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WILLY BRANDT:
A STRATEGY OF GOALS

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WILLY BRANDT - A STRATEGY OF GOALS

"Great times make great men..." The truth in this expression lies not in the times' ability to shape the man, but rather the man's ability to shape the times. Europe after World War II was badly in need of great men - - politically and militarily divided, economically ruined, and frequently on the brink of superpower confrontation. An important actor on this stage was Willy Brandt. First as Mayor of Berlin during the construction of the Wall, and later as Foreign Minister and Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, he was the key to the stabilization of this precarious situation. As I studied Brandt's political career, it became apparent to me that his genius was not in his development of his grand strategy, but rather in his modification of existing national goals. I will show in this paper that the goal of reunification, strongly supported by most Germans, was in direct conflict with the overriding interest of European (and world) peace. With that realization, Brandt pursued his goals of understanding and cooperation with other European nations while convincing his countrymen that a unified Germany would have to wait. Therefore, his success was not made possible by his strategy of Ostpolitik, but rather his efforts to convince his countrymen to modify their emotionally-held short-term goals. From this shifting of national priorities, his strategy naturally evolved. I will begin with a brief discussion of the context of Germany in the 1960's, as well as the

international context of a divided Germany in the shadow of the superpowers. I'll discuss how Brandt saw Germany as the symbol of the division of the world in a bipolar struggle. Finally, I'll describe the conflict between Germany's goals and her long-term national interest, and how that led to the process of compromise which became Ostpolitik. I will not cover details of the strategy itself, or its execution. This paper is written from references in National Defense University course materials, except where noted.

Europe in the late '50s and early '60s was unstable to the point of being explosive. Immediately after World War II, Germany had been divided by the four conquering powers. In the next decade, France, Britain and the United States had endeavored to reconstruct a free and viable West Germany, while the Soviet Union had ruled the East through an autocratic puppet regime. By the early 1960s, West Berlin had risen from the rubble to become Germany's largest industrial city, and a developing scientific and cultural center. West German pride was once again beginning to surface through the lingering guilt about the war. East Germany, on the other hand, was struggling economically and politically under a system which discouraged the kinds of successes seen in the west. In this way, Germany (in particular, Berlin) became a symbol of the cold war relationship between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. -- the societies on both sides of Germany were a direct reflection of the corresponding superpowers.

As the differences in freedoms and opportunities became more pronounced, East Germans began migrating to the west in ever increasing numbers. By 1960, this exodus threatened economic and intellectual bankruptcy of East Germany. On 13 August 1961, the German Democratic Republic began construction of the Berlin wall, a tangible symbol of the philosophical barrier between the cold war participants.

At this point, I need to summarize the part that national and international power played in the evolving situation. The military power of the two Germanys was not a factor in the post-war years, since the occupying forces were not about to permit rearming of the German people. The other elements of national power were also lacking: the economies were shattered; the people were fragmented --oscillating between guilt and anger over the war; and the governments were impotent puppets of the occupying powers. As I mentioned, this situation began to change for the better in the west by the late 50s, but for the most part, the national power that really mattered was that of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. So in that way, Germany was a stage on which the great powers played out their political, economic and philosophical differences. Conflicts on this stage were viewed in terms of their potential to set off a nuclear confrontation, and not their effect on the German people. The West Germans were, by and large, content with the way their government was developing; as long as they felt

secure in the belief that the U.S. would look out for their interests, they felt no need to come to terms with the East. However, the events of August 1961 changed this status quo. President Kennedy did not see it within the interests of the United States to challenge the building of the wall, since he did not see it as an attack on the West. To Kennedy, while the Wall was a serious problem, it was between the Soviets and their East German clients, and U.S. intervention would risk escalation to an unacceptable level. The West Germans were not happy with this view - to them, *East Germany* wasn't threatened by the wall.....*Germany* was threatened by the wall. To Willy Brandt, this was a signal that absolute reliance on the United States to provide security for West Germany was not a satisfactory strategy - since the United States was always going to put its own interests ahead of those of Germany. The perception of the United States being "pushed around" by East Germany caused Brandt to begin rethinking the power relationships in Europe. Having Germany at the mercy of the power of unpredictable giants was not a permissible situation - perhaps it was time for the Federal Republic of Germany to develop some power to influence European affairs, and to enhance German security.

So we see that the national power which predominated in the region in the early 60s was that of the superpowers, not of the two Germanys. Now let's return to the discussion of the political context, focusing on the Germans. The German

people, whether in East or West, believed in the ultimate reunification of Germany. Centuries of cultural unity and a common language could not be overlooked. The important point to understand is the way the governments of the two Germanys reacted to this goal of the people for a unified Germany. In the West, the evolving democratic government tended to reflect the will of the people, and reunification was a basic tenet of most policies in dealings with the East. The deep belief that East Germany had to be "liberated" from the Soviet conquerors led the West Germans to refuse to recognize or even establish relations with the G.D.R. The Social Democrats, who came to power under Konrad Adenauer as Chancellor in 1949, pursued this philosophy with Germanic fervor. Professor Carlo Schmid, a persuasive influence on Adenauer and on the German people, argued eloquently for the reunification at all costs.² Under the Hallstein Doctrine, the West Germans went so far as to sever relations with any nation that recognized East Germany.³ At the same time, the leaders in the Soviet-installed government of the German Democratic Republic had become intense believers in East Germany as a separate socialist state, and they could only see Germany as a reunified socialist nation. So the isolation grew worse, and there was no diplomatic dialog to speak of.

Willy Brandt's heart was broken by the partition of Germany into two states, but he also recognized that the

situation had to change or Germany had the potential to be the playing field for the competition of the nuclear giants. As I have already shown, his confidence in the U.S. was weakened by the perceived non-reaction to the building of the Berlin Wall. To Brandt, the Wall situation, the Hungarian invasion in 1956 and the results of the riots in East Germany in the early 1950s all followed the same scenario: "a courageous uprising of the population, merciless intervention by the Soviets, and stupor of the West."² Brandt was dedicated to the continuation of West Germany as an ally of The U.S., but basing his survival exclusively on another nation's power looked like a poor strategy. He realized that the greatest threat to the maintenance of peace in Europe was the lack of diplomatic dialog between the factions. Brandt also realized, however, that this situation would never improve as long as both sides held to the goal of reunification *on their own terms*.

So Willy Brandt found himself juggling the goals of his countrymen (on both sides of the wall) with what he perceived as the national interests of the Federal Republic of Germany. The buildup of armed forces in both the East and the West concerned him greatly. The divided Germany was appearing more and more like the chess board on which the great powers were playing out their cold war, with potentially disastrous results. He knew it was in Germany's interests to maintain close ties with the West - the Wall made that clear. But an overriding interest was peace and stability in Europe. As

long as there was no diplomatic dialog, stability was an impossible dream. While setting goals to support this overriding interest, Willy Brandt saw that a balance of power was necessary. As West Germany's reconstruction showed more and more success, it occurred to him that a united Germany on *either* side in the cold war would be seen as potentially destabilizing. Add this realization to the previous discussion that neither side was willing to reunify except under *their* government and on *their* terms, and you can understand why Brandt felt it necessary to abandon, at least in the near term, the goal of reunification.

Imagine how Willy Brandt must have anguished in the development of his strategy. To accept a divided Germany would go against the fierce pride and nationalism that the Germanic people have shown since the middle ages. I see this subordination of national goals to the cause of peace as the central theme of Willy Brandt's success as a statesman. How many conflicts around the world could be resolved if only one side would back off from a goal or point of national pride in the interests of peace? As Brandt took his case to the German people, he stressed that the current situation was destroying German *cultural* unity - Germans were becoming enemies of Germans. His perspective was that the only way to preserve German national unity was by "deconstricting" their relationship through cooperation and communication. He took on the task of convincing the German people that they could

come to a reconciliation as a culture, while *accepting* the fact that they live in two states. This was not easy -- the hard-liners saw this as a "sellout" to the East. However, most Germans recognized the dire situation in Europe, and gradually came to accept the fact that it was time for Germany to look east, and establish relationships that could eventually lead to a lasting peace.

In our seminar discussions, we had some confusion about what constituted a national goal as opposed to a national interest. Willy Brandt knew the difference, and studying his philosophy has made the difference clear to me. Brandt knew that the goal of German reunification as a free nation, worthy as that goal might have been, was incompatible with the national interest of peace and stability in Europe. Brandt knew that the partitioning of Germany wasn't just a part of the European problem, it was the key to it.³ Now that Brandt understood that peace was much more important than the political reunification of Germany, his diplomatic efforts to open a dialog throughout Europe could begin.

Brandt's strategy began with meetings with the East German government. While progress was slow, his efforts gradually opened up a communications between east and west for the first time since the war. His diplomacy throughout the rest of the Warsaw Pact nations was characterized by a cautious suspicion, but a willingness to meet the other side

half way. He also accepted the political realities of eastern Europe, and never took a major step without first consulting the Soviet Union. Besides building a framework to ease tensions in Europe, he set an example for the rest of the world -- that a thirst for peace and a willingness to compromise can go a long way towards changing the world for the better.

I have discussed Willy Brandt's development of the eastward-looking grand strategy for Germany, or Ostpolitik. I have shown that, in my opinion, his greatest genius was not in the way he executed the strategy, but in the setting of national goals. Once the idea of a united free Germany was subordinated to the idea of a peaceful, stable Europe, the strategy naturally followed. I don't want to take anything away from the brilliant execution of the strategy over the next ten years, but suffice to say Brandt was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1971. It's important to note that Brandt didn't arbitrarily capitulate to the demands of the other side. As a German who resisted Hitler's madness before and during the war, he knew very well that he had to negotiate with the understanding that the power of the free world was behind him. But without giving away the keys to national security, Chancellor Brandt had, in the words of the Nobel committee, "stretched out his hand to reconcile peoples who were enemies for a long time."⁴ This "stretching out of

the hand" is the lesson we learn from Willy Brandt -the willingness to compromise in the name of peace. As Brandt said in Oslo during his acceptance of the Nobel Prize:

"But I cannot end my speech without reminding you and myself of those who at this moment are living and suffering in war, especially on the Indian subcontinent and in Vietnam. I include also the people living in the Middle East and other areas of crises. I do not feel like making loud appeals, for it is easy to demand moderation, reason and modesty of others. But this plea comes from the bottom of my heart: May all those who possess the power to wage war have the mastery of reason to maintain peace."⁵

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1. Willy Brandt, *My Road to Berlin* (Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1960), p. 209.
 2. *Ibid.*, p.243.
 3. Willy Brandt, "Lecture Given at the Annual Meeting of the Advisory Board of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung on November 30th, 1967, in Düsseldorf," *Peace* (Publishing House, Bonn, Germany, 1971), p.60
 4. *Ibid.*, "Reasons Given by the Nobel Committee," p.7.
 5. *Ibid.*, "Acceptance Speech in Oslo, 11 December, 1971," p.141.