be well advised to peer into the past. The demise of the Berlin Wall and Germany's subsequently peaceful reunification offer lessons for solidifying the German-American relationship that has served – and must continue to serve – as a fundament for freedom and progress.

Lesson One: Don't accept the status quo if the status quo is not in our favor.

In 1989, President George H.W. Bush and Chancellor Helmut Kohl left no doubt that they would ever accept the division of Germany or Europe. Together, they worked towards a Europe whole and free that would advance Western values.

Europeans and Americans realize today that that work is unfinished. Russia's disrespect for international borders and its renewed saber-rattling are clearly unacceptable for the US, Germany and their allies. We must now strive for a new status quo, one in which Ukraine has

its territorial integrity restored and the prospect of stronger links with the West. The new status quo must also end European dependence on Russian energy sources. A European energy union embedded in a trans-Atlantic energy partnership, as envisioned by former Polish Prime Minister and incoming European Council President Donald Tusk, would be a significant step.

Lesson Two: Think Big.

East Germans certainly did when they took to the streets, demanding freedom. Their perseverance contributed greatly to the fall of the Wall, which few believed even several weeks earlier would happen in their lifetimes.

We need to be equally confident and visionary today. The trans-Atlantic project that currently deserves such commitment is the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), a free-trade deal that is forecast to provide badly needed jobs and growth for Europeans and Americans. Negotiations started last year in a spirit of optimism but have since become bogged down. The discord around all-encompassing US surveillance activities has taken its toll. Germans especially have made TTIP the whipping boy for all that has gone wrong in the trans-Atlantic relationship.

Leadership and political will are needed so that the focus can return to long-term issues of mutual importance. TTIP offers the possibility of a debt-free economic stimulus that could simultaneously set standards for the rest of the world. That's a big deal.

Lesson Three: Trust equals strength.

Negotiations for German reunification were in no small part successful due to the strong bonds of trust between Bonn and Washington. This level of trust must be restored. Germans are justifiably angry and disappointed by US spying, but they must compartmentalize the issue. Intelligence activities are necessary, and compromises must be found. Disagreement on this subject, despite its importance, cannot infect other aspects of the trans-Atlantic relationship.

For its part, the US must acknowledge that Germany also deserves trust. Berlin has repeatedly proven itself: It led moves to impose sanctions on Russia, is working to overcome historical concerns to assume a greater role in global crises, and has contributed immensely to a united Europe, which is in US interests.

It's time for both sides to recognize that our common, fundamental values remain unchanged despite the vicissitudes of time. We can surely secure these values more successfully together than apart. Our shared successes in the past should give us the confidence to remain unified.

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