

# The German government and the Iraq war

## A reply to Günter Grass

Ulrich Rippert  
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Dear Günter Grass:

I was interested but also rather astonished to read your April 7 commentary in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Yes, it is true that the war against Iraq was planned long in advance. It is a war of aggression that violates international law and elevates the use of force to the status of an international legal norm. As Sonja Mikich commented on Germany's ARD television programme, *Monitor*: "Welcome to the Middle Ages".

I was very glad to read your mention of "another America." You aligned yourself with the American opponents of the war expressly to defend the democratic rights and principles for which many Americans gave their lives. Those great struggles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have inspired people throughout the world ever since.

Consequently, I was all the more amazed that you fail to grasp with the same perceptiveness the situation in Germany. Instead, you give the impression that the great antiwar protests in this country can somehow be equated with the position held by the federal government.

I was particularly roused to protest by your following words: "I thank Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer for their steadfastness; despite all the hostility and slander from home and abroad, they have remained credible".

The claims by Schröder and Fischer that they "reject the necessity of this war" take on a completely different meaning when considered objectively, rather than as some high-sounding moral abstraction. Well-known international legal experts have described Washington's attack on Iraq as a clear break with international law. The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in Geneva, for example, speaks of a "flagrant violation of the prohibition of the use of force." Yet, the federal government has guaranteed the Americans unlimited use of German air space and US military bases in Germany.

In doing so, the German government itself is violating German and international law, since both the German

Constitution and the UN Charter prohibit the preparation, conduct and support of a war of aggression. This war, which can better be described as a massacre of the Iraqi people, is being conducted to a great extent from German territory. In recent days, American military transport planes from Ramstein, the biggest US Air Force base outside the US, and from the Rhine-Main air base have been taking off and landing every hour, delivering munitions to the Iraqi war zone and bringing back wounded US soldiers.

The transport of troops and materiel has been coordinated from the European Command logistics centre in Stuttgart, and direct preparations for war involving the computerised war games manoeuvre, "Victory Scrimmage", took place at the beginning of the year in Grafenwöhr at the Pentagon's biggest military training area in Europe. How can this be seen as anything but proof that Germany is an accomplice in this war of aggression?

It is instructive to examine how the governing parties justify their support for a war that violates international law. Last month, on the day the war began, the executive committee of the Greens' parliamentary faction approved a resolution that expressly supported the granting of fly-over and usage rights to American and British bases. The resolution stated: "Irrespective of the assessment of the actions of the US and Great Britain in relation to international law," a political decision had been made to avoid jeopardising the "indispensable cornerstones of German foreign and internal security policy".

In other words, the federal government considers its own foreign policy interests to be more important than international law. However, that is exactly the position of the Bush administration when it invokes its foreign and domestic security interests to assert the right to attack Iraq and set up an American protectorate there. Thus, the conflict between Berlin and Washington arises not from concerns about international law, but from foreign policy interests that are increasingly in conflict, despite the frequent and mutual affirmations of transatlantic friendship.

Where is all this leading?

I am aware that I am speaking to someone who has intimately experienced and commented upon the great tragedies of the past century. But that is precisely why the following question must be posed in all frankness. Why is it that current European policy so grotesquely underestimates the American government? What does it take to stop the grinning and bearing of everything and acknowledge that power has been seized in Washington by a gang of criminals who, if not stopped, threaten to engulf the whole world in flames.

The taking of Baghdad has not satisfied the appetite of the warmongers in the Pentagon; it has merely whetted it. The next targets of strategic conquest are already marked out. The hope of once again drawing the Bush administration within the orbit of the United Nations and bringing it under control through concessions, diplomatic manoeuvres and a de facto legitimisation of the flouting of international law is naive and dangerous.

The world witnessed a similar spectacle 65 years ago. In retrospect, one can only shake one's head when reading the reports about Chamberlain's "appeasement policy" with which the British government tried to restrain Hitler's Germany and reach a peaceful settlement in the spring of 1938.

At the first meeting, the major European powers expressed their willingness, under certain conditions, to support Hitler's ambitions concerning Austria. The question was no longer even on the agenda for the second meeting. The *Anschluss* (incorporation of Austria into Germany) had already been brutally and violently executed. At the third meeting, Britain and France condoned the annexation of the Sudetenland. A year later the Second World War began with the invasion of Poland.

And today? European governments, particularly the Germans, have shown themselves to be utterly incapable of opposing America's policy of imperialist conquest on democratic and legal grounds. The economic interests of big business and the banks, which wield the most influence in Berlin, are too closely tied to American big business and its political interests. While the cowardly line of the SPD (Social Democrats)-Green government, with its numerous half-truths and compromises, is encouraging the most right-wing political elements in the US, plans are simultaneously being made to accelerate and upgrade the arming of Europe. Thus, an arms race with fatal consequences is beginning.

I remain convinced that it is wrong to concede that the Schröder-Fischer government has earned our gratitude.

I would like to make a second point. This government should not be judged according to two separate criteria: good in foreign policy, bad in social policy. Never since the 1930s has a government attacked the weakest and poorest sections

of society so openly and shamelessly. The social austerity measures announced by Chancellor Schröder in his government statement last month are aimed almost without exception at the long-term unemployed, social welfare recipients, sick people and pensioners—that is, at those most underprivileged layers who have no one to represent their interests.

Periodic reductions in unemployment benefits and the merging of "unemployment benefits" with "social welfare" will drive a large part of an entire generation into financial ruin. Such an attack on the most impoverished layers of society is not only extremely antisocial, it is a political crime. It accelerates the process of social decomposition, undermining precisely the social force upon which the struggle against militarism and war must be based—the great majority of the working population.

The great lesson of the last century lies precisely in the observation that social crises and war are intimately connected. The danger of war is growing even now as social tensions and conflicts increase. This is why the peace movement must not allow itself to be guided by the government; rather it must develop into a broad social movement, uniting working people worldwide across every border.

The correct example is not—as you finally suggest—Sisyphus, tirelessly taking up his task from the beginning again, but the great humanists and socialists who have always called for the transformation of protest against war into a systematic political struggle to create a society where the interests of the whole population are placed above the profit interests of the corporations.

With best regards,

Ulrich Rippert, Chairman of the Party for Social Equality in Germany

\* Günter Grass is the Nobel Prize-winning author of *The Tin Drum* and most recently *Crabwalk*. The article in the *Los Angeles Times* was based on a speech he made on the occasion of his acceptance of the Citizen Prize from the city of Halle in eastern Germany.



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