

AMERICAN PRESIDENTS AND THE GERMANS, 1945–2005

Third Edmund Spevack Memorial Lecture at Adams House, Harvard University, November 22, 2005. Co-sponsored by the GHI and the Edmund Spevack Memorial Trust. Speaker: Robert Gerald Livingston (Senior Visiting Fellow, GHI, and former director, American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, John Hopkins University).

Robert Gerald Livingston's lecture traced the varying attitudes of American presidents, from Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush toward the Germans and their leaders. During World War II and the first two post-war years, Roosevelt and Harry Truman based their policy on their determination that Germans recognize that they had been utterly defeated, so that there could be no reprise of the "stab in the back" myth of the 1920s and 1930s, and on the conviction that even erstwhile Nazis could be democratized.

Astonishingly quickly in 1947–1948, Truman's administration dropped the punitive elements of this policy and opened Germany to Marshall Plan assistance. Then, after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, he worked to integrate the country into a U.S.-led military alliance. Roosevelt's aim of a weak postwar Germany was jettisoned in favor of rebuilding Germany's economy, political institutions, and army. As early as 1946, Washington's overly ambitious efforts to denazify the Germans were scrapped. Nazi Germany's crimes played almost no role at all in American presidential decision-making on Germany, even immediately after World War II. Beginning with the Soviet blockade of Berlin (1948–1949), defense of the city and of the Federal Republic against a Soviet threat became central to the strategy of Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. Every American president since 1945 has found it politically important to pay a symbolic visit to Berlin. First the Berliners, then the West Germans became favored alliance partners. This paid off for the East Germans too in 1989–90, when George H. W. Bush proved to be the only first-rank foreign leader to support the country's unification wholeheartedly. Bush, along with Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, developed close working relations with the long-serving chancellor Helmut Kohl.

During the discussion following the lecture, participants mostly posed questions about the low points in relationships between German chancellors and American presidents. There have been three of these: during the first two years of the Kennedy administration; most of Jimmy Carter's; and most of George W. Bush's, when personal animosity between George W. Bush and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, whose opposition to the Iraq war was outspoken, led to tensions. Presidential personalities accounted as much as policy differences for these low points,

Livingston explained: a youthful Kennedy bent on better relations with Moscow versus an aged Adenauer highly skeptical of Soviet intentions; a moralistic Carter versus a pragmatic Helmut Schmidt; and a unilateralist and belligerent-sounding George W. Bush versus a Gerhard Schröder whose country is deferential to international institutions and constrained in a wide range of policymaking by its membership in the European Union and whose people fear being dragged into overseas military expeditions by an ally devoted to spreading democracy far and wide. Livingston focused on American presidents, but in concluding the discussion, he expressed the hope that a future Spevack lecture might examine German chancellors' attitudes toward their counterparts in the White House.

Robert Gerald Livingston