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From Alliances to Ambivalence: The
Search for a Transatlantic Agenda

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In the 21st Century***

by

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From Alliances to Ambivalence: The Search for a Transatlantic Agenda In the 21st Century

By Jackson Janes

Talking about German-American relations always reminds me of the story of the American writer Samuel Clemens, Mark Twain as his pen name, who was traveling through Heidelberg and was invited to attend a concert there. The concert was composed of Richard Wagner's opera: The Ring.

Asked how he liked it, Clemens responded that he thought the music might be better than it sounded. Something similar might be said about German-American relations, but in two ways. Sometimes the relations sound better than they are, and sometimes they are better than they sound.

This past year has been one of the years in which some of the many dimensions of German-American relations have not sounded very good. Some of the instruments, used to playing together, seemed to be out of tune with each other. And the audience, on both sides of the Atlantic, did not like what they were hearing. They only knew that it should be better than it sounded. But it wasn't.

I would like to try and explore what we might want to consider in terms of re-tuning the instruments. Yet, I think we need to start with two observations pertinent to German-American relations: that the music is going to sound a bit different even if we get things retuned and that we will have different opinions about what sounds good and what doesn't.

The path of transatlantic relations during the past half-century has been marked continuously by moments of conflict, public mood fluctuations and by accomplishments, all of which result from the increasingly high amount of interaction and cooperation across the Atlantic. This has as much to do with the fact that there are real differences in

interests — and therefore policy choices — among nations as it does with the fact that we share a level of interdependence of increasing magnitudes, whether we like it or not — or rather despite what we like about it and what we don't. In addition, the spectrum of stake holders in the transatlantic framework — in particular the addition of central and eastern European nations, but also the increasing number of NGOs — has increased in its size and impact during the past fifty years, making the process of reaching consensus on either side of the Atlantic increasingly complicated. This can be seen in the current effort to formulate a constitutional basis for the EU or by the increasing level of political polemics in the U.S. less than one year before the presidential elections.

For these reasons, we have moments when we, Germans and Americans, really don't understand each other or even ourselves. We certainly have moments when we have direct differences of interests and opinions. That might not be new.

Yet, there are some that would argue that this past year was different, that the transatlantic rift goes deeper and will last longer. The inability to reach a consensus over the war in Iraq seems to have underlined resentments and accentuated political and cultural differences, which have been simmering under the surface of transatlantic relations for a long time.

If this is accurate, it is because the references we shared in determining our goals and methods for more than four decades after World War II have been altered by the tectonic shifts during the final decade of the twentieth century. Further, the vocabulary with which we talk about them may have different meanings, be it expressions like war on terrorism; containment or deterrence or bringing democracy to the Middle East; or the interpretations of social or economic security or individual freedom and responsibility.

Within the context of the post-Cold war era, we are in an environment in which the perceptions of choices and necessities in determining our foreign and domestic policies and priorities may be diverging across the Atlantic. We are learning that we need each other in different ways, for different purposes than was the case during the Cold War

when the Berlin Wall represented a common challenge and a very tangible reminder of what and why we had to do together.

During the Cold War, European-American relations were often marked by differences over tactics but we did share for the most part a strategic goal that was to be achieved on the basis of the twin principles of deterrence and détente. Many of you will recall the Harmel report in the late sixties, which was one of the main expressions of that strategy. We argued frequently about which side of the equations was more important during those years. One can recall the suspicion in Washington about Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik or the clashes of views over missile deployment in Europe in the eighties. But the goals remained for the most part clear, and we eventually achieved them in the form of German unification and the opportunity to unify Europe with democratic governments and free markets that even include Russia in the equation.

Looking back on the past decade in particular, however, it would seem that Europeans and Americans started to draw different consequences from the Cold War experiences and the new opportunities emerging from post Cold War environment. The European movement toward unity escalated quickly throughout the nineties, driven particularly by Germany and France, with a firm conviction that the creation of a deeper and wider European Union was a long-term guarantee of peace and stability in Europe and for the world at large. Further, it was a model of supra-national political and economic integration, the next evolutionary phase in international systems. The presence of Brussels and the EU as a force in the lives of Europeans grew exponentially and continues today. The European project has been an all-consuming focus across the continent, including now the ten new members who are joining this process. Equal momentum was attached to the expansion of NATO, after it had proven its value during the Cold War. The long-term goal of a Europe whole and free seemed at hand.

Yet in the same decade, we saw the emergence of a war on Europe's doorstep in the Balkans, the Gulf War following Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, the outbreak of genocidal ethnic wars in Africa, and the continuing conflict in the Middle East and in southwest

Asia. The world remained a dangerous place in the post-Cold war period and the questions about how to respond remain difficult to answer.

In the United States, the bombing of the World Trade center in 1993, the attacks on its Embassies in Africa five years later, North Korea's nuclear programs, the attack on the U.S.S. Cole, and the increasing uncertainty about Russia's future or China's regional and potential global power all added up to an escalated effort to rethink the strategic role of the world's remaining super power, which was increasingly seeing itself as the main target and the main influence on the conflicts looming on the horizon.

In some ways, the end of the Cold War had changed the equation of importance that Europe held for the United States and the dependence of Europe on the U.S.

For four and a half decades, the U.S. had been concerned about keeping Europe safe and secure in our own interests and in theirs. Now that it was safe and secure, there were other matters to deal with. Europe did not appear as the main cause of American foreign and security policy as it did when Soviet divisions and missiles were positioned across the Fulda Gap. The EU was certainly in a position to exert influence in the world of trade as both a partner and a competitor. On the other hand, its limited ability to project military power was embarrassingly clear during the Balkans wars, but its members were ambivalent about how much it was willing to put up for its own defense capability, apart from the difficulty of reaching a consensus on its shape, leadership and content.

Although it often proclaimed its commitment to a strong Europe, the U.S. was ambivalent about the degree to which the Europeans should actually accomplish that consensus as well as how much it was willing to continue to protect this affluent part of the world. And the geo-political interests and concerns of the U.S. appeared to be drifting away from Europe toward other areas where opportunities, risks and dangers were lurking, in the Middle East, Asia and Russia. The bargain we had struck across the Atlantic distributing burdens and influence to protect Europe and maintain a strong western alliance was coming unglued in the post-Cold War period when it seemed that Europe ought to be able

to protect itself and the alliance was facing new challenges outside Europe. But what was the right equation or bargain in this new environment?

By the time George W. Bush took the White House, the new leadership in Washington was determined to reset the rules under which American global power would be used, including its relations with its partners, international institutions, treaties and with its adversaries. Whether it be the Kyoto Protocol, Landmines, Biological Weapons Conventions or ABM Treaties, the ICC, or Missile defense, the leaderships on either side of the Atlantic were coming at odds over different priorities and policies designed for the changing environment of the post-Cold War era. The Europeans, and the Germans in particular, saw a ringing success in the architecture of the past few decades and they themselves were the best illustration. In Washington, there was greater skepticism, especially in the Bush White House, about whether the tools, the international institutions and their bureaucracies and cultures formed after World War II were adequate for the challenges of the post-Cold War.

And then came 9/11.

While the enormous wave of solidarity with the United States after the attacks on Washington and New York was a unique moment in world history, less than a year later, the European-American dialogue was strained as never before. The inner European dialogue was equally strained as it was confronted with the challenge of dealing with terrorist threats which had always been there but now extended their capabilities and reach to everywhere. But the EU could not speak with one voice on that question either.

While the decision to remove the Taliban and eliminate Al Qaeda was accepted as a necessary step after 9/11, the signals that the agendas in Washington and in Europe were going out of sync were found further in the ambivalent reaction in Washington to the Article V invocation at NATO right after the attacks. The United States, it appeared, would prefer to handle this by itself, partly because it could and partly because the

experience of the Balkan conflicts had left a bad taste in the mouths of those who did not want to fight another “war by committee” as it was labeled by some in Washington.

In fact, getting rid of what was perceived as constraints on the use of American power was a central core belief of the Bush administration’s approach.

Only a few weeks after September 11, the White House announced it was withdrawing from the ABM Treaty. It seemed in Europe like everything that was deemed the tools and institutions of the Cold War legacy was being unilaterally jettisoned by the Bush team. In Washington, the feeling was that the 9/11 wake up call had been heard - or should have been - and it was time to change things in order to deal with its own newly discovered vulnerability as well as that of the rest of the world.

As far as the White House was concerned, 9/11 meant that policies of containment and deterrence were no longer relevant as far as the war on terrorism was concerned. As far as Europeans were concerned, declaring war on terrorism was too comprehensive a strategy to encompass the complex differences among the sources and methods of terrorist groups around the world and many of which had been experienced for years directly within their own societies.

Perhaps the most catalytic source of conflict was generated by the President’s National Security Strategy document in September of 2002. With a few references to the need to act preemptively against threats to the United States, the document quickly became the focus of transatlantic debates within the UN Security Council in regard to the emerging battle over Saddam Hussein, within the councils of the European Union and, in the summer and early Fall of 2002, within the national election campaign in Germany.

In part, the clash over the Atlantic revolved around the interpretation of how imminent the threat was, be it in Iraq, be it the forces of Al Quaida, or the sources of terrorism in other countries such as Iran and North Korea. The argument was about different interpretations of containment, deterrence, and also legitimacy. In contrast to the

argument over geography during the Cold War, the argument was about time, either in terms of how quickly Saddam or terrorist groups could mobilize weapons of mass destruction or in terms of the proliferation of such weapons to make the attacks on New York and Washington look tame in comparison. It was about the perceived risks of inaction to prevent such attacks. It was about creating real capabilities and the willingness to use them.

Finally it was also about the differing domestic politics of these debates in Europe and in the U.S. The urgency felt by the Bush Administration to act against Saddam was shared by the majority of American public opinion still shaken by 9/11 but not shared among the majority public opinions in Germany or France or elsewhere in Europe and even though it was shared in Downing Street, it was not altogether shared in Britain. The aversion to the military response to Saddam was in part driven by the popular European perception of President Bush as trigger happy and unconcerned with the need for a stamp of legitimacy through the UN before taking that action. It was also driven by an aversion to war, especially to what was perceived to be a war of choice, not imminent necessity

The accusations coming from Europe were that President Bush had forsaken legal principle for brute power and that his unilateral actions would undermine the system of security and stability which had been built up during the past half century, in fact in large measure by American leadership and which made European unity possible to begin with.

Yet the White House's response was: You just don't understand. The UN is failing its own mission by not enforcing its own resolutions and encouraging terrorists elsewhere to ignore the consequences of their actions. Indeed, the Bush administration used the experiences of the Nineties in Africa and the Middle East to underscore how the reluctance to use of force had led to 9/11.

We seemed to be at loggerheads over the right balance of power and principle in dealing with the challenges of the 21st century.

It is important to separate out the transatlantic tensions of this past year at different levels. The policy battles between the White House, the Kanzleramt and the Quai de Orsay were a mixture of accusations and assessments about the intentions. . In Paris and Berlin, there was a growing assumption that the U.S. was going to war against Iraq no matter what happened in the UN and they decided that they would not grant the White House a Security Council blessing on that unilateral decision which they felt was not only destabilizing but also a dangerous precedent. The Bush administration decided that Paris and Berlin saw the U.S. as a danger greater than Saddam's dictatorship and put greater value on the effort to reach a consensus than on dealing with the perceived threats and on acting to eliminate them.

All of this was refracted throughout the landscape of the media on both sides of the Atlantic and in the perception of public moods. While some public opinion polls in the spring of 2002 suggested that transatlantic cleavages were less serious, those taken a year later reflected a far greater clash of views and perceptions about the role of Europe and the United States. Without a shared threat, it seemed that we no longer shared a common vision about ourselves, or of problems elsewhere around the world.

It is interesting to note that while all this was happening, the economic ties that bind Europe and the U.S. together were widely seen as being less encumbered by the political tensions with the exception of a few sectors sensitive to defense procurement issues, the French wine industry, and isolated cases of symbolic boycotts. In fact, the European Union and the U.S. were working on the WTO meeting scheduled in Cancun while the political shouting matches at the UN and between Washington, Paris and Berlin were loudest, arguing over the continuing problems of steel and agricultural subsidies, FSC, and other regulatory problems which had been and remained contentious issues across the Atlantic but without causing such a public mudslinging as we experienced over Iraq. That might have to do with the prominent role of European and U.S. leaders leading the

charges. President Bush or Donald Rumsfeld commanded more press than Trade Representative Robert Zoellick; Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder more than EU Commissioner Pascal Lamy. But it should be added that these economic policy battles were no less intensive within their own circles given the stakes involved.

What does all this tell us about where we go from here. Are we looking at a passing phase in transatlantic relations which will be overcome when the President of the United States is someone other than George W. Bush or a different set of leaders are in power in Berlin or Paris. I think that would be a wrong assumption. No doubt, style and substance matter in diplomacy, especially when both are confrontational. But the fact is that we have yet to come to grips with structural and psychological changes in the relations across the Atlantic which result in different points of reference or relevance we have for each other now and in the future, regardless of who has their hands on the political steering wheels in Europe and the United States

I believe there are significant implications for some of the institutions we have developed during the past fifty years, be it the Security Council membership, the UN itself, NATO, and the EU.

I also believe that we are going through a clash of national narratives or stories about where we are, where we have come from and where we need to go. US reactions and European reactions to two forms of 9/11 have generated different domestic debates about what is needed to deal with the future opportunities and risks we face. The 9/11 of 1989 set off a vast array of changes in Europe as did the 9/11 of 2001 all over the world but particularly in the minds of Americans. We may be dealing with similar problems at home (overburdened pension systems, rising costs of health care, high levels of unemployment) but also with uniquely different challenges (the unification of Germany, the expansion of the EU) and with common problems and risks abroad (the Middle East, AIDS, proliferation, global economic inequity and terrorism). Yet we have no consensus on dealing with them on either side of the Atlantic. There is a significant amount of dissension and confusion as to how we are going to deal with our domestic problems as

well as our foreign policy challenges in both Germany and the US. And that makes things that much more difficult to sort out on the transatlantic stage because it is difficult to decipher which part of the musical score to listen to.

In some cases, we may not need a consensus although we can learn from each other about dealing with similar challenges, be in regard to domestic or foreign policy issues. The EU and the US need not be on one page on all fronts. In deed, we will be facing each other as competitors in many instances. We do need to agree on the rules under which we compete. But we can disagree on how we regulate ourselves at home or how we deal with foreign policy interests in China or India. It is when how we make our respective decisions impinges on each other that frictions become serious.

But we will also find that we may be less in need of a complete consensus on matters where heretofore we wanted complete unanimity. That will be the case across the Atlantic, such as working out the relationship between NATO and a European Security and Defense, or within the EU, as it tries to work out its voting procedures. The result will be a more uncertain set of relations marking the complex network linking these two most affluent, secure, and technologically advanced regions in the world. The main challenge will be to make sure that the nature of competing agendas does not appear to cancel each other out. It will also be to learn how to listen to our respective decision-making processes better.

Let us examine the security relationship.

After 9/11/89, NATO seemed to be looking for a new mission. Even though there was a rush to gain membership from central and Eastern Europe, the end of the Soviet Union raised questions about what NATO would do without an enemy. The ambivalence surrounding NATO's future was exacerbated by the fledgling efforts of the EU to establish a security and defense capability, which was more than rhetoric and U.S. reaction to that initiative. Figuring out a new equation between European and American

defense burdens and power sharing remains an illusive task. The fact that NATO went to war in Serbia – without a UN resolution – and is now in Afghanistan suggests that NATO can be proactive as an institution. But how a European force running parallel to NATO becomes acceptable in an ambivalent Washington skeptical of both motives and capabilities remains a mystery. The pronouncement by the U.S. Ambassador to NATO last August suggesting that the clash over providing armaments to Turkey represented a “near death experience” for NATO shows how nervous this issue makes people and how fragile the consensus process is and may become in the future. And the addition of the eastern Europeans into the EU will make forming a consensus around ESDP and NATO more challenging, given their needs, expectations and capabilities and their perception of NATO. The Solana paper and its continuing evolution suggest in more detail than how an ESDP can be envisioned. But implementation remains cloudy, particularly at a time when European governments are freezing their defense budgets in light of domestic pressures and priorities and the Americans are surging ahead with a military which is for the foreseeable future unmatched in terms of money or capabilities. A recognition of this asymmetric relationship by the Europeans has to be matched by a recognition in Washington that a European capability can be an important tool for both sides of the Atlantic, but that is easier said than done. It will remain a bone of contention until the European capability can be clearly demonstrated.

Within the economic equation, we will be continually reminded of the common vision required to assure free and open markets shared on either side of the Atlantic. The battles over standards and regulations controlling food stuffs, drug patents, privacy, corporate governance, tax regimes, corporate mergers, as well as the continuing clashes over steel or agricultural subsidies are unavoidable within the increasing engagement of our economic interests, public and private. While Europe mostly trades with itself, there are sufficient motivations among corporate interests to be targeting the two largest and richest markets in the world and to be lobbying to achieve that access. The fact is that transatlantic commercial ties are the largest in the world, totaling over 2.5 trillion dollars and rising, employing over 12 million people on either side of the Atlantic. We are our

most important markets, and remain so especially in the wake of massive transatlantic investments in the Nineties in the wake of industry deregulation, technological advances and financial market liberalization.

And German affiliates in the U.S. sold more than four times the amount of direct exports to the U.S. An expanding European market is highly attractive for U.S. corporations, which can now operate with a common currency saving enormous sums in exchange rates. Indeed, more than half of the American foreign direct investment in the last decade went to Europe which is where the majority of American foreign corporate assets are to begin with. European firms make up two thirds of total foreign assets in the U.S.

With that kind of motivation and market opportunity, we can expect trade policies to remain at the center of the transatlantic dialogue. However, it should also be noted that an exposure to the American economic market does not necessarily carry with it an unlimited enthusiasm among Europeans for all of the component parts of the American environment. The lessons of Enron, the distaste with the Sarbanes/Oxley legislation and the security measures taken by the U.S. in the post 9/11 marketplace have discouraged some initiatives among European economic explorers. The forces of the market place will move with the opportunities available wherever they are and they have been significant in the transatlantic framework. But if the Americans and Europeans cannot find common ground in certain regulatory areas, it may be that we will agree to disagree on the use of GMO's, technological standards, or Anti-trust legislation. That could lead to more competition but also to duplication in an increasingly interwoven global market. The challenge for the coming decade is to see how such political policy problems can be dealt with. Yet there is too much at stake to let traffic accidents hold up the economic autobahn across the Atlantic.

Lastly, there is much discussion whether the social/cultural ties are diminishing across the Atlantic. The legacy of the post war period has now receded further into the history books for the generations now assuming power and responsibility. The fire of World War

II and the joint effort to rebuild afterwards are distant reference points for most of the populations on either side of the Atlantic. The changing social demography of the United States and the self-engagement of Europeans with Europe can be presented as evidence that the transatlantic ties between elites and publics may be loosening. While we share the core values that Europe and the U.S. do not threaten each other in geopolitical terms, the presence of frictions of various sorts can raise doubts about the ways in which we are relevant to each other as models or reference points. Go in to a bookstore in Berlin or Paris today, and one finds a wide range of choices about the shadowy side of American society, from death penalties to lack of health care to callous markets to the end of the American era. Complaints about the presence of religious fervor in American politics, individual stories of treatment over visas and when entering the U.S. and a widespread dislike for the President combine to generate frictions at many levels of European societies, leaving many very ambivalent about their views on the U.S.

On the other hand, depictions of a Europe mired in sluggish growth, aging societies, over regulated economies, fearful of immigrants, somewhat self-satisfied and unwilling to engage itself on the world stage are equally widespread in the U.S. Among some, that is grounds to view Europe as a danger to U.S. interests. Among others, there is a feeling of ambivalence concerning how such a Europe can be of real help to a United States increasingly challenged to shoulder global burdens and seeking to shed restraints so that it can use its power to change the status quo in a dangerous world.

A more optimistic look at the transatlantic relationship sees a more multifaceted set of connections made up of a vast web of interest groups pursuing common interests, be they in the scientific/research community, the corporate board rooms, NGOs of all kinds, and various levels of state and local government in contact with each other. That may be true but it does not necessarily result in the sum being greater than its parts. Such connections can be useful for the purposes of those engaged but it did not prevent the dialogue between Washington and Berlin, for example, from exploding in fury and accusations in the wink of a political moment, despite that web.

Yet here again I come back to the competing narratives which may be a source of the clash. The beginning of the Nineties was a symbol of triumph for Europe. The beginning of the new millennium was marked by tragedy for Americans.

What the American people had to tell themselves after 9/11 and what the President told us about how we need to deal with that new vulnerability generated a level of national emotion which no one had experienced since 1941 and for a portion of the population since the Korean and Vietnam wars. It was possible for Europeans to sympathize but they could not fully grasp the impact of the experience in American society, as many Americans still can't either. . And it was not easy for Americans to recognize the experiences that some Europeans had digested in dealing with their forms of terrorism because the belief is widespread that the U.S. remains the primary target – something which is unsettling in a new way for the super power which won the Cold War, In the U.S. we called upon our own historical references and cultural symbols to help unify us after the attacks in New York and Washington and to decide how to respond. And it was during that process that the dialogue across the Atlantic seemed to break down. It was a confused set of messages in language sent and received on both sides of the Atlantic about threats, dangers, coalitions, missions and that has not gotten a whole lot clearer, not only at the level of the political leaders but also at the level of our respective publics who were all grasping for a way to understand what the uncertain future holds for them.

And it is for that reason that the search for a way to forge a new agenda at this critical point has to overcome what I see as a widespread ambivalence on both sides of the Atlantic. An alliance has a common purpose and is the basis for strategies and tactics to fulfill it. It also sees a common threat. Germans and Americans may share more of a sense of ambivalence than alliance about the threats looming on the horizon.

What do I mean by ambivalence? The dictionary tells us that ambivalence means simultaneous but contradictory attitudes or feelings toward something, continual fluctuations in perceiving something or uncertainty about an approach to it

Today we face a vastly more complicated environment full of threats and opportunities. We have an agenda made up of putting out the fires burning beyond Europe and the United States but which could also easily set our own houses on fire. They are all over the Middle East, in parts of Asia and Africa. The same engagement we had with each other when Europe was the object of the alliance now needs to be redefined restructured and then presented to the public on both sides of the Atlantic with a different object in mind. We still may find that we will make different choices, set different priorities when dealing with this common agenda. And that is because Europe and the U.S. have other capabilities and opportunities to make different choices today than they had during the Cold War.

For the United States, there will be a continuing balance to strike between working with friends and allies where possible, but also having to act alone when it seems necessary because no one else can. But it will also require the understanding that power does not equate always with control. For Europe, there will be a continuing effort to grasp the asymmetry of political and military power across the Atlantic while maintaining the ability to find a basis of cooperation as well as competition with the U.S. in providing the resources and leadership to help other states and societies overcome the same challenges Europe was able to meet in securing peace and stability.

Pooling our resources will require a great deal of listening and leadership. We need to have agreement on the need for a full range of responses, to challenges we face just as we did after World War II. We may even find that the word alliance needs to be replaced with a better concept to define the agenda we face in the 21st century. It must convey the sense of common mission even if we differ on the methods or the measurements of success.

But if we cannot find a set of goals under which we can subsume both capabilities and opportunities, then we will stumble along together. We did that at the beginning of the

twentieth century with horrific consequences. While the second half of that century showed how we can do better, it is no guarantee that we will.