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## VIEWPOINT

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# Doing Well by Doing Good

## American generosity toward defeated Germany was a great investment

**T**HE OBVIOUS LESSON OF THE LUFTBRÜCKE, OR AIR bridge, as the Germans call the Berlin Airlift, is simple: if you have to lose a war, lose it to the United States. Fifty years ago, as the first "raisin bombers" began to fly food and fuel into beleaguered West Berlin, Germany was one of the most hated nations on earth. It had launched a war that would claim 55 million dead. It had invented industrial genocide. To slay the Nazi monster, the entire planet had to be mobilized for a fight to the death.

Afterwards, Germans understandably thought that theirs was an indefinite future of punishment and prostration—Versailles cubed, as it were. But a remake of the cruel peace of 1919 was not to be. The Germans were very lucky, and Lady Luck's name was America.

When Joseph Stalin ordered the blockade of West Berlin, he unwittingly cemented what he sought to prevent: the fusion of victors and vanquished on the other side. Stalin was the aggressor, trying to starve 2 million Germans into submission. And America was the saviour: with close to 280,000 planeloads hitting the runways at a breathtaking (and death-defying) rhythm of one every 90 seconds.

Of the heroic blockade runners, 78 perished in accidents, but it wasn't all friendship that animated them in this 11-month test of wit and will. The French call it *renversement des alliances*: when the winner embraces the loser to turn against yesterday's comrade-in-arms.

But what a boon that cold-blooded reversal proved for the Germans—and for all of Western Europe. Those *Amis* who had just finished hanging the Nazi elite at Nuremberg, who were forcing their alien democratic ways on a sullen populace, had suddenly become the most generous of friends. They brought not only coal, but candy, coffee and Camels, the latter the currency of choice until the deutsche mark was born.

Western Europe, too, took notice and heart. This time, the Americans would not abandon the Old World as after World War I. This time, Europe could count on—and commit to—Mr. Big. And so those C-54s did more than just stiffen the spines of West Berliners. In 1948 and 1949, Stalin also lost in Italy and France where the large Communist parties were voted into impotence.

Today, Berlin, Germany and Europe are reunited and free. But that "magic moment," as Bill Clinton put it during the 50th anniversary in Berlin last week, was born in the round-the-clock drone of the raisin bombers. In wider, historical terms, the Airlift marked the beginning of the end of the "German problem" that had brought so much grief to Eu-

rope since Reunification I in 1871. The muscular Reich's first bid for hegemony brought on World War I. The punitive Treaty of Versailles paved the way for the second, immeasurably more brutal, try under Hitler. But American policy in the late 1940s made all the difference.

Nuremberg was quickly shouldered aside by NATO, whose 50th anniversary we shall celebrate next year; it blessed the West Germans with a shelter and a community. Instead of reparations, which bled the Weimar Republic's economy dry after 1919, there was the Marshall Plan, showering Western Europe with vital start-up capital. Instead of beggar-thy-neighbors tariffs, there was free trade, encouraged and enforced by the United States.

This was the setting in which West Germany's "economic miracle" could flourish, where democracy was associated not with misery and imposition, but with prosperity and respectability. Safety "Made in U.S.A." provided the sturdy walls behind which a liberal polity in Germany and beyond could flourish.

What a nice historical twist! For never has altruism been so profitable for a great power as was America's "proactive" commitment to Western Europe in the late 1940s. If Europe is "whole and free" again, as George

Bush put it, we have Harry S. Truman and General Lucius D. Clay, the impresario of the Airlift, to thank for it.

And the lesson endures. In Clinton's words: "Today, no less than 50 years ago, our destinies are joined. If Europe is at peace, so is the United States." And "Each nation can grow more prosperous because its neighbors are prosperous." Today, such incantations sound obvious, if not trite. But back then, history could just as well have turned the other way, with the U.S. hunkering down again in Fortress America. Which is why the larger lesson endures. The genius of American diplomacy was to pursue the country's national interests by serving those of others—by building air bridges and institutions such as NATO or the IMF, and now the Partnership for Peace and the NATO-Russia Council that reach out to the rest of Europe. So what is the abiding lesson of the *Luftbrücke*? Simple: Great powers do well for themselves by doing good for others. ■

GARY HERSHORN—REUTERS