

West Germans ask the U.S.—“Where has all the power gone?”

## A Perplexed Ally

BY WOLFHART PANNENBERG

For many years the German people liked to consider themselves America's closest allies on the European continent. Since the late 1940s, when former foes joined ranks against further Russian expansion, the Germans could be counted as one of the more solid rocks in the Western defense system. Within decades of a devastating war they not only surprised the world with a strong economy, but they took pride in developing a model democratic society. Even most East Germans (unofficially, of course) used to look to the young Federal Republic as an example and testing ground for the future of the entire country, although the East German state tried desperately to promote a model of its own. The general feeling was—and to some extent still is—that the Eastern model did not work, while the Western one did.

The apparent stability of the economic and political structure of West German society, however, rests upon a rather uncertain basis; and this fact profoundly influences German evaluation of recent developments in American policies. As a result of World War II, Germans lost their national identity, particularly in terms of a united people and territory. During the '50s and early '60s many still hoped to reestablish national unity with the assistance of the Western allies and especially through the American alliance. But that hope slowly subsided.

Sometime after the Kennedy assassination of 1963 there was felt in Germany yet a new loss, this time of political identification. Before this the identity gap had been concealed by a widespread belief in the values of American democratic humanism. But after 1963, and increasingly during the years of the Vietnam war, the image of America held by many Germans became more ambiguous, especially among the younger generation and on the political Left. Correspondingly, Marxism developed a new and unexpected attractiveness for the student movement and for a small but vocal minority of intellectuals. To be sure, this did not affect the loyalty of the vast majority of Germans toward the American people, nor did it influence significantly the policies of the German Government. But in recent years the German chancellor has been meeting increasing pressures from a Marxist-inspired left wing in his own party.

This came to the fore in a particularly interesting way two years ago during the debate over the neutron bomb. While one part of German public opinion, led by the renowned *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, considered its projected introduction into the NATO defense system as an appropriate response to the overwhelming superiority of the Russian tank force, others—including an important part of the Social Democratic party—rejected it as morally detestable. Hans Egon Bahr, secretary of the SPD and chief negotiator of the Moscow treaty a decade ago, denounced the neutron bomb as a particularly inhuman weapon, since it would destroy organic life while sparing buildings and equipment. Certainly there were serious problems with that project. One could object that it would intensify the temptation to enter “small” nuclear weapons in the strategic calculations of “conventional” warfare, thus rendering the actual use of such weapons in combat more likely.

This was an important point, since for many years it had been assumed that nuclear weapons were confined to a role in massive deterrence. But this threshold had been passed before the debate on the neutron bomb took place. If it is an illusion to assume that nuclear weapons can be restricted and postponed to use in massive retaliation, then it is no longer obvious why the neutron bomb was considered so much more inhuman than other nuclear devices with higher fallout and additional destructive effects. There was, of course, the psychological connotation: that it expressed a peculiarly “capitalist” calculation to save material investments at the price of human life. But was that a serious argument? In any event, it proved effective, working along the same lines as did the Russian propaganda campaign against that project. The Russians succeeded in stirring up so much popular resistance in Western Europe that the project was dropped—a clear success, which apparently encouraged them to try again in response to the NATO decision to modernize its middle-range nuclear systems (see Excursus I, November *Worldview*).

The military aspect is essential in understanding German attitudes to recent developments in U.S. foreign policy. Ever since the '50s Germany has been anxious not to become the battlefield in a future war, and certainly not a nuclear one. During past decades the military and political strength of NATO and particularly of the U.S. reduced these anxieties. The decline of American power, however, causes such problems to surface again. The possibility of a “conventional” war in

Europe, although still unlikely, seems more possible today than two or three decades ago. This appears to be the particular reason why many Europeans support the idea of "disengagement": It promises a peaceful future for Europe at a time when American power alone no longer can guarantee lasting peace. It is said that Charles de Gaulle was motivated by similar considerations. His answer was twofold: political overtures to the East and, at the same time, creation of a national nuclear deterrence capacity.

For Germany only the political approach was viable. This was put into action at a time when détente became the catchword of official Western policy. But there were also more particular reasons that induced the Germans to hang onto détente policies even at a time of drastic change in the global situation. It has been apparent for some time that the Soviet Union uses political détente as a cover in pursuing its own imperialistic (or "world revolutionary") objectives. But some arrangement with the Communist East is mandatory if American power no longer guarantees peace in Europe. Quite apart from dreams of a national reunification under a form of socialism (à la Egon Bahr), considerations of this kind can be followed on purely pragmatic grounds without diminishing cooperation within NATO, whose fundamental importance for European security continues to be emphasized. The point is that some additional security is wanted. The risk of such a policy, however, is that inadvertently it can weaken the Western alliance and enhance the chances of political blackmail against the nations of Western Europe. This is the concern of the German opposition, the Christian Democrats; but among the majority of the people détente is still gaining support in spite of the ugly facts right at West Germany's eastern doorstep and notwithstanding strong suspicion of the Soviets and continuing feelings of loyalty toward the American people.

### FACING UP TO IT

At the root of the problem is the steady decline of American power and worldwide influence since the 1950s. Germans who deeply sympathize with the humanist values of the American political vision remember nostalgically the early postwar prospect of "making the world safe for democracy." It seemed a real possibility then, when the U.S. was in a position of almost undisputed dominance. How was this vision squandered, while the Soviet empire continuously strengthened and expanded in spite of some serious setbacks? Why did America derive so little lasting benefit from its initial advantages in the postwar period?

The question deserves careful analysis, but even without a detailed study it is important that we are aware that such deficiencies exist and that it is in the common interest of the Western alliance to face them in order to cope with them. It should even strengthen the mutual friendship between Western nations and the United States. There is no realistic alternative to their alliance, certainly not in a European perspective. Hence there are probably few Western Europeans who do not support the idea of a NATO alliance, even if their countries do not belong formally. And NATO members themselves do not dispute the fundamental

importance of the alliance for their common survival.

One may have good reasons, like the French, to prefer a line of separate policy and action, at least in time of peace. But this is not the case with Germans, whose dependence on the alliance is much stronger, notwithstanding the desire for additional political security through special arrangements with the Soviet bloc. Different opinions, however, emerge in the German political debate over how far compromises with the Eastern powers should and can go without jeopardizing the basis of the Western alliance. Sometimes the readiness to compromise results in a reluctance to augment the allied forces.

It is true that since the Vietnam war Germans have come to suspect the intentions of American policy, much more so its wisdom. Even opposition to American involvement in Vietnam (later and less vocal in Germany than elsewhere) would probably have calmed down had the U.S. only succeeded, and that within an appropriate time. There are many things that can be forgiven an empire by those who are dependent on it—but not weakness. It is not so much U.S. military strength that is in question but the wisdom and, especially, the determination of the U.S. to use it effectively if necessary.

The disturbing lack of determination in U.S. politics has become most apparent in the events of the Iranian crisis. It was painful to observe that until the final moment the U.S. administration could not decide whether or not to support the shah. If he was to be supported, one expected it to happen with full employment of American power. If not, the sooner the rearrangement took place the better. But when U.S. loyalty finally turned to Bakhtiar for some days, it was not only too late but, once again, too little.

The impression left by the events in connection with the assault on the U.S. embassy in Teheran was not completely dissimilar. Remarkably, during that period German politicians and German media refrained from critical comments on American reactions, and news of the abortive rescue attempt was received in the same way—with distress and compassion, but also with silent disbelief. A subsequent poll showed that a good majority of Germans not only approved of the rescue attempt, but most considered failure an inevitable risk. This may be due partly to lack of information. Few papers exposed, as did *Der Spiegel*, the technical details, especially that only a minimal helicopter reserve had been provided. Those to whom the information percolated were shocked by the apparent incompetence, particularly since failure would surely shame the reputation of an empire. *Der Spiegel* had already reported that when the embassy was taken, there had been no one in charge to order the building's defense. Whether or not these reports were correct, the impact was one of alarm, casting doubt on the determination and efficiency of U.S. action.

Other examples could be taken from more normal areas of political decision-making. If at the start of an administration a president proclaims a reduction in spending on armaments, only to do the direct opposite (without his secretary of state's knowledge!), a foreign observer must wonder about the long-term strategy of U.S. military policy.

## THE POT AND THE KETTLE

For Germans the major problem with U.S. foreign policy is its apparent lack of determination and consistency. Another issue, not unrelated, is the moralism of U.S. policy. In some way it seems to occupy the place of political strategy. But can it really serve that purpose? In former years it appeared in the expectation that governments all over the world should be democratic in the ways of Western democracy. Certainly a commendable aim. The necessary presupposition, however, that democratic institutions can operate properly everywhere, has not been proven. It is not enough simply to insist on a norm; such a policy inevitably appears unrealistic. For example, the Carter administration started with a proclamation of human rights as an international norm of political conduct, and initially received enthusiastic response. In fact, however, the U.S. is unable to secure general observance of human rights or to enforce appropriate sanctions against transgressors. The final disappointment is that even in South Korea, a country largely dependent on U.S. assistance, the United States Government has been either unwilling or unable to secure basic human rights. Such failure undermines U.S. credibility when it speaks of, for example, South Africa. The selectivity of application casts doubt upon the purity of motive.

This leads to a third problem: the interference of domestic concerns with foreign policy. The major case in point, of course, U.S. policy in relation to Israel and the Middle East. The cautious overture of the European community to the Arab standpoint in this matter triggered one of the recent disagreements in the alliance. But it is sometimes difficult to postpone international policies until after the U.S. presidential elections. The major achievement of the Carter administration in foreign policy was, after all, the Camp David agreement. It still seems to contain the only hope for lasting peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors under conditions that should be acceptable to Israel. And yet the same administration allowed that peace to be jeopardized again. Even for Sadat time could be running out.

If a European comments critically on U.S. foreign policy, he must be keenly aware of the serious shortcomings of the European nations themselves. The most distressing shortcoming is the apparent inability of Western Europeans to overcome their national particularisms in order to form a federal political unit. Delay of this process could prove fatal; all other forms of European provincialism are related to it. Yet now more than ever Western Europe remains dependent on American leadership. Success or failure of U.S. foreign policy inevitably becomes Europe's own. 

# ETHICS & FOREIGN POLICY

**Donald F. McHenry**



**Third Distinguished CRIA Lecture  
on  
Morality & Foreign Policy**

**With an Exchange Between  
Ambassador McHenry  
and His Audience**

TO: CRIA  
170 E. 64th Street  
New York, N.Y. 10021

Please send me \_\_\_\_\_ copy[ies] of ETHICS & FOREIGN POLICY @ \$4.00 per copy (plus 60¢ handling/1st class postage).

My check in the amount of \$\_\_\_\_\_ enclosed.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

*Please make checks payable to CRIA*