



## AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY GERMAN STUDIES

November 13, 2008

The American Institute of Contemporary German Studies at Johns Hopkins University celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary on November 13. The AICGS has honored young academicians and it gathered ten of them for the event. They shared their views in a 2-hour discussion at Brown Brothers Harriman on Wall Street. Here are some of their observations.

Recent US-German relations – at least on the popular level - can be seen as a period of “mutual contempt.” Germans wanted to have nothing to do with George Bush’s America. He and even Ronald Reagan were viewed as ugly Americans, but the Soviet threat dampened this reaction to Reagan.

In sharp contrast, Obama personifies for Germans America as the land of unlimited possibilities. He brings the culture of the listener. Some compare his election to the fall of the Berlin Wall. (The dark side being that the reality is more complex and difficult than one imagines.) He is how Germans want to see themselves, youthful, tall, slim, intelligent and professorial. During the inspirational part of his campaign, Germans were uncomfortable, but he entered a “cooler” period towards the end.

Germans are less likely to respond to a politician’s call for dedication to higher goals except with respect to human dignity. They take some credit for Obama’s election, by their presence at his speech in Berlin.

Colin Powell was Europe’s best friend in the Bush administration, but Europe failed to support him and he lost influence. Has Europe learned from this and will it do more to support Obama, to help him succeed?

Obama’s election causes Europeans to consider their own politicians and what is possible. In less dramatic ways Merkel and Sarkozy can both be viewed as outsiders (an East German woman and a Hungarian). Of course, Sarkozy won in part because he was opposed by a woman.

Non-traditional media and news sources, especially You-Tube, will play an expanded role in elections around the world.

Germany’s role in Afghanistan cannot be compared with its success in the Balkans. Germany could offer EU membership as a carrot, to motivate the Balkan countries. This is not possible with Afghanistan. The EU cannot motivate Turkey without the likelihood of membership. Germany solved European problems for the last 20 years by bearing the costs. It no longer does that.

NATO is a problem. It is a military organization being used by the US to try to expand democracy. Expanding it towards Russia tends to make Russia the enemy, whether it is or not. Merkel has been helpful in the Georgia/Russia dispute. The US wants Germany to be involved with the Russians but to do what the US wants, not what the Germans want.

In the current economic crisis, we can learn from the German system, but we are in danger of taking the worst part of that system – state support for jobs in failing industries – instead of, for instance, its healthcare system.

Prior to the Great Depression, the US had no regulations and no government guarantees. Now the US has government guarantees, but only lax regulations. Politicians still do not talk openly about sacrifice. It is not easy to make sacrifice for the EU. Many Germans see the financial crisis as confirmation of their views of US style capitalism. But the US still likes the market much more than the Germans. Germans do not understand that US references to “human capital” are meant to give greater value to labor, by raising it to the level of money.

In the US election, the Republican attacks, particularly by Sarah Palin, on European socialism were excessive and offensive. But (possibly therefore) Palin will remain a force in US politics. On the other side, German politicians frequently condemn “US conditions.” The Obama election brought about commitment and enthusiasm not seen since the civil rights movement of the 1960’s.

Federal style governments, as in the US and Germany, have trouble leading. The US and German have many areas of disagreement despite the great overlap of their basic values and attitudes.

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