

The German press and the Iraq war: 'Might makes right'

Peter Schwarz
26 April 2003

If German editorial writers were to form an association, they might choose the weather vane as their coat of arms. Since the military success of the US in Iraq, they have carried out a complete about-face.

Before the war, most commentaries struck a critical note. The flouting of international law, the disregard for the United Nations, the forged evidence of weapons of mass destruction, the oil and power interests of the US—all this was widely analyzed and condemned. After the war, the themes have changed to worshipping the accomplished fact and bowing to the law of the jungle.

As usual, *Die Zeit* has led the way. After much Faustian wrestling with itself, presented in its typically long-winded, moralizing style, the flagship newspaper of German liberalism finally dropped its opposition and came out in support of the war.

On March 6, two weeks before the war, Michael Naumann was still lashing out, on the front page, against “the discarding of international law in the name of a world order defined by America” and the “morally inspired policy of hegemony” of the US. He made quite clear in whose interest international law was thrust aside: The American president, he said, was under pressure “not from the majority of the American people, not from their trade unions, but from the elected elite in Congress and the lobby of the military-industrial interests, the oil corporations and, above all, the sensationalist mass media.”

Naumann concluded: “The days when Washington expended considerable diplomatic efforts on successful peace and disarmament negotiations are apparently over. The president of the world’s oldest republic (whose majority did not vote for him) wants to free the world of war by establishing an everlasting Pax Americana, using violence if need be. America does not deserve this kind of redemption—nor does Europe.”

Three weeks later—seven days into the war—the same

author penned another editorial. The Faustian wrestling began. While in the title, Naumann still regretted that the war was proceeding “among the ruins of international law,” he added a qualifying subtitle: “A foreign policy devoid of morals is cynical, but morality alone cannot protect us from terror and mass murder.” (“Terror and mass murder” referred not to the American bombs raining down on Baghdad at the time, but to the attacks of September 11 and the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.)

Variations on this theme were then intoned over a span of five columns, until even the most attentive reader was at a loss to discern Naumann’s real intentions. But then, the outcome of the war had not yet been decided.

One thing emerged quite clearly: Naumann put much less emphasis on international law than three weeks earlier. Lengthy passages were devoted to qualifying its principles, because, according to Naumann, “international law did not provide for such developments [as the September 11 attacks], and the world community of the United Nations has done much too little to prevent them.”

Two weeks further along, on April 10, Bernd Ulrich—again in an editorial of *Die Zeit*—came to the conclusion that if the US flouted international law, the latter itself was to blame: “Yes, this war constitutes a breach of international law. The Americans must be criticized for that—and so must international law.”

By April 16, when the outcome of the war had been decided, *Die Zeit* had arrived in the camp of Bush. “A super power which makes a claim for morals does not necessarily have to be good, but it certainly has the potential to be good, and while this is not yet a cause for confidence, it does give us hope,” the newspaper wrote, under the headline “Morality Under Arms”. The author this time was Jan Ross.

Ross contrasted the “go-getting manners” of the US to the “European legal culture”, and professed his enthusiasm for the former. America, he wrote, would

hardly “feel able to carry out such energetic acts if it was not deeply convinced of the value of its cause and the universality of its mission, of the true and universal validity of its ideals.”

Europe’s insistence on international law, on the role of the United Nations and the virtues of multilateralism, in contrast, contained “an element of spiteful unproductivity, of gleeful obstruction resulting from a lack of drive.” Ross continued: “It is a strange mixture of illusionary pedantry regarding legal paragraphs and impassive *realpolitik*.” The article warned against any retreat into “cold arguments of statecraft” when “trying to counter George W. Bush’s revolutionary activities.”

Words fail to describe this shameless bowing to naked power. The brutal actions of the American military machine and the provocative behavior of people such as US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and General Tommy Franks clearly impress and fascinate the editorialists of *Die Zeit*.

However, a crime remains a crime, even if it succeeds. The actions of the US government, which were a criminal violation of international law before the war began, remain so after it has ended.

Who would take seriously an analogous comment on a successful bank robbery? “Yes, this robbery was a breach of criminal law. The robber must be criticized—but so must criminal law.” What kind of author would favorably compare the “go-getting manners” of the robber, who is “deeply convinced of his mission,” to the “unproductivity, gleeful obstruction and illusionary pedantry regarding legal paragraphs” on the part of the criminal court?

The course of this war—in which thousands of bombs were dropped on virtually defenseless Iraqi soldiers—and the actions of the occupying powers have confirmed the criminal nature of the entire operation. Nothing symbolizes its essence more strikingly than the fact that US tanks protected the oil wells and the oil ministry, while all other ministries as well as the invaluable cultural heritage of the country were given over to looters. The aim of the war was the colonial subjugation of Iraq and the entire region to the interest of the US and its corporations.

Die Zeit was not alone in concluding that, in the event of a conflict between international law and America’s drive for world hegemony, it is international law that must yield. Many more newspapers have published similar editorials.

Thus, Stefan Kornelius admits in the *Süddeutsche*

Zeitung of April 12 that the US has “broken the chains of the international order.” He writes: “The sovereignty of states—one of the major rules among the peoples—is less and less heeded.” However, he continues, this “does not necessarily have to lead to lawlessness.” Rather, the US is now called upon to elaborate new rules together with its allies, because “history is written by the victors.”

The rejection of internationally recognized legal principles in favor of facts created by violence, and the dismissal of “legal culture” in the name of “go-getting manners”, are reminiscent of the worst chapter in German history. In 1933, many German professionals and jurists easily adjusted their doctrines and convictions to the Nazi regime. Behind this was more than mere adaptation and cowardliness. They were fascinated by the brutal actions of the Nazis, by the ruthless creation of accomplished facts. Echoes of this attitude persist to this day in the cult surrounding figures such as Ernst Jünger and Leni Riefenstahl.

However, it would be unjust to blame the editorialists alone. They only formulate the position that the German government has taken in practice. Chancellor Schröder and Foreign Minister Fischer have long been working towards reconciliation with the US.

“In contrast to the official announcements,” *Der Spiegel* magazine (which is usually well informed about developments within the government) wrote as early as two weeks ago, “the German *realpolitiker* Schröder and Fischer have long accepted the triumph of the United States in the Gulf and the victors’ prerogatives that flow from it.” A “central role” for the United Nations is demanded in official pronouncements only, and there is discussion of a German contribution to the rebuilding of Iraq and the deployment of German troops.

In every interview, Schröder makes a point of emphasizing the “joint values” of Germany and the US. Speaking to *Der Spiegel*, he, in effect, apologized to President Bush: “I very much regret that there have been exaggerated statements, even from the ranks of my former cabinet,” he said.

Schröder and Fischer, having failed to stop the US war project by diplomatic means, now seek to enlist as junior partners.



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