

Merkel and Obama (November 17, 2016)

Abstract

Good chemistry between heads of state is often seen as an important component in facilitating good relations between individual countries. Barack Obama and Angela Merkel shared many commonalities in policy approaches and substance even if their rhetorical styles differed.

Source

Late love

Angela Merkel and Barack Obama: This is the story of a rapprochement between two contrasting politicians. Why they were able to form a close relationship in the end, after all.

Shortly before Barack Obama leaves for his last visit to Germany as U.S. President, he quickly pays Angela Merkel (CDU) a memorable compliment. The Chancellor has been his “closest international ally” during his eight-year term of office, he says. This should ensure a harmonious atmosphere at the meeting between the two this Thursday and Friday. After all, more appreciation and esteem is hardly possible.

The acquaintance of Merkel and Obama did not exactly have a happy beginning. In 2008, Merkel refused to allow the then-presidential candidate to speak against the backdrop of the Brandenburg Gate. He had to make do with the less attractive victory column.

But differences in character also made it seem unlikely at the time that these two would get along well: Here the sober political administrator, there the brilliant rhetorician with the big ideas; they did not seem compatible. Unlike Merkel, Obama is not only able to rationally justify politics, but also to communicate them emotionally, says Karsten Voigt (SPD), then coordinator of the Federal Government for German-American Cooperation, describing one of the main differences.

For Merkel, the enthusiasm that Obama sparked in Germany in 2008 may have been difficult to bear in part because some praise for the presidential candidate also seemed to echo criticism of her own political style. “He created a mood that made it possible to believe in politics,” Norbert Röttgen (CDU), then Parliamentary Director of the Union parliamentary group, said in praise of Obama. Indeed, that was not something Merkel could do.

Still, after Obama's election, on official occasions there were barely any signs of disgruntlement or distance. Former Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung (CDU) still has the 2009 NATO summit in Baden-Baden in mind, Obama's first visit to Germany as president. Already then, the relationship between Merkel and Obama was very friendly and characterized by trust, he says.

More that connects than separates

In general, Jung certainly sees more things that unite than separate Merkel and Obama. Beyond all rhetorical differences, Obama also cultivates a thoroughly sober and pragmatic political style, says Jung. What is decisive, however, is the liberal view of the world that both share. For Voigt, a common basis of values is also the most important explanation for why Merkel and Obama eventually came together.

The current government coordinator for transatlantic cooperation, Jürgen Hardt (CDU), even speaks of an affinity between the two top politicians. Both are willing to reconsider and change firmly held

opinions before making a decision that may be wrong or suboptimal.

On Merkel's visit to Washington in 2009, Obama himself had already made clear what he particularly appreciated about Merkel: she is “smart,” he said, thinks practically and can be trusted when she says something. On another occasion, he praised her humor. There was also no lack of official awards. In 2011, Merkel was the second German to receive the highest civilian award in the USA, the Medal of Freedom.

“Merkel is on the right side of history.”

Nevertheless, there were many disgruntlements in the beginning. Points of contention during Obama's first term in office included the American demands that Germany accept Guantanamo prisoners or send more soldiers to Afghanistan. The relationship was strained in 2011 when Germany abstained from voting on the Libyan resolution in the Security Council. But Merkel also felt quite generally that during Obama's first years in office in Washington she often received too little attention.

However, this probably had less to do with the Chancellor herself than with the fact that other parts of the world were simply more important to Obama. Germany, for example, noticed very acutely that Obama set aside 90 minutes for the Chinese president at a nuclear summit in the USA, but only 45 minutes for the German head of government. Obama first had to learn that Europe is still the most important and reliable partner of the U.S., says former U.S. coordinator Voigt.

There were also conflicts during Obama's second term in office. The German side was outraged that members of the German government and even the Chancellor were being wiretapped by the NSA. Obama, in turn, was unhappy that Merkel responded to the European debt crisis with a tough austerity and reform program instead of debt cancellations and economic stimulus programs. On the other hand, there was a great deal of agreement during the Ukrainian crisis, when Obama largely trusted the Chancellor's crisis management.

Merkel's “yes, we can”

During the refugee crisis, Merkel then suddenly seemed to take guidance in a very new way from Obama. For some observers in Germany, at any rate, her famous “*Wir schaffen das*” reminded them of the U.S. President's battle cry of 2008: “Yes, we can.” Even if the U.S. itself hardly accepted any Syrian war refugees, Obama – unlike his designated successor – bestowed the highest praise on Merkel in this regard. Merkel is “on the right side of history,” said the U.S. President during his visit to the Hanover Trade Fair in the spring.

However, comparable tributes from Merkel about Obama are not known. “I enjoy working with the American president,” she once said, that had to do.

In contrast to Obama, Merkel has the chance to participate in shaping world affairs also in the coming years. Obama, in any case, thinks this is desirable: “The world benefits from her steady presence.”

Source: Katharina Schuler, “Späte Liebe”, *Die Zeit Online*, November 17, 2016, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2016-11/angela-merkel-barack-obama-usa-deutschland/komplottansicht>

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