

François Mitterrand, Of Germany and France

Caption: In 1996, François Mitterrand, President of France from 1981 to 1995, recalls the negative attitude of Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister, towards German reunification.

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In Great Britain, on 10 November 1989, the Prime Minister's Press Office published a statement in which Mrs Thatcher welcomed the lifting of the restrictions on movements of the population of East Germany towards the West, hoped that this would be a prelude to the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, looked forward to the installation of a democratic government in the German Democratic Republic and warned, 'You have to take these things step by step.' On the subject of unification, however, she said not a word. Three days later, at the Lord Mayor's Banquet at the Guildhall in the City of London, she spoke about free elections and a multiparty system in East Germany, cooperation with the emerging democracies of Central Europe and the new role which NATO would have to play. Once again, however, she said nothing about unification. Interviewed in the *Times* on 24 November, she said that it was necessary to concentrate on what was most important and that the priority was to secure democracy in all Eastern European countries. When democracy had been established, she explained, the result would be, perhaps in ten years, perhaps in twenty, a very different map (of Europe). Still there was no reference to unification. On her return from Paris, following the extraordinary meeting of the European Council held on 18 November, which I had convened, the BBC asked for her comments. With great tenacity, she repeated that the only thing that mattered was the advent of democracy and that change in Eastern Europe should bring with it a strengthening of the Atlantic Alliance and provide new opportunities for East-West negotiations on disarmament. She took advantage of this opportunity to reject plans for a common currency for the Europe of Twelve. On the subject of unification, however, her lips were sealed. It was not until 24 January 1990, in an interview given to the *Wall Street Journal*, that there finally appeared the far-off prospect of German unity which, in her opinion, would have to be brought about in conditions which took other needs into account and which would allow sufficient time to resolve them, because otherwise it might destabilise everything. She had finally said it, albeit grudgingly. Eventually, on 18 February, Mrs Thatcher acknowledged, in a speech to representatives of the Jewish community in Great Britain, that German unification was inescapable and imminent. There was no doubt, she admitted, that the two parts of Germany would end up together again. For ten months, then, from May 1989 to February 1990, she had persisted in her refusal to tackle a subject which she regarded as inappropriate and dangerous. Her silence on the subject of German unification — at a time when everybody was talking about it — far from disguising her desire to delay it, actually emphasised that desire. What happened between 24 January and 18 February that could have caused this sudden U-turn? There is only one explanation. History was advancing at the double. Hans Modrow, on a visit to Moscow, spoke of 'Germany, a united country', and Mr Gorbachev said, in reply, that he no longer ruled out the possibility of unification. In Bonn, there were plans for a currency union between the two German States. Helmut Kohl and Mikhail Gorbachev took the view that it was up to the German people alone to decide whether or not they wanted to live 'within a single State'. Helmut Kohl and Hans Modrow were agreed that unity was now possible. The Germans and French reiterated their agreement on the process currently under way, while Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti and Chancellor Kohl adopted a similar position. Finally, a meeting was arranged for 24 February, at Camp David, between George Bush and Chancellor Kohl, with the aim of putting the finishing touches to the arrangements for negotiations between the Four Powers and the two German States (the Two plus Four Conferences). Great Britain could not remain absent any longer, and Mrs Thatcher understood this. From then on, she quickened her pace in order to catch up with events, to associate herself with the arrangements leading up to German unity and, if possible, to act as though she had got there first. She reversed her position with her customary vigour and even went so far as to confide, in the *Sunday Times* of 25 February, that Great Britain had been 'isolated and right' in demanding that unification should be achieved taking into account all its 'international implications'. She claimed that the British had been the first to say this and that everyone else was now following them. Dear Mrs Thatcher! Here we can recognise her inimitable style, a mixture of strength of mind and tactical flexibility. In actual fact, she was neither the first nor the only one to refer to the 'international implications', but, although she kept her thoughts to herself in her public speeches, she did not hide them in her private conversations with those in whom she knew she could confide. For example, I can vouch for the fact that, at the European Council in Strasbourg held on 8 and 9 December 1989, she stubbornly took cover behind those famous 'implications' (the recognition of borders by the Federal Republic of Germany, the rights of the Four Powers, the expansion of NATO to include the GDR) in order to avoid any decision which, by giving extra weight to Germany,

would, she said, have caused a serious imbalance in Europe. I remember her astonishment (and her anger) when Helmut Kohl, from the word go, made clear his position by submitting a document in favour of German unity which included a paragraph identical to the one which had been discreetly inserted in the middle of a long document adopted by NATO (and forgotten by everybody except him) in 1967, in other words twenty-two years earlier, at a time when there was agreement on everything, since decisions seemed impossible to implement. I shall come back to this discussion later. Anyway, throughout all these debates, I constantly repeated my point of view to Mrs Thatcher, in more or less the same terms as I used when we met for lunch on 20 January 1990 in London, when I told her that I did not say no to reunification, because that would be stupid and unrealistic. I said that I did not see any power in Europe that would be able to prevent it and that I was not even sure that the Soviet Union was capable of doing so now. It would be better, I said, to accept it with our eyes open and to link the unity of Germany European integration and the safeguarding of borders. At that point, with some passion, she conjured up a picture of a Europe dominated by a powerful Germany and begged me to consider the terms for a Franco-British rapprochement which would be capable of acting as a counterbalance. I told her then, as I did every time that our conversations touched on this subject, that, to my deep regret, the alliance between our two countries, always extolled in official speeches, in fact had very little in the way of substance, and that we would never succeed, because of her country, in reaching a specific agreement on any subject whatsoever, including the question of how to harmonise even the simplest armaments systems. I also said that Great Britain did not have sufficient room to manoeuvre to escape from the control of the United States and that we would not exchange an integrated Europe, of which Federal Germany was one of the cornerstones, for a Franco-British agreement which, though desirable, consisted of nothing more than good intentions. On several occasions, I expressed my views on this situation to various British Ambassadors in Paris. They all made a show of being terribly upset and dashed off alarming telegrams to Downing Street. Yet nothing changed. Neither the excellent welcome that we were always given in London nor the good atmosphere at the Franco-British summits, on which I had taken the initiative, nor the repeated assurances of a revival of the alliance nor the quality of my personal relations with Margaret Thatcher – none of these things resulted in any initiative or decision which would have given impetus to any real concerted action. At meetings of the Europe of Twelve and at her meetings with me, Mrs Thatcher continued to fret and to fume in isolation, ending, every time, in fits of anger. We all know what happened in the end: the British Prime Minister signed, without any more ado, the agreements enshrining Germany unity.

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