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Foreign Dissent on Bush's Imperial Ambitions

by James Bovard

The Bush administration was outraged this past summer when German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder starkly declared that he would not support Bush's war with Iraq. The resulting transatlantic brouhaha provides insights into political developments and delusions in both the United States and Germany. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld huffed that the German campaign had been "unhelpful" and that Schroeder's comments "had the effect of poisoning the relationship" between the United States and Germany.

Richard Perle, chief of the Bush administration's Defense Policy Board and perhaps the most militant warhawk in Washington, even demanded that Schroeder resign — shortly after he was reelected. In an interview with a leading German newspaper, Perle declared,

"Never in my life have I seen relations with a close ally damaged so fast and so deeply as during Chancellor Schroeder's election campaign. It would be best if he resigned, but he's not going to do that."

Schroeder was not threatening to impose an embargo on American children (such as the United States imposes on Iraqi children). He was not threatening to declare the state of Vermont a "no-fly zone" and start bombing any suspected military installation spotted by air force patrols. He was not calling for the American masses to rise up and hoist Bush out of the White House. And he did not threaten aggression against anyone. Instead, he was simply making it clear that Germany had no enthusiasm for going to war with Iraq and would not support any such endeavor.

In contrast, the Bush administration — with its recently unveiled "first-strike-for-all" doctrine — is threatening the entire world with preemptive attacks.

And yet the moral onus is supposed to fall on Schroeder.

New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd declared, “Maybe the Bush policy on Empire & Preemption allows us to decide not only who can run a country, but what are the proper issues for other nations’ election debates.”

Dowd noted that President Bush

“was always the Roman candle and hatchet man in the family, [and] has turned his father’s good manners upside down — consulting sparingly, leaving poor Tony Blair to make the case against his foes for him, and treating policy disagreements as personal slights.”

Washington sensitivities were also inflamed when one of Schroeder’s colleagues, Ludwig Stiegler, declared that “Bush is acting as if he is Caesar Augustus and Germany is the province of Germania.”

One might have thought Bush’s conservative faithful would have appreciated that Bush was not compared to Commodus or Caligula — Roman emperors renown for dissipation, debauchery, and a general failure to uphold family values.

But some of Bush’s utterances understandably make observers doubt whether he is being crushed by the weight of his own humility. Bush informed *Washington Post* editor Bob Woodward,

“I’m the commander — see, I don’t need to explain — I do not need to explain why I say things. That’s the interesting thing about being the president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don’t feel like I owe anybody an explanation.”

This attitude does not inspire confidence in foreign nations that Bush is demanding follow him into war.

The Bush-Schroeder dispute

I was in Germany in August and again in November and spoke to many people there about their reaction to the Bush-Schroeder dust-up. Most of the people I spoke to prefaced their comments by stressing their respect or admiration for America. But almost all of them were opposed to going to war with Iraq and most sounded genuinely puzzled that Bush wanted to attack Saddam Hussein. (I tried to explain to them the concept of “Texas family honor,” but to no avail.) Almost no one had any expectations of good results from the war, even if the United States did easily smash Hussein’s army and regime.

Relations between the Bush and Schroeder camps further deteriorated after a German newspaper quoted Germany's Justice Minister, Herta Daeubler-Gmelin, as saying, "Bush wants to divert attention from his domestic problems. It's a classic tactic. It's one that Hitler used." After controversy erupted, Daeubler-Gmelin denied making the comment, announcing, "I am surprised by the article, because it is absurd and libelous to attribute to me a comparison between a democratically elected politician and a leading Nazi." She admitted having made a reference to the Nazi leader but insisted that no direct comparison to Bush was made.

White House spokesman Fleischer denounced the comment as "outrageous and is inexplicable" and revealed that President Bush was "very angered" by it. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice ruled, "The comments by the justice minister, even if she only said half of what is alleged, are unacceptable."

Some of the official indignation in Washington sounded as if some Bush administration officials thought the Germans had violated a U.S. copyright, as if American presidents should be the only people in the world to declare who is and is not comparable to Hitler.

Much of the German skepticism towards America was fueled by the new preemptive-strike military doctrine that Bush officially unveiled in September. The new "National Security Strategy of the United States" declared,

"The United States has long maintained the option of preemptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to our national security. The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction — and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively."

Perhaps some Germans understand Hitler's crimes better than some Americans do. Most people have forgotten that one of the key charges against German generals at the Nuremberg trials was that they waged "aggressive war" not unlike what is now lustily championed in Washington. The International Court presiding at the Nuremberg Tribunal in 1945-46 declared,

"To initiate a war of aggression, therefore, is not only an international crime, it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole."

Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, the chief American prosecutor at the Nuremberg trial, declared that “launching a war of aggression is a crime and that no political or economic situation can justify it.”

Schroeder is a slippery politician who cannot be trusted further than he can be thrown. But he was not more demagogic on the war issue than was Bush and the Republican Party in the recent U.S. midterm elections. Bush and Schroeder both played the war card for domestic audiences — but apparently all the onus rests on those who fail to favor war.

The Bush-Schroeder clash was probably the key factor in allowing Schroeder to win reelection over lackluster Christian Democratic Union candidate Edmund Stoiber. (Stoiber also suffered because many northern Germans have a profound disdain for southern Germans; one restaurant owner in the north German city of Molln swore to me that she would never vote for any Bavarian.)

After winning, Schroeder promptly disavowed his promise not to raise taxes. Germans are increasingly disgusted with him and he risks being heaved out of office regardless of his razor-thin reelection margin. (Schroeder forced his justice minister to resign shortly after he won another term.)

Germans supported and aided the first American war against Iraq and provided support personnel for U.S. adventures in Somalia and Afghanistan, as well as the U.S.-Euro salvation missions in Bosnia and Kosovo. But, happily, Germany (unlike the United States) is now devoid of theorists preaching the need for its hegemony over the world.

Criticism of U.S. policy

Bush’s foreign-policy officials sound as intolerant of any criticism of U.S. war plans as Attorney General John Ashcroft is of any criticism of his post-September 11 crackdowns. (Ashcroft’s pronouncement to the Senate Judiciary Committee last December — “To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this, your tactics only aid terrorists for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve. They give ammunition to America’s enemies and pause to America’s friends” — sounded like it came from an earlier, darker era in history.)

The Bush administration’s overreaction to the German comments is a measure of its delusions of grandeur. The administration is not accustomed to being defied by anyone — not by Congress, not

by federal courts, and not by average Americans (who are strictly prohibited from protesting in areas that the president might see when he visits their cities). The Bush administration, like the Nixon administration, could be heading for a crash.

There is an ancient German saying that “one peace is worth ten victories.” Tragically, that saying seems to have passed out of the German consciousness about the time that Bismarck took power in the 1860s. Now, as that old wisdom may finally be reviving in German consciousness, it would be prudent for the United States to also consider the maxim.

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