

The First Armageddon The View from Berlin

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A three-bell alarm is ringing in Germany, in the European Union, and in transatlantic relations. Yet so far, voters seem oblivious to the threat.

That's why the vote for the European Parliament (EP) next week – normally a sleepy affair - is now the unlikely arena for the first Armageddon between the continent's democrats and demagogues. Already right-wing activists feel strong enough to go beyond their former frontal attacks on the European Union. This time around, instead of calling for dissolution of the EU, ultranationalists in Europe are going on the offensive and trying to capture the whole EU from within, beginning with its embryo legislature.

Within Germany the nation's pragmatic centrist political consensus of seventy years has shrunk so far that months-long negotiations will be required to form a coalition government after each election. Within the EU, too many democracies are sleepwalking toward authoritarianism. The current [abdication](#) of the United States from leadership of the international peace order it founded in 1945 leaves vacuums for spoilers to fill. And in a post-fact world of 260 million tweeters with their own atomized truths, accelerating technological and geopolitical disruption are generating intertwined existential crises of disorientation, polarization, and loss of social trust.

Germany

"I did too. We all believed in it," mused Thomas Bagger, Director-General for Foreign Affairs in a conversation in his office in the German presidential palace. Crowds on both sides of the Brandenburg Gate cheered as the hated wall that split Berlin fell overnight in 1989. East and West Germany reunited peacefully in 1990. Russian reformer Mikhail Gorbachev withdrew the 20 Soviet divisions that had encircled Berlin for almost half a century a thousand miles to the east. The "[third wave](#)" of democratization saw off the fascist and communist ideologies of the 20th century. American political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously proclaimed "[the end of history](#)."

"Toward the end of a century marked by having been on the wrong side of history twice, Germany finally found itself on the right side. What had looked impossible, even unthinkable, for decades suddenly seemed to be not just real, but indeed inevitable," wrote Bagger retrospectively. "Only a free and open society could unleash the creativity that was at the core of economic innovation and success in the information age. [T]here was [no room for authoritarianism in our imagination](#) of the imminent end of history."

Within a generation, however, this utopian conviction of linear progress and East-West convergence suffered shocks. In 2008 the Great Recession shook faith in Western capitalism. In 2014 Russia waged an undeclared war on Ukraine and annexed Crimea in the first post-1945 seizure of a neighbor's territory by force in heartland Europe. And, above all, Chinese President Xi Jinping demonstrated that a [Chinese autocracy](#) could build a modern economy with a middle class larger than America's without triggering any sustained bourgeois demand for loosening of political control.

Today's Germany, the world's star pupil in renouncing a criminal past, embracing liberal democracy, and transforming the mindset of its citizens, was the hardest hit by this disillusionment. As Bagger put it, Germany is "more fundamentally challenged than others by the recent [anti-democratic] turn in international affairs."

Until a year and a half ago, even as chauvinist waves swept over much of Europe, Germany, the continent's acknowledged leader from behind, seemed stable and immune to the nativist contagion. Until September 2017 the pragmatic center of a left-right "grand coalition" held a huge 80 percent majority in the Bundestag. For a decade conservative Chancellor Angela Merkel -- "Mutti" (Mom), as she was nicknamed -- had been the most popular German politician, as she slowly eased her classical conservatives toward the center and then on to the moderate left.

The general election of 2017, however, swept a far-right party -- the upstart [Alternative for Germany](#) (AfD) -- into the Bundestag for the first time in half a century. In Saxony in the east the AfD outshone even the legacy parties with a plurality of 27 percent to the conservatives' 26.9 percent and the Social Democrats' catastrophic 10.5 percent. Regional elections soon brought the AfD into the legislature of [every German Land](#).

In the 2017 election the AfD's only real issue was anger over Merkel's humanitarian open door for more than a million refugees from war-torn countries in 2015 and early 2016. The dispute seemed artificial, since in a groundswell of "welcome culture," [up to eight million Germans](#) had volunteered to teach Syrian schoolchildren German or help Afghan mothers shop in the bewildering urban West. Integration was not ideal, but hundreds of thousands of newcomers found apartments and jobs, a controversial deal with Turkey kept the flow of successive immigrants down, and by fall 2017 [migration trailed the usual pocketbook issues](#) in voter concerns.

Nonetheless, during the campaign the AfD kept reviving the searing memory of the sexual assaults on more than 20 German women on New Year's eve in the train station square in Cologne in December 2015 by groups of North African men, many of whom were asylum seekers. The issue hijacked the election. The AfD attracted protest votes from both right and left, especially from small-town east Germans who rarely saw a non-Aryan face in their midst and had transitioned from Nazi to Communist autocracy with no intervening foretaste of democracy. The party's success sparked hot debate about whether the postwar German democracy might prove to be as vulnerable to subversion as the [Weimar Republic of the 1930s](#).

The election results spooked the "grand coalition" ("Groko") of the big-tent "people's parties." The 154-year-old Social Democratic Party (SPD) plunged to a disastrous 20.5 percent, while the conservative sister parties of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) made their worst showing since Germany's initial postwar election at 32.9 percent. Given the grand coalition of the center, the AfD's 12.6 percent made the newcomer the largest opposition party. It became operational with unusual speed, in part by hiring experienced staffs from CDU MPs who lost their seats, in part by cultivating widespread grass-roots community connections in eastern Germany. Chancellor Merkel required an unprecedented five months of varied negotiations before she could form a new government.

At the end of the day the Groko survived, but its parliamentary majority was shaved to 53.5 percent. The CSU swerved to a bitter anti-migrant (and anti-Merkel) posture to lure back voters poached by the AfD before concluding that this tack only encouraged more defections to the overtly xenophobic party from the CSU's own decades-long Bavarian loyalists. The intramural conservative spat over migration induced Angela Merkel to quit her 18-year chairmanship of the CDU in 2018 and announce that she would step down as head of government at the end of her current fourth term.

With this, Merkel became a lame duck in domestic politics. Her protégé, former minister-president of Saarland Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (aka “AKK”) was elected CDU party chair last December. She is using the EP campaign to move the CDU back to the center to reconcile Merkel’s critics, and the refugee dispute is dormant. She has recovered some of the party’s defectors in special elections and opinion polls in a way that the SPD has not. For now, at least until the end of this year, the center’s dread of new elections that promise only to reproduce existing divisions is holding the grand coalition together.

A Forsa opinion poll from early May now shows only 15 percent support for the SPD, below the rising 20 percent of the eclectic Greens and the slipped 29 percent of the CDU/CSU. The AfD, after rising to 17 percent half a year ago, has [dropped back to 13 percent](#), basically its share in the 2017 election. This still accords the far right a nuisance role in Germany, but the party seems to have “lost its magic,” in the view of veteran politicians.

In retrospect, in her 13 years as Chancellor, Angela Merkel has decelerated but not reversed the long-term crisis of erosion of the center consensus in German politics. Nor has she tamed the AfD, with its tolerated fringe of overt neo-Nazis and lethal “hunters” of dark-skinned foreigners and at least one national leader who has drawn ad hoc [surveillance from federal watchdogs](#) on suspicion of illegal far-right agitation. Nor, despite German and EU funding programs to promote economic development in Africa, has she eased the [long-term pressure of migrants](#) desperate to reach the havens of Europe in general and Germany in particular.

What Merkel has accomplished, though, is to prolong Germany’s own stability in a disoriented world as it adapts to the political turbulence and disruptive technologies that kill old unskilled jobs before creating new ones (and have shrunk the old SPD base of trade unions). This gives the conservatives a year to regroup. It gives Social Democrats a year to regain self-confidence, perhaps, from what some are calling their current *Selbstzerfleischung*, or self-laceration over their electoral humiliation. Mainstream democrats hope it also gives the opposition AfD time to expose in the public arena its subliminal and not-so-subliminal violence and reveal past skeletons through factional infighting.

Surprisingly, despite her domestic weakness, Merkel has so far lost little of her authority in EU and world affairs. As of this writing she is still the go-to person for the likes of would-be Brexiting Prime Minister Theresa May and Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar. Even Greek Prime Minister and ex-firebrand Alexis Tsipras - whose party newspaper used to feature cartoons portraying Merkel as Hitler’s henchman – warmly welcomed her visit to Athens earlier this year as an asset in his own re-election campaign. She is giving this year’s commencement address at Harvard. According to

Josef Janning, founder of the ECFR’s authoritative [biennial mapping of EU networks](#) and coalitions, she is still expected to be the kingmaker for top European posts after the European Parliament ballots are counted and to steer the budget priorities that will guide the EU’s next seven-year medium-term strategy.

The European Union

“The European Union is this country’s first political priority,” stated Niels Annen, State Minister in the German Foreign Ministry, in an interview. “The good news is that all the polls indicate that after the Brexit process, support for Europe has gone up” to a 36-year high of 68 percent among the populations of the member states. “This gives a chance for pro-European parties to seize the momentum” in the May 23-26 European Parliament elections.

Any of Annen's predecessors would have emphasized the same priority, if for varying reasons. Initially, in the infant years of post-Nazi (West) Germany, they seized the chance to rehabilitate their country and reintegrate it into the world community of nations, even as French visionaries Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman seized the chance to end for all time the devastation of repeated French-German wars. The modest beginning was the 1951 European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) that put the raw materials of weapons under the joint and transparent authority of Germany, France, Italy, and the Benelux countries.

With strong support from Washington – including the defense umbrella of the new NATO alliance – the infant ECSC grew into the European Community, which grew into today's European Union. A new form of governance was invented that was less than a federation, but far more than a confederation. Its core innovation, as pinpointed by British and then EU diplomat Robert Cooper, was the counterintuitive license for members to [meddle in each others' domestic affairs](#).

Somehow, it worked. Decisions were not always lowest common denominators. France converged away from its sacred *dirigisme* toward Germany's sacred ordoliberalism. Germany was the biggest paymaster, but also the biggest beneficiary of what became a 500-million-strong market. "Iron Lady" Margaret Thatcher handbagged her willing peers (in this case) into converting that nominal single market into a real one, and British diplomats punched well above their weight in Brussels' behind-the-scenes bureaucracy. Spain, Portugal, and Greece socialized away from autocracies and juntas as they joined the club and adapted to democratic norms. An intramural bargaining mode evolved in which issues were seldom actually voted on but were exhaustively talked into a consensus among all but two or three holdouts, who then agreed not to veto actions requiring formal unanimity.

Together, Bonn and Paris became the EU engine that could generally persuade their respective northern and southern allies to accede to whatever compromises the pair wrought in all-night shouting matches at summits. Repeatedly, heads of government concluded by dawn that the ["voice"](#) of influence in defining the pooling of their own puny sovereignties into a powerful trade collective outweighed the lonely ego-trip of "exit."

When the 36-year-old East German physicist Angela Merkel entered politics in a suddenly reunited Germany in 1990, she shared none of the European passion of the EU pioneers. But as she applied her trademark dispassionate analysis to the issue, she endorsed further European integration as Germany's most rational foreign-cum-domestic policy. After she was elected chancellor to head the government in 2005, she quickly became the indispensable facilitator within the EU. By February of this year she gave an impassioned defense of the EU at the blue-ribbon Munich Security Conference that evoked a standing ovation from the largely European audience (and conspicuous silence from American Vice President Mike Pence and First Daughter Ivanka Trump).

At this point the European Union is beset by two centrifugal forces. The acute crisis is the never-ending melodrama of the United Kingdom's "Brexit," with its unmet March 29, 2019 deadline for implementing London's announced withdrawal from the EU. The chronic crisis is the backsliding of EU member states – especially in Central Europe – from the democratic standards and rule of law they pledged to uphold on joining the club.

The first-ever choice of exit over voice by any member in EU history was launched in summer of 2016. It was - and still is - traumatic for both sides. The deeply split Tories in the UK sought to heal their internal divisions over

the European Union's touchstone of free travel within its borders and intake of migrants from outside by shunting off to voters a simple out-in referendum on quitting the Union altogether.

Brexit was arguably the oddest manifestation of nationalist backlash to the globalization that in recent decades has [spread prosperity](#) around the world to unprecedented levels, at the cost of greater [inequality within nations](#). The UK had at first balked at participating in the continental experiment in pooling sovereignty, but finally joined the club in 1973. However, after four decades of benefiting from the single market but chafing under Brussels' regulations and indignities like the European Court of Justice ban on corporal punishment in British schools, nostalgia set in. Britons, once renowned for their pragmatism, recoiled against the post-imperial enhancing of shrunken sovereignty by cooperation with other Europeans – and even against their cherished three-century-old myth of a blended British identity – and reverted to [neo-Little-England patriotism](#). The [Mother of Parliaments](#), long hailed as a vital organ of democracy that tempered raw majoritarianism and mobocracy, was subordinated to a casual binary referendum that activist Leavers won by 52 to 48 percent. Remainers among urban dwellers, university graduates, and the young were outvoted by non-urban, less educated, and older voters.

Oxford historian Timothy Garton Ash called the Brexit exercise a “[national nervous breakdown](#)” that defied all cost-benefit calculations. Harvard historian Simon Schama called it “a [sorry tale of blind flight](#).” [David Frum](#), [one-time speechwriter](#) for President George W. Bush, hypothesized that “the question of whether to stand up to Europe or work with Europe seems likely to emerge as the [great culture clash in British politics](#), replacing the ancient politics of social class.” The *Economist* said the ruling Tories' failure over three years to get beyond slogans and agree on a concrete plan for EU exit made Britain a “[laughing-stock](#).”

Two weeks after the missed deadline for withdrawal an emergency EU summit agreed on a 2:15 a.m. compromise that formally gave London an extra half year to forge an intramural consensus by extending the final Brexit deadline from three days short of All Fools' Day to Halloween. It soon dawned on the actors, however, that because of the complications of the European Parliament elections - which the UK was obliged to participate in as long as it was still an EU member - the operative [deadline will actually be this summer](#).

In any case, two Oxford academics have pointed out that further extensions of deadlines do nothing to resolve the Tories' entrenched “[trilemma](#)” of three fixed goals, with any two of them incompatible with the third: “preserving the country's territorial integrity, preventing the return of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and enabling the UK to strike its own trade deals.”

In the run-up to the EP election hardline Leaver and Member of the European Parliament Nigel Farage accused his one-time Tory allies of betraying pure Brexit and founded a “real” Brexit Party. The four-month-old party already ranks at 34 percent among British voters, or [more than the Tories' miserable 11 percent and Labour's 21 percent combined](#). A triumphant Farage proclaimed, “[It puts a no-deal Brexit back on the table](#).”

A chaotic no-deal exit, with no specified terms of divorce, has already been rejected multiple times by Parliament and is the nightmare both of British moderates and the EU. It could sunder British conservatives for decades to come and forfeit what looks like an early British general election to a Labour party headed by veteran left-winger Jeremy Corbyn. “Brexit is no longer a policy. It is a religion and selection is by faith alone. There is [only purity and heresy](#),” marveled Robert Shrimley in the *Financial Times*.

Centrist [Tory MP Rory Stewart now worries](#) that Brexit could kill moderate conservatism in Britain altogether. *Financial Times* columnist Philip Stephens fears that Brexit might dissolve the three-century-old United Kingdom itself by fueling the independence movement in pro-EU Scotland and [scuttling the 20-year-old Good Friday peace settlement](#) in Northern Ireland. *Financial Times* senior economic commentator Martin Wolf, along with most mainstream economists, calculates that “the UK economy is already 2.5 per cent smaller than it would have been if Britain had not decided on Brexit” and that ongoing losses from the “knock-on effect on the public finances” is running at [£360 million pounds per week](#), or “almost exactly the sum” that Leavers blithely promised would be saved by quitting the European Union. The World Bank calculates that the UK will slip from the world’s [fifth-to-seventh-largest economy](#) this year. International bankers are relocating from London to Frankfurt and Dublin.

This month the damning judgment on London’s three-year fixation on Brexit came not from the bogeymen in Brussels, but from voters in British local elections on May 2. The Conservatives lost more than 1300 councillors. Labour, which had expected to gain seats, [instead lost 82](#). Liberals, Greens, and independents replaced them. Remainers’ hopes for a more nuanced rerun of the 2016 plebiscite rose slightly.

With the Brexit process suspended for the moment, the European Union will presumably turn to countering other chronic centrifugal forces inside the EU once the EP vote is sorted out. In foreign policy, Hungary and Italy are becoming bolder in flirting with Russia and China. Chancellor Merkel may not long be able to perpetuate the four years of EU sanctions on Moscow over its military intervention in Ukraine by means of discreet half-year rollovers.

Yet by far the greatest threat to EU cohesion and standards is domestic. It comes from democratic backsliding in defiance of the EU’s democratic norms by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán Poland’s eminence grise Jaroslaw Kaczynski, and Romania’s ruling Social Democratic Party. Authoritarian temptations are not confined to Central Europeans, but these EU newcomers have gone farthest in their slide toward authoritarianism. The EU has started disciplinary proceedings against Hungary and Poland for politicizing justice and committing majoritarian offenses against minority rights and rule of law. Budapest and Warsaw have covered each other’s backs, however, and the EU has been reluctant to press for the ultimate penalties of loss of voting rights in EU deliberations or cuts in the billions of Euros flowing from Brussels to the two states. The EU has also just given an ultimatum to Bucharest not to pass draft legislation that would confer “de facto immunity” on Social Democratic officials who face corruption charges.

[Both Orbán and Kaczynski initially reached their leadership positions](#) by the [preferred modern route of elections](#) rather than coups, then consolidated their power. Orbán evolved from a youth leader who used street protests for Hungarian sovereignty against Soviet masters into a middle-aged apostle of strongman government unfettered by checks and balances. Buoyed by President Donald Trump’s [old-boy embrace of him](#), he now wields Hungarian sovereignty as a weapon against the EU’s insistence on democratic practices. In 2014, in a speech to Hungarians in Romania, he explicitly [championed “illiberal democracy”](#) as a superior form of government. Kaczynski understood the message, [“systemically copied the strategies”](#) pioneered by Orbán, and tapped the deep roots of Poland’s fierce Catholic solidarity that long ago kept the Poles’ sense of nationhood alive for more than a century without any Polish state. He [flipped the reforms and bold “extraordinary politics”](#) of Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz and other urban cosmopolitans in the 1990s into a [crusade against all judges](#) and other professionals who had held office in the old Communist days. Repeatedly he has threatened to indict former Polish Prime

Minister and current President of the European Council Donald Tusk for alleged conspiracy in the death of his twin brother Lech Kaczynski in a plane crash in Russia nine years ago.

German State Minister Annen may well be right in saying that today's soaring popular approval for the EU after the Brexit agony offers an opportunity for pro-EU parties to seize the initiative in this month's EP election. But its corollary is also true. The European far right sees a unique opportunity to regain the momentum it lost when Emmanuel Macron defeated Marine LePen in the French presidential runoff in 2017, and form a collective voice inside the EU in what would seem to be the oxymoron of an Internationale of chauvinist forces.

Viktor Urban already has the inside track in this endeavor. When Hungary joined the EU in 2004 Orban's Fidesz Party joined the big-tent European Parliament caucus that German Chancellor Helmut Kohl had founded in 1998 to ensure a conservative majority and a socialist minority [for decades to come](#). The European People's Party (EPP) caucus has been reluctant to expel Orban and potentially lose its EP majority and dominant role in EU politics. Last March it half-heartedly suspended Fidesz's voting rights within the caucus over the Hungarian party's democratic transgressions but did not kick it out of the EPP. Orban, who had himself threatened to leave the EPP, declared instead "[We cannot be excluded](#)" and kept his camel's head inside the tent.

More recently Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini – a latter-day convert from the cause of northern Italian secession to that of “Italians first” and strongman of the anti-establishment coalition with comedian Beppe Grillo that demolished centrist parties last year in Italy – joined the insider game by founding his own right-wing movement and inviting his “[natural partners](#)” to join in. The Finns Party, Danish People's Party, and German AfD (campaigning under the slogan “Out of love for Germany. Freedom instead of Brussels”) showed up. Salvini met later with Viktor Orban and Heinz-Christian Strache of the far-right Freedom Party that is in the Austrian coalition government and appealed to nationalist parties to halt the Islamic caliphate in Europe. He also keeps up with Steve Bannon, former strategist for Donald Trump and founder of a new finishing school for right-wing politicians in an Appenine monastery outside of Rome.

Far-right alliances may not have a long-term future, given the contradictions between national interests of the Italian first receivers of Mediterranean migrants and all the landlocked countries that have refused to help Rome by taking in refugee quotas – or the clash between Polish anti-Russian views and Salvini's admiration of Vladimir Putin. Yet in the short term a negative alliance to undermine or gridlock the European Union gives them a common cause.

The rapid growth of the far right across Europe, which would have been unthinkable even three years ago, has triggered anxiety about the outcome of the EP election among centrist politicians, think tanks, and NGOs. The usual low turnout – down from 62 percent in the first EP vote in 1979 to 43 percent in 2014 – makes the election vulnerable to manipulation by highly motivated extremists. The tendency of young people who have no memory of war is to take for granted their unprecedented peace and prosperity on a bloody continent and their freedom to glide without passports from Spain to Finland on Erasmus scholarships. Some 75 percent of those between 18 and 24 years of age think of themselves as born Europeans, but in 2014 only 28 percent of that cohort bothered to vote. So far they have been keener on exercising their right to be apolitical than on exercising their vote to ensure that their peace and freedom and international lifestyle continue.

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Numerous civic initiatives are therefore encouraging both the overall 68 percent silent majority and especially young people to vote this time. The European Council on Foreign Relations is trying to "Unlock Europe's Majority." The Bertelsmann Foundation is conducting cross-border "EU Citizens' Dialogues." The BMW Herbert Quandt Foundation is hoping to nudge three million young people to go to the polls by turning the Freddie Mercury hit *Friends will be friends* into a kind of EU rock anthem, as performed by 28 top singers and bands from the 28 member states (including Britain).

Transatlantic Relations

"I feel as if I wasted my whole life," confided a retired German ambassador who had devoted his career to nurturing transatlantic relations. His lifespan parallels that of history's first fully democratic Germany.

"Europe is suffering from a form of PTSD," declared John Kornblum, a former U.S. ambassador to Germany who is now Senior Counsellor at Noerr LLP in Berlin. "Without the glue of a strong American leadership Europeans dissolve. Europe is now defining itself against America as a moral but weak power being put upon by the big powers." His lifespan too parallels that of the Federal Republic of Germany.

From the beginning, on November 8, 2016, Angela Merkel took a warier approach than her European colleagues did to the man who regarded his own election as the best infomercial ever for Trump Inc. French President Emmanuel Macron might try old-boy bonhomie. British Prime Minister Theresa May might appeal to the remains of the special Anglo-American relationship. But Merkel, whom Trump vilified as early as 2015, when she edged him out to become *Time's* Person of the Year as "Chancellor of the Free World," kept her distance.

In this she was in tune with ordinary Germans, who (like the French) had admired President Barack Obama and given him up to 90 percent approval ratings. Today only [10 percent of Germans approve of Trump](#), according to the latest Pew opinion polls. Obama's ratings slipped slightly among Europeans as he began his pivot to rising superpower China and paid less attention to Europe, which he regarded as peaceful and able to take residual care of its own basic security (until Russia's undeclared war on Ukraine). But German public and elite approval of the American President plummeted as Trump assumed office and abdicated from America's 70 years of leadership of the post-World-War-II peace order. He insisted on a bilateral and transactional approach to both international trade and European security rather than the old global exchange and bookkeeping, and threatened to pull the United States out of NATO if European member states did not immediately ante up the 2 percent of national budgets for defense that they had pledged as a long-term goal.

Most of all, perhaps, many Germans felt betrayed by the unsettling discovery that their American mentor – which had not only solved for them the vexed "German question" of being too powerful for neighbors' comfort, but also taught them Western democracy – was itself sliding into erosion of democratic institutions and norms.

Once again, the geopolitical winds of change hit the Germans the hardest of any Europeans. In an interview Wolfgang Ischinger, current Chairman of the Munich Security Conference and German ambassador to the United States during the 9/11 terrorist shock, explained why. "The Donald Trump phenomenon has created a more painful experience for Germans than for other Europeans. Neither the French nor the British needed America in order to be in the West. They believe they are the ones who created the West. For Germans of my generation this is an entirely different experience. Heinrich August Winkler wrote about this in [Germany: The Long Road to the West](#).

In a nutshell, we decided after World War II with Chancellor Konrad Adenauer that we wanted to be part of the West.

“So how do you define the West? It’s the White House. It was JFK, who symbolized its attractive values. I have a 14-year-old daughter. I cannot tell her the White House and Donald Trump stand for these values. [But for us] there is nothing to replace America. It’s very difficult for me to imagine that we Europeans could define ourselves as the West without it. We need the US that created for us the [postwar] multilateral liberal order. My point is, the Germans are losing a lot more than other Europeans through the Trump phenomenon. We feel like orphans now. This is disappointing for the British and the French. For us it’s not disappointing. It’s painful.”

Chancellor Merkel’s contingent congratulation on Trump’s victory in November 2016 opened by noting that “Germany’s ties with the United States of America are deeper than with any country outside of the European Union.” She offered him “close cooperation” [based on](#) shared American-German “values [of] democracy, freedom, as well as respect for the rule of law and the dignity of each and every individual, regardless of their origin, skin color, creed, gender, sexual orientation, or political views.” (Trump reciprocated the chill a year later by waiting until four days after the Chancellor’s reelection to congratulate her.)

Initially, in public, German officials brushed off all questions about fundamental differences between Trump and Merkel by noting that adjustments to any new administration in Washington are always a bit rocky. Beneath the show of complacency they strove mightily to keep up their ties with old NATO friends in the U.S. like retired marine general and former Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis and Congressional Republicans who were stalwart Atlanticists. They made efforts to deepen ties to California and other statehouses that were enacting laws to mitigate climate warming. They encouraged politicians from Kansas and other Midwest states to lobby Trump to defend their soya bean exporting farmer constituents (and also German exporters to the U.S.) by avoiding a U.S.-Europe trade war. They packaged previous pledges to increase defense spending as if these were responses to Trump’s browbeating of them and emulated Jens Stoltenberg, the Norwegian NATO chief, in framing their defense of NATO by stressing how much the alliance and its preservation of peace in Europe serves America. And they hunkered down to weather the storm until the next US presidential election.

By May of 2017, however, after a fractious transatlantic summit, Chancellor Merkel acknowledged publicly the European sense of estrangement from Washington. “The times in which we can completely rely on others are somewhat over, as I have experienced in the past few days,” she told a political rally in a Bavarian beer tent “and therefore I can only say that [we Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands.](#)”

By November 2018 - after Trump had announced U.S. withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement, pulled the U.S. out of the multilateral Iran nuclear deal and in the view of Europeans bolstered Iran’s hardliners, threatened punitive tariffs on BMW and Mercedes to force a bilateral U.S.-German trade balance, publicly haranged European allies in general and Germany in particular for being [deadbeats and freeriders](#) on American power at a NATO summit and threatened to pull the United States out of the alliance, drastically cut aid to the moderate Palestinian Authority that the EU was also funding, and tore up the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement – Merkel reiterated her key phrase to tell the European Parliament that “we Europeans have to take our destiny into our own hands if we want to survive as a community.” *Politico* “decoded” Merkel’s message as “Like France, [Germany is freaked out by Donald Trump](#). Merkel stands firmly alongside Emmanuel Macron in his tussle with Trump over the future of European security.”

The German angst about what the impulsive Trump might do next reached its zenith three days before Christmas 2018. On that day Defense Secretary Mattis – widely described in American media as “[the last adult in the room](#)” – resigned over the U.S. Commander-in-Chief’s decision to abandon allies by abruptly ordering pullback of U.S. Special Forces advisers in Afghanistan. This step would “undermine an international order that is most conducive to our security, prosperity and values,” Mattis explained in his resignation letter. “One core belief I have always held is that our strength as a nation is inextricably linked to the strength of our unique and comprehensive system of [alliances and partnerships](#). While the U.S. remains the indispensable nation in the free world, we cannot protect our interests or serve that role effectively without maintaining strong alliances and showing respect to those allies,” Mattis wrote.

For Germans who had for decades worked closely with Mattis, the ex-marine general’s resignation – immediately converted by Trump into his own firing of his Secretary of Defense – was devastating. They had seen his presence in the administration as their last guardrail against unpleasant surprises from Washington. Now their guarantor was gone. They would have to pursue damage limitation by other means. Their tactical reaction was to quietly postpone the NATO summit planned for summer of 2019 to the end of the year to avoid giving Trump a bully platform to execute his threatened death of the transatlantic alliance by proclamation. NATO’s gala 70th anniversary was entrusted instead to a sub-summit tableau in April by officials holding the ranks of those who participated in the birth of the longest-lasting military alliance in history.

And how long will it take to mend U.S.-German and U.S.-European relations after the Trump phenomenon?

On the diplomatic level, Wolfgang Ischinger says, “I am optimistic. In our postwar relationship personalities have played a high role. I think things could actually be brought back to a friendly, trustful relationship.”

Then he adds, “Having said that, realistically it’s important to note that things will never be exactly the same as before. The scars of this Trump episode will not ever fully disappear.” He sees the present state of play as the “adolescence of Germany and Europe. It will not go back to the same patron-client relationship. The sentence of Chancellor Merkel that we can’t rely on the United States as we did in the past 60 or 70 years – I think that was a correct statement. And I think it would be unfortunate if we did not take that as a point of departure to grow up and become self-reliant. The question is to get back to a relationship of trust.”

The first Armageddon is the battle between democrats and demagogues in next week’s European Parliament election. The last Armageddon will be the battle to restore shattered social trust not only among transatlantic partners but also within their domestic polities.