



Parting Ways

The Crisis In German-American Relations

Reviewed by

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The German-American split was a part of a larger crisis in transatlantic relations that began with the end of the Cold War, increased with the current Bush presidency, and erupted with ferocity in the fall of 2002 over the war in Iraq. The drama reached its peak during winter and spring of 2003. That year, Stephen F. Szabo claims, proved to be a watershed in a relationship that had been of central importance to the United States since the end of World War II. What began as a temporary tactical shift of the German chancellor toward Paris and away from Washington, maintains Szabo, came to possess a strategic significance: Europe had taken priority over Germany's transatlantic tie with the United States, and American power was regarded with suspicion, rather than as a stabilizing force in international relations.

Szabo, a professor of European studies at The Johns Hopkins University, analyzes large shifts within the global system of international relations and also discusses profound consequences. Chapter One deals with the start of a poisoned relationship. Chapter Two describes the drift from tight solidarity to reckless adventurism after 9/11. The next chapter, "Partner in Contradiction: From the Election to War," delves into Germany's special circumstances. In "Is it Bush or is it America?" Szabo portrays trendy German images of the United States, and in "Welcome to the Berlin Republic," he reflects the broader scene in Central Europe. Finally, the author investigates the ongoing reshuffling in "From Alliance to Alignment."

What was at stake, according to the author? The current rift between Germany and the United States over Iraq should be viewed as the death of the canary in the coal mine, an early warning to both sides of the dangers of taking the other for granted and assuming that their relationship is strong enough to withstand bad politics and bad diplomacy. A united Europe could in the future become a peer competitor. There remains a real possibility that, as Europe redefines itself, it will do so against the United States. Here again, Germany is crucial. During the crisis over Iraq, Germany abandoned its traditional policy of positioning itself between Washington and Paris to create a countercoalition with Russia and France against the United States. If Berlin follows the French road toward an independent Europe that can act as a counterbalance to the American hegemon, there will be the real prospect of a split in the West. Donald Rumsfeld's words about "old" Europe already indicated this trend. But, in reality, underlines Szabo, these conflicts were a mirror of deeper changes: George W. Bush and Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder — who was not reelected in the fall of 2005 — served as catalysts.

Some of Szabo's findings deserve emphasis. If Bush overplayed a strong hand, Schroeder overplayed a weak hand when he stated that Germany would not support a war even if the UN Security Council issued a mandate. Therefore, the German chancellor, along with the French president, bears a great deal of responsibility for the splitting of Europe, which the Bush administration then used for its own ends. What Schroeder called "pragmatics" could be seen as opportunism. He came from the party bureaucracy and had no university education, but earned a law degree attending night school. His foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, did not complete any professional training. He made his way inside the student Left and up into the Green party. In essence, Szabo says, the former street protesters, who during the German-American crisis over Iraq held the highest positions in government, were repeating their resistance against an American war.

On the American side, "neocons" had long held regime change in Iraq to be a high priority, believing that this was the key to putting into motion a reverse domino effect that would create a new democratic dynamic in the Middle East and offer prospects for a real settlement of the Pa-

Lebanese-Israeli dispute. Now, neither restricted by another superpower nor restrained by an American public looking for a heavy-handed response after the events of September 11, 2001, the White House and the Pentagon (led by Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld) focused on regime change. The elimination of Saddam's (non-existent) weapons of mass destruction was the putative reason. Saddam Hussein did everything to make it easy for his enemies. Moreover, the strategic divergence between Berlin and Washington played into his hands. As we now know, he thought until the last moment that the new Berlin-Paris-Moscow axis could successfully prevent a war.

There are many reasons for the strategic divergence between parts of continental Europe and America. The decline in the perceived importance of Europe in U.S. defense policy, underlines Szabo, was due both to the shift of threats (and the very different perceptions of their causes) and the growing gap in military capabilities between the United States and most of its European allies. From this perspective, the reader might conclude that all the talk about so-called European soft power is nothing but an attempt to cover a position of weakness with somewhat more appealing, but equally ineffective, rhetoric.

Szabo's book also gives the impression that old Europe was in a deep sleep as well. Its leaders did not foresee the dramatic changes that were coming with the increasing violence in the Palestine conflict and the series of plots against America. While America lived through a profound shock therapy that culminated in 9/11, most parts of Europe were busy with the unification process. America was developing the activist doctrines of preemptive and preventive war; Europe had no means for this at its disposal. Whereas America dived into militant nationalism, Europe went full speed ahead with an overreaching multilateralism.

After the Madrid bombings, Javier Solana, the EU's high representative for foreign policy, declared, "Europe is not at war." Of course, he had taken into account the growing minorities of Muslims in Great Britain, France and Germany (and the delusionary idea that if you distance yourself from the United States or Israeli policy of harsh punishment for terrorists, they would spare you somehow). Some have argued that the riots in Paris were the result of European complacency.

Szabo also raises the question of Leitkultur (dominant culture). For the followers of the concept of multiculturalism in Europe (located especially in the Green parties and other liberal circles), there is no cultural model. This could turn out to be a dangerous illusion. If we look forward with Szabo, there are indeed diverging values and interests between both sides over the Middle East, especially between Washington and Berlin. There has been a shift from strategic alliance to tactical alignment. No problem other than terrorism could divide the West more. Yes, there is still a shared set of values, but in the longer run even this might vanish if new generations come to power with a different view of history and the future. If there were a British prime minister of Pakistani descent, a French president with Arab roots and a German chancellor with a Turkish background, how would they see the history of their own regions and America? Or — a step closer — how do Muslim representatives in European parliaments regard relations with Washington?

Parting Ways is very well researched and written. It offers profound lessons from failures in leadership on both sides, on unilateralism and on deeper currents of change. Leadership and personality matter, but the personalization of conflicts rarely pays off. Dealing with others on equal terms and knowing their political cultures are preconditions of world leadership. But, for some generations, Szabo's conclusion is appalling:

"The future of the German-American relationship will not be founded on sentiment, friendship or common values, but rather on the cold calculation of self-interest. No amount of good feeling or renewed pledges of friendship will overcome the absence of the mutual strategic interests that bound the countries during the cold war. The German political culture will no longer give any U.S. government the benefit of the doubt. The key question for the future is whether the common strategic interests that remain can be shaped to give the relationship a realistic basis."

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