

Chatting House Rules

Richard von Weizsäcker meets with the Young Königswinter Alumni of the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft and the Young Leaders Alumni of the Atlantik-Brücke to talk about 'Europe and America'

At the same locale where in the 18th century the famous *salon* of the Jewish intellectual Rahel Varnhagen discussed '*ordentliche Dachstubenwahrheiten*', or orderly truths from the attic, the Young Königswinter Alumni



and the Young Leaders Alumni met for their first joint event on 18 October 2007. They came together in a lavish flat high above Berlin's Gendarmenmarkt to talk about 'Europe and America' with Richard von Weizsäcker, Germany's head of state from 1984 to 1994. Weizsäcker, who is an honorary president of the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft and an honorary member of the Atlantik-Brücke, a network that fosters German-American relations, appeared delighted about the initiative of the Young Königswinter Alumni to bring the two networks together. Right at the start Weizsäcker emphasised his long-lasting links to Britain in particular. Turning to the more American-minded half of the audience, he then pointed out that long speeches were unusual in the United States. The *Bundespräsident a. D.* thus only briefly presented his view on world politics in order to then give room for the 80 guests to contribute.

The ensuing discussion quickly moved eastwards. He could talk about Russia for 20 minutes, Weizsäcker cautioned, and about Poland even for half an hour. Stopping short of that, the former president said that the main task of his generation had been to do something for German-Polish understanding, and it remained an important task today: This year, he had already been to Poland four times. It quickly became clear that here a politician was speaking whose commitment was strongly shaped and inspired by his personal experiences at key points of the history of the 20th century, by events like the *Luftbrücke* to West Berlin and by the end of the Cold War, by encounters with other presidents like Michail Gorbatchov and George Bush.

It therefore did not come as a surprise that Weizsäcker confirmed the leading role of the United States in, together with Europe, forming 'the West'. But today the world's rule was shared by five poles, he summarised – by the USA and the EU, by Russia, a world power through times, and increasingly by India and China. In view of this balance of power he highlighted the importance of a direct and clear dialogue between America and Europe, even if it was not always easy.

Above all, Europe should do its homework, he insisted, underlining his argument by slamming his fists on the table. Examples were the ratification of the Lisbon treaty or the handling of regionalisms like the ‘extraordinarily painful process’ in Belgium, where no government had been installed for four months after the recent elections and where one would get two invitations for the same university event, one in Flemish and one in Walloon.

Things looked different when it came to the relations with Russia, a territorial and well-armed world power, rich in natural resources, that did not want to create political bonds with any other state and that pursued ‘a different kind of democracy’, as one participant phrased it. One should not be that naive, Weizsäcker warned, to believe that a democracy as we like it would be installed only if we cry for it long enough. When he recently met the chairman of the foreign policy committee of the Russian parliament, the latter asked Weizsäcker in a similar stance: ‘Doesn’t the West have any interest other than reproaching us constantly that we do not yet have a Westminster-style democracy?’ Weizsäcker complained about the lack of a distinguishable middle class in Russia. This was the most important social group, he said and stamped his feet. Europe and Russia were different in many aspects, but they also had a number of vital common interests. Historical experiences of the Czech Republic and Poland, that after the Soviet Union had fallen into pieces both had wanted to become a member of NATO and notably before joining the EU, should be taken more seriously. Then one would better understand their reactions to the planned US missile shields in Eastern Europe.

Most importantly, Europe needed to become stronger. It was fundamental, Weizsäcker concluded, that the European member states recognised their common interests. He joined the urgent call for a common European foreign policy, administered by different regional centres like Paris, London and Berlin. ‘We must stand up to the fact that we really are the West’ and ‘that we as Europeans can be counted on, when a new government will take over in America’. This put a smile on the face of the American deputy ambassador who attended as a guest of honour. His British colleague, in contrast, had a rather serious look on his face when he heard from the former president that Britain should realise that it was merely a ‘middle power’ if it was doing things alone. After all, it was the former British premier Winston Churchill who in 1946 envisioned a United States of Europe: This, the 87-year old ended, had been the beginning of a ‘great act in world history’.

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For more information on the Young Königswinter Alumni: www.debrige.de/alumni

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