

Casual

GERMANY AND THE F-WORD

Jeff Gedmin lured me to Berlin the other week with the prospect of good talk—specifically, an interesting exchange of views with some journalists, politicians, policymakers, Foreign Ministry planners, Britain’s ambassador to Germany, and the U.S. chargé d’affaires (our old ambassador has left, and no replacement has been named). Jeff, who is fluent in German, runs the Aspen Institute Berlin, which he has made the de facto U.S. embassy. I was curious to learn whether the Rice-Bush charm offensive had had any discernible effect on Germany’s decidedly anti-Bush, anti-American policies.

I suppose I should have divined the answer from the comfort of my London sitting room. Instead, I was unprepared for what I learned. The rules of engagement prevent me from identifying the people with whom I spoke, but their views about the president’s trip were so nearly uniform that there’s no need to name names.

My interlocutors—who on other subjects had wide-ranging views—all emphatically agreed on one thing: Bush should stop talking about “freedom.” Several people had counted the times our president had used the F-word. They noted that Chancellor Gerhard Schröder had avoided using it at all. The Germans prefer “stability” to disturbing the status quo by trying to spread “freedom.”

They also agreed that nothing would induce Schröder to provide any help to America in Iraq, although he will continue to give marginal assistance in training Iraqi police and soldiers elsewhere. Most felt that Germany had done enough by sending troops to Afghanistan. None expected

Schröder to abandon his election-winning anti-American rhetoric.

An underlying theme was that America has overreacted to September 11, which most of those I spoke with saw as an incident rather than part of a “war.” Said one, “We know war, and we don’t like it.”

Two amusing exchanges reveal a



great deal. The first occurred at the Foreign Ministry, where an official blamed the difficulties we confronted after the war on Charles Krauthammer’s post-battle “triumphalism,” which in his view had produced overconfidence and arrogance. I was happy to learn of Charles’s power over policy, and didn’t try to explain that it just might be that the president had his own ideas.

The second occurred after I suggested that Europe, by its failure to recognize America’s view of September 11 as an existential threat, might drive America to go it alone, and even to withdraw from European affairs. One guest said that would be awful—“We need the United States as the

world’s policeman”—at which point another chimed in, “But don’t use a gun.” Everyone agreed that this exchange captured Germany’s ambivalence about the role of America in world affairs.

Add to ambivalence about the United States, schizophrenia about Germany’s own place in the emerging world order. Germany is trying to accomplish two conflicting goals. It wants to become a “normal country,” exerting influence proportionate to its economic strength (never mind its current 12.6 percent unemployment) and therefore endowed with a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council. At the same time, it wants to see a united Europe, with a single foreign policy, which would involve ceding substantial control to the E.U. foreign minister.

In short, the president’s visit improved nothing—Germany still supports lifting the arms embargo against China; it still sees its future as part of a Franco-German axis to offset American power, although not at the cost of diverting funds from its welfare state to the military.

And in some respects the visit made matters worse. All that talk of “freedom” and of spreading democracy to contain terrorism makes Germans nervous. Dangerous stuff. Unsettling. My cataloging of elections in Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and perhaps soon in Egypt did nothing to change any minds. Neither did the fact that we were sitting in Berlin, where the word “freedom” should have meaning.

Yet, not absolutely all the news is grim. Our discussions were civil, the disgust with Schröder’s vulgar anti-American rants uniform, Jeff Gedmin’s hospitality impeccable. Now, if the president would only have the good sense to name Jeff our next ambassador to Germany, U.S. policy would find a gentle but firm defender who might—only might—begin to swing public opinion our way.

IRWIN M. STELZER