



If You Can't Stand the Heat, Stay out of the Kitchen

**An Interview with His Excellency Gerhard Schröder,
Chancellor, Federal Republic of Germany**



EDITORS' NOTE *Chancellor Gerhard Schröder harbors the belief that the future prosperity and security of Germany, Europe, and, indeed, the world are closely related. Beginning with the Federal Republic, he already has begun to institute – with the “overwhelming” support of his Social Democratic Party (SPD) – a series of “far-reaching reforms,” whose “aim is to modernize our welfare state so that it can protect the needy, guarantee solidarity and the common good, and empower people to develop and deploy their capacities.”*

Addressing the next wider sphere, the German chancellor wholeheartedly supports the imminent ratification of the European constitution – which he deems “a unique chance for Europe not only to unite geographically, but also to

integrate truly on the basis of our common values” of “freedom, peace, and human and social rights.” Even more, he considers it “our historic duty to make unification possible,” so that all member states can “benefit politically, culturally, and of course economically.”

Speaking of which, the leader of the continent’s “strongest economy” favors a drastically “enlarged European Union” – one someday in “enhanced partnership” even with Russia, North Africa, and the eastern Mediterranean – and reveals it as the goal of European leaders today “to become the world’s most dynamic and competitive economic region” within the next six years. “However,” he hastens to clarify, this ambition “is not directed against any other country” – or against America specifically. In fact, “the world economy will continue to be strongly dependent upon the performance of the United States,” he reaffirms, “but it will certainly run much better if it is drawn by not one, but by two” transatlantic “locomotives going forward.”

Finally, in discussing the globe’s “enormous challenges, from international terrorism to poverty, from disease to global warming,” Chancellor Schröder contends that “neither individual nation states nor even regional groups of states are large and powerful enough” to surmount them. As such, he voices his ongoing belief in the United Nations and what “we all need more” of – “international cooperation” and “true multilateralism,” with the military summoned only “after all other means of resolution have been exhausted.”

Born in 1944 in Westphalia, Gerhard Schröder studied law at Göttingen University before entering politics. Long affiliated with the Social Democratic Party, he was elected chancellor in 1998, unseating the incumbent Helmut Kohl after 16 years in office.

The Chancellor as Reformer

Germany is in the midst of the most difficult and far-reaching reforms the country has undergone in the past 50 years. How will your Agenda 2010 change Germany?

These are far-reaching reforms indeed, but so have been the changes brought about by globalization and the demographic development toward an aging society. Germany has been left with no alternative but to reform decisively the structures of our labor market, and of our health-care and pensions systems. The aim is to modernize our welfare state so that it can protect the needy, guarantee solidarity and the common good, and empower people to develop and deploy their capacities.

At the same time, by reducing consumptive state expenditures, we are gaining the necessary means to invest in education, family support, and innovation.

The first major change brought about by Agenda 2010 has been a change in people’s mentality. The vast majority of the population is now convinced that we must reform if we want a return to economic growth and full employment. At the end of the day, we will see a Germany with much better options for international competitiveness and social justice and a better future for us and for our children.

You’ve faced strong opposition in your own party to these reforms. How do you overcome such challenges?



We all need more, not less, international cooperation.

We need true multilateralism.



Of course, the Social Democratic Party was in intense debate over these issues. That’s only natural for a party whose identity is based upon the values of freedom, solidarity, and justice. The SPD has been fighting for social justice and an active welfare state for many decades, but it has also always been a movement for the self-determination and participation of all, including the not so well-to-do members of society. So, discussing our future course and thoroughly weighing the arguments for or against one measure or the other, shows respect for the dignity of this grand old party.

As of now, two party conventions have, by an overwhelming majority, voted to approve these reforms. And once this important party is rallying behind one’s plans, it is a lot easier to lead for change. I have always made it clear that we must do the right thing for our country, and I have put my own political fate at stake. In making reforms, it is important to face and to take on all special and vested interests, along with their representatives. You can lead your country through a difficult process only if you display a high degree of responsibility for all of society, and if you are ready to fight lobbies and pressure groups that are looking out only for their own interests.

How will these reforms help get the German economy back on track?

Germany has a strong economy to begin with. Actually, it is still Europe’s strongest economy. We are a country that is rich in industrial infrastructure and production and rich in intellectual and technical

resources. Our creative, skilled, and self-confident workforce has great potential.

Even with our current problems, overall foreign direct investment in 2002 reached €35.6 billion – an increase of €11 billion. Structural reforms and investment in future-oriented policies, such as education and research and development, will enhance economic growth and, just as importantly, will lower the threshold for the creation of new jobs. That is why we are decreasing taxes and labor costs. And we are already enjoying some positive results: Unemployment has gone down slightly, although we have not yet reached the growth rates we are aiming at. I anticipate a modest recovery during 2004 and a full-fledged return to robust rates with significantly lower unemployment in 2005.

On European Unification

Is it realistic to expect the European constitution to be approved in the near future?

It is more than realistic. I am firmly convinced that it will be approved. I was among those who pushed the hardest for this constitution, and I think the convention, led by Giscard d’Estaing, the former president of France, has done a splendid job. This is a unique chance for Europe not only to unite geographically, but also to integrate truly on the basis of our common values. And remember: It was Germany that insisted the “value chapter” – our common commitment to freedom, peace, and human and social rights – be raised to the level of constitutional guarantees.

This constitution is essential for an enlarged Europe to function. European governments, and even more so our citizens, must know who is responsible for what in this bigger Europe. Furthermore, people want to see more European responsibility and influence in world matters.

Is it wise to have the central and eastern European countries joining the European Union at this time?

Definitely. These countries have met all the necessary conditions, and they will benefit enormously from their adherence to the European Union, along with the rest of us. The division of Europe by the Iron Curtain went against history and against humanity. So for us, the current leaders of Europe, it is our historic duty to make unification possible. As I said, we will all benefit politically, culturally, and of course economically, as well.

After all, the enlarged European Union will be the world’s single largest market, but I don’t think we should stop there. Negotiations with Romania and Bulgaria are under way, and the Balkan states should follow once they are ready for the necessary reforms. By the end of 2004, we will decide whether or not to open negotiations with Turkey, where we have already seen some remarkably



LEADERS Editor-in-Chief Henry O. Dormann interviewing Chancellor Schröder.

positive developments, such as the abolition of the death penalty and the recognition of Kurdish rights. Turkey is getting ready to be accepted as a European partner. Eventually, we shall also organize a process of “enhanced partnership” with our neighbors in Russia, Ukraine, the Maghreb [northwest African] states, and, one day, a peaceful eastern Mediterranean. All of this will serve to strengthen our common security.

There are many who believe that the European Union may present an economic threat to other areas of the world, such as the United States and certain countries in Asia. Is this truly the case, or do you have a more positive feeling about how countries can work together?

I do not see any danger of that kind. On the contrary, if we want to overcome economic difficulties worldwide, if we want to reach the United Nations’ Millennium Goals – such as a drastic reduction in poverty – and if we want the World Trade Organization to be a success, we need a strong Europe that can be a strong partner to the United States. We need an economy that works for the benefit of all.

Europe has set a goal for itself: to become the world’s most dynamic and competitive economic region by 2010. However, that goal is not directed against

any other country in the world. Rather, it is an open invitation to join Europe in reaping the benefits of free trade and sustainable economic development. In the long run, the world economy will continue to be strongly dependent upon the performance of the United States, but it will certainly run much better if it is drawn by not one, but by two locomotives going forward in the same direction.

The Need for Worldwide Cooperation

You obviously favor a strong, economically and politically united Europe. In your opinion, should the rest of the world unify in this manner?

Today’s world is facing enormous challenges, from international terrorism to poverty, from disease to global warming. Neither individual nation states nor even regional groups of states are large and powerful enough to face these challenges. So, we all need more, not less, international cooperation. We need true multilateralism. We can bring about and guarantee security only if we apply a comprehensive definition of security – a definition that embraces social, cultural, and juridical security.

Does that rule out military action once and for all?

Unfortunately, some conflicts, as we

have seen in the Balkans and Afghanistan, cannot be solved without military resolve. But the use of force should always remain a last resort, after all other means of resolution have been exhausted beyond reasonable doubt.

Having said this, I would like to stress Germany’s commitment to international responsibility both with and without military means. I personally went a long and sometimes hard way to convince the German parliament that we had to dispatch troops to Kosovo and Macedonia. German soldiers are doing their job alongside our allies in Afghanistan and other areas involved in “Operation Enduring Freedom.” At this point, Germany is second only to the United States in having sent troops on internationally mandated peacekeeping and peace-enforcing missions.

Disagreements between nations are sometimes solved peacefully by the United Nations, but in other cases military conflict seems unavoidable. What changes do you recommend to bring about peace in the world?

Let me first state that the United Nations is absolutely indispensable. There is no other legitimate international body that could enforce true multilateralism and bring about international stability and development. So, to all of those

who flirt with the idea of an “irrelevant” United Nations, I say this: Beware of breaking the plate unless you already have a new one.

In its present shape, the United Nations is not fully able to respond to the new challenges of a globalized world with global problems, such as failing states, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, “privatized” warfare, and international terrorism. Without a doubt, the United Nations needs to continue reforming, and I very much appreciate the serious efforts and proposals of the secretary general in that direction. Reform will certainly concern the Security Council, for there can be no legitimacy without representation. There is also a need to further develop international law. We will have to work on the U.N. charter so that the international community can shoulder its responsibility to protect people, prevent conflict, and confront those who grossly violate human rights or incite genocide.

Overall, our guiding spirit should be one of conflict prevention through fighting root causes, a just development strategy, and the enhancement of free trade and shared wealth. We must listen, and we must convince the international community of these needs. This is also true for our relations with friends and partners; hence, it will continue to be the basis for our strong German-American friendship. As Europeans, we should showcase and advertise our own experience in overcoming conflict, war, and rivalries through regional cooperation. I remain convinced that, more often than not, a juicy carrot – offered under the right conditions – may produce better results than a big stick.

How can the “strong German-American friendship” you mention be developed further? And what is your opinion of President Bush?

First of all, I think German-American relations rest on a very firm foundation. We share a common interest in the economic sphere. The German and

American business communities are very closely integrated and interwoven, and, indeed, they share a number of common interests. So that’s the first thing that unites us.

Second, Germany and the United States share certain values. These common values are enshrined in the constitutions of our countries, and they are given life through the exchanges between our governments, between businessmen from our two countries, and between our cultures and societies. These values and shared exchanges constitute a foundation of very fond relations between Germany and the United States. While this foundation is firm, it allows us to disagree occasionally with regard to certain matters. Germany and the United States do have differences of opinion from time to time, but they are discussed in a spirit of friendship.

President Bush is a person whom I have great respect for. We have been able to establish a good working relationship, and, again, that allows us to also differ from time to time – but all in the spirit of friendship.

Do you look to the future with hope and enthusiasm?

With both, assuredly. There are many reasons to be optimistic and confident about the future.

On Leadership

There’s pressure on the leader of any nation. How do you cope?

Time and again, one is not overly enthusiastic about another day of nasty media coverage or pressure from interest groups or international bodies. But as they say, if you can’t stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen. After all, I ran for this office of my own free will, and if you look for responsibility, you must live up to it.

However, I admit that there is pressure, which is why it is so important for me never to lose touch. I need to speak to people, and not only cabinet ministers and journalists. For instance, I have introduced regular soirees in the Sky Lobby of the Federal Chancellery in Berlin, where we have readings, discussions with artists and intellectuals, and little theater performances. This is not only relaxing; it also opens up one’s mind, even after a long day of political groundwork. Further, it helps me to engage the cultural and intellectual elites of our country for our common good.

What advice would you give to others – government or business leaders, or even young people looking to the future – to help them overcome strife and find success?

Be self-confident. Never give up. Always have a plan. Remain firmly committed to your goals and values, even if you encounter some opposition. And don’t let yourself become discouraged if a particular project doesn’t work. And as a “child of European enlightenment,” I advise people to stick to the “categorical imperative” of Immanuel Kant: “Act so that the maxim of your action may serve as a universal law for all rational beings.” ●

