

VIEWPOINT

Strong on Words, Weak on Will

Schröder rejects Bush's line on Iraq, but will either one stick to his plans?

Josef Joffe

PATRIOTISM", WROTE DR. JOHNSON IN THE 18TH CENTURY, "is the last refuge of a scoundrel." Make that "campaigner" today, and take a look at pre-election Germany. In the aftermath of Sept. 11, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder pledged "unconditional solidarity" with the United States. Now, he is telling George W. Bush to count Germany out. "Under my leadership, this country won't participate in any adventures [against Iraq]," the Chancellor thundered. "We will go our own German way; we won't be roped in." Not even a U.N. mandate would make Berlin join the war.

What happened? Easy. Schröder has to face the voters on Sept. 22, and all the polls signal a sure defeat. His Social Democratic Party has been trailing Edmund Stoiber's Christian Democrats for many weeks, most recently by seven percentage points. Schröder simply cannot clamber out of the hole that is deepened daily by a sinking economy, plummeting stock markets and worsening unemployment. About to end up as a one-term Chancellor, he is playing his last worst card: nationalism with an anti-American tinge.

This 180-degree turn reflects desperation. Since the rebirth of democracy some 50 years ago, no German government has sought refuge in nationalist, let alone anti-American, rhetoric. Even the Chirac government is (very) quietly signaling Washington that it would go along in a war against Iraq—if also for the self-serving reason of being at the table where the spoils of victory would be distributed. To have a hand in the postwar reorganization of Iraq also explains Britain's judiciously rationed support for an attack. Tony Blair is not George W.'s "poodle," as his domestic critics are wont to ridicule him; he is a hard-nosed realist who is already thinking about an Iraq minus Saddam.

Yet flag-waving Schröder is both shortsighted and disingenuous. By dashing out in front without coordinating with Paris and London, he will more likely reap self-isolation than influence over U.S. decision making. Nor is his calculated play with the fires of nationalism completely honest. Since Sept. 11, Germany has stationed a number of Marders—tanks configured for operation in nuclear, chemical and biological environments—in Kuwait. If Schröder were really serious about keeping Germany out of "adventures," he would have withdrawn those tanks. But he has not, and he will not risk so blatant a breach with Germany's best ally. It is election-eering *über alles*. And cynical, to boot.

Meanwhile, George W. does not seem to suffer from a surfeit of purpose either. In the duel against Saddam, the U.S. plays a Gulliver strong on words and weak on will. Will it really go after the Butcher of Baghdad? Maybe. Or not. It all depends on who is talking. The Pentagon seems to be gung-ho on war, the State Department much less so. The military does not like wars it is not guaranteed to win with zero casualties. So the brass does what it knows best: leaking its doubts all over Washington. And Congress has launched hearings on a campaign that may or may not be. Such maneuvers will hardly impress Saddam, but they provide plenty of grist for allies who fear nothing more than an irresolute superpower.

They remember only too well the last round against Saddam—when Bush the Elder refused to go the last mile and topple Saddam in 1991. They remember America's isolationist reflexes in Bosnia and Kosovo—"Let's bomb 'em and get out." Allies loathe entrapment in indeterminate wars that leave them holding the bag. Listen to German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer make the point. Does the U.S. understand, he asks, that victory has to be followed by a "complete reordering of the Middle East, above all politically?" This might "require a U.S. presence that could last for decades. But are the Americans truly willing to stay?" If not, "we, the Europeans, would be left to suffer the fatal consequences."

These are very good points, and the babble inside the Beltway delivers no answers. Instead, there is much loose talk about America-as-new-Rome. But Rome never held hearings on the Punic Wars, nor did it slide in and out of indecisive contests. Beholden to 535 Secretaries of State, as Henry Kissinger liked to mock the Congress, the U.S., the oldest democracy in the world, has neither an imperial class nor an imperial ethos. It is Gulliver without the patience to rule.

Of course, Saddam is a menace to the region and beyond. Of course, he is grimly building weapons of mass destruction. And the Europeans know it. But they prefer an Iraq that is both contained and constrained to an America on the loose. They haven't even made up their mind what is worse: an America that won't put its troops where its mouth is, or a truly imperial one that reorders the Middle East in its own image. But if the U.S. doesn't know what it is doing, why should the Europeans?

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Quelle: TIM

Time (international)

Montag

19.08.2002

Nr:

33

Seite:

21

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Hard-hitting candidate Schröder pledged to go the "German way"