

GEGEN ÜBER

Transatlantic Stories

Transcript of the Audio Feature by Nadine Linder

00:00:00 Aircraft employee:

Welcome aboard this Boeing 787 with destination Washington Dulles.

00:00:05 Nadine Lindner:

High above the Atlantic, even before I set foot on US American soil, it already becomes clear that 2026 will be a special year for the United States. Even on the in-flight entertainment system, advertisements in red, white and blue promote their America 250 celebrations.

00:00:24 Music plays, followed by a deep voice:

As the year turns 2026, America turns 250.

00:00:31 Nadine Lindner:

My first stop on my small speaker's tour is Washington, D.C., the city where the main America 250 events are expected to take place.

President Donald Trump about his plans for the National Mall.

00:00:45 Recording of U.S. President Donald J. Trump:

In my campaign for president, I pledge to give America the most spectacular birthday party the world has ever seen for Americas 250th anniversary. From June 25th to July 10th, we will host the Great American State Fair on the National Mall, featuring pavilions from all 50 states, highlighting breathtaking innovations, and celebrating Americas exceptional history and culture.

Frankly, you'll never see anything like it, and you'll never see anything like it again.

00:01:14 Nadine Lindner:

But 2026 is not only about America 250. It is also the year of the FIFA World Cup, which the United States is co-hosting with Canada and Mexico. So far, I have seen World Cup souvenirs on the store shelves, but I haven't really felt much excitement yet. The tournament is somehow present, but at the same time strangely absent. What may shape the country's future even more are the upcoming midterm elections in November.

Anniversary, World Cup, elections. What state of mind are the United States in as they move through this pivotal year of 2026?

00:01:54 Liz Goodwin:

When you talk to voters, people feel very disillusioned with the system at large.

They think that politicians are responding more to big corporations, big donors, and they see that as a problem that affects Democrats and Republicans. So people don't have a lot of trust.

00:02:11 Nadine Lindner:

Liz Goodwin is an experienced political correspondent for the Washington Post. I had a chance to speak with her at the Goethe Institute in Washington, D.C.

During our discussion that evening, Liz said something about the current political atmosphere that stayed with me throughout my entire trip.

00:02:28 Liz Goodwin:

I do think the disillusionment has gotten worse even since I've been covering politics.

Now, pretty much every election, this group called the Double Haters gets bigger and bigger, which is the voters who hate both candidates. So it feels like voters are operating from a more negative place, like every year, more and more negative.

00:02:49 Nadine Lindner:

Her words set the tone for my little speaker's tour, which later took me to Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Boston. At each stop, I spoke about the first year of German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's government.

But during and after these events, I also ask Americans how they feel about America to 50.

00:03:08 Mark McGuigan:

You have, of course, the official federal government level, and of course, the current president has a great deal of influence on that. And this is where you see a kind of, these conflicts have always existed in these kind of celebrations, but you see it even more so. You see a desire to sort of deny the complexity of American history, in the service of a strongly patriotic theme that's sort of a little bit of my country, right or wrong, right?

And that's what's coming out of the Trump administration in Washington.

And this is where, you know, critical historians are stepping in and saying, Hey, we've come a long way in looking at the, like being proud, but in a much more nuanced way, where we look at the good things, we look at the bad things, we celebrate our progress.

00:03:54 Nadine Lindner:

Mark McGuigan is the president of the German Society of Pennsylvania. One of my events in Philadelphia is hosted in their beautiful historic library. The German Society was founded in 1764, even more than 250 years back.

Mark describes himself as a history enthusiast. Born and raised in Philadelphia, the birthplace of the American Constitution, Mark is always fascinated by the past.

As the evening in the library is too busy, we meet up later online for an in-depth conversation.

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00:04:26 Mark McGuigan:

The real damage being done is at the national level, where you have the president setting a tone that says, we don't look at the past, we don't consider it honestly. We see ourselves only as great.

It's all about greatness.

And I think, just personally, I'm very much someone who believes, if you're going to be proud of something, you must take all of it. You must take the good, the bad, and the ugly.

00:04:52 Nadine Lindner:

My next stop is Pittsburgh, the former steel capital farther west in Pennsylvania. There, I meet Victoria.

00:04:58 Victoria:

I am Victoria. I'm 24 years old, and I am a Pennsylvania resident. I was raised here.

00:05:06 Nadine Lindner:

When I asked Victoria, about America to 50, it quickly becomes clear that she hasn't paid much attention to the anniversary yet, a reaction I encounter quite often during my trip.

00:05:17 Victoria:

I'm not in any celebratory kind of mood at all because of how disappointed I am with the current state of this country.

00:05:27 Nadine Lindner:

The drive from Pittsburgh to Cleveland turns into one of the most memorable road trips I've had in a long time, and that is because of Steve, my Uber driver.

Steve is in his 60s and already retired from a career in finance and construction. He describes himself as a lifelong Republican and a Trump voter. But even for him, the 250th anniversary doesn't feel like a joyful occasion. We talk as we drive, the radio playing softly in the background, the highway rolling with a constant sound beneath our wheels.

00:06:01 Nadine Lindner:

How would you see like the state of America right now? Do you see that there is like a need for unification or do you think that people like on the everyday basis go along together very well?

00:06:14 Steve:

I think, myself, as a Republican, I think the unification of the United States is very much needed. I think there's too much divide and it's almost like children, you know, can't play well together.

It's silly that we can't agree on more things unilaterally to move the country forward.

00:06:45 Nadine Lindner:

And in Cleveland, on the shores of Lake Erie, Ohio, an industrial center of the 20th century of the American Midwest, as well, many of the people I speak with seem emotionally distant from America 250.

00:06:59 Aircraft employee:

Ask a crew member for help. Keep the aisles, exits, and bulkhead areas clear.

00:07:04 Nadine Lindner:

The final stop of my speaker's tour is Boston, home of some of the world's most prestigious universities, Harvard. On campus, I meet Emma and Jeremiah, both in their 20s, both originally from Germany, and both studying at Harvard.

00:07:19 Emma:

Hi, I'm Emma. I'm 25 years old, currently studying for my Master of Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. I haven't got a lot of substantial input about America 250. It's been more of a marketing campaign in my... In my perception, so banners that I've seen in lots of places, I think America 250, I have a feeling that the 4th of July is going to be a big celebration this year, but I'm personally also a little bit negatively biased towards America 250 because I don't feel it's necessarily a moment to celebrate.

So I really wonder what this year is going to bring in terms of reflecting on 250 years that have elapsed, but also how the next 10, 20, 50 years might shape up.

00:08:13 Jeremiah:

And I think there is a hugely missed chance to bring people together from across very different regions, right? I feel people on the East Coast tend to have a more judgmental look on the people in the Midwest.

I've had many encounters in the school and beyond in which people were like, what, the Midwest? How is it? More with a condescending look.

And I think this is a chance to celebrate the plurality of this country. That's the strength of this place.

00:08:37 Nadine Lindner:

By now, it has become clear that many Americans are not genuinely excited about the country's 250th birthday, at least not yet.

But it is also obvious that there is a deep desire for common ground within society.

America 250 could have been an opportunity to create a shared sense of identity.

Right now, however, it doesn't seem to be unfolding that way.