Appreciating Our Relationship with Germany

Is America’s relationship with Germany something that the average American should care about? Yes, says Dr. Jacoby: “If you’re an American who likes to see America get its way in the world, then you want the nation to have strong allies and partners. And it’s hard to think of a partner with whom we work more effectively, more often than the Germans.”

That being said, BYU German studies professor Dr. Hans-Wilhelm Kelling says that the average American has at most a very superficial understanding of that alliance and hardly realizes that, even though Germany is a member of NATO and is thus compelled to defend the United States, Germany is especially reluctant to support U.S. actions in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. “[That American] has even less understanding and appreciation of German language, culture, and political institutions, in part,” says Kelling, “because since the two world wars, the German language has declined substantially in American academic institutions.”

But, as Dr. Jacoby says, if Americans would advocate the strengthening of an alliance with a solid country like Germany then we should strive to understand and appreciate it.

It may come as a surprise to some that 72 percent of Americans in a survey done by the Pew Research Center view Germany as a dependable ally, given that the relationship between the two countries has seen its share of ups and downs over the past several decades. Only 71 years ago we were at war with Germany, and a mere 28 years ago the Berlin Wall still stood. But since the wall’s collapse, and even before then, we as a country have been breaking down the economic, communication, and cultural barriers that separated us from Germany, thus forging a new relationship based on trust and respect. It is now a relationship that can best be described as amicable, with Germany and the United States working closely together on several key initiatives.

Allies like that aren’t always easy to come by, especially in this day and age. Therefore, various initiatives have been put forward to support it, among them the Transatlantic Academy, a partnership between several nonprofit groups with the specific purpose of fostering relationships across the Atlantic. The academy recently appointed Dr. Wade Jacoby, a BYU political science professor, to research and discuss prominent issues involving the United States and Germany.
the current quality of the relationship. This understanding would also help us recognize the significance of Dr. Jacoby’s appointment. It is thus imperative to understand not only the history of our relationship with Germany but also the recent, significant obstacles it has overcome.

Obstacles and Their Overcomings

The trouble began in 2013 when Edward Snowden leaked classified surveillance reports showing that the United States had been spying on Germany. The U.S. was monitoring political figures such as Chancellor Angela Merkel and various companies. New information shows that Germany’s own intelligence agency, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND), collaborated with the NSA. The NSA gave the BND lists of emails, IP addresses, and phone numbers for them to plug into their own database. European businesses and possibly various individuals were targeted.

Understandably, German voters were upset about the spying, according to Dr. Jacoby. Chancellor Merkel went so far as to tell Washington that spying on allies was a no-go. Fortunately, Germans also recognized that German intelligence services do similar things.

Negotiations over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP), a proposed trade agreement between the European Union and the United States, have also proven strained. Germany is a major player in the European Union and has a very strong economy that claims 22 or 23 percent of the European Union’s overall GDP. Former president Barack Obama and European Union leaders hoped to create a free-trade area spanning more than half of the world’s economic output and 800 million people, with the goal of increasing trade and economic development among the countries involved.

But the Germans objected to the accord on the grounds that the United States uses GMOs and has regulations that they perceive as lax. Germans also feared it would give too much power to U.S. corporations. Current president Donald Trump has repeatedly criticized free-trade agreements and, in fact, cancelled the similar Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). T-TIP has yet to be signed by either the United States or the European Union.

Resolving the Problems

In hopes of raising awareness about the relationship between Germany and the United States, the Transatlantic Academy has assembled a group of scholars, writers, political experts, and the like from both the United States and Europe as part of an annual consortium that examines issues of transatlantic importance. Dr. Jacoby was one of the seven fellows chosen to participate. In 2016–2017, the group met periodically from September 2016 to May 2017, hosting workshops, researching, and writing articles on the year’s theme of the relationship between the United States and Germany. The fellows’ work culminated in May when they presented a collective report.

Like the other fellows, Dr. Jacoby composed and presented a paper detailing his research and findings on a specific facet of the overall topic: the conflict over Germany’s trade surplus and America’s trade deficit. About this topic, he says, “The two countries disagree about the causes of [Germany’s] surplus. They disagree about the size of the surplus, and they disagree about how beneficial to Germany the surpluses actually are. And so it’s . . . a technical discussion, a political discussion, and an emotional discussion.” Dr. Jacoby wants to explore how this disagreement arose and present potential solutions, because current discussions on the subject are going nowhere. Dr. Jacoby calls the situation “a dialogue of the deaf.” Comparing it to the Cold War talks with the Soviet Union over nuclear weapons, Dr. Jacoby says he chose this particular subject for study because he thinks it’s important to talk about not only the things that are working well in the transatlantic relationship but also the things that are not working so well. While our current relationship with Germany is working well overall, it is not without its critics. Dr. Jacoby hopes that his involvement will point to ways that Germany and the United States can resolve any and all conflicts between themselves in order to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship.

Dr. Jacoby explains, “Stepping back, it’s just easier for American leadership to get things done in the world if it [has] a strong and willing [partner]. And Germany has been among the stronger and more willing of its partners over many decades.” Regardless of its past or even its current difficulties, America’s relationship with Germany is not to be minimized or taken lightly. Indeed, through the academy, Dr. Jacoby hopes to make a difference for good. “I anticipate being able to try and influence the . . . public policy of the United States on this question.” However, it isn’t just policy that Dr. Jacoby is focused on, but also BYU. He hopes that his participation in the academy will help him be better prepared to teach his students. “Being around the policy process in Washington always helps me help my students understand what’s necessary for a policy job these days,” he says. “I’m constantly updating my . . . catalogue of skills so that I can help students polish the skills they need to flourish.” Dr. Jacoby added that BYU students are further benefited when faculty’s research is published by prominent journals.

Staying Involved and Informed

It’s no secret that the United States and Europe are two of the biggest players in global politics and economics. Of the European Union members, Germany is perhaps the most important; indeed, Dr. Jacoby notes, “It’s hard to think of a country whose economy is more important to the EU than the German one is.” Because of Germany’s influence, Dr. Jacoby stresses that Americans need to stay informed about our politicians’ efforts to maintain a solid relationship with Germany and whether or not they are working to mend the damages done by the spy scandal and stalled T-TIP negotiations.

The average American, acquainted even slightly with the dynamics of our relationship with Germany in general, and Dr. Jacoby’s involvement in the Transatlantic Academy specifically, may be able to hope for a brighter future for their family and others.

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To Germany’s Economy

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