Rediscovering the New World

Translation of Speech

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Minister-President, State of North Rhine-Westphalia

at opening of US Information Center at Essen (see opposite page).

WHEN I LOOKED THROUGH the pages of the invitation which I had received for today’s dedication, I became aware of the great variety of means which will be used at this place to improve and strengthen the ties between the New World and the Old. Inadvertently, at that moment, I could not help thinking of the history book which had accompanied me through my school days.

I remember very clearly the extensive passages on the Low German and Franconian emperors, on the fate of Brandenburg under the Great Elector and on a more recent historical event, the German War of 1866. I conclude from the fact that I remember a picture of George Washington — the man whose birthday the United States is celebrating today — that the book also had something to say about the history of the United States. It is the only recollection I have of anything the book contained about the history of the United States.

However, I doubt that this lack should be attributed to the forgetfulness of the student alone. I should rather think that neither the book nor the teacher gave much attention to the subject “America.”

The study of Karl May was the only addition at that time to my knowledge of the New World, and I am impolite enough to assume that among the students of the same age there was almost none whose knowledge differed considerably from my own.

In the meantime we have had — at least from 1945 on — a much more lasting and a more comprehensive lesson about the New World — a lesson taught by life itself. Aside from our own experiences of CARE packages, the Marshall Plan, the Airlift and the protection that American units constitute to western Germany and Berlin, the mention of one name suffices to explain what the United States means to the world: Korea.

The Communist attack has been confronted with a determination which justifies the hope of the free nations that they will live to see a peace of genuine cooperation without fear. Without the sacrifices made on this battleground between East and West, mainly by American soldiers who are fighting not only for Europe but for the world, the hope for peace would at best be a self-deception with no real value. The fate of the Free World will be decided by the fate of the United States.

IN ORDER FOR US to understand and appreciate the powers of this country which have placed it in this decisive role in the world-wide struggle between Western and Eastern ideologies, it is not sufficient to polish up the recollection of George Washington’s picture in an old history book. It would be wrong to believe that the America of our days is a mixture of Coca-Cola, Hollywood and optimism — a description which we sometimes still come across in feuilleton-type travel reports.

I believe that this continent has shown a surprisingly different face to everybody who during recent years has gained a knowledge of modern American literature. Those who, furthermore, have come to know that America since approximately 1935 is the leading nation in the scientific world with regard to research in pure mathematics — a field of science which requires intensive theoretical work without practical value — will have to revise their narrow views on research work in the United States which they believed to be limited to certain purposes only — for instance, to the development of atomic weapons.

They will then recognize that we will have to overcome the “terrible simplifications” blurring our sight of the United States and they will realize that, after 450 years, we will have to discover the New World for the second time. For this New World begins to return to Europe the goods, though changed and converted, which were brought to her by the Old World in past centuries.

If it is correct that the decisive changes take place in the field of culture and not on the battlefield, this process will require our utmost attention. The literature which undertakes to investigate this phenomenon is growing, not only in Germany but everywhere. This is neither a fading nor the expression of those who like to keep up to date. On the contrary, it follows the concept that a historic process of tremendous proportions is under way.

THIS BUILDING IS DESTINED to place means at our disposal which will help us to form an opinion of our own. Thus we no longer will have to rely on the eyes of other observers. American literature, American science, American music and painting are available here and documentary films will give us an idea of landscape and work in the New World. This building is destined to become a center for free exchange of opinion and for individual forming of opinion, free from compulsion.

Thus the very idea that caused the construction of this building symbolizes the ideal of those states which in 1787 gave themselves a constitution “determined to promote the general welfare and to strengthen the blessings of freedom for us and our descendants.”

I should like to express the thanks of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia for the generous gift of the American people and to extend greetings to a nation which in recent years has proved that no sacrifice is too great in the cause of freedom all over the world.

* German novelist of imaginative, exciting tales about American Indians.