Germany’s Opposition to the Iraq War and Its Effect on U.S.-German Relations

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In a famous comment in January 2003, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld referred to a difference between Old Europe and New Europe. By “Old Europe,” he meant mainly the traditional European leaders, France and Germany, which adopted a stance critical of U.S. policy on Iraq. He saw the “New Europe” as consisting of former Iron Curtain countries, now part of the free world, whose leaders supported the U.S. on Iraq.

In fact, within Europe, the phrase “the New Europe” has been used differently, to designate the European Community, which has been carefully built over the last half century. After the end of World War II, in an attempt to forsake nationalism, the Western European nations sought to forge common institutions. The countries joined together to found the European Common Market, which became the European Community in 1967, and the European Union in 1992. It encompasses a borderless region of free trade; standardization of products; free migration; right to employment anywhere; a single currency; and parliamentary representation through the direct democratic election of ministers by each citizen of the member nations. Its 15 members expanded on May 1 of this year to 25. The Union now includes 450 million people, who are responsible for more than one quarter of the world’s total economic output.

The emergence of the “New Europe” has been a development of great historical significance. It has marked the transformation of Europe from being the world’s epicenter of war and destruction in the first half of the twentieth century into a model of international cooperation in the second—something that would have seemed beyond the wildest imagination of anyone viewing the debris of World War II in 1945.

From being practitioners of the unbridled nationalism that led to two world wars, the countries of Europe have radically changed their historical course, and adopted foreign policies that stress the importance of international mediation, peacekeeping, and human rights advocacy.

Germany is a country that has been at the heart of the move toward European unity. Its policies since World War II have reflected a renunciation of militarism, a strong commitment to democracy and human rights, and support for the peaceful resolution of international conflicts. It has also been a solid ally of the United States since World War II. The tensions between Germany and the United States over the war in Iraq marked an unusual break in policies and values that led Germany into its opposition to the United States over the war in Iraq.

The Specter of the Past

Rising from the ashes of unconditional surrender of World War II, Germans have struggled to overcome extreme militarism, nationalism, and a Nazi past that seems incomprehensible to Germans today. Anti-war sentiments lie particularly deep in Germany; Older Germans remember vividly the horrors of war: the sounds of ear-deafening sirens alerting the population of imminent bombing attacks; limited space in underground shelters; pervasive hunger; lack of medical assistance; destroyed cities renowned for classical architecture; the sight of frightened, wounded, or dead civilians; millions of refugees; and the return of loved ones from two fronts long after the war had ended—ill and broken from years in prisoner-of-war camps. As a young girl in postwar Germany, each day I would hear the clacking footsteps of a young bride walking to the train station in my village, expecting her fiancé to arrive with the 10:45 night train. He never returned, long killed on the Russian front at the age of twenty-four. As a result of such a history, Germans have developed a profound angst about war. The thought of war stirs their greatest of fears.

In the deep layers of the contemporary German psyche is an awareness of the Nazi legacy. Germany has not recovered from its crimes against humanity of World War II, a legacy that has created irreparable damage to its reputation. The horror has carved indelible scars on the lives of Germans—old and young alike. The old are grappling with guilt for what occurred in their time, searching for answers to explain the malaise to the younger generation. The young are ashamed of the incomprehensible deeds of their grandparents and are often alienated from their German roots. A deep shame pervades their lives, pierced with resentment toward their elderly whom they still question as to the “why”—without receiving satisfactory answers. Massive restitutions that have been made to Israel and to Holocaust victims do not remove this guilt. Neither does the request of Johannes Rau, former president of the German Republic:

I am asking for forgiveness for what the Germans have done, for myself and my generation, for the sake of our children and grandchildren whose future I would like to see alongside the children of Israel.
Common Cause with the United States

Until the Iraq war, there had been strong consistency between U.S. and German foreign policy. The Marshall Plan enabled the reconstruction of Germany after the devastation of World War II, and Germans have ever since acknowledged the generosity of the United States. Germany was host to hundreds of thousands of American soldiers stationed in the country during the Cold War until the Soviet bloc collapsed. The dream of reunification of Germany then became a reality.

After the Cold War, Germany looked toward a new world order dominated by the leadership of democracies. This order would be based on increased world prosperity with the expansion of free markets, and a renewal of efforts to secure international peace through cooperation.

In the post-Cold War period, Germany partnered with the United States in many military endeavors. Its warplanes were sent to Turkish airbases in 1990 to support the Gulf War against Iraq, to which Germany donated five billion dollars. After the NATO bombings of former Yugoslavia, Germany and the United States collaborated in joint peacekeeping operations in Kosovo. After September 11, 2001, the German government proclaimed its unlimited solidarity with the United States in defeating terrorism and committed German peacekeeping forces to join their American counterparts in Afghanistan. More than 10,000 German troops are presently serving alongside American forces in the Balkans, Middle East, and the Horn of Africa—far beyond the defensive NATO perimeter to which Germany’s conscript army was originally confined. Germany has actively promoted the expansion of NATO to include former Soviet bloc countries.

In addition to its special relationship with the United States, Germany has pursued policies of promoting the European community, on one hand, and the influence of the United Nations, on the other. German foreign policy asserts the need for respect for international human rights, engagement in multinational dialogue on global concerns, renunciation of force, and confidence-building. These policies are rooted in a belief, derived from Germany’s own past experiences, that militarism, unilaterality, and the aggressive pursuit of nationalism rather than international law and global cooperation can be devastating to world peace and prosperity. Although Germany accepts that there may be occasions that need military action, it requires a major violation of international law, such as Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, or indisputable aggressive intention, for military intervention to be acceptable.

Prior to the dispute over the war with Iraq, these German policies were very compatible with the maintenance of good relations with the United States. The dispute over whether to go to war seriously disrupted these good relations.

The Build-Up to the Iraq War

Germany was a strong supporter of the United States following the September 11 attacks. After the ouster of the Taliban in 2001, German leaders expected that the next stage of the war on terrorism would be to consolidate the victory over the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and recon- struct Afghanistan under its new government so that it would be impossible for the Taliban and al-Qaeda to make a comeback. In the German view, it was also important that the international community forge a common purpose in taking preventive measures against world terrorism. The problem of Iraq, whose leadership was not connected to the September 11 attacks, was considered to be a separate issue from the war on terrorism.

In 2002, however, the Bush administration made it clear that it was seriously considering military action against Iraq. President Bush described Iraq as part of an “axis of evil” in his State of the Union address in January. As the year progressed, officials of his administration spoke increasingly of the threat of weapons of mass destruction that Iraq was said to be developing and the need for regime change in the country. In a speech at the United Nations in September, Bush listed violations by Iraq of previous UN resolutions that required Iraq to renounce weapons of mass destruction and to cooperate with UN weapons inspectors. He accused Saddam Hussein’s government of subverting the oil-for-food program organized by the UN, and called on the UN to enforce its resolutions and take action against Saddam Hussein’s government. The following month, the U.S. Congress authorized a resolution that would allow the president to undertake an invasion of Iraq.

Germany acknowledged that Saddam Hussein had not complied with past UN resolutions, but advocated the resumption of UN inspections of Iraq’s military programs. Germany leaders took the position that any military initiative against Iraq would need to be a last resort, taken only with international consensus and UN Security Council approval, like the first Gulf War that had driven Iraq out of Kuwait. Apart from a preference for diplomatic over military solutions, German leaders were uncomfortable with the idea of invading Iraq for very much the same reasons that the administration of the first President Bush had rejected that option after the first Gulf War in 1991: there was too great a chance that an invasion would lead to chaos or the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Iraq, and the United States would end up as a foreign military occupier, facing armed resistance in Iraq, losing influence in the Arab world, and strengthening the position of anti-American militant and terrorist groups in those regions.

The efforts of U.S. diplomats to secure a strong UN resolution against Iraq resulted in the passage of UN Security Council resolution 1441 in November 2002 after weeks of negotiation. Germany supported the resolution, which was designed to force Iraq to give up all weapons of mass destruction and which threatened “serious consequences” if Iraq did not comply. Iraq accepted the terms of the resolution and the weapons inspections resumed.

With public opinion in Germany and other European countries firmly against an invasion of Iraq, German leaders attempted in 2003 to maintain U.S. support for the UN weapons inspectors and allow them to complete their task. In early February 2003, however, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell told the UN that inspections were not achieving the disarmament of Iraq, and other U.S. officials warned that
time was running out for Iraq to declare its weapons of mass destruction and destroy them. The U.S. and U.K. pressed for a new resolution authorizing military action against Iraq. Germany opposed the resolution, demanding that more time be given for inspections. France and Russia threatened to veto it in the Security Council. In the face of opposition, the U.S. and U.K. withdrew the resolution on March 17, and the war began two days later.

A speech by Chancellor Schroeder on March 18 to the members of the German Parliament expressed the German policy:

Does the extent of the threat that emanates from the Iraqi dictator justify the use of war, something that will bring certain death to thousands of innocent men, women and children? My answer in this case was and still is: No! Iraq is now a country subject to extensive UN monitoring. What the Security Council has demanded in the way of disarmament steps is being fulfilled more and more. As such, there is no reason to interrupt this disarmament process now.... We have always seen this as our contribution to first and foremost secure peace in the world.3

Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer had previously reiterated the anti-war stance in a speech before NATO at a Prague summit: “Our position is completely clear: we will not take part in a military strike against Iraq.”4 In an earlier interview with a German daily, he had stated that “even though there were among allies differences in size and strength, an alliance between free democratic nations should not be reduced to blind allegiance,” and that “alliance partners are not satellites.”5

The disagreement over Iraq resulted in unprecedented tension between Germany and the United States. Germany, which is more dependent for oil on the Middle East than the United States, was accused of trying to appease Arab opinion. German news commentators attacked the U.S. leadership for being too warlike, while American commentators attacked the German leadership for being gun-shy and shrinking from military action. In a much-publicized statement, the American neoconservative Robert Kagan asserted that “Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus.” Foreign Minister Fischer retorted that “those who know our European history know that we do not live on Venus, but rather we are the survivors of Mars.”6

The U.S. commentators who criticized the German position, in my opinion, underestimated the extent to which the position reflected deeply-held values based on a renunciation of the militarism and nationalism that have characterized so much of European history. The success of the European Union has convinced Germans and other Europeans that moves toward multinational cooperation and peace can work—but they require a strong will to act for these objectives in the first place.

Relations since the Iraq War
Public opinion polls taken in both the United States and Germany since the Iraq war of 2003 have reflected the tensions that the war caused.7 One U.S. poll showed that while in 2002 83 percent of Americans viewed Germany favorably, in 2004 only 50 percent of Americans did so. On the German side, a nationwide telephone survey found that the German rating of the United States was 38 percent favorable, 49 percent somewhat unfavorable, and 10 percent very unfavorable. These findings were in sharp contrast to Germany’s view of the United States in the summer of 2002, when 61 percent rated the United States...
favorable, 31 percent somewhat unfavorable, and 4 percent very unfavorable. A majority of those polled in Germany also believed that the Iraq war damaged the fight against terrorism, because it diverted resources from the struggle against al-Qaeda, and increased anti-American feelings in the Arab and Islamic worlds.

Germans draw a clear distinction between the U.S. as a country and the American people. Opinions about Americans remain quite favorable (68 percent in 2004, 67 percent in 2003, and 70 percent in 2002).

Despite disagreements with many traditional U.S. allies over the war in Iraq, a majority of Americans (55 percent) continue to believe that the partnership between the U.S. and Western Europe should remain as close as it has been. Only 36 percent think the U.S. should take a more independent approach. In contrast, in 2004, 63 percent of Germans favored a more independent approach, up from 57 percent the previous year. About 70 percent of Germans say it would be a good thing if the EU becomes as powerful as the U.S.

Notwithstanding these findings, there remains a great deal in common between the United States and Germany. Both are strongly committed to democratic values, and despite the differences in Iraq, it is clear to German leaders that, in the words of German Foreign Minister Fischer in an interview with al-Jazeera, “the United States is indispensable when it comes to peace and stability in the world.” While Germany remains unwilling to intervene militarily in Iraq, it has emphasized the importance of resolving the current situation through the establishment of a stable and democratic state, in line with the declared U.S. objectives. Germany has stressed the importance of United Nations initiatives as a means of bringing this about, and the recent support by the United States for the mission of UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi to Iraq has brought the Bush administration closer to Germany in this respect. A renewed commitment by the United States to the principle of multilateral cooperation as a means of solving world problems would go a long way to eliminating the differences that arose at the time of the Iraq war.

Notes
2. See www.germany-info.org/relaunch/politics/new/pol_nato_Nov2002b.htm
3. See www.germany-info.org/relaunch/politics/speeches/031803.html
4. See www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/nato11-21-02.html
7. The opinion poll findings reported in this section were obtained from a 42-page Pew Research Center Survey in nine nations under the direction of the Princeton Survey Research Associates International released March 16, 2004, pp.2-34. Online at www.people-press.org/Reports/pdfs/021604.pdf

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