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Mrs. Merkel's War

Josef Joffe

By Josef Joffe

Mr. Obama's War is now Mrs. Merkel's War, ever since the nasty "September Surprise," sprung on her three weeks ahead of the national elections.

Last Friday, a German ISAF commander called in an air strike against a group of Taliban gas rustlers who had hijacked two tanker trucks. It was a classic "fog of war" tale such as soldiers have encountered since the Battle of Jericho, give or take a thousand years. The truck had gotten stuck in a ford and the hijackers started siphoning off the precious stuff. Naturally, the villagers were not going to be

left out. And it was dark. Ordered to hit the trucks by German colonel Georg Klein, two American F-15s dropped one 500-pound GBU-38 each. These are highly precise weapons-- against buildings, not against gasoline-filled trucks in an open space. Dozens were killed. And so was German innocence, though as of Wednesday the civilian count was not known.

Now it is Angela Merkel's War. Why so? German troops went into Afghanistan under Bush-baiting chancellor Gerhard Schroder in 2002. Just as for Barack Obama, for Germans Afghanistan was the "good war," Iraq the "bad" one. But for Germany it wasn't really war. The Bundeswehr set up shop in Kunduz in the north, a (relatively) nice, quiet place without much shooting. The fighting was done in the south, mainly by American, British and Dutch troops. And in the

east.

The battle against the Taliban, when properly led, manned and equipped, actually has been quite successful, something we forget now as U.S. generals, angling for an additional 40,000 soldiers, wring their hands over the war going bad. Tactical success, ironically, was bad political news for the German contingent, which led a reasonably serene life as school builders and well drillers. Hard-pressed by coalition forces in the south and east, the Taliban have shifted to the north. And suddenly, since the spring of this year, the Germans had a war on their hands that they had fervently sought to avoid.

"Germans to the front!" was not part of the plan. Theirs was a "stability operation," a mix of development aid and policing. Whatever the circumlocution, "war" was a no-no-- its use was strictly verboten because it evokes killing and being killed. "In Afghanistan it is like a war," opined Walter Kolbow, a Social Democrat on Bundestag's defense committee, "but for us it is not war." That was a subtle distinction worthy of the fabled Talmudic sage Rabbi Eliezer.

The rules of engagement for the Germans were such as to practically tie both hands behind their back: no offensive Operations, just shooting back, but carefully, please.

They were going to be good allies, but not bad guys who went around with blood on their hands. This was just one of the many "national caveats" so many nations have imposed on themselves in order to

evade the "body bag syndrome" back home. The Germans were by no means alone in the game of "look, ma, no dirty hands."

Now, war has come to the Germans--and demolished a carefully laid out scheme whereby they could live by the old German adage: "Wash me, but don't wet me." With the

troops out of range and out of trouble, the Bundestag would regularly renew their mandate, and even increased their strength to 4,200, which makes them the third-largest contingent after America's and Britain's. The game worked nicely for seven years-- until 2009, when the Taliban opened a new front in the north. And it blew up in Mrs. Merkel's face this last Friday, along with two tanker trucks and dozens of dead Afghans.

End of the story, end of the entanglement? Here are two more "September Surprises." One was produced by Germany's good friends, the Americans and the French, who used the slaughter-in-the-stream for a round of "Let's blame the other guy," laced with a dollop of payback for their hanging-back strategy and schadenfreude about their comeuppance.

Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, France's answer to gaffe-prone U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, was the first to launch into the Germans. "A big mistake," he shot off the next day, before the "fog of war" could rise to the tree tops. The American ISAF commander, Stanley McChrystal, intoned: "It's a serious event that's going to be a test of

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whether we are willing...to show that we are going to protect the Afghan people." The foreign minister of the great state of Luxemburg (with an army of 900) pontificated: "If there had been only one civilian dead, this operation should not have been done."

Chancellor Merkel was not amused, and rightly so. With friends like that... But the bigger surprise unfolded in the Bundestag debate on Tuesday. Those who like to worry about German angst might have expected a frantic "Let`s quit!" Instead they were treated to an earnest, thoughtful debated--a stellar moment of "tripartisanship" uniting the chancellor (Christian Democrat), Vice Chancellor Frank-Walter Steinhilber (Social Democrat) and the leader of the opposition Free Democrats, Guido Westerwelle.

The upshot of the debate was: We will investigate with scrupulous diligence, but we will not tuck tail.

"We did not stumble in like headless chickens, we are not going to stumble out like headless chickens," exclaimed Mr. Steinmeier, who also happens to be the man running against Mrs. Merkel for chancellor. Addressing the Left Party, the only one demanding immediate withdrawal, Mrs. Merkel made the central point, to think again about cut-and-run: "The consequences of nonaction will be held against us in the same measure as the consequences of action." An almost-great power cannot act like the great state of Luxemburg, she meant to say.

This is not a bad turn for a country whose Constitutional Court had to decide just 15 years ago whether it was okay for German NATO personnel to man AWACS planes over the former Yugoslavia. After all, these folks not only tracked Serbian movements in the sky and on the ground,

but might also, God forbid, issue

"Fire away!"

commands to allied fighters-- an act of war! The Court nodded consent.

How long will the Germans stay? The consensus shaping up is for five years. But Mrs. Merkel`s War is above all Mr. Obama`s War, and the decisive debate will un-

fold in the U.S. Congress, not in the Bundestag. The allies remember only too well Saigon in 1975, Beirut in 1984 and Mogadishu in 1993, when the U.S. suddenly called it quits. As they say, nobody wants to be the last man to die in a war.

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