

Sister Cities Conference

September 25, 2002-09-22

Ambassador Coats

Glenn Gray, Nancy Huppert from Sister Cities International, thank you for making the journey from the U.S. to be with us here today,

Distinguished guests,

It is a pleasure to meet with you here today. Your attendance is proof that the German-American relationship -- and it's gotten a lot of coverage lately -- is indeed alive and well.

In the difficult months that lie behind us -- and the challenging times that lie before us -- initiative and commitment, dialogue and trust, all that you bring to this conference today, are and have been crucial.

Just as the German-American relationship is crucial to the United States. It is crucial because it is unique. It has been a long and a valuable relationship and the people of Germany are very important to the American people.

Sixty-eight million Americans claim German ancestors. A great majority of those 68 million Americans came for the same reasons as the first immigrants that settled in Germantown, in today's Philadelphia, in 1683 over 300 hundred years ago. Those first immigrants came in search of freedom -- the freedom to pursue their religious beliefs and the freedom to seek economic opportunity for themselves and their families.

Across the centuries, America has been identified with those ideals. The United States could not have developed the way it did, nor become the society that it is today without the moral courage and the intellectual and technical skills brought to us from the Old World, and particularly from Germany.

In the last half-century, that relationship, based on the common values of a common heritage, has been developed and fostered. Over 13 million soldiers and their dependents have served and lived in Germany since the end of World War II. Thirteen million Americans have come here, and learned about German culture and German society, and formed bonds with German people. This is an extraordinary story, unparalleled to any other experience that Americans have had with a culture beyond their shores.

But also in the past half-century, a legion of scholars and exchange students have learned from each other. This includes the numerous German participants in the first programs of the early postwar years -- when a trip to America meant the discovery, or the re-discovery, of freedom.

And today we see an ever-growing number of Germans and Americans working alongside each other, part of a dynamic transatlantic business presence.

What makes the German-American relationship so unique is that it is based on personal ties. These are the ties that bind -- and they link and build communities in myriad ways. For over 50 years, sister city relationships here in Germany have been community-builders.

There are 220 existing partnerships between German and American cities. And that does not count the partnerships between states and counties.

And here today, I am happy to say, we have representatives of many of those partnerships. Partnerships:

- from cities and communities from across Germany.
- from cities and communities of all sizes.
- from cities with established partnerships, the pioneers like Stuttgart and Ludwigshafen that look back on relationships that are over 50 years old.
- and from cities, like Rostock and Magdeburg, that are just now putting the final signatures to the partnership agreements.

I am especially pleased to welcome those of you who are indeed in the process of setting up sister city partnerships. And pleased that there are so many representatives from the New States.

Obviously, there are more partnerships -- and older partnerships -- in the areas of Germany where American troops were stationed. That is a reflection of Germany's political history and geography and our shared history. That accident of history is also, to be honest, part of what makes the German-American relationship so special.

[Those first partnerships were often the result of close personal contacts and the friendships that developed between Germans and U.S. military personnel and their families. And that was not necessarily a given in the early postwar years: For in 1945, non-fraternization was the policy of the Occupation Government.. That meant that members of the U.S. military could not associate with Germans. But a U.S. army captain, posted in a small German town, was convinced that the time had come to establish people-to-people relations between Germans and Americans. In the summer of 1946, he decided to establish a German-American friendship club, but the club was criticized as a violation of existing military occupation policy. He was ordered to terminate the club and he was relieved from his post.

But that army captain did not give up. Convinced of the validity of his idea, he demanded a court martial. For the U.S. Secretary of State Byrnes had just said, in a historic speech in Stuttgart that the American people wanted to help the German people win their way back to an honorable place among the free and peace loving nations of the world.

General Clay, then the Deputy Military Commander of Germany, decided that non-fraternization was no longer a desirable policy. He then not only cancelled the court martial request but added that army captain to his personal staff with instructions to found German-American societies and clubs throughout the American zone. That was a very significant moment in the beginning of a new relationship between the Americans and the Germans. The relationship that was fostered through our military, people in uniform, has made our current day relationship very, very special.]

And the basis for the transatlantic agenda of today.

In 1996, that "transatlantic agenda" took on an official new face and the development of citizen-to-citizen exchange was recognized as an important part of the mission of U.S. embassies and consulates. Just a few months ago, Secretary of State Powell reinforced that message. In a cable to all Embassies he made it clear that exchanges -- and he specifically mentioned sister city partnerships -- are true multipliers in the process of global and transatlantic dialogue. Sister cities relationships are perfect multipliers because they can cover all the bases -- student and professional exchanges, commercial partnerships, economic development, cultural programs, charity and volunteer projects.

And for that reason, here in Germany, sister cities can be the basis for a relationship of the future with communities in all parts of the country, east and west -- a relationship that continues to be very, very special.

So that is why we are so pleased to host this conference. It is symbolic that you will be meeting at two locations -- here at the Amerika Haus and in Potsdam.

We are very thankful for the support of Sister Cities International, the Deutscher Städtetag, League of Mayors, for these organizations can provide you with the information you need to succeed.

For example, they have learned that the "personal and individual element" of the history of the early partnerships, in the postwar period, often resulted in "twinning" between cities and communities of very different size and character. Now we know that city partnerships function best if the two communities are somewhat compatible. So the "gurus" from Sister Cities International and my colleagues here at the Embassy and the consulates recommend that cities seeking a sister look for a network of shared interests and connections.

But both are important -- common interests and goals and personal interaction based on commitment and resolve -- these two factors form the basis for a successful sister city partnership and the basis for any successful relationship.

Thank you again for coming. And I wish you all a very interesting and productive meeting.

Meine Freunde, vielen Dank.