

Grußadresse

zum 80. Geburtstag Helmut Kohls

Barbara and I are delighted to send our warmest wishes to everyone gathered for the celebration of our dear friend Helmut Kohl's 80th birthday.

It was a great joy to see Helmut just recently in Germany, as we marked the 20th anniversary of the opening of the German border. It was a very happy and moving occasion for me to reflect on those heady days when we worked together to help Germany turn that last page on World War II – and begin the process of moving beyond the Cold War. In my estimation, no European leader contributed more to this noble cause than Chancellor Kohl, the Chancellor of German Unity.

Our relationship was forged in the fires of political controversy. When Helmut became Chancellor in 1982, the Atlantic alliance faced one of its gravest challenges of the Cold War over the decision to deploy the Pershing II missiles. Shortly thereafter, I traveled to Germany as Vice President to help sell the program, and witnessed firsthand the intensity of public opinion against it.

It has been said that "hope is putting faith to work when doubting would be easier." At that time, in the early 1980s, it would have been easy to doubt Germany's ability to stay with the United States and NATO – but such doubters would have been underestimating Helmut Kohl.

And as he often did during his remarkable career, he would prove those doubters wrong.

Later, in 1989 and 1990, Helmut Kohl showed great vision when he immediately seized on the fall of the Berlin Wall to press for German Unification. Again, many in Europe, on Capitol Hill, in Moscow, and certainly in the media doubted the prospects of uniting Germany at that time.

The rapidity with which Unification subsequently took place may mislead some today to mistake the events of that period as pre-ordained – not true. In my view, it would not have happened as quickly as it did without Helmut Kohl's superlative leadership helping to drive the process.

A few years ago, a prominent American think tank issued a report which asserted: "Former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's legacy is truly remarkable – so much so that history will likely regard him as one of the most influential figures of modern Europe." For my part, I view him as the greatest European leader of the second half of the 20th century.

Politics aside, I treasure my personal friendship with this remarkable man. I treasure the wurst and beers we shared. I will never forget a visit to Krefeld where we tried to outwit an angry mob of protestors with a decoy motorcade – a maneuver which met with a spectacular lack of success.

Most of all, I treasure the memory of our many meetings. A historic visit to Camp David with his beloved Hannelore in February of 1990 stands out. Between our sessions, which focused on German unification, we went out for a walk in the woods surrounding the retreat. When we reached a fairly steep hill, as we advanced it was not clear that the Chancellor – who was suffering from a mild case of jet lag following an arduous trip – would make it to the top.

We immediately dubbed it Helmut Kohl Memorial Hill because, as he always seemed to do, the Chancellor proved his doubters wrong.

Helmut, my dear friend, please accept our best wishes and family love as you celebrate this milestone in your remarkable life. May God continue to bless you and your wonderful countrymen, and may Almighty God bless a free and united Germany!

March 12, 2010

George H. W. Bush