

EUROPE

V I E W P O I N T

Just Don't Mention the War

Will Schröder's flirtation with the pacifist lobby bring electoral success?

Josef Joffe

GOD MUST LIKE GERHARD SCHRÖDER. FIRST, THE LORD sent the Great Flood that inundated eastern Germany, and, lo, as the Chancellor bestrode the broken dikes with a serious mien and a generous hand, his ratings began to creep up. For several months, his Social Democratic Party (SPD) had been trailing Edmund Stoiber's Christian Democrats by 6 or 7 points. So calling the Sept. 22 election was a no-brainer: goodbye, Gerhard; hello, Edmund.

Then came a second godsend, those rumblings of war in faraway Iraq. A consummate opportunist, Schröder started playing the pacifist card. No, Germany would not participate in any "adventures" (read: "cowboy imperialism"), nor would Germany write any checks (as it had done in the first round against Saddam in 1991). As his ratings crept up, Schröder realized he had chanced on a winning issue. Never mind rising unemployment or the sinking economy. Wrapping himself in the flag, he proclaimed the virtues of the "German way" while letting his minions dispatch daily rounds across the Atlantic. His point man Franz Müntefering, the party secretary-general, has been moving into heavier calibers ever since. No, a U.N. mandate wouldn't budge Germany either. Even if the U.S. could prove Iraqi complicity in global terrorism, Germany would tell George W. to go fly a kite.

Never in the history of the Federal Republic has a Chancellor lashed out so brazenly against its oldest ally. Schröder even let it be known he had refused to take a call from Bush, a definite first. But the gambit has paid off. The latest polls show an astounding reversal of fortunes. Schröder's SPD has pulled ahead of Stoiber's CDU/CSU by a margin of 3 points. If the trend holds until Sunday, Schröder might yet extract victory from the jaws of once-certain oblivion.

This is not the first time foreign policy has been wielded as an electoral cudgel. Except that in the past it was swung by the right people in the right direction. In the 1950s, the Christian Democrats fought and won elections on "Whither Germany?" Would it join America, NATO and Europe—or go down the neutralist, anti-Western road mapped out by the Social Democratic left? In 1972, having emerged from decades of opposition, Willy Brandt's Social Democrats campaigned victoriously on Ostpolitik, the opening to the East that would once more realign the Federal Republic with a West that was now reaching out for détente with the Soviet Union. In 1983, with the cold war taking a nasty turn, CDU

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Chancellor Helmut Kohl triumphed against an SPD that was again playing with the fires of neutralism and pacifism.

Are there still flames in those embers? To be fair, Schröder is neither anti-American nor pro-pacifist. He just wants to win. Yet at what cost? He may have scored 5 percentage points or so, but the loser is German foreign policy. Every major European country—Britain, Italy, Spain, even France—is ever so cautiously (and conditionally) lining up behind Washington. Instead of increasing its influence, Berlin is isolated among its best friends in Europe. Instead of stopping Bush in his war tracks, it has reaped anger and contempt in Washington. If Schröder's maneuvers weren't so transparent, they would be a tragedy. Let's assume he does come out first on Sept. 22. Let's further assume he can then harness a coalition in the Bundestag that will reconfirm him as Chancellor. Then what?

Will he continue to stiff George W., and thus unintentionally serve as Saddam's comrade-in-diplomacy? What if the U.N. Security Council issues an ultimatum to Baghdad: "Readmit the arms inspectors—or else." Will Schröder proclaim "Peace *über alles*" and thus lighten the pressure on Saddam? And what if Bush does go to war? Would Schröder close the U.S. air base in Ramstein that is destined to play a major role in any action against Iraq?

No to all of the above; that is a solid bet. The real tragedy is that this campaign is fought by the wrong people

on the wrong issues. The right issues are an economy that has ground to a standstill and an unemployment rate that is heading for the highest mark in postwar history. The country's social-support systems are moving toward the breaking point. Labor market rigidities are keeping people out of work even in good times. According to the 2002 World Competitiveness report from the Institute for Management Development in Switzerland, in terms of flexibility and adaptability, Germany ranks 47th out of 49 major economies in the world. Why the wrong candidates? Whoever wins, there is no "New Frontier" beckoning for Germany. Once the powerhouse of Europe, Germany risks turning into the Continent's Japan: a country that has fallen victim to its success in the past and refuses to change. Ironically, both Schröder and Stoiber are perfect representatives of this malaise. They ask little of their country, and the country expects little of them.

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Antiwar protesters reacting to Bush's visit to Berlin last May