

16. Obama, Trump, the Decline of an Imperial Democracy and U.S.-German Relations 2009–2021. An Essay

Pride comes before a fall. This proverbial wisdom applies in everyday life as well as in world history. A hybrid loss of reality therefore plays a decisive role in the fall of great empires. Usually, this loss of reality is causally intertwined with the internal crises of an empire and its growing number of enemies. Climate change and epidemics can accelerate this decline. The *locus classicus* in Western history is the fall of the Roman Empire; the well-educated founding fathers of the United States already knew this. Therefore, the construction of the Constitution was to be a negation of the past. Under no circumstances should the future American empire meet the fate of the Roman Republic; a new “Caesarism” should be prevented by the system of *checks and balances*.¹

Today we are contemporaries of the decline of the leading Western power, the United States of America. The whole world is looking spellbound at the crisis of the imperial Pax Americana, which President George W. Bush wanted to establish in response to the Islamist terrorist attack on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001.² The U.S. remains probably the most influential nation-state in the increasingly multipolar world of today, but it is no longer a world leader, far removed from Bush’s vision of world domination.

1 On the history of interpretation of the fall of the Roman Empire from Augustine to the present, cf. Alexander Demandt, *Zur Interpretationsgeschichte des Untergangs des Römischen Reiches von Augustinus bis zur Gegenwart* cf. Alexander Demandt, *Der Fall Roms. Die Auflösung des römischen Reiches im Urteil der Nachwelt*, München 2014. On climate change, cf. Kyle Harper, *Fatum. Das Klima und der Untergang des Römischen Reiches*, München 2017. On the perception of the Constitutional Fathers, cf. Thomas E. Ricks, *First Principles. What America’s Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How That Shaped Our Country*, 202; Alexander Demandt, *Die klassische Antike in Amerika*, in: Philipp Gassert, Detlef Junker, Wilfried Mausbach, Martin Thunert (eds.), *Was Amerika ausmacht. Multidisziplinäre Perspektiven*, Stuttgart 2009, pp. 33–46. On the crisis of the Pax Americana, cf. Heinrich August Winkler, *Zerbricht Der Westen? Über die gegenwärtige Krise in Europa und Amerika*, München 2017. On the prehistory of the crisis and Germany’s “long march west,” cf. his *Geschichte des Westens*. vol. 1, *Von den Anfängen in der Antike bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*, München 2016. vol. 2, *Die Zeit der Weltkriege*, München 2016.

2 See chapters 14 and 15 in this volume.

This historical decline, which already began during the term of George W. Bush, could not be stopped by the great hope-inspiring figure of President Barack Obama and accelerated with breathtaking speed under the presidency of the “great disrupter” Donald Trump. Whether the election winner Joe Biden can at least partially reverse this historical trend is an open question.

In parallel and in causal connection with the loss of the world leadership role and an American population weary of world-politics, the political and social system of this liberal republic is gradually breaking down, as America falls apart under the increasing pressure of a race, class, and caste society. More importantly, the American idea of freedom, which has given the American people a sense of themselves, i.e., an identity for more than 200 years, is increasingly losing credibility and persuasiveness in the USA and the world. The victory in the competition between the systems of the Cold War has faded, and the old joke about the difference between socialism and capitalism is visibly gaining in reality: “What is the difference between socialism and capitalism? In Socialism you socialize the economy and then you ruin it. In Capitalism you ruin the economy and then you socialize it.”

The decline of the leading power of the transatlantic West poses existential problems for Europe and Germany. In the global reach of U.S. interests, Germany played only a minor role even before Trump’s term in office. It is an open question whether the Federal Republic will be able to maintain its interests and its political way of life—representative democracy, the rule of law, and the social market economy—without military, economic, and spiritual support from the New World.

President Barack Obama (2009–2017)

This outlook for the future is fundamentally different from the hopes at the beginning of President Barack Obama’s time in office ... twelve years ago. The young, charismatic, educated, and astute black president with washboard abs, whose speeches enchanted not only Americans but especially Germans, promised the American people new hope and profound change (*hope and change*). “Yes, we can” Obama assured the American people, who were deeply dissatisfied with the policies of outgoing President George W. Bush. Bush’s approval ratings had fallen to 25 percent, the lowest ever recorded for an American president. When a “redneck,” a poor white farm worker, declared on camera, “this

time I am going to vote for the nigger,” there was even hope that the black president would, if not eliminate, at least significantly reduce the deep-seated racism in the United States, the country’s original sin.

The 48-year-old president had an unusual educational and professional history, which he himself considered so significant that he spent long nights writing his own autobiography at the age of 34.³

This first autobiography initially sold very poorly. That changed overnight when Barack Obama, then an Illinois state senator at the Capitol in Washington, was invited by presidential candidate John Kerry to deliver the “keynote address” at the Democratic convention in Boston on July 27, 2004. He had prepared for this good 20 minutes for weeks. He presented it by heart and with great rhetorical persuasiveness.⁴ The reactions of the audience and television viewers were enthusiastic. A media superstar was born. Rumors that people had just witnessed the next president spread like wildfire. Circulation of the autobiography exploded. The sales success dispelled the financial worries of the couple Michelle and Barack Obama. They were able to pay off their student debt and afford a condo for the first time. In the meantime, the Obama couple earned triple digit millions from their memoirs and paid speeches. They have entered show business and cater to the mass market.

At the latest with this speech at the party convention, Obama had an experience that shaped his politics, namely that he was able to inspire people from all social and educational backgrounds with his speeches. He always prepared his speeches himself in collaboration with his speechwriters.⁵ He combined political substance and hopeful rhetoric (“Yes, we can!”) in a way that was as elegant as it was sophisticated; he made confident use of the idealistic and value-laden commonplaces of the American tradition, which for him had universal validity. On the other hand, he did not shy away from accusingly describing the brutal reality of his country. When the “magic” of the beginning led to the “disenchantment”⁶ of Obama due to the president’s enormous,

3 Cf. Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father. A Story of Race and Inheritance*, New York 1994, here quoted from the 2004 edition [dt. *Ein amerikanischer Traum. Die Geschichte meiner Familie*, München 2008].

4 Cf. Michelle Obama, *Becoming*, New York 2019, pp. 214–216.

5 Cf. Ben Rhodes, *Im Weißen Haus. Die Jahre mit Barack Obama*, München 2019.

6 Cf. Tobias Endler, Martin Thunert, *Disenchantment. Skizzen und Anmerkungen zu der USA in der Ära Obama*, Opladen, Berlin, Toronto 2016. An early testimony to the enchantment is an anthology of the weekly newspaper “Die ZEIT”: Patrick Schwarz, *Obamas Amerika. Eine Bestandsaufnahme*, Hamburg 2011.

but still limited power in the U.S. constitutional system, as well as the realities of U.S. domestic and world politics, the accusation was made that he was naive and too idealistic in believing that he could change the U.S. and the world with his speeches (“speechifying the world”).

How had he said it in his autobiography? “If I could only find the right words—almost everything could change: South Africa, the lives of children in the ghettos just a few miles from here, my own fragile position in the world.”⁷ The 48-year-old president had undergone not only an inner educational path, but an extraordinary formal educational path, driven by a search for his own identity as a person of color, as a black and white American, and a renewed mission for the United States that recommitted itself to the promises of the Founding Fathers. The son of a black Kenyan and a white American, he grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia. Then he won a scholarship to a college in California, studied political science in New York at Columbia University, worked a year for a consulting firm and three years as a community outreach director in a black ghetto of Chicago. He experienced more misery and decay there than in Indonesia or Hawaii. He became a devout Christian in a black and white church. In 1988, he received a scholarship to Harvard Law School, became the first black to serve as president of the prestigious student-published *Harvard Law Review*. This is a position of high national prestige that usually opens all doors. He graduated magna cum laude, went back to the black South Side of Chicago as a social worker (*community advisor*) despite tempting offers from law firms, married lawyer Michelle Robinson in 1992, became a civil rights lawyer in Chicago for three years, as well as a lecturer in constitutional law at the University of Chicago from 1993 to 2004.

Eventually, the ambitious and mission-minded Obama plunged into politics against his wife’s continued opposition; beginning in 1996, he won a seat for Chicago in the Illinois Senate, which he held until 2004. His attempt to move into the U.S. House of Representatives in 2000 failed. But in 2004, he moved into the Senate in Washington as an Illinois representative, then the only person of color. During those years, he learned one thing above all: You have to be able to compromise in politics. Because of this history, the great existential tension of his personal existence and his presidency, the tension between ideal and reality, between theory and practice, between what is and what ought to be, was inherent in his long journey to himself. That he was

7 Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, p. 106.

able to endure these tensions made him a “political wunderkind” in the eyes of his wife.⁸

Obama’s speeches are interpreted a little more precisely because in them the core of his democratic mission for the world is revealed; because the contradiction between ideal and reality became a main argument for the “disenchantment” with him; and, last but not least, because the “late love” between Obama and the German Chancellor Angela Merkel grew out of the ideals they shared, despite all the conflicts on economic and security issues. Equipped with the lawyer’s passion for the precise concept and the right word, in possession of an excellent memory and concentrated creative power, in good physical shape through playing basketball and morning fitness training, Obama studied the history and current state of world interpretations, especially the history of the United States.

His search for a vision for a better world was in the best American tradition, for example, of President Abraham Lincoln or civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. He traced his vision for a better America back to the founding of the nation itself. For Obama, it also came down to finally making good on the promises, whose origins were in 18th-century, of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that had been canonized in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. His rise, founded on his mother’s painstaking attention to his education, his extraordinary diligence, great talent, and multiple scholarships, meant that Obama’s own “dream” stood out to the American people as a shining example of the American dream, even to those who never had such an opportunity.⁹

Three traditions in particular shaped him: the history of American democracy, the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism, and the deep and hard controversies during the 1970s and 1980s at the country’s universities.¹⁰ Major European classics were also on his reading list, including Augustine, Pierre Bourdieu, Edmund Burke, Emil Durkheim, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Friedrich Hayek, Thomas Hobbes, Karl Marx, Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, and

8 Michelle Obama, *Becoming*, p. 284.

9 It is possible that he thereby embodies the “tyranny of meritocracy” and drove ordinary people into Trump’s populist camp. Cf. Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit. What’s Become of the Common Good*, New York 2020.

10 On his intellectual biography, see James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama. Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition*, Princeton 2011. See also David Remnick, *The Bridge. The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*, New York 2010.

Max Weber.¹¹ Obama was strongly impressed by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who came from a American-German pastorate. His book, *The Irony of American History*, is one of the most influential books for Christian realists in the United States. Niebuhr affirmed Obama's belief in Martin Luther King's sacred formula: "Love without power is a sentimentality. Power without love is dangerous. Love plus power is justice."¹²

Especially in his speech to 215,000 enthusiastic people in Berlin on July 24, 2008, and his inaugural address to the U.S. Congress on January 21, 2009, he formulated his visions to the U.S. and the world for a new beginning in global politics. He confronted the main foreign policy problem of his presidency, the age-old dialectic of war and peace, in an unusual way in Oslo on December 10, 2009. Having unexpectedly been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize—as an advance for future peace initiatives, as it were—his acceptance speech addressed an equally old problem, the problem of just war. After all, he had inherited from President Bush two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the global war on terrorism, and the loss of prestige of the United States due to the torture practices of the U.S. intelligence services.

Berlin was the Democratic presidential candidate's first stop on a global campaign tour that also took him to Afghanistan, Kuwait, Iraq, Israel, the West Bank, France, and Great Britain. America, he asserted, had no better partner than Europe.¹³ The new bridges for the world should be reminiscent of the bridges across the Atlantic. The joint struggle for freedom of Berlin and the Federal Republic was an example of decades of transatlantic cooperation. In our time, all problems were so intertwined that no nation could solve them alone. Then came a long list of the problems he wanted to tackle during his presidency: Terror had to be stopped and the sources of extremism had to be dried up. It was therefore necessary to ensure that NATO's first mission outside Europe in Afghanistan was a success. One must also stick to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons, secure unprotected nuclear material, prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and reduce the nuclear material of a bygone age. Europe must seek its own security and welfare, while at the same time cooperating with Russia. Iran must

11 Kloppenberg, pp. 1–85.

12 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, Chicago 1952; reprinted 2008 with an introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich.

13 *The New York Times*, Obama's Speech in Berlin, July 24, 2008. Transcript, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/24/us/politics/24text-obama.html> (Dec. 7, 2020).

give up its nuclear ambitions, Lebanon must be helped; Israel and the Palestinians must be supported in finding a lasting and social peace. Once the war in Iraq had come to an end and a new Iraqi government had taken over, life would have to be rebuilt for millions of Iraqis. He also commented on global problems. The time had come to work together to save the planet by reducing carbon dioxide emissions. Since we lived in a globalized world, we must also think about the forgotten corners of the planet where people lacked food and shelter and were denied human rights.

In preparing the Berlin speech, his speechwriters had come up with a German term to crown his message of world interdependence: *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*. But they found out on the eve of the speech that Hitler had used the word “*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*” prominently in a Berlin speech. Obama then reworked the ending himself at the last minute, as he could already imagine the headline in front of him: “Obama links to Hitler in Berlin speech.”¹⁴

Obama, who had promised hope and change during the campaign, began his inaugural address on Jan. 21, 2009,¹⁵ with the classic overture of any newly elected president: The nation, he said, was in the midst of a crisis. It was at war against a far-flung network (of terrorists) of hate and violence. The economy was badly damaged (by the great banking and financial crisis), a consequence of the greed of some, but also of a collective failure to make tough decisions and prepare the nation for a new era: Homes had been lost, jobs destroyed, and businesses closed. Moreover, every day proved that America was using energy in ways that empowered its enemies and endangered the planet. The country was suffering from an undermining of self-confidence, from a gnawing fear that the decline of the United States was inevitable, and that the next generation would have to roll back its expectations.

But America would rise to the challenge; America must be renewed. Then followed a list of the problems that the country must tackle. Obama was particularly forceful in addressing the fundamental problems of the American economy and society, which has been a concern of all countries in the world since the technical-industrial revolution: What should be regulated by the state, what should be regulated by the market? He attacked the basic convictions of the Republicans, who had

14 Rhodes, *In the White House*, p. 56.

15 See Barack Obama, *Inaugural Address*, Jan. 21, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address> (July 21, 2021).

systematically tried to destroy the legacy of Roosevelt and the state-interventionist New Deal since the time of President Ronald Reagan.¹⁶

The question, Obama said, was not whether government was too big or too small, but whether it worked: whether it helped families find jobs at a decent wage, a health care system they could afford, and retirement plans that preserved their dignity. Only then could the fundamental trust between the people and the government be restored.

The question at hand, was not whether the market was a force for evil or good. But the current crisis had reminded Americans that the market can spiral out of control without a watchful eye. The nation could not be prosperous if the market favored only the rich. The success of an economy depended not simply on the size of its gross domestic product, but on the scope of its prosperity, on its ability to give every willing heart a chance, not out of charity, but because that was the surest path to the common good of the American people.

The passages on foreign policy and the role of the USA in the world were characterized by particular rhetorical finesse. The nation learned nothing of the U.S.'s global military and economic interests in Obama's inaugural address. He focused on America's missionary idea of freedom and resisted making a false choice between security and ideals in the cause of "common defense." Presenting a "false" choice that is to be avoided is Obama's favorite rhetorical device, serving to set the stage for his own rational and correct decision.

Obama expressed his belief that the ideals of the Founding Fathers still enlightened the world, and that the U.S. would not sacrifice them for utility. "We are ready once again to lead the world." Fascism and communism, he said, were defeated not only with missiles and tanks, but also through robust alliances and deeply held convictions. The world's security had grown out of the righteousness of its cause. Currently the U.S. was the custodian of that heritage. Therefore, applying this principle to the two wars he had inherited from President Bush, Iraq would be left to the Iraqi people in a "responsible manner" and progress would be made toward peace in Afghanistan.

Then Obama reminded the American nation of its multicultural heritage, of its own patchwork. The United States was a nation of Christians and Muslims, of Jews, of Hindus and non-believers. America was shaped by every language and culture in the world, from every corner of the globe. As America had tasted the bitter, dirty water of

16 Cf. chapter 5 in this volume.

civil war and segregation, there was nothing to be done but to believe that the old hatreds would eventually end. America must play its role in bringing about a new age of peace.

Obama made an offer of cooperation to the Islamic world, borne of mutual interest and respect. All corrupt systems, Obama continued, were on the wrong side of history. He offered development aid to the poor peoples of the world.

There followed a tribute to the American military, the most respected group in American society. He thanked the American soldiers who served the nation in faraway deserts and mountains as “guardians of freedom.”

He offered the world a new age of “accountability.” That was the price and promise of citizenship. The meaning of freedom could be seen in the fact that women, men, and children of all races and creeds could attend his inauguration ceremony. And that was why a man like him, whose father would not even have been served in a restaurant 60 years earlier, could now stand before the American nation to swear the sacred oath.

President Obama gave what he considered his most important speech on foreign policy on Dec. 10, 2009, in Oslo,¹⁷ when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He had just had to give in to the urging of his military leaders and promised them what all militaries in world history demand in a tight situation, namely more troops and resources. To him, the memory of the Vietnam fiasco was very present. At the same time, military officials were spreading rumors that they worried about Obama’s “resolve.” Indignantly, Obama asked confidants in the Oval Office, “Why is this whole thing being framed around whether I have any balls?”¹⁸ Just prior to the Oslo speech he had decided to send 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, with NATO providing 10,000 more. With the help of the new troops, the situation in Afghanistan was to be stabilized. After 18 months, the withdrawal was to begin.

Obama began his speech in Oslo—after the usual formulas of modesty—in an unusual way. He would not fail to mention that the awarding of the prize had generated considerable controversy because his “work on the world stage” was only beginning, not ending. Above all, he was the commander-in-chief of a nation engaged in two wars.

17 See Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, Dec. 10, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize> (Dec. 7, 2020).

18 Rhodes, *In the White House*, p. 119.

He could also have added that he was the commander-in-chief of the greatest military machine of all time, on land, sea, air, and space.

Obama used his speech for reflections on world history, on the nature of man, on just peace and just war. He used the term war 43 times, the term peace 28 times, and proper nouns such as “World War II” a few times.

Wars have existed from the beginning of time, he said. For a long time, it was simply a fact of life, like droughts or epidemics. Then a law of *nations* developed. Philosophers, theologians, and statesmen have tried to regulate the destructive power of war, for the most part, in vain. War between armies had become war between nations. He recalled the two world wars, not the Korean War, nor the Vietnam War. He could not imagine a more just war than the war against the Third Reich and the Axis powers.

He could have won a “Nobel War Prize” for this part of the speech.

The dialectic of his speech moved between the reality of just and unjust wars on the one hand, and the hopes for and conditions of a just peace on the other. He was also aware of the deep gap between aspiration and reality, between what is and what ought to be, which had already been thought about in antiquity. He resisted the idea that the condition of present humanity made it impossible to strive for the ideal: “I refuse to accept the idea that the ‘isness’ of man’s present condition makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal ‘oughtness’ that forever confronts him.”¹⁹

In his time, he saw new dangers. The greatest threat was not a war between nuclear superpowers, but the proliferation of nuclear weapons and modern technologies. This was another reason why he could not bring a final resolution to the problem of war today. One must face the hard truth. Mankind would not be able to eradicate violent conflict in the near future. There were times when nations, alone or in alliance with others, found the use of force not only necessary but morally justified. He made that statement consciously, and despite the insights Martin Luther King Jr. professed when he was awarded the

19 About the problem of is and ought and the legitimacy of value judgments the author of this volume had a lively controversy 50 years ago with the Dutch historian Herman von der Dunk, cf. Detlef Junker, *Über die Legitimität von Werturteilen in den Sozialwissenschaften und der Geschichtswissenschaft*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift*, vol. 211, 1, August 1970, pp. 1–33. Obama probably never understood that from all descriptive and explanatory sentences about the world it cannot be logically concluded what should be done.

Nobel Prize: “Violence can never bring lasting peace, it does not solve any social problem, it only brings new and more complex problems.” Obama noted that his statement was made in full awareness that he was standing before his audience as a direct consequence of Dr. King Jr.’s life’s work, adding that the moral force of nonviolence was not something weak, not passive, not naive.

But then Obama restated the contradiction between reality and ideal, between reality and utopia, between is and ought, that he worked himself up to and that shaped his actual actions as president. He had sworn an oath to protect and defend his nation. He had to take the world as it was. Faced with the dangers to the American people, he could not stand idly by. Let there be no mistake: Evil existed in the world. And then, in front of a global audience, there followed the end-all moral argument for wars since the middle of the 20th century. Nonviolence would not have stopped Hitler’s army. Negotiations could not convince Al Qaeda to lay down its arms. Following in the footsteps of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Obama declared, “To say that violence is occasionally necessary is not a call to cynicism; it’s an acknowledgment of history, of man’s imperfection, and of the limits of reason.” He wanted to speak this truth because there was great ambivalence in many countries about military action, combined with a reflexive distrust of the United States, the world’s only military superpower.

It was also important to remember that it was not only international institutions, treaties, and declarations of intent that brought stability to the world after World War II. Whatever mistakes the U.S. made, the simple fact remained that for six decades the U.S. guaranteed global security through the blood of its citizens and the strength of its weapons. Americans in uniform had brought peace and prosperity from Germany to Korea and ensured that democracy took root in places like the Balkans.

Obama then assured the world that America, as a global power, would use the full range of its influence and power to work toward a just world order. America would not waver in its commitment to global security. But America also needs allies, like NATO soldiers in Afghanistan. Merely believing that peace was inevitable was rarely enough to achieve it. But in the use of power, there was also a need to limit it. That was why he had banned torture and ordered the Guantanamo prison closed.

Obama then cited a long list of tasks to be accomplished in world politics, such as the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. He reported

that he was working with Russian President Medvedev to reduce the U.S. and Russian arsenals. In addition, Iran and North Korea must be prevented from manipulating the system. The threat of an arms race in the Middle East and East Asia should not be ignored. Nor should the genocide in Darfur, the systematic rape in Congo, and the repressions in Biafra be left without consequences.

In conclusion, Obama spoke about the nature and criteria of a peace to strive for, especially universal human rights, which were by no means only Western principles. He praised President Nixon for negotiating with Mao despite the horror of the Cultural Revolution. Pope John Paul II's initiative had created space not only for the Catholic Church in Poland but also for labor leaders like Lech Walesa.

Finally, Obama reflected in Oslo on religious wars in history. He recalled that a holy war can never be a just war.

America had borne the burden of responsibility, not because the country wanted to impose its will on anyone, but out of *enlightened* self-interest. Yes, that is how it is: The instruments of war had to play a role in the preservation of peace. Like any head of state, he too must reserve the right to act unilaterally to defend "my nation." And while America had an obligation to global security, America could not keep the peace alone.

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The world naturally wonders what Obama has achieved after eight years of "working on the world stage." In terms of foreign policy, has he been able to halt the decline of U.S. power and prestige in the world, with the legacy of his predecessor George W. Bush? Domestically, has he been able to make fundamental changes to the nation's deep divisions, which had become increasingly entrenched since President Reagan?²⁰

20 For an overall account of his presidency, see Julian E. Zelizer (ed.), *The Presidency of Barack Obama*, Princeton 2018; Winand Gellner, Patrick Horst (eds.), *Die USA am Ende der Präsidentschaft Obamas. Eine erste Bilanz*, Wiesbaden 2016; Stefan Hagemann, Wolfgang Tönnies, Jürgen Wilzewski (eds.), *Weltmacht vor neuen Herausforderungen. Die Außenpolitik der USA in der Ära Obama*, Trier 2014; Florian Böller, Jürgen Wilzewski (eds.), *Weltmacht im Wandel. Die USA in der Ära Obama*, Trier 2012; Gordon M. Friedrichs, *US Global Leadership Role and Domestic Polarization: A Role Theory Approach*, New York 2021. See also Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, *Barack Obama (2009–2017). Der erste afroamerikanische Präsident: A Dream Come True?*, in Christoph Mauch (ed.), *Die Präsidenten der USA. 45 historische Porträts von George Washington bis Donald Trump*, Munich

After all, these were precisely the two hopes associated with Obama's election. Obama's ambition and self-image also went far beyond the hoped-for symbolic effect of a colored president in the White House. All of his memoirs and autobiographies make that unmistakably clear, now already running to over 1500 pages. An end is not yet in sight.²¹

The starting point for judging President Obama on the "world stage" is the measure of whether he has helped to affirm and defend U.S. global interests and values. After all, since the country's entry into World War II, the U.S. had—this is a leitmotif of this volume—defined its national interests globally. Since Roosevelt, the country's own claim had been to shape the structure of the international order over a long period of time and over large areas according to its own interests and values, and to at least neutralize enemies of the system. It is no coincidence that this globalism is the essence of all U.S. strategic plans and security memoranda from 1941 up to the tenure of George W. Bush. The high point and at the same time the turning point of this globalism was the equally famous and infamous security memorandum of September 17, 2002, on national security, when President Bush, influenced by neoconservative ideologues, wanted to take advantage of the moment after 9/11 to transform American globalism beyond a world leadership role into U.S. world *primacy*. It was only logical that this new U.S. claim led to a fundamental discussion of "American imperialism" under George W. Bush.²²

This strategic discussion was also heated because the majority of Americans, then as now, rebel against the term "imperialism" as a self-designation for the country's global policy. The U.S.'s global claim to power and influence is almost always described in terms of "global leadership" or "global responsibility." In connection with the American idea of freedom and its global mission, American politicians and strategists like to speak of the "*indispensable nation*." At best, the term

2018. See also "Obama's World. Judging His Foreign Policy Record," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 5, September-October 2015. "Inequality. What Causes It. Why It Matters. What Can Be Done," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 1, January-February 2016.

21 In addition to "Dreams from My Father" (see note 3), "The Audacity of Hope. Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream," New York 2006, and the first part of his memoir for the period of his presidency, "Barack Obama. A Promised Land," New York 2020, German version "Ein verheißenes Land." The memoir covers only the first three years of his term. For the next five years, we can certainly expect another 1000 pages.

22 Cf. chapters 14 and 15 in this volume.

“*empire of liberty*,” coined by Thomas Jefferson, meets with approval. Imperialists? Those were the Europeans or other empires in world history.

Obama felt the same way. In his famous speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009, in which he invoked a new beginning in the relationship between the United States and the Islamic world, he passionately rejected the accusation of imperialism. “America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of the revolution against an empire. We were founded upon the ideal that all are created equal, and we have shed blood and struggled for centuries to give meaning to those words—within our borders and around the world.”²³ This globalization of the scope of American foreign policy activity also grew out of the increasing interdependence of world politics itself, including as a reaction to the foreign policies of enemies and allies of the United States, especially the often exaggerated threat perceptions that the actions and ideologies of other states and societies evoked in the minds of Americans and their politicians.

Within this American globalism, three major objectives can be distinguished since the United States’ entry into World War II: indivisible security, the indivisible world market, and indivisible freedom. These three indivisibilities will be sketched out in an ideal-typical shorthand, because they form the yardstick for classifying Obama’s and Trump’s foreign policy.

The Indivisible Security

Indivisible security means maintaining a pro-American balance in the world and blocking hostile hegemonic powers on the Eurasian double continent that could endanger the long-term security of the Western Hemisphere, the sanctuary of the United States. This security of the Western Hemisphere, at the center, of course, the security of the continental United States, has been the supreme goal of American security policy since the famous Monroe Doctrine of 1823. Whenever this appears threatened, the nation is put on high alert. A bon mot about the problem of American security reflects a reality deeply embedded in

23 The White House, Remarks by the President at Cairo University, Apr. 6, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09> (June 21, 2021).

the collective consciousness of Americans: bordered to the north and south by weak neighbors, to the east and the west by fish.

Despite the nuclear balance of terror with the Soviet Union, now with Russia, any real or perceived threat to the security of the Western Hemisphere forces the U.S. government to act. One need only recall the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 or the responses to 9/11. At present, there is again an incendiary situation. The U.S. will not tolerate nuclear-tipped long-range missiles from North Korea that could threaten the continental United States. It is no coincidence that during President-elect Donald Trump's courtesy visit to the White House, Obama spoke almost exclusively about the biggest problem facing American security: North Korea.

These global objectives of the U.S. were dialectically linked with global threat scenarios: In the case of National Socialism with the assumption that Hitler and Germany wanted to conquer the whole world; in the case of the Cold War with the subjective certainty that communism, first in Europe and Asia, and after the globalization of Soviet foreign policy in the Khrushchev era, also in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, was endangering all three indivisibilities. International terrorism is perceived as a new global threat.

Moreover, part of the capacity of this imperial power was to forge together global coalitions of different governments and systems when needed. This U.S. globalism has produced a global American military power since World War II, with alliances around the world; its power gobbled up 38 percent of all military spending in 2019 (by comparison: China 14 percent and Russia 3.4 percent); it is protected domestically by an alliance of the military, the defense industry, and Congress (the military budget has not been vetoed once in the last 60 years); it has a thousand bases around the globe, some of which are secret; if the political decision was made, it can pulverize any point on Earth in 20 minutes; and, during George W. Bush's tenure, as already indicated, it was given the mission of defending a Pax Americana for the foreseeable future against any combination of possible adversaries and preventing any regional hegemon in any continent from threatening this global leadership role.

The centerpiece of U.S. security policy continues to be the nuclear triad, that is, the ability to launch nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles from submarines, from reinforced silos, and from bombers. However, the U.S. has reduced its deployable nuclear warheads from over 31,000 in 1967 to 5,800 at present, Russia to 6,375. France currently has 290 nuclear warheads deployable, while China

has 320, the U.K. 215, Pakistan 160, India 150, and Israel 90. The North Korean dictator's dangerousness lies in the fact that he wants to be the second nuclear power after Russia that could threaten the U.S. itself with intercontinental missiles.

The visible armed forces of the USA at sea, on land, in the air, and in space are supplemented by an invisible intelligence empire, which collects information everywhere in the world by almost any means, thus seeing, listening, and reading everything. It has therefore been suggested to add to the American national motto: "In God we trust—all others we monitor."

For Obama, however, this vast military apparatus was merely an instrument of deterrence. Although the president acknowledged in principle the legitimacy of a "just war" in his Nobel Prize speech, he was determined not to involve U.S. troops in new land wars and thus reduce the U.S. global "footprint" in the world. He knew that the vast majority of the American people was war-weary—with the exception of the mission-minded "hawks" in the national security apparatus, in Congress, in think tanks, and those in the role of public intellectuals. Since world history knows no vacuums, Obama thus opened up opportunities for other powers to occupy new spaces in Eurasia and other parts of the globe, which they did during his tenure. Instead of soldiers on the ground, Obama favored drones, aerial bombing, targeted killings, intelligence, sanctions, and negotiations as means of national security policy. The targeted killing of bin Laden on May 2, 2011, was the most popular act of his tenure.

He was also skeptical that the U.S. could or should solve the domestic problems of other states by force. Obama was far removed from the Bush administration's global, military-backed missionary idea after 9/11, despite all the global rhetoric of freedom that manifested itself in his public speeches. This drove the president into paradoxical decision-making situations, for example, in Afghanistan. In order to be able to withdraw American soldiers there in the long term without endangering the country's reconstruction, he wanted to stabilize the situation there by temporarily increasing the number of U.S. combat troops. However, the country was not stabilized during his term in office. As is well known, that goal has not been reached to this day. Despite the continued presence of American troops, the Taliban are steadily gaining ground. President Biden has now decided to withdraw the troops. However, Obama was able to withdraw troops from Iraq during his term in office even though the country had not been stabilized.

De facto, the U.S. has lost both wars, and both countries are in chaos and civil war. Iraq and probably Afghanistan will add to the long list of failed attempts to bring freedom to peoples and states by force: Haiti, Cambodia, South Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Nicaragua, and at times Panama. The U.S. and NATO have great difficulty acknowledging the failure of the “peacekeeping mission” in Afghanistan.

Whatever Obama attempted militarily ended in costly disaster. In Iraq, the US intervened militarily and occupied the country, and the result was a costly disaster. In Libya, the U.S. did intervene from the air but did not occupy the country, and the result was also a costly disaster. In Syria, Obama did neither intervene nor put American boots on the ground, and the result was a costly disaster. In Yemen, he relied on drones and active diplomacy, but again the result was a costly disaster.

In his relations with Israel, President Obama also made no progress toward an Israeli-Palestinian two-state solution. Before his scheduled speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009, he visited Saudi King Abdullah ibn Abd al-Aziz, the guardian of the two holy mosques of Mecca and Medina and a strict protector of the Wahhabis, a particularly radical variant of Islam. As the meeting took place in a relaxed atmosphere and the king recalled favorably a meeting his father ibn Saud had with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Obama asked the king if his kingdom and other Arab League members might consider making a gesture toward Israel that might initiate peace negotiations with the Palestinians. The king ignored the question.²⁴

It is not known whether the king knew that his father ibn Saud had unequivocally declared to Roosevelt on February 14, 1945, aboard the “USS Quincy” in the Great Bitter Lake, and to Prime Minister Winston Churchill a day later, that the Arab world would never tolerate a free state for the Jews in Palestine. Support for Zionism, from whatever quarter, would undoubtedly bring the greatest bloodshed and disorder to the Arab lands.²⁵ This is how it has remained until today: an absolute friend-enemy relationship, that is also based on conflicting doctrines of salvation. This friend-enemy relationship has not changed significantly from Roosevelt to Obama and Trump.

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24 Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*, p. 362.

25 David B. Woolner, *The Last 100 Days. FDR at War and at Peace*, New York 2016, pp. 162–165.

Europe, including the security of Europe and Germany, was not at the center of Barack Obama's global agenda. The Old Continent, unlike the Middle East and the entire Islamic world, seemed to be a pacified region in terms of security policy; safe under the protection of NATO and the U.S. nuclear security guarantee. No one during Obama's tenure thought to question Article 5 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, according to which an attack on one country would mean an attack on all allies.

Moreover, even before Obama's tenure, NATO had expanded eastward, not primarily at the urging of the United States but of countries that did not trust Russia even after the collapse of the Soviet Union and feared Russia's imperial power revisionism, which indeed developed. In 1999, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joined, followed in 2004 by Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and the Baltic states. NATO's expansion eastward is a complicated and contentious story.²⁶ At the opening of the Holocaust Museum in Washington on April 22, 1992, Czech President Václav Havel and Poland's Lech Wałęsa had said that nothing like this should ever be allowed again, thus pressuring President Bill Clinton, who was hesitant on the accession issue but visibly moved.²⁷ Moreover, after many personal telephone conversations, President Obama and Russia's President Medvedev had agreed in Prague on April 8, 2010, to sign the most comprehensive nuclear disarmament treaty in two decades (START = Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), which actually led to substantial reductions on both sides. For those in Prague, it seemed as if Obama had taken a decisive step closer to the promise he had made in a rousing speech to tens of thousands a year earlier, namely, to make a world without nuclear weapons possible.

As early as September 2009, Obama had decided to halt the deployment of missiles in the Czech Republic and Poland in order to enable a "reset" of U.S.-Russian relations. However, Putin cancelled this "reset."

Vladimir Putin, Russia's dominant, visibly dictatorial force since 2000—as president, in the interim as prime minister in an exchange of roles with Medvedev, now president for "life"—considered and still considers the disintegration of the Soviet Union to be the greatest catastrophe in Russian history. Obama's judgment that Russia was only a "regional power" was an unforgivable humiliation for Putin. Obama's assessment of Russia was very close to German Chancellor

26 Oxana Schmies, *NATO's Enlargement and Russia. A Strategic Challenge in the Past and Future*, Stuttgart 2021.

27 Detlef Junker, *Power and Mission. Was Amerika antreibt*, Freiburg im Breisgau 2003, p. 149. Cf. chapter 13 in this volume.

Helmut Schmidt's judgment of the Soviet Union: "Upper Volta with missiles." At Obama's first face-to-face meeting with Putin in Moscow in July 2009, the Russian delivered an "endless monologue" about every injustice, betrayal, and slight the Russian people had experienced, especially during George W. Bush's tenure. Through U.S. nuclear policy, the inclusion of former Warsaw Pact countries in NATO, and support for "color revolutions," he said, the United States has encroached on Russia's "legitimate sphere of influence."²⁸ On Putin's initiative, the U.S. ambassador in Moscow, Michael McFaul, became the object of a hate campaign in the media that broke all diplomatic customs. He was said to be a specialist in "color revolutions" and sent by President Obama to orchestrate a change of government.²⁹

What did Putin mean by a "legitimate sphere of influence" for Russia? The undisturbed establishment of a dictatorship at home and undisturbed expansion to the West. The longer his term lasts, the more he falls back on this classic pattern of all dictators in world history. What happened under Stalin in the name of international communism is now to become a "Russian world," a Russian-dominated Eurasia. That is why Putin is haunted by two primal fears: liberation movements at home and, in foreign policy, countervailing powers on Russia's western frontier that could stop the construction of a "Russian world."

Domestically, Putin's dictatorship relies on the military, violence, police, prisons, and secret services, on a bogus constitutional façade, on corruption, terror, propaganda, lies, and fake news. However, it can rely on the Orthodox Church and a deep Russian nationalism. There are protest movements, but the majority of the population follows the centuries-old wisdom of Russian peasants: as long as you don't raise your head, it won't be cut off. The population is grateful that Putin ended the chaos during President Yeltsin's term.

At the same time, Putin has modernized the armed forces, increased their clout and operational readiness, and above all perfected cyber-weapons. He has long since begun to try destabilize Europe and the USA, that Western world he hates.

In the spring of 2014, during the crisis in Ukraine, he saw an opportunity to annex Crimea and destabilize eastern Ukraine militarily. The move was reminiscent of the 2008 invasion of Georgia by Russian troops and the recognition of the "independence" of South Ossetia and

²⁸ Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*, p. 467f.

²⁹ See Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace. An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia*, Boston 2018.

Abkhazia. Russia had recognized Ukraine's independence in several international agreements, most notably, in the Budapest Agreement of December 3, 1994, in which the Russian Federation, the United States, and the United Kingdom had committed themselves under international law to respect Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and existing borders as the price for the destruction of nuclear weapons stationed on Ukrainian territory. Despite this, Putin was highly alarmed by developments in Ukraine at the beginning of 2014. He saw his two primary goals, internal stability and external expansion, at risk: from the spillover of the liberation movement into Russian domestic politics and from Ukraine's possible admission into the EU and NATO. He probably also had a domino theory in mind like Leonid Brezhnev, the general secretary of the KPDSU, in 1968 when Eastern Bloc troops invaded Czechoslovakia. In the event of a victory for the "Prague Spring," he feared that the freedom movement would spill over into Ukraine.³⁰

Therefore, Putin's Russia first militarily occupied Crimea and then annexed it in March 2014. Through employing Russian guerilla fighters, it has, since February 2014, supported pro-Russian forces in their infiltration and destabilization of eastern Ukraine. The pro-Russian forces fought for the secession of two so-called People's Republics: Donetsk and Luhansk. It is indisputable that Putin was the driving force in destabilizing Ukraine, although his various motives remain unclear to this day.³¹

How did Obama respond to this attack by one state on another in Europe for the first time since the end of the Cold War? With sharp rhetoric and by announcing economic sanctions. He did, however, deny the Ukrainians "lethal weapons." He de facto accepted the annexation of Crimea and the expansion of the Sevastopol naval base, but denied Putin the "stamp of legitimacy." At least the U.S. called a spade a spade, while German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier avoided direct criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Steinmeier invoked the "Great Interdependence" that should never be disregarded. In the face of Putin's aggressions, he

30 Cf. Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert, Detlef Junker (eds.), 1968. *The World Transformed*, Washington D.C. 1998, pp. 111–172.

31 A good analysis of the various "conjectures" about Putin is in: "Putin's Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 3, May–June 2016, pp. 2–55. No Western politician has spoken and negotiated with Putin more often and for longer than German Chancellor Angela Merkel. It would contribute significantly to the political education and enlightenment of the German people if Angela Merkel, after the end of her chancellorship, were to publish a detailed memoir on this topic as well.

concluded, “Security in Europe is not possible without Russia, security for Russia not without Europe.”³² To more than a few Americans, this sounded a lot like “equidistance” between Putin’s Russia and the West. However, Obama was grateful that under Angela Merkel’s leadership the Ukraine conflict was at least frozen under the “Normandy format” (Minsk Agreement). In contrast to the peace agreements after the Balkan wars, Obama was not willing to bring the U.S. into the Ukraine crisis as a peace broker; a signal that Putin certainly understood.

On the Ukraine issue, there remained a deep tension between the Federal Republic and the United States, shaped by geography, history, and differing military potential. The tone of the Americans was much harsher. In no uncertain terms, Obama declared the annexation of Crimea and occupation of eastern Ukraine to be Russian aggression. He assured the Baltic states that Article 5 of NATO applied without restriction.

The protests of the West did not change the strategic shift of power. Putin’s Russia annexed Crimea, did not give up eastern Ukraine, and has since been waiting for a chance to destabilize other states on its own western border through infiltration and annexation. Belarus or Ukraine may become the next cases.

The naval base in Crimea also became a factor in Putin’s successful attempt in early January 2017, during the chaotic transition from Obama to Trump, to achieve what the Tsarist Empire had unsuccessfully attempted, and President Truman had prevented with the U.S. fleet: a strategic penetration of the Mediterranean by Russia and the Soviet Union. Presumably, he will also try to make the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea a strategic sphere of influence for Russia.

Putin’s air force, together with planes and helicopters of the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, bombed eastern Aleppo to the ground. A few days later, Assad agreed with rebel groups on a ceasefire that would apply to all of Syria. The guarantor powers would be Russia, NATO member Turkey, and the theocratic state of Iran, all of which met for a conference in Moscow. Neither UN representatives nor U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry were invited, and the United States was not even consulted. Since then, there has been a Russian “footprint” in Syria, including a small port for the Russian fleet. The New York

32 Cf. Robin Lucke, Bernhard Stahl, *Die transatlantischen Beziehungen am Beispiel der NSA-Affäre und des Ukraine-Konflikts: Im Westen nichts Neues*, in: Winand Gelter, Patrick Horst (eds.), *Die USA am Ende der Präsidentschaft Barack Obama. Eine erste Bilanz*, Wiesbaden 2016, pp. 385–404.

Times commented bitterly, “Amid a difficult transition of power in Washington, Mr. Putin has effectively marginalized the United States.”³³

The Indivisible World Market

For Obama, it was a matter of course that the world’s most powerful and influential economic nation would pursue its interests in a global world market that was as indivisible as possible. He knew that America’s real economy and the U.S. financial sector had become increasingly important in the 20th and 21st centuries. The U.S. had also entered World War II to prevent aggressive states that were aiming at autarky and a command economy—Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan—from dominating the Eurasian double continent and thus destroying the indivisible world market.³⁴ The systemic antagonism between capitalism and communism had also shaped the Cold War.³⁵ With the end of the Cold War, the hope of an “end of history” germinated, because it seemed that all alternatives to liberal capitalism had been exhausted and history had reached its end goal as Hegel had understood it.³⁶

In 1945, an undestroyed U.S. economy of extraordinary productivity and great competitive advantages faced an impoverished Eurasian double continent. From Vladivostok to London, there was no economic region that could compete with the U.S. Even the markets of Latin America were further penetrated by the U.S. With a share of over half of all world production of industrial goods, the U.S. exceeded even the years from 1925 to 1929. This indivisible world market is also the basis for what is generally associated in the world with the term “Americanization,” namely, the enormous influence of the American knowledge and culture industries, especially the American entertainment industry and its global pop culture. The messages conveyed by U.S. pop culture—freedom, independence, expansiveness, consumption, violence, and sexuality—seem to simultaneously represent and justify

33 Quoted from Matthias Naß: Frieden schaffen mit Putins Waffen?, in: ZEIT online, 4.1.2017, [https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2017-01/krieg-syrien-russland-iran-tuerkei-waffenruhe-5vor8? \(21.7.2021\).](https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2017-01/krieg-syrien-russland-iran-tuerkei-waffenruhe-5vor8? (21.7.2021).)

34 Cf. Detlef Junker, *Der unteilbare Weltmarkt*, Stuttgart 1975. Cf. his, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1933–1945): Visionär und Machtpolitiker, in: Mauch (ed.), *Die Präsidenten der USA*, pp. 328–343.

35 Cf. chapter 9 in this volume.

36 Cf. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York 1992.

global pipe dreams. American English has become the international lingua franca. Today, no maître can get by without good English.

Already during the war, at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, the U.S. managed to establish the dollar, together with gold, as the international leading, reserve, and transaction currency. Until the Nixon shock in 1971, when the Americans removed the gold peg because they could not finance “guns and butter” at the same time, the Bretton Woods system prevented bubbles from forming on the capital markets by restricting short-term international capital movements (*hot money*) and thus also ensured a high degree of stability on the international capital markets and a low risk of contagion in the event of national financial crises. The Americans dominated the new International Monetary Fund and the new World Bank. The 1947 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and later the WTO, embodied basic American ideas of free trade and an “open door” through their goal of reducing tariffs and other trade barriers.

The dramatic and worldwide reduction of tariffs in the postwar period to just a few percent is without precedent in history. Unlike after World War I, Americans behaved in a systemic and exemplary manner after 1945 because they too gradually reduced U.S. tariffs. Driven by the memory of not having assumed international responsibility in the 1920s and of the Great Depression and its global political consequences in the 1930s, the U.S. was now determined to replace England as the guarantor of a liberal world economic order and an indivisible world market. Through all the periodic crises of market-based capitalism—the U.S. has weathered twenty-one recessions since 1900 and the Great Depression of 1929—the country held fast to the principle of open, rules-based markets even under President Obama; in part because the U.S. had been the hegemon in that system for decades. To this day, they alone are able to print the world’s reserve currency, as the dollar continues to hold its special place around the globe. 90 percent of bank-financed transactions take place in dollars, which is also the most dangerous weapon for economic sanctions.

The pursuit of its own interests was integrated into multilateral, regional, and global organizations and agreements, such as the UN and its specialized agencies like the WHO, or NATO, in which the interests of other states were also represented. This system is also called “liberal internationalism” in the USA. Since the turn of the millennium at the latest, this world market has been increasingly shaped by the digital revolution, the interdependence and globalization of

the real, capital, and media markets, the destruction of the environment, and the foreseeable climate catastrophe. Nation states, which are always the starting point for all actions in international relations, and international organizations are finding it increasingly difficult to fulfill their functions—being driven by lobby groups, administered by legal-bureaucratic monsters, and riddled with the power calculations of elected or appointed representatives.

President Obama was involved in projects to save the open world market or at least improve its operating logic in three crucial phases: during the great economic and financial crisis of 2007 to 2010, in attempts to strengthen the cooperation of the U.S. economy with Europe through the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), and with Asia through the Trans-Pacific Trade Agreement (TPP). He also thought of stabilizing agreements with the Arab world during the “Arabellion.”

Already in the final phase of the election campaign in the fall of 2008, President Bush had invited Obama and his Republican opponent John McCain to the White House for an emergency meeting to confront both of them with the threatening financial and economic developments in the U.S. and the world, which held the potential of a new Great Depression like the one in the late 1920s. While Obama was exquisitely prepared for the meeting through his study of the Great Depression of 1929 to 1932 and the response to it by Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) known as the New Deal,³⁷ McCain could not think of a single word to contribute.³⁸ Obama had already declared during the campaign that he was in the tradition of FDR, who had “saved capitalism from itself.”³⁹

Indeed, the causes of the Great Depression of 1929 and the financial and banking crisis of 2007 to 2010 were very similar and comparable. It had become apparent that the U.S. financial system had not learned enough, despite generations of award-winning economists who had labored to analyze the Great Depression. Even in the 1920s, the causes included massive income inequality, structural underconsumption, and high unemployment. Above all, a speculative boom had developed in the 1920s, as it had before 2007, out of all proportion to the real economy and turned into a dazzling soap bubble that burst in the New York stock market crash of 1929, dragging the whole world into

37 Cf. chapter 5 in this volume.

38 Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*, p. 273.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 257.

the abyss. Branches of New York stockbrokers and investment trusts had sprung up all over the United States like chain stores. Americans were buying stocks like crazy, and securities were being manufactured like soap, because there was quick money to be made in making and selling them. All over the world, potential debtors were persuaded by American bankers, using all the tricks of sales promotion, to issue bonds on the U.S. capital market. A village in Bavaria, for example, was persuaded in the 1920s to borrow \$3 million rather than \$125,000.⁴⁰

In a sense, the situation was even more threatening in 2007: “The equity of some of the very large financial institutions (represented) only two to three percent of their assets worldwide.”⁴¹ New, often globally networked financial products established a global casino with a high risk of contagion, which could lead to a collapse of the entire system overnight through domino effects. This could only be prevented by the casino’s croupiers fetching new chips from the taxpayer and by ensuring that the lavish liquidity and financial injections from the U.S. Federal Reserve and from abroad, especially from China, continued to flow unabated. The blackmail potential of the financial industry was so high in both crises because the limits on this perpetual motion machine—such as massively increasing the capital requirements of lenders or by strictly monitoring ever new financial innovations and other measures—had not been put in place soon enough.

Financial products that were not easy to see through, even for financial experts, included subprime mortgages with high debt and little equity; bank debt consisting of money market loans, especially money market funds; and mortgage securitizations, especially credit default swaps (CDS), which were a subsystem of the notorious financial derivatives to enable exchange and redistribution of risks. These derivatives are an ideal tool for gamblers and speculators, which is why investor Warren Buffett has called them “financial weapons of mass destruction.” As in the 1920s, these financial products found brisk sales not only in the U.S. but around the world—with far-reaching

40 Detlef Junker, *Der unteilbare Weltmarkt*, 236–242; cf. his *Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1933–1945): Visionär und Machtpolitiker*, in: Mauch (Hrsg.), *Die Präsidenten der USA*, pp. 328–343.

41 Anat Admati, Martin Hellwig, *Des Bankers neue Kleider. Was bei Banken wirklich schief läuft und was sich ändern muss*, Munich 2014, p. 256. See also Carmen M. Reinhart, Kenneth Rogoff, *This Time Is Different. Eight Centuries of Financial Folly*. Princeton 2009. German edition: *Dieses Mal ist alles anders. Acht Jahrhunderte Finanzkrisen*. Jesus Huerta de Soto, *Geld, Bankkredit und Konjunkturzyklen*, Stuttgart 2011.

consequences when the bubble burst. The real estate boom was particularly dangerous for the bubble of the little man, because home loans were often granted without checking the creditworthiness of the homebuyers, and not infrequently after only a telephone call. Loans were even made to people with no income, no job, and no assets—the infamous “NINJA loans” (No Income, No Job, No Assets). I myself was able to witness the consequences of this policy firsthand in Florida. In addition to the market failure, there was also a massive regulatory failure.⁴² The famous economist Joseph Schumpeter once said, the genius rides atop debt to success. What he did not say is that this debt has to remain manageable and must actually be repaid at some point.

On the structure of the finance-driven global economy at the end of Obama’s term, let us just mention two figures: World financial assets had grown from \$119 trillion in 2000 to \$267 trillion in 2015. This gap between the real and financial economies has been widening every year since. Global financial transactions accounted for nearly four times the value of goods markets during Obama’s tenure. Bonds, stocks, and loans of nearly \$270 trillion were set against a more or less stagnant real economy of \$73 trillion. This difference does not even include the so-called derivatives, i.e., speculative future transactions, the *weapons of mass destruction*.

Creatio ex nihilo, the creation out of nothing, has been haunting the history of theology as an attribute of God since the second century. Today, central banks and commercial banks have taken the place of God. They give loans and print money out of nothing, while always being advised by real economists.

President Obama faced a difficult inheritance as a result of the financial crisis and excessive borrowing by his predecessor, George W. Bush. In the last quarter of Bush’s term, gross domestic product (GDP) had fallen by 8.9 percent, unemployment had risen to nearly 10 percent, debt to nearly 5 percent of GDP, and the budget deficit to nearly 9 percent. Again, a Democrat had to deal with a Republican’s disastrous policies. President Ronald Reagan had handed a massive deficit to President Clinton. The latter had managed, after 8 years in office, to hand over a balanced and debt-free budget to his successor, George W. Bush. The latter, in turn, again left his successor with high

42 Cf. Stormy-Annika Mildner, Hannah Petersen, Managing the Economic Crisis? Die Finanz- und Wirtschaftspolitik Obamas, in: Florian Böller, Jürgen Wilzewski (eds.), *Weltmacht im Wandel. Die USA in der Ära Obama*, Trier 2012, pp. 115–148.

debt, especially due to tax cuts for the rich and the financial industry as well as expenditures for the global *war on terror*.

Obama was therefore confronted with three tasks that he could not possibly manage at the same time: in the short term, to provide emergency aid in order to alleviate the economic consequences of the financial crisis for the unemployed and for those Americans thrown out of their homes; in the long term, to regulate and reform the financial markets in order to prevent a bubble from forming again and thereby at least partially shut down the casino; in the long term, to visibly improve the social situation and upward mobility of the lower 70 percent of the population with domestic policy reforms. All this had to be pushed through against massive resistance from the financial industry, with its huge lobby in governments, parliaments, and law firms, not to mention the Republicans.

Indeed, on Feb. 17, 2009, Obama succeeded in pushing through a package to stimulate the economy worth nearly \$800 billion in the face of united opposition from Republicans in Congress (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, ARRA)—for health care, education, infrastructure measures, and energy efficiency. Other stimulus measures followed, notably the Tax Relief, Unemployment, Insurance Reauthorization, and Job Creation Act in December 2010 and a bill to rescue the U.S. auto industry. A bank bailout bill, the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), had already been signed by President Bush on October 3, 2008.

As usual, a Homeric battle developed between Democrats and Republicans over the question of at whose expense the budget could be consolidated in the long term and whether they could agree to raise the debt ceiling which is set by law. It was in this context that the Tea Party movement was founded and began its passionate fight for tax cuts (for the middle and upper classes) and against the theories of economist John Maynard Keynes, who advised fighting economic crises by government borrowing and spending. The Tea Party called for tax cuts, cuts in social spending, and a balanced budget. The road to Donald Trump and Trumpism was mapped out.

Like FDR before him, Obama wanted not only to provide emergency aid, but also to structurally regulate the financial casino, to build a firewall against the next crisis, and to steer “innovations” in the financial sector in responsible directions. FDR had tried to do this with the second Glass-Steagall Act, especially by strictly separating retail lending from investment banking to better secure deposits. This law

was already a legal-bureaucratic monster, it was often undermined in practice by the financial lobby, and it was repealed under President Bill Clinton in 1999 as a result of the neoliberal zeitgeist. For many analysts, this, together with other deregulation measures, is an important cause of the outbreak of the new financial crisis starting in 2007.

Obama attempted to stabilize the U.S. financial market through a modified new edition of Glass-Steagall, through the Dodd-Frank Act of July 21, 2010. Congress passed a law with 541 articles on 849 pages, whose legal, organizational, and substantive provisions were only understood by a few specialists. It is fair to doubt whether the law achieved much in the real world, even though the heads of state translated elements of this law into global principles at the G20 meeting in London in April 2009 and in Pittsburgh in September 2009. After all, capital requirements were raised significantly, *living wills*, i.e., resolution plans, were imposed on financial institutions, and a Consumer Financial Protection Bureau was set up along the lines of Elizabeth Warren's ideas. Meanwhile, not only the financial world has become part of the casino, but also the highly indebted states. The newest honorary member of the casino is the European Union. It prints the money with which it goes into debt—a perfect *creatio ex nihilo*.

The discrepancy between the financial markets and the real markets has become even greater during both Obama's and Donald Trump's terms in office. Any day the bubble can burst again as Obama was not able to achieve a long-term stabilization of the indivisible world market. Under President Trump, restrictions of the Dodd-Frank Act have even been lifted for many banks. They have more leeway for speculative activities again.

Obama achieved his greatest success in U.S. domestic politics, namely in the fight for healthcare reform, which he was able to push through in the face of united opposition from Republicans and the Tea Party. On March 23, 2010, he signed what was probably the most important domestic policy law of his term in office, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. In this case, it was not the world market that was under scrutiny, but the relationship between the state and the market in the U.S. capitalist system. Obama's health care reform was also about saving capitalism from itself in the name of social justice. Although his opponents declared him a socialist and communist, his basic idea was closer to the European concept of the social market economy.

The contrast between wealth and poverty manifested itself during his tenure in an oft-cited ratio: one percent at the top versus the remaining 99 percent. Nobel laureate Joseph E. Stiglitz caricatured a proud leitmotif of American democracy “of the people, for the people, by the people”: “Of the 1 %, for the 1 %, by the 1 %.”⁴³

Reforming the health insurance system was Obama’s most important legislative initiative of his first term to alleviate this massive health insurance inequity.

Since President Roosevelt and his New Deal in the 1930s, several presidents had tried in vain to introduce a fairer and more cost-effective system with the help of Congress, because that is what it has always been about at its core: more justice and lower costs. That is why the law was, not without reason, called the “Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.” The many failed attempts resulted in books with titles like: “The Road to Nowhere,” “One Nation Uninsured,” or “Dead on Arrival.” Prior to Obama’s tenure, there were over 50 million uninsured Americans; costs had skyrocketed; the U.S. spent more money in the health care system than any other developed nation. It gobbled up over 17 percent of the gross national product. The core of Obamacare, therefore, is universal insurance, but on a free-market basis, either through employers or private contracts that can be purchased on online marketplaces. Patients could not, in principle, be excluded from insurance because of pre-existing conditions.

There also has been and continues to be the explosive problem of underfunding. According to surveys, 45 percent of Americans said they have great difficulty paying their medical bills, even if they have insurance coverage. Medical costs have been and continue to be one of the most significant factors in why people fall below the poverty line. 66 percent of personal bankruptcies are caused by high medical costs.

Although the U.S. health care system is based in part on universal and government programs, it is primarily a variety of market-based providers that compete to protect Americans from the risk of “sickness.” Government health insurance coverage for retirees (Medicare) and the poor (Medicaid) was introduced under Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency in the 1960s. From the beginning, the profiteers of this system—doctors, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, and insurance companies—fought tooth and nail against changing it. Today, Karl

43 Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Great Divide. Unequal Societies and What We Can Do About Them*, New York 2015. [dt. Ausgabe: *Reich und Arm. Die wachsende Ungleichheit in unserer Gesellschaft*, Munich 2015].

Marx would not count industrialists, but doctors and lawyers among the worst exploiters. Although the problems result in large part from a glaring market failure, the profiteers of this system keep successfully invoking the American creed that the best government is no government, and that the federal government should not under any circumstances interfere with the “rights of citizens and individual states.”

Moreover, a system had developed that tied health insurance to the employment relationship. In times of good economic activity and high job security, this system works reasonably well; in times of economic crisis and unemployment, an American family quickly falls into a bottomless financial pit, because the market-based players charge horrendous prices. Just one example: In Heidelberg, a prostate operation costs about 5,500 euros; in New York, at Sloan-Kettering Hospital, it costs about \$75,000, and the patient is discharged after one day.

Back to foreign policy and the global market: The attempt during the Obama presidency—in the power triangle between the White House, Congress, and lobby groups—to put economic relations with Europe on a new footing through the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) has also failed, although it must be added that TTIP failed primarily because of the Europeans (keyword: chlorine chicken). The goal was to give more weight to the transatlantic economic area by improving market access, reducing non-tariff barriers, and supplementing rules for the global trading system.

In the words of an economic historian: “The project is apparently intended to define a transatlantic economic area that lays down rules and procedures that bind the two partners more closely together, despite occasional strategic differences, but that will have global effects in the medium term and thus respond to fundamental shifts in the world economy, such as the rise of the emerging economies. This means that TTIP has a global claim, even if it is not openly expressed. In this respect, it can be seen as an extremely ambitious project politically, not just in terms of trade policy.”⁴⁴

For four years, the TTIP project has been negotiated behind closed doors in the United States, in Brussels, and within the European nation-states, amid sharp public criticism. In Germany in particular, the

44 Andreas Falke, Pooling Economic Power? Die Transatlantische Handels- und Investitionspartnerschaft (TTIP) als Gegengewicht zum Aufstieg neuer Wirtschaftsmächte und die Zukunft amerikanischer Weltführungspolitik, in: Stefan Hagemann, Wolfgang Tönnesmann, Jürgen Wilzewski (eds.), *Weltmacht vor neuen Herausforderungen. Die Außenpolitik der USA in der Ära Obama*, Trier 2014, p. 434.

TTIP negotiations were a major cause of growing anti-Americanism in particular and capitalism in general. The agreement was buried—and this was no fault of Obama’s—when President Donald Trump ended further discussion of the TTIP agreement as part of his new “America First” strategy of bilateral mercantilism.

A similar fate befell the planned Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, which was to become an important pillar of the “pivot” of U.S. foreign policy to Asia (*Pivot to Asia*) announced with enthusiasm by Obama and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Intended as a multipurpose weapon, the agreement was meant to curb Beijing’s ever-growing influence in the Pacific. For Obama, who had grown up in Asia, his upbringing and youth played a not insignificant role in this “pivot.” He was even able to push Congress to deal with this planned agreement quickly (*fast track authority*); although even in this case, massive criticism was leveled at the secret negotiations and every senator or congressman paid close attention to ensure that their own voter base did not suffer the slightest disadvantage. The planned agreement fell victim to U.S. domestic politics. Even Hillary Clinton had to revoke her support because she feared criticism from Senator Bernie Sanders’ supporters during the election campaign. Donald Trump revoked the cooperation by means of an “executive order” three days after taking office.

The Indivisible Freedom

President Obama, like all his predecessors in office, was also convinced of the American mission of freedom. He, too, never doubted the American trinity of *God, Country, and Freedom*. He knew, as a historically conscious American, that this community-building doctrine of faith had held American society together, especially in times of crisis. He knew that American commemorative culture and the politics of its history, national holidays and rituals, especially presidential speeches, centered around the ideas and symbols of American civil religion. He knew that the American national motto, “In God We Trust,” which also embosses the back of every dollar bill, and the wording in the Pledge of Allegiance, “One Nation Under God,” are meant to represent all Americans.

The history-conscious Barack Obama also knew that the debate over America’s special mission of freedom, and its relationship to

God, providence, and history had been going on for over 400 years. He had studied, probably more than any president before him, American history. He also knew that this ongoing discourse, as we would say today, about the special mission of the United States, its uniqueness and chosenness, is itself at the core of American identity. That is why, in his Cairo speech, he had so passionately rejected the charge of American “imperialism.” He also knew that it was this idea of mission that enabled the majority of Americans—despite the fact that there were always dissidents—to justify all wars and military interventions as just wars; from the wars against the Indians to those in Afghanistan and Iraq, but especially World War II and the Cold War.

Setbacks and defeats have not caused Americans to bid farewell to this missionary idea until Trump’s tenure. As is well known, the vast majority of American attempts to establish and consolidate democratic regimes in the long term through or after military intervention have failed. On the other hand, Iraq and also Afghanistan extend the long list of failed American attempts to bring freedom to peoples and states by force. Nevertheless, it is extraordinarily difficult for Americans to say goodbye to their idea of mission. For it is part of the essence of secular utopia that, like religion, it does not allow its utopian surplus, its core of hope, to be destroyed by bad reality and painful facts.

The American self-image as the guardian of freedom and law led to the founding of the League of Nations in 1919 and the United Nations in 1945. It legitimized the fight against National Socialism and Communism. It was also responsible for the USA becoming the midwife of Western Europe after 1945 and making German reunification in peace and freedom possible. Without the U.S., reunification would have failed because of the Europeans. That is why the transformations of Germany and Japan into living democracies are considered shining examples of the power of freedom in U.S. public discourse.⁴⁵

The weight of this tradition and his own fundamental convictions presented President Obama with a dilemma, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, when the uprisings in almost all the countries of the Arab world, the so-called “Arabellion,” captivated the world. He had witnessed his predecessor, George W. Bush, fail in the elections also because of the war weariness of the American people. He himself had great difficulty ending the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Therefore, he

45 Cf. Detlef Junker, *The Chosen People. Geschichte und nationale Identität der USA*, in: Gassert, Junker, Mausbach, Thunert (eds.), *Was Amerika ausmacht*, pp. 19–32.

was determined not to lead the U.S. into a new war against a Muslim country under any circumstances. On the other hand, in his speeches all over the world, he maintained the American missionary idea of freedom and the protection of human rights; for him, the U.S. continued to be a “city upon a hill,” and a beacon of freedom. In this sense, as announced in his Nobel Prize speech, he wanted to continue his “work on the world stage.” During his term in office and in his retrospective reminiscences, programmatic speeches were among the highlights of his life. After all, his speech at the Democratic National Convention had propelled him onto the national stage. Wherever he spoke, he sparked enthusiasm. One could almost say that he joined his listeners in a kind of *unio mystica*.

When a young Tunisian merchant publicly burned himself to death in December 2011 because he could no longer see any prospects in life, this self-immolation became the beacon of protest and uprising movements in the Arab world of the Middle East and North Africa, for the “Arabellion” or “Arab Spring”—in Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia. The whole world watched as these protest movements were brutally suppressed and shot down by the powers of the status quo: by rulers, militaries, and corrupt elites. The Arabellion therefore posed a fundamental problem for President Obama, the American mission idea of freedom, and the president’s human rights rhetoric. In keeping with his ideals, should he effectively and sustainably support the Arab Spring?

While polls showed there was never a majority of the American population in favor of military intervention, the Obama administration and the State Department were deeply divided. Among the “hawks” were three women: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice, and especially Samantha Power, the National Security Council’s human rights envoy. Obama had brought Samantha Power onto his team because he was deeply impressed by her book on the Rwandan genocide.⁴⁶ She and other hawks tended

46 Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell. America and the Age of Genocide*, New York 2003. On the problem, see: Marc Lynch, *Obama and the Middle East. Rightsizing the U.S. Role*, in *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 5, September-October 2015, pp. 15–36; Fred Kaplan, *Obama’s Way. The President in Practice*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 1, January-February 2016, pp. 46–63; Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings Never Ended. The Enduring Struggle to Remake the Middle East*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 1, January-February 2021, pp. 111–121. See also Dennis Jonathan Mann, Angelika Wahlen, *Just “Cheap Talk”? Die USA, humanitäre Interventionen und die Zukunft der amerikanischen Weltführungspolitik*, in:

to intervene for the protection and security of oppressed people and therefore to relativize Article 2.4 of the United Nations Charter, which guarantees the territorial integrity and political independence of every state. All dictators in the world invoke this constitutive article of the UN Charter to declare as illegitimate any intervention to protect human rights. This is especially true when a possible intervention by foreign powers arouses even a suspicion of initiating regime change. This issue deeply moved all U.S. State Department officials. That is why, on May 19, 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton invited President Obama to deliver a keynote address to top U.S. diplomats on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa.⁴⁷ It is one of Obama's most important speeches because he forcefully and unstintingly adhered to "indivisible freedom" as the foundation of American foreign policy before his diplomats.

In this case, too, he began with a time loop through the past. The resistance in Tunisia reminded him of the Boston Tea Party in 1773, when the colonists refused to pay taxes to the British king. Or of Rosa Parks refusing to follow segregation on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. Today, he said, there is a similar situation in the Middle East and North Africa. The states of this region had long since won independence, but the peoples had not. They lacked political and economic self-determination. The leaders of these states would falsely blame the West for this plight. But these strategies of oppression would no longer work. The big question, he said, is what role America should play in this story. For decades, the United States had pursued the central issues of this region: combating terrorism, ending nuclear proliferation, the free movement of goods, security in the region, especially the security of Israel, and the Arab-Israeli peace process. Now, he said, America must realize that this limited way of pursuing its own interests neither fills stomachs nor allows freedom of speech. He had already stated in his Cairo speech that the U.S. had an interest not only in the stability of nations but also in the self-determination of individuals.

Then followed a typical Obama argument: after decades of accepting the world in this region as it is, the U.S. now has a chance to

Stefan Hagemann, Wolfgang Tönnesmann, Jürgen Wilzewski (eds.), *Weltmacht vor neuen Herausforderungen. Die Außenpolitik der USA in der Ära Obama*, Trier 2004, pp. 399–433.

47 Barack Obama, *On American Diplomacy in Middle East and Northern Africa*, May 19, 2011. Transcript, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamamiddleeastpolicy.htm> (May 21, 2021).

shape it as it should be. Obama then enumerated nearly all the values that have been associated with the goal of “indivisible freedom” in the American tradition to date: the end of violence and repression against peoples, universal human rights, equality between men and women (in the Arab world), religious freedom, economic reform, and the transition to democracy. Obama also advocated economic reconstruction, debt relief for this region, and an idea he pursued at the same time in Europe and Asia: a trade and investment partnership. This is also necessary, he said, because this entire region of 400 million people exports only as much as Switzerland, if one disregards oil.

Posterity knows that this vision of Obama remained a dream. Although he supported individual measures, for example the resignation of the Egyptian dictator Muhammad Husni Mubarak or the bombing of Libya and the killing of the mass murderer Gaddafi, whom the UN once appointed to the Committee on Human Rights, the “Arab Spring” failed across the board. Today, ten years later, people rightly speak of “zombies in ruins,” with Tunisia as a hopeful exception.⁴⁸

Nowhere else in the world has the U.S. been able to transform a country into a peaceful democracy, even to enforce respect for human rights. This was also true of Obama’s human rights policy toward China in the context of the much-discussed “*pivot to Asia*,” the conception of which had been prepared by Obama’s Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during his first term.⁴⁹ Following its entanglement in the Arab world, Clinton and President Obama wanted to position the United States more forcefully as a counterweight against China’s rapid economic rise and its growing claim to power beyond Asia. From the outset, critics have considered this pivot to Asia to be window-dressing, because the U.S. had never withdrawn from Asia since 1945 and

48 Cf. Christoph Ehrhardt, Rainer Hermann, *Zombies in Ruinen*, in: F.A.Z., 17.12.2020.

49 The literature on the rise of China and the American response is boundless. However, it has been the subject of intense debate even as it has unfolded in the United States itself. To cite just a few examples: Andrew J. Nathan, Andrew Scobell, *How China Sees America. The Sum of Beijing’s Fears*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 5, September–October 2012, pp. 33–47; Aaron L. Friedberg, *Bucking Beijing. An Alternative U.S.-China Policy*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 5, September–October 2012, pp. 49–58; Kevin Rudd, *Beyond the Pivot. A New Road Map for U.S.-Chinese Relations*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 2, March–April 2013, pp. 9–15; Thomas J. Christensen, *Obama and Asia. Confronting the China Challenge*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 5, September–October 2015, pp. 28–36; Fred Kaplan, *Obama’s Way. The President in: Practice*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 1, January–February 2016, pp. 46–63.

because it never became clear whether this reorientation was aimed at *engaging* China or *containing* it as in the Cold War era.

Strategically, economically, ideologically, and alliance-wise, all U.S. administrations had always maintained a presence in the Pacific and Asia during the era of the Cold War and global anti-communism. The United States fought two hot wars in Asia, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. To name just one dimension of that presence: When Obama took office, the Pacific Command (US Pacific Command—PACOM) was the largest of the world's six command areas in terms of firepower and geopolitical reach—with 325,000 military and civilian personnel, 180 warships, and nearly 2,000 aircraft. The nuclear triad also applied to Asia. The U.S. presence was embedded in bilateral alliances with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, and South Korea, and a security guarantee for Taiwan. As the latter has democratized over the decades, it is visibly becoming a liberal and law-based alternative to authoritarian China, which is becoming an Asian despotism under the rule of Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CCP and president of the People's Republic of China.

On the other hand, since 1972, when President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger visited China and initiated a sensational turnaround in Sino-American relations that seemingly broke the logic of the Cold War, every U.S. administration has asserted that China's welfare and security were in the U.S. interest. Moreover, no country in the world has contributed more to China's modernization than the United States. It has given China access to the world economy through the WTO, including to the market, capital, and technology in the United States itself. It has trained China's scientists, technicians, even lawyers in the U.S., whether the Chinese respect the intellectual property of others or steal like ravens. But a major problem in U.S.-China relations has always remained China's interior conditions, i.e., the failure of the country to gradually democratize. The West's great hope that the dynamics of the market economy would eventually be followed by political liberalization and respect for human rights proved to be an illusion of world historical dimension. Communist state capitalists did not become liberal democrats. This was a fact that Obama, at least at the beginning of his term, refused to accept. In his second term, as in many other fields of his politics, he had to submit to the inevitable. But Barack Obama was no Henry Kissinger; he never once asked the ex-Secretary of State for advice. For Obama, the demand for freedom and human rights in China was also part of his swing to Asia.

Ironically, Cold Warrior Richard Nixon was the only post-1945 American president who, under pressure from the Vietnam War, developed and partially implemented a foreign policy alternative to the policy of containment. He was inspired and supported by his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, who had already subjected all models of progress based on a philosophy of history to critical scrutiny in his master's thesis and had trained his thinking on great European conservatives and "realists," especially Richelieu and Metternich, Castlereagh and Bismarck. Kissinger wanted to liberate the Americans from their idea of mission and give them back, of all things, that concept of international relations from which the moralist and missionary Wilson had wanted to redeem the world: the concept of the balance of powers. For Kissinger, even relative stability in international relations—the best that could be expected in view of the *human condition*—could only be achieved if the existence of the main powers, regardless of their respective internal order, was recognized as legitimate, i.e., not called into question.

The relationship of states to each other, he argued, should not be made dependent on their domestic political structure, but on their foreign policy behavior. Just as the statesmen at the Congress of Vienna in 1814/15 had succeeded in preserving peace in Europe for a century by recognizing this principle, so the United States was called upon to establish a stable tripolar, or rather pentagonal, order of the main powers: the United States, the Soviet Union, China, Japan, and Europe. American foreign policy, Kissinger said, should therefore see itself neither as a "subdivision of theology" nor as a "subdivision of psychiatry." The policy of the hawks, the theologians, who in missionary zeal wanted to bring down the communist systems in the Soviet Union, in China or in Vietnam, missed the realistic middle just as much as the policy of the doves, the psychiatrists, who again and again proceeded from the illusion that they could support the supposedly peaceful factions within hostile states by incentives.

Legitimacy and stability were for Nixon and Kissinger the highest maxims of a responsible foreign policy, because in the age of nuclear weapons the worst possible accident, a nuclear holocaust, had to be prevented at all costs. Kissinger, who "served" Nixon as Metternich once served Emperor Franz I, sought to disengage Americans from their one-sided fixation on the "lessons of Munich" and to focus their attention on the "lessons of Versailles"—on the need for a viable international order. The world, Nixon said in 1971, would be safer if there were five healthy and stable centers that kept each other in balance. Not

communism, but international anarchy, was the greatest danger. Such a new world order would also allow the U.S. to shift some of its burden to other shoulders (Nixon Doctrine), as it became increasingly clear that the U.S. had overstretched itself economically with the Vietnam War.

Thus, in February 1972, through their negotiations with Mao and Zhou Enlai, Nixon and Kissinger succeeded in putting relations with China on a new footing. Although the two sides could not agree on the thorniest problem to date, the future of National China (Taiwan), they declared that normalization of their relations was not only in the interests of both states but would also help reduce tensions in Asia and the world. And both sides assured that they did not want to establish hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region.⁵⁰

Obama did not want to come to terms with this logic of the power and equilibrium politics of a Nixon and Kissinger in Asia either. Here, too, he promised “hope and change,” at least at the beginning of his term in office, being convinced that he could provide it. His reaction to an event on his first trip to China, when he gave a major speech to selected students in Shanghai, is significant. He expressed disappointment at their tame and meaningless questions, which had obviously been pre-selected. While he did not think their patriotism was feigned, he said they were too young to remember the horrors of the Cultural Revolution and the violent suppression of the Tian’anmen Square protests in Beijing from April to June 1989. After that meeting, it became clear to him that he “had to show that America’s democratic, rule-of-law, pluralistic system could still deliver on the promise of a better life if I were to convince this new generation.” In Beijing, he reminded a faltering President Hu Jintao that “dealing with Chinese dissidents” remained one of the “priorities” of American policy toward China.⁵¹ During his time in office, Obama repeatedly raised the fate of the Tibetans and Uyghurs with China. To the great chagrin of the Chinese, he met with the Dalai Lama at the White House four times during his presidency; for the last time on June 15, 2016, despite explicit warnings from Beijing that this meeting would damage diplomatic relations. Several times, Obama has promised the Dalai Lama “strong support” for Tibetans’ human rights.

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⁵⁰ Cf. Junker, *Power and Mission*, pp. 106–111.

⁵¹ Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*, pp. 480 ff..

What can be said of Obama's foreign policy from a historical perspective? In answering this question, it is also wise to recall once again Bismarck's insight that history is more accurate in its revisions than the Prussian High Audit Office. During Obama's presidency, the United States no longer possessed the power to transform any country in the world into a liberal democracy under the rule of law or to enforce respect for human rights. Nor would he have received a mandate from a war-weary American people to do so. In this respect, the decline of American leadership began under Obama, not just his successor Donald Trump. The declining global political influence of the U.S. was also the consequence of Obama's fundamental decision not to engage the U.S. in war anywhere in the world, despite the fact that as commander-in-chief he commanded the strongest military force of all time on land, at sea, in the air, and in space, and despite the fact that he did not deny the legitimacy of a "just war" in his Nobel Peace Prize speech. He was the only post-1945 U.S. president to break the close link between American foreign policy and war. However, he did not question the U.S. nuclear umbrella or American alliances in Europe or Asia. But that was not enough to prevent the massive gains in influence by authoritarian and potentially totalitarian states on the Eurasian double continent and other parts of the world.

In security terms, his most dangerous legacy was his inability to force North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un to give up building a nuclear bomb and developing long-range international missiles that could threaten the security of the continental United States. Consequently, this was the only message he left on the presidential desk in the Oval Office for his successor, Donald Trump. In contrast, the nuclear agreement with Iran negotiated by Security Council members and Germany was among his successes. However, this was nullified by Trump when he terminated the agreement, as he did with the Paris climate agreement. In both cases, Obama had not dared to have these agreements ratified by the Senate.

After the great financial crisis of 2008/2009, Obama, in cooperation with other states and international organizations, has been able to stabilize to some extent the "indivisible world market." However, the possibility of another bursting of a money and credit bubble remains dangerously immanent in the system. In a global economy where money and credit no longer have a price, the bursting of the next bubble is possible again at any time. The starting point could again be the U.S., as in the Great Depressions of 1929 and 2008, but it could be in another

country and another region of the world due to the ever-increasing interconnectedness of the capital markets. We are all sailing on the “Titanic” toward the next iceberg, but in the event of a collision, we no longer have any lifeboats, because the global economy, the states, and international organizations are already up to their necks in debt.

President Donald Trump (2017–2021)

The contemporary is not the best connoisseur of the time in which he stands. He has a fragmented sense of his present and his future and cannot grasp the entire complexity of the present, even if he is highly competent in his field.

Hillary Clinton herself had to learn this in a dramatic way when she tried to explain why Donald Trump won the presidential election on November 8, 2016. Overall, slightly more than one in four of the 232 million eligible voters voted for Trump, nearly 63 million or 27 percent. If just 40,000 more voters from Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania had cast their ballots for Hillary Clinton, she would have become the first woman in U.S. history to be elected the 45th president. Based on the electors from the states won by each of the candidates (or districts in Maine and Nebraska), Trump should have received 306 electoral college votes, Clinton 232. But there were breakaway votes on both sides, so Trump ultimately received 304, and Clinton 227.

What had happened? Why could this happen? These were the overriding questions that incessantly occupied Clinton every day in the period after her defeat. These are also the central questions that dominate her recollections of the period after November 8, 2016. “What Happened?”⁵² Her book is an attempt at personal justification and explanation for an event she could barely grasp; not, of course, an impartial book. Her account is the remarkable admission of a woman who knew, as no American woman before her, the structure of American politics and society, including especially the electoral system, the management of voter expectations, and the rules of the game of American politics; a woman who had experienced and suffered a series of successes and defeats.

52 Hillary Rodham Clinton, *What Happened*, London 2017, cited here from the paperback edition London 2018.

Hillary Rodham Clinton, married to the 42nd President William J. “Bill” Clinton since 1975; a “First Lady” in the White House from 1993 to 2001; a politician in her own right as a New York State Senator since November 2000; a failed presidential candidate in 2008, who after long conversations was persuaded by the winner of the election, President Obama, to become his Secretary of State, and, after equally long talks, urged by Obama to run once again as the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate to secure his legacy. As secretary of state from 2009 to 2013, she had traveled the globe 123 times to countries around the world.

Dozens of books have been written about her over the decades, mostly sensational and sales-boosting “tell all” stories; but also solid biographies like that of Carl Bernstein, who himself acquired early fame when he uncovered Nixon’s Watergate break-in with Bob Woodward.⁵³ Bernstein sketched out her key character traits: her Methodist religiosity and missionary self-confidence and her almost self-destructive love for Bill Clinton—she hated the sin and loved the sinner (it was Hillary who saved her husband’s presidency after his affairs with Jennifer Flowers and Monica Lewinsky). Bernstein delved into her revolutionary interpretation of the role, not provided for in the Constitution, of the president’s wife, the First Lady; her high intelligence, passion, and iron discipline; her ability, discovered early on, to speak publicly on any subject in a polished style; her combativeness, ruthlessness, self-righteousness, and the absence of any self-irony. Her religiosity was also the source of her lifelong struggle for women’s rights, and, in general, for the downtrodden and overburdened in society. Throughout her life she had a Methodist confessor and counselor at her side. She admired Barack Obama, as well as President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt. It was no coincidence that she announced her presidential candidacy in 2015 on “Roosevelt Island” in New York’s East River.

On the other hand, Hillary Clinton was never a darling of the media. Her persona and the way she announced and then filled her role as first lady itself became a heavy burden on her husband’s presidency. Twice, in the 1992 and 1996 campaigns, the Clinton administration’s campaign advisers and spin doctors pulled the emergency brake and tried to change her image—an attempt partially seen through by the

53 Cf. the review of Carl Bernstein, *Hillary Clinton. Die Macht einer Frau*, Munich 2007, in: Detlef Junker, *Schlaglichter auf die USA im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert*. 30 Rezensionen in der *Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung*, Heidelberg 2013, pp. 67–70.

media. Far beyond the scathing and bigoted attacks of the Republicans, the Christian Right, and the so-called Moral Majority, Hillary was attacked by the media with such aggressive hostility that she could rightly speak of a “conspiracy of the Right” against the Clintons. Her active intervention and failure in health care reform, her state-interventionist ideas, her dislike of the press and the Washington establishment, and the never-ending series of trivial scandals reinforced the image of a power-hungry, scheming “Lady Macbeth”; an ice-cold, constantly manipulating, and truth-hiding demonic force in the White House. A columnist for the “New York Times” called her a “born liar.” Her numerous image changes led to accusations that she lacked authenticity and was, at her core, a woman without a genuine character. She changes her roles as often as her hairstyles.

In the election campaign summer of 2016, she was again involved in an affair, the so-called “email affair.” The FBI had begun an investigation into whether her private email addresses had been misused for official purposes. The FBI’s conclusion was that she had acted negligently, but that there was no evidence of a crime.

In her search for an answer to the question of what had led to her defeat, Hillary Clinton made an important distinction that, until Trump’s defeat on Nov. 3, 2020, was on the minds of not just the active political class, publicists, and academics but people all over the world. Of less importance, she said, was the question of why she lost crucial votes in the final days of the campaign. The overriding question, she said, was why Trump was able to garner so many votes in the first place.

At the end of Trump’s term, the question becomes even more acute. Why, after four years of Donald Trump being in office, during which he had driven the U.S. into a pre-civil war situation and destroyed its world leadership role, did even more Americans vote for Donald Trump in 2020 than in 2016, 74 million instead of 63 million? Why did he improve his share of the vote among white women from 52 percent to 55 percent? Why would he have won the election without his complete failure in the Corona crisis? Why did the world escape a global political Chernobyl by a hair’s breadth?

Clinton can answer the short-term problem of why she lost votes in the final weeks of the campaign with good arguments. A few days before the election, the vain and naive head of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), James Comey, had dropped a political bombshell. His agency was investigating new emails that could be related to Clinton’s email affair. When he then declared two days

before the election that there were no incriminating findings about Hillary Clinton, nothing could be saved. In the crucial week before the election, the press reported almost exclusively on the Democratic presidential candidate's e-mail affair.

One of the most important structural causes for her defeat and the success of Donald Trump, on the other hand, was, according to Hillary Clinton, the unrestrained false propaganda and agitation by Donald Trump, supported by the well-filled coffers of the Republican Party and above all by the Fox News television station. Fox's majority shareholder, Robert Murdoch, now undermines three Anglo-Saxon democracies through his media empire: his native Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Moreover, Trump's increasingly scandalous statements attracted almost all of the media's attention. Therefore, he hardly needed to spend any funds on his own election advertising. However, he also saved the financially struggling CNN network, which was able to broadcast nonstop "breaking news" thanks to Trump. Circulation of the New York Times and Washington Post also increased dramatically.

One of those propaganda lies, Hillary said, cost her the election victory. It was simply not true, but rather a dirty lie, that she did not care about the fate of the coal mines and the unemployed miners in the "rust belt" of the USA. In fact, she said, their fate was one of her most important issues in the campaign. However, in retrospect, she regretted having made a serious tactical error in early September 2016 when she assumed—probably correctly—that half of Trump's supporters were in the basket of *deplorables*, calling them "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic."⁵⁴ But then, she said, she became the victim of a campaign of lies and slander. In a panel discussion, she had spoken about the fact that the coal region only had a chance in the long term if coal could be replaced by green, renewable energy. In that context, she had said a phrase that probably cost her crucial votes in the Rust Belt: "Because we are going to put a lot of coal mines out of business."⁵⁵ That phrase was a gobstopper for Donald Trump, the Republican Party and Fox News. For months, that one sentence was repeated—out of context—on every television channel and radio

54 Cf. Aaron Blake, Voters strongly reject Hillary Clinton's "basket of deplorables" approach, in: Washington Post, September 26, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/09/26/voters-strongly-reject-hillary-clintons-basket-of-deplorables-approach>.

55 Hillary Clinton, *What Happened*, p. 263.

station. None of Clinton's attempts at a correction were aired. The entire Appalachian region was saturated with that phrase. There were consequences. At an attempted campaign appearance in the small West Virginia town of Williamson, Hillary Clinton faced hundreds of angry and fanatical protesters holding up signs, "We want Trump," "Go home Hillary."⁵⁶

From the outset, this campaign of lies by Trump was of a different order of magnitude than traditional populism in American election campaigns. In this respect, too, the comparison with President Andrew Jackson (1829–1837) does not lead anywhere. Trump's campaign of lies and disinformation aimed at destroying the foundations of democracy, namely the exclusion of the real world and the denial of reality. This campaign of lies therefore logically ended up destroying democratic structures and driving the country into a pre-civil war situation,⁵⁷ using violence to prevent the legitimate outcome of the elections, and condoning a coup d'état. The "Big Lie" about the 2020 presidential election resulted in the storming of the Capitol. A global audience watched as Vice President Mike Pence was prevented from certifying the election results. A gallows had already been erected. Even the attempt at a coup, however, could not persuade the—democratically and ethically deflated—Republican Party to impeach President Trump. Already in the 2016 election campaign, Trump had preemptively claimed that a Hillary Clinton election victory could only be fraud.

This disinformation and lying strategy of Trump's goes far beyond what Americans already knew from the marketed election campaigns before Trump.⁵⁸ For even before Trump, election campaigns had become a pure market phenomenon. Standing between the candidates and the voters there was not only the traditional media—print, television and, more recently, social networks—but also a mobilization and marketing industry of demographers, campaign strategists, and spin doctors. This industry has relied and continues to rely on ever more sophisticated polling techniques, focus groups, the detection of new target audiences, electronic mail, and telephone surveys. In the a-social media of the

56 Ibid. p. 277.

57 The author of this text asserted this early on, cf. e.g., Detlef Junker, *Die Krise des Westens*, in: ifo Schnelldienst 23, 2016, 8.12.2016; Junker., *The Crisis of the American Empire. Farewell Lecture 8.2.2018*, in: Annual Report 2017–18, Heidelberg Center for American Studies 2018, pp. 184–203; Idem, *Donald Trump und die Zerstörung einer Demokratie*, in: Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung, 3.3.2020, p. 12.

58 Cf. Detlef Junker, *Die vermarktete Politik. Der Kampf um das Weiße Haus*, in: Óscar Loureda (ed.), *Manipulation. Studium Generale*, Heidelberg 2016, pp. 51–66.

digital age, the remaining reality-based content is evaporating. Anyone can launch a disinformation campaign. There is a fear that democracy will not survive the digital age.

This industry often produces “banana peel words,” slick phrases designed to make an attack from a political opponent impossible. They often do not sell real politicians or political programs, but market-tested artificial products that rely on the impact of emotions, fictions, images, slogans, conspiracy theories and, increasingly, denigration and personal attacks (*negative campaigning*). The development has paralleled the rise of television. Election campaigns are less and less about content and more about meaningless slogans that are therefore difficult to attack, and increasingly about scandalous personal attacks on one’s opponent. One could say with a certain amount of exaggeration that, due to the marketing industry, the election campaign is no longer a contest between politicians, but between their coaches. The starting point is the market-tested hypothesis that voters are fundamentally lazy in their thinking. They must be entertained with emotionality, competition, and spectacle. Very often this has nothing to do with reality. In one of Warren Beatty’s political comedies, a senator decides to commit suicide after watching the TV commercials for his re-election.

The influence of the marketing industry is not without consequences. Under President Reagan, for example, a single image consultant almost single-handedly managed to discredit the word “liberal” among the majority of the American population. Contrary to the literal sense of the word, “liberal” in contemporary America means something like leftist state interventionism. Newt Gingrich’s famous 1994 “Contract for America,” which was intended to usher in a conservative revolution, had been pre-tested sentence by sentence in focus groups. Al Gore was strictly forbidden by his advisors in the 2000 election campaign against George W. Bush to talk at all about his life’s mission, saving the planet. And George W. Bush’s advisors succeeded in discrediting his opposing candidates John McCain and John Kerry with nasty negative campaigns.

Critics see this development as the end of the Enlightenment in the U.S.—at least of the Enlightenment hope that elections would be fought with ideas and passion, but also with arguments that were close to reality. One example of the decline of Enlightenment culture in America can be readily described. Before the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, future President Abraham Lincoln and his opponent Stephan A. Douglas had held ten debates in Illinois before thousands of people.

Voters traveled for hours by horse and buggy, listened to a three-hour speech by Lincoln in elaborate English, took a half-hour break, and then followed Douglas' arguments for another three hours. Today, the average commercial on television has shrunk to just a few seconds, partly because commercials have become increasingly expensive.

The question of who pays for election campaigns is also tied into the tension between the state and the market. Since the founding of the United States in the 18th century, all election campaigns have been paid for by the private sector. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt once made the futile proposal that federal elections be financed by public money and that all private money be banned. Since World War II, there have been several laws and federal Supreme Court decisions to legislate public campaign reimbursement for primaries, the general elections, and nominating conventions. The result is either a victory for the market or a political disaster, depending on your point of view. In fact, the market has won across the board. All present-day candidates are foregoing public funds because the associated restrictions imposed by law are so severe that the increased costs of modern campaigning can no longer be borne. The numbers make this clear. Add in the parallel costs of House and one-third Senate elections, and the 2016 campaign is estimated to have spent about \$8 billion. Acceptance of the 20 million reimbursement per candidate, which is tiny in comparison, would come with such strings attached that the campaigns could no longer be financed. Adding to the costs is the fact that candidates and marketing strategists often have to communicate new strategies and, in some cases, new messages after the midterms. While the primaries target voters in one's own party or potential party-affiliated voters, the general election is about the people as a whole. As in soccer, new players are often brought in. As in soccer, an own goal in the first half often cannot be made up for.

In this context, a 2010 Supreme Court decision cut deeply into the structure of election campaigns (*Citizen United v. Federal Election Commission*). In a narrow 5–4 vote, the Supreme Court held that the First Amendment to the Constitution of November 3, 1791, prohibited the U.S. government from limiting “independent political expenditures” by “nonprofit organizations.” Among other things, the First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees freedom of speech. The ruling is an endorsement of the marketplace. The First Amendment, the justices said, prohibits interfering with the marketplace of *ideas* and “rationing” of free speech. “There is no such thing as too much speech.”

Allegations of possible corruption or the appearance of corruption by these private donors do not withstand strict scrutiny, they said.

The ruling does not mean, however, that this leaves the present marketplace of ideas to the super-rich alone, even though the Republicans benefit most through millionaires and billionaires that radically support the market. Billionaire brothers David and Charles Koch, for example, have been systematically undermining almost all government functions since the 1970s; they ensured, through the influence of the “Federalist Society,” that Donald Trump nominated only jurists to members of the Supreme Court that were radical supporters of the market: Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett.⁵⁹ Casino capitalist and billionaire Sheldon Adelson pledged \$100 million to Trump for the 2016 campaign, then became Trump’s biggest supporter with significantly less, \$25 million. For Trump’s inauguration festivities, Adelson also made the largest single donation of \$5 million. In the 2012 campaign, he had announced that he would spend \$100 million to prevent an Obama victory.⁶⁰

But the iPhone and swarm intelligence in social networks have also unleashed a revolution from the bottom up, according to the motto: Every little bit helps. Millions of Americans transfer small amounts of money to candidates. They have become the second major source of income, so, one could also say: the market works.

Donald Trump and the Self-Destruction of a Democracy

As already indicated, despite Americans’ habituation to market-tested slogans, propaganda, and spectacles, neither Hillary Clinton nor the American people were prepared for the fact that Donald Trump would corrupt and dominate the public sphere through lies, propaganda, conspiracy theories, and calls to violence; that he would further divide an already divided nation and drive it into a pre-civil war situation, undermine the legal system and government institutions, and call on

59 Cf. Christopher Leonard, *The Secret History of Koch Industries and Corporate Power in America*, New York 2019. Cf. his, Charles Koch’s Big Bet on Barrett, in: *New York Times*, October 12, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/12/opinion/charles-koch-amy-coney-barrett.html>.

60 Cf. Robert D. McFadden, Sheldon Adelson, Billionaire Donor to G.O.P. and Israel, Is Dead at 87, in: *New York Times*, January 12, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/12/business/sheldon-adelson-dead.html>.

his supporters to storm the Capitol with his “Big Lie” about the 2020 elections.⁶¹

The moral and intellectual gap with his predecessor, Barack Obama, is so great that historians quickly run out of yardsticks when making comparisons. Trump, from the first day of his term, which began with several lies, had neither the character nor the judgment to fill the presidency responsibly. With an extraordinary destructive energy, Trump has been an arsonist and an accelerant in the self-destruction of an imperial democracy.

He was able to attempt this because the American president today has an extraordinarily large amount of power—more than in other Western, legally constituted systems. Trump, like every president, was at once head of state, head of government, and the power center of the executive branch. He commanded military forces, foreign policy, intelligence agencies, and the civil service. No Supreme Court justice could be appointed without his approval. Moreover, he was part of the legislative process; he had an incredible number of opportunities for office patronage. He dominated the media, created the images of enemies and fake news, and tweeted at the world before breakfast. This permanent presence in the media was a core element of his power.

De facto, he was depriving Congress of the right to declare war because, by invoking the “clear and present danger” clause, he claimed that right for himself. Trump ordered a military strike against Iranian General Soleimani, without ever having consulted Congress before or after his decision—something he would have been legally obligated to do. Why was he able to commit this breach of law? Because, as the world witnessed in two impeachment proceedings, Trump corrupted the Republicans. Trump simply blocked the proceedings with the help of the Republicans. He not only prevented witnesses from testifying, but removed them from their posts afterwards. He simply took revenge like an autocrat.

Trump’s tendency to justify his monopoly on power through a permanent state of emergency was also meant to preempt a possible existential crisis, namely ending up in prison after leaving the White House. Several deferred criminal proceedings await him. To be on the safe side, he had already announced that yes, he could pardon himself. Trump put into practice the insight of the infamous German

61 Ezra Klein, *Der tiefe Graben. Die Geschichte der gespaltenen Staaten von Amerika*, Hamburg 2020, (from the American).

constitutional law scholar Carl Schmitt: “The true sovereign is the one who decides on the state of emergency.” To prevent just such an abuse of power, the American Founding Fathers had designed a special system of separation of powers and overlapping powers (*checks and balances*). The Constitution was intended to preclude precisely what Trump had his lawyer Rudolph Giuliani publicly proclaim: that he was above the law.

He fired Cabinet members and high-ranking military officers at an increasingly rapid rate like no other president before him. The most important positions in his immediate environment within the White House changed several times. He surrounded himself only with sycophants who somehow survived his tantrums. Everyone feared the “one-man firing squad.” The eulogies of himself became more and more grotesque, as did the staging of small successes. Like a godfather of the mafia, he demanded not fidelity to the law but “loyalty” from his cabinet members and staff. He had no relationship to the rule of law, the free press, or free science. His press conferences became empty agitprop events with attacks on the media before he stopped them altogether. After that, journalists were only allowed to ask questions on the way to his helicopter. He answered only what he wanted, almost always with lies.

By now, the whole world knows his character; those interested in politics also know his life story.⁶² He is a pathological, malicious, and brutal narcissist; a notorious gambler and cheat, a racist and sexist. This is what he was raised to be in his family. His father had taught him early on: “Be a killer.” Therefore, as president, he applied daily the

62 In the four years of his presidency, English-language publishers alone have published more than 1000 books about Trump. Cf. Martin Thunert, Donald Trump 2017–2021. Die beispiellose Präsidentschaft, in Christof Mauch (ed.), Die Präsidenten der USA. 46 historische Porträts von George Washington bis Joseph R. Biden, Munich 2021, pp. 498–521, 594–599.

From the growing German-language literature on Trump, see Stephan Bierling, *America First. Donald Trump im Weißen Haus. Eine Bilanz*, Munich 2020; Elmar Thevessen, *Die Zerstörung Amerikas. Wie Donald Trump sein Land und die Welt für immer veränderte*, Munich 2020; Florian Böller, Christoph M. Haas, Steffen Hagemann, David Sirakov, Sarah Wagner (eds.), *Donald Trump und die Politik in den USA. Eine Zwischenbilanz*, Baden-Baden 2020; Tobias Endler, *Game Over. Warum es den Westen nicht mehr gibt*, Zurich 2020; Michael D’Antonio, *Die Wahrheit über Donald Trump*, Berlin 2016. Josef Braml, *Trumps Amerika – auf Kosten der Freiheit. Der Ausverkauf der amerikanischen Demokratie und die Folgen für Europa*, Berlin 2016; Torben Lütjen, *Amerika im kalten Bürgerkrieg. Wie ein Land seine Mitte verliert*, Darmstadt 2020.

tactics he had learned in a brutal segment of the New York real estate market: in addition to excessive tax avoidance, probably tax evasion (that will come out in civil suits after the end of his term), he pursued a highly speculative investment policy that led him several times to the brink of bankruptcy, and engaged in nepotism, corruption, and collaboration with the Mafia and speculative bankers. In recent years, he was supported only by Deutsche Bank; U.S. bankers no longer even wanted to touch him with a ten-foot pole. Trump also had contacts with the mafia because Anthony Salerno, known as “Fat Tony,” the boss of the Genovese clan, controlled and supplied the cement market in New York, including the material used for the “Trump Tower” on Fifth Avenue and other projects.

Russian oligarchs and kleptocrats helped keep Donald Trump, who was more than four billion dollars in debt, afloat in the late 1990s. At least that’s what historian Timothy Snyder of Yale University has found out.⁶³ They gave Trump loans and used his real estate for organized money laundering. His Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue was just one of two buildings in New York that allowed the anonymous sale of apartments. Trump’s survival depended on money from Russian oligarchs. After signing a memorandum of understanding for a “Trump Tower” in Moscow, he tweeted in July 2015, “Putin likes Donald Trump.” As president of the United States Trump was susceptible to blackmail by Putin on many fronts: the multiple business ties from Trump and his family to Russian oligarchs that continued during his presidency; Russian influence on the 2016 election campaign in favor of Trump and with the goal of undermining Hillary Clinton’s position; and, finally—possibly—recordings of Trump with prostitutes in Moscow. These conflicts of interest are the only way to explain the fact that Trump never once publicly criticized Putin, but always showed understanding for the position of the Russian dictator, far more than, for example, for the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Angela Merkel. Trump kept minutes of confidential talks with Putin to himself or had them destroyed.

Trump’s mentor was a notorious lawyer named Roy Cohn, who from the 1950s through the 1980s legally represented anyone who could pay him. Cohn had begun his career as a Communist hunter during the McCarthy era. He was indicted several times as a lawyer on charges

63 Cf. Timothy Snyder, *Der Weg in die Unfreiheit. Russland, Europa, Amerika*, Munich 2018, pp. 223–234.

including extortion, bribery, stock fraud, and perjury. Because he was always able to maneuver his way out of seemingly hopeless situations, Trump thought his lawyer was vicious but a “genius.” Trump could accurately observe how to extricate himself from hard-pressed situations. Trump pre-existing belief in Social Darwinism was reinforced by Cohn’s tactics: never give up, never admit to anything, immediately go on the public and legal counterattack; sue those who sue you for double the amount; create headlines, especially television images; speak emotionally and hatefully, and appeal to people’s baser instincts. That’s part of the reason Trump blocked the two impeachment hearings and immediately responded with political counterattacks. Cohn, however, had to recognize that Trump dropped him, his mentor, stone cold when he fell ill. Before his death in 1992, he said of Trump: “Donald pisses ice water.”

Donald Trump, who didn’t take office until he was 70, had over his long life developed into a genius of self-promotion, in the real estate market and as a star on television shows, especially “The Apprentice,” where his favorite line was: “You are fired.” He realized that the more he violated minimum standards of interpersonal decency, the greater the public impact. He dominated and manipulated the market-based public sphere in the U.S. and then in the world like no politician before him; he also imposed his agenda on the critical and hostile media. The more deceitfully and violently he appealed to the emotions and hatreds of his audience, the more frenetic the applause and the more radical the criticism. He did not care as long as HE was the center of attention.

The extent to which the system of lies destroyed American society and the public sphere cannot be underestimated.⁶⁴ He began his lies as an office holder as soon as he was sworn in. He never intended to fulfill his oath of office, which was to execute the office of President of the United States to the best of his ability and to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. Against all appearances, he claimed that never before had so many people watched the inauguration of a president. His craving for recognition was so great that he did not mind that the whole world could see his lie on the screen. His press secretary spoke of “alternative facts.” The White House website has a long list of his alleged accomplishments—almost all spun or deceitful statements. According to a Washington Post lie counter, he made

64 See Philip N. Howard, *Lie Machines. How to Save Democracy from Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations, and Political Operatives*, New Haven and London 2020.

13,455 false or misleading statements in his first 1,000 days in office. That is why, in a letter to New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, the writer of this essay suggested putting up a ticking presidential lie clock next to the national debt clock on 44th Street—unfortunately to no avail.

The public use of the presidential lie as the dominant form of communication, the systematic denigration of his opponents and of all institutions of American politics and society, and the promise of salvation by President Donald J. Trump who would lead the (white) American people to new greatness against internal and external enemies—“to make America great (and white) again”—all this exacerbated the already existing divisions and conflicts in American politics, economy, and culture. Even President Obama had only been able to marginally change these problems:

- The partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats that had spilled over into society and families.
- The deficiencies of the U.S. political system: the antiquated, unrepresentative electoral system, open to manipulation and abuse; the dysfunctional legislative process in Congress, accessible only to specialists; and the Supreme Court, whose conservative majority believes it must interpret jurisprudence in the 21st century according to the intentions of the Founding Fathers and the social constitution of the 13 colonies in the 18th century (*original intent*). The Land of Liberty lacks a basic philosophical foundation of law drawn from a philosophy of freedom in the sense of Kant: Only in a constitutional state can the freedom of the individual be guaranteed by the freedom of others, without the antagonistic freedom claims of individuals canceling each other out. Because this philosophical cornerstone is missing, the American constitutional state is, in many areas, only a state of “legal redress.” The slave laws in the individual states and the endless stream of repressive measures after the Civil War were not laws at all in the philosophical sense of liberty, but acts of arbitrariness.
- The country’s inability to come to terms with its original sin of racism, to deliver on the promise of a multicultural society, and to accept its internal globalization.⁶⁵

65 On the problem of racism, see the work of Manfred Berg, “No, he couldn’t!”, in: in: Die Zeit, August 11, 2016. <https://www.zeit.de/2016/34/barack-obama-kampf-gegen-rassismus>. Was ist aus Martin Luther Kings Traum geworden? Amerikas

- The deep and profoundly divisive opposition over what should be provided by the market and what should be provided by the state in the 21st century, combined with enormous economic, social, and cultural inequality;⁶⁶ also with massive inequality of opportunities for advancement, leading not only to a class society but also to a caste society.⁶⁷
- The increasing destruction of the environment, the decay of public infrastructure, and the rapidly increasing number of environmental disasters that affect the population in very different ways.
- The wide gap between life experiences and realities on the ground in rural and urban regions of the U.S. and the ensuing culture clash between rural and urban populations.
- The inability of the U.S. to consolidate the monopoly of legitimate violence reserved to the state and to stop the endemic proliferation of privately owned firearms (approximately 400 million), which, if possible, would mean the disarming of a potential army in the case of a civil war.

Schwarze Minderheit seit der Bürgerrechtsbewegung, in: Michael Butter, Astrid Franke, Horst Tonn (eds.), *Von Selma bis Ferguson. Rasse und Rassismus in den USA*. Bielefeld 2016, pp. 73–92; Von Barack Obama zu Donald Trump. Martin Luther Kings Traum vor dem Ende?, in *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 67, 18, 2017, 22–28; Begrenzter Handlungsspielraum: Obama und das Problem des Rassismus, in: *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik* 10, 2, 2017, pp. 97–109, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12399-017-0621-5>.

66 See Welf Werner, Winfried Fluck (eds.), *Wie viel Ungleichheit verträgt die Demokratie? Armut und Reichtum in den USA*, Frankfurt 2003. Welf Werner, *The Trump Phenomenon: Economic Causes and Remedies*, in: Heidelberg Center for American Studies (ed.), *Annual Report 2018–2019*, pp. 170–188; Christian Lammert, *The Broken Social Contract: The Domestic Roots of U.S. Hegemonic Decline in the World*, in: Florian Böller, Welf Werner (eds.), *Hegemonic Transition. Global Economic and Security Orders in the Age of Trump*, Basingstoke 2021. See also Emmanuel Saez, Gabriel Zucman, *Der Triumph der Ungerechtigkeit. Steuern und Ungleichheit im 21. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 2020 (from the American). On urban inequality, see Ulrike Gerhard, *Die Bedeutung von „Rasse“ und „Klasse“ im US-amerikanischen Ghetto*, in: *Geographische Rundschau* 66, 5, 2014, pp. 18–24; idem, *Strukturwandel und wachsende urbane Ungleichheiten im US-amerikanischen Rustbelt*, in: *Geographische Rundschau* 67, 3, 2015, pp. 20–27.

67 Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste. The Origins of Our Discontents*, New York 2020.

- The Republican political counter-revolution, which has systematically subverted the courts, legislatures, and governments in the interests of its party since President Ronald Reagan was in office (1981–1989). It is no coincidence that the House of Representatives’ desperate attempt in March 2021 to use a reform bill (H.R.1) to change election law, stop partisan and grotesque *gerrymandering*, curb the influence of big money on election campaigns, and establish minimum ethical requirements (!) for Supreme Court justices, the president, and the executive branch has met with massive Republican resistance. Anyone who wants a sober picture of the state of American democracy should delve into this bill.⁶⁸ However, this bill will fail because of another procedural blockade, the obstruction of a Senate decision by continuous speakers (*filibusters*); i.e., where a speaker can spend days reading from the Bible to block a decision. The only purpose of the filibuster is to increase the approval rate in the Senate from 51 to 60 votes (a two-thirds majority).
- The left wing of the Democratic party, which is increasingly dominated by identity politics, purification fantasies, and ahistorical moralism.
- The fragmentation into more than a thousand religious communities, which dissolves the unifying bond of American civil religion—the trinity of “God, Country, and Freedom”—from within.

The big million-dollar question, of course, is why Trump was elected in 2016 and why he lost by a very narrow margin in 2020. In 2016, only slightly more than one in four of the 232 million eligible voters voted for Trump, nearly 63 million or 27 percent, and in 2020, by contrast, about 74 million of the eligible voters, or about 32 percent.

To get closer to answering this question, let’s start with Trump’s election strategy: Who was targeted by his emotions, lies, and fake news? Trump catered to the partly open, partly hidden racism of his voters, their fears of alienation and loss of status, their bitterness about the traditional elites and what they see as a corrupt political system. He catered to their penchant for simple and, if need be, violent solutions. He offered himself as a leader who would bang the table on domestic and foreign policy, understand the “real” interests of the people and

68 117th Congress, H.R. 1. For the People Act of 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1/text> (Mar. 15, 2021).

lead them to the Promised Land. At a campaign event, a Trump supporter was asked why he supported this president. His simple answer: "Because he talks like us."

If three ideal-typical groups of voters are singled out, 1. the faithful, 2. the poor, underprivileged, and disenfranchised, and 3. the rich, it must at the same time be noted that parts of these groups can also be found among Democrats or non-voters.

The first group is the evangelicals. More than a third of Americans, i.e., more than 100 million people, are counted among the Protestant evangelicals, who are increasingly taking over from the old Protestant churches. Evangelicals are fundamentalists in the sense that they base their faith solely on the literal interpretation of the Bible as the Word of God. They cannot share the conviction of many Protestants, involving 2000 years of interpretive history, that the Bible is God's word in man's word. They are at war with America's liberal tradition; they literally demonize divorce, adultery, abortion, and homosexuality; and they fight against the legal separation of church and state, a cornerstone of the American Constitution. All initiatives promoted by the fundamentalists in judicial, social, family, and economic policy are subordinated to these goals. As Christian Zionists, they also unconditionally support Israel on theological grounds.

During the campaign, Trump discovered evangelicals mostly by accident. He was stunned that his Republican competitors always knew God was on their side. Therefore, he invited the leaders of the main evangelical religious communities to Trump Tower in New York and promised to fulfill all their wishes, including concerns about personnel. For the sake of these promises, they ignored the president's not very Christian character traits. In fact, he appointed Mike Pence, a fanatical evangelical, as vice president; and, as desired by the evangelicals, he held on tenaciously to the choice of a conservative federal judge, namely Brett Kavanaugh. Secretary of State Pompeo and Attorney General Barr were also evangelicals. Of course, when they tried to test his Christian credibility, he lied about his supposedly regular church attendance. When they asked him about communion, he recalled "drinking my little wine and having my little cracker."⁶⁹

The second large group is the white underclass and lower middle class, although it should be added that a quarter of Trump's voters

69 John Fea, *Believe Me. The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, Grand Rapids 2018, p. 3; cf. Philip Gorski, *Am Scheideweg. Amerikas Christen und die Demokratie vor und nach Trump*, Freiburg in Breisgau, 2020 (from the American).

were not white.⁷⁰ They are victims of the enormous social and political inequality in the country. 33 percent of so-called “blue collar workers,” that is, people without college degrees, are white. This class often lives in extremely precarious conditions, always on the verge of catastrophe. Sixty percent of Americans live paycheck to paycheck. A single failure to receive a monthly payment can plunge them into social disaster. The statistics are also of little value in terms of the employment rate, and the same is true of the average income. The latter is statistically \$75,000 annually. But the 122 million Americans at the bottom of the income pyramid (the bottom 40 percent) earn an average of only \$18,500 annually. They do not hold the American economic and cultural system primarily responsible for the blatant inequality in the U.S. and their own precarious situation, as left-wing Democrats do; rather, they feel they are victims of globalization and sinister, foreign powers.

Income inequality is exacerbated by a regressive tax system. The bottom 40 percent of the population still have to pay 25 percent tax despite being on the edge of subsistence level income; while the lower middle class pays 28 percent, and the rich only very slightly more. For the richest 400 billionaires, the tax rate then drops again to 23 percent. The net result is that the “Trumps” “Zuckerbergs” and “Buffets” have a lower tax rate than their secretaries. For the first time in over a century, there is this disparity between billionaires and their secretaries.⁷¹

Their children have no chance to pay for a good education. American students have more debt than any homeowner. Health insurance, if they have any at all, is rapidly becoming Swiss cheese. The epidemic drug and opium use in the U.S. is also related to the fact that this underclass, discharged from the legally required emergency room, is only given pain-relieving pills for a few days, then they have to find other ways of getting these drugs. They are therefore always looking for scapegoats and a “leader” who will finally put them out of their misery. And that is what Trump promised them. Trump delivered them the scapegoats in brutal language and miserable English: The nations that make their unfair trade profits at the expense of the U.S.; the immigrants and refugees who take away the jobs. His speeches, as noted, are peppered with racial innuendo, especially, but not only,

70 Cf. Charles M. Blow, *The Devil You Know. A Black Power Manifesto*, New York 2021, p. 212.

71 See Emmanuel Saez, Gabriel Zucman, *The Triumph of Injustice. How the Rich Dodge Taxes and How to Make Them Pay*, New York 2019.

against African Americans. He skillfully instrumentalizes America's original sin, racism.

The third group of Trump supporters are rich Americans who benefit from the money and credit glut, as well as from the Republicans' tax policy. They continue to follow their interests first and foremost; they had filled Trump's campaign coffers for the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections to the brim. The reality of life for the 24.8 million golfers in the U.S. in 2020 (including 6 million women) at 14,100 golf courses, for example, is fundamentally different from the reality of the rural and urban poor. In these Republican bastions, most golfers are rock solidly convinced that by virtue of their own efforts and hard work, they have earned their prosperity themselves. Their only constant complaint is taxes being too high. They have all forgotten that in 1960 they still paid almost 60 percent in taxes. It is only in this milieu that Trump spends his—extraordinarily ample—free time. They do not want to make their contribution to the common good through an active state and taxes, but through voluntary *charity*. Among the great American patrons, a gain in distinction is in any case no longer achieved by the size of the money earned alone, but also by the money donated. For many religious Republicans, charity is an obligation of worldly success, which can still be interpreted as a sign of being chosen by divine grace (Max Weber). As one of the greatest philanthropists of all times, Andrew Carnegie, famously said, he wanted to avoid the shame of dying rich.

In many ways, American patrons are in the tradition of the greatest philanthropist of the early modern era, Jakob Fugger, a banker and entrepreneur from Augsburg, a global player of his time who saw eye-to-eye with the pope and emperor and, at the height of his European influence in 1519, founded with his brothers an entirely new, middle-class institution for the poor, the "Fuggerei," which still exists today. The Fuggers, like Americans today, were always on the lookout for "their industrious but poor fellow citizens." Under no circumstances was charity allowed to end up with idlers, drunkards, thieves, and violent criminals. This civic spirit of voluntary charity between the market and the state is also the basis for the worldwide "service clubs" (*We Serve*) founded by the USA, such as Lions and Rotary, the Soroptimists and Zontas. On average, Americans donate seven times as much per person as Germans.⁷² Meanwhile, thanks to the bubbles

72 Statista Research Department, Comparison of the volume of donations in Germany and the USA (in euros per inhabitant per year), Statista 2009, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/37177/umfrage/spenden---vergleich-des->

in the financial and capital markets, so much economic power has accumulated among the major donors that they themselves want to solve humanity's problems, which the indebted states and international aid organizations cannot handle. A prominent example is Bill and Melinda Gates, who are fighting poverty, disease, and inequality in the world.

Democrats, on the other hand, have had more trouble filling their coffers for the primaries and elections. There are comparatively few wealthy Americans who traditionally support the Democratic Party. Many of them were deeply concerned that the party might nominate as its presidential candidate a leftist man or woman whom they all consider to be a socialist or a communist. After all, a social market economy in the European sense is inconceivable even to wealthy Democrats. They, too, are imbued with the quintessentially American conviction that the best government is no government.

If one compares the lower class, which lives on the edge of the subsistence level and often drifts into illegality, with those rich, who are fixated on tax avoidance, Hegel's insight that the "poor" and the "rich" rabble are the greatest structural threat to bourgeois society in the New World, seems to deserve more thought and credit. Among the poor and the rich rabble there would be a problematic understanding of law.⁷³

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Rebellious Republicans are largely in Trump's pocket. He threatened and continues to threaten congressmen and senators that he can mobilize his supporters against them in their districts. That is why the Republican Party has become a shadow of itself. The big question is what actions of Trump it will take to lose the loyalty of Republicans. Obviously not by impeachment proceedings and a storming of the Capitol.

Trump harbors an almost bottomless hatred for his predecessor Barack Obama. The intelligent and charismatic Obama is a living provocation for the racist Trump. After Obama's election, Trump helped to spread a conspiracy theory that Obama was not born in the USA and therefore not a legitimate president (*birtherism*). Obama initially

spendenvolumens-in-deutschland-und-den-usa/ (March 29, 2021). Cf. Detlef Junker, *Stiftung und Mäzene in historischer Perspektive – eine nichtgehaltene Laudatio auf Manfred Lautenschläger*, in: Dr. h. c. Manfred Lautenschläger. *Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag*, Heidelberg, n.d., pp. 68–72.

73 Cf. Klaus Vieweg, *Hegel. Der Philosoph der Freiheit*, Munich 2nd ed. 2020, pp. 513, 768; cf. Jürgen Kaube, *Hegels Welt*, Berlin 2020.

considered this conspiracy theory too absurd to take a stand on it. Only when this theory became more and more popular did he have a confirmation of his birth (*Certification of Live Birth*) published, according to which he was born on August 4, 1961, in Honolulu, Hawaii.

But then, on May 1, 2011, Obama used a major social event in Washington, D.C., to humiliate Trump and expose him to ridicule, something Trump could never get over. Every year—until the end of Obama’s term—journalists accredited to the White House invited the respective president and a select public of up to 2,000 people to a dinner to ridicule each other with criticism, wit, satire, and humor. Like all such associations, this dinner was a collective affirmation of self-importance—one belongs to the club. Donald Trump and his wife Melania had been invited to the Washington Post table. President Obama fulfilled his role dazzlingly, with self-mockery, wit, subtle allusions, and selected eulogies (while at the same time preparations were underway to kill Bin Laden the next day). Obama announced that the state would now publish his birth certificate in long form, while he himself would release the official video of his own birth. Then he hailed one of the founding fathers of the conspiracy theory, Donald Trump. Obama said that there must be no one happier than Trump, as he could now put the birth certificate story to rest in order to devote himself to a new task, namely proving that the moon landing had been “fake news.” The hall shook with laughter, the deeply humiliated Trump left the event, never to appear there again.

However, he will have been told that Obama lashed out at him again at his last correspondents’ dinner on May 1, 2016, in the midst of the election campaign. He said he absolutely had to talk about Trump again, even though he felt hurt because he had not shown up. What do you think Trump is doing these days? Eating a Trump steak or insulting Angela Merkel on Twitter? The establishment of the Republican Party is shocked, Obama said, because Trump has no experience in foreign policy. But to that, Obama added, in all fairness, Trump has met with world leaders: Miss Sweden, Miss Argentina, and Miss Azerbaijan. In one field, however, Trump’s experience is invaluable, closing Guantanamo (the U.S. maximum security prison for terrorists in Cuba). After all, Trump has experience in bankrupting maritime properties.⁷⁴

74 Barack Obama, The President’s Speech, White House Correspondents’ Dinner, May 1, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/05/01/president-s-speech-white-house-correspondents-dinner> (Mar. 25, 2021); *idem.*, The President’s

Trump's hatred of Obama, a constant throughout his tenure, also has a root in Obama's humiliations before Washington's social elite, which despised him anyway because it looked down on this vulgar, pompous, and lying *nouveau riche*. Trump never arrived in New York and Washington society, which, along with tax avoidance, was an important reason for his retreat to Florida, where he is preparing to return to power, as Napoleon once did on Elba.

Donald Trump and the Destruction of America's World Leadership Role

While Donald Trump drove the U.S. into a pre-civil war situation in domestic politics and deepened the divisions within its society, he ruined the U.S. position in world politics with breathtaking speed. He could not even think of the global reach of U.S. national interests, the great constant of U.S. foreign policy since entering World War II, indivisible security, indivisible world market, and indivisible freedom. The U.S. maintained a military and economic presence in the world during his presidency, but Trump was incapable of any kind of "world policy." For four years, Trump produced chaos in American foreign policy under the slogan "America First."

This was not only due to his narcissism, but also to his complete inability to perceive the outside world, such as other states, societies, and international organizations, as individual entities. He transferred his experiences from the real estate business and show business to the world and always encountered only himself. At the same time, his personnel policy deprived the departments and institutions of U.S. global power of their knowledge of the world. This applied to the Departments of State, Defense, and Commerce, to the National Security Council, to U.S. embassies and consulates, and even to U.S. representation in global organizations. Trump's entry into the White House also meant a hostile takeover of U.S. foreign policy by the "Trump Enterprises."

In foreign policy, Trump said, he doesn't need to be lectured by anyone except his gut. Disillusioned staffers complained that even in foreign policy he only had the attention span of a 13-year-old. His much-described "America First" strategy was nothing more than the

Speech, White House Correspondents' Dinner May 1, 2016, Transcript. <https://time.com/4313618/white-house-correspondents-dinner-2016-president-obama-jokes-transcript-full/> (Mar. 25, 2021).

transfer of his Social Darwinist experiences in the merciless New York real estate scene to world politics. He was never about “America First,” but about “Trump First.” Because he did not know the world, he perceived it as a hostile outside entity that, if he wasn’t careful, would continue to cheat and ruin Americans. “My job is not to represent the world, my job is to represent the United States,” he proclaimed in his first message to Congress on March 1, 2017.⁷⁵ The first has never been claimed by any U.S. president; the second is a given, namely the execution of his duties. The intent of this meaningless juxtaposition was to insinuate that his predecessor Obama did not represent the interests of the United States and was unpatriotic. The second part of his message to Congress was a brutal reckoning with his predecessor’s policies.

A new chapter of American greatness, Trump said, will begin; the mistakes of the past decades should not define the country’s future. The U.S., he said, had embarked on one global project after another but ignored the fate of children in the inner cities of Chicago, Baltimore, and Detroit; the U.S. had protected the borders of other countries but opened its own borders wide to anyone; the U.S. had spent billions overseas while infrastructure collapsed at home. But then, in 2016 (with his election) the earth had moved beneath Americans’ feet. Millions of Americans had awakened, united in the very simple but crucial demand that America put its own citizens first. Only then could America truly be led to new greatness (“Truly Make America Great Again”). Trump grouped his domestic and foreign policy demands around this leitmotif. In domestic policy, he presented a grab bag, the contents of which would make the USA great again in order to let the country shine in new splendor in nine years—at its 250th anniversary in 2026.

His main domestic policy demands included repealing Obama’s health care reform (Obamacare), reducing violence and crime, ending corruption, lowering taxes, partially privatizing the school system, strengthening the police, ending many unnecessary environmental regulations and building new oil pipelines. He promised to stop the “export of jobs and American wealth” to foreign countries, to cancel the Trans-Pacific Free Trade Agreement (TPP) negotiated by Obama, to build a wall on the border with Mexico to stop immigrants and terrorists, especially from Muslim countries. He said the decision to admit China to the WTO in 2001 cost the U.S. 60,000 factories. He

75 Donald Trump, Remarks by President Trump, in: Joint Address to Congress, February 28, 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-address-congress/> (Mar. 29, 2021).

also attached a price tag to future foreign policy in general. The U.S. would only engage in the world “directly, robustly, and sustainably” if partners in NATO, the Middle East, and the Pacific paid their “fair share of the costs.” Trump’s decades-old obsession with the rest of the world freeloading at U.S. expense was a leitmotif of his first message to Congress.

What was missing from Donald Trump from day one was a knowledge of and understanding for the American mission of freedom, not to mention support for human rights anywhere in the world. This aspect of “liberal internationalism” was not part of his Social Darwinist view of humanity. Relative to the rhetoric of his predecessor Barack Obama, indeed of almost all presidents in the 20th and 21st centuries, Trump’s foreign policy had no idealistic dimension of freedom. The American idea of mission was no longer present anywhere in the world during his presidency.

Trump also had no idea about global American security policy, indivisible security, as Defense Secretary James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and many others inside and outside the Cabinet were horrified to discover during his first months in office. Trump had no knowledge of history and had major problems with the world map. He knew little about the basics of American global politics after 1945, U.S. alliance systems, and the global military presence of U.S. forces. He also had only “gut feelings” about world politics; when his spontaneous “ideas” were criticized, he went into fits of rage. Obviously, for him, the worldwide military presence, bases, and alliances were a waste of money; also, because the allies paid too little, being free riders of American generosity. If alliances were to be kept at all, he said, everyone should pay more for them in order to stop cheating the United States. While he was quick to try to build good relations with dictators and authoritarian regimes to broker a leader-to-leader “deal,” he not only questioned the purpose of NATO but was also inclined to withdraw U.S. troops from South Korea and Afghanistan.

Being highly alarmed at the situation, military leaders and secretaries had a saving idea. They decided to try impress Trump by inviting him to the Pentagon’s inner sanctum, the legendary room 2E924, called “The Tank,” where senior generals and admirals develop and visualize strategies for war and peace. Defense Secretary James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, as well as Gary Cohn, director of the National Economic Council, and others hoped to win over the president with presentations, maps, diagrams, and speeches. To get his attention, many

documents simply had Donald Trump's name written into them. This meeting turned out to be a disaster in every respect.⁷⁶ The very first sentence on the screen proclaimed exactly what Trump deeply hated: "The rule-based postwar world order is the greatest gift of the greatest generation." The "greatest generation" in the U.S. is fondly understood to mean the victors of World War II. General Mattis also lectured on NATO's significant role in stabilizing Europe, which in turn serves U.S. security. Steve Bannon, at that time still an important advisor to Trump, a whisperer, Lenin admirer, and also a "great disruptor," was already worried about disaster after the first sentences. This would go wrong. Trump would not even be able to say the phrase "rule-based postwar world order" if his life depended on it. He simply does not think that way.

For an hour and a half, Trump was briefed not only on the global security situation but also on the benefits of free trade. Trump, as always plagued by a short attention span, reacted visibly annoyed, interrupting whenever it occurred to him and putting on record his worldview, according to which he actually acted during his presidency. The world's statesmen and politicians would have been spared many disappointments if the minutes of this meeting had been made available to them at the beginning of Trump's term.

To name just a few of Trump's key positions: South Korea should pay for the U.S.-developed missile defense system itself, he said, even though it was designed to shoot down ballistic missiles from North Korea to protect South Korea *and* U.S. forces. Moreover, he said, he could easily eliminate the threat of North Korean nuclear missiles by making a deal with dictator Kim Jong-un: "This is just leader against leader. Man against man. Me against Kim." NATO is also worthless, he said. NATO countries owe the United States heaps of money. This, he said, was simply "back payment" that the U.S. was not collecting. If a company were run that way, it would have gone bankrupt long ago. In response, General Mattis even dared to contradict his president. NATO partners do not owe the U.S. "rent." The circumstances, he said, were complicated. Above all, he said, the president must see the big picture, because NATO protects not only Western Europe, but also the United States.

76 The meeting, which has been documented several times, is most fully described in: Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig's, *Trump gegen die Demokratie*. "A Very Stable Genius," Frankfurt 2020 (from the American), chapter 9; see also Bob Woodward, *Furcht: Trump im Weißen Haus*, Reinbek 2018 (from the American); idem, *Rage*, London 2020.

Cohn then tried to explain to President Trump the value of trade agreements. Trump disputed all of Cohn's arguments, stating that he should not even try to convince him of free trade. That's going totally wrong, he said. "They're screwing us. All the jobs are gone. They're screwing us." Trump also repeated the threat to withdraw from the Iran nuclear agreement. That, he said, is the worst deal ever. The Iranians would cheat and build nuclear bombs. Finally, Trump also attacked the military personally. He demanded an explanation why the U.S. still hasn't won the war in Afghanistan after 16 years, he said. This, he said, was a "loser's war." He talked himself into a rage, telling the military officers present, "You're all losers. You don't even know how to win anymore." He yelled at the assembled military and went on to hurl an outrageous insult at everyone in the room: "You're nothing but pussies and babies." That's what the military men, who had put their lives on the line several times in their long careers, had to take from a draft dodger who had been certified by a doctor friend as having bone spurs in both heels and therefore unable to do military service in Vietnam.

None of the military leaders present had the courage to directly contradict Trump, not even Vice President Mike Pence, who looked white as chalk and frozen, like a "deer in the headlights." Only Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the longtime CEO of ExxonMobil, dared to criticize Trump, ushering in the end of his short tenure as U.S. secretary of state. What the president is saying is not right, he said; he is dead wrong. "The men and women who choose to become soldiers do not do so to become mercenaries. That's not why they put on uniforms and risk their lives ... They do it to defend our freedom." When President Donald Trump disappeared with his motorcade, Tillerson did not hide his disdain: "He's a fucking moron."

This "fucking moron" intervened in U.S. security policy "leader to leader" all over the world, although he probably never read a single memorandum on security policy. Occasionally, scraps of these memoranda were smuggled into his speeches by his apparatus. But one could never know how far these elements reflected his own fleeting views. This was true, for example, of his speech to the United Nations on September 9, 2017, when he declared North Korea's brutal and terrorist regime a gang of criminals and a scourge on humanity.⁷⁷ He said he may have no choice but to completely destroy North Korea. Of dictator

77 See Politico, Full text: Trump's 2017 U.N. speech transcript, Sept. 19, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/19/trump-un-speech-2017-full-text-transcript-242879> (Apr. 6, 2021).

Kim Jong-un, he said, “Rocket Man is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime.” Denuclearization of North Korea, he said, is the only viable way out. He said he faces similar choices not only in North Korea, but also vis-à-vis Iran, the many terrorist organizations, and the criminal regime of Bashar Hafiz al-Assad.

Trump was convinced that he could solve most of these problems “leader to leader,” with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, Russian president and dictator Putin, Chinese dictator Xi Jinping, and Turkish autocrat Erdogan. One of Trump’s key problems with NATO was that he could not find a NATO “leader”—that would actually be himself—and therefore he had to insult different heads of state depending on the occasion, such as Emmanuel Macron or Angela Merkel. NATO’s diplomatic Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg could always inject a little moderation into Trump’s vain blood stream. A particular example of his dealings with other “leaders” was his relationship with Kim Jong-un. Despite his frontal attack on North Korea at the United Nations, Trump was convinced that he could defuse the overriding U.S. security problem in the Pacific, North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, through face-to-face talks. By making a “deal” with Kim, he wanted to outdo Obama and win a Nobel Peace Prize—one that was truly deserved.

North Korea had begun developing a nuclear program as early as the mid-1960s. Although the country had joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985, it had continued to work continuously on improving its nuclear program, and in 2003 it withdrew from the NPT again.⁷⁸ The nuclear program was intended to ensure the survival of the Kim dynasty. Only those capable of a retaliatory nuclear strike would not be attacked by the United States. The fates of Syria’s Bashar Hafiz al-Assad and Libya’s Muammar al-Gaddafi were cautionary examples from Kim’s perspective. Moreover, nuclear power status increases North Korea’s prestige and policy options, particularly its blackmail potential against U.S. allies Japan and South Korea. China’s strategic interests are also existentially affected by this program.

No president before Trump had succeeded in solving the problem of North Korea becoming a nuclear power. Trump now wanted to do it spectacularly in face-to-face talks. In doing so, he gave one of the most bloodthirsty dictators a place on the world stage that his father

78 Cf. Oliver Thränertm, *Des Kaisers neue Kleider: Trump und Nordkorea*, in: Florian Böller, Christoph M. Haas, Steffen Hagemann, David Sirakov, Sarah Wagner (eds.), *Donald Trump und die Politik in den USA. Eine Zwischenbilanz*, pp. 291–306.

and grandfather had not even dared to dream of. Trump did not deny that Kim was violent and evil. But, Trump told journalist and historian Bob Woodward, Kim tells him everything, he knows everything about him. Kim, he said, killed his uncle and chopped off his head. Then he had posted his dead body where the North Korean “senators” had to pass. The chopped-off head had been on his chest, he said, which was hard. “You know, they think politics in this country is tough.”⁷⁹

To prepare for his meetings with Kim in Singapore, Hanoi, and on the demarcation line between North and South Korea, the president and dictator wrote many letters to each other: Kim alone wrote 27 letters to Trump, which the president described as “love letters” full of turgid flattery about their unique, world-historical greatness. That did not stop Trump from reminding Kim about the fate of Gaddafi, which nearly derailed the negotiations before they even began. But neither carrots nor sticks helped, and the global media hype that Trump enjoyed also came to naught. Kim did not deviate one millimeter from his maximum position. Trump, however, lied, as he always does, in a tweet on June 13, 2018, saying there was no longer a nuclear threat from North Korea. Obama had said that North Korea was the biggest and most dangerous problem facing the U.S. “No longer, sleep well tonight,” he assured Americans. Again, a presidential lie dominated the headlines. Then, when Trump announced that he would personally guarantee North Korea’s security and end joint maneuvers with the South Koreans, to the great dismay of the South Koreans and the American military, General Mattis tried to water down this order of Trump’s with many tricks. Once again, a typical discussion ensued between Mattis and Trump. He, Trump, wondered why the U.S. is fighting terrorists all over the world. So that the terrorists, Mattis replied, would not attack the U.S. again. That means, Trump said, that we would have to fight terrorists “all over the world.” No, Mattis said, that is not what it means.⁸⁰

This pattern of lie-driven and reality-deprived “security policy” was evident in Trump’s interactions with all world “leaders.” He has not solved a single U.S. security problem in the world. Apart from his basic belief that the U.S. would be betrayed everywhere, there was no discernible and sustained definition of U.S. foreign policy interest during his tenure, although he constantly bandied about the empty phrase

⁷⁹ Bob Woodward, *Rage*, 2020, p. 184.

⁸⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 106–111.

of “true interests.” Even the word “isolationism” had no geopolitical meaning during his tenure—quite the opposite to the isolationists in the 1930s, who wanted to limit the vital interest of the United States to the Western Hemisphere, half the Atlantic, and half the Pacific.⁸¹ Trump, on the other hand, intervened wherever it occurred to him. It is pointless to attribute to him the “grand strategy” of isolationism; he moved on the world stage like an elephant in a china shop.

Trump alienated traditional allies in Europe and Asia; destroyed the most important currency in international politics, i.e., trust; withdrew the U.S. from international agreements and organizations and thus undermining the foundation of America’s world leadership role; vengefully cancelled government agreements Obama had signed or advanced, such as, the Paris climate agreement, the nuclear deal with Iran, and the transatlantic and transpacific trade agreements. He crippled the WTO from within, threatened to cancel NATO’s Article 5, the collective defense obligation, and withdraw troops from Germany. He handed over the Kurds to Turkey and encouraged his Jewish son-in-law, Jared Kushner, saying that by moving the American embassy to Jerusalem and other measures they could finally destroy any hope for a two-state solution to the Middle East conflict. He supported an agreement between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, and Morocco, called the “Abraham Agreement.” To this end, all three states were bribed: the Emirates with an arms deal; Morocco with a promise to support the annexation of the Western Sahara; while Sudan was taken off the list of “state terrorists.” Kushner, in the tradition of his father-in-law, considered the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians a “pure” real estate issue.⁸² The confrontation with Iran could have ended in war. Nor did a constant strategy ever develop toward China and Russia. Putin and Xi must have considered it a stroke of luck in world history to know this “complete idiot” was in the White House.

The old adage also applies to Trump: Only those who think the possible can recognize the real. NATO and other international organizations would probably not have survived a second Trump term: the U.S. would have failed as the military and economic anchor of the world, while the influence of dictators in Eurasia would have risen even faster. It is conceivable that Trump would have used nuclear weapons in

81 Cf. chapters 6 to 8 in this volume.

82 See Michelle Goldberg, Kushner’s Absurd Peace Plan Has Failed, *New York Times* May 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/17/opinion/us-israel-palestine-jared-kushner.html> (May 21, 2021).

a situation of assumed weakness, while Europe would have fallen into a deep crisis without military protection and open markets. Nor would Trump have addressed in his second term the major issues confronting humanity: nuclear proliferation, overpopulation, corruption, the threat to democracy posed by digitalization and fake news, pandemics, and, last but not least, climate change.

If anyone deserved a Nobel Prize for World Survival, it is the U.S. voters who narrowly prevented a second election for Donald Trump.

Donald Trump and the Indivisible World Market

Trump was proudest of what he had accomplished for the American economy. Despite the roller coaster of his professional life, he felt he was an expert in this area. He had, after all, set out first and foremost to prevent the world from continuing to “screw over” America.

Indeed, there was one area where no one could fool him, a cornerstone of his business model: tax avoidance and evasion. Besides the wall facing Mexico and stopping immigration, there was no other policy area where the Republican Party and he were more in agreement than in the resolve to cut taxes. He personally benefited from the 2017 tax reform, which cut middle incomes by as much as \$800, but the top 1 percent by 64 times.⁸³

When it came to self-promotion of his economic genius, Trump liked to be measured by rising stock prices, although one may doubt that these prices are a gauge of the overall economy and the general prosperity of citizens. After all, in the U.S., only half of American families own stocks at all, while the richest quarter own 90 percent. That is why most of the relief provided by tax reform has not gone into developing the real economy or improving the ailing infrastructure, but has encouraged the purchase of more shares by those who are already wealthy.

Trump also comes last in another ranking, although it is highly debatable among economists whether a president’s impact on the growth of the U.S. economy can even be measured. In a new, comparative study by The New York Times of the annual growth in gross national product and nonfarm employment of 14 presidents from Roosevelt in

83 Cf. Anabelle Körbel, Das Präsidentenduell, in: brand eins, February 26, 2021. <https://www.brandeins.de/magazine/brand-eins-wirtschaftsmagazin/2021/frei-arbeiten/das-praesidentenduell> (13.4.2021).

1933 to the present, Trump lands in last place everywhere, with Obama in 10th and 9th place, respectively. The study also showed that growth has increased an average of 4.6 percent under Democratic presidents since 1933, and 2.4 percent under Republican presidents.⁸⁴

In another area, Trump's record is mixed at best: on trade deals and tariffs. During the campaign and as president, he used bold rhetoric to present himself as a mercantilist. He would eliminate the U.S. trade deficit, especially with China and Germany, oppose currency manipulation by other countries with punitive tariffs if necessary, and cancel all "unfair" trade agreements, all of which—*nota bene*—had been concluded by American governments and presidents in the well-understood interests of the United States. Trump found for his "Voodoo Economics" a previously unknown economist who had long shared Trump's anger about the alleged exploitation of the United States, Peter Navarro. He had published a book, "Death by China," in 2011 and was convinced that the U.S. should stop sacrificing its interests "on the altar of global trade." Navarro became one of Trump's chief whisperers. The president made Navarro the White House director of a newly created Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy (OTMP). Navarro was never fired throughout Trump's tenure.

Most dramatically, however, the toxic combination of an excessive amount of money and credit in the capital markets on the one hand and exploding government debt on the other hand developed during the term of President Donald Trump, including the simultaneous tax cuts pushed by Trump and the Republicans for the rich and super-rich, who used the tax giveaways to increase their portfolio of stocks, bonds, and speculative financial products. The central banks of the U.S., Japan, the U.K., and the European Union, the "glorious four," have pumped more than \$13 trillion into the economy since the great financial crisis of 2008, not to mention the "normal" banks.⁸⁵ When it comes to financial injections, they will not run out of ammunition, proclaimed Jerome Powell, the chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve. He had presumably taken a cue from Mario Draghi, president of the European Central Bank, who was much-admired in the U.S., as he had already

84 See David Leonhardt, Yaryna Serkez, A better U.S. economy under Democrats. Annual growth rate from highest to lowest, *New York Times*, Feb. 10, 2021, pp. 8–10.

85 See Sebastian Mallaby, *The Age of Magic Money*, July-August 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-05-29/pandemic-financial-crisis> (May 21, 2021).

promised in 2012 to finance as much debt as was necessary (“whatever it takes”). The age of “magic money” has begun. Finance ministers can also amass new debts in their countries if they are authorized by national parliaments. For politicians who want to be re-elected, the temptation to do so is almost irresistible, as they are tempted to do so again and again by the fundamental transactional dynamic of any democracy—election promises for votes.

Institutions in Germany such as the Federal Audit Office and the Federal Constitutional Court, which want to curb this debt frenzy with economic and legal arguments, are regarded in the Anglo-Saxon financial world as hopelessly old-fashioned, not up to date, and barely familiar with the latest financial products. When the author of this essay expressed similar doubts to a banker in New York, he smiled mildly and said: “Detlef, please, remember we are living in a monied economy.” The share prices of all companies have only marginally to do with their actual productivity. They are driven by the expectations of investors who live off the financial bubble. The ten largest asset managers all come from the USA, with Blackrock and Vanguard at the top.⁸⁶

The U.S. national debt has continued to explode during Donald Trump’s time in office, from 104 percent of GDP at the beginning of his term to 131 percent by the end of his term. To combat the Corona epidemic and its economic consequences, U.S. government debt will increase dramatically once again, as will the European Central Bank and European countries. The U.S. central bank has long since lost its political independence, it has become the lender of last resort not only for “Wall Street” but also for “Main Street.” The next big crash is pre-programmed. The financial bubble may burst sometime and somewhere ... and the “analysts” will still be arguing the night before about why interest rates are not rising or wondering why the stock markets are panicking when the key interest rate rises by 1 percent. Even renowned economists warn: “The vicious circle of interdependencies between banks and states continues to spin merrily ten years after the start of the euro crisis. Banks are about to lose their essential role in the distribution of capital.”⁸⁷

86 Cf. Markus Frühauf, Furcht vor der Macht von Blackrock, in: F.A.Z., <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/finanzen/gerhard-schick-warnt-vor-marktmacht-von-etf-anbieter-blackrock-17291483.html>.

87 Oliver Bäte, Lars Feld, Was die EZB jetzt tun muss, in: F.A.Z. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/neue-strategie-was-die-ebb-jetzt-tun-muss-17396467/oliver-baete-ist-vorstandschef-17396464.html>

In parallel with rising debt, American influence in the global financial economy has also increased under Trump. Almost two-thirds of the foreign exchange reserves of all central banks are held in dollars, while the Chinese yuan only accounts for 2 percent. The dollar remains the global reserve currency. Savers around the world want the dollar for the same reason that students around the world learn the English language: both are needed everywhere. The U.S. ability to borrow money safely and cheaply is a reflection of the dollar's strength as the world's reserve currency. Next to war or the threat of war, therefore, the dollar is the toughest weapon of U.S. foreign policy. Today, the American financial system has more power over countries and peoples than ever before. Moreover, the world's digital services are dominated by U.S. economic infrastructure superpowers: Microsoft, Google, Facebook, Apple, and Amazon. China, Russia, and, to a modest extent, Europe, are trying to shorten this lead.

U.S.-German Relations 2009–2021

U.S.-German relations from 2009 to 2021, during the terms of Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump on one side of the Atlantic, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel on the other, were to a large extent preformed and postformed by a series of historical events in the world and developments *prior to* their terms in office: by the end of the Cold War, the reunification of Germany, the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1989 to 1991, by a revolution in Europe; and by the U.S. response to the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 which was a semi-revolution in U.S. world politics, namely the attempt to grow out of the West's world leadership role in the Cold War into a global world supremacy role (*primacy*).⁸⁸

The result of both revolutions was that for the USA, after two world wars and the Cold War, the German question was resolved. The Two Plus Four Treaty of 1990 created the kind of Germany that the U.S. had always wanted since the founding of the German Empire in 1871.⁸⁹ It was no accident that President George H. Walker Bush's administration made possible German reunification from the Western side—a project

88 Cf. chapters 11, 12, 14, 15 in this volume; cf. Till Karmann, Simon Wendt, Tobias Endler, Martin Thunert (eds.), *Zeitenwende 9/11? Eine transatlantische Bilanz*, Opladen 2010; Philipp Gassert, *September 11, 2001*, Stuttgart 2021.

89 Cf. chapter 2 in this volume.

that would have failed if left to the Europeans. Since then, Germany has played a special role in the memorial culture of the Americans—along with Japan—as a prime example of the world-historical significance of the American missionary idea of freedom.

On the other hand, since reunification, especially after 9/11, the U.S. has expected Germany, as a “new partner,” to broadly follow the interests and values of the world’s only remaining superpower. The U.S. also defined its interests vis-à-vis Germany in terms of indivisible security, an indivisible world market, and indivisible freedom. Even in the 1990s, when the author of this essay lived in Washington, D.C., the recurring question was what the reunified Germans would now do for the common cause of the West. From the American point of view, however, George H. Walker Bush’s soothing mantra that the two states should cooperate in the future as “partners in leadership” did not mean that two states would face each other at “eye level,” but that Germany as a whole would support American interests and values in Europe and the world. Despite all the rhetoric of friendship and cooperation that U.S. diplomacy, especially during Obama’s presidency, mastered on all continents, from the American perspective there was no “eye level” in realpolitik with Germany. The U.S. world leadership role was never in question in Washington’s corridors of power. It was precisely this power imbalance that German Chancellor Angela Merkel, herself extremely power-conscious, was able to react to very sensitively. She also demanded of the U.S. what she could not have: equality and an “encounter at eye level.” The German chancellor very often perceived the behavior of the global power USA—and rightly so—as “domination diplomacy.”⁹⁰

The futile exhortation to “see eye to eye” with the United States has been a tradition at least since Gerhard Schröder, the chancellor of a red-green coalition, delivered his inaugural address on November 10, 1998. He spoke of the “self-confidence of an adult nation that feels superior to no one, but also inferior to no one”⁹¹—a beautiful projection of the social democratic idea of equality onto the hierarchy of international power politics. In the context of the legal construction of a European “Security and Defense Policy” (ESDP), which to this day de facto does not exist, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer declared in December 2000 that an alliance with Europe would give the U.S. the

90 Cf. Stefan Kornelius, Angela Merkel. Die Kanzlerin und ihre Welt, Hamburg 2013, pp. 121–151.

91 Quoted from: Stephan Bierling, Vormacht wider Willen. Deutsche Außenpolitik von der Wiedervereinigung bis zur Gegenwart, Munich 2014, p. 79.

chance for a “genuine global partnership.”⁹² He was formulating the old hope of a transatlantic alliance on two pillars that had accompanied the Cold War like a shadow. In the hot election campaign of 2002, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder led the Federal Republic into the most serious crisis in U.S.-German relations since reunification when he declared that Germany would not join the “coalition of the willing” to wage war against Iraq.⁹³ A serious conflict with President George W. Bush ensued. Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer complained in May 2002: “Alliance partnerships among free democracies should not be reduced to allegiance; allies are not satellites.”⁹⁴

The fall of 2002 and the spring of 2003 were part of Angela Merkel’s foreign policy formative phase,⁹⁵ when war and peace were at stake and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in a campaign speech on the Opernplatz in Hanover lobbed a rhetorical grenade at President George W. Bush, saying that Germany would not be available for “adventures” in Iraq under his leadership, although “we” were ready for solidarity. In Goslar, Schröder once again sharpened the tone: Germany would not speak out in favor of intervention, even if the UN voted for it. Schröder, as mentioned earlier, was of the same mind as President Bush. While Bush declared that whatever the UN decides, we go in, Schröder declared that whatever the UN recommends, we stay out. Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer let U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld know in a famous session of the Munich Security Conference, “Mr. Secretary, we are not convinced.”⁹⁶

As the leader of the CDU and its fraction in the German parliament, Angela Merkel had a decidedly different view at the time. In an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* on Feb. 20, 2003, she assured Americans that Chancellor Schröder did not speak for all Germans.⁹⁷ She justified the U.S. war against Iraq with a clarity never heard again once she became chancellor. In view of the hostility and contempt for President George W. Bush among the German public, especially among the left and the Greens, Angela Merkel positioned herself in

92 *Ibid.* p. 92.

93 *Ibid.* p. 97.

94 *Ibid.*

95 Kornelius, *Angela Merkel*, p. 131.

96 *Ibid.*, pp. 130–132.

97 Angela Merkel, *Schroeder Doesn’t Speak for All Germans*, *Washington Post*, Feb. 20, 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2003/02/20/schroederdoesnt-speak-for-all-germans/1e88b69d-ac42-48e2-a4ab-21f62c413505/> (May 21, 2021).

the pro-American camp, at the same time criticizing the French government and President Jacques Chirac.

Rarely, Angela Merkel said, could one experience the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. The fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11 were the two revolutionary events that forced Europe and the United States to redefine the foundations of their domestic, foreign, and security policies. On the one hand, Europe is assuming new obligations in Kosovo and Afghanistan. On the other hand, Europe is divided on many issues; possibly even deeply divided. The most important principle for German policy must be: Germany should never again act alone. This lesson, she said, had been pushed aside by the German government ... for electoral purposes. This indictment was almost tantamount to a stab in the back of the Berlin government, having been carried out at the headquarters of the leading Western power. Possibly she remembered how successful the stab in the back against her foster father, Chancellor Helmut Kohl, had been with an article in the “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.”

The danger from Iraq, Angela Merkel said, was firstly not fictional but real. Second, she said, Europe, together with the United States, must assume greater responsibility for maintaining international pressure against Saddam Hussein. That meant advocating military force as a last resort to carry out the decisions of the United Nations. It is true, she said, that war should not become a normal means to resolve political conflicts. But the history of Germany and Europe in the 20th century holds one lesson in particular: even if military force is not the—normal—continuation of politics by other means, it should never be ruled out or questioned (as the German government has done) as a last resort to deal with a dictator. Anyone who rules out military force as a last resort, she said, weakens the pressure that must be maintained against dictators, or else you make war more likely, not less likely.

Angela Merkel ended by praising the common security of Europe and the United States. The U.S., she said, is the only remaining superpower; yet it depends on a common security alliance. Germany also needs friendship with France, she said, but the benefits of that friendship can only be realized with its old and new partners (in the East) and within the transatlantic alliance with the United States. She fired another broadside against the French government and President Jacques Chirac, an agile politician with no deep European convictions who had invoked U.S. boycott measures against France in

the diplomatic turmoil before the attack on Iraq.⁹⁸ The Japanophile Chirac, who had flown to Japan 45 times in his political career and felt a passion for the Arab world, had major problems finding his way in the transatlantic relationship. At one point, he had proposed to the Americans that NATO's command in the Mediterranean be placed under the French. "When Chirac, who knows the region better and was once friends with Saddam, threatened a veto in the UN Security Council, the U.S. decided to punish France, but to forgive Germany under Schröder thanks to the influence of Condoleezza Rice (the U.S. National Security Advisor)." ⁹⁹

Germany and Indivisible Security

The contribution of Germany's "peace and civil power" to the common defense within the NATO alliance, a cornerstone of U.S. global, indivisible security, has been and continues to be an explosive problem in American-German relations. This problem feeds not only on the logic of international security relations, but also on a *clash of expectations*. The Americans expect the Germans to make a substantial contribution to defense. For many Germans, on the other hand, eternal peace had broken out with the end of the Cold War, at least in Europe. Germany seemed to be surrounded only by friends in Europe. If a German military contribution had to be made outside Europe at all, it would only be as a peacekeeping stability measure. Like the devil shies away from holy water, the German parliament shied and still shies away from the word "war" when it comes to sending German troops. The American troop withdrawal and the parallel development of the Bundeswehr continue to cause great tension in U.S.-German relations to this day.

According to data collected at great expense, approximately 22 million members of the U.S. Armed Forces were stationed in Germany from 1945 to 2000: soldiers, civilian support personnel (*servicemen*), and family members. This presence was the largest peacekeeping and security-giving mission in all of world history.¹⁰⁰ In 2019, during Trump's threat to withdraw troops from Germany, 38,000 U.S. troops were

98 Cf. Albrecht Rothacher, *Das Unglück der Macht. Frankreichs Präsidenten von de Gaulle bis Macron*, Berlin 2020, pp. 441–475.

99 *Ibid.* p. 471.

100 See Dewey A. Browder, *Population Statistics for U.S. Military in Germany, 1945–2000*, in: Thomas W. Maulucci Jr., Detlef Junker (eds.), *GIs in Germany*.

still stationed in Germany, more than in any other European country. The U.S. European Command (EUCOM) in the south of Stuttgart coordinates forces in 51 countries. There are also several U.S. bases in Germany, some for missions that extend beyond Europe. For decades, the returned GIs were special ambassadors of the Federal Republic in their homeland. In the remotest corners of the U.S., you could meet former soldiers at a bar who had come from Ramstein, Heidelberg, Rothenburg o. d. Tauber, Lake Chiemsee, and the Munich Oktoberfest.

A special group were the three million African-American GIs who had experienced a “breath of freedom” in the Federal Republic. After returning to the United States, a not inconsiderable number of them therefore became involved in the civil rights movement and the fight against structural racism in the United States.¹⁰¹ The center of U.S. global military strategy for Eurasian security, international trade, and keeping sea lanes open remains the nuclear triad. The United States has by far the highest military spending in the world (\$778 billion in 2020), followed by China, India, Russia, and the United Kingdom.¹⁰²

The personnel strength of the Bundeswehr, on the other hand, has been reduced from almost 480,000 in 1991 to 183,969 in 2020, of which a maximum of 10,000 soldiers can be made available for missions at any given time. After the fall of communism, the remnants of the GDR’s National People’s Army that had not disbanded also had to be integrated, some 90,000 servicemen and women and 50,000 civilian personnel.¹⁰³ This Bundeswehr was downsized several times and always reorganized because it was an army without a clear military mission.

The Social, Economic, Cultural, and Political History of the American Military Presence, New York 2013, pp. 351f.

101 See Maria Höhn, Martin Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom. The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany*, New York 2010.

102 World military spending rises to nearly \$2 trillion in 2020, in SIPRI, Apr. 26, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/world-military-spending-rises-almost-2-trillion-2020> (May 21, 2021).

103 There is a separate branch of research on the development of the Bundeswehr. Cf. Wilfried von Bredow, *Armee ohne Auftrag. Die Bundeswehr und die deutsche Sicherheitspolitik*, Zurich 2020; Sönke Neitzel, *Deutsche Krieger. Vom Kaiserreich zur Berliner Republik – eine Militärgeschichte*, Berlin 2020; Klaus Naumann, *Einsatz ohne Ziel? Von der Politikbedürftigkeit des Militärischen*, Hamburg 2008; Hans-Peter Bartels, *Deutschland und das Europa der Verteidigung. Globale Mitverantwortung erfordert das Ende militärischer Kleinstaaterei*, Bonn 2020; Volker Stanzel, *Die ratlose Außenpolitik und warum sie den Rückhalt der Gesellschaft braucht*, Bonn 2019; Constantin Wißmann, *Bedingt einsatzbereit. Wie die Bundeswehr zur Schrottarmerie wurde*, Munich 2019.

Since reunification, it has lost seven male ministers of defense and two female ministers of defense. At the suggestion of a charismatic impostor and plagiarist from Bavaria, Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg, compulsory military service was also abolished, becoming law under his successor Thomas de Maizière on June 1, 2011. Chancellor Angela Merkel also considered the abolition of compulsory military service to be an appropriate contribution to the “debt brake” in the financial and banking crisis. After all, zu Guttenberg had been the first minister to dare to speak of “war-like conditions” in Afghanistan; a courageous act in view of the dominant pacifism in the German population and the fact that in August 2010, 64 percent of Germans advocated withdrawal from Afghanistan. Now, ten years later, the withdrawal has begun. After a completely failed “police mission,” police officers have already left the country.¹⁰⁴ The democratization of the country has completely failed. This was already predictable in 2001.¹⁰⁵

The Bundeswehr has strategically vacillated between a strategy of national and alliance defense in Europe (Ukraine, Crimea, Lithuania, Kosovo, Mediterranean) on the one hand; potentially global out-of-area missions in West Africa (Western Sahara, Mali), East Africa (Sudan, Somalia, Horn of Africa), the Middle East (Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Qatar, Kuwait) and Asia (Afghanistan) on the other hand. Defense Minister Peter Struck’s phrase has become legendary: “Germany will also be defended in the Hindu Kush”—and not just in Hindelang.

The German armed forces were constantly plagued by personnel shortages, severe deficiencies in equipment and chronic problems with the defense industry on the one hand and procurement administration on the other; they had to contend with bureaucratic idleness, competence disputes, promotion freezes and a lack of resources, but above all with a lack of support from the population. Procurement management and scandalous equipment deficiencies in particular were tarnishing the reputation of the German armed forces. While the 2016 annual report of Hans-Peter Bartels, the Federal Commissioner for the Armed Forces, ruthlessly exposed the weaknesses of the Bundeswehr

104 Cf. Peter Carstens, Das abrupte Ende einer Polizeimission, in: F.A.Z., 4.5.2021, p. 4. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/afghanistan-abruptes-ende-der-deutschen-polizeimission-17323785.html> (21.5.2021).

105 Cf. chapter 14 in this volume.

in his report to the Bundestag, that same year the federal government produced a “white paper,” basically general niceties on a “networked security.”¹⁰⁶

President Barack Obama, who, as reported, had decided to increase U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan by 30,000 servicemen and women the day before he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, while promising the American people that the other NATO countries would also make their contribution of 10,000 troops, was increasingly disillusioned with the lack of support from other NATO members, especially Germany under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel. He finally let his Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, off the leash, launching a harsh attack on NATO allies at a NATO meeting in Brussels on June 10, 2011. Gates sharply criticized NATO’s weaknesses in Afghanistan and in the air campaign in Libya, in which Germany had refused to participate at the last minute. He stressed the need to improve political and military capabilities if NATO is to survive at all, and warned of the growing difficulty of maintaining current U.S. support for NATO if American taxpayers continue to bear the brunt. In both Libya and Afghanistan, he said, the Europeans failed by providing too little support to their own forces. Although NATO has two million troops in uniform—not including U.S. soldiers—the alliance has struggled at times to assemble a force of 25,000 to 40,000 troops, he said. Despite the pressure on budgets, President Obama and he—Gates—thought it would be a big mistake for the U.S. to withdraw from its global responsibilities, and that applied to Asia and Europe. But that’s not the way to go, he said. During the Cold War, the U.S. bore about 50 percent of NATO’s costs, but two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it bears 75 percent. Only five allies—the U.S., the United Kingdom, France, Greece, and Albania—would spend the agreed-upon 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense.

Since Gates’ speech, the 2 percent figure has created a mine field in U.S.-German security relations. President Donald Trump threatened several times to cancel Article 5, the automatic collective defense obligation and thus the military-political core of NATO. This encouraged French President Emmanuel Macron to declare NATO’s “brain death” and offer the old mirage of a European nuclear power—under French

106 Cf. Hans-Peter Bartels, Drucksache 18/10900, Deutscher Bundestag, 18. Wahlperiode, pp. 4–51; Weißbuch 2016 zur Sicherheit und zur Zukunft der Bundeswehr, Berlin 2016. <https://www.bmvg.de/resource/blob/13708/015be272f8c0098f1537a491676bfc31/weissbuch2016-barrierefrei-data.pdf>.

hegemony. His ambitions were steered in more modest directions by the German chancellor with promises of joint arms projects. But it is more likely that a camel will pass through the eye of a needle than that Macron will abandon the Gaullist temptation.

Europe and Germany were not at the center of either President Obama's or President Trump's global security policy vision, if one can speak of a "vision" at all with Trump. This also applied to U.S. anti-terrorism policy, which was sharply criticized by the German public, but also to some extent by the European public, especially the brutal treatment of prisoners and the establishment of the Guantanamo detention camp in Cuba. Even the so-called NSA affair did not change this when Edward Snowden, who had been employed for years by the U.S. intelligence service through a temporary agency, revealed in sensational documents that an alliance of Anglo-Saxon intelligence services from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the U.S. (*Five Eyes*) spied on the entire world, including NATO allies such as the Federal Republic, without regard for the privacy of those concerned. That is why these services are called secret services.

The majority of Americans considered Snowden a traitor. The Obama administration justified the program in the U.S. Congress with national security and especially with terrorist attacks "prevented" by U.S. intelligence agencies. The head of the NSA, General Keith Alexander, apparently kept accurate records. He claimed in his congressional hearing that the program had prevented 50 attacks, 20 of them in the United States. From the confidential intelligence reports, the German public also learned what the U.S. Embassy in Berlin thought of the German chancellor. "Persistent under pressure, but avoids risk and is rarely creative." When "Der Spiegel" revealed in October 2013 that the chancellor's cell phone—which was poorly secured—had been tapped, Merkel complained to Obama by phone, saying she found the tapping "completely unacceptable." In Brussels, she declared, "Spying among friends, that's not acceptable at all." Now it has become known that the Americans, with the help of the Danes, also spied on other German politicians, namely then-Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and SPD candidate for chancellor Peer Steinbrück. Of course, the Chancellor also finds this unacceptable.

Under the roof of the American Embassy in Berlin, the U.S. intelligence service had established a listening post, almost within sight of the Chancellor's Office. This was not how the chancellor had envisioned cooperation at "eye level," but she accepted the situation because

the Germans themselves benefited from the information provided by the U.S. intelligence services.¹⁰⁷

Germany and the Indivisible World Market

Power, according to Max Weber, is the ability to impose one's will on another. There are three means of exercising this power in international relations: talk and persuasion (diplomacy), exchange (trade and economics), and force, or at least the threat of force (military). A state that has nothing to offer on all three levels plays no role in international politics. It becomes the object of other powers. This is also true of international organizations such as the former League of Nations, the UN, and the unique institution (*sui generis*), known as the European Union. The legal constitution of international institutions says nothing about their actual influence.

The Federal Republic of Germany, a state roughly the size of the U.S. state of Montana, has a very limited and collectively integrated military presence. This was also, as shown, a condition of reunification.¹⁰⁸ Germany's most important foreign policy resource is therefore its economy. Since reunification, Germany has become the most important economic power in Europe; the country is present throughout the world with its goods and services, and to a modest extent with its banking and financial services. Outside Europe, the latter is particularly difficult; the crash landing of Deutsche Bank in New York being a good example.

All German governments have tried to support the status of German business around the world. For example, when Chancellor Angela Merkel flew to China, in addition to her chancellor's plane, she needed other planes for CEOs to accompany her. German business is the largest German lobbying organization for trade with Russia. For the German government, this also meant representing its own country's interests in bilateral and regional negotiations and institutions, despite a fundamentally open, liberal world market. This is also necessary

107 Cf. Robert Lucke, Bernhard Stahl, *Die transatlantischen Beziehungen am Beispiel der NSA-Affäre und des Ukraine-Konflikts*. In: Winand Gellner, Patrick Horst (eds.), *Die USA am Ende der Präsidentschaft Barack Obamas. Eine erste Bilanz*, Wiesbaden 2016, pp. 285–404; Bierling, *Vormacht wider Willen*, pp. 238–265.

108 Cf. chapter 11 in this volume.

because even a rule-based world market constantly produces winners and losers. Losers, such as the American coal industry, are by no means reassured by Adam Smith's wisdom that the market produces the greatest happiness of the greatest number; instead, workers are taking to the barricades. They are demanding that Congress impose "fair" protective tariffs against foreign competition. Fair is what benefits them. That is why the world market does not function according to the principles of the WTO alone, but is characterized by countless trade conflicts that must always be renegotiated.

In addition, foreign trade relations are becoming increasingly complex in the face of ever greater interconnectedness. Capital flight, taxes, plant, animal, consumer, and health protection are now also at stake. Genetically modified foods are to be included in these trade agreements, and different legal systems and national preferences are to be taken into account. In transatlantic relations, cooperation is also particularly difficult because on the European side, first among 28, now 27 states, a result must be negotiated that can be ratified in individual states.

Even before the Obama and Trump terms, therefore, there were a number of failed attempts to achieve what was strongly supported by Chancellor Angela Merkel: a trade and investment agreement to promote transatlantic cooperation, at least in this area, while developing a counterweight to the emerging trans-Pacific agreement, which was given high priority by the U.S. Congress.

When Barack Obama was finally allowed to give his speech on the east side of the Brandenburg Gate on June 19, 2013, he spoke of "our trade and our economy" as the engine of the global economy.¹⁰⁹ The attempts by the chancellor and president to take the initiative in transatlantic economic relations may also be related to dramatic memories, namely the brutal pressure that Obama, along with his Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, exerted on the chancellor and Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble during the Greek and euro crises, which Obama lays out in unflattering detail in his memoirs. Geithner, a very competent alpha male from the financial industry whom Obama had made into a shepherd in the banking and financial crisis, tried with all his might to impose the U.S. model of excessive debt financing on

109 The White House, Remarks by President Obama at the Brandenburg Gate – Berlin, Germany, June 19, 2013. Transcript, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/19/remarks-president-obama-brandenburg-gate-berlin-germany> (26.4.2021).

the Europeans, especially Germany, as a solution to the crisis. Merkel's slightly malicious allusion to the failure of the Lehman investment bank, that "we don't do Lehman," did not reassure Obama. He considered the reluctance of Germans, Dutch, and other eurozone citizens to keep throwing good money after bad money an "act of Old Testament justice" to prevent "moral wrongdoing" by the Greeks. He was pleased when, in his interpretation, the Europeans agreed on a "firewall" of a magnitude proposed by his Treasury secretary. Generously, Obama stated: "Since we didn't have the leverage to make sure Europe's fundamental problems were permanently fixed, Tim and I had to be satisfied with having helped defuse another bomb for the time being."¹¹⁰

On the day of Obama's speech, the chancellor and the president had spoken at length about the future economic relationship at a joint press conference in Berlin. The chancellor was pleased that they had decided to start negotiations on a free trade agreement. The economies on both sides of the Atlantic would profit from such an agreement. Obama rejected the suggestion that the transatlantic alliance was no longer so important for the U.S. and that the U.S. was looking more to Asia. Thus, at least rhetorically, he put the famous "pivot to Asia" into perspective. In the talks with the German Chancellor and also with the German President, he had reminded them that, from the U.S. perspective, the relationship with Europe continued to be the cornerstone of American security and freedom. The talks on economic issues that had begun at the G8 summit continued. Germany, he said, is America's most important trading partner in the European Union. Obama reminded the Germans that the U.S. had gone through one of the worst recessions in years. But there had been progress, he said, and the U.S. had implemented banking reform. The U.S. banking system is much stronger now, he said.¹¹¹

Merkel's and Obama's hopes of revitalizing the transatlantic alliance, at least in the economic sphere, of launching, as it were, an "economic NATO" under the title "Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership" (TTIP), failed on both sides of the Atlantic: in Brussels, due to endless conferences, massive public criticism, the U.S.-European

110 Cf. Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*, pp. 731–741.

111 Die Bundesregierung, Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel und US-Präsident Obama, June 19, 2013. Mitschrift Pressekonferenz <https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/archiv-de/dokumente/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-und-us-praesident-obama-844776> (May 14, 2021); on the actual "success" of the transformation of the banking system, see pp. 262–268.

secret negotiations, and a particularly pronounced anti-Americanism in Germany. Many Germans distrusted U.S. consumer protection and the business practices of American entrepreneurs and financial service providers. They trusted European Union protection standards more than American standards. “Many feared that as a result of TTIP in Europe, workers’ rights, consumer, environmental and health protection and public services would suffer, as would culture, animal welfare, or food safety.”¹¹² Until the end of Obama’s term, the trade and investment agreement with Europe never received as much attention in Congress as the Trans-Pacific Agreement, which was planned at the same time. When the Democrats lost the 2016 elections, only 17 of the planned 27 chapters had even been formulated, and ratification in Congress or in Europe was a long way off on both sides of the Atlantic.

With President Donald Trump, who, as explained, could not even think the word “rules-based world order,” the planned agreements were off the table. Trump embodied the “economic warrior” who wanted to defend his country’s “true” interests through pressure, threats, blackmail, and retaliatory tariffs. He accused China and the EU of undermining the U.S. trade balance with “unfair” trade practices and exchange rate manipulation.¹¹³ Trump’s accusations were extraordinarily popular at home. Just before the 2016 presidential election, 85 percent of Republican voters and 54 percent of Democratic voters agreed with the claim that free trade had cost America more jobs than it had created. In 2018, Trump tweeted, “When a country loses many billions in trade with almost every country, trade wars are good and easy to win.”¹¹⁴

Trump was part of a long tradition of “economic warfare” that has always existed in parallel with the emergence of international free trade. Free trade never existed in pure form. Today, Chinese foreign trade policy, for example, is also based on the strategies of Chinese war theorists. In addition to China, Trump particularly attacked the EU as an “enemy,” and within the EU, especially Germany. The Germans, he said, are “bad, very bad.” “Look at the millions of cars they sell to the United States. Bad. We will stop that.” Regarding France, he repeated an old demand that has been continuously made of the country from

112 Stormy-Annika Milder, *Ziemlich beste Freunde – meistens*, in *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 68, vol. 4, October 2020, p. 624.

113 On the type of “economic warrior” in history since antiquity, see Ulrich Blum, *Wirtschaftskrieg. Rivalität ökonomisch zu Ende denken*, Wiesbaden 2020.

114 Bierling, *America First*, p. 100f.

other parts of the world: The French must abandon their agricultural protectionism and open their market, he said.

The dangerous spiral of tariffs and counter-tariffs was set in motion in the American-European relationship, but was not developing into a full “trade war.” On the one hand, this was due to EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who in July 2018 persuaded Trump to start negotiations to reduce industrial tariffs and (non-)tariff barriers to trade. While these negotiations did not produce any results, they did prevent new punitive measures by the Trump administration. On the other hand, Trump seems to have realized in lighter moments that U.S. consumers had to foot the bill, because the billions of dollars the U.S. government collected in additional punitive tariffs were nothing more than special taxes on imported goods that U.S. citizens had to pay. It was not so easy after all to escape the promise of prosperity through foreign trade and the international division of labor.

Another aspect of unilateral U.S. “domination diplomacy” strains relations with the U.S., especially with regard to Angela Merkel: the U.S. sanctions policy that is combined with the attitude of an imperial power to enforce sanctions and export controls outside the U.S., even when interests of allies were affected. For these sanctions affected not only Iran or Russia, but also Germany. However, when President Trump announced punitive measures against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project at the end of 2019, he could not make the German government compliant. These sanctions are also explosive because they are justified not only with economic but also with strategic arguments: The pipeline would bring the EU into a dangerous dependence on Russian energy, destabilize Ukraine, and finance the system of oligarchs around the dictator Vladimir Putin, including the German ex-chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Similar criticism can be found in Germany and the European Union.

Germany and the Indivisible Freedom

It was indeed a “late love” between Angela Merkel and Barack Obama. He was the type of charismatic, telegenic man, not plagued by any self-doubt, with a universal mission idea, who could also enchant his audience emotionally with dazzling rhetoric. Therefore, even before his election, he had expected to give a speech at a global symbol of freedom, the Brandenburg Gate, which Merkel refused. He had not yet

achieved anything and would first have to prove himself. But masses of people also flocked to him at the Victory Column; he “enchanted” more than 200,000 Germans in Berlin and millions on TV.

In principle, the chancellor has a deep aversion to male self-promoters, whom, within her own sphere of power, she politically disposes of quickly, coldly, and single-mindedly if necessary. Of course, she could not do that with an U.S. president, even though Obama was by no means dealing with her on “eye level” as the chancellor would have liked. She also had to note that Obama made no official visit to Berlin during his first term and declined an invitation to the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall because he had more important things to do in Asia, a clear sign of his “pivot to Asia.” Nor had he made a single trip to Europe during his time as a senator in the U.S. Congress and a member of the Foreign Relations Committee.

He set foot on German soil twice during his first term: once on the occasion of a NATO summit in Baden-Baden, and a second time for a visit to the Frauenkirche in Dresden and the Buchenwald concentration camp on June 5, 2009. “My visit was a purposeful gesture of respect to a now stalwart ally.”¹¹⁵ Obama was en route from Cairo to Paris because President Nicolas Sarkozy had asked him to speak on the 75th anniversary of the Allied landings in Normandy. He was accompanied in Dresden and in Buchenwald by the chancellor, and in Buchenwald also by his friend, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel. Obama was struck by how the chancellor spoke to the press “in words as clear as they were humbling, of the need for Germans to remember the past, to face the agonizing question of how their

115 Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*, p.368. On the relationship between Obama and Merkel, see Kornelius, *Angela Merkel*, pp. 143ff; Bierling, *Vormacht wider Willen*, pp. 238ff; Matthew Rhodes, *Germany and the United States. Whither ‘Partners in Leadership’?*, in: *German Politics and Society*, vol. 36, no. 3, Autumn 2018, pp. 23–40; Constanze Stelzenmüller, *The Singular Chancellor. The Merkel Model and its Limits*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 3, May-June 2021, pp. 161–172; Katharina Schuler, *Merkel und Obama. Späte Liebe*, in: *ZEIT online*, Nov. 17, 2016, https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2016-11/angela-merkel-barack-obama-usa-deutschland?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F (May-26-2021); Klaus Larres, *Angela Merkel and Donald Trump. Values, Interests, and the Future of the West*, in: *German Politics*, vol. 27, 2, 2018, pp. 193–213, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1428309> (21.6.2021); in general, see also Podium *Zeitgeschichte. Jenseits von Donald Trump*. Authors: Philipp Gassert, Andreas Etges, Stormy-Annika Mildner, Michael Hochgeschwender, Reinhild Kreis, and Jan Logemann, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 68, issue 4 (October), 2020, pp. 575–656.

homeland could have committed such atrocities, and to recognize that they now had a special responsibility to stand up against fanaticism of any kind.” Obama felt that, as he said later, the chancellor was “on the right side of history” and that he had an ally for his missionary idea of freedom and human rights. Elie Wiesel confessed that he was no longer sure of his original “optimism” that the world had learned from the crimes of the Nazis, in view of the “Killing Fields of Cambodia, Rwanda, Darfur, and Bosnia.”¹¹⁶

Obama also came to appreciate another quality of Angela Merkel’s: her almost inexhaustible energy, her hunger for information and arguments, her analytical expertise and critical rationality, her effortless ability to absorb data and facts, to carefully relate the means and ends of decisions, and to think about things “from the end result.” During the euro crisis, they had often talked on the phone. Listeners to their conversations were sometimes reminded of a “senior seminar.” A close aide to Merkel sighed at a security conference in Munich, “It’s like working next to a nuclear power plant: it just runs, and runs, and runs.”¹¹⁷ In his memoirs, Obama contrasts the chancellor, in a slightly ironic tone, with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who was “quite the epitome of emotional outbursts and exaggerated rhetoric,” a man like something out of a Toulouse-Lautrec painting, driven by vanity for headlines, by the urge “to be at the center of the action and take credit for everything that was worth taking credit for.”¹¹⁸

Despite the differences in their political systems, Obama and Merkel also practiced similar techniques of governance. They both relied on an inner circle of discrete collaborators, and they both secured their decisions through opinion polls. The most important thing for Obama, however, remained that the German chancellor shared his ideals, that she was on the right side of history. That’s why he gave her a big stage in Washington, while at the same time subtly tying her to her “dreamland of freedom.” She received the extraordinary honor of being the first German head of government—after Adenauer in 1957—to address both houses of Congress on November 3, 2009.

This speech is an undisguised expression of her political values. “Nothing stands for this Federal Republic of Germany more than its constitution, its Basic Law. It was passed exactly 60 years ago. Article 1 of this Basic Law states: “Human dignity is inviolable.” That short,

116 Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*, p. 369.

117 Stelzenmüller, p. 161.

118 Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*, p. 335.

simple sentence—“Human dignity is inviolable”—was the answer to the catastrophe of World War II, to the murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust, to the hatred, devastation, and destruction that Germany brought upon Europe and the world.” She thanked the U.S. soldiers who were stationed in Germany and secured the freedom of Germans. She included Presidents John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan in her thanks, and was especially indebted to George H. Walker Bush, who had offered the Germans something priceless: “Partners in Leadership.” Twenty years had passed since that overwhelming gift of freedom, she said, “but still there is nothing that excites me more, nothing that spurs me on more, nothing that fills me more strongly with positive feelings than the power of freedom.” Europe and America are held together not only by a shared history and by common interests and challenges, she said. “The thing that brings Europeans and Americans together and keeps them together is our common foundation of values. It is a common image of humans and their inalienable dignity. It is a common understanding of freedom with responsibility. This is what we stand for in the unique transatlantic partnership and in the community of values that is NATO. This is how ‘Partners in Leadership’ is brought to life, ladies and gentlemen. It was this foundation of values that brought the Cold War to an end. It is this foundation with which we can and must now pass the tests of our time.”¹¹⁹ She concluded with a *tour d’horizon* of all the security and economic problems of the present that could be solved together in the spirit of freedom. She directed the attention of the Congress to the protection of future generations, the protection of natural resources and the climate. Global warming must not exceed two degrees Celsius, she said.

Two years later, on June 7, 2011, the German Chancellor received an even greater honor in the name of freedom. President Obama presented her with the highest civilian award in the USA, “The Presidential Medal of Freedom,” in a magnificent ceremony at the White House. Even her husband Joachim Sauer, whom the German public only sees as the “Phantom of the Opera” when he visits Bayreuth, came to the ceremony. Merkel’s place card stated succinctly, “Dr. Angela Merkel symbolizes the triumph of freedom because she was the first East German to succeed in the office of chancellor of a united Federal Republic of Germany.” Merkel took up this leitmotif and said in her

119 Angela Merkel’s Speech in U.S. Congress, in: Die Welt, May 26, 2021. <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article5079678/Angela-Merkels-Rede-im-US-Kongress-im-Wortlaut.html> (May 26, 2021).

address, “What power the longing for freedom can unleash has often been shown by the history of society. It moved people to overcome fears and openly oppose dictatorships. (...) No chain of dictatorship, no shackle of oppression can resist the power of freedom in the long run (...).”¹²⁰

When Obama was finally able to deliver his speech at the Brandenburg Gate on June 19, 2013, he too, made the history, present and future of freedom his leitmotif. It was an ode to freedom, to the world as it should be. He traced the historical arc from the Reformation to the Enlightenment and Kant’s concept of freedom as an inalienable human right to the Berlin Airlift of 1948/49, the Marshall Plan, the founding of NATO, the uprising of East Germans on June 17, 1953, and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The history of Berlin, he said, boils down to a simple question: “Do we want to live in freedom or in chains, in an open society or a closed one that suffocates souls?” The American Declaration of Independence and Germany’s Basic Law, with its first sentence, “Human dignity is inviolable,” spring from the same fundamental conviction, he said. All over the world, nations had committed themselves to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This was exactly what had been at stake all those years in Berlin. But two decades after the triumph of freedom in Berlin it had to be acknowledged that a certain complacency had taken hold in Western democracies. And although they often came together in places like Berlin to remember the past, they did not make history themselves. There is a tendency, he said, to turn inward to one’s own desires, but not to follow the sweep of history.

Then, as in many speeches in all parts of the world, he addressed the great threats to the survival of humanity: overpopulation, social antagonisms, proliferation of nuclear weapons and, above all, the climate crisis that endangers humankind. Finally, he recalled the globalization of U.S. national interests, the indivisible security, the indivisible world market, and indivisible solidarity (in freedom) that bind Europe and the United States. “Our alliance is the foundation of our global security. Our trade is the engine of our global economy. Our values are a commitment to care for the lives of people we will never meet. When Europe and America lead through their confidence, not their fear, we can do deeds that other nations are neither able nor willing to do.”¹²¹

120 Cf. Kornelius, Angela Merkel, p. 150f.

121 The White House, Remarks by President Obama at the Brandenburg Gate – Berlin, Germany, June 19, 2013, Transcript, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/>

The ideals of freedom and emancipation had led to an unusual message of greeting from President Obama to the Heidelberg Center for American Studies (HCA), which was founded by the author of this essay, and Heidelberg University in June 2011. To mark the 625th anniversary of Ruperto Carola, the HCA and the Faculty of Theology had established the James W. C. Pennington Award. With this award, the university commemorated the runaway slave, pastor, historian, fighter against slavery and for peace, who had been awarded an honorary doctorate in Latin by Heidelberg University's Faculty of Theology in 1849.

He was—as far as is known—the first African American ever to receive such an award. The Heidelberg theologian Friedrich Wilhelm Carové had met Pennington at the Paris World Peace Congress in 1849. He was extremely impressed by Pennington's theology, rhetoric, and appearance and immediately suggested that he be honored at Heidelberg. He had, according to the certificate, “not only set himself at liberty over body and soul, but had also repeatedly labored assiduously to dispel the spiritual blindness of his countrymen and to purify their depraved minds.”¹²²

In his message, President Obama conveyed his greetings and appreciation for the James W. C. Pennington Award. The President thanked the HCA for this initiative, which reflects the strong alliance and enduring friendship between the United States and Germany. It is particularly appropriate, President Obama said, that this award gives scholars the opportunity to conduct research on topics that were important to Pennington: Slavery and Emancipation, Peace, Education, Religion, and Intellectual Understanding. The president also expressed his belief that by honoring James W. C. Pennington's achievements, Heidelberg University would inspire future generations of Americans and Germans.

Merkel's reliable policies and their shared values and ideals made the German chancellor Obama's most important ally in Europe in the final years of his term, despite all the conflicts over security and economic issues. That is why there was an emotional meeting between the president and the chancellor in Berlin on November 16, 2016, eight days after Donald Trump was elected president of the United States.

[the-press-office/2013/06/19/remarks-president-obama-brandenburg-gate-berlin-germany](https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/19/remarks-president-obama-brandenburg-gate-berlin-germany) (4/26/2021).

122 Jan Stievermann (ed.), *The Pennington Lectures 2011–2015*, Heidelberg 2016, p. 16. The Pennington Lectures have been supported by Dr. h. c. Manfred Lautenschläger since 2011.

Both were under a certain amount of shock, both had expected Hillary Clinton to win the election; American and German politics were not prepared for the election of the “great disruptor” Trump. Both saw the danger that the Western alliance as a community of security and values could fall apart if Trump tried to realize his statements in the election campaign. They spoke for more than three hours over dinner at the Adlon Hotel. It was the longest time Obama had ever spent one-on-one with a world leader.

Obama also presumably encouraged the chancellor to run for a fourth term, given the precarious state of the world. His speechwriter and adviser Benjamin Rhodes offered a toast to the “female leader of the free world” in an adjoining room.

*

Trump indeed developed into a nightmare for German politics; conversely, the reputation of the U.S. in Germany sank to an unprecedented low. According to a poll conducted in September 2019 and released in March 2020, 75 percent of Americans and 34 percent of Germans thought American-German relations were good, while 17 percent of Americans and 64 percent of Germans thought they were bad.¹²³

Even before his election, Germany and the chancellor had become the number one bogeyman. When Trump criticized Europe’s trade surpluses, he was referring primarily to the Germans. They could finance their sprawling welfare state at the expense of the United States because they contributed nothing to the common defense. Already in 2015 and then increasingly during the election campaign, Trump criticized the German chancellor’s refugee policy, especially for her decision to allow a million refugees into the country. “What Merkel did to Germany, is a sad, sad, sad shame.”¹²⁴ To this day, people ponder Trump’s deep-seated hatred of Germany. Did Merkel remind him of

123 See Survey by Jacob Poushter and Mara Mordecai, *Americans and Germans Differ in Their Views of Each Other and the World*, Mar. 9, 2020, at: Pew Research Center, *Global Attitudes & Trends*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/03/09/americans-and-germans-differ-in-their-views-of-each-other-and-the-world/> (June 3, 2021).

124 Cf. Susan B. Glasser, *How Trump Made War on Angela Merkel and Europe*. The German Chancellor and other European leaders have run out of patience with the President, Dec. 17, 2018, in *The New Yorker*, Dec. 24 & 31, 2018, p. 3, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/24/how-trump-made-war-on-angela-merkel-and-europe>. (5/26/2021); cf. Bierling, *America First*, pp. 151–165.

Hillary Clinton, also an assertive woman whom he deeply despised? Was it because his father, Fred Trump, denied his German heritage after World War II and claimed his ancestors were Swedish? Or was Merkel, like Obama, a representative of the multilateral, free-market globalism he abhorred?

Angela Merkel, who had already outlasted two U.S. presidents, did not know what to do at first. She was advised to establish personal contact with Trump or to invite his daughter Ivanka to Berlin, which she did without visible success. She had prepared for her first meeting with Trump more intensively than for any other inaugural visit. She had read a famous 1990 “Playboy” interview with Trump, watched episodes of his television appearances on “The Apprentice” and read his 1987 book, “The Art of the Deal.” The Protestant pastor’s daughter, however, did not manage to woo him untruthfully with flattery, court his favor with spectacular honors or a golden golf club, or, like German industrialists, talk down to him.

Thus, even the first meeting with Trump in Washington was a personal and diplomatic disaster, followed by similar meetings at World Economic Forums and NATO summits. When Merkel wanted to greet Trump with a handshake in front of the cameras in the Oval Office, he refused. When the photographers had left the room, he immediately addressed the leitmotif of his next years: “Angela, you owe me one trillion dollars.” When the chancellor wanted to talk about Putin and showed him a map of the Soviet Union from 1982, overlaid with Putin’s territorial ambitions, Trump didn’t want to talk about that, but about his poll numbers with Americans.

Trump also repeatedly attacked Germany and the chancellor at international meetings. What has become famous is an extremely contentious summit of the G7 countries on June 8 and 9, 2018 in La Malbaie in Canada, especially a photo published by the German side.¹²⁵ It shows the chancellor at the center of the group in vigorous attack on Trump, who remains defiant, scowling and sitting with his arms folded. At the end of the meeting, Trump reportedly threw two red candies on the table: “Here, Angela. Don’t say I never gave you anything.”¹²⁶

During his tenure, NATO in its existing form, Europe, and especially Germany, as outlined, topped Trump’s enemy list. He ceaselessly tweeted at the American people with his criticism; he put the fear of

125 Cf. the cover image of this volume.

126 Glasser, *How Trump Made War on Angela Merkel and Europe*, p. 3.

the Lord in NATO allies with continued threats to terminate Article 5 of the NATO treaty and to lay the axe to Europe's security. He seems to have at least partly repressed his defense secretary's criticism in the memorable Pentagon meeting that NATO also guaranteed U.S. security.

Trump's threats endangered the very core of the transatlantic community of security and values in whose name both Barack Obama and Angela Merkel had conducted policy. Desperate rhetorical lunges by the chancellor and parts of the German public, saying that the European Defense Community (EDC) should play a larger role, remained dreams without the hint of a chance of realization. This alternative was already buried in 1954, when the French National Assembly rejected a version of the EDC and NATO was made the core of Western European defense instead.¹²⁷

You cannot get into the same river twice. A new European fighter aircraft that has just been decided on will create jobs in Europe, but it is not expected to be operational until 2040 at the earliest. By then, the next global financial crisis may have halted the project, or it may not be able to take off because climate catastrophe makes it impossible for aircraft to take off and land, even for fighter jets.

At the same time, Trump could not even imagine the American missionary idea of freedom and thus the ideal core of NATO as a community of values. Merkel's speech before both houses of Congress and her speech when awarded the Medal of Freedom by Obama, as well as Obama's two speeches in Berlin would not have been possible under Trump. In the worldview of the "trade warrior" Donald Trump, values as the transatlantic glue holding the West together did not exist. Indeed, he had attached a "price tag" to the entire U.S. global policy.

Trump also destroyed the domestic political room to maneuver of future American presidents because he catalyzed the divisions within the country, which is tired of world politics, into a potential civil war situation.¹²⁸ One can use other images for this process and declare the U.S. the land of "tribal warriors" and of "tribalism" but what is undoubtedly true is that the foreign policy room for maneuver of the new, 78-year-old President Joe Biden is very limited for domestic political reasons. It is an open question whether he can revitalize the transatlantic West.¹²⁹

127 Cf. chapter 10 in this volume.

128 Cf. this chapter, pp. 40–51.

129 Klaus-Dieter Frankenberger, *Land der Stammeskriege*, in: *F.A.Z.*, 5/31/2021, p. 8, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/gespaltenes-amerika-land-der-stammeskriege-17365619.html> (6/3/2021).

Thus, after 150 years of American-German relations, the Federal Republic of Germany is caught in an existential paradox. There is no security, prosperity, or freedom for Europe and Germany outside the transatlantic alliance. At the same time, it can no longer be taken for granted that the United States can continue to fulfill its role as the leading power of the West and that the Germans will cling to their ties to the West. The U.S.-German relationship is thus approaching the basic human condition as described by Kant: In view of the unsociable sociability of human beings, they could not suffer one another, but neither could they let one another go.¹³⁰

130 Immanuel Kant, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, 4th movement, Berlin 1784.

