

## TOWN HALL DISCUSSION MIT US-BOTSCHAFTER PHILIP D. MURPHY

Alexander von Humboldt, one of the Humboldt brothers, was one of the great men – the other one being his brother Wilhelm, of course (I hope that did not sound too patronising) – after whom our university was named in 1949. In 1804, while being on his way back to Europe, he visited the city of Washington where he met the American President Thomas Jefferson several times for dinner at the White House. Jefferson was already quite familiar with the famous Baron von Humboldt, who had enchanted everyone in Washington in no time at all. Jefferson and Humboldt shared all sorts of academic and scientific interests and Jefferson was deeply impressed by Humboldt's achievements in life. They had a great deal in common, as both were scholars who – in the case of Jefferson only periodically – liked to drift away from the spheres of politics in order to engage in the academic domain. This notwithstanding, they had also come together to discuss the new border between Mexico and the United States, a border that was a product of the Louisiana Purchase. Humboldt delivered a lot of information about the border situation, he even provided Jefferson with some of his personal impressions and maps illustrating the border region, thereby making a deep and lasting impression on Jefferson. Jefferson later commented on Humboldt's visit: »Actually, I was enthusiastic as I received more information about all sorts of things in less than two hours than I had read or heard of in the last two years«.

What can we learn from this episode in history, which connects our two countries, dear Ambassador, an episode in history about one of the greatest presidents of the United States and one of the greatest German scholars? This episode demonstrates that our shared history did not start in the 20th century, when after the German catastrophe the very special relationship between Germany and America was formed and ensured the continued existence of a remaining free part of Berlin and indeed of West Germany in its entirety. The images of the American support to defend West Berlin's freedom are very deeply engraved in the cultural memory of our city: the »Luftbrücke« (Berlin Airlift), the »Rosinenbomber« (Candy Bombers) and in particular the celebrated visit of John F. Kennedy culminating on the balcony of the Schöneberg City Hall. Furthermore, Berliners and Germans still remember the famous speech of Ronald



Reagan in front of the Brandenburg Gate: »Mister Gorbatschow, tear down this wall«. Reagan said these words only a few years before his claim – finally! – became true.

The contribution of the United States towards the liberty of all Germans secured our country's very existence and left a deep and lasting impression on West Germany; increasingly this also became part of the collective memory in the Eastern part of Berlin – of which Humboldt-Universität is a shining example. Recently, one of our most distinguished German historians, who became a Professor at the Humboldt-Universität after reunification in 1990, gave his farewell lecture about »The Long Road West«. His lecture made one thing apparent: along with West Germans, East Germans are, since German reunification, increasingly convinced that the orientation towards the West and the special relationship between Germany and the United States are integral elements of the political identity of the Federal Republic as a free and democratic state governed by the rule of law. I know for a fact that Heinrich August Winkler's conclusions were drawn not only from statistics, journals and archives, but also from what he experienced working at this East German university for nearly twenty years and seeing opinions change with the ongoing unification process. Placed in the heart of the divided and once again united city of Berlin, the Humboldt-Universität is not only a successful example for the reunification of East and West Germany, but also a particularly meaningful example in this respect.

Returning to my introductory thoughts about Humboldt's visit to Washington, and the joint endeavour of Jefferson and Humboldt striving for freedom, demonstrates that in the anniversary year of this university – which is also the anniversary year of Alexander von Humboldt's death – Germans and Americans have so much more in common. The heydays of our shared history – a history which, I hardly believe that I need to remind you, also bore dreadful low-points – are not only to be found in the common images of the second half of the twentieth century, but this is less known in Germany.

When I learnt that you, Ambassador Murphy, would like to give your first public lecture in Germany in front of students here, at the Humboldt Universität, I was both highly impressed and delighted. I was impressed because you

honor us with your visit. It is obvious and well known that you know this country very well, and also how much you love this country. You once lived in Germany with your family in Frankfurt am Main. In your recent Welcome Remarks in the American Embassy near the Brandenburg Gate you not only spoke about the special relationship between Germany and the United States, but you also highlighted your own personal relations to Germany. I was even more impressed that you apparently know that it is possible in some parts of Germany to greet people by saying »Grüß Gott!« (roughly translated as »greet the Lord!«), without being met with the sarcastic remarks you encounter when using this greeting in other parts, for instance here in Berlin »Wenn Du ihn triffst« (»should you meet him«). Someone who knows the language of the people so well also has a great understanding for the people.

This leads us back to Alexander von Humboldt who, like his brother Wilhelm, had been a passionate language scholar. An important foundation is named after him, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, which supported many American scholars to visit German universities and again many German scholars to go to the United States. The Humboldt Universität is one of the most attractive and appealing places for foreign scholars within the programmes of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and other funding bodies, such as the well-known Fulbright Commission.

2009 is a year of commemoration in many respects: we celebrate and commemorate the 200th anniversary of the foundation of the Humboldt Universität, the 150th anniversary of the death of Alexander von Humboldt, the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the peaceful revolution in East Germany and Eastern Europe. Your visit, dear Ambassador Murphy, clearly demonstrates that we do not only remember and commemorate the great past, a past that we owe our freedom to. Because we are aware of this past we can look jointly towards the future. The fact that you, Ambassador Murphy, will do this together with us today, in our university, and partly with our students, is a great honour for me and for the entire Humboldt-Universität. Once again, a very warm and sincere welcome to you!