

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

West German leader's White House ordeal

Franz Josef Strauss, head of the Christian Social Union (CSU), the Bavarian component of West Germany's ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU), visited the White House on July 29 to meet with President Reagan.

Little did he realize that he would get caught up in the heat of the U.S. presidential campaign, and even take a little unintended physical abuse for his trouble.

With reports that leaders of the CDU/CSU in West Germany are tilting in favor of Michael Dukakis, this reporter put a question to Strauss in the driveway outside the West Wing of the White House, when he emerged from his meeting with Reagan.

I asked Strauss what difference it would make to West Germany whether Bush or Dukakis won in November.

Strauss's answer was predictably diplomatic. He said it was not his role to interfere in the internal politics of the United States, but that he was confident that "every American President will have the same policy with respect to Europe and West Germany, regardless of who wins. The guidelines of American policy will remain unchanged."

Then I went into the White House press room, where Marlin Fitzwater was conducting a briefing.

"Outside just now," I interjected, "Minister Strauss of West Germany said in the usual diplomatic way that he felt there would be no difference for his country whether Bush or Du-

kakis were elected this fall. What is your reaction to that?"

Fitzwater replied, "I would suggest that anyone concerned about such matters should examine what Dukakis has had to say about defense posture, about cutting defense and reducing our commitments all around the world. I would advise anyone to take a pretty close look at that before coming to any conclusions."

Members of the White House press corps began accusing Fitzwater of campaigning for Bush, but didn't get far until cameramen from the back of the room started to rush to get out of the door and back onto the driveway. They'd been tipped off by walkie-talkie that something big was going on out there. The reporters followed, bolting out of their seats to see what was going on outside.

It was Bush, who had come out of the West Wing to shake hands with Strauss in front of West German television cameras.

In the rush to get to the scene with cameras rolling, one cameraman bowled over NBC correspondent Andrea Mitchell, ripping the back of her dress and sending her careening into Strauss, knocking him to the ground.

Bush was still sliding back to the office door, grinning with his hands in the air like a surrender, saying he had to go. At my question, though, he stopped. "What difference would it make to West Germany if you were President or if Dukakis was?" I asked.

Bush answered, "Well, I'm not going to put the minister a difficult position, but I am for NATO, I know all about it, and I am for strengthening the alliance."

Meanwhile, Strauss had pulled himself onto his feet, and, with his back to the scene, was answering questions from a West German reporter in front of a TV camera.

Strauss cautious on trade with Soviets

So indifferent had the press corps been to Strauss before this melee, that when he first emerged from his meeting with Reagan, no one but this reporter had a single question to ask him.

So I took advantage of the opportunity to ask him to comment about the trip that day of West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher to Moscow. Strauss and Genscher are sometime factional opponents on Bonn's political scene.

Strauss sounded a much more cautious tone toward dealing with the Soviets than he had taken immediately following his own meeting with Gorbachov last winter.

While he said Genscher would be discussing trade with the Soviets, he added, "It will not go faster than Western interests will allow. There are serious limits."

He said, "Gorbachov asked me about expanding trade when we met, but I told him it is not in our hands. We have a market system. Yours is a centralized economy. The goods you offer must be accepted by our consumers."

Strauss explained, "Our trade with the Soviets is very small, and 85% of it is in oil and petrochemicals. Of the remaining 15%, half is in raw materials. What the Soviets produce for the civil economy is not adequate to our consumers. They must upgrade their ability in this sector if they expect to do business with us."

Then I asked about his reaction to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's criticisms of the planned 1992 full integration of the European Community. Strauss replied that West Germany shared Thatcher's reservations about a common currency and common central bank.