

Testing

the German–American Bond

By Terry Martin

Talk about a rough patch. In September US–German relations hit rock-bottom. “Poisoned” was the word used by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. In diplomatic discourse between allies, this is as bad as it gets.

Relations went ballistic when, in the middle of the German election campaign, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder decided opposition to US military intervention in Iraq would be a big vote getter. He was right. His ratings shot straight up, helping him close a ten-

point gap with the conservatives. Unfortunately, that position made Germany very unpopular in Washington where George W. Bush was clamoring for “regime change” in Baghdad.

As President Bush’s saber rattling grew louder, Chancellor Schröder’s antiwar rhetoric became ever more strident. The world’s two largest trading nations—who’ve enjoyed excellent ties for decades—suddenly found themselves on a diplomatic collision course, and both sides stubbornly stuck to their path.



A crowd of nearly 4,000 demonstrators marched through Cologne on September 14 protesting a possible war on Iraq.

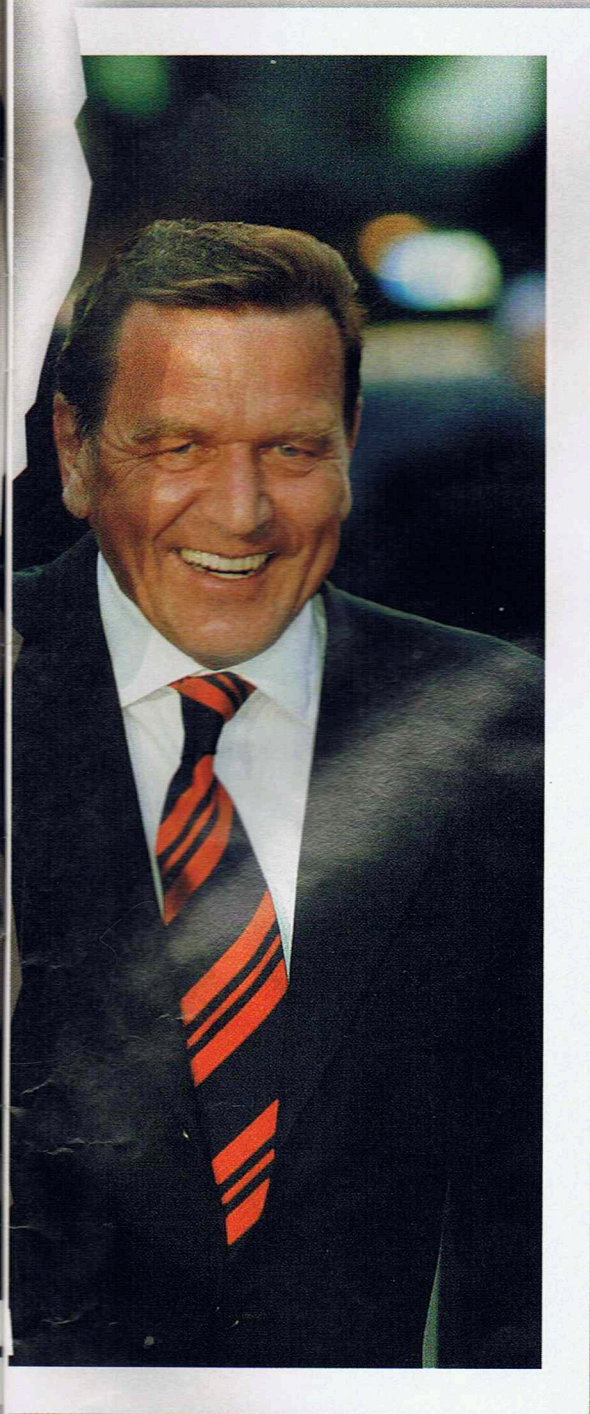


Happier times: Bush met with Schröder in Berlin last May.

Bush lobbied hard for a United Nations resolution to use military action against Iraq. Schröder rejected it unconditionally.

Transatlantic observers watched with amazement as Schröder went further and further out on a limb. Twice a day at campaign rallies—and once in a nationally televised debate—Schröder put rejection of “a military adventure” in Iraq at the very top of his policy agenda. The crowds went wild. Germans (like the Japanese) have developed a deep-seated aversion to war.

Although awkward, the tension in



US-German relations remained manageable during most of the campaign. Schröder apparently felt the transatlantic bond was strong enough to endure a few weeks of electioneering at America's expense. But the strategy was fraught with risks.

First, Schröder risked alienating many older voters who feel historically obliged to support the US on matters of security. Second, on a European level, he risked isolating Germany within the EU and jeopardized efforts to forge a common position on matters of global

urgency. Finally, Schröder's aggressive manner and tone (more so than his message) risked creating an atmosphere of bilateral hostility with far-reaching consequences.

It was within this highly charged atmosphere, just three days before the election, that events took a terrible turn. German Justice Minister Herta Däubler-Gmelin was already angry at Bush for backing out of the International Criminal Court treaty. Then, in the midst of a heated debate, she hastily compared the president's tactics to those of Hitler, suggesting that George W. Bush—like “Adolf Nazi”—was using the specter of war to distract attention from America's domestic problems. This analogy was the diplomatic poison Condoleezza Rice referred to.

Schröder quickly issued a written apology to Bush. But it was too little too late. The damage was done. Needless to say, Däubler-Gmelin did not return to Schröder's cabinet. And Bush did not call to congratulate the chancellor on his election victory. Schröder's foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, got the job of patching things up and called Secretary of State Colin Powell the next day to keep the lines of communication open.

Sadly, the dispute over Iraq has overshadowed other important aspects of US-German relations: joint peacekeeping operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan, for example. Gerhard Schröder may have disagreed with Amer-

ica's stance on Iraq, but he is fully committed to the war on terrorism. Germany has 10,000 troops serving alongside American forces abroad. Immediately after the September 11 attacks, the chancellor famously declared his “unlimited solidarity” with the United States.

The “either-or” logic of war threatens to reduce the complex web of transatlantic ties to a single topic. This is most

unfortunate because it jeopardizes progress on a host of issues where Germany and the US disagree. America's refusal to sign the Kyoto protocol on carbon dioxide emissions, for instance, is immensely annoying to environmentally conscious Germany. Schröder's government objects to a whole range of US tariffs and subsidies, particularly those involving steel and agriculture. German companies also do not appreciate being force-fed America's new rules on corporate governance. Other disputes center on America's contempt for the International Criminal Court and Germany's abhorrence of the death penalty. In the machine of bilateral diplomacy, these points of friction require regular oiling.

Paradoxically, while Schröder's re-election campaign was accused of exploiting anti-American themes, the style of the campaign itself couldn't have been more American. For the first time in German election history, the main political rivals squared off face-to-face in nationally televised debates. The popular format, expected to be incorporated into future campaigns, was a direct import from the United States. This was the year German elections became “Americanized.” ☹



German soldiers continue to serve as part of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.