

# Bush in Berlin: illusion and reality

Ulrich Rippert  
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It was a “really significant” speech, in some passages even an “historic speech”. This was the reaction of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) to the speech given by United States president George W. Bush to the German parliament last week. Similar comments have been made repeatedly by leading politicians and the German media since Bush gave his speech last Thursday.

The truly significant aspect of Bush’s Berlin speech at the beginning of his week-long trip to Europe, however, was not so much the string of hackneyed diplomatic phrases regarding the apparent health of the trans-Atlantic alliance, but rather the enthusiastic and, in some quarters, even euphoric reactions by the German political elite.

The reaction to Bush’s speech reflects an important change in German foreign policy. Before the Bush trip, both German foreign minister Joschka Fischer of the Green Party and Schröder had stressed how they regarded a war against Iraq as misconceived and would do everything in their power to dissuade the US government from taking such a course.

Although in his speech Bush did not mention either Iraq or Saddam Hussein, his repeated references to the “trans-Atlantic joint interest in the struggle against terror” left no doubt that preparations for a war against Iraq were central to his discussions during his stay in Berlin. The “standing ovation” he was given by parliamentarians and members of the government was a signal of German agreement.

“Of course we spoke about Iraq,” said Fischer on the floor of parliament following Bush’s speech, adding that the US president had emphasised a number of times that there were “no precise plans” for a military attack. To journalists Fischer remarked, “I do not see Iraq on the top of the agenda for the next period.” The German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* concluded that his statement indicated that an agreement had been reached behind closed doors that a war against Iraq should not commence before September 22, the date of Germany’s general election.

Such an agreement allows the German government to make its own preparations for war behind the backs of the German people and, thereby, prevent demonstrations opposing military action from disrupting the elections. Participation by the German army in a US-led onslaught against Iraq would have to be agreed upon by the German parliament and it is evident that such a debate is entirely unwanted by the coalition partners in

the run up to elections.

There are a number of reasons for the change in policy by the German government regarding a war against Iraq. Firstly, the last few months have made clear in Berlin and other European capitals that they do not have any influence over America anyway when it comes to the issue of war, or indeed, any other issue. Secondly, the German government is seeking to pursue its own imperialist interests and does not want to be pushed out of the picture as America strives to set up its own protectorate in one of the world’s most important oil exporting countries. Thirdly, a war serves to reignite German and European militarism and enable the government to press ahead with a programme of rearmament that has already been agreed upon.

The applause for Bush is an expression of a turn to the right by the European parties, reflecting their reaction to growing social problems and conflicts for which they have no real solution. Under conditions of mounting unemployment, poverty and growing social tensions, the European political elite feel increasingly threatened and are closing ranks against the threat they perceive emanating from the working class. America’s warlike policies, applauded in the Reichstag, are not only directed against foes abroad but also at home.

The gulf between official politics and the broad masses of the population was palpable during the course of the Bush visit. It was expressed not only in the stark contrast between the tens of thousands taking part in demonstrations and protest meetings under the slogan, “We do not want your wars, Mr. President!” and the standing ovation in parliament for Bush. It was also glaringly apparent that in the course of his entire stop in Berlin, during which he repeatedly spoke of “policies in the interests of the people” and “freedom and human rights”; he did not meet a single ordinary German citizen.

During his speech Bush evoked former times, when the former President John F Kennedy visited Germany and, to the applause of thousands, drove through the streets of West Berlin in an open limousine with Chancellor Willy Brandt; or even Ronald Reagan who in 1987 uttered his well-known phrase before a huge crowd assembled at the Brandenburg Gate, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” In contrast Bush was totally isolated from any contact with the German people. There were too many fears that his welcome would not be restricted to only eggs and tomatoes.

For the first time in the history of the city, a large part of the

centre surrounding the Reichstag was hermetically sealed. It was impossible to penetrate the police barricades. Those living in the area cordoned off by the police were forced to endure hours of body searches before they could return home. Police helicopters circled overhead and snipers were posted strategically on rooftops across the city centre. Berlin citizens were visibly disturbed by the disruption, with an elderly woman commenting to cameras, "When he is so afraid of the people, why does he bother to come here?"

Perhaps the most interesting remark made by Bush was not part of his carefully prepared official speech. It came in a statement to journalists when he commented on the artificial atmosphere surrounding his visit: "I am living in a balloon."

The air of unreality was not limited to purely external factors, but also characterised Bush's speech. Virtually every sentence stood truth on its head. At one point, and with special pathos, Bush emphasised that he cared for, and was interested in, every human life: This from a man, who as governor of Texas, personally authorised more than one hundred and fifty executions.

In long passages Bush referred to "German-American friendship" and emphasised "joint values and interests", although everyone knows that such close relations have faded long ago. Conflicts and clashes of interest on all levels have marked the most recent period.

The suppression of reality was not limited to Bush. It was also reflected in those applauding his speech. Green party deputy Cem Özdemir declared of Bush, "He said that which Europeans have been waiting for." His party friend Winfried Herrmann, regarded as a left-winger and a man who voted against German army participation in the war in Afghanistan, was even more fulsome: "This was no hardcore-Bush." How easy it is to impress the Green party politicians.

It has seldom been so obvious that the ruling elite no longer dare to look the truth in the face, confronted with problems for which they have no solution.

Facts, however, are stubborn things. Neither Bush's appeals regarding past German-American friendship and cooperation, nor the courteous applause and hopes for sufficient consultation on the part of Washington by politicians in Berlin can disguise the reality of growing conflicts between the US and Europe.

It has been clear for some time that with the war in Afghanistan and its current preparations for military action against Iraq, the US government is following its own independent geo-strategic interests. Right-wing think-tanks have been arguing for the military occupation of Central Asia for years. In 1997 the former US security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote, in a book containing a foreword written by Fischer's predecessor as German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, that Central Asia is the "chessboard which will decide in future who dominates the globe." In early May US television channel NBC revealed that already on September 9, two days before the hi-jacked planes crashed into the World

Trade Center and the Pentagon, a war plan for the crushing of Al-Qaeda lay on the desk of the president awaiting his signature. It was just a question of putting the plan into action.

The most recent example of the violent clash of European and US interests is to be found in the Middle East. Israeli attacks on Ramallah and other towns resulted in the destruction of the infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority that was almost entirely financed with European donations.

Washington's recent punitive measures against European steel imports have also led to sharply critical reactions in Europe. In order to protect its domestic steel industry, the US has virtually closed its borders to imports since March this year. The commission of the European Union (EU) has reckoned the losses for European steel at \$2.4 billion per year and trade commissioner Pascal Lamy has already announced European counter-measures in the form of restrictions on US imports.

A further conflict is looming on the horizon. Recently the US Congress decided to increase its subsidies to domestic agriculture at a time when European countries are reducing subsidies as part of the preparation for EU expansion. Some press reports are already speaking of the possibilities of a trade war.

Additional sources of trans-Atlantic tensions include the recent announcement by the US of its unilateral termination of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (which pledged the Great Powers to limit their weapons systems); the American rejection of proposals for an international court of human rights, as well as its refusal to agree to the so-called Kyoto Agreement aimed at reducing carbon monoxide emissions.

Under such circumstances, German and European politicians are confronted with a dilemma. With conflicts developing, the overwhelming military superiority of the US, which it is prepared to utilise in a ruthless manner, leaves Berlin and Brussels holding the short straw. Nevertheless the ruling elite in Europe is doing its best to catch up in both the economic and military spheres.

Behind the chorus of friendly words and mutual congratulations, a period of vigorous trans-Atlantic conflicts has opened up, which threatens increased instability on a world scale.



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