

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT BITBURG AIR BASE

Federal Republic of Germany
May 5, 1985

Thank you very much. I have just come from the cemetery where German war dead lay at rest. No one could visit there without deep and conflicting emotions. I felt great sadness that history could be filled with such waste, destruction, and evil. But my heart was also lifted by the knowledge that from the ashes has come hope and that from the terrors of the past we have built 40 years of peace, freedom, and reconciliation among our nations.

This visit has stirred many emotions in the American and German people, too. I've received many letters since first deciding to come to Bitburg cemetery; some supportive, others deeply concerned and questioning, and others opposed. Some old wounds have been reopened, and this I regret very much because this should be a time of healing.

To the veterans and families of American servicemen who still carry the scars and feel the painful losses of that war, our gesture of reconciliation with the German people today in no way minimizes our love and honor for those who fought and died for our country. They gave their lives to rescue freedom in its darkest hour. The alliance of democratic nations that guards the freedom of millions in Europe and America today stands as living testimony that their noble sacrifice was not in vain.

No, their sacrifice was not in vain. I have to tell you that nothing will ever fill me with greater hope than the sight of two former war heroes who met today at the Bitburg ceremony; each among the bravest of the brave; each an enemy of the other 40 years ago; each a witness to the horrors of war. But today they came together, American and German, General Matthew B. Ridgway and General Johanner Steinhoff, reconciled and united for freedom. They reached over the graves to one another like brothers and grasped their hands in peace.

To the survivors of the Holocaust: Your terrible suffering has made you ever vigilant against evil. Many of you are worried that reconciliation means forgetting. Well, I promise you, we will never forget. I have just come this morning from Bergen-Belsen where the horror of that terrible crime, the Holocaust, was forever burned upon my memory. No, we will never forget, and we say with the victims of that Holocaust: "Never again."

The war against one man's totalitarian dictatorship was not like other wars. The evil war of Nazism turned all values upside down. Nevertheless, we can mourn the German war dead today as human beings, crushed by a vicious ideology.

There are over 2,000 buried in Bitburg cemetery. Among them are 48 members of the SS. The crimes of the SS must rank among the most heinous in human history. But others buried there were simply soldiers in the German Army. How many were fanatical followers of a dictator and willfully carried out his cruel orders? And how many were conscripts, forced into service during the death throes of the Nazi war machine? We do not know. Many, however, we know from the dates on their tombstones, were only teenagers at the time. There is one boy buried there who died a week before his 16th birthday.

There were thousands of such soldiers to whom Nazism meant no more than a brutal end to a short life. We do not believe in collective guilt. Only God can look into the human heart, and all these men have now met their Supreme Judge, and they have been judged by Him as we shall all be judged. Our

duty today is to mourn the human wreckage of totalitarianism, and today in Bitburg cemetery we commemorated the potential good in humanity that was consumed back then, 40 years ago. Perhaps if that 15-year-old soldier had lived, he would have joined his fellow countrymen in building this new democratic Federal Republic of Germany devoted to human dignity and the defense of freedom that we celebrate today. Or perhaps his children, or his grandchildren, might be among you here today at the Bitburg Air Base where new generations of Germans and Americans join together in friendship and common cause, dedicating their lives to preserving peace and guarding the security of the free world.

Too often in the past each war only planted the seeds of the next. We celebrate today the reconciliation between our two nations that has liberated us from that cycle of destruction. Look at what together we've accomplished. We who were enemies are now friends; we who were bitter adversaries are now the strongest of allies. In the place of fear we've sown trust, and out of the ruins of war has blossomed an enduring peace. Tens of thousands of Americans have served in this town over the years. As the Mayor of Bitburg has said, in that time there have been some 6,000 marriages between Germans and Americans, and many thousands of children have come from these unions. This is the real symbol of our future together, a future to be filled with hope, friendship, and freedom.

The hope that we see now could sometimes even be glimpsed in the darkest days of the war. I'm thinking of one special story — that of a mother and her young son living alone in a modest cottage in the middle of the woods. And one night as the Battle of the Bulge exploded not far away, and around them, three young American soldiers arrived at their door — they were standing there in the snow, lost behind enemy lines. All were frostbitten; one was badly wounded. Even though sheltering the enemy was punishable by death, she took them in and made them a supper with some of her last food.

And then, they heard another knock at the door. And this time four German soldiers stood there. The woman was afraid, but she quickly said with a firm voice, "There will be no shooting here." She made all the soldiers lay down their weapons, and they all joined in the makeshift meal. Heinz and Willi, it turned out, were only 16; the corporal was the oldest at 23. Their natural suspicion dissolved in the warmth and the comfort of the cottage. One of the Germans, a former medical student, tended the wounded American.

But now, listen to the rest of the story through the eyes of one who was there, now a grown man, but that young lad that had been her son. He said, "Then Mother said grace. I noticed that there were tears in her eyes as she said the old, familiar words, 'Komm, Herr Jesus. Be our guest.' And as I looked around the table, I saw tears, too, in the eyes of the battle-weary soldiers, boys again, some from America, some from Germany, all far from home."

That night — as the storm of war tossed the world — they had their own private armistice. The next morning the German corporal showed the Americans how to get back behind their own lines. And they all shook hands and went their separate ways. That happened to be Christmas Day, 40 years ago.

Those boys reconciled briefly in the midst of war. Surely, we allies in peacetime should honor the reconciliation of the last 40 years.

To the people of Bitburg, our hosts and the hosts of our servicemen, like that generous woman 40 years ago, you make us feel very welcome. Vielen dank. (Applause.)

And to the men and women of Bitburg Air Base, I just want to say that we know that even with such wonderful hosts, your job is not an easy one. You serve around the clock far from home, always ready to defend freedom. We are grateful and we are very proud of you.

Four decades ago we waged a great war to lift the darkness of evil from the world, to let men and women in this country and in every country live in the sunshine of liberty. Our victory was great and the Federal Republic, Italy, and Japan are now in the community of free nations. But the struggle for freedom is not complete, for today much of the world is still cast in totalitarian darkness.

Twenty-two years ago President John F. Kennedy went to the Berlin Wall and proclaimed that he, too, was a Berliner. Well, today freedom-loving people around the world must say: I am a Berliner, I am a Jew in a world still threatened by anti-Semitism, I am an Afghan, and I am a prisoner of the Gulag, I am a refugee in a crowded boat foundering off of the coast of Vietnam, I am a Laotian, a Cambodian, a Cuban, and a Miskito Indian in Nicaragua. I, too, am a potential victim of totalitarianism.

The one lesson of World War II, the one lesson of Nazism, is that freedom must always be stronger than totalitarianism and that good must always be stronger than evil. The moral measure of our two nations will be found in the resolve we show to preserve liberty, to protect life, and to honor and cherish all God's children.

That is why the free, democratic Federal Republic of Germany is such a profound and hopeful testament to the human spirit. We cannot undo the crimes and wars of yesterday, nor call the millions back to life, but we can give meaning to the past by learning its lessons and making a better future. We can let our pain drive us to greater efforts to heal humanity's suffering.

Today I have traveled 220 miles from Bergen-Belsen, and, I feel, 40 years in time. With the lessons of the past firmly in our minds, we have turned a new, brighter page in history.

One of the many who wrote me about this visit was a young woman who had recently been Bat Mitzvahed. She urged me to lay the wreath at Bitburg Cemetery in honor of the future of Germany. And that is what we've done.

On this 40th anniversary of World War II, we mark the day when the hate, the evil, and the obscenity was ended, and we commemorate the rekindling of the democratic spirit in Germany.

There's much to make us hopeful on this historic anniversary. One of the symbols of that hope was, a little while ago, when we heard a German band playing the American National Anthem and an American band playing the German National Anthem. While much of the world still huddles in the darkness of oppression, we can see a new dawn of freedom sweeping the globe. And we can see in the new democracies of Latin America, in the new economic freedoms and prosperity in Asia, in the slow movement toward peace in the Middle East, and in the strengthening alliance of democratic nations in Europe and America that the light from that dawn is growing stronger.

Together, let us gather in that light and walk out of the shadow. Let us live in peace.

Thank you, and God bless you all.

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT AT BERGEN-BELSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP

Federal Republic of Germany
May 5, 1985

Chancellor Kohl and honored guests. This painful walk into the past has done much more than remind us of the war that consumed the European continent. What we have seen makes unforgettably clear that no one of the rest of us can fully understand the enormity of the feelings carried by the victims of these camps.

The survivors carry a memory beyond anything that we can comprehend. The awful evil started by one man, an evil that victimized all the world with its destruction, was uniquely destructive of the millions forced into the grim abyss of these camps.

Here lie people — Jews — whose death was inflicted for no reason other than their very existence. Their pain was borne only because of who they were and because of the God in their prayers. Alongside them lay many Christians — Catholics and Protestants.

For year after year, until that man and his evil were destroyed, hell yawned forth its awful contents. People were brought here for no other purpose but to suffer and die. To go unfed when hungry — uncared for when sick — tortured when the whim struck — and left to have misery consume them when all there was around them was misery.

I'm sure we all share similar first thoughts. And that is: What of the youngsters who died at this dark stalag? All was gone for them forever. Not to feel again the warmth of life's sunshine and promise; not the laughter and the splendid ache of growing up; nor the consoling embrace of a family. Try to think of being young and never having a day without searing emotional and physical pain — desolate, unrelieved pain.

Today, we've been grimly reminded why the commandant of this camp was named, "Beast of Belsen." Above all, we're struck by the horror of it all — the monstrous, incomprehensible horror. And that's what we've seen, but is what we can never understand as the victims did. Nor with all our compassion can we feel what the survivors feel to this day and what they will feel as long as they live.

What we've felt and are expressing with words cannot convey the suffering that they endured. That is why history will forever brand what happened as the Holocaust.

Here, death ruled. But we've learned something as well. Because of what happened, we found that death cannot rule forever. And that's why we're here today. We're here because humanity refuses to accept that freedom of the spirit of man can ever be extinguished. We're here to commemorate that life triumphed over the tragedy and the death of the Holocaust — overcame the suffering, the sickness, the testing, and, yes, the gassings.

We're here today to confirm that the horror cannot outlast hope — and that even from the worst of all things, the best may come forth. Therefore, even out of this overwhelming sadness, there must be some purpose. And there is. It comes to us through the transforming love of God.

We learn from the Talmud that, "It was only through suffering that the children of Israel obtained three priceless and coveted gifts: The Torah, the Land of Israel, and the World to Come." Yes, out of

this sickness — as crushing and cruel as it was — there was hope for the world as well as for the World to Come. Out of the ashes — hope. And from all the pain — promise.

So much of this is symbolized today by the fact that most of the leadership of free Germany is represented here today. Chancellor Kohl, you and your countrymen have made real the renewal that had to happen. Your nation and the German people have been strong and resolute in your willingness to confront and condemn the acts of a hated regime of the past. This reflects the courage of your people and their devotion to freedom and justice since the war. Think how far we've come from that time when despair made these tragic victims wonder if anything could survive.

As we flew here from Hanover, low over the greening farms and the emerging springtime of the lovely German countryside, I reflected — and there must have been a time when the prisoners at Bergen-Belsen, and those of every other camp, must have felt the springtime was gone forever from their lives. Surely we can understand that when we see what is around us — all these children of God, under bleak and lifeless mounds, the plainness of which does not even hint at the unspeakable acts that created them. Here they lie. Never to hope. Never to pray. Never to love. Never to heal. Never to laugh. Never to cry.

And too many of them knew that this was their fate. But that was not the end. Through it all was their faith and a spirit that moved their faith.

Nothing illustrates this better than the story of a young girl who died here at Bergen-Belsen. For more than two years Anne Frank and her family had hidden from the Nazis in a confined annex in Holland where she kept a remarkably profound diary. Betrayed by an informant, Anne and her family were sent by freight car first to Auschwitz and finally here to Bergen-Belsen.

Just three weeks before her capture, young Anne wrote these words: "It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them because in spite of everything I still believe that people are good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness. I hear the ever approaching thunder which will destroy us, too; I can feel the suffering of millions and yet, if I looked up into the heavens I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end and that peace and tranquillity will return again." Eight months later, this sparkling young life ended here at Bergen-Belsen.

Somewhere here lies Anne Frank. Everywhere here are memories — pulling us, touching us, making us understand that they can never be erased. Such memories take us where God intended his children to go — toward learning, toward healing, and, above all, toward redemption. They beckon us through the endless stretches of our heart to the knowing commitment that the life of each individual can change the world and make it better.

We're all witnesses. We share the glistening hope that rests in every human soul. Hope leads us, if we're prepared to trust it, toward what our President Lincoln called, "the better angels of our nature." And then rising above all this cruelty, out of this tragic and nightmarish time, beyond the anguish, the pain and the suffering for all time, we can and must pledge. . . .

Never again.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

June 14, 1985

Dear Mr. Healy:

On behalf of President Reagan, I wish to acknowledge receipt of the resolution adopted by the Cambridge City Council regarding the President's decision to visit the military cemetery at Bitburg, West Germany.

Your sending of this statement is appreciated, and the views contained in it have been communicated to the appropriate Administration officials. I am taking the liberty of enclosing copies of the President's speeches at Bitburg Air Base and the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp that you may wish to have available for the record.

With the President's best wishes to you and to the members of the City Council,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Anne Higgins".

Anne Higgins
Special Assistant to the President
and Director of Correspondence

Mr. Paul E. Healy
City Clerk
City Hall
Cambridge, MA 02139

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Comm. from Anne Higgins, Special Assistant
to the President and Director of Correspondence,
acknowledging receipt of the resolution adopted
by the Council together with copies of the
President's speeches at the Bitburg Air Base
and the Bergen-Belson concentration camp.

In City Council,
June 24, 1985

6/24/85
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