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**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the Thomas Mann House
in Pacific Palisades, U.S.
on 19 June 2018**

...and let me just say: Friends,

I am so very happy to be here!

This is a wonderful moment – for many of you here who have worked so hard for this day, with so much passion and so much personal dedication; it is a wonderful moment also for my wife and me personally as well as for many of those who arrived, late last night, on our plane from Germany. And: I do believe that it is also a wonderful moment for the friendship between our countries in turbulent times!

Tonight, the attention of our transatlantic community is on a different White House. Indeed, this house was not only a family home, not only a place of thinking and writing, a center of “Weimar on the Pacific”, a hub of literature, music, film and art. No, this was a ‘White House’, and Thomas Mann’s study was, in many ways, the Oval Office of the émigré opposition to Hitler’s reign of terror in Berlin.

Frido Mann told me about one of his earliest childhood memories, and this image really stuck with me. Standing in the sunlit corridor, the little boy – just about to turn four years old – is feeling a stir in the house: frantic telephone calls, hushed visitors, a sense of agitation all around him. It’s July 21, 1944. The attempt on Hitler’s life has failed. But as news of the previous day trickle in, it is not disappointment or resignation that settles over the family – no, it’s a new-found hope that this must finally be the beginning of the end of the detested dictator.

I am grateful to you, Frido and Christine Mann, for giving us a memorable tour of this house on this wonderful occasion.

And, most importantly, I am grateful to the many, many friends and partners in this garden who have made this wonderful moment

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come true: dedicated Members of the German Bundestag, passionate supporters in the Federal Foreign Office, the German Consulate General here in L.A., and, of course, the whole Villa Aurora team ; and the generous contributors in the Berthold Leibinger Foundation, the Robert Bosch Foundation and the Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach Foundation. Friends, thank you all so very much!

I also want to mention the neighbors... To all those neighbors who are among us tonight: As President of Germany, I officially apologize for the construction noise... But in return, I can promise you some rather interesting new neighbors...

So let me welcome those new neighbors: the inaugural Thomas Mann Fellows – Jutta Allmendinger, Yiannos Manoli, Burghart Klaußner and Heinrich Detering. I also want to remember a friend of ours and a friend of the transatlantic relationship, who was set to be among the inaugural fellows and who tragically died last fall. We all miss Sylke Tempel.

To all of the new fellows I want to say: Your work here will be important work! You are going on this transatlantic journey in a time of political turbulence – turbulence on both sides of the Atlantic but turbulence also between the two sides.

When I was preparing for this trip, I found an episode from the post-war years in Thomas Mann's letters. In 1951, shortly before his second period of exile in Switzerland, Thomas Mann finds himself caught between a United States descending into the paranoia of McCarthyism, and a Europe physically and morally devastated by war. He shares his worries with another exiled writer, Erich von Kahler. Von Kahler, in his letter to Mann, sounds similarly distressed, but he cannot help telling his friend this caustic but rather funny story: Two friends are crossing the Atlantic by ship – but in opposite directions, one from the U.S. to Germany, the other from Germany to the U.S. Their ships happen to meet right in the middle of the Ocean. As they pass each other, the two friends stand by the railing and shout at one another simultaneously: "Are you mad?" ...

I happen to know that one of our Thomas Mann Fellows actually did make his way to America by boat – but I don't know, Burghart Klaußner, if you met anybody at sea who was heading the other way...and of course, I can't say if anything would have been shouted...

Yes, these are turbulent times. But this makes your work as fellows even more important. To set the horizon for this important work, let me quote Thomas Mann's timeless words from 1947 one last time and, for that, allow me to switch briefly into the original language: „Sofern es [...] um die Anpassung der menschlichen Gesellschaft an die Erfordernisse der Weltstunde geht, ist gewiss mit Konferenzbeschlüssen, technischen Maßnahmen, juristischen

Institutionen wenig getan. Notwendig zunächst ist eine Wandlung des geistigen Klimas, ein neues Gefühl für die Schwierigkeit und den Adel des Menschseins“ „What is most needed“, he says, “is a new feeling for the difficulty and the nobility of being human.”

My dear friends, I ask you: Which other form of society would be more suited to this “difficulty and nobility”, to the challenge and adventure of humanity, than ours: a free and democratic society! The struggle for democracy, the struggle for a free and open society is what will continue to connect us, the United States and Germany.

That is why we acquired this building. That is why we restored it into such a beautiful, comfortable and welcoming place. May the Fellows fill this space with democratic spirit and debate that will span continents. In my speech tomorrow, I will want to say a little bit more about that. But to me, that is the essence to which this historic place and these new fellowships shall be dedicated: a transformation of the intellectual climate, a new spirit in which democracy will thrive.

Thank you.