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Only Guantanamo Stands Between Two Leaders

Bush and Germany's Angela Merkel disagreed on closing the prison. Otherwise, they got along fine.

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Philadelphia Inquirer
January 14, 2006

President Bush rejected a suggestion yesterday from German Chancellor Angela Merkel that the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba be closed.

But their gently worded disagreement during a news conference did little to dampen the warm spirits they displayed toward each other during Merkel's first visit to the White House in her new job.

The United States and Germany are seeking to improve relations that had soured because of former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's fierce opposition to the Iraq war and generally bad blood between him and Bush.

Merkel was on a mission to make nice but also to show her independence, especially regarding Bush's detainee prison at Guantanamo, which is widely unpopular in Western Europe.

She did so by raising the issue during her 45-minute Oval Office meeting with Bush and acknowledging it publicly in a subsequent news conference. Merkel's opposition to the prison was no surprise, as she had outlined her objections in a German magazine interview before arriving in Washington.

"Yes, she brought up the subject, and I can understand why she brought it up, because there's some misconceptions about Guantanamo," Bush said after their meeting.

"Guantanamo is a necessary part of protecting the American people," Bush contended, "and so long as the war on terror goes on, and so long as there's a threat, we will inevitably need to hold people that would do ourselves harm in a system... in which people will be treated humanely."

Speaking in German, Merkel said that she and Bush discussed the issue "openly" and that she agreed with him on the nature and dimension of the terrorist threat. But she added that Germany and other European nations "need to come up with convincing proposals as to how we ought to deal with detainees."

Guantanamo has become a symbol in Europe for what many people see as Bush administration excesses in hunting down and interrogating potential terrorists. At least one German is among about 500 foreign-born men held indefinitely at the prison camp on Cuba's eastern tip.

Bush said the United States and Germany still disagreed over the Iraq war, despite the change in chancellors.

"It's been a difficult issue in our relationship, and I fully understand that," he said. "But in spite of disagreements, we share the desire for the Iraqi people to live in freedom."

Bush appeared relaxed with Merkel, a far cry from his stiff, edgy body language during meetings with Schroeder. Their relationship got so bad that Bush sometimes refused to take Schroeder's phone calls.

Bush felt comfortable enough with Merkel to needle her about something they have in common: "We both didn't exactly landslide our way into office," he said, referring to his contested election in 2000 and her close race in November.

The President, who stated early in his administration that he looked into Russian President Vladimir V. Putin's eye and found someone who was straightforward and trustworthy, left his meeting with good vibrations about Merkel.

"She's smart; she's plenty capable. She's got kind of a spirit to her that's appealing," he said toward the end of the news conference. "I'm looking forward to consultations, visits, contacts, phone calls, all the things you do. And now I'm going to take her to lunch."