

Germans Growing Uneasy About Bush

by Rainer Apel

On the surface, support among the German political establishment for President George Bush's military expedition against Afghanistan, and for his measures against terrorism, is overwhelming. The government has backed Bush on every decisive step he has taken since the Sept. 11 attack. And with the exception of a handful of dissidents, the national legislature in Berlin has voted for "unconditional military solidarity" with Bush's Afghanistan intervention.

But the support for Bush is not really so sound: A lot of pressure has been exerted by the Americans to keep the Germans in line. Critics, for example, were strongly arm-twisted into accepting the "solidarity" policy before the "unconditional military solidarity" vote.

Also, the government is trying to establish a moderate version of the anti-terrorism legal package that U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft has put together for the United States. But, German investigators have been highly embarrassed at the way in which Ashcroft's people have pushed the story of "German-based Arab terrorism" allegedly being the command center and operational base for the Sept. 11 attacks. The evidence that German investigators have found on the terrorist suspects, whose names were handed over to them by the FBI, simply does not merit that conclusion. The fact that in the late 1990s, Mohammed Atta and other Arabs were students at the University of Hamburg, and had either minor contact with radical Muslims or became radicalized themselves, alone does not prove that the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were planned out in Hamburg. The Germans have told the FBI that, but Ashcroft's people have not wanted to listen, nor have U.S., German, and other international media stopped their attacks on the German investigators for not supporting their FBI colleagues sufficiently.

The frictions between Germany and the United States broke out into the open on Oct. 23, during a visit of Interior Minister Otto Schily to Washington. When Attorney General Ashcroft spoke of "Hamburg being a center of preparations" for the Sept. 11 attacks, at a joint press conference, Schily promptly corrected him: "We have no evidence whatsoever of Hamburg being such a planning center." Schily added that the terrorist pilots, according to the FBI's own accounts, had been trained at schools in the United States, and that some of them had lived for some time in the United Kingdom, so that the blame should not be put on Germany, exclusively.

Amid mounting U.S.-German tension over the right approach in the "war on terrorism," Peter W. Schroeder, a syndicated columnist in Washington who works for numerous regional news dailies in Germany, revealed in an Oct. 24 article, that FBI field officers are pursuing U.S.-based terrorism in connection with the anthrax incidents. "We are searching for terrorists among right-wing/radical circles in our own country," FBI investigators told Schroeder. "We are not putting that out in public, in order to avoid traces being eliminated, and we also don't want to run into trouble with politicians who like putting the blame on foreign terrorists."

Political, Not Military Solution Needed

Remarks that German Assistant Foreign Minister Ludger Volmer made in a interview with the national Deutschlandfunk (DLF) radio station on Oct. 30, revealed another aspect of German uneasiness with the Bush policy course. Volmer reported that during talks in Qatar a few days earlier, he met with a lot of Arab criticism of the U.S. air war, which is killing more Afghan civilians than Taliban militias. This sentiment has to be taken "very seriously," Volmer said. "Large parts of the Islamic world will not take it any longer, when Ramadan begins, when inside the Islamic world, reconciliation even between adversaries and enemies is on the agenda."

Volmer warned that the anti-terrorism alliance will hold only if there is serious commitment to political solutions. "For that, you need the cooperation of the Western world with the Islamic world, and with other big powers such as Russia, China, and others." Hopefully, the Bush Administration would take that into account, he said.

Volmer also revealed that immediately after the Sept. 11 terror attacks, the Bush Administration had thought of "options even worse" than the Afghanistan intervention, and that, fortunately, these had been discarded, because of interventions by, among others, the Germans.

Volmer's remarks indicate that the German government would like to seek a way out of the Afghanistan quagmire at the next opportunity. The beginning of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month, on Nov. 17, is seen as such an occasion to interrupt the air war and attempt to work out an acceptable political settlement for a post-Taliban era.

However, the situation is now a military and political mess not unlike the one that the Germans had gotten into, when granting support to then-U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's war on Serbia in March 1999. Growing uneasy with the "collateral damage" of injury and death among Serbian civilians during the NATO air war, Germany began a slow withdrawal in April 1999, and German officials engaged in intense shuttle diplomacy among Germany, Russia, and China, to restore a UN framework for a Balkans cease-fire. As was the case then, the mess over Afghanistan, too, may have been avoided, had the Germans said, "No," at the start. If they say no now, that is useful nevertheless.