

TRANSATLANTIC MEDIATORS: AMERICAN PROTAGONISTS OF AMERICAN-GERMAN RELATIONS SINCE WORLD WAR II

Bernd Schaefer

Research Fellow, GHI

"Never underestimate the depths of German stupidity," U.S. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger quipped in October 1970 when speaking on the phone to Ford Foundation and Council of Foreign Relations Chairman and former U.S. High Commissioner for Germany John J. McCloy (also called by some "the chairman of the American establishment"). In their conversation both men shared their misgivings about Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* and West Germany's self-assertive foreign policy. "We've fought the war and we won, and here a small minority is taking the ball away from us in a way that will profoundly affect the rest of us," McCloy stated. After Kissinger had promised to arrange a meeting for McCloy with President Nixon to fill the latter in on the dangers of Germany's current path, the former High Commissioner claimed, "I've been through the fire with Brandt." Kissinger added: "He is a public relations guy." McCloy continued: "I defended Berlin two or three times when the blue shirts [of the East German communist youth organization FDJ] were there." Kissinger then asserted regarding Brandt, "He's a weak man," and McCloy then noted, "If we had relied on Brandt we'd have lost the city." "Exactly," Kissinger replied.¹

German readers in particular might be astonished by such frank private talk between these two men, both considered solid pillars of close German-American relations through their entire postwar careers. Yet in the patronizing American perception, Germany's trajectory from defeated enemy to recruited ally and eventually to respected but unequal partner was always rocky under a smooth-looking surface. Skepticism and uneasiness over German national character and its ambivalent potential never fully waned on the U.S. side.² At various crossroads during the Cold War, such feelings became activated to a greater or lesser extent. At the highest levels of the government decision-making pyramid, German-American relations were actually on thin ice for most of the period between 1949 and 1990. Focusing exclusively on relations between presidents and chancellors over the entire course of the Cold War would reveal leaders stumbling from misperceptions and misgivings to crises, interspersed with a few periods of close cooperation and genuine trust when personalities on both sides matched. Yet in the wake of shared

perceptions of threats, pragmatism prevailed most of the time. Both sides were able to skillfully paper over differences to a significant degree.

Many German narratives, though, tend to downplay tensions and prefer to assume tight postwar bonds and a deeply rooted relationship with the United States. In a sense, these narratives might indeed be closer to the truth than government-focused accounts of misgivings. As Volker Berghahn has pointed out, works on the "postwar Atlantic elite" have mostly focused on a "few individuals at the top" with the result of gaining "little systematic knowledge about the next layer of these networks."³ With his study of Shepard Stone, Berghahn has made his own contribution to illuminating this "next layer." Indeed, looking at the broad spectrum of civil society promises to reveal more pertinent and permanent features of the American-German relationship than a perspective concentrating on elected officials and temporary officeholders. An exclusive focus on the American side and selected areas from the aforementioned layer allows for deeper understanding. Overall, relations between the United States and West Germany would turn out surprisingly stable, creating remarkable and enduring bonds between the two countries.

Within the framework of an oral history project, the GHI intends to interview around thirty "transatlantic mediators" of German-American postwar relations, both American-born and naturalized U.S. citizens. In all likelihood, focused questioning will bring to life some prevalent features of the German-American postwar relationship on a broad and diverse scale. Transatlantic ties and cooperation rested on many pillars, and the interviewees selected should be able to highlight most of them in an exemplary manner. The sample of personalities to be interviewed will focus on the following areas: government and intelligence agencies; philanthropic and policy institutions; academia; business; and the military.

The GHI plans to publish the interviews in condensed form, with an introduction, on the GHI's website by the summer of 2007.

Notes

¹ Telecon John J. McCloy, 31 October 1970. National Archives and Records Administration, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, Henry A. Kissinger Telecons, Box 7.

² Thomas A. Schwartz, "The United States and Germany after 1945: Alliances, Transnational Relations, and the Legacy of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 19 (1995), 549-568.

³ Volker R. Berghahn, *America and the Intellectual Cold Wars in Europe: Shepard Stone Between Philanthropy, Academy, and Diplomacy* (Princeton, 2001), 284.