



Guardian International Pages

Eyewitness: Berlin: Cheers in the sun as Obama promises nuclear cuts

Kate Connolly in Berlin

685 words

20 June 2013

The Guardian

GRDN

24

English

© Copyright 2013. The Guardian. All rights reserved.

He did not, everyone agreed, have the rhetorical punch of his predecessors. But it was going to be difficult for Barack Obama to live up to the "Ich bin ein Berliner" or "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall" lines of John F Kennedy and Ronald Reagan.

Yet as the US president admitted after delivering the greeting "Hello Berlin!" - which despite its lack of oratory prowess drew huge cheers from the Berlin crowds at the Brandenburg Gate yesterday - times have changed.

"We no longer live in fear of global annihilation," the US president said, referring to the era when Berliners "carved out an island of democracy against the greatest of odds" surrounded by the Berlin Wall and in the shadow of the permanent threat posed by the cold war.

But Obama made use of the historical setting to try to conjure the very same sort of shared values that brought western nations together when the iron curtain divided Europe; he announced plans to cut nuclear weapons.

Proposing reductions of a third in US and Russian nuclear warheads, Obama stated: "So long as nuclear weapons exist, we are not truly safe."

He added: "After a comprehensive review I've determined that we can ensure the security of America and our allies - and maintain a strong and credible strategic deterrent - while reducing our deployed strategic nuclear weapons by up to one-third." He would seek negotiations with Russia to "move beyond cold war nuclear postures".

In a broad-brush speech, which frequently touched on the topic of freedom and Berliners' resilience, he could not fail to mention the concern felt across Europe about more modern-day encroachments on individual liberty, the recent revelations of internet surveillance and US drone warfare - issues which dominated his 25-hour visit to the German capital.

To defend his position he turned for help from Immanuel Kant, recalling the 18th-century German philosopher's belief "in open societies that respect that sanctity of the individual", before stating his own confidence that the US was capable of striking the right balance between security and privacy.

Earlier, alongside the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, he delivered what appeared to be a charm offensive to Europeans, monopolising a large portion of their joint press conference, which also touched on Syria, Guantanamo and the global financial crisis, to address concerns raised by the NSA surveillance scandal.

Speaking later to the 4,000-strong invitation-only crowd, almost exactly 50 years since John F Kennedy delivered his legendary Berliner speech, Obama won applause after suggesting that the welcome he had received had been so warm and the temperatures so high (in the mid-30s), he would remove his jacket and roll up his sleeves.

His wife, Michelle, and their daughters, Malia and Sasha, were off visiting the Berlin Wall memorial. "The last thing they want to do is listen to another speech from me," he said to laughter.

Several seats were vacant, some of those invited having cancelled. It was said extras were brought in to fill some of the holes. First-aid teams attended people fainting, while even Obama appeared too hot in his shirt sleeves.

In the audience was the "candy bomber" **Gail Halvorsen**, now 92, who, as an American airforce pilot, dropped sweets to children during the 1948-49 Berlin airlift, which kept the city's population alive during the Soviet blockade and which became the strongest symbol of US-German friendship.

"I hope I look that good when I'm 92," the president quipped, as Halvorsen stood and waved.

Captions:

The Obamas in Berlin. Clockwise from top: Barack Obama, with Angela Merkel, waves to the crowds at the Brandenburg Gate; police monitors survey the scene from the rooftops; Michelle Obama and her daughters at the Holocaust Memorial; Joachim Sauer and his wife Angela Merkel with the Obamas before a state dinner; the president suffering from the heat; Malia, left, and Sasha Obama at the Berlin Wall memorial; the crowds gather for the speech at the Brandenburg Gate

Document GRDN000020130620e96k00018

Search Summary

Text	"Gail Halvorsen"
Date	All Dates
Source	All Sources
Author	All Authors
Company	All Companies
Subject	All Subjects
Industry	All Industries
Region	All Regions
Language	English