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Swaggering Home: Trump, Grenell, and Pompeo in Conflict with Germany

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Everyone saw the photo of President Donald Trump and Chancellor Angela Merkel glaring at one another during the G-7 summit in Quebec in June 2018. Trump, seated, looked stubborn and impetuous; Merkel leaned forward across the table in stern disapproval. The photo went viral after being tweeted out by the Chancellor's press chief, Steffen Seibert – an indication that Merkel herself may have approved this framing.¹ Fifteen months earlier, the Chancellor's staff had publicized more amicable photos of the Chancellor's visit to Washington, but the gaping rift between the U.S. and Germany was becoming impossible to gloss over.² The exceedingly poor personal chemistry between Trump and Merkel was, of course, one major source of tension. Even the President's attempts at levity, such as when he famously tossed Starburst candies at the Chancellor, came across as sour and ill-tempered.³ But a broader review of recent U.S.-German dust-ups suggests that the damage was compounded by the “swaggering” demeanor of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the brusque comportment of the U.S. ambassador to Berlin, Richard Grenell. In their own distinctive ways, all three men trampled on German sensibilities – and all of them put the U.S. on a course toward withdrawing from strategic assets in Germany, a profoundly destabilizing prospect for European security.⁴

Trump's election loss in November 2020 put an end to the free-fall in U.S.-German relations. Since the inauguration of President Joe Biden, no European country has seen a greater favorable swing in public opinion toward the United States.⁵ But it would be naïve to anticipate a full restoration of German confidence in Washington or an enthusiastic embrace of what was once called, quite unironically, U.S. leadership. Chancellor Merkel has remained studiously aloof toward the Biden administration.⁶ The specter of Trump is not fully

¹ David McHugh, “Body Language: Photo of Merkel, Trump captures G-7 tensions,” *Associated Press*, June 10, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-ap-top-news-germany-international-news-politics-ca58db1f82c24a9aa48985002a55d948>. Unless otherwise noted, all citations refer to on-line editions of the publications in question.

² “Trip to the USA: Angela Merkel meets Donald Trump,” photo series published on the chancellor's web site, <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/mediathek/trip-to-the-usa-angela-merkel-meets-donald-trump-603116>.

³ “Bremmer: Trump threw Starbursts on table,” *CBS News*, June 20, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/bremmer-trump-threw-starbursts-on-table-told-merkel-dont-say-i-never-give-you-anything/>.

⁴ This essay draws on numerous journalistic accounts from the period. None are more compelling than the half-time report by Susan Glasser, “How Trump Made War on Angela Merkel and Europe,” *The New Yorker*, Dec. 17, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/24/how-trump-made-war-on-angela-merkel-and-europe>.

⁵ Eli Yokley, “Biden's Early Tenure Has Improved America's Image Abroad,” *Morning Consult*, April 27, 2021, <https://morningconsult.com/2021/04/27/biden-100-days-global-views-america/>. Between January and April 2021, favorable views of the U.S. in Germany rose from 24% to 46%; unfavorable views fell from 62% to 37%.

⁶ Constanze Stelzenmüller, “Germany Is Pouring Cold Water on the Biden-Europe Love Fest,” *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 22, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/22/germany-biden-europe-love-fest/>; Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff and Andrea Rotter, “Deutschland hat den Neustart mit Joe Biden verpatzt,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/100-tage-und-viele-verpuffte-transatlantische-gesten-deutschland-hat-den-neustart-mit-joe-biden-verpatzt/27140582.html>.

banished so long as his hold over Republicans remains uniquely strong. More importantly, perhaps, the Trump administration exhibited an entire spectrum of troubling behavior, extending well beyond the President's own 'America First' nationalism. Trump's departure from the White House leaves behind a legacy not of isolationism, but of crude efforts to undermine Germany's governing coalition and push a multilateral agenda that is at odds with German values and interests.

Personalities dominate media coverage, and this was particularly evident in reports on meetings between Trump and Merkel. Attention often focused on the gender dynamics: the President's body language conveyed a lack of courtesy and respect. During their first White House meeting, he either ignored or did not hear Merkel's request to shake hands.⁷ Trump betrayed a consistent pattern of belittling women in positions of power, and Merkel was the single most influential female leader that he encountered during his four years in office.⁸ During their phone calls, the President berated the Chancellor, reportedly calling her "stupid" while conveying a long litany of grievances. Although Merkel remained remarkably calm during these encounters, such revelations – coming late in Trump's term in office – would surely have deepened the crisis in U.S.-German relations had he been re-elected.⁹

Yet Trump's snide treatment of Merkel reflected a deeper animus toward Germany. Europe's strongest economy was a touchstone for President Barack Obama's foreign policy, and Germans had responded rapturously to Obama as a candidate; he drew a crowd of more than 200,000 to the Victory Column in Berlin in July 2008. Disillusionment set in during Obama's second term, as ongoing drone strikes and espionage allegations by whistleblower Edward Snowden touched off a furious response in Germany. Obama's initiative for a Trans-Atlantic Investment and Partnership (TTIP) encountered a great deal of suspicion, and might have been derailed even under a Hillary Clinton presidency.¹⁰ Nevertheless, within U.S. domestic politics Democrats have often foregrounded Germany as a positive role model – as seen in President Bill Clinton's enthusiasm for German job apprenticeship programs.¹¹ For a president determined to reverse Obama's line on every front, and to undo whatever Democratic administrations had done in the past, a rejection of warm relations with Berlin was only to be expected.

Thanks in part to Trump's colossal ignorance of history, the President did at least refrain from taking cheap shots about the Third Reich; baseless remarks about Germans as Nazis – taking no cognizance of Germany's democratic flourishing since 1945 – were absent from Trump's rhetoric. The hoary old specter of "Rapallo," the suspicion that Germany and Russia might secretly conspire against the interests of the West, fell into abeyance. On the contrary, it was the humanitarian impulses of Merkel's Germany that drew fire from Trump during his 2015-2016 election campaign. Trump declared in November 2015 that he was "no longer a fan" of Merkel; her improvised decision to welcome nearly one million refugees from Syria's civil war was a "total disgrace."¹² The following summer he claimed (falsely) that asylum seekers in Germany had driven crime "to levels that no one thought they would ever, ever, see."¹³ It was a convenient talking

⁷ Madeline Conway, "In Awkward Exchange, Trump Seems to Ignore Merkel's Handshake Request," *Politico*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/03/trump-angela-merkel-no-handshake-236175>.

⁸ Greg Jaffe, Mary Jordan, and Josh Dawsey, "Trump's Tough Words for Merkel and May raise Questions about His Relationships with Female Leaders," *Washington Post*, July 13, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-tough-words-for-merkel-and-may-raise-questions-about-his-relationships-with-women-leaders/2018/07/13/88cd2c66-85e3-11e8-8553-a3ce89036c78_story.html.

⁹ Carl Bernstein, "From pandering to Putin to abusing allies and ignoring his own advisers, Trump's phone calls alarm US officials," CNN.com, June 29, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/29/politics/trump-phone-calls-national-security-concerns/index.html>.

¹⁰ Daniela Schwarzer, "Why Obama Couldn't Rescue U.S.-German Relations," *Foreign Policy*, April 22, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/22/why-obama-couldnt-rescue-u-s-german-relations/>.

¹¹ David Finegold, "Making Apprenticeships Work," *RAND Issue Paper*, Institute on Education and Training, March 1993, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/issue_papers/2006/IP114.pdf.

¹² "Trump blasts Merkel over Refugee Crisis," AP video footage from Nov. 17, 2015 (posted to YouTube on Nov. 16, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrzMtSw3kmc>.

¹³ Felicia Schwartz, "Trump Goes After Merkel, and Germany Takes Note," *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 17, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-WB-65071>.

point for Trump's base, highlighting his own determination to keep out refugees and to stop migration at (or before) the U.S. borders. As president, Trump continued to tweet out defamatory claims about German crime rates.¹⁴

Germany also loomed large as a leading advocate for international action against climate change. "This Paris climate accord is not just some accord or the other," Merkel remarked at a press conference in May 2017. "It is a central accord in defining the contours of globalization."¹⁵ The President, in turn, spoke of the Paris agreement as a "self-inflicted, major economic wound" that "handicaps the United States' economy in order to win praise from the very foreign capitals and global activists that have long sought to gain wealth at our country's expense."¹⁶ There was no scope for common ground here. After Trump formally announced U.S. plans to withdraw from the Paris accord, Merkel's expressions of regret commanded the headlines, and the chancellor went on to make climate change the central topic of the G-20 summit she hosted in Hamburg in July 2017. Merkel orchestrated a united front against Trump in Hamburg; the summit's final communiqué rebuked the U.S. position and declared the Paris agreement to be "irreversible."¹⁷

Long before Merkel emerged as the European ringleader of resistance to Trump's policies, the President had enumerated his core grievances against Germany. There was trade, of course. In January 2017, the President-elect threatened to impose a 35% tariff on German vehicles – in apparent ignorance of the fact that U.S. workers in South Carolina were building BMWs exported to the world market.¹⁸ Coverage of the Trump-Merkel encounters emphasized the chancellor's hapless efforts to educate the President about the nature of global trade, and to explain why Germany's gaping trade surplus vis-à-vis the United States need not be a source of concern.¹⁹ Such reports implicitly backed the German standpoint. But there clearly *was* a larger challenge posed by German economic policies; tight German budgets at home fueled underinvestment and created structural imbalances with respect to most of the planet, including many EU countries.²⁰ Unfortunately, Trump's 'America First' policies were singularly ill-suited to yield a change of course in Berlin. Instead, they reinforced European solidarity with Germany. When the Trump administration imposed a 25% tariff on steel and 10% on aluminum against the European Union in June 2018, it prompted retaliatory tariffs against iconic U.S. products such as bourbon, blue jeans, and Harley-Davidson motorcycles.²¹ A more damaging row over airplanes continued into the end of the Trump years. These trade battles did little to advance American interests; they were simply a way for the President to lash out against countries that were deemed to be trading unfairly with the United States.

¹⁴ Adam Taylor, "Trump Says Crime in Germany is Way up. German Statistics Show the Opposite," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/06/18/trump-says-crime-in-germany-is-way-up-german-statistics-show-the-opposite/>.

¹⁵ Amy Davidson Sorkin, "Angela Merkel and the Insult of Trump's Paris Climate-Accord Withdrawal," *New Yorker*, June 1, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/angela-merkel-and-the-insult-of-trumps-paris-climate-accord-withdrawal>.

¹⁶ "Trump's Speech on Paris Climate Agreement Withdrawal, Annotated," *National Public Radio*, June 1, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/06/01/531090243/trumps-speech-on-paris-climate-agreement-withdrawal-annotated>.

¹⁷ Alison Smale, "Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron Unite Behind Paris Accord," *New York Times*, June 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/02/world/europe/paris-agreement-merkel-trump-macron.html>; documentation on the G-20 summit of July 7-8, 2017, available at <https://www.g20germany.de/Content/EN/StatistischeSeiten/G20/Texte/g20-gipfeldokumente-en.html>.

¹⁸ Peter Campbell, "Donald Trump Threatens 35% tariff on BMW Imports," *Financial Times*, Jan. 16, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/9a81eee2-db8a-11e6-86ac-f253db7791c6>.

¹⁹ Sonam Sheth, "Angela Merkel Reportedly Had to Explain the 'Fundamentals' of EU Trade to Trump 11 Times," *Business Insider*, April 22, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-trade-merkel-germany-eu-2017-4>.

²⁰ Heather Long, "The Huge Number Driving Trump's Frosty Relationship with Germany's Merkel," *Washington Post*, April 27, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/04/27/the-huge-number-driving-trumps-frosty-relationship-with-germanys-merkel/>. For a monumental critique of German policy in the wake of the Euro crisis, see Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2018).

²¹ Jonathan Stearns, "EU Metals Tariffs Retaliation to Start June 22," *Bloomberg News*, June 20, 2018, <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/eu-metals-tariffs-retaliation-to-start-june-22-1.1095766>. For a timeline of the effects on U.S. whiskey manufacturing, see https://www.distilledspirits.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/U.S.-EU-UK-Retaliatory-Tariffs_-002.pdf.

Arguably Trump's deepest conviction about Germany involved its unsatisfactory performance as a military ally. His twitter feed, preserved in the "Trump Twitter Archive," contains frequent expressions of anger over Germany's lagging defense spending. March 18, 2017: "Germany owes vast sums of money to NATO & the United States must be paid more for the powerful, and very expensive, defense it provides to Germany!" December 8, 2018: "All we ask is that you pay your fair share of NATO. Germany is paying 1% while the U.S. pays 4.3% of a much larger GDP – to protect Europe. Fairness!"²² To be sure, there is a much longer history of U.S. presidents urging the European allies to spend more on defense. The Nixon administration used a strong-arm tactic similar to Trump's, threatening to scale down U.S. forces if Germany did not keep "offsetting" the cost of stationing American soldiers there.²³ But whereas Nixon's cabinet desperately needed 'burden-sharing' help from the Europeans and did not actually favor troop withdrawals, the Trump administration had the opposite priority. Demagogic attacks against free-loading Germans provided cover for a determined effort to wriggle free of alliance commitments.

Trump's views on Germany were impervious to change. In that sense, the July 2020 decision on troop levels – announcing that one-third of U.S. forces in Germany would be sent home or redeployed elsewhere in Europe – was long foreordained. "We spend a lot of money on Germany, they take advantage of us on trade and they take advantage on the military, so we're reducing the force," the President explained, leaving no doubt that his motive was purely punitive and not grounded in military considerations.²⁴ Yet like so many Trump decisions, the execution was hasty and improvised, with little input from the State Department or the Pentagon. The financial rationale was nonsensical; the redeployments would cost billions, and two countries favored in the relocation – Belgium and Italy – fell equally short in meeting NATO's spending targets.²⁵ Only after the withdrawal announcement did the Trump administration find a way to reward Poland, a bigger-spending NATO ally, by reestablishing the V Army Corps with a forward base in Poznan.²⁶

Trump's punishment of Germany can be seen as the culmination of his vision for the Atlantic alliance, a demonstrative act intended to sort out which leaders would kowtow to Washington, and which would not. By singling out Germany for abuse, the President treated the entire alliance as an instrument of American caprice. But in keeping with the Trump administration's typically chaotic decision-making, the action was also a case study in how the petty emotions of influential insiders could deflect the direction of U.S. policy. The ego in question here was that of Richard Grenell, Trump's handpicked ambassador to Berlin and a second major irritant in U.S.-German relations alongside the President himself.²⁷

Grenell's brief and turbulent two years as ambassador, from May 2018 through June 2020, magnified all of the most unwelcome features of the Trump presidency. Insulting tweets from the White House were bad enough; insults from a United States ambassador in Germany were completely unacceptable. Grenell's first noteworthy act on the job was an impolitic tweet sent on May 8, 2018, the very day he presented his credentials: "German companies doing business in Iran should wind down operations immediately."²⁸ He claimed that this was merely intended as friendly advice; with the Trump administration withdrawing from the "Iran Deal," the Joint Comprehensive Plan

²² <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/?searchbox=%22Germany%22&results=1>.

²³ Hubert Zimmermann, *Money and Security: Troops, Monetary Policy, and West Germany's Relations with the United States and Britain, 1950-1971* (New York: Cambridge, 2002).

²⁴ Ryan Browne and Zachary Cohen, "US to Withdraw Nearly 12,000 Troops from Germany in Move that Will Cost Billions and Take Years," *CNN*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/29/politics/us-withdraw-troops-germany/index.html>.

²⁵ Michael R. Gordon and Nancy Youssef, "Pentagon to Move Nearly 12,000 U.S. Troops From Germany," *Wall Street Journal*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/pentagon-to-detail-plans-for-u-s-troop-cuts-in-germany-11596026413>.

²⁶ John Vandiver, "V Corps Takes up Position at new Poland Headquarters," *Stars and Stripes*, Nov. 20, 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/europe/v-corps-takes-up-position-at-new-poland-headquarters-1.652807>.

²⁷ Matthias Gebauer, Christiane Hoffmann and René Pfister, "Trump's Former Ambassador to Germany Gets His Revenge," *SPIEGEL International*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/donald-trump-s-former-ambassador-to-germany-gets-his-revenge-a-e201cdf-9563-4ad8-be40-efb2c6fc6d99>.

²⁸ Tweet by @RichardGrenell, May 8, 2018, <https://twitter.com/RichardGrenell/status/993924107212394496>.

of Action (JCPOA), the U.S. was planning new economic counter-measures against the mullahs.²⁹ But it sounded like an order – and the timing, coming on the anniversary of Germany’s capitulation in World War II, reinforced the negative reaction. Veteran columnist and publisher Theo Sommer wondered why German foreign minister Heiko Maas should even bother meeting with an ambassador who practiced diplomacy by Twitter.³⁰ Wolfgang Ischinger, a former ambassador to Washington, tried to school Grenell gently in how diplomacy was supposed to work: “Explain your own country’s policies, and lobby the host country – but never tell the host country what to do, if you want to stay out of trouble. Germans are eager to listen, but they will resent instructions.”³¹

Grenell did not take the hint. He pushed hard on other economic questions, decrying Nord Stream 2 – the Russian gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea – as a conduit for European dependence on Russia. In another remarkable breach of diplomatic protocol, he wrote letters directly to German companies involved in building the pipeline, warning that they faced “a significant risk of sanctions.”³² More threats followed in March 2019 as Grenell sought to persuade Merkel’s government to bar the Chinese firm Huawei from any role in building Germany’s 5G telecommunications network. Pointing to the security risks inherent in Chinese technology, Grenell observed that Huawei’s presence would hamper U.S. intelligence sharing with Germany.³³ In both cases, regardless of the strong merits of the U.S. position, Grenell proved to be an unsuitable messenger; his poor reputation undermined the position of German officials and lawmakers who otherwise agreed with him. Opposition parties on the center and left, the Free Democratic Party and the Left Party, called on Merkel to declare Grenell persona non grata.³⁴ If German politicians sought political advantage in denouncing the U.S. ambassador, it was a sure sign that his mission was already a failure.

Almost as damning was the applause Grenell garnered from the right-populist Alternative for Germany (AfD). From the start, the ambassador expressed his intention to advance a political agenda: “I absolutely want to empower other conservatives throughout Europe,” he told the far-right *Breitbart* in June 2018. In classic populist language, he spoke of mobilizing a silent majority against the “group-think of a very small elitist crowd” that controlled European politics. Asked for an example, Grenell pointed to Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, calling him a “rockstar.”³⁵ This was, in effect, an endorsement of Kurz’s controversial political alliance between his own Austrian People’s Party and the right-populist Freedom Party of Austria. Interviewed by Tucker Carlson on Fox News, Grenell claimed that Kurz was gaining in popularity “throughout Germany” as a result of his hard line against immigration; Germans, he said, wanted leaders who promised secure borders. To news magazine *Der Spiegel*, this was a “thinly veiled call for a change of government in Berlin,” an affront against Angela Merkel’s governing coalition between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU) and Social Democratic Party

²⁹ Martin Knobbe, “A Visit With Trump’s Man in Berlin,” *SPIEGEL* International, May 23, 2018, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/a-profile-of-u-s-ambassador-to-germany-richard-grenell-a-1208545.html>.

³⁰ Theo Sommer, “Ein notorischer Vertragsverbrecher,” *Die Zeit*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2018-05/friedensnobelpreis-donald-trump-europa-5vor8>.

³¹ Tweet by @ischinger, May 9, 2018, <https://twitter.com/ischinger/status/994113518604636160>.

³² Darko Janjevic, “US Ambassador Richard Grenell Threatens German Firms over Russian Pipeline,” Deutsche Welle, January 13, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/us-ambassador-richard-grenell-threatens-german-firms-over-russian-pipeline/a-47062540>. The story first broke in *Bild am Sonntag*, a tabloid publication that was once extremely favorable to the United States.

³³ Bojan Pancevski and Sara Germano, “Drop Huawei or See Intelligence Sharing Pared Back, U.S. Tells Germany,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/drop-huawei-or-see-intelligence-sharing-pared-back-u-s-tells-germany-11552314827>.

³⁴ David Gilbert, “German Lawmakers want Trump’s Ambassador Kicked Out,” *VICE News*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/eve93a/german-lawmakers-want-trumps-ambassador-kicked-out>; “‘Die Linke’ Demands Berlin Expel Outspoken U.S. Ambassador,” *The Local* [Berlin], March 29, 2019, <https://www.thelocal.com/20190329/die-linke-demands-berlin-expel-outspoken-us-ambassador/>.

³⁵ Chris Tomlinson, “Trump’s Right Hand Man in Europe Rick Grenell Wants to ‘Empower’ European Conservatives,” *Breitbart*, June 3, 2018, <https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2018/06/03/trumps-right-hand-man-in-europe-wants-to-empower-european-anti-establishment-conservatives/>.

(SPD).³⁶ The ambassador's conduct bordered on internal interference in German sovereign affairs – though he did at least refrain from official meetings with AfD leaders, despite their shared views on immigration.³⁷

In light of Grenell's prior experience as a *Fox News* contributor, it was no surprise when he began lambasting German media outlets for publishing 'fake news.' He was not always wrong about this: in December 2018, *Der Spiegel* acknowledged that a prize-winning staff journalist, Claas Relotius, had fabricated long passages of his supposed field reports from Trump's America.³⁸ Any other U.S. ambassador might have thanked the magazine for publicly confronting its substantial lapses in journalistic integrity. Grenell exploited the occasion to blast the mainstream press, accusing *Der Spiegel* of crass anti-American bias.³⁹ The Relotius scandal did, indeed, expose uncomfortable truths about elite German journalism. Editors were catering to a German public that craved stories about the shabby xenophobia of small-town American life – just as Fox viewers apparently wanted to hear lurid, exaggerated reports about crimes perpetrated by migrants to Germany. The estrangement between Germans and Americans was not purely a function of Grenell's ham-handedness or even Trump's constant obscenities. But Grenell, with his frequent appearances on Fox, was a constituent part of the media ecosystem that fed off of and intensified negative images of Germany. He had little use for harmonious U.S.-German relations; he treated the country as a negative foil in speaking to domestic U.S. audiences – foremost among them the President himself.

In theory, a political appointee with the ear of the American President might be especially welcome to a host government. An ambassador with that kind of White House access can provide authentic presentations of a President's views.⁴⁰ Such an advantage did not accrue to a Trump appointee, given that there was never any doubt what this particular president thought on a daily basis. Closeness to Trump was, in fact, a liability for Grenell, since German public opinion toward the administration had already cratered by the time of his arrival. As Trump's reservoir of willing collaborators began to shrink, Grenell's ultra-loyal posture made him a significant asset in Washington, and he kept getting pulled in to perform other tasks – as a special envoy for Serbia and Kosovo (from October 2019) and as acting Director of National Intelligence (February – May 2020). Grenell tried to hang on to his post in Berlin, but German officials complained that his new roles were incompatible with full-time service as ambassador, and he finally tendered his resignation at the beginning of June 2020.⁴¹

Ambassadors do not ordinarily have sway over military strategy, yet Grenell – in conjunction with Trump's ambassador to Warsaw, Georgette Mosbacher – had been calling for redeployments from Germany to Poland for some time. He told the *German Press Agency* (dpa) in August 2019 that "it is actually offensive to assume the U.S. taxpayer must continue to pay to have 50,000-plus Americans in Germany, but the Germans get to spend their surplus on domestic programs."⁴² Some German analysts dismissed Grenell's threats about

³⁶ Konstantin von Hammerstein, "Trump's Ambassador Finds Few Friends in Germany," *SPIEGEL* International, Jan. 11, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/u-s-ambassador-richard-grenell-is-isolated-in-berlin-a-1247610.html>.

³⁷ Grenell later expressed regret that he had not met with AfD leader Alice Weidel; Chris Johnson, "Grenell Says not Meeting with Germany's Far-Right Leader a 'Difficult Thing': Report," *Washington Blade*, Oct. 6, 2020, <https://www.washingtonblade.com/2020/10/06/grenell-says-not-meeting-with-germanys-far-right-leader-a-difficult-thing-report/>.

³⁸ Ullrich Fichtner, "SPIEGEL legt Betrugsfall im eigenen Haus offen," *SPIEGEL*, Dec. 19, 2018, <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/fall-claas-relotius-spiegel-legt-betrug-im-eigenen-haus-offen-a-1244579.html>.

³⁹ Tim Stelloh, "U.S. Ambassador Accuses a Leading German News Magazine of Anti-American Bias," *NBC News*, Dec. 23, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/us-ambassador-accuses-leading-german-newsmagazine-anti-american-bias-n951486>.

⁴⁰ Stephen F. Szabo, "Richard Grenell: An American Ambassador Leaves Berlin," American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AICGS), June 9, 2020, <https://www.aicgs.org/2020/06/richard-grenell-an-american-ambassador-leaves-berlin/>.

⁴¹ Erik Kirschbaum, "Germans Demand U.S. Ambassador, a 'Biased Propaganda Machine,' Be Replaced," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 25, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-02-25/richard-grenell-ambassador-germany-acting-director-national-intelligence>.

⁴² Timothy Jones, "US Threatens to Withdraw Troops from Germany," *Deutsche Welle*, Aug. 9, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/us-threatens-to-withdraw-troops-from-germany/a-49959555>.

redeployments as a “PR stunt,” pointing to the enormous strategic significance of U.S. infrastructure in western and southern Germany.⁴³ The Merkel government did lay out plans to boost defense spending over time, albeit at a comically slow pace – achieving 1.5% of GDP by 2024 and 2% by 2031.⁴⁴ Grenell was scarcely mollified by this; and on his way out the door he resolved to defy German expectations by orchestrating the long-mooted troop withdrawals. Working behind the scenes with Trump and National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien, Grenell achieved the shock effect he was aiming for.⁴⁵ Afterwards he tweeted smugly: “Warning ignored.”⁴⁶ By all indications Grenell was and is proud of having taught the Germans a lesson.

In comparison with Trump and Grenell, both of whom cared more about media dynamics than institutional structures, Mike Pompeo had a bureaucratic role to play as Secretary of State. He came to office promising more stability for U.S. diplomats following the disruptive purges of the Rex Tillerson era.⁴⁷ Unlike Trump and Grenell, he had experience on the ground in Germany, having served as a tank commander at the Fulda Gap during the final years of the Cold War. Leaders in Berlin did their best to play up those historical connections, but Pompeo’s understanding of the past was flat and marked by a one-sided emphasis on U.S. dominance. For Pompeo, the United States could get its way merely by projecting confidence, or “swagger” – an attitude more familiar to Wilhelmine Germany than the Berlin Republic of the twenty-first century. His critique of multilateral institutions appalled his German counterparts, and his efforts to win bilateral German support for U.S. regional initiatives largely foundered. U.S. leadership never looked less convincing, or less palatable, to German counterparts.

Upon entering office in April 2018, Pompeo made reassuring noises about NATO, reaffirming the importance of mutual security in deterring Russian aggression.⁴⁸ As late as October 2018, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas claimed that Pompeo “listens to our viewpoints and deals with them constructively.” In observing that “the US is more than the White House,” Maas apparently hoped that Pompeo would push back against Trump’s callow rejection of the “ideology of globalism.”⁴⁹ Any such hopes were put to rest following a major address Pompeo delivered to the German Marshall Fund in December 2018. The Secretary of State opened with a nod to the years following World War II, when “collectively, we convened multilateral organizations to promote peace and cooperation among states.” But he went on to claim that these institutions no longer served their purposes well – neither the UN nor the World Bank nor the International Monetary Fund nor the European Union. The core problem, he asserted, was the “poisoned fruit of American retreat... Bad actors have exploited our lack of leadership for their own gain.” He denounced China, Iran, and Russia as countries that were undermining the international system, even as Trump’s America sought to reform it. “We aspire to make the international order serve our citizens – not to control them.” Perhaps Pompeo did take the prospect of institutional reform seriously; but it sounded as though he

⁴³ Tweet by @thorstenbenner, Aug. 10, 2019, <https://twitter.com/thorstenbenner/status/1160132337444818944>, referencing Paul-Anton Krüger, “Kalte Kosten-Nutzen-Rechnung,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Aug. 9, 2019, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/us-truppen-deutschland-grenell-abzug-1.4559036>.

⁴⁴ Robin Emmott, “Germany Commits to NATO Spending Goal by 2031 for First Time,” *Reuters*, Nov. 7, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-nato/germany-commits-to-nato-spending-goal-by-2031-for-first-time-idUSKBN1XH1IK>.

⁴⁵ Zachary Cohen, Vivian Salama and Barbara Star, “Germany Troop Withdrawal Highlights Rising Fortunes of Two White House Allies amid Esper’s Isolation,” *CNN*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/26/politics/germany-troop-withdrawal-obrien-grenell-esper-isolation-pentagon-tensions-trump/index.html>.

⁴⁶ Tweet by @RichardGrenell, July 30, 2020, <https://twitter.com/RichardGrenell/status/1288885381119827968>.

⁴⁷ Alex Ward, “Mike Pompeo Spent his First Week as Secretary of State being the Anti-Rex Tillerson,” *Vox*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/5/2/17306630/mike-pompeo-trump-tillerson-state-department>.

⁴⁸ Lesley Wroughton, “On First Day, Pompeo Charms NATO but Warns on Iran, Defense Spending,” *Reuters*, April 27, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/places/brazil/article/us-nato-foreign-pompeo/hours-into-the-job-pompeo-in-brussels-for-show-of-support-for-nato-idUSKBN1HY0CA>; Nick Wadhams, “Trump Confronts NATO. Then Pompeo Praises It,” *Bloomberg*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-07-11/trump-s-nato-digs-followed-by-pompeo-s-praise-for-the-alliance>.

⁴⁹ Maas interview with SPIEGEL Online, “The US is More than the White House,” posted by the Federal Foreign Office on Oct. 2, 2018, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/maas-spiegel-online/2144366>.

wished to replace any semblance of a multilateral, rule-based order with naked American might. “America intends to lead,” he intoned, “now and always.”⁵⁰

German observers read Pompeo’s speech as a watershed, a definitive U.S. repudiation of the cooperative legacy of the Marshall Plan and the liberal international order.⁵¹ In response, Heiko Maas redoubled his efforts to forge a political counterweight, an “alliance for multilateralism,” at the United Nations. Maas advanced the notion with his counterparts from France, Canada, and Japan during the Munich Security Conference in February 2019; refined the contours in tandem with French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian in April; and convened the foreign ministers of fifty countries for an inaugural session in New York in September 2019.⁵² In substantive terms, the “alliance for multilateralism” has avoided head-on collisions with the United States; but merely to stress the significance of international cooperation on climate or health or humanitarian law is to rebuke the nation-state egotism espoused by the Trump administration. Just as Merkel rallied G-7 and G-20 leaders against Trump’s climate policies, so Maas performed a similar organizing function for a much wider circle of foreign ministers. Participating ministers have continued to meet via videoconference throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Operating below the level of lofty and diametrically opposed principles, Pompeo’s State Department did maintain a semblance of working relations with German authorities. Here and there Germans acceded to U.S. requests – barring an Iranian airline from landing in Germany, or imposing sanctions on Russia in response to the radiation poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in London.⁵³ At the urging of Israel and the U.S., Germany outlawed the Iranian-backed Hezbollah organization in April 2020, and enforced the ban with raids on mosques.⁵⁴ But on larger questions such as the “Iran Deal,” German and U.S. policy remained at loggerheads, and there is little indication that German policy makers were moved by U.S. entreaties concerning Syria, Afghanistan, or North Korea, let alone China. Pompeo did, at least, see value in attempting to line up German support for U.S. positions; but what incentive did Germany have to follow the U.S. lead at a time when Washington commanded so little respect?

Merkel’s government offered an olive branch in November 2019 by inviting Pompeo to participate in the 30th anniversary celebrations commemorating the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁵⁵ Maas escorted Pompeo to Modlareuth, a tiny German town that had been separated by the East-West border during the Cold War; the Secretary of State took special note of a “plaque honoring American troops who protected peace and freedom in Western Europe.” Pompeo spoke with earnest conviction about common values: “We share a strong belief in the rule of law and in democracy, human dignity, free speech, freedom of religion...”⁵⁶ But after returning to Berlin, during the unveiling of a statue of Ronald Reagan on the grounds of the U.S. embassy, Pompeo reverted to his customary American exceptionalism: “(N)o other nation holds high the cause of human dignity in the same way that the United States does.” By demanding that Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev “tear down this wall!” Reagan had shown himself to be “an indispensable leader of the signal American mission to defend

⁵⁰ Pompeo, Remarks to the German Marshall Fund, Brussels, Belgium, Dec. 4, 2018, <https://ua.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-secretary-pompeo-at-the-german-marshall-fund/>.

⁵¹ Paul-Anton Krüger, “US-Außenminister stellt international Ordnung in Frage,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Dec. 4, 2018, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/rede-in-bruessel-us-aussenminister-stellt-internationale-ordnung-infrage-1.4238788>.

⁵² For the group’s programmatic statements, see multilateralism.org (<https://multilateralism.org/>) as well as corresponding material on the home page of the French foreign ministry (<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/united-nations/multilateralism-a-principle-of-action-for-france/alliance-for-multilateralism/>).

⁵³ “Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at a Joint Press Availability,” Berlin, May 31, 2019, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/secretary-of-state-michael-r-pompeo-and-german-foreign-minister-heiko-maas-at-a-joint-press-availability/index.html>.

⁵⁴ Ivana Kottasová, Frederik Pleitgen and Nadine Schmidt, “Germany Bans Lebanese Militant Group Hezbollah and Raids Mosques and Homes,” *CNN*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/30/europe/germany-bans-hezbollah-grm-intl/index.html>.

⁵⁵ For an invaluable study of the significance of Berlin Wall commemorations since 1989, see Hope Harrison, *After the Berlin Wall: Memory and the Making of the New Germany, 1989 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge, 2019); H-Diplo Roundtable at <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/6632323/h-diplo-roundtable-xxii-10-harrison-after-berlin-wall-memory-and>.

⁵⁶ “Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas At a Joint Press Availability,” Leipzig, Nov. 7, 2019, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-german-foreign-minister-heiko-maas-at-a-press-availability/index.html>.

unalienable rights.”⁵⁷ Such language was grating to German ears and ran at cross-purposes with Pompeo’s rhetoric about shared values. There was little scope for multilateral cooperation if the United States insisted on setting the terms unilaterally – especially in light of the Trump administration’s dubious relationship with the ‘rule of law.’

The following summer, when the Trump administration’s punitive troop withdrawals were announced, Pompeo played along – despite his exclusion from the decision-making process. Neither Washington nor Berlin was really pretending to aspire to partnership any longer. Merkel refused to attend a planned G-7 summit at Camp David, citing the global pandemic; but by this point it was hard to imagine what kind of productive gathering could be chaired by Donald J. Trump.⁵⁸ Pompeo and Maas spoke by phone every month or so during the pandemic, but there were few points of common action. As U.S. pressure mounted against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline – this time in the form of a letter by three Senators threatening sanctions – Maas conveyed his “displeasure” to Pompeo.⁵⁹ Ongoing clashes over Huawei marked Pompeo’s final months in office, as did a constant stream of rumors about a planned U.S. strike against Iran. German leaders did not trust the Trump administration to keep the peace, and worried that political desperation might yet lead to violence. As the President’s response to electoral defeat demonstrated, such fears were not entirely misplaced.

“The only thing that will help now is to hibernate [*überwintern*],” remarked Wolfgang Ischinger during Trump’s second year in office.⁶⁰ The metaphor suggested that spring would follow the Trumpian winter, and U.S.-German relations would thaw accordingly. But international politics is not as cyclical as the seasons, and after four years of Trump neither the U.S. nor Germany can set back the clock to January 2017. Germans have begun to forge other paths, such as Heiko Maas’s nascent “alliance for multilateralism.” For her part, the long-serving Merkel remembers well the immoderate enthusiasm Europeans showed toward Barack Obama in 2008-9 as he replaced the hugely unpopular George W. Bush. This time around, President Biden should not count on being embarrassed with an awkwardly premature Nobel Peace Prize.

With the political scene in Germany now fully given over to the fall parliamentary elections, Merkel’s outgoing government is scarcely in a position to recalibrate its foreign policy. Both coalition parties, the Christian Democrats and especially the Social Democrats, are keen on completing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline regardless of what the Biden administration thinks.⁶¹ Merkel has yielded her seat as CDU party chair to Armin Laschet, a regional politician who appears unlikely to push hard against the German business interests that are heavily invested in energy imports from Russia and capital goods exports to China.⁶² After years of being browbeaten by an amoral and incoherent Trump administration – and wrestling with the farcical and extremely time-consuming process of Brexit – the CDU/SPD coalition is fundamentally unreceptive to leadership or even expertise coming from the Anglo-American world.⁶³

⁵⁷ Pompeo speech, “The Lessons of 1989: Freedom and Our Future,” Nov. 8, 2019, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-lessons-of-1989-freedom-and-our-future/index.html>. For background, see Bojan Pancevski, “Berlin Didn’t Want a Reagan Statue – but It’s Getting One Anyway,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 6, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/berlin-didnt-want-a-reagan-statue-but-its-getting-one-anyway-11573055038>.

⁵⁸ Matthew Karnitschnig, David M. Herszenhorn, Jacopo Barigazzi and Andrew Gray, “Merkel Rebuffs Trump Invitation to G7 Summit,” *Politico*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-rebuffs-donald-trump-invitation-to-g7-summit/>.

⁵⁹ David Rising, “Germany’s Maas Confronts Pompeo over Pipeline Threat,” *AP News*, Aug. 10, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/baltic-sea-heiko-maas-angela-merkel-mike-pompeo-ted-cruz-8fc6b65665b746bc84134835e6a055f7>.

⁶⁰ Bernd Riegert, “EU-Ratschef Tusk haut auf den Putz,” *Deutsche Welle*, May 16, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/de/eu-ratschef-tusk-haut-auf-den-putz/a-43813034>.

⁶¹ Steven Pifer, “Rebuilding US-German relations: Harder than it appears,” Brookings, March 25, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/03/25/rebuilding-us-german-relations-harder-than-it-appears/>.

⁶² Laurenz Gehrke, “German conservative Armin Laschet: 5 things to know,” *Politico*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-conservative-cdu-csu-armin-laschet-5-things-to-know-elections-chancellor/>.

⁶³ See Adrian Daub’s marvelously perceptive essay on why German financial regulators ignored years’ worth of detailed reporting by the *Financial Times* about fraud at Wirecard, a German payments-processing company. “The Weird, Extremely German Origins of the Wirecard Scandal,” *The New Republic*, April 21, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/162084/weird-extremely-german-origins-wirecard-scandal>.

If there is one force in Germany that has taken away constructive lessons from the Trump years, it is the Green Party. Under co-chairs Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck, the Greens have developed a realist critique of Russia and a human rights critique of China – positions that are compatible with Biden’s team without having been imposed from the outside. Remarkably, a party with its origins in the ecological and peace movements now embraces the deterrent logic of NATO as a bulwark against Russia.⁶⁴ September 26 is many months away, but the Greens stand atop the polls and are very likely to be participants in – or leaders of – the next governing coalition. Political renewal in Germany may provide an opportunity for a refounded U.S.-German partnership pursuing twenty-first century goals such as climate protection.

On the other hand, reminders of Trump’s America still abound in Germany. The right-populist AfD – in league with an assortment of so-called “independent thinkers” [*Querdenker*] – has been mimicking the style and slogans of the Coronavirus protests at various U.S. state houses. Even QAnon flags have made an appearance. This is not an insignificant corner of German politics; the AfD is polling over ten per cent, putting it within a few percentage points of the SPD and the Free Democrats (FDP). Over time, the larger stumbling block for U.S.-German relations may not be the staggering number of Germans who disapproved of Trump, but rather the uncomfortable number of Germans who still admire him. The Biden administration must certainly hope that memories of the 45th president and his brash loyalists, Grenell and Pompeo, will disappear swiftly. There is scant legacy to build on from their time in power. Fortunately, the haphazard execution of Trump’s orders has ensured that most decisions, including the withdrawal of soldiers from America’s most vital European ally, can still be revisited.

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⁶⁴ See the joint interview with Franziska Brantner (Green foreign policy expert) and Stephen Wertheim (Quincy Institute) in *Die Zeit*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/2021-03/usa-transatlantic-relations-franziska-brantner-stephen-wertheim-english/komplettansicht>; Brantner is far more positive about the U.S. contribution to NATO than is Wertheim. On Baerbock, Sheena McKenzie, “Meet Annalena Baerbock, the trampolinist giving Germany’s Green party a bounce in the race to succeed Angela Merkel,” CNN, May 11, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/11/europe/annalena-baerbock-german-green-party-leader-cmd-grm-intl/index.html>.