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**Opening Speech at the Ceremony Marking the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961, 17. January 2011**

- Es gilt das gesprochene Wort! -

Dear Ambassador Murphy,

Distinguished guests,

Dear colleagues, students, alumni and friends of Freie Universität,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you in the Henry-Ford-Building of Freie Universität for today's commemorative event marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John F. Kennedy's inauguration as President of the United States.

When the Embassy of the United States contacted us last fall with the idea of organizing such an event here at the Henry-Ford-Building, it did not take us long to reply with an enthusiastic "yes". I am very pleased that we can mark this important anniversary together, and I wish to thank Ambassador Murphy for his initiative and for his choice to hold his address here in the Henry-Ford-Building of Freie Universität. My special thanks also go to Professor Etges at the JFK-Institute for his expert help, and to all staff members who have contributed to the organization of today's event.

Ladies and Gentlemen, on January 20, 1961, when John F. Kennedy took office as the 35th President of the United States, the world was watching expectantly. Never before had a change in the White House attracted such a degree of public attention and tension. The narrow victory on November 8, 1960 — Kennedy's lead over his rival Richard

Nixon was only 0.2 percent, 113,000 popular votes — represented a turning point not only in the succession of generations; Eisenhower, the outgoing President, was 70, Kennedy was 43 years old. Kennedy's victory also signified a political change. His inaugural address reinforced this external impression. In it Kennedy appealed to the individual responsibility of each citizen ("ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country"). He also invoked a new boldness in an unbiased analysis of the political reality and indicated that in the future there would no longer be barriers against agreements and confidence-building measures between the antagonistic powers of the Cold War: "Let us never fear to negotiate."

What really changed with Kennedy's presidency beyond such announcements? The answers are complex because by now the Kennedy myth is characterized by traces of false glorification as well as rugged criticism. There is a bright and a dark Kennedy. Both images are mythical so far as they claim, respectively, to cover up the historical experience with the basic pattern of a non-historical individual typology. In an attempt to find a clarifying answer to the above-formulated question, it is necessary to remain neutral. The clarification must begin with facts unrelated to the myth.

The facts concern, first of all, the changes in the area of direct political administration. Kennedy sought to selectively relax the antagonistic conflict between the West and the East, the armaments madness of the Cold War. His main motivation was economic, aware as he was of the horrendous financial burdens resulting from the spiraling (a) arms race. He was also well aware that none of the Great Powers has the right to claim world domination for itself. In November 1961 he stated, "... we must face the fact that the United States is neither omnipotent or omniscient — that we are only 6 percent of the world's population — that we cannot impose our will upon the other 94 percent of mankind...." This claim was not always implemented, as the examples of Cuba and Vietnam show. But it was what propelled Kennedy's attempts to provide new foundations for his country's relations to the Soviet Union, despite setbacks in the first year of his administration.

Kennedy's tenure, which lasted less than three full years, was characterized not least by far-reaching cultural change. The President contributed to an open intellectual climate. He invited artists and scientists to the White House and surrounded himself with strategic advisers of high caliber — Theodore Sorensen, Arthur Schlesinger, Henry Kissinger, to name just a few. His speeches carried a new intellectual atmosphere. They were not restricted to statements and politically calculated ostentation, but rather pioneering options for fundamental courses of action.

In the third place, the influence of the media merits attention. Kennedy was the first American President to recognize the importance of being under observation by the press and television and to make use of the media to his advantage. Even as a Senator, and later in the presidential campaign, and finally, in the few years of his presidency, he staged his prestige and his image quite purposefully. His television presence, his effective rhetoric, and his youthful appearance were all elements of his political success story. These factors were supported by his charisma and a life that was marked by dramatic tension curves. War and war wounds, immense wealth through paternal inheritance, an attractive wife, a private life wrapped in legend — all these are material for media stories. The media thread is not yet broken, partly because the mystery surrounding his murder still seems unresolved. At the end, the fairy tale had become a dark conspiracy, the last resolution still pending.

What changed while Kennedy was President? One of the answers leads us back to our university, in June of 1963. During that month, Kennedy gave a number of groundbreaking speeches further developing what he had already outlined in his inauguration speech of January 1961. Two and a half difficult years for his administration had passed: the Cuban missile crisis and ultimatum, failed disarmament negotiations in Vienna, the construction of the Berlin Wall. This new period of frost in the Cold War was not conducive to fundamental revisions of the iron fist policy. Yet Kennedy knew that he had to act because the arms race between the major powers had become increasingly uncontrollable. The planned nuclear test ban treaty and the preparation of a joint

space program with the Soviet Union were the first steps toward a strategy of de-escalation.

On June 10, 1963, Kennedy spoke at the invitation of Bob Byrd and President Anderson at American University in Washington. He stated that in the long run security created through weapons, cannot be the only means of modern foreign policy. The West would need to review its attitudes toward peace, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War. “Let us reexamine our attitude” — with this invitation Kennedy explicitly called for revision of the foreign policy strategy that the White House had followed so far. The speech culminated in a statement that was addressed to all Americans: “For we can seek a relaxation of tension without relaxing our guard.” “Relaxation without sacrificing security interests” — this was a new formula in the political ice-age of the Cold War.

Kennedy’s trip to Germany began two weeks after his speech in Washington. Cologne, Bonn, and Frankfurt am Main were the first stops. In St. Paul’s Church in Frankfurt, the President spoke on June 25, 1963, on the need to unite Europe. Foreign policy considerations with respect to Eastern Europe played no significant role in his remarks. The next day he flew to Berlin, made a stop at Checkpoint Charlie, and proceeded on to Schöneberg Town Hall where he greeted 400,000 enthusiastic spectators. His rousing speech, which was repeatedly interrupted by chants and the rhythmic scanning of his name, culminated in a comparison between ancient Rome and that modern symbol of freedom, Berlin. This speech has long been a central part of the Kennedy myth. A visit at Freie Universität was planned for the afternoon. It had rained that morning, but by early afternoon there was mild summer weather, and a warm breeze was blowing over the city. Kennedy arrived in Dahlem around 3:20, in an open Lincoln Continental with Washington plates, accompanied by the former American commander in Berlin and personal representative of the President in Berlin, Lucius D. Clay, as well as German Chancellor Adenauer and the Governing Mayor of Berlin, Willy Brandt. The rector, Ernst Heinitz, greeted him in front of the Henry Ford Building and escorted

him to the festival stage, which was built under the open sky in front of the main entrance. Twenty thousand people had gathered at the Dahlem campus, forming a wide band that extended from Boltzmann Street to the economics faculty at the end of Gary Street. During a special ceremony, Kennedy was made an honorary citizen of Freie Universität. After the presentation of the ceremonial chain by the rector, Kennedy gave his second major speech on this day. It lasted almost thirty minutes and caused the audience to sit up and listen.

The speeches given in Schöneberg and Dahlem differ from each other in a remarkable way. The contrast between them makes it possible to sense the tension that characterized Kennedy's foreign policy during his final year. The partly impromptu speech at the Schöneberg town hall cultivated the rhetoric of the Cold War. Its spontaneous fervor had startled Kennedy advisers because it turned out more aggressive in tone than the prepared written version. Its tenor was one of escalation in the middle of a threatening situation. The speech praised West Berlin as a protective fortress of freedom, while denouncing the Eastern regime as the epitome of ideological arrogance. Kennedy's impressions of the Wall and barbed wire led him to depart from his written speech and insert these phrases as a prominent part of his talk. Two weeks previously at American University in Washington, Kennedy had instructed the U.S. diplomats to avoid all forms of rhetorical hostility in the future. Now he violated his own order, and fell back into the language of the Cuban missile crisis.

The tone of the Dahlem speech was far less harsh than that of the one given in the morning. At Freie Universität Kennedy referred to considerations that he had presented 2 ½ weeks earlier in Washington. He addressed his speech to the members of the university as future political decision makers, just as he had done in opening his speech in Washington. At first Kennedy argued along the lines he had drawn in the morning. He spoke of the regime of a police state in Eastern Germany, of harassment and threats under the Soviet regime. He then referred to the founding of Freie Universität in 1948 and the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, linking the academic world

and the division of Germany. Kennedy turned to the self-image of Freie Universität and associated it with an analysis of the political constellations of the Cold War. At the same time, he formulated proposals that sounded conciliatory. He stated that in the long term, the protective shield of freedom is not sufficient to ensure peace. “But behind that shield it is not enough to mark time, to adhere to a status quo, while awaiting a change for the better.” Kennedy stressed the opportunity for change and reconciliation – “possibilities of reconciliation.”

In contrast to the highly emotional celebration of freedom that he had brought forth in the morning, Kennedy now chose moderate tones. He announced his new policy toward Eastern Europe as outlined two weeks earlier at American University. For his audience in Dahlem, this was the first indication of a changed conception in American foreign policy. At Freie Universität the President presented the central theme of his strategic re-evaluation of the Cold War, which he had not previously formulated so clearly in Europe. His key concept was “change”: “(...) the winds of change are blowing across the curtain as well as the rest of the world.”

For the governing mayor of Berlin, Willy Brandt, Kennedy’s strong words were a sign of encouragement that his own fundamental ideas about a new policy toward the eastern part of Germany could be pursued jointly with the United States. Brandt had already made a detailed evaluation of the speech at American University. Just a few days before this speech, he had traveled to Boston, as he was granted an honorary doctorate from Harvard University. On June 11, 1963, Brandt announced to the press in New York that Kennedy’s speech was a new comprehensive attempt to change the relationship between the East and the West based on the actual situation rather than holding onto illusions.

In view of Kennedy’s Dahlem speech, Brandt realized that Kennedy was serious about his course of rapprochement. The immediate effect of Kennedy’s words was not long in coming. On July 15, 1963, just three weeks after the President’s visit at Freie Univer-

sität, Brandt's closest political adviser, Egon Bahr, head of the Press and Information Office for the Land of Berlin, held a lecture at the Evangelical Academy in Tutzing that made history. Bahr had also followed Kennedy's speech on June 26 at Freie Universität very closely, sitting just a few seats behind the speaker's panel in front of the high windows of the Henry Ford Building. In Tutzing Bahr spoke publicly for the first time about the goal of a new policy for Germany that would be based on negotiations rather than being purely about security concerns. The goal should be not to magnify division by increasing economic pressure, but to reach formal agreements for the solution of certain issues, according to Bahr. He underlined his commitment with a formula that in the Germany of 1963 caused some resistance: "Change through rapprochement." This lecture by Bahr, which laid the foundations for the Federal Republic of Germany's later social liberal policy toward its eastern counterpart, would have been inconceivable without Kennedy's speech at Freie Universität.

The sense of unity that Kennedy's words created in the audience in Dahlem lasted for several years. In the wake of student protests beginning in 1966 that were also directed against the war of the Americans in Vietnam, new fronts arose that ran through the center of West Germany's society and also through Freie Universität. Kennedy, whose Vietnam policy remained ambiguous, did not live through these times of turmoil. The détente that Kennedy conceptually prepared, but did not live to pursue, was carried out later by others. His speech at Freie Universität was the source of new impulses leading to the German Eastern Treaties negotiated since 1970 by the social liberal coalition under the motto "change through rapprochement" that later became realpolitik. When we celebrate the 50th anniversary of Kennedy's inauguration, we at Freie Universität can recall with pride this previously little known connection.