

The Murky Dismissal of German Defense Minister

by Rainer Apel

The July 18 sacking of Germany's Defense Minister, Rudolf Scharping, may be for the benefit of anti-Iraq warhawks in the Pentagon around Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz. Scharping, who was opposing a war on Iraq, has been replaced by a German "hawk" who organized the German parliament, the Bundestag, to vote narrowly for the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's announcement came less than 24 hours after news wires had begun running previews of a story in the July 18 issue of the *Stern* weekly, about alleged "irregularities" in Scharping's private finances. The focus of the story was a publicist's payment of 80,000 deutschemarks into a Scharping bank account a few days before he was appointed minister of defense in the new German cabinet at the end of October 1998. The payment was for a book that Scharping planned to publish in 1999.

Scharping's demise is welcome among many, if not most military men, because of his failure to provide the necessary, minimal funds and up-to-date equipment for the armed forces. Earlier in the week, Scharping called off, because of "fiscal bottlenecks," the procurement of a new armored personnel carrier with the project name of Panther, designed to replace the 30-year-old Marder vehicle. But the government members mainly to blame for the fiscal malaise are Schröder and Finance Minister Hans Eichel, who have carved out several billion marks from the defense budget every fiscal year since 1998. Scharping was reduced to being the executor of budget cuts decided by the rest of the cabinet.

'Lack of Solidarity' with Washington

But Scharping's failure to convince the military of the "necessities" of the budget cuts, also put him on the list of people whom the Chancellor wanted to remove at the next appropriate occasion. With national elections just two months away, Schröder may have wanted to present a cabinet that would radiate more "efficiency." The timing and orchestration of this abrupt end of Scharping's career, also pose some other questions, however.

Numerous leading dailies, like the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, suspected a hand from inside the cabinet behind the story that appeared in the notorious Anglo-American "leak-sheet," *Stern*. Scharping, after initially sailing along with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's Kosovo

War in March 1999, later became critical of NATO military policies in the Balkans. For that, and for his opposition against another Iraq war, Scharping had become a target of the Wolfowitz gang, as early as the transition from the Clinton Administration to the Bush Administration. Had Schröder fired Scharping already then, he certainly would have received applause from the other side of the Atlantic.

Scharping stayed in office, but remained the target of an unabated campaign of media leaks about his "wimpishness." The net effect of all the trans-Atlantic armtwisting was that Scharping never put up any real resistance against a German role in the post-Sept. 11 military missions in Afghanistan, East Africa, and related stationing projects in the Persian Gulf. And he might not have caused real problems, after all, even at the start of a new Iraq war. But repeatedly, his ministry had been the source of "unauthorized" leaks about the Pentagon's next plans, which the Wolfowitz faction read as acts of "obstructionism"—as a "lack of solidarity."

By contrast, Peter Struck, the chairman of the Social Democrats' parliamentary group, who was appointed new Minister of Defense on July 18, might be of use to the Wolfowitzers. Strong opposition in October-November last year against the planned war in Afghanistan was crushed by Struck, with a whole arsenal of political blackmail against dissident Social Democrats. This secured a thin majority of two votes for Chancellor Schröder's "yes" to a German role in the war against the Afghani Taliban, when the Bundestag held a no-confidence vote on the issue.

German Support Against Iraq?

It is also due to Struck, that there has been no prominent engagement of Social Democrats in an open debate about the consequences of Sept. 11. Efforts by former Deputy Defense Minister and Social Democrat Andreas von Bülow, for example, to initiate a debate among Social Democrats about the military-intelligence cabal aspect, as opposed to the "bin Laden" cover story, have been fought vehemently by Struck and his people. This has forced von Bülow to have his interviews and articles published by journals that are more in the right-wing camp, as journals linked to the Social Democrats were recruited (or, blackmailed) by the Struck group to boycott any such interviews.

Struck proffers "unconditional solidarity" for Chancellor Schröder's "unconditional solidarity with the U.S.A." on all matters related to the "war on the axis of evil." Therefore, if a military strike against Iraq is launched by no later than September or October, Struck will guarantee that the German government supports it. The tradition German role as a huge storage area in Europe for U.S. combat and other military equipment, is crucial for any in-depth operation against Iraq. The major military air bases near Frankfurt, at Ramstein and at Spangdahlem, will be vital to airlift American matériel and manpower from Europe to the Persian Gulf region, via Turkey.