

German Chancellor Schröder comes to the aid of Bush

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For the first time in two years, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was received last weekend at the White House. Following a one-hour talk, he was invited to a joint luncheon with President Bush. Interviewed by the press, he stressed that the president and he had resolved to settle past differences in order to focus on the present situation and the future.

In reply to a question by the *Washington Post*, “Is the war between you and President Bush over?” Schröder said, “We never had a war. What we had was a difference of opinion... As far as Iraq is concerned, both of us are interested in seeing a stable and democratic Iraq.”

In the same interview, Schröder emphasized that Germany was already actively supporting the occupation of Iraq on a number of fronts. “First, we contribute to the reconstruction of the country by investing in infrastructure and restoring its water supply. In March, we will begin to train Iraqi police officers in the United Arab Emirates with Japan and France.”

In addition, Schröder pointed to the strong German engagement in Afghanistan, which the US president had “expressly acknowledged.” The two leaders had agreed, moreover, “on the need for some international burden sharing” in relation to Iraq and Afghanistan. He was, Schroeder said, “very satisfied” with his visit.

German commentators, who all use virtually identical, standardized formulations about the “end of the transatlantic ice age” and the “return to normality” in German-American relations, miss the real content of Schröder’s servile pilgrimage to Washington. Eight months before the US presidential elections, the conduct of the German chancellor amounts to active support for the re-election campaign of a government representing the most reactionary and even criminal elements within American politics.

Why? It would have been entirely possible for Schröder to tell Bush, Rumsfeld and Co. some unpleasant truths.

The reasons they gave to justify their attack on Iraq one year ago have all been exposed as intelligence fabrications or outright lies. Iraq did not possess any weapons of mass destruction and posed no military threat. There has never been a trace of evidence that Baghdad gave support to Al Qaeda. It was only during and after the war that Al Qaeda fighters were able to cross the border into Iraq and assist Islamic fundamentalist elements there.

Democracy and prosperity, which the bombs and tanks were supposed to bring to Iraq, are today further away than ever before. The country’s infrastructure has been all but destroyed, and the main purpose of the reconstruction program is to generate fabulous profits for American and British firms.

In addition, there was the US president’s outrageous intervention into German domestic politics during the last national elections, in the autumn of 2002. Bush openly promoted the extreme right wing of the conservative Christian Democrats, led by Roland Koch, while violating the most elementary conventions of international diplomacy in his conduct toward Schröder, the chancellor and leader of the Social Democrats.

So Schröder did have some cards up his sleeve when he arrived in Washington. It would have been entirely possible for him to make clear that he regarded Bush as a “lame duck” president and was expecting a “regime change” in Washington. Instead, Schröder decided to lick the boots that had kicked him.

In politics, character and personality play a not insignificant role. Gerhard Schröder and his foreign minister, Joschka Fischer of the Green Party, belong to that section of their generation that never had to conduct a serious fight for anything, never stood up for principles or political convictions, and always followed the line of least resistance. In all areas of politics, they observe the motto: “Crawl before the bigwigs and bully the underlings.”

However, certain political and social developments have

the effect of intensifying this organic inclination towards opportunism. The Iraq war was such a development. The original opposition of the German government to military intervention in Iraq was not based on considerations of principle, such as a rejection of neo-colonial conquest or defence of Iraq's right to sovereignty. Quite the opposite: the governments in Berlin and Paris feared for their own economic interests, which they had fostered in Iraq, with its rich natural resources, over the preceding years. Their rejection of the war was half-hearted from the very beginning. At no point did the German government even consider blocking American military bases in Germany or denying US war planes the use of German airspace.

When it became clear that the Bush administration would be deterred neither by UN resolutions nor by diplomatic manoeuvres, and that the US government was prepared to ride roughshod over international law and international institutions, European politics was thrown into crisis. Neither Paris nor Berlin was prepared, or was in a position, to confront Washington's aggression. On the other hand, they could not allow themselves to be reduced to the role of America's vassals. This dilemma intensified when the Bush administration began to actively intervene into European politics, organizing its allies and isolating its critics.

The effects of the Iraq war on European politics were much deeper than might be thought at first glance. In the period following World War II, the economic and political unification of Europe was, for a long time and to a high degree, an American project, aimed at creating a strong bulwark against the Soviet Union in the context of the cold war. Under these conditions, the process of European integration was bound up with a policy of social balance and reforms. Social and regional antagonisms were, to a certain degree, ameliorated by numerous structural arrangements and regional funds of the European Community.

The end of the Soviet Union, and the trans-Atlantic tensions that have been intensifying ever since, fundamentally changed the situation in Europe. Under the mounting pressure of the US, the old, unresolved conflicts and rivalries between the European powers are beginning to re-emerge, at the same time that social tensions are growing.

At his first stop, Schröder, speaking before businessmen in Chicago, warned of any further intensification of conflicts over trade and monetary policy. One day later, European economic sanctions went into effect that are to be tightened every month if the American government

does not intervene to halt tax loopholes for US firms that contradict international regulations. There are many indications that in economic and trade policy, too, the Bush administration is renouncing international collaboration and is leaning towards protectionism.

All European governments, including the German, react to this economic and political pressure by intensifying their attacks on the social and democratic rights of their own populations.

This is the key to understanding the reasons for Schröder's grovelling before Bush.

Foreign policy cannot be separated from domestic policy. Even last year, at the height of the conflict between Berlin and Washington, Schröder was careful not to identify too closely with the powerful protests and mass demonstrations against the Iraq war. Meanwhile, the German government, in line with most of its European counterparts, has declared a virtual war on its own population. All areas of social policy are ravaged by cuts unprecedented since the 1930s. At the same time, large corporations and the wealthy elite are granted one tax cut after another.

Under these conditions, the most reactionary and corrupt elements are expanding their influence in European politics. In those countries where the Social Democrats still hold power, they pave the way for these forces and collaborate with them whenever possible. This is the message sent by Schröder from the US capital.

Nothing would be more misleading than the notion that Schröder's handshake in the oval office meant a return to trans-Atlantic stability. Rather, the Bush administration will be strengthened by his support, and will be encouraged to launch new, unexpected attacks. It would not be the first time that a bootlicker was rewarded with a kick in the teeth.



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