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**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
on the occasion of the central final parade to mark the end
of the Afghanistan mission
in Berlin
on 13 October 2021**

It was snowing in Berlin on 2 January 2002 when the first German soldiers landed in Kabul.

Almost twenty years: Enduring Freedom and ISAF, Resolute Support and the military evacuation operation. The Bundeswehr mission in Afghanistan lasted almost twenty years.

Twenty springs and summers, autumns and winters in Berlin and in Kabul, in Calw and in Kunduz, in Wunstorf and in Feyzabad, in Mittenwald and in Taloqan, in Seedorf and in Isa Khel. Twenty years, almost an entire generation.

For twenty years the Bundeswehr – you – were in Afghanistan. And yet Afghanistan has remained a faraway land for many of our fellow Germans. A country which featured in the evening news now and again. I have the impression that it was not until the final months, not until the victory of the Taliban and the evacuation operation, that the vast majority of Germans paid attention to what was happening in Afghanistan. Indeed, in the case of some people it was the first time they had taken any notice at all of events in Afghanistan.

But for you, the soldiers who were deployed there during the last two decades, Afghanistan is something quite different: for you, Afghanistan is part of your lives, of your life stories. For you, Afghanistan is comradeship, the military postal address to where your letters were sent and homesickness. For you, Afghanistan is the never-ending day at the base camp – and the seemingly never-ending moment in combat. For you, Afghanistan is hope and disillusionment, heat and dust, hardship and fear. For many of you, Afghanistan also holds memories of injuries – and death – and grief.

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More than 150,000 Bundeswehr soldiers served in Afghanistan. At times, more than one quarter of the Bundeswehr were involved in the mission. Some of you here today were part of the first contingent, others of the last. Many of you were over there more than once, some of you 13 or even 17 times, while others spent one thousand or more days of their lives in Afghanistan.

This mission left its mark on you the soldiers who served in it. And this mission had a greater impact on the Bundeswehr than any other mission in the over 65-year history of this army.

We are here today to remember this – your – mission. And to pay tribute to it. Soldiers of the Bundeswehr, one thing is undoubtedly true – there are no ifs or buts: the Bundeswehr accomplished its mission.

Some 76 contingents, with very different mandates and a mission adapted to the situation on an ongoing basis: the Bundeswehr carried out everything it was mandated to do by politicians – the Bundeswehr can be relied upon to get a job done!

Veterans, this is your great achievement and it is solely down to your efforts. I want to thank you on behalf of our country – we are proud of you!

We are also indebted to other citizens. Germany was not only engaged in this mission militarily. We sought to network military and civilian engagement. Our country's thanks therefore also expressly go today to the members of the Federal Foreign Office, the Federal Police and the Federal Intelligence Service, the many development workers, members of NGOs and everyone else who served and worked in Afghanistan during these twenty years.

And our country is also indebted to the courageous Afghan men and women who worked for German organisations and who, as a consequence, now live in fear of their lives in their home country. You were able to bring many of them to safety – but so many others are still in Afghanistan. I know that many Germans, including many veterans, are worried about the safety of these people. And they rightly expect our country to continue to seek all possible ways and means to live up to our obligation to protect these individuals.

Today we are remembering the 59 German soldiers who lost their lives in Afghanistan. Today we are remembering the 59 German soldiers who lost their lives in Afghanistan. We are deeply indebted to them. We pay humble tribute to the memory of those who perished during the mission – and we are aware of our enduring responsibility towards their families, some of whom are here today. The Federal Republic of Germany and the Bundeswehr had to learn during the last twenty years how to honour soldiers who had died in action – today at the Bundeswehr Memorial we laid wreaths in their memory. We will not forget them.

Today we honour all those still bear the wounds they suffered during the mission – either physical or emotional. In my capacity as Federal President, I well remember the many rounds of discussions I had the honour of conducting with soldiers who had served in this mission. We spoke about bravery and injuries. I know that many soldiers take a long time to return to normal life. Some are still struggling today. It is good that the Bundeswehr has made such progress when it comes to caring for those wounded during the mission – and, above all, that we have ended the taboo on veterans' mental health and made it a focus of attention.

During one of my conversations, I met Sergeant Tim Focken, who was wounded in the arm during an exchange of fire in Afghanistan in 2010. His operation lasted 17 hours and his upper arm is paralysed to this very day. Today, Tim Focken calls his wound "the struggle I wasn't prepared for". He told me of his thoughts at the time when he was haunted by feelings of guilt because he felt he had let down his comrades.

It is important that we know these stories – his story, your stories. It is important that our country supports the men and women wounded during the mission. Combat and bravery, trauma and death, German soldiers with guns in other countries – we Germans tend to repress any thoughts about that. We talk about these things far too seldom and only reluctantly. That does not make it easy for you, the veterans of missions abroad. We should regard the end of the Afghanistan mission as an opportunity to break this silence – and my impression is that we managed to do that to some extent during the military evacuation operation.

The soldiers of the Bundeswehr are our fellow Germans, our neighbours, our friends. They are citizens in uniform – and the stories of the Bundeswehr are our stories. They deserve to be heard.

Sergeant Focken is now an army sportsman. A few weeks ago, he competed in a shooting event as part of the German Paralympic team at the Games in Tokyo. Once again, he flew halfway round the world for our country.

Afghanistan left its mark on him – Afghanistan left a mark on all of you – and Afghanistan left its mark on the Bundeswehr. It will take this army, indeed it will take us Germans a long time to get over the Afghanistan mission. In short, we have to talk about Afghanistan!

Twenty years after 9/11 and two months after the fall of Kabul, many people who served and suffered in Afghanistan have questions. They have questions regarding the point of this mission.

These are difficult questions, bitter questions. They are directed at Parliament and the governments which sent the Bundeswehr to Afghanistan.

- Why – despite all the efforts on the part of individuals and all the resources deployed – was it not possible to build a stable and self-sustaining social and political order in Afghanistan? A new order which the many different groups from Afghanistan called for so fervently at the Bonn Conference twenty years ago?

- Why did the Afghan Government and armed forces, in which we invested so much over so many years, fall apart so quickly?

- Was the way the international troops were withdrawn the right decision?

- Have the suffering, our efforts, all the physical and psychological wounds, all the lives lost during the last twenty years all been in vain?

- And, above all, what lessons have we learned from this bitter experience for other missions, in other countries around the world from where a threat to our own security emanates?

You the veterans of Afghanistan, but also the citizens of this democracy, are asking these questions – and you expect answers. We politicians owe you these answers – answers which should be honest and well-considered rather than quick. And we have to find them together with our Alliance partners.

Soldiers of the Bundeswehr, Germany deserves a security policy which incorporates the lessons from twenty years in Afghanistan. That is a task which goes far beyond the immediate future. It is a task for a new government and a new Bundestag, which will be constituted this month.

For me personally, walking to this lectern was not easy today.

From the outset and over a long period, until just under five years ago, I myself bore responsibility for the Afghanistan mission, as a member of the Bundestag and of more than one government.

I would certainly not claim that we did everything right during all the years. However, I can assure you that German politicians never made decisions about Afghanistan lightly – no party and no coalition did. The decisions on new or amended mandates were often accompanied by heated debates.

I firmly believe that the decision to invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty in 2001 – the first time in NATO's history – to show solidarity with our partners, in particular the United States and go to Afghanistan as an alliance was the right one. We achieved our military goal of defeating those who had been based in Afghanistan and wrought horrendous terror on our allies twenty years ago.

However, we did not achieve our long-term goal of building stable state structures in Afghanistan. Over many years, the military mission, your mission, gained the time and space needed for this political

transformation process. But in the end, neither we nor the Afghans succeeded.

So, just as Germany was only able to go to Afghanistan as part of an alliance, the withdrawal from Afghanistan was also only possible as part of an alliance. In the intervening years, there were many rounds of evaluations, assessments and political debates. There were doubts – and often sharp criticism – but there were always also good reasons for us to stay in Afghanistan.

The bitterness of the past few weeks therefore does not stem from a sudden revelation that reveals to us all of our mistakes in hindsight. No, above all it is bitter that we stand here today and have to answer these bitter questions despite all the self-assessment, despite all the struggles to set goals and priorities, despite all the changes to the mandates and strategies, despite all the efforts and despite all the sacrifices.

I firmly believe that the fall of Kabul marked a turning point. We are standing at a crossroads which forces us to think again with a measure of self-criticism about our responsibility in the world, about our options and their limits. I hope that we will not look back at this crossroads in twenty years' time and say: resignation and withdrawal were our answer to Afghanistan.

That would be the wrong conclusion to draw!

After all, we Germans do not live in isolation. And incidentally, much less so in 2021 than in 2001. Germany is the most populous country in the European Union. Germany is the world's fourth-largest economy. Germany carries weight in the world.

Moreover, Germany is respected worldwide – and is being called upon to shoulder ever greater responsibility internationally. I have witnessed this for decades on my visits to all continents. The world is not indifferent to what Germany does and what happens in Germany. In light of our history, as well as our interests, Germany cannot remain indifferent to what is happening in the world.

Therefore, withdrawal from the world cannot be our response. We have to deal with the world as it is and, at the same time, remain determined not to leave it that way. I am convinced that German foreign policy has to become more honest, smarter and stronger in the wake of events in Afghanistan.

We have to be more honest when it comes to exploring our options and our limits. We have to define our foreign-policy objectives and interests realistically – that means, on the one hand, that we have to be more modest, that we should show less of a sense of mission and missionary zeal and, on the other hand, with greater courage when we know that we are called upon to take action. Germany must learn to gauge and use its own strength while, at the same time, recognising its

limits. In a democracy, that is only possible if the political parties and the media, if experts and practitioners, if all of us discuss together, indeed even fervently debate, without ideological reservations or blinkers, what our interests are – and for what our country wants and is able to stand!

We have to be smarter when deciding where and with what means we want to get involved. We have to broaden our capabilities and better network our instruments – diplomatic, military, civilian, humanitarian, as well as those in the development and economic policy spheres. If there is one thing we learned in Afghanistan, it is that we have to network our instruments so that development workers and soldiers, politicians and diplomats on the ground are not standing in each other's way but, rather are pulling in the same direction. That requires more consultation and coordination, more clarity and transparency and less ministerial sectionalism and dissynergies.

And we need to be stronger when it comes to our options, also in the military sphere. Our state's most important task is to protect its citizens. In these unstable times, Germany is investing more in its defence – and rightly so. The Bundeswehr needs good equipment and functioning structures because our country needs a functioning Bundeswehr. These two elements belong together: strength at the negotiating table and strength in defence. Our call for a strong, rules-based peaceful order, our concrete efforts to defuse conflicts, cannot be realised from a position of weakness, at least not in the world as it is today.

To put it briefly, we need a strong Bundeswehr – our partners expect it and our army deserves it.

Yes, we are aware of the heavy burden of our history – and no-one knows it better than the soldiers of the Bundeswehr. Knowledge of places such as Babyn Yar, where I spoke exactly a week ago – knowledge of the events that occurred there and in other places, especially in Eastern Europe, remind us that the Wehrmacht of the National Socialist era did not establish a tradition on which we can build today. The Bundeswehr is unlike any other army. Beyond their vow to follow orders and obey, the members of our armed forces have a duty to follow their own conscience and to uphold civic and moral values. Our constitution's values provide the unalterable foundation of this army, which is committed to freedom, the rule of law and democracy.

We Germans can count on the Bundeswehr – and we can trust it!

"Promote world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe" – that is the precise and succinct requirement enshrined in our constitution's preamble. That is what German policy stands for, that is what German society stands for – and that is what the Bundeswehr stands for.

However, the question as to what this requirement means in concrete terms has to be answered once more time and again. And the time to answer it has come again – a new chapter has begun.

I am sure that our children and grandchildren will not judge us on our military strength or the billions we have spent, or the number of days a mission lasted, the quantity of development workers or diplomats in other countries. Rather they will judge us on whether we were able to resolve problems and conflicts.

The problems and conflicts in the world have not become fewer – and many of them affect German and European interests. The call for a foreign and security policy which incorporates the lessons of twenty years in Afghanistan is impossible to ignore.

We have to take it seriously.

The citizens of this country expect that. They deserve good and honest answers. And no one deserves these answers as much as you – the citizens in uniform who are prepared to give your utmost for your country.

You have an obligation to your country – and your country has an obligation to you.