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James F. Byrnes and the Turn in American Policy toward Germany

James F. Byrnes (1882-1972) was United States Secretary of State from July 3, 1945 to January 21, 1947. Preceding his tenure as Secretary of State, Byrnes served as director of the Office of War Mobilization from 1943 to 1945, during which he oversaw an expansion of wartime industry that effectively brought an end to the Great Depression in the United States through the employment it brought with it.[[1]](#footnote-0) As such, Byrnes understood the power that industry had in a given nation’s economy, and as Secretary of State during the immediate postwar period, Byrnes no doubt understood the role that relieving economic anxieties had in stabilizing nations. Given his wartime role, Byrnes would also have been aware that the United States was in a keen position economically to influence the war-torn, economically devastated countries of Europe, including Germany. As such, the Byrnes speech stands as a turning point in American policy on Germany, moving from an unclear, sometimes retaliatory policy to one dedicated to creating a stable, democratic, economically-prosperous Germany.

The United States came out of World War II virtually undamaged compared to the destruction that the European powers of the United Kingdom, Soviet Union, Germany, and France had faced. In this context, the United States came to be the leading economic power of the world, and given its immense global presence and status as the sole nuclear power by the end of the war, the U.S. suddenly found itself in a situation where it could either return back to its prewar isolationism or become a world superpower. With the major powers of the old world more or less in ruins and fearing the spread of communism throughout Europe and the world, the Truman administration chose the latter option.

In September of 1946, U.S. Secretary of State James F. Byrnes gave a speech titled the “Restatement of Policy on Germany” in the ruins of Stuttgart, Germany. The speech, commonly known as the “Stuttgart Speech” or the “Speech of Hope,” sets out the United States’ policies on the future of Germany, primarily how the German economy should be run, how democracy ought to be built, to what extent German territory would be doled out among the victors, and how the German populace should be treated. Overall Byrnes took a moderate stance on Germany relative to some of his contemporaries, believing that Germany ought not to be totally dismantled as was put forward in the Morgenthau Plan.[[2]](#footnote-1) Furthermore, Byrnes committed the U.S., and the other western allied powers, to building a “true democracy” in Germany, with an emphasis on building local democracy (i.e. city councils) first so as to give Germans first-hand experience with democracy. Byrnes’ speech marked the beginning of heavy U.S. involvement in European affairs, marking the U.S.’ official commitment to non-isolationism. The document can be found on the website of the U.S. Embassy in Germany here:

<https://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/ga4-460906.htm>.[[3]](#footnote-2)

**Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order:**

Associated Press Radiophoto. “Text of Secretary Byrnes' Speech on U. S. Policy in Germany;

MR. BYRNES DELIVERING ADDRESS AT STUTTGART.” *New York Times Archives*.

New York, September 7, 1946.

[https://www.nytimes.com/1946/09/07/archives/text-of-secretary-byrnes-speech-on-u-s-po](https://www.nytimes.com/1946/09/07/archives/text-of-secretary-byrnes-speech-on-u-s-policy-in-germany-mr-byrnes.html?searchResultPosition=117)

[licy-in-germany-mr-byrnes.html?searchResultPosition=117](https://www.nytimes.com/1946/09/07/archives/text-of-secretary-byrnes-speech-on-u-s-policy-in-germany-mr-byrnes.html?searchResultPosition=117).

This article ran the day after Byrnes gave his speech, on September 7, 1946. The article is simply a full publication of Byrnes’ speech, however the same edition of the paper also features the following article:

“Capital Calls Talk a Reply to Molotov Bid to Germans.” *New York Times Archives*. New

York, September 7, 1946.

[https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1946/09/07/84637728.html?action=clic](https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1946/09/07/84637728.html?action=click&contentCollection=Archives&module=LedeAsset&region=ArchiveBody&pgtype=article&pageNumber=5)

[k&contentCollection=Archives&module=LedeAsset&region=ArchiveBody&pgtype=arti](https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1946/09/07/84637728.html?action=click&contentCollection=Archives&module=LedeAsset&region=ArchiveBody&pgtype=article&pageNumber=5)

[cle&pageNumber=5](https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1946/09/07/84637728.html?action=click&contentCollection=Archives&module=LedeAsset&region=ArchiveBody&pgtype=article&pageNumber=5).

This article views the Byrnes speech in Stuttgart as a response to a speech given by the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vyacheslav Molotov in Paris on July 10 of the same year. The New York Times states that Byrnes’ speech “[. . .] was looked upon as a particularly effective notice to the Germans and Russians [sic] that [the United States] was going to stay in Germany.”[[4]](#footnote-3) The New York Times, therefore, viewed Byrnes’ speech as part of the larger geopolitical game between the United States and the Soviet Union, and takes a clearly American-biased approach toward their reporting on the subject.

“SELF-GOVERNMENT FOR GERMANY: Mr. Byrnes States U.S. Policy.” *The Guardian,   
 newspapers.com Digital Archive*. London, Greater London, September 7, 1946, p. 5.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/259427615>.

This article from The Manchester Guardian, which is now known as The Guardian, placed the main emphasis of Byrnes’ speech on his demand for a formal peace treaty with Germany. Of particular interest is the way in which The Guardian frames Byrnes’ speech, as “demands,” which gives the impression that Byrnes’ speech was rash[[5]](#footnote-4). This, however, makes some sense given that the U.K. was undergoing a transition into a secondary power in the shadow of American postwar power following the financial burdens of having fought a six-year-long world war and having to rebuild mainland Britain following the Blitz.

In a different article on the same page titled “SPEECH WELCOMED BY GERMANS,” The Guardian’s Special Correspondent in Berlin, Germany analyzed the German response to Byrnes’ speech a beacon of hope of sorts for Germans following the uncertainty of how the victorious powers would treat the German people and state. The article also states that the Russian [Soviet] and French governments did not view the speech so favorably, with their dissatisfactions aimed at economic ties with the west and concerns over the Ruhr and Rhineland areas, respectively.[[6]](#footnote-5) Thus, The Guardian’s Special Correspondent in Berlin saw the Byrnes speech as a promise of sorts to protect German territorial integrity and promote economic ties between the “west” (i.e. the U.S., U.K., and France) and Germany. Interestingly, in neither of The Guardian’s articles is Byrnes’ promises for building democracy mentioned, and main focus is given to territorial and economic factors.

“MR. BYRNES ON GERMANY.” *The Times of London Archive*. London, Greater London,

September 7, 1946, p. 5.

[https://www.thetimes.co.uk/archive/article/1946-09-07/5/2.html?region=global#start%3D](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/archive/article/1946-09-07/5/2.html?region=global#start%3D1946-09-06%26end%3D1946-09-09%26terms%3DByrnes%26back%3D/tto/archive/find/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26prev%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26next%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/3)

[1946-09-06%26end%3D1946-09-09%26terms%3DByrnes%26back%3D/tto/archive/find](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/archive/article/1946-09-07/5/2.html?region=global#start%3D1946-09-06%26end%3D1946-09-09%26terms%3DByrnes%26back%3D/tto/archive/find/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26prev%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26next%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/3)

[/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26prev%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:194](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/archive/article/1946-09-07/5/2.html?region=global#start%3D1946-09-06%26end%3D1946-09-09%26terms%3DByrnes%26back%3D/tto/archive/find/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26prev%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26next%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/3)

[6-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26next%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/archive/article/1946-09-07/5/2.html?region=global#start%3D1946-09-06%26end%3D1946-09-09%26terms%3DByrnes%26back%3D/tto/archive/find/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26prev%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26next%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/3)

[09-09/3](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/archive/article/1946-09-07/5/2.html?region=global#start%3D1946-09-06%26end%3D1946-09-09%26terms%3DByrnes%26back%3D/tto/archive/find/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26prev%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26next%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/3).

In this article, the Times of London describes Byrnes’ speech as “[. . .] perhaps the most significant single pronouncement on allied policy toward Germany since the Potsdam agreement,” and that “Its main importance lies in its bold, clear and logical conception of the future development of both German institutions and forms of allied control, and in the hope it offers to the German people of economic and political reconstruction [. . .].”[[7]](#footnote-6) Similar to the previously cited article from the Guardian, The Times stated the significance of the hope that Byrnes’ speech offers to the German people. However, unlike The Guardian, The Times believed that the political reconstruction offered by Byrnes was of much importance to the rebuilding of a new Germany. The Times continues to state that the Byrnes speech placed importance on building unity between the allies and in Europe in general, stating optimistically that “The unity of Germany remains the key to the unity of the allies.”[[8]](#footnote-7) Although The Times did not identify it at the time, their analysis of the Byrnes speech shows a change in American policy toward Germany, and Europe in general, as the U.S., not for the first time, but perhaps for the most significant time thus far, took the helm in dictating allied policy toward Germany, moving it from punitive to reconstructive.

Kreikamp, Hans-Dieter. “Die Amerikanische Deutschlandpolitik Im Herbst und die

Byrnes-Rede in Stuttgart.” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* [“The American

Germany Policy in Fall 1946 and the Byrnes Speech in Stuttgart.] 29, no. 2 (1981): p.

269-85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30196453>.

Kreikamp cites Byrnes’ speech as a major *Wendepunkt* (“turning point”) for U.S. policy on Germany. Specifically, Kreikamp states, “Byrnes betrachtete es als Kernelement seiner Rede, zu versichern, daß die Vereinigten Staaten ihre Besatzungstruppen in Deutschland ‘for a long period’ belassen würden.”[[9]](#footnote-8) [Byrnes viewed it as a core element of his speech to ensure that the United States would leave its occupation troops in Germany “for a long time.”] Kreikamp then cites a memorandum from Secretary Byrnes to president Truman, which states that the most important goal of his speech was “‘to let all nations know that we are not going to do what we did after the last war - withdraw our troops and show no interest in enforcing the disarmament of Germany.’”[[10]](#footnote-9) Thus, Kreikamp states that Byrnes’ speech was a change in U.S. policy toward Germany, as Byrnes himself states in his memorandum to president Truman.

Burns, Adam. "Occupation over Annexation (1912–73)." In *American Imperialism: The*

*Territorial Expansion of the United States, 1783-2013*, p. 136-58. Edinburgh: Edinburgh

University Press, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0514c.12>.

Burns cites Byrnes’ Stuttgart speech as a turning point in American policy on Germany, stating “Byrnes’ speech essentially loosened the shackles of JCS 1067 even further and set the US on course for the complete rejection of a policy of revenge” and that “[f]ollowing Byrnes’ speech, the United States stepped up both the economic and political rebuilding of western Germany,” which in turn were seen by the USSR as “[. . .]even more compelling evidence of creeping US imperial ambition in the years that followed.”[[11]](#footnote-10) In Burns’ view, the Byrnes speech marked a starting point for U.S. imperial influence in Europe, as the rebuilding of Germany that followed Byrnes’ speech firmly aligned West Germany with the United States and its NATO allies.

1. “James F. Byrnes.” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Last edited on April 28, 2019. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_F._Byrnes>. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Henry Morgenthau. “Suggested Post-Surrender Program for Germany [The original memorandum from 1944, signed by Morgenthau] (text and facsimile).” *Box 31, Folder Germany: Jan.-Sept. 1944 (i297)*. Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum (published 27 May 2004). Archived from the original on 31 May 2018. <https://web.archive.org/web/20130531235410/http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/psf/box31/t297a01.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. James F. Byrnes. “Restatement of Policy on Germany, Stuttgart, September 6, 1946.” *U.S. Diplomatic Mission to Germany*. Last edited in September, 2001. <https://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/ga4-460906.htm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. “Capital Calls Talk a Reply to Molotov Bid to Germans.” *New York Times Archives*. New York, 1946. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1946/09/07/84637728.html?action=click&contentCollection=Archives&module=LedeAsset&region=ArchiveBody&pgtype=article&pageNumber=5>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. “SELF-GOVERNMENT FOR GERMANY: Mr. Byrnes States U.S. Policy.” *The Guardian, newspapers.com Digital Archive*. London, Greater London, September 7, 1946, p. 5. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/259427615>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. “SPEECH WELCOMED BY GERMANS.” *The Guardian, newspapers.com Digital Archive*. London, Greater London, September 7, 1946, p. 5. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/259427615>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. “MR. BYRNES ON GERMANY.” *The Times of London Archive*. London, Greater London, 1946, p. 5.

   <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/archive/article/1946-09-07/5/2.html?region=global#start%3D1946-09-06%26end%3D1946-09-09%26terms%3DByrnes%26back%3D/tto/archive/find/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26prev%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/1%26next%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Byrnes/w:1946-09-06~1946-09-09/3>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Hans-Dieter Kreikamp. Amerikanische Deutschlandpolitik Im Herbst 1946 Und Die Byrnes-Rede in Stuttgart." *Vierteljahrshefte Für Zeitgeschichte* [“The American Germany Policy in Fall 1946 and the Byrnes Speech in Stuttgart.” *Quarterly Journal for Period History*] 29, no. 2 (1981), p. 276. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30196453>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. James Byrnes, “Undated Memorandum for Conversation with the President - NA 740.00119 Control (Germany)/ 9-246 CS/A,” quoted in Hans-Dieter Kreikamp, Amerikanische Deutschlandpolitik Im Herbst 1946 Und Die Byrnes-Rede in Stuttgart." *Vierteljahrshefte Für Zeitgeschichte* [“The American Germany Policy in Fall 1946 and the Byrnes Speech in Stuttgart.” *Quarterly Journal for Period History*] 29, no. 2 (1981), p. 276. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30196453>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Adam Burns, “Occupation over Annexation (1912-73).” In *American Imperialism: The Territorial Expansion of the United States, 1783-2013*, p. 136-58. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017: p. 149-50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0514c.12>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)