

V I E W P O I N T

Josef Joffe

(Just Like) Starting Over

Germany and the U.S. are friends again. Is it more than a marriage of convenience?

IT'S BACK TO "GERHARD" FOR MR. BUSH—AFTER A YEAR OF ICY silence during which the U.S. President refused to lay eyes on German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. The feud was not just over policy; it was personal. Last fall, Schröder saved his sinking campaign by raising the sluice gates of anti-Americanism in Germany, while his Minister of Justice compared Bush to Hitler. The Bushies repaid the compliment by dumping Berlin in the junkyard of "Old Europe," putting out the word: "Talk to the Russians, punish the French, ignore the Germans."

But at the U.N. General Assembly last week, Bush and Schröder met for a 40-minute tête-à-tête, complete with a photo-op handshake and pretty smiles. What's next—Schröder at Camp David or even Crawford?

Whence this sudden warmth between two men who presumably still can't stand each other?

As a Bush adviser said, "Things change." And Republican Senator Chuck Hagel added: "The forces of reality have set in." Reality, though, has been biting both sides.

The U.S.: with every dead soldier in Iraq, the war becomes a harder sell at home. It becomes tougher still when the White House asks Congress for another \$87 billion and is told that \$42 billion has to be rustled up by other countries. Nor is it easy to wake up to the fact that ultrasmart weapons, though wonderful for winning wars, are useless against Baathist thugs and water shortages. To win the peace, legitimacy is as vital as physical reconstruction. And both require help from the rest of the world. The lesson for America is harsh but essential: Even the mightiest nation on earth can't go it alone.

The Europeans: they have been bitten by another reality, their irreducible weakness in the great-power ring where America is the last man standing. Strong enough to deny the U.S. a war resolution in the Security Council in March, France and Germany were too puny to stop the war itself. Their fabled "axis" has begun to creak; unlike French President Jacques Chirac, Schröder carefully refrained from pressuring Bush for a speedy handover of authority to the Iraqis. Schröder must have realized that it was not so wise to remain inside Chirac's pocket. The months Schröder spent in there helped radicalize French policy and alienate Washington, Germany's trustiest ally for a half-century. Generally, all Europeans are resisting Schadenfreude for a simple reason: it is in nobody's interest that the U.S. should fail in Iraq.

Though they are nursing hangovers on both sides of the Atlantic, the headaches are all for the good. While Schröder is making nice to Bush and inching away from Chirac, the French

are no longer brandishing their veto. If the Germans promise all kinds of aid (save military) to the Americans, the French no longer insist on immediate sovereignty for Baghdad. But sobering up is not (yet) making up. Europe and America are blowing kisses; their ancient marriage still is not out of the divorce court.

Maybe, Mr. Bush will get his Iraq resolution, one that lays down a very judicious timetable for the transfer of sovereignty. To do so posthaste, as the French were demanding, would be patently absurd—just imagine if the U.N. had ordered the U.S. back in the fall of 1945 to relinquish supreme authority over occupied Germany and Japan by, say, March 1946. The wrangling will continue, but meanwhile, there are more portentous mat-

ters to consider. This may be a unique moment in transatlantic history. Amid all the broken glass, a window of opportunity stands wide open. Both chastened, Europe and America could be looking at a wondrously creative moment in their turbulent relationship. Gone is the ancient Soviet threat that used to fuse them together; they now confront a whole slew of new threats neither can manage on its own—from terrorism to AIDS, from creeping protectionism to the collapse of failed states.

Why not raise our sights above the headlines and consider a grander bargain?

Think about the golden age of American diplomacy in the 1940s that was described so poignantly in Secretary of State Dean Acheson's memoir, *Present at the Creation*. The deal was as breathtaking as it was simple: instead of going back to the old balance-of-power politics, the U.S. built a cooperative international order that promoted American interests by serving those of others. Leadership was not grabbed, but earned. And the Europeans were stakeholders rather than, as Don Rumsfeld would now have it, foot soldiers in changing "coalitions of the willing." Why maximize nuisance value *à la française* if you can use your voting stock?

Can Bush, Schröder and Chirac change perspective—or will it be back to the future of 19th century power politics? In those days, Lord Palmerston famously proclaimed: "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies;" only "our interests are eternal and perpetual." In the 21st century it is exactly the other way round: our interests keep changing, but our friends, ornery and spiteful as they may sometimes be, remain the same. ■

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**PUT IT THERE:
Schröder and Bush
make nice; Chirac
makes his case**

LUKE FRAZZA—AFP/GETTY IMAGES