

German Chancellor Merkel covers up for illegal CIA practices

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The German-American partnership is based on “common democratic convictions and values,” and on the basis of these values Germany and the US are seeking “to master together the new challenges and threats of the twenty-first century.” These were the words used by German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) as she welcomed US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Tuesday during the latter’s stopover in Berlin. The words used say a great deal about Merkel and the character of the government she leads.

What are the “values” to which Merkel refers?

In the days preceding Rice’s arrival, the German and international headlines were dominated by reports on the illegal activities of the American intelligence service, the CIA. A series of new details emerged over illegal arrests, kidnappings, renditions and torture. The *Berliner Zeitung* summed up the role of the American government in a comment: “No other US government has ever carved such a path of destruction through international law—the illegal war of aggression becomes the legitimate means, statements extorted by torture the legal norm....”

But on these issues Merkel had nothing to say. Instead, she publicly welcomed the assurance by Secretary of State Rice that the US acted in accordance with its international obligations and abided by national and international law in its fight against terrorism—an assertion that completely defies reality.

One week previously, in her initial government statement, Merkel said that she expected the US government to confirm whether reports over secret prisons and prisoner transportation via European air space were true. On Tuesday, the whole issue was forgotten.

For her part, Rice refused to give any concrete response, even though she had assured the German foreign minister, Frank Walter Steinmeier, during his recent visit to Washington that she would clear up the issue. In ritual fashion, Rice merely repeated again and again that the war against terror was being carried out in accordance with American and international laws—without ever addressing a

concrete question.

Merkel’s comment at their joint press conference—“We spoke about one case which was acknowledged by the government of the United States to be an error”—drew an angry response from Rice’s staff. “We are not exactly clear what the chancellor was thinking of,” one Rice staffer commented to a Reuters correspondent during their subsequent flight to Romania.

Merkel was alluding to the case of the German citizen of Lebanese origin, Khalid al-Masri, who had been seized by the CIA during a vacation to Macedonia, abducted to Afghanistan and abused over a period of five months. Al-Masri has lodged charges against his kidnapping in a US court. Although his abduction is thoroughly documented, Rice was not even prepared to concede an error in this case.

Instead, she defended the practice of the illegal abduction, declaring on a German news program: “The attitude of the US is that ‘renditions’ are a legal practice to pick up terrorists from the streets.” “Rendition” is the term used to describe the secret arrest of terror suspects and their transfer to countries where they can be tortured.

In her government statement last week, Angela Merkel, who grew up in the former East Germany (GDR), described the coming down of the Berlin wall as “the biggest surprise of my life” and a “gift of freedom.” She then went on to expressly praise the virtues of democracy. Her friendly reception for Rice shows the real meaning of her words one week ago. Although the illegal machinations of the CIA overshadow in many respects the crimes committed by the East German security police, Merkel has either remained silent or covers up for such crimes.

This is not an issue of diplomatic protocol. In other cases, far lesser offences would be sufficient to demand to see the ambassador of a country and write a sharply worded note of protest. Merkel’s behaviour shows what can be expected from her government when it comes to adhering to democratic rights. The principal reason for her silence arises from the fact that both the new and former German governments were thoroughly informed on the illegal

practices and operated as accomplices.

To forestall European criticism prior to Rice's trip, the Bush administration made certain facts public. Thus, the *Washington Post* published a report on the case of al-Masri, which makes clear that the German interior minister at that time, Otto Schily (Social Democratic Party, SPD), had been promptly informed by the American ambassador about the case. It is alleged that a member of the German intelligence forces was even involved in the interrogation of al-Masri in Afghanistan.

The case of al-Masri, however, is only the tip of the iceberg. According to the *Neuer Zürcher Zeitung*, the German Intelligence Service (BND) regularly receives abbreviated protocols of such interrogations from the CIA. For the German Intelligence Service and other Western security agencies, the statements of prisoners held by the CIA are among the most important sources of information on the activities of Islamic dissidents. "Berlin thus profited from the anti-terror strategy of the US and is at the same time indignant about the methods used," concludes the NZZ.

The case of al-Masri shows the full extent of the complicity of the German government. Although it concerns a German citizen, the government did nothing to protect him or clarify his situation. The Munich public prosecutor's office, which is conducting investigations "against unknown persons" involved in the al-Masri kidnapping, has been groping in the dark for months, although the relevant government agencies in Berlin were long aware of the relevant facts.

Through its actions, the German government has made itself liable to prosecution. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* refers to an "abyss...because the facts are mounting in a manner which one does not want to associate with a German government: for example, torture, grievous bodily harm, committed by omission. Or obstructing justice in office, because the clarification and pursuit of a major criminal offence, i.e., kidnapping of a German citizen, was prevented or at least obstructed while the relevant public prosecutor's office was being led by the nose."

In the meantime, the issue of al-Masri has assumed such proportions that Merkel felt obliged to respond. She promised that Foreign Minister Steinmeier will make a statement to the parliamentary control committee (PKG) of the Bundestag. Steinmeier has since admitted that he had already been informed in the summer of 2004 of the kidnapping by al-Masri's lawyer. He probably knows much more. As head of the chancellery of former chancellor Gerhard Schröder, he maintained contact with the intelligence services and coordinated the work of all ministries—and was therefore informed about all important incidents.

Any statement made to the PKG, however, is aimed at covering up, not clearing up. The committee meets secretly, and its members are pledged to strict silence. It has not even been elected by the incoming Bundestag because the conservative union parties want to prevent a former High Court judge, Wolfgang Neskovic, who supports the Left Party, from participating in the PKG.

In the meantime, however, there are increasing calls for a public parliamentary committee of inquiry. The head of the neo-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), Guido Westerwelle—a party that held the leading posts in the foreign ministry and intelligence services for a long period and is not known for its transparency—has described the abduction of al-Masri as a "crime by a foreign secret service" that had to be cleared up "in the eyes of the public."

As a result, Foreign Minister Steinmeier could become the first member of the new government to be swept into the vortex of a public scandal. There is a certain irony in such a development. Steinmeier is a close trusted friend of former Chancellor Schröder and is regarded as the architect of the SPD-Green government's Iraq policy, which at the time led to violent conflicts with Washington. His appointment as foreign minister, which came about following pressure from Schröder, was seen as a guarantee that the Merkel government would not snuggle up too close to Washington. If he should now fall over the CIA scandal, this would presumably lead to closer relations between Washington and Berlin.

At this point, it seems unlikely that Steinmeier will lose his post. Nevertheless, the recent exposures have made one thing clear: the extent of involvement by the SPD-Green government in the illegal practices of the Bush administration. The latest revelations confirm that the Schröder government's rejection of the Iraq war had nothing to do with legal or moral scruples, but was entirely bound up with the interests of German imperialism, which follows its own interests in the Middle East and Iraq.



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