

## Chapter 6: You've Got a Friend

On June 9, 2011, Merkel made her third visit to Washington during Obama's presidency—this time to receive the prestigious Presidential Medal of Freedom award from President Obama, making her the second German next to Helmut Kohl to receive the Award. However, just before Merkel's visit, her government cast an extremely controversial vote when it abstained on the UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized military intervention in Libya. With this vote, for the first time in modern history, Germany voted against the "West," including France and the UK, as well as the United States.<sup>1</sup> Because of this questionable move, the press on both sides of the Atlantic debated whether the upcoming ceremony were anything other than a symbolic gesture. The issue quickly became politicized when media outlets with different political leanings placed their own spin on the ceremony. Russell Berman, a Conservative blogger, stated:

“When German Chancellor Merkel meets with President Obama this week in Washington, symbols will outweigh substance, even more than usual in international politics. The rationale for the visit is explicitly symbolic: the president will bestow the Medal of Freedom on the chancellor.”<sup>2</sup>

On the other side of the Atlantic, news outlets viewed the United States' gesture with suspicion as well. The weekly German magazine *Die Zeit* claimed: “Sometimes praise is harder to bear than criticism. ... Those who give praise expect something in return.”<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the financial German daily *Handelsblatt* argued:

“The excessive American hospitality this week comes with a crystal clear agenda. The U.S. wants Germany to take responsibility on a number of points – as financier of

reconstruction in the Arab world, as an anchor of stability in the euro turbulence and as a political heavy lifter in the Middle East.”<sup>4</sup>

The crisis in Libya was only one of the pressing issues on which Merkel and Obama disagreed—the financial crisis facing Greece was another topic of disagreement between the two leaders that would inevitably be addressed. President Barack Obama urged European countries and bondholders to prevent a “disastrous” default by Greece and pledged U.S. support to help tackle the country’s debt crisis. With U.S. unemployment at 9.1 percent, Obama blamed outside forces for impeding the economy, including high fuel prices, the earthquake in Japan, and the euro zone crisis. Meanwhile, the EU was in the middle of finalizing the details for a bailout package worth the enormous sum of somewhere between 80-100 billion euros over a three year period, a deal Merkel was having trouble justifying to the German citizens, parliament, and even the German court.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the disagreements and dubious press on the Conservative side, the Liberal newspapers saw Merkel’s visit as the honor it was attended to be.

The left-leaning papers saw the relationship between the president and the chancellor with higher regard and less suspicion than the more conservative news outlets, and as such were less suspicious of the president’s motives.

The center-left *Süddeutsche Zeitung* claimed:

“The relationship between Merkel’s Germany and Obama’s America was never really bad or plagued by distrust. In fact, the chancellor and the president are more similar than they would probably like to admit. But these relations have changed—indeed, none of Obama’s relationships with other countries work according to the traditional model. ... Obama doesn’t need admirers—he needs modern allies who can take work off his hands.

... Because this is what Obama and Merkel have learned in this era of super realists:

Those who allow themselves to be divided (think Libya) friendship no longer arises out of pure loyalty to alliances, but through talking with each other—and delivering in the end.”<sup>6</sup>

As Kristen Allen wrote in her piece in *Der Spiegel* that according to the financial daily paper *Handelsblatt*:

“The pragmatic Americans quickly realized the advantages that arose from Germany’s surprising abstention on the Libya vote. Berlin’s veering off course, which caused consternation among career diplomats, paves the way for compensation measures. Obama makes no secret of this. In turn, Washington has avoided public criticism of Germany’s decision to go its own way, instead [of] building bridges. Germany couldn’t have been more easily forgiven for its faux pas.”<sup>7</sup>

Merkel’s unusual move to vote against the West caused quite a bit of controversy from other allied nations—including Obama. Nevertheless, the president did not allow his disappointment impact his overall impression of her leadership. Despite the difference of opinion the two shared, the president willingly and publicly honored her with the highest honor he could bestow on her.

One could claim that the president’s actions indicated that his respect for Merkel went much further than one vote on an important foreign policy item. The shared values and commonality of other policies far outweighed differences of opinions which were typical among even the best of friends.

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The opening ceremony for Merkel's historic celebration began on the South Lawn of the White House at approximately 9.30 a.m. on June 9, 2011. The sun shone brightly as President Obama, First Lady Michelle, Vice President Joe Biden, and his wife, Dr. Jill Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and other key administration members greeted the German chancellor and key members of the German delegation with a full military ceremony. The United States flag flew high next to the German and EU flags, while the military band played the national anthems of both countries.

Following the presentation, President Obama and Chancellor Merkel shared the podium again to discuss the partnership and friendship the two shared—both as leaders and as individuals.

Ceremonial pomp and circumstance festivities are typical of state affairs, designed to demonstrate the relationship between two nations, but this one was different in nature because Obama also used it to present demonstrate Merkel as an individual.

In Obama's brief remarks, he referred to the partnership between the United States and Germany as "the most successful alliance in human history, our commitment to our common defense is also a pillar of global security, from completing our mission in Afghanistan to preventing terrorist attacks to achieving our vision of a world without nuclear weapons."<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, Obama articulated his relationship with the German chancellor when he referred to Merkel as "one of my closest global partners."<sup>9</sup>

These remarks point to Obama's personal affinity with Merkel, while emphasizing the importance of the allegiance between Germany and the United States. Moreover, the fact that the president mentioned the subject of global security and Afghanistan shows the closeness of the partnership between the two nations. By stating this at an event to honor Chancellor Merkel, one

could surmise that he believed her actions, as well as her government actions, were paramount in keeping the world safe from future global attacks.

In a very moving closing, Obama, using Germany as an example, demonstrated that difficulties of the past can be overcome, new bonds can be formed, and people can start anew.

“As people around the world imagine a different future, the story of Germany and our alliance in the 20th century shows what is possible in the 21st. Wars can end. Adversaries can become allies. Walls can come down. At long last, nations can be whole and can be free.”<sup>10</sup>

Throughout Obama’s remarks, Merkel stood next to him, looking straight ahead—as if she were concentrating on understanding his English words—but as the president turned toward Merkel, and uttered the words, “Madam Chancellor,” she turned toward the president, and as he continued, “the arc of our lives speaks to the spirit. It’s obvious neither of us looks exactly like the leaders who preceded us, but the fact that we can stand here today as President of the United States and as Chancellor of a united Germany is a testament to the progress, the freedom, that is possible in our world,”<sup>11</sup> Merkel uncharacteristically smiled broadly, and as the translators repeated those same words into German, her smile repeated. Merkel’s smile demonstrated her appreciation of the significance of Obama’s remarks, but as it turned out, she would later repeat those same words herself.

When President Obama turned the podium over to the German Chancellor, Merkel began her remarks with the more formal “Dear Sir Mr. President”, Dear Madame Michelle Obama, Mr. Vice President, members of both cabinets, guests of honor ... thank you very much for this very warm and very moving reception that is overwhelming. I am indeed delighted.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless,

by the end of her short address, not only did she refer to the President as “Barack” but she added the endearment “dear” as well to her comments.

In light of the extraordinary lengths to which the Obama administration had gone to welcome the German chancellor, it would not have been unusual for someone would express their gratitude in a less formal manner, for example, referring to Obama as “Barack.” As pointed out by Lisa Schewsig Germans, as a general rule, are normally very reserved in paying compliments or showing any form of affection, and the fact that the chancellor did so spoke volumes about their relationship.

Greeted by applause from the audience, Merkel discussed how Germans would always remember how America stood by their side and on the side of freedom and unity when a barbed wire divided Germany and Europe during the Cold War.<sup>13</sup> She reiterated that the two countries shared the fundamental values of rule of law, the universality of human rights, democracy and freedom.<sup>14</sup> Merkel proclaimed that the close relationship between the United States and Germany “is just as much as much part and parcel of Germany’s *raison d’être* as is European integration. Both belong together. Both are and remain the pillars of German foreign policy.”<sup>15</sup>

Much like President Kennedy’s Berlin speech had emphasized the importance of the relationship between the United States and Germany, Merkel’s remarks on the South Lawn accomplished the same goal. Just as Kennedy argued “Ich bin ein Berliner,” so Merkel declared the partnership between the United States an essential component of Germany’s existence. It can be stated that Kennedy offered the opening remarks in the case about the strength of the relationship between the two nations, while Merkel’s statement on the White House lawn 28 years later served as the closing argument.

Merkel also took the opportunity while at the podium to acknowledge the success the two nations had in combating together the global economic crisis, the conflict in Afghanistan, and in the Middle East:

“Today, we are just as closely linked to each other by the bonds of friendship as we were those 20 years ago. ... Germany and the United States are partners, sharing responsibility for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. We are pulling in the same direction trying to keep Iran from following its course of developing a nuclear forces capability. In North Africa, we support the struggle for freedom. And in the Middle East, we support efforts to fill the peace process with new life. Together, we mastered the aftershock of the global economic and financial crisis.”<sup>16</sup>

In her remarks, Merkel acknowledged that the current global world in which we live is a complex one with difficult challenges that need to be addressed. Then, in an extremely rare event, Merkel addressed the crowd in English and claimed, “Mr. President, dear Barack, in Berlin in 2008 you spoke to more than 200,000 people. And in your address, you said America has no better partner than Europe. And now it’s my turn to say Europe and Germany have no better partner than America.”<sup>17</sup>

This statement demonstrated how far the relationship between the two of them had come. For the first time, Merkel discussed the support Obama had received from her citizens—despite her own opposition to him in Berlin, and she addressed the president not only by his first name, but she again called him “dear Barack.” More importantly, Merkel’s words illustrated that the initial discord between the two of them was all but forgotten--something that belonged in the history books. Even though Merkel’s English is proclaimed to be good, and she travels with a translator, she seldom speaks English in public, or in an official capacity.<sup>18</sup> That she did so here

is a further sign of appreciation of her relationship with both the president and the American people.

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Following the military opening ceremony on the South Lawn, Obama and Merkel held a bilateral meeting, followed by their usual press conference. Obama began his welcoming remarks in his usual charming way, but the difference was that for the first time he addressed the German chancellor publicly as “Angela,” rather than the more formal “Chancellor Merkel.” Obama typically complimented Merkel in his opening remarks, and he tied such remarks to the theme of their meetings. Obama chose Merkel’s superb English skills as the source of his praise for that morning’s press conference: “We had a wonderful dinner last night—one on one—although, as you saw again this morning, Angela’s English is much better than my German.”<sup>19</sup> To which Merkel smiled modestly.

Obama expressed his gratitude toward both Merkel personally and her citizens for their assistance in Afghanistan. He acknowledged the alliance between the two nations remained strong, that soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder—where Americans served under Germans and Germans served under Americans as one—as partners to bring about peace in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> The president’s remarks were telling because here he insinuated that the universal goal was to protect of protecting allied nations against attack from their democratic principles. Upholding the shared values between countries was more important than one’s nationality, and if that meant an American soldier taking orders from a German soldier to protect those values, then so be it.

Types of alliances like these were possible because of the ongoing trust and relationships between countries that the establishment of organizations such as NATO made. Obama hinted that because of the partnership between the two countries, significant progress had been made in



Afghanistan, including breaking Taliban momentum, training Afghan forces, and reducing American forces that summer, as Germany and NATO allies supported Afghans in their political and economic efforts to forge a lasting peace.

President Obama then changed focus from the conflict in Afghanistan to the alliance between the United States and Germany. He emphasized that the “two peoples, bound by common values and committed to the security, the prosperity, and the dignity not just of our own citizens, but far beyond, emphasized the shared common values the two countries held. ... And that’s also the essence of my partnership with Chancellor Merkel.”<sup>21</sup> He then turned toward to Merkel, and said:

“Angela, I believe this is our tenth meeting together. That doesn’t include the many phone calls, and video conferences that we seem to have at all hours of the day and night. There’s hardly any global issue where we don’t consult one another. I’ve said before I always value Angela’s pragmatic approach to complex issues, her intelligence, her frankness. I trust her. And as she’s said herself, it’s just fun to work together. And it has been, again, fun today, even as we’ve addressed some very urgent challenges.”<sup>22</sup>

In light of the complex issues which faced the two leaders, that it would take a certain amount of personal chemistry between two parties for them to characterize their working relationship as “fun”.

Obama mentioned that he and Merkel discussed their hopes of creating a free trade agreement between the United States and the EU. This had been important to Merkel since the beginning of Obama’s presidency, but it was first broached publicly here:

“Germany is one of our largest trading partners, and we discussed how to keep our economies growing and create the jobs that our people need. ... The Chancellor and I discussed the need to eliminate regulations and barriers so we can unleash even more trade and investment, including in the area of electric vehicles, where both our countries are leaders and where the possibilities of American-German cooperation are enormous. And of course, I very much appreciated the Chancellor’s views on the financial situation in Europe, which we agree cannot be allowed to put global economic recovery at risk.”<sup>23</sup>

Obama’s words were interesting because rather than to argue about the disagreements the two had over economic policies, he emphasized what they did agree on. As world leaders, they both understood their own nations, as well as the rest of the world, depended upon them to bridge their differences and put forth an acceptable solution.

The two agreed that if Iran continued to invest in their nuclear energy program and continued their refusal to speak with the international community, then members of the international atomic energy agency—to which both the United States and Germany belong—may be left with no alternative but to consider ramping up their punishment against the Iranian regime, including additional sanctions.

When the subject of Libya came up, Obama addressed the issue without mentioning the controversial vote Germany had just taken. Instead, he emphasized that the United States and Germany were on the same side of the issue and they spoke with one voice: “The Chancellor and I have been clear—Gaddafi must step down and hand power to the Libyan people, and pressure will only continue to increase until he does.”<sup>24</sup>

Rather than focus on the disagreement between the two nations, Obama chose to concentrate only on the fact that two parties remained united in the result—even if they disagreed on how to achieve that result.

President Obama finished his remarks by acknowledging his profound respect for Chancellor Merkel, adding that “given the Chancellor’s own remarkable life story—and her experience helping to heal the wounds of the past and build a united Germany—I very much appreciate the personal friendship that I enjoy with the Chancellor.”<sup>25</sup>

No one can doubt Obama had the utmost admiration for Merkel on both a professional and personal level. Whenever the opportunity presented itself, Obama admitted he respected her leadership, her wisdom, and her candor. Nevertheless, it was also apparent that Obama respected Merkel because of where she came from and what she has become. It is more than that Obama, as the first U.S. African American president, paralleled his life and voyage with that of Merkel’s. He understood the difficulties and obstacles it took to get where they were, which is why he had a tremendous amount of respect for someone who accomplished that.

Merkel began her comments as she referred to the president as, “Mr. President, dear Barack.”

The chancellor listed the challenges that faced the world but assured the public that these challenges would be met together, and they would be done so “in this spirit of freedom, of shared values.”<sup>26</sup>

She linked the past to the future with respect to the work that needed to be done in North Africa and the Middle East. She mentioned that Germany was able to get back on its feet following World War II because of the assistance granted by the United States with the passage of the Marshall Plan, and she saw Germany’s role in assistance similar to that with regard to the Egyptians and Tunisians. Merkel very much wanted Germany to offer an alliance for job training

and education for these people, because she thought it would be a good opportunity for Germany with its various training and vocation programs already in place in its country. To this end, they “opened up an office in Benghazi that will serve as a clearinghouse for training schemes, for the security forces, the police there on the ground, and we will also, through an additional commitment to Afghanistan, lend a contribution to mastering the common challenge.”<sup>27</sup>

So, just as there had been controversy that Germany had not held up their end of the bargain with respect to Libya, Merkel knew her country’s obligations and was prepared to help.

Once again, Merkel emphasized the need for a two-state solution regarding the Israelis and the Palestinians, and she reiterated the unity between the United States and Germany on this important issue:

“I think this was a very important initiative to point out yet again that the United States of America, just as Germany and the EU, wish to promote a further development of the peace process. We’re saying this to both countries: We want a two-state solution. We want a Jewish state of Israel and alongside a [sic] independent Palestinian state.

Unilateral measures are not helping at all to bring about this cause, and we agree that we wish to cooperate very closely on this, because as we both say, time is of the essence.”<sup>28</sup>

Merkel proclaimed that the joint commitment between the United States and Germany regarding the mission in Afghanistan “has turned out excellently,”<sup>29</sup> but she wanted to transfer responsibility from the military engagement to the civil side.<sup>30</sup> Adding that “We wish to go in together, out together. Afghanistan will need our support ... we will not abandon them.”<sup>31</sup> The chancellor ended her speech by stating:

“Barack, thank you very much again for the very friendly talks, for this very warm atmosphere, for making it possible to have this exchange of views in a very candid manner. I think even though we may look differently than our predecessors we have a lot in common, I think, and we have a lot to discuss.”<sup>32</sup>

Once again, she referred to the president by his first name—a level of intimacy that is unusual for Germans—and expressed her gratitude toward an open relationship and friendship.

During the question and answer session between the two leaders and the media, they fielded numerous questions about the overall health of the economy. Obama summarized steps the United States had taken to decrease the national unemployment including: the extension of unemployment insurance, the payroll tax, and tax breaks for business investment in plants and equipment.<sup>33</sup> Obama acknowledged these steps had helped put the country on a path to recovery, with “... the overall trend that we’ve seen over the last 15 months—2 million—over 2 million jobs created over the past 15 months ... all indicates that we have set a path that will lead us to long-term economic growth.”<sup>34</sup>

Obama admitted things were going well in the United States but they could go better, and he and Merkel discussed the difficult economic situation in Europe—particularly with respect to Greece who, since spring 2010, had caused a great deal of stress and turmoil for the other, stronger European Union economies. The government had managed to find itself in a tremendous amount of debt and on the verge of economic collapse. After over 14 hours of negotiations in May 2010, Merkel, French President Sarkozy, and other European leaders agreed that Germany would contribute to 123 billion Euros.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this loan, in 2011 Greece found itself once again in dire financial straits, about which Merkel and Obama had differing opinions on how to address. Obama stated:

“We are on the path of recovery, but it’s got to accelerate ... I have had extensive discussions with Angela about the situation there. It’s a tough situation and I think we all acknowledge it.”<sup>36</sup>

Obama admitted the situation was complicated, but he failed to mention the disagreement between him and the chancellor on the best way to address the problem.

When Merkel discussed the economic crisis, she reassured the audience that Germany and the EU understood their obligation toward getting the economy back on track:

“We are very well aware of responsibility for the global economy. Barack just outlined what the Americans are doing in order to generate growth and combat unemployment, which is what we’re doing in Europe as well.”<sup>37</sup>

Merkel also emphasized that the economic crisis was a reminder of how globalized and interconnected the world had become:

“Through the global financial and economic crisis, we’ve seen how interdependent we are. And the stability of the euro zone is therefore an important factor of stability for the whole global economy. So we do see clearly our European responsibility, and we’re shouldering that responsibility with the IMF.”<sup>38</sup>

Through her remarks, she implied that she and Obama may not have been in total agreement on how to keep the path to recovery growing, but the fact that she still referred to him as “Barack”

indicated that their personal disagreement over the issue did not impact her personal relationship with him.

Obama acknowledged that the debt in Greece significantly negatively impacted other international markets. In a direct way, Obama explained that Greece, as a member of the Eurozone, could turn to other countries for assistance with the problem. He pointedly mentioned Germany:

“Germany is going to be a key leader in that process. And the politics of it are tough ... But I am confident that Germany’s leadership, along with other key actors in Europe, will help us arrive at a path for Greece to return to growth, for this debt to become more manageable. But it’s going to require some patience and some time, and we have pledged to cooperate fully in working through these issues both on a bilateral basis but also through international and financial institutions like the IMF.”<sup>39</sup>

Although Obama did not mention it explicitly, if one reads between the lines, he clearly hoped that under Merkel’s leadership Germany would contribute the funds necessary to help revive Greece’s struggling economy.

When Merkel addressed the Greek crisis, she in a not-so-subtle way told the United States to mind its own business, when she stated:

“As far as the situation in the United States is concerned, I think each and every one ought to deal with his or her own problems. We in Europe have our hands full already with that we need to do, and I’m absolutely convinced that as we shoulder our responsibility and meet our responsibility, so will the United States of America.”<sup>40</sup>

Merkel admitted that she understood the entire stability of the euro as a whole became questionable when one country was in trouble, and because of this, assistance from stronger economies to help endangered countries was par for the course. The disagreement between Merkel and Obama did not impact their interaction and relationship with each other.

Obama reiterated the significance of the U.S. relationship with Germany and his personal relationship with Merkel in regard to the ongoing crisis in the Middle East:

“On the international stage, there’s no issues that we don’t coordinate closely with Germany. And our work in Afghanistan, our work together with NATO, the approach that we’ve taken with respect to the Middle East and the Arab Spring, our approaches to development issues and how we help the poorest countries find their place in the international economy, these are all going to be areas where I think Angela’s leadership will be welcomed and will be absolutely critical for us to be able to achieve the kind of more peaceful and prosperous world that we want to see.”<sup>41</sup>

Merkel admitted her and Obama’s shared belief on a strategy:

“... what’s also important in this context—and that’s an approach that we both share, Barack and I—is that we need to combine military and civil engagement. And so I think we live up to our international responsibilities. The world is full of problems that we need to address. That’s a reality and you cannot have enough partners that work together with you in a coordinated way, and this is why this cooperation is so extremely important for our common future.”<sup>42</sup>

Merkel stated that the complicated world the world leaders found themselves in the 21st century required trust and collaboration from as many friends as allies as they could have.



When Obama responded to a question from the media about Greece, he stated:

“... this is a tough and complicated piece of business. And ultimately, Europeans are going to have to make decisions about how they proceed forward. What you have to do is balance the recognition that Greece has to grow, and that means that there has to be private investment there. ... But given their level of debt, it also means that other countries in the euro zone are going to have to provide them a backstop and support. And frankly, people who are holding Greek debt are going to have to make some decisions, working with the European countries in the euro zone about how that debt is managed.”<sup>43</sup>

Obama then claimed that because the growth of America’s economy was contingent upon a solution to the problem, America would do what it could to assist them with their recovery.

“What we’ve done is to say to Germany and other countries that are involved, we will be there for you; we are interested in being supportive; we think that America’s economic growth depends on a sensible resolution of this issue; we think it would be disastrous for us to see an uncontrolled spiral and default in Europe, because that could trigger a whole range of other events. And I think Angela shares that same view.”<sup>44</sup>

Because of the interconnectivity of the world markets, Obama firmly believed that the problems which faced the Greek and subsequently the EU nations also impacted the United States.

Although he believed that the Europeans needed to take a more prominent role to help with Greece, he understood he could not directly tell the Europeans what to do. Hence, the president’s remarks served as incentive to push them to take whatever actions necessary, and since the health of the United States economy rested with success in Europe, Obama offered any support they needed in their efforts.

When Merkel answered the question about the economy, she admitted that because of the success of the G20, they were able to “ward off the worst that could have happened.”<sup>45</sup> Merkel admitted that the G20 had proved to be an effective format to establish rules for financial markets and come up with credible solutions to ongoing problems.<sup>46</sup> Merkel argued that despite the controversial subjects they debated, such as how much stimulus is needed, what kind of structural programs are needed, and how many savings programs and cuts programs, success had been achieved:

“I think that shows great openness because we’re all breaking new ground. These are uncharted waters, and we cannot ... rely completely on the financial business community to give us good advice every day. So we were dependent on our own good and sound judgment.”<sup>47</sup>

Merkel’s remarks indicated that one of the main reasons the financial crisis became as problematic as it did was because countries did not communicate with one another. But, because of the formation of the G20, the countries could serve as a check and balance on each other—something that had not been done before. In other words, thanks to the G20, the crisis was resolved before it became an even bigger problem.

While military intervention may have been the initial focus of NATO, it provided a much broader spectrum. Because of the trust, alliances, and partnerships among allied nations NATO created because of NATO, world leaders successfully worked together to divert another Great Depression.

When Merkel responded to a question about Libya and her country’s controversial vote, she reiterated her position that she believed Qaddafi needed to step down. Merkel emphasized that

Germany supported the NATO operation—mainly by having a presence there, and by stepping up their commitment in Afghanistan.<sup>48</sup> Merkel argued that often in a friendship and partnership there may be differences of opinion, but she professed, “What’s important is that we wish each other every success.”<sup>49</sup> Those important words illustrated how true world leaders and partners address and handle differences of opinion.

In the course of their 40-minute press conference, Obama and Merkel discussed a myriad of topics including the upcoming Medal of Freedom ceremony, Afghanistan, and the economic crisis. As Merkel and Obama walked from the Oval Office to the East Room of the White House to address the media, Merkel joked with Obama that media would most certainly question him about why he had not made the traditional state visit to Berlin. Just after the two leaders had answered numerous policy and foreign relations questions, a reporter saved the most “pressing” question of the day for last, and just as Merkel had predicted, the German journalist asked President Obama why he had not visited Berlin.<sup>50</sup> As the journalist asked the question, Chancellor Merkel’s normally stoic face turned to a grin as she sheepishly glanced at President Obama, who stood at the podium to her left. Catching her smile, Obama smiled back. Given the timing of the question, the fact a German reporter asked the question, and Merkel’s response, one is left to wonder if she had in fact paid the journalist to ask the question. Merkel’s response, as translated, was, “Berlin opens its arms to him every day, but Berliners can also wait. They have proved this throughout their history.”<sup>51</sup> Obama was obviously pleased with her answer because his smile continued to grow bigger through the course of her answer. Even after President Obama had dismissed the press with his “Thank you, everyone” words, Merkel clearly had not finished her answer. “And I can promise that the Brandenburg Gate will be standing for some more time,” she concluded, and she walked over to the president where the two of them

exchanged a cordial handshake and the change in protocol did not go unnoticed by the media.<sup>52</sup> A headline in *The Washington Post* outlined this metamorphosis between the two leaders: “Soooo, it’s Angela and Barack now. This Angela and this Barack—better known as German Chancellor Merkel and President Obama—haven’t always appeared to be the best of buds,” wrote Manuel Roig-Franzia, who added that during the 39-minute press conference, Obama referred to Merkel as “Angela” no fewer than 11 times, while Merkel returned the compliment four times, even referring to him as “Lieber Barack” or “dear Barack” once.<sup>53</sup> “That’s quite a leap in coziness. During two joint news conferences back in 2009, for instance, the leaders referred to each other by their first names exactly, well, zero times, according to transcripts,” noted Roig-Franzia, a clear change in protocol.<sup>54</sup>

As author Hans W. Gatzke wrote, “for a true and lasting Freundschaft to develop, the prospective friends must first consume at least a bushel of salt together to give them time to get to know each other.”<sup>55</sup> It can be stated that this press conference was Merkel and Obama’s joint consumption of a bushel of salt.

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The press conference set the tone for the ceremony which occurred in a formal state dinner in the Rose Garden later that evening. The guest list comprised of 208 dignitaries including Eric Schmidt of Google and Bob McDonald of Procter & Gamble, America’s Supreme Court Justice Chief John Roberts and Orchestral Conductor Christoph Eschenbach.<sup>56</sup> Chancellor Merkel’s husband, Professor Sauer, also attended the gala. His attendance spoke of the importance of the event, because he usually remains absent from his wife’s public events. In fact, he had not even taken time off work when Merkel’s was sworn in as Germany’s first female chancellor.<sup>57</sup>

Because of Sauer's frequent absence from the public spotlight, the German tabloids had dubbed him as "Phantom of the Opera" because the only public appearance he had made was at the Bayreuth opera.<sup>58</sup> Michelle Obama sat next to Merkel's husband. At one point during the course of dinner, Michelle Obama, who normally steered clear from foreign affairs, made a point of telling Merkel, "He really treasures you, Angela."<sup>59</sup>

The reality that both First Lady Michelle Obama and Professor Sauer not only attended the evening's festivities, but, in Obama's case, intervened on an issue she normally remained silent on, speaks volumes about the importance of the event. As with many "firsts" with their relationship, this was the first time Professor Sauer made a public appearance, but it would not be the last.

Prior to the presentation of the award, Obama took the opportunity to say a few words on behalf of Merkel and her achievements: "We want to pay tribute to an extraordinary leader who embodies these values and who's inspired millions around the world—including me—and that's my friend, Chancellor Merkel."<sup>60</sup>

He summarized Merkel's first political experience as a young child who saw her country divided the day the Berlin Wall was built, and he described the integrity she displayed when she refused to spy for the Stasi.<sup>61</sup> Obama argued that the focus of the evening's festivities was for Merkel's achievements once she obtained her freedom:

"Determined to finally have her say, she entered politics—rising to become the first East German to lead a united Germany, the first woman chancellor in German history; and an eloquent voice for human rights and dignity around the world."<sup>62</sup>

From the president's remarks, it is clear he found Merkel's journey from a child under the control of the East German government to the first East German, woman chancellor as nothing short of remarkable. While he appreciated the journey Merkel's life had taken, he was even more impressed with what she has done for herself and others once she obtained her freedom.

The president concluded with a practice that becomes common between the two of them over the course of their working relationship—he repeated the words Merkel had spoken at her speech before Congress in 2009:

“Her words spoke not only to the dreams of that young girl in the East, but to the dreams of all who still yearn for their rights and dignity today: to freedom which ‘must be struggled for, and then defended anew, every day of our lives.’”<sup>63</sup>

Obama explained that the Presidential Medal of Freedom was the highest honor a president can bestow on a civilian—and by receiving this honor, she joined the ranks of only a handful of other non-Americans, including Pope John Paul II, Nelson Mandela, and her fellow German, former Chancellor Helmut Kohl.<sup>64</sup>

When Merkel addressed the guests, she began with her standard greeting of, “Mr. President, dear Barack.”<sup>65</sup> She emotionally described the impact the building of the Berlin Wall had had on her as a young child: “seeing the grownups around me, even my parents, so stunned they broke out in tears, was something that shook me to the core.”<sup>66</sup> Merkel expressed humility for being a recipient of the Medal of Freedom:

“But imagining that I would one day stand in the Rose Garden of the White House and receive the Medal of Freedom from an American President, was certainly beyond even

my wildest dreams. And believe me, receiving this prestigious award moves me deeply.”<sup>67</sup>

Merkel then personally thanked the Americans as well as President Obama personally:

“My thanks go to the American people, first and foremost, for this extraordinary honor, knowing full well how much how much you have done for us Germans. And I thank you personally, Mr. President, because you are a man of strong convictions. You touch people with your passion and your visions for a good future for these people, also in Germany.”<sup>68</sup>

Those final remarks are important because they indicated the profound respect Merkel had developed for Obama over the years. The two had gotten off to a difficult start in their relationship because Merkel thought that Obama had been “all talk” and she was reluctant to embrace the charisma and vision that her fellow citizens had seen. After two years of working with the president, she saw for herself that Obama held true to his words and his actions. Despite the fact the two politicians did not agree on every single policy issue, they had a respectful working relationship and personal chemistry between them.

Merkel, as a true leader, acknowledged that the award Obama granted her also gave it to the rest of the German people, and everyone who still fought for freedom:

“Also today, the yearning for freedom may well make totalitarian regimes tremble and fall. Freedom is indivisible. Each and every one has the same right to freedom, be it in North Africa or Belarus, in Myanmar or Iran. ... We see that living in freedom and defending freedom are two sides of one and the same coin, for the precious gift of

freedom doesn't come naturally, but has to be fought for, nurtured, and defended time and time again.”<sup>69</sup>

Then, for the second time in the course of her visit, she addressed the guests in English when she stated:

“Neither the chains of dictatorship nor the fetters of oppression can keep down the forces of freedom for long. This is my firm conviction that shall continue to guide me. In this, the Presidential Medal of Freedom shall serve to spur me on and to encourage me.”<sup>70</sup>

The German Chancellor's passionate remarks demonstrated the passion and convictions Merkel had with respect to standing up for the fundamental principles of freedom.

Additionally, she argued that the receipt of the Presidential Medal of Freedom award would help to encourage her in ongoing dilemmas which would face her. In the later years of her chancellorship, she would face some obstacles which would force her to remember and even question these convictions. Whether these words or this medal entered her mind as she made the challenging decisions is a question worth asking. As Kornelius stated argued

“... the finale to such occasions is traditionally provided by a big name from American show business or pop music ... James Taylor, the most American of American singer-songwriters, performed for her, Taylor later declared that the White House had specifically requested his song “You've Got A Friend.”<sup>71</sup>

Despite all the pomp and circumstance of the day's activities, Merkel's departure remained consistent with her usual ambivalence. In fact, Kornelius summarized Merkel's departure at the end of the evening nicely when he said, “But Angela Merkel would not be Angela Merkel if she



had let it rest at that brief moment of emotion. So the state dinner in Washington ended with a heartfelt handshake.”<sup>72</sup>

Never would James Taylor’s words be truer than when Obama and Merkel would meet again, later that year in Cannes, France, to discuss the global economy, most notably the Greece situation at the G20 summit.

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In October 2011, Greece caused trouble again. Despite receiving the astronomical second bailout of 240 billion euros, which equated to the equivalent of their entire annual budget, they remained unhappy. Merkel called Charles Dallara, the then managing director of the Institute of International Finance, the organization representing the world’s leading financial institutions. Merkel told the financier that investment banks had to accept losses of 50 percent on Greek government debt held in private hands.<sup>73</sup> Dallara grudgingly accepted Merkel’s terms, and everything appeared to be resolved. Merkel addressed the international media on October 27 in a manner Qvortrup classed as “almost jubilant.”<sup>74</sup> She happily reflected on the success of the deal, saying, “I am very aware that the world’s attention was on these talks. We Europeans showed tonight that we reached the right conclusions.”<sup>75</sup>

It turned out that Merkel’s comments reflected not just opinion of EU members, but the markets as well. As Qvortrup stated, when the stock markets opened, every relevant index rose after what economists described as a “breakthrough.”<sup>76</sup>

However, Merkel’s relief was short-lived. On October 31, 2011, she received a telephone call from Greece’s president Papandreou, who informed her that their 27th agreement would have to be submitted to a referendum. Papandreou’s move was unexpected and had not been

coordinated with anyone.<sup>77</sup> The response from the markets was unequivocal: the German DAX lost five percent. Speculation was rife that Greece would leave the euro, and in the process inflict serious damage on the euro, if not cause its collapse.<sup>78</sup>

During a meeting between French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Christine Lagarde, the newly elected President of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Merkel at the Cannes G20 summit November, they told the Greek prime minister he would receive no money whatsoever until after a possible referendum had been held. Papandreou returned to Greece and resigned, and the referendum was cancelled.<sup>79</sup>

In remarks Obama and Merkel made before press ahead of the G20 summit, President Obama commented:

“It’s wonderful to be back together with my good friend, Angela Merkel. I think that the last time we were in Washington, D.C., together we presented her with the Medal of Freedom, and that indicated the high esteem that not only I, but the United States, hold her and her leadership ... This is going to be a very busy two days. Central to our discussions at the G20 is how do we achieve greater global growth and put people back to work. That means we’re going to have to resolve the situation here in Europe. And without Angela’s leadership we would not have already made the progress that we’ve seen at the EU meeting on October 27th. But I just want to say, once again, how much I enjoy working with Angela. She exhibits the kind of practical common sense that I think has made her a leader not only in Germany but around the world.”<sup>80</sup>

With his remarks Obama reiterated his profound support and admiration of her leadership. Apparently, Obama’s praise of the German chancellor was not limited to the cameras of the media, but behind the closed doors of the summit meetings as well.

According to Kornelius's account of the G20 summit, the other European leaders placed an enormous amount of pressure on Merkel to use the Bundesbank gold reserves during the Eurozone crisis, and Obama "stepped in when Merkel was about to face humiliation. He called a halt: things had gone too far, Angela Merkel should not have to undergo political execution."<sup>81</sup>

Just as Obama had stepped in and defended his partner from humiliation during the NATO Summit in Germany early in their relationship in 2009, Obama employed the same tactic here. While Obama may have intellectually agreed with the other EU leaders about the use of Bundesbank funds for the Eurozone crisis, Obama did not take kindly to Merkel being bullied into deciding, so stepped in to defend her.

The attack that Merkel had undergone during the Cannes Summit was similar to the one that Reagan had experienced in a 1981 summit in Ottawa, Canada. Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and the French President François Mitterrand had disagreed with many of Reagan's U.S economic foreign policies, and as Richard Aldous argued in his book, *Reagan and Thatcher: The Difficult Relationship*, Regan came under constant attack on U.S. economic policy from Trudeau and Mitterrand throughout the summit, setting the tone for future meetings."<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Aldous argued that Thatcher happened to agree with the two world leaders on multiple issues, but the reservations she had for Reagan's policies she reserved for her one-on-one meetings with the president, so publicly she appeared to be the president's staunchest supporter. In fact, Trudeau described the closeness of their relationship when he declared proclaimed, "She and Reagan formed a very solid team."<sup>83</sup> At one point during the discussions, Thatcher even accused the Canadian prime minister of being obnoxious, "Pierre, you're being obnoxious. Stop acting like a naughty schoolboy!"<sup>84</sup> Just as Obama had come to Merkel's defense during the Cannes G7 Summit, Thatcher had come to Reagan's defense. Both examples

are telling of the strength of the relationship between the pairs of leaders, because in both circumstances the two had differences of opinions, but came to one another's defense regardless.

Despite Papandreou's resignation and the cancelation of the referendum, the markets remained unstable, so in December 2011 the European Council (the heads of state and government) agreed to the European Fiscal Compact, introduced automatic sanctions, which tightened the rules for national budget deficits, and empowered the Commission to set targets for individual countries. The problem had not been resolved, but the danger of a meltdown had been reduced.<sup>85</sup> Once again, Germany was in the driving seat and dictating the rules-- the plan stopped the relentless run on the euro.

Between the state dinner that Obama threw in Merkel's honor, where she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and the summit in Cannes where Obama defended his friend and partner, 2011 proved to be a turning point in the relationship between the two world leaders. The next time the two would meet, it would be Merkel's turn to return the favor—Obama would finally deliver his speech in front of the Brandenburg Gate.



## Chapter 6: You've Got a Friend

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