

Dr. Dieter Zetsche

Chairman of the Board of Management of Daimler AG

Head of Mercedes-Benz Cars

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Thank you, Governor Deal, for the kind introduction.

And thank you, Dr. Janes and everyone at AICGS, for this award.

I'd also like to thank the previous speakers for their remarks.

Governor Deal, Ambassador Wittig, it's great to see you and many other familiar faces again.

Receiving recognition from a prestigious organization is always an honor. But for me, it's even more meaningful in this case – because AICGS promotes ties between the two countries in which I've spent the most time living and working.

This evening, we are celebrating something very important.

We're recognizing the 25th anniversary of German reunification.

Today, it's hard to even imagine a Germany split in two. Still most of us with ties to Germany will forever remember what we were doing when the Berlin Wall came down.

And it's a very fitting coincidence that I was in the Americas in 1989: I was working in Argentina at the time.

This was probably the happiest moment in our nation's history.

Still, I did not feel like I missed out – although I was more than 7,000 miles away from center stage in Berlin.

I recall the Argentines celebrating, and everyone congratulating me. And the fact that this was big news even in Argentina made me realize: how blessed we are as a people, how grateful we should be that this change came peacefully, and just how big that change was.

Witnessing the fall of the Berlin Wall was one of many experiences that made my time in Argentina very memorable. However, it wasn't a single memory that stood out to me after I went back to Germany.

My main take-away was a lesson. A lesson that I had learned before while working in Brazil – and that I've learned again and again throughout my entire life:

Different perspectives broaden your horizons.

And tonight, I'd like to talk about three perspectives on Germany and America in particular.

The first is that of a Turk in Germany. Now let me make this perfectly clear: I don't claim to actually be a Turk.

But I was born in Istanbul, Turkey. At the time, my father worked as a civil engineer on the construction of a dam in Anatolia. However, I was still too young to form any lasting memories by the time my family had returned home.

Still, Turkey will forever fill the "place of birth" line in my passport.

I don't think being born somewhere should ever be considered an achievement – nor should it ever be a stigma. It's simply a fact.

But at the same time, it's something that lives with you and influences your life. And that's an experience many others have felt with much greater consequences.

When my family left Anatolia, we were pretty much the only ones moving from Turkey to Germany. Less than 10 years later, hundreds of thousands of Turks would follow.

Back then, they were known as “Gastarbeiter”. It literally means “guest laborers” – and it captures what many Germans thought about immigrants: They'd come to work for a few years – and then they'd return to their home countries.

In fact, that's exactly what most “guest laborers” thought as well – and many of them did go back to their home countries. However, more than 2.5 million of them stayed – and faced various challenges.

For someone of Turkish birth, I had it relatively easy in Germany:

I don't look Turkish – well, maybe except for the moustache...

I don't have a Turkish name.

And my native language is German, not Turkish. Although knowing a little Turkish would have been a big asset working at Daimler.

I've never had any bad experiences based on my heritage, appearance, name, and language. But for many people, those factors still strongly influence how others view them – and draw on any preconceptions or prejudices they may have.

That's true for people of Turkish descent living in Germany, but also for many Hispanics in the U.S. – and other ethnic groups as well.

Of course, few countries have more experience learning to deal with diversity than America. In many ways, Germany is still just a “babe in the woods” in that respect.

For most of us who came of age in Germany in the post-war era, “diversity” was more defined along the lines of Protestant or Catholic – or maybe Bavarian or anything else...

In fact, some Germans are just now coming to terms with East or West Germans – “Ossies” or “Wessies” – respectively.

And those are all Germans!

So, in a way it's understandable that some of my fellow countrymen see mostly problems when they look at the current refugee challenge.

After all, taking in more than a million people in just one year is a herculean task. And even a wealthy country like Germany cannot open its borders to everyone forever.

But the current situation does not just bring about many challenges – it also offers many opportunities.

Because a lot of people now coming to Germany could also form the foundation for the next “economic miracle”. Just as millions of immigrants from Turkey and many other nations made a huge contribution to the “Wirtschaftswunder” in West Germany in the 1950s and ‘60s.

The immigrant experience has shown one thing time and again: A person who leaves everything behind in one country and takes enormous risks to travel to, live, and work in another – is by definition highly motivated to build a new life.

Those are exactly the kind of people who are needed in an aging nation like Germany today. According to current studies, for example, nearly 40,000 apprentice positions are likely to go unfilled.

That shows: Immigration is a great chance for the German economy – and for Daimler in particular.

We may be a “German company”, but we have more than 280,000 employees spread over 150 countries around the globe. And our entire company benefits greatly from this diversity and all the different perspectives that come along with it.

Over the years, I’ve lived in several of those countries. I had some of the happiest times in my life – both personally and professionally – working in your country: the United States.

And that's the second perspective I want to talk about:

The perspective of a German in America.

When I was offered my first job in the U.S. in 1991, I was very excited to move here. I had looked forward to the opportunity ever since my first trip here. That was back in the 1970s with some college friends.

We spent three months driving an old car around Canada and the U.S.

Of course this time, I wasn't coming for a road trip. This time, I'd spend less time behind the wheel and more time behind my desk. And like many Germans going to the U.S., I was warned of the "ugly" side of American corporate culture: ruthless companies that would put short-term profits over long-term planning.

In retrospect, I admit – that image was probably influenced by "Gordon Gekko", the character from the movie "Wall Street."

His infamous declaration that "Greed is good!" captured the Zeitgeist of the finance world in the late '80s.

Luckily, my real-life experience at Freightliner in Portland, Oregon, and later at Chrysler in Detroit, differed vastly from that of Gordon Gekko. I found my colleagues to be great people – not one of them would have sold their grandmother to make a buck.

Unfortunately, there are still many Germans with these preconceptions about the U.S. – and there are just as many Americans who believe in false German stereotypes.

You can see that in the current discussions concerning the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership - TTIP:

Surveys show that Americans and Germans think common standards would “weaken consumer protections”. The core of that is largely fear – on both sides.

Europeans are afraid of genetically modified corn. Americans are concerned their food hygiene rules might be watered down. The list of line items goes on and on.

No doubt, these are topics worthy of serious discussion.

Still, in our decades-long partnership, we have always been able to reach fair compromises through productive dialogue on issues of equal or greater weight.

Just think of the pivotal role the U.S. played in the talks leading to German reunification. Our European partners had major doubts about a reunified Germany – and given our history, that was understandable.

But the U.S. always believed that a reunified Germany would also be a democratic, pluralistic, and peaceful Germany.

When former President George H. W. Bush spoke to the German people on the reunification, he hoped that the U.S. and Germany “will be partners in leadership”¹.

¹ George H. W. Bush: “Address to the German People on the Reunification of Germany”, October 2, 1990.

This has often been the case in the past 25 years. And we should renew this “partnership in leadership” with regard to the TTIP negotiations.

I’ve publicly spoken out for that partnership – and not just because it’s the right decision for our economies. But because I know:

American managers are not like Gordon Gekko from “Wall Street”.

And American politicians are not like Frank Underwood from “House of Cards”.

I had that experience over and over again in the six years I spent in the U.S. And there are many other things I learned here as well. That brings me to my third perspective – that of an American in Germany.

After I came back to my home country in 2006, I brought home far more than just great memories and souvenirs.

I also returned with more of an American perspective. It’s very hard to pinpoint exactly what that is – perhaps a certain optimism, a can-do mindset, a “why not?”-perspective.

Earlier this year I was reminded again of the power of this mindset when we held our annual top management meeting in Silicon Valley.

Most of my German colleagues had been to the Bay Area before.

After all, Daimler is a Silicon Valley veteran: We set up shop there 20 years ago.

But this summer, we didn't go there to celebrate our anniversary. We went there because Silicon Valley is a unique place. It's not just about the typical clichés of start-ups in garages, getting rich on stock options and wearing hoodies. It's even more than just the epicenter of digital disruption.

In many ways, Silicon Valley embodies all the positive American attributes I experienced in my time living and working here.

For example, I like to remind people in Germany: The forefathers of Sergej Brin, Elon Musk or Jerry Yang didn't exactly sail over on the Mayflower.

The key aspects that make the Silicon Valley ecosystem so unique are the same that made America so attractive to generations of entrepreneurs from around the world:

It's innovative, attractive and open.

It has a business culture that fosters new ideas from anyone who has them, allowing everyone to fully reach his or her personal potential.

So, in this regard, Silicon Valley is not a place.

It is the original American mindset made new again.

It's a mindset that does not follow the old "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" rule. Instead, it says: "Break it, and make it work even better".

I think that's a great attitude. And ever since I've returned to Germany, I've enjoyed working as an "informal" U.S. ambassador to bring a little bit of that to Daimler.

And it seems to be catching on. We're in the middle of a big cultural change. We want more entrepreneurial spirit to help drive innovation. So, we're giving our employees more personal responsibility and doing away with unnecessary hierarchies.

One example: our "Digital Life Days". We frequently gather 500 employees to talk digitalization, discuss business concepts – and award a prize to the best ideas.

But we don't just talk about new ideas. We also make sure they become reality – be it in the form of new services, new ways to connect with customers, or new lines of business.

One of many examples is our car sharing service car2go.

One year ago, we introduced the service to New York.

Today, the city is our fastest growing market in North America. In fact, one of our trademark, white and blue smart cars even made the cover of the "New Yorker" last month.

Ladies and gentlemen,

tonight we're commemorating the 25th anniversary of German reunification. And that reminds us: Even the biggest gap can be bridged. And different perspectives help to build bridges.

I'm not the first person to realize this. Someone with far greater knowledge of foreign politics saw this potential much earlier. That someone was former German chancellor Willy Brandt.

He called it "change through rapprochement" – "Wandel durch Annäherung". His ideas helped ease the tensions in the Cold War, led to major improvements in the relations between the two German states – and ultimately were the first step toward reunification.

It's that story that shows the incredible power of working together instead of working against each other.

We've already seen that different perspectives helped to bring both parts of Germany together as well as both sides of the Atlantic. And I think they can now help us, to bridge the gap between industrialized and developing countries as well.

So, let's focus more on tearing down the walls that divide us, not on erecting new ones – be it physical walls or the ones in our minds.

That's how we can create a better future for the generations to come!

And I applaud all of you in the AICGS for doing your part to contribute to this end!

Thank you very much!

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