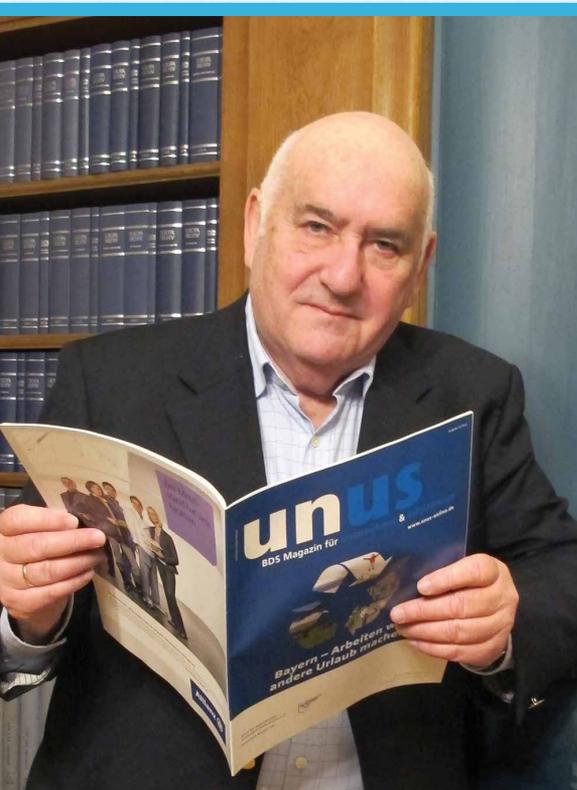


**I**n the decades following World War II, few nations admired and emulated the United States more than Germany. According to Dr. Werner Weidenfeld, director of the Center for Applied Policy Research at the University of Munich, older Germans would have almost certainly described the U.S. “as a magnet of future hopes.” The image of the American way of life was the model most wanted to follow across Europe, especially in Germany.



“It was a melting pot, a big, integrated society with people coming from all countries and being accepted and integrated,” said Weidenfeld, who was Germany’s federal government coordinator for German-American cooperation from 1987 to 1999. “It was a country full of hope, where a dishwasher had the opportu-

## WERNER WEIDENFELD

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nity to become a millionaire.”

As Germany eventually built itself into a global economic powerhouse, the U.S. offered a model, a new frontier with societal consensus. To Germans, who were used to political discord, the American political system was stable and powerful.

“It was almost impossible for Germans to see real deep differences between Republicans and Democrats,” Weidenfeld said. “For the Germans, America was the big partner who guaranteed freedom, peace and security, the leading power in creating a new world political architecture.”

In the past couple of years, however, the perception in Germany and across Europe has undergone a significant change, he said. There has been a deeper, disturbing view of change in the United States, and it has resonated across the continent.

“There is no longer the feeling that the U.S. is the leader in creating a global political architecture,” he explained. For Germans, for example, the revelations of the NSA spy case, in which it was revealed that the U.S. tapped the phones of German leaders like Angela Merkel, set off deep concern.

“Why do you need to spy on your friends?” Weidenfeld asked. “This created feelings of ambivalence and mutual distrust. The basic impression of America now, especially in the current election cycle, is that of a country full of conflict and tension; of regular people on the street against the Washington

establishment, poor people against rich people and much tension against immigrants.”

Weidenfeld noted that Trump’s declaration of his intent to build a wall across the Mexican border spurred deep, psychological emotions. “Europeans have a deeper psychological impression of walls because a wall divided Europe for decades,” he said.

Despite the political tension, Weidenfeld said that the short-term impact on global business will be negligible. German automakers, for example, are unlikely to stop selling cars in the U.S. The American marketplace remains the de facto standard for companies in global business enterprises.

“But it is no longer self-evident that if I want to create a big future-oriented initiative in my business that I would look to the U.S.,” he said. “Because you don’t want to be surrounded by these conflicts and tensions.”

Inevitably, the perception that the U.S. is a simmering stew of political and civil unrest, whether overstated or not, leaves a deep impression on Europeans, especially Germans, according to Weidenfeld. People keenly observe what is going on in America and wonder what strategic perspective will emerge in America.

“The lack of a strategic perspective is a problem in Europe today, but to me, it is far bigger in the U.S.,” Weidenfeld said. “The future depends on who is taking the lead. So much depends on the quality of the top political leadership.” ★