

My First German-American Summit Simulation November 2017

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As a German-American student from the suburbs of Washington D.C. now studying in Bonn, Germany, I have made the political and cultural relationship between the two nations a central focus of my academic career. While at the University of Bonn, I have researched how high-profile political events are reflected in the German and American media. During my studies, I served as an intern with Congresswoman Virginia Foxx of the US House of Representatives, (2016), and Senator Thom Tillis, member of the US Senate on the Armed Services Committee, (2017), the US Consulate in Leipzig, and the European Commission Office in Bonn.

In each of these internships, I have had to deal with constituents. Over the course of my time in each of these political institutions, I was provided a very unique look into the developing political dynamic both within the United States as well as with regards to their relationships abroad, specifically with Germany. In the US House, the constituents with whom I spoke often expressed frustration. This appeared to stem from a sense of insecurity that their views and their needs were often not being properly addressed. The following year after President Trump's inauguration, the message changed. Many more constituents praised the work that had been achieved. The needs of many Americans seemed to have been met.

On the other side of the Atlantic, in Leipzig, the general opinion from the Germans reflected a sense of being forgotten, often asking: *what about us?* Lastly, while at the EU Commission, I could discern a sense of unity within Europe. Since Trump's victory, the idea that the US has become an unreliable partner has spread, thereby strengthening European solidarity.

My First Trump-Merkel Simulation

Seeing German high-school students convincingly playing Donald Trump and Angela Merkel and the members of their cabinets gave cross-cultural understanding a whole new meaning.

For the simulation, students were divided into the American government, the German government, and the press. The aim of the simulation was for respective cabinet members to write a joint communique that would be presented at the 'press conference' later that day.

Students were then divided into groups of 6-8 people and assigned the task of acting out the roles of the two nations' leaders, President Donald Trump and Chancellor Angela Merkel, as well as their respective cabinet members. Each cabinet member was to first outline a draft communique and define the country's goals in that specific sector. The material they were given included websites for the respective secretary or minister. Afterwards, they met with their counterpart in the other government and were faced with the challenge of compromising

with one another on different topics, and authoring a coherent joint communique. Donald Trump and Angela Merkel acted as mediators for the negotiations and kept their colleagues focused on the ‘bigger picture’ while staying in character.

Half-way through the negotiation rounds, students were faced with an unexpected twist—the press informed the leaders of dramatic event—a missile attack from North Korea—in response to which the two governments were expected to present a statement at the press conference.

Expectations

My expectations for this simulation reflected my previous experience working with high school students and discussing similar topics. Many of the students with whom I interacted before, for example, while interning at the US Consulate in Leipzig, had never been to the United States, or even come in contact with an American before. Accordingly, I expected students to inquire about the appropriate stance on key issues, particularly those on the American side. How long the students would be able to stay in character was difficult to predict. The students exceeded my personal expectations as they moved out of their comfort zones to take on new, unfamiliar roles, thereby expanding their own personal knowledge and horizons.

Key Experiences

Observing the students at work navigating the American and German political systems to create the realistic characters was a new experience for me, revealing in a unique way how young people in Germany see the world and, in particular, how they see the manners and objectives of Trump and his cabinet.

I confronted questions about the American mentality and culture in a manner that I had not been exposed to before. What caught my attention throughout the simulation was the perception of Americans held by the students and how it diverged from my personal experience and observations. While many students were generally aware of what the U.S. stands for, how it was established, and the principle of individual liberty, they lacked more than a superficial understanding of their counterparts across the Atlantic as I’m sure many Americans fail to fully understand Germans. But, the dedication of the students to their roles truly impressed me. While many did not seem to agree with the American point of view, they were able to convincingly portray the often-misunderstood American perspective. The simulation, for me, emphasized the need for more cultural exchanges between the U.S. and Germany on an individual level.

Conclusion

This exercise covered familiar issues in German-American relations, but it also made clear how much the resolution of these issues depends on dialogue and negotiation. These skills need more emphasis in the social sciences.