

## German Self-Definition Against the US

America's one-time protégé turns against its patron

by Richard Herzinger

**Why has the mood in Germany turned so vehemently against the United States? The usual answer is George W. Bush. On closer examination, however, this does not fly. Opposing Bush's war plans in Iraq did not require siding with France in an outright showdown with the US.**

Explaining how irritated many Germans are with their erstwhile democratic foster father and main protector is not easy. The American presence in Germany coincided with the happiest period in the country's history. Under the general supervision of the Western Allies and under the nuclear umbrella of the United States, the Federal Republic developed into a model of democracy—not only one of the most stable but also one of the most prosperous and socially secure democracies in the Western world.

Granted, some of the Germans were excluded from the fruits of these achievements for forty years. But when the communist dictatorship in the East collapsed, it was once again the Americans who proved themselves the best intentioned of the former victorious powers in the West. Overriding considerable resistance from Great Britain under Margaret Thatcher and France under François Mitterrand, the United States gave the German desire for rapid reunification the backing without which the process never could have taken place as quickly and smoothly as it did.

Interestingly, however, the trouble that the French in particular made over reunification has left no trace of anti-French resentment in the German mind. It is discerningly said of the French that they will never be able to forgive the Americans for having liberated them. The very memory of the American triumph reminds France of the disgrace of having sunk to its knees almost without a fight against the Nazi conqueror. In the final analysis, however, the saying is so apt also because it expresses the neurotic family rivalry between the French and the American parvenu. France and the United States are considered the fundamental models of Western democracy, their common roots being the Enlightenment and revolution. But France, which long saw itself as civilization's yardstick for all the world, finds it difficult to cope with the fact that the United States has clearly come out on top. France's systematic anti-Americanism is thus essentially cultural. Little brother has long since grown into an overwhelmingly big brother overseas with whom France finds itself competing not only for geopolitical influence and sales markets but also for recognition as the embodiment of the genuinely Western way of life and the ideal of true democratic society.

For France as a former world and colonial power, the postwar era and the concomitant ascendance of the United States to the rank of superpower are primarily linked to the decline of French importance in world politics. French ill will toward America may therefore be exaggerated and irrational, but it is relatively easy to explain.

By contrast, Germany under American predominance rose steadily in social and economic respects and on the stage of world politics after total col-



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lapse in 1945. The Germans have always only profited from their close ties to the United States, and there is no apparent reason why this successful record should not continue, even under the changed conditions ushered in by Germany's reacquisition of full sovereignty in 1990. Unlike France (in Africa, for instance), Germany has no traditional zones of influence to defend against American encroachment. Germany's possibilities, whether economic or political, generally improve wherever the American sway grows.

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So why has the mood in Germany turned so vehemently against the United States? The usual answer is George W. Bush. Upon closer examination, however, this does not fly. Granted, Bush's war plans in Iraq have stirred primal German postwar anxieties—the fear that Germany could be dragged as a “vassal” into a war that ostensibly does not concern it and could even ultimately involve it in a long, bloody conflict as an occupation power's underling. But avoiding this feared misery did not have to mean siding with France in an outright showdown with the United States over fundamentals, nor did it even have to go as far as total refusal. And now that the American project of democratizing the Near East is manifesting at least incipient signs of success, there is no reason to continue this overt affront, as is happening with the issue of suspending the embargo on selling weapons to China.

The emotionally charged rejection of American foreign policy by a majority of the German population is nothing new, of course. When Ronald Reagan was president in the 1980s, much of the public suspected that the American government wanted to provoke a world war. The federal German government at the time did not yield to that mood. In early 2003, though, shortly before the US attack on Iraq, the hundreds of thousands of people demonstrating against American policy felt in tune with their government.

It would be too simple to attribute this shift solely to the differing ideological backgrounds of the Kohl and Schröder governments. Old persuasions of leftist “anti-imperialism” may indeed play a certain role in the deep-seated aversion that Schröder and his party have to the Bush administration's aggressive foreign policy. By and large, though, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's basic skepticism of America has not been an expression of “leftist” policy. His early categorical “no” to the Iraq war and his adherence to that stance was one of the few responses that has really resonated since he took office. It has been supported by the vast majority of Germans across the board. It has also been more than emotional, knee-jerk, gut-level populism. Schröder's fundamental opposition to the war in Iraq has been utterly systematic in its calculations. His formula of “unconditional solidarity” with the United States after 9/11, in addition to the Federal Republic's active participation in the military operation in Afghanistan, eliminated Germany's final barrier to deploying the Bundeswehr anywhere in the world. With the war in Kosovo having broken the taboo that for many years had made it inconceivable for German soldiers to engage in action outside NATO territory, the Bundeswehr now operates outside Europe as well.

But standing shoulder to shoulder with the United States has netted the chancellor and his foreign minister harsh criticism from the left. Some of the Greens and particularly the Social Democrats only reluctantly voted for the in-

tervention in Afghanistan. The confrontation in Iraq thus came at the right time for the chancellor, handing him the chance to improve drastically his negative image as an alleged lapdog of big brother overseas. Even so, his behavior in the Iraq crisis followed the same pattern it had during the war in Afghanistan. The intent was to open new space for Germany's national interests and to involve the country as a player in its own right. Schröder's dictum that German foreign policy would be forged in Berlin, not in Washington, made this point clear inside and outside his party—with a wink to anti-American sentiments.

The direction of the strategic goal behind this policy of seeking German independence is extremely unclear. In tripartite meetings with President Jacques Chirac of France and President Vladimir Putin of Russia (Spain's Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero was added recently as well), Schröder likes to invoke the idea of a "multipolar world," but German foreign policy sorely lacks the real means of power to make this a reality. And the vision of a strong, unified Europe as a coherent factor in world politics and a body with which German interests could merge, is still only rhetorical, if not utopian.

### Economic Irrationality

From an economic perspective, too, it is highly questionable whether the brusque gestures of independence that Schröder makes to the United States are actually guided by rational interests. For example, the German economy would profit only indirectly at best from a suspension of the European Union's weapons embargo on China. Even after such a change, German export of weapons to China would be unthinkable. The German arms industry, which is pushing into the giant American arms market, even sees major danger in Schröder's unilateral stubbornness on the embargo issue. If the United States makes good on its threats to restrict technology transfer if the embargo is lifted, the Europeans—namely, the Germans—would indisputably get the worst of it. Schröder's position on the embargo question is crafted primarily to cast himself as a reliable partner in the eyes of the Chinese rulers. He hopes for Chinese benevolence when it comes to future business contracts with German industry, and he seeks Chinese support for Germany's aspirations for a permanent seat with a veto on the UN Security Council. But it remains a mystery why the German government is pushing so hard for this seat. It is equally unclear whether, as Schröder postulates, the Germans actually consider the veto an essential part of that package or whether, as in the variation of Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, the whole campaign for a Security Council seat serves primarily as pressure to move ahead with basic UN reform.

The emancipation of German foreign policy from US tutelage is thereby curiously abstract and labors under symbolic gestures. Despite all the recent German talk about power, the United States remains Germany's most important strategic, economic, and security partner. The confused zigzags of German foreign policy can perhaps annoy the Americans; at worst, it can complicate the achievement of their aims, such as a change of regime in Iran. But Germany is nowhere near having a real alternative global political strategy, even in its ad hoc interplay with Russia and China, which in itself is highly problematic by the standards of democratic values.

German foreign policy lacks the real means to make a reality of a "multipolar world."

The obvious conclusion is that Germany's most recent course of disassociating itself from America is more about identity and political history than about *realpolitik*. Yet this is no less serious an issue. Quite the contrary. Beyond quotidian political interests, this process of shifting political and historical parameters is creating lasting foundations for Germany's gradual alienation, if not decoupling, from the United States. The consequences could well differ from what the government coalition of Social Democrats and Greens imagines, for its demonstration of a new national sense of self is based on idealistic assumptions of the 1990s that are threatening to burst like soap bubbles. Drawing on the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas, the Social Democrats and the Greens came to power with the notion that the Europe of progressive integration had witnessed the emergence of "postnational" states that could substitute a kind of European supranationality for their national interests. Speaking about basic principles three years ago, Joschka Fischer drew on this historical and philosophical forecast when he invoked the creation of a federally structured United States of Europe. This vision has long since vanished

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from discussion. A process of renationalization, vigorously fanned by the assertive posturing of the Paris-Berlin axis, has commenced in Europe and is allowing the conflicts of interests between the individual EU member states to surface ever more plainly. Behind the seeming symbiosis of the former archenemies—France and Germany—the potential friction between them is also becoming recognizable.

In the "post-national" discourse, standing up to America has served to project a European identity as a vehicle for designing an alternative world order. Instead of American power politics bent on domination, a Europe structured for peace by its horrific experiences with war and nationalism is supposed to be a kind of beacon for the rest of the world, a light marking the way to the non-violent, cooperative management of conflict. In this ideology's coordinate system, the United Nations is regarded as the transcontinental agency of the European mission. These ideas, reiterated by Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida in a perfectly clear and unworldly program in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* two years ago, are shattering on a world bent everywhere by forces untamable by discourse on conflict-solving strategy. These forces can only be contained or else countered by force.

The expectation that German national feeling will one day merge with European identity, transcending itself and entirely shedding its dangerous character, is proving illusory. The issue of a new national search for identity is thus moving ever more to the center of the German debates. In essence, they revolve around the new role that Germany must play in world politics as a key intermediate power now that the cold war has ended. But forward-looking discussions that bluntly spell out the country's interests and derive strategic orientations from them are scarcely possible in Germany. The burden of the Nazi past makes the political and intellectual class shrink from such open pronouncement of the real dangers and opportunities presented by the new situation in the world. Furthermore, the German mind remains deeply rooted in former West Germany's comfortable special situation,

which permitted the country to observe world conflicts from the grandstands without having to develop specific options for solving them. Although ever louder calls are sounding for the new Germany to have a say commensurate to its size and weight in world politics from now on, the conceptual instruments with which to articulate that input are lacking.

### Self-Definition by History

The new self-definition is therefore sought on the terrain with which post-war Germans are the most familiar, the past. They are consciously searching for a portrayal of history appropriate for their self-concept. It will be a depiction that gives them foundations and affords them the inner freedom they need for taking action. Attempts to derive the new positive national feeling from eras before 1933—the tradition of Prussia, for example, or the spirit of classical German idealism—have proven unsuitable. Any collective luminosity such visions once had cannot escape the black hole of the hiatus in German civilization. The new discourse about the past therefore necessarily focuses on Nazism and World War II, the interpretation of which is to be illuminated and told from a new angle. This effort is anything but trite revisionism or relativism. As Gerhard Schröder explicitly stressed in his recent speech on the anniversary of the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp, the establishment and memory of German guilt and the “responsibility” of posterity has become part of the “national identity” of the Germans. But that also means the Germans have meanwhile appropriated the history of being a victim and built it into their own national historiography.

This subliminal wound to the democratic sense of self explains the bitterness.

The key dilemma of this construct is that maintaining an intense culture of remembering the horrors of Nazi Germany must not be allowed to continue interfering with the optimistic, future-oriented, vital consciousness of the new Germany now striving for a leadership role in world politics. Remembrance must therefore take place in a way that brings out with increasing clarity the stark difference between the evil, “dark” era and the now chastened, democratic, and peaceful Germany that has thoroughly grasped the lessons of the past. Ever greater emphasis must be put on what the Germans themselves have done to overcome their dreadful past. After all, the intent is to enable the Germans, by virtue of their own national political culture, to remain credible, reliable, even exemplary democrats without overall therapeutic and educational supervision by Western powers.

From that perspective, America appears to be the most formidable main obstacle to the requisite rectification of the past. As proud as the Germans justifiably are of the structure of their well-functioning and very stable democracy, it still grates that this achievement would not have been possible without the use of external force and the presence of a re-educator and supervisor. This gnawing, subliminal wound to the democratic sense of self explains the bitterness with which the debate on Allied guilt is occurring in many places. For example, it is striking with what frenzy historian Jörg Friedrich repeatedly scourges the Western Allied bombardments of German cities as war crimes and acts of mass destruction, even though his point is hardly new.

This angry talk in an open, undefined space is precisely what makes the aggressiveness of its indictment so unusual. It is especially notable in view of the wide popular response it has elicited, as registered by the astronomical sales figures for Friedrich's book, *Der Brand* [The Fire]. The German public evidently has a strong need to revisit the air war—without, however, bringing it before a judicial institution. The purpose of the exercise is inward instead. In the future, we want to be able to feel different, namely, morally equal, when looking at our calamitous history.

In an interview with the *Berliner Zeitung* not long ago, historian Joachim Fest saw a “political,” but no moral, difference between the selective murder of civilian populations, as at Oradour-sur-Glane in France, and the bombing of Dresden. Yet the reason that the Allies unleashed their air war begins to become clear only when one takes a look at everything that happened before Dresden. To be sure, there was Germany's bombardment of Coventry and Rotterdam, but those acts were certainly not the chief reason behind the unscrupulousness demonstrated by the Allies in defeating Nazism. Nor was it Auschwitz, of which there was little or no mention at that time. The disinhibition of the Allies when it came to choosing their ways and means is explicable only if one realizes that Hitler's war was no “normal” war, even when its unimaginably high death toll is discounted. His war was one of extermination and enslavement, an attack on the very bedrock of European and Western civilization as it had come to see itself over the course of at least two thousand years.

Ignoring this background and reducing the issue to some inherent dynamic called “modern technological warfare” would be a dubious misrepresentation of the actual moral factors vying with each other in World War II. The Western Allies were pitted against the worst enemy the free human

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race had ever faced. The fact that they saved the world from him puts them in the moral right. Today, this context is slipping from general awareness because, in the spirit of a highly emotionalized universal humanity, we are excessively inclined to focus our moral evaluations on the human suffering of the victims. On account of the misery suffered individually by the victims, we state that we must avoid any hierarchization among them. But we then jump to the conclusion that the moral guilt of the perpetrators is equally uniform. Speaking from historical distance and with the will to avoid reopening old rifts and to bless the reconciliation of former adversaries in the interest of a better, common future, we take refuge in empty phrases. One of them, for example, is the assertion that the things nations did to each other were hideous and need to be remembered but also jointly overcome in a new spirit of coexistence. But such histrionic lack of differentiation between crimes also summons forces utterly alien to its humanitarian message. It is not by chance that the venomous agitation by the extremist right-wing German National Democratic Party (NPD) slams the “United States as the headquarters of genocide.” It is no accident that it rants against US “terrorism from the air,” whose “trail of blood” leads from Hamburg and Dresden to Korea and Vietnam and from there to Serbia and the present wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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The NPD also echoes leftist slogans of “anti-imperialism.” The party has embarrassed many “antifascist”-minded democrats who have condemned the US war against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq as an illegal war of aggression, for they find it hard to explain why they nevertheless cling to a “community of values” with the United States. Reaching the young generation, the slogans of the neo-Nazis have an audience far beyond their narrow circle of followers. Shortly after NPD members of Saxony’s state legislature in Dresden had triggered a nationwide scandal by speaking of a “bombing holocaust” against the German people, 27 percent of the people under 30 years of age who were interviewed by the *Welt am Sonntag* found nothing repugnant about the term. And a spectacular survey by a Bielefeld research institute in 2004 showed that 51 percent of the Germans who responded agreed with the statement that Israel’s course of action against the Palestinians resembled the war crimes of the Nazis.

Be that as it may, the vast majority of the Germans definitely do not identify with hate-filled, extreme anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism. However, statements like those quoted from the aforementioned surveys do indicate that something has slipped in our democracy’s coordinate system. Its American authorship has become embarrassing to German democracy. The hidden agenda of its now headlong recalibration of policy on dealing with the past is thus to reframe the story of Europe’s liberation and minimize the US’s role in it. Germany would like to stand as tall as America—or taller—if not politically, then at least morally. As the world champion in coming to terms with the past, Germany finds it completely legitimate to judge moral shortcomings of its former teacher. This message was paradigmatically clear in the speeches by Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder on the 60th anniversary of the Normandy landing last year. As Schröder proclaimed there: “Europe has learned its lesson, and we Germans in particular will not dismiss it....Europe’s citizens and politicians have responsibility for seeing to it that jingoism, war crimes, and terrorism have no chance elsewhere, either.” By appearing in Normandy, Schröder and the French president subtly reinterpreted the front lines of World War II. In their scenario, the United States comes across as a power mired in yesterday, a power whose wanton belligerence is about to repeat the errors of the past. People will be “forever grateful” to it as the former liberator, but that *hommage* is no longer to serve as a source of an American claim to political and moral leadership.

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The shadow of US military and moral predominance will not automatically yield to such rhetoric. The downright paradoxical link between German history and the course taken by the United States goes back much further than just 1945. It goes beyond the fact that the United States twice thwarted Germany’s bid for world power. Without Germany, the United States itself would never have become a world power. At any rate, it was two wars provoked by the German empire that forced America to intervene in Europe’s affairs. At the very least, those two world wars greatly accelerated the rise of the United States to the status of a global superpower.

The Germans have unmistakably buried the dream of world power once and for all. But deep within the present German discourse on the search for identity, there seems to be a secret wish still to witness the failure of the power that made it all the way to the top in Germany’s stead. For our own sake, we ought to hope this wish never comes true.