

The American Election Campaign in Germany

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“Puzzling America”

On the occasion of the presidential election less than two months away, the German weekly *Die Zeit* published a series of articles entitled “Puzzling America.” In fact, this could be regarded as a good summary of the current mood in Germany. The passionate critique of the Bush administration’s foreign policy – which (along with well-argued stances) merged simple (anti-) American clichés with simplistic conspiracy theories into a politically effective mix (especially around the time of the 2002 *Bundestag* election and in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq war) – has given way to a kind of incredulous helplessness. Nothing – neither the sluggish economic recovery, persistently high unemployment figures, millions of people in poverty and without health insurance, nor the weapons of mass destruction never found in Iraq, the torture scandal in Abu Ghraib, and the daily toll of dying soldiers – seems capable of convincing American voters of the “necessity” of a change of government in Washington, D.C. Just days before the Republican convention, Caroline Koenig wrote in *zeit.de* about the “Mystery of Bush” and about the “high degree of irrationality” that seemed to explain “the ongoing stalemate of both candidates in the opinion polls.”¹ In Germany today you can observe a collective shaking of the head that – when it doesn’t show up in its angry, mockingly arrogant, or fatalistic versions – longs to find explanations in what Germans perceive as paradox-ridden “American conditions” (“*amerikanischen Verhältnisse*”).

Omnipresent in the media, but intellectually abridged

The omnipresence of the U.S. election campaign in the media contributes little to solving the intellectual puzzle of “America.” Every major German daily newspaper publishes, in addition to the usual print articles, an updated internet “dossier” accompanying the campaign, it lets its readers talk things over in a “special” section or “forum,” or – like the television news program *Tagesschau* – offers viewers its own online diary (<http://blog.tagesschau.de/>). These days there is hardly a news broadcast that doesn’t make a topic for discussion out of the latest developments in George W. Bush’s race against John F. Kerry. The so-called *horse-race* aspect frequently does occupy the foreground: Politics becomes a kind of sporting event, with forecasts and opinion surveys depicted by graphs showing interim results. Some of the online dossiers actually might supply meaningful background information (say, about the electoral system or the so-called *swing states*), interesting links, or more or less familiar trivia (like the invention of the donkey and elephant motifs for the Democratic and Republican parties by the “German-American” *Harper’s Weekly* cartoonist Thomas Nast in the 19th century [see the “Dossier” of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*]). On the other hand, many

¹ Caroline Koenig (2004): “Das Mysterium Bush.” URL: http://www.zeit.de/2004/36/parteitag_republikaner. After the convention in New York, Koenig explained the mysterious non-gap, which suddenly grew to a real gap of 11 percentage points, by the way Bush resorted to “a skillful combination of emotion, vision, and simplicity.” Caroline Koenig (2004): “Emotion, Vision und Einfachheit.” URL: <http://www.zeit.de/2004/37/uswahl>.

German journalists confine themselves to duplicating the topics making headlines in the United States without providing any analysis of their own. Usually, the papers (including their feature pages) dispense with commentary on substantive issues putting things in context, with informative explanations that might make American conditions easier for the German reader to understand. It is like what the approach of the *New York Times* would be without any equivalent to the *Times'* articles analyzing news in depth. (There are some major exceptions, as in the often well informed and astute commentaries by staff correspondents on the regular U.S. beat, and especially in the weekly papers or magazines, like *Die Zeit's* Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff.)

John F. Kerry: The “European candidate” or “Bush Light”?

Perhaps there is less emphasis on analysis here in Germany because the frontlines already seem to be settled. Bush and Kerry would not have to bother with “undecided voters” in Germany, because the election would already have been decided: In surveys, 80 percent of those questioned routinely declare that they prefer the Senator from Massachusetts; the President would only get a meager 8 percent in Germany. But what do these numbers express? Their unequivocal character is deceptive. It is really more of a vote against George W. Bush than a sign of confidence in John F. Kerry. Germany and other European countries are on a search for the “other America” – and they are not sure whether they will find it in Kerry. Kerry has become a screen onto which Germans are projecting their hopes, but also their fears, about the foreign policy of a Democratic administration. On the one hand, there is a widespread view that the problems in the transatlantic relationship are based to a large extent on personal differences with George W. Bush and the conservative hardliners in his government, and that – as Defense Minister Peter Struck put it in November 2002 – these problems would disappear like “snow melting in the spring”² after a change of government in Washington. On the other hand, some observers warned early on that a President Kerry would have neither the opportunity nor the inclination to undertake a U-turn in foreign policy.

Thus the German view of Senator Kerry oscillates between hope (the “European candidate”) and anticipated disappointment (“Bush Light”). Two (distorted) images are being constructed, each one only partially correct. For, on the one hand, Kerry und Edwards cannot be construed as the ideal alternatives to Bush and Cheney; they are not identical with those caricatures of candidates “by the grace of Europe” whom their (neo-) conservative critics reproach for conceding a “veto” over national security decisions to France or Germany.³ Even a President Kerry would not unconditionally sign the statute for the International Criminal Court or the Kyoto Protocol. He supported the autumn 2002 Congressional resolution that empowered President Bush to use military force against Iraq, and he would not – even if he is now dangling the prospect of withdrawing American troops from Iraq within four years – order an immediate pullout from Iraq. And

² Quoted by Stephen F. Szabo (forthcoming): *Parting Ways. The Crisis in German-American Relations*, Washington, D.C., p. 6.

³ Cf. Gary Schmitt (2004): “John Edwards: Disrespecting Our Allies. America isn’t acting alone,” *The Weekly Standard*, 1. September 2004. URL: <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/004/544xedeab.asp>.

even Kerry emphasized in his address to the Democratic convention that he would not hesitate to use military force without UN approval in cases of a national threat. These stances are surprising only against the background of excessive expectations on the part of Germans and Europeans.

On the other hand, Kerry is more than “Bush Light.” Both German and U.S. observers of the campaign emphasize that, even if the substance of American foreign policy might not change under Kerry, its style, method, and gesticulation would. This is a partial truth, because what is partly criticized as a “mere” stylistic difference between Bush and Kerry cannot be separated from “substance”: Foreign policy strategy includes, indeed combines, means and ends, “style” and “substance.”⁴

A debate between two varieties of internationalism

The foreign policy stakes on November 2nd are not, admittedly, about a choice between two antagonistic poles, but they amount to more than a choice between two “evils.” Kerry represents foreign policy views that were characterized at the time of the Cold War as liberal internationalism. This *Cold War liberalism*, which formed the foundation for a decades-long consensus within the foreign policy establishment, was based on free trade and the establishment and securing of a global American leadership role in and through international organizations. As differentiated from the (*neo-*) *conservative* internationalism of the first four years of the Bush-II administration – which united aggressive realists (like Donald Rumsfeld or Dick Cheney) and conservative internationalists with the idealist-utopian approach of the so-called neoconservatives (like Paul Wolfowitz or Douglas Feith) – Democrats are attempting to define their approach now as “*progressive* internationalism.”⁵ In foreign policy terms, therefore, the 2004 election campaign is a debate between two varieties of internationalism. While neoconservative and progressive internationalism concur when it comes to definitions of interest (global economic and security interests that the United States needs to defend actively) and aims (transforming autocratic regimes and nation-building) in American foreign policy, they are far apart on questions of how to implement these interests (multilaterally vs. unilaterally, diplomatically vs. militarily).

The central question in Iraq after the end of the war was and is the establishment of a legitimate order (Michael Walzer calls it *jus post bellum*). This is not just a question of exit strategy after regime change, but of nation-building (or, even better: state-building) – about building institutions – which the conservative opposition during the Clinton administration disparaged as *social work*. Adherents of the Bush administration’s (*neo-*) conservative internationalism are correspondingly vague about what their idealist-utopian approach entails; they prefer talking about regime change and liberation or freedom rather than democracy. Progressive internationalism, by contrast, emphasizes

⁴ Cf. Melvyn P. Leffler (2004): “Think Again: Bush’s Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2004.

URL: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=2671&print=1.

⁵ Programmatically: Ronald D. Asmus et al. (2003): “Progressive Internationalism. A Democratic National Security Strategy,” October 2003. URL: http://www.ppionline.org/documents/Progressive_Internationalism_1003.pdf.

the responsibility that goes along with the deployment of military force – not just liberation, but also pacification and the work of economic and political construction. In this connection, a great deal would be expected of allies like Germany from a Democratic administration. It would be much harder to give a “multilateralist” President Kerry the cold shoulder in questions of political and military commitment than it was during the last four years with George W. Bush.⁶ Thus, ironically, it might be a Democratic President in the White House who would kick off a fundamental debate about Germany’s foreign policy and its policy toward America.

Throughout the entire post-war era, transatlantic relations were never without tension. For this reason, and owing to the changed strategic situation after the end of the Cold War, it is pointless and politically unhelpful to idealize the past. In order to keep the pendulum swings between hope and disappointment from getting out of hand, the first thing needed is an understanding of societal contexts and the political conditions for action. Sound and systematic knowledge has to lead the way for critical debate. Otherwise, criticism is just a shot in the dark.

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⁶ Cf. Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff (2004): “Im Ernst, Europa!,” *Die Zeit*, Nr. 32, 29. Juli 2004.
URL: <http://www.zeit.de/2004/32/Kerry>.