

White House snubs German foreign minister

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The Bush White House went out of its way to deliver a humiliating snub to German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer during Fischer's visit to Washington last week.

The German Green Party leader, second in prominence only to Social Democratic (SPD) Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in the SPD-Green coalition government, was the first leading German official to visit the US since the "Red-Green" coalition was reelected on September 22. But Fischer, who in past visits routinely met with Vice President Dick Cheney or Bush's National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, was not invited to the White House. Instead he met with Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The snub was designed to send a public signal that the Bush administration remains hostile to the SDP-Green government, which pulled out an election victory in the final weeks of the campaign by declaring its opposition to a unilateral US military attack on Iraq. Schröder and Fischer had been trailing badly in pre-election polls behind the right-wing opposition headed by Christian Social Union leader Edmund Stoiber. However, once they decided to make an appeal to the broad anti-war sentiment in Germany, they rapidly pulled ahead and went on to win the election.

The Bush administration reacted with barely concealed frenzy to what it considered an act of political defiance, one, moreover, that revealed the depth and breadth of popular opposition to Washington's militaristic agenda, not only in Germany, but throughout Europe. The White House also feared, with good reason, that an SPD-Green victory would encourage the growth of anti-war opposition within the US.

In the run-up to the German vote, the Bush administration made clear its support for Stoiber, and in the election's aftermath committed an extraordinary breach of diplomatic protocol—refusing to congratulate Schröder on his victory. To this day, Bush has failed to send a note of congratulation. US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has refused to meet with his German counterpart, and a number of leading Bush officials have characterized relations between the two countries as "poisoned."

For their part, Schröder and Fischer have worked feverishly to mend fences with the American government. Fischer had planned to visit Washington within a few days

of the German election, but the White House let it be known he was persona non grata. He was finally allowed to make the pilgrimage on October 30, but found the doors to the White House barred.

Bush administration spokesmen sought to underscore the calculated nature of the rebuff. A White House official, when asked, did not deny that the snub was intentional. He said only that Secretary Powell would report on his discussions with Fischer at a later date.

White House hostility toward the German government has been compounded by the refusal to date of Schröder and Fischer to shift their position on the impending US war against Iraq. In a speech to the German parliament early last week, prior to Fischer's visit to Washington, the chancellor said, "We will not take part in a possible war against Iraq." In the same session, Fischer declared, "Does making Iraq a priority really make sense? I say no."

At the same time, Fischer has repeatedly stressed that Germany's differences with the US are of a tactical, rather than a principled, character. The German foreign minister has reiterated German support for the US "war on terrorism," noted the participation of the SPD-Green government in the 1999 air war against Yugoslavia and cited the presence of German special forces troops alongside their American counterparts in the attack on Afghanistan.

The ostensible reason for Washington's diplomatic semi-quarantine of Germany is a remark reportedly made by the then-justice minister, Herta Däubler-Gmelin, in the week before the September 22 election. According to a local press report, Däubler-Gmelin told a group of German trade union officials, in reference to the American war drive against Iraq: "Bush is seeking to divert from his domestic problems. This is a well-known method. Hitler used it."

With the encouragement of the White House, which denounced the reputed remark as an outrageous attempt to equate Bush with the Nazi dictator, Stoiber and the conservative media in Germany sought to leverage the incident into a political scandal, hoping thereby to shift the election in favor of the opposition parties.

In point of fact, the alleged comparison between the modus operandi of the Bush administration's foreign policy and

that of the Nazis is entirely legitimate. Däubler-Gmelin's only offense was to say out loud what is being said in private by political leaders throughout Europe. Not since Hitler has a head of state based his foreign policy so centrally and openly on military force and aggressive war as the present occupant of the White House. Nor is there any doubt that a major driving force behind Bush's push for war against Iraq is the growth of social discontent within the US over mounting job cuts and economic distress, compounded by revelations of pervasive corporate fraud and corruption.

Nevertheless, the German justice minister immediately declared that she had been misquoted, and Schröder issued an effusive apology to Bush. Schröder let be known, moreover, that Däubler-Gmelin would not be reappointed in a new Red-Green government, a pledge that has been carried out.

Speaking to reporters following their meeting on October 30, Powell and Fischer made a show of friendship, referring to one another as "Colin" and "Joschka." They acknowledged continued differences over Iraq, while stressing their points of unity, including Germany's agreement to take command of the Afghanistan "peace-keeping" force and its cooperation in investigating the Al Qaeda network. At the same time, Powell made a point of urging his German counterpart to support the rapid admission of Turkey into the European Union, something Germany has been resisting.

Powell's more moderated approach reflects, in part, concerns within American government circles over the provocative posture of the Bush White House toward Germany. These are both short-term and longer-term. After January 1, Germany takes a seat on the United Nations Security Council, and Washington is counting on its neutrality, if not support, for the planned attack on Iraq.

Reflecting broader concerns over the implications of a breakdown in US-German relations, former secretary of state Henry Kissinger has in recent days published columns in the *Scotland on Sunday* newspaper and the *Washington Post* urging the Bush White House to adopt a more conciliatory posture. In the *Scotland on Sunday* piece, Kissinger chastised Schröder for the "anti-American" tone of his election campaign and placed the onus for the near rupture in US-German relations on Berlin. At the same time, he advised Bush to consider the colossal implications of a breach between the two great powers, warning ominously of "a return to pre-First World War conditions for Europe."

For his part, Fischer was effusive to the point of unseemliness in his praise for the United States and his protestations of support for the Bush administration. "If there are differences and turbulences," he said, "we will discuss these problems inside the family." He repeatedly

praised Powell and thanked the US for "rescuing" Germany after World War II and aiding the reunification of the country more than a decade ago. "We will never forget what the United States has done," he declared.

Despite his best efforts, however, Fischer was unable to extract a commitment from Powell to urge the White House to agree to a one-on-one meeting between Bush and Schröder. Bush has refused the German chancellor's entreaties for an invitation to the White House, and has not said whether he will meet with Schröder at next month's NATO summit meeting in Prague.

Fischer's obsequiousness is not simply, or even primarily, a reflection of his subjective cowardice and political spinelessness. He is a representative of German imperialism, which finds itself thrown into crisis by the belligerent and hegemonic character of US foreign policy. On the one hand, German capitalism cannot for long accept the expansion of US military and economic domination into the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as Eastern Europe and Turkey, traditionally a focus of German imperialist ambitions. At the same time, German aspirations to dominate Europe through the European Union have been predicated on the stability of the US-European alliance and American support for European integration.

Berlin fears that an open breach with the US—which remains far more powerful economically and militarily—will undermine the German economy and intensify centrifugal tendencies within Europe. The Schröder government, moreover, faces widespread opposition within German corporate circles to its anti-American stance on war with Iraq. It also fears the social and political implications at home of a growing movement against imperialist war, at a time when it seeks to expand and rearm the German military and lay the groundwork for German wars of conquest in the not-so-distant future.



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