

Barack Obama, Europe and the Transatlantic Relationship: From the World's White Knight to the Spy that Came in from the Cold? – A German Perspective

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ABSTRACT: Reading assessments of the transatlantic relationship omnipresent in the German media in 2014, one could easily assume that the so-called “Obamania” that had swept over Europe six years ago, has not significantly improved transatlantic relations since the Bush years. While Barack Obama was celebrated in the German media in 2008 as the presidential candidate with the “Messiah-Factor,” only six years later he was disparagingly dubbed the “Drone Warrior.” Examining the German media’s evaluation of the transatlantic relationship, one can observe an almost seamless transition from the celebration of a Obamanite age of multilateralism to the declaration of a new “transatlantic Ice Age.” Considering this circumstance, the following paper aims at giving this shift in transatlantic perceptions closer attention. It will be looking at how the perception of transatlantic relations under Barack Obama has been reflected and interpreted in German media discourse over the course of his presidency and which role President Obama plays as imaginative projection surface in the negotiation of a “Eurotopian” narrative of self in this context.

KEYWORDS: Obama; American Presidency; Transatlantic Relationship; European Identity; NSA

Commenting on U.S. diplomat Victoria Nuland’s polemic judgment of the European Union’s Ukraine policy—“Fuck the EU”—*Focus Online* firmly demanded in February 2014: “Europa muss sich vom amerikanischen Einfluss endlich lösen” (Vogel). Reading such assessments of the transatlantic relationship omnipresent in the German media in 2014, one could easily assume that the so-called “Obamania” that had swept over Europe six years ago has had no remarkable impact on the relations between the U.S. and its European partners. Have transatlantic relations simply returned to the status quo before Barack Obama had entered the stage? At first sight it seems a long way from the presidential candidate with the “Messiah-Factor” who appeared to be “The World’s White Knight” to the with the “License to Kill” (“Messias-Faktor”; “Barack Retter”; Kornelius,Rüb).

Reading the European perspective on the transatlantic partnership through German public discourse, this paper will offer a closer examination of the almost seamless perceptual transition from the proclamation of a “New Era” to that of a new “Ice Age” between the U.S. and Europe.

In order to address this matter, I will, in the following have a look at how perceptions of transatlantic relations under President Obama have been reflected and interpreted in the German media discourse. In the first part of the paper, in order to fully grasp the perceptual shift that took place during Barack Obama's time in presidential office, I will briefly sketch out the implications of early perceptions of Obama during his first presidential campaign in 2008. In a second step I attempt to clarify in how far I see current perceptions of the transatlantic relationship, as reflected in the German media, going beyond a, as Kristof Nichols terms it, mere redefinition of the "Brand America" in Europe ("Rebranding"). As I will elaborate in the following, I would like to suggest seeing the Obama presidency as a catalytic watershed in a long-standing European process of redefining the transatlantic relationship per se. Before giving European perceptions of the transatlantic relationship in the 21st century a closer reading from a German vantage point, we first have to understand the place that "America" has taken up in German imagination in the past.

From the 18th Century on German-American relations served as a space to narrate the German self. Co-existing in a deeply engrained love-hate-relationship, utopia and dystopia continuously fought over the definitorial prerogative in this context. As much as anything else, as Mary Nolan puts it, America was everything to the German: "a model to be embraced," "a model to be selectively appropriated," or one to be "emphatically rejected" (3). As she goes on:

America was both fascinating and frustrating because it had built a contradictory society and culture on the basis of European colonists and immigrants, who had brought but then transformed European institutions, practices, and values. It seemed deceptively familiar at the same time that it was appealingly – or appallingly – foreign. (5)

For given reasons America served as viable screen on which Germans projected their own fantasies and fears; it provided visions of the past and the future against which Germans could position themselves. Due to its history, America "represented another, that yet was not completely other" (Nolan 3). Oscillating between feelings of admiration and envy, according to Brendon O'Connor, Germany's relationship with the "New World" was always defined by a "coexistence of attraction and disdain" (78).

In the following the major phases of German-American relations and their respective functional narratives playing a role in this context will be briefly laid out. Beginning with the onset of America's independence movement during the mid-18th century which turned the North American continent into more than a "European outpost," the German-American relationship can roughly be divided into four major stages: the inception of America as space of massive European settlement to the end of the Second World War (1800-1945), the post-WWII Cold War-Era (1945-1989), Post-Cold-War Phase from 1989 on, and the post- 9/11 Era (2001).

The first of these phases is defined by a number of aspects: On the one hand German perceptions were driven by a fascination with America as a space of political, economic and technological modernity. According to Wolfgang Hardtwig, America was seen as an open experimental field and a role model for the negotiation of the modern nation state (206). On the other hand many German contemporaries at the time considered America to be an arcadian "Garden Eden" defined by a state of limitless natural diversity and resources, and a vast, untouched landscape. As Etta Madden notes, America was imagined as the "land of milk and honey" (6). At the same time German perceptions of America were also defined by a deeply engrained disdain for the materialist "Yankee" nature of "the American": uncultured, greedy, superficial. In the face of their own 19th and 20th century challenges, Germans hovered between a negatively connoted and "largely culturally-oriented criticism premised on the laborious conjuration of European cultural superiority and America's uncultivated inferiority"—"the ugly other"—and the admiration of America as model of success (O'Connor 78).

The post-WWII phase gave German-American relations a new foundation. With the U.S. as occupying force in Germany, America, according to Gerrit-Jan Berendse, stood as "the sole viable guarantor of national survival, economic recovery and cultural prosperity" (334). "To become Western-European was to go through the school of Americanization," thereby turning Americanness into "the basis for a new sense of common identity" in Western European states, as Jan-Gerrit Berendse put it (341). Germany's "Wirtschaftswunder" was driven by Coca Cola, Rock'n' Roll and James Dean. Hence, there remained few alternatives:

you would either accept the narrative of America as the natural role model or reject America as cultural and political imperialist. As one of Wim Wender's protagonists claims in the 1976 film *Kings of the Road*: "[T]he Yanks have colonized our sub-consciousness" (*Kings of the Road* 1976). In this period America received either a somewhat natural form of admiration or was seen as the "hated other."

The third phase of the German-American relationship set in with the end of the Cold War and the ideological void this left in Western Europe. In this period the German perception of the transatlantic relationship was mostly defined by instability. The following parameters were determinative: With America's victory in the Cold War, globalization was perceived as being equal to an Americanization of the globe. As Peter Beinhart claims, "[b]y Bill Clinton's second term, what Americans called 'globalization' was in the rest of the world increasingly being called 'Americanization'" (290). The leading question that surfaced now, was: "Are we all American now?"¹ On the other hand, there was a feeling of self-confidence inspired by the liberation "from the omnipresence of the armed forces in the 1990s" (Berendse 344). Germany strived for a redefinition of the German-American relationship mostly driven by the wish to claim an independent political identity on the world stage. With the call for holding up cultural independence, Germany now laboriously worked on loosening its ties with the U.S., while at the same time shifting to a Eurocentric focus. In this phase of identity disorientation, a mix of anti-globalist and anti-American standpoints as well as a profound inability to form an independent identity dominated the general perception of German-American relations.

9/11, according to Russell Berman, can be seen as the most recent turning point in German-American relations (16). After Europe's collective declaration of deeply felt empathy and loyalty with the U.S. after the terrorist attacks—"We are all Americans"—Germany, as much of the rest of Europe, quickly began to publicly express astonishment over the rigorous unwillingness of America's political elite and the broad public to critically discuss the cultural and political origins that gave rise to 9/11 (Colombani; Wagner). The apparent insularity of

¹ see also: Robert, Singh. "Are We all American Now? Explaining Anti-Americanisms?" in: *The Rise of Anti-Americanism*. Eds. Brendon O'Connor and Martin Griffiths. London: Routledge, 2005. 25-47.

American society and its sole resort to a seemingly “blind” patriotism and nationalism severely disturbed transatlantic relations (Vanaik 12). In this phase the German-American relationship experienced a decidedly negative redefinition. George W. Bush’s declaration of the “War on Terror” led to a massive surge of Germans claiming a Eurocentric identity. Reacting to this, continental Europe had to engage in a sustainable effort to display “cultural, intellectual, and political independence after being [America’s] ‘little brother’ during the Cold War” (Berendse 337). With Bush’s proclamation “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” and Donald Rumsfeld’s depreciative declaration of France and Germany as “Old Europe”, the Bush administration – once again – turned America into the impersonation of a recklessly imperialist world power (Bush; Rumsfeld). Many German magazine covers dealing with the Bush presidency openly put forward this perception. While a 2001 *Spiegel* cover was blazoned with Bush dressed up as gun-slinging cowboy claiming the globe as his own (“Der Kleine Sheriff”), one year later Bush and his administration adorned the cover of the *Spiegel* as Rambo with his superhero-team of, for example, Colin Powell as Batman or Donald Rumsfeld and Condoleeza Rice as Hercules and Xena (“Bush Krieger”). A third cover published by the *Stern* in December 2013 promoted a similar message, showing George W. Bush as the Statue of Liberty who is about to set the world on fire with its liberty flame (“Bushs Spiel”). It becomes more than obvious when looking at these examples that the German media’s reflections on the administration across the Atlantic take an open anti-Americanist standpoint. Under these circumstances, definitorial identity narratives began to shift their focus towards Europe defining a counter-image to the U.S. – the alien “other.”

In 2008, “Obamania” unstoppably gained momentum around the globe, seemingly resolving the previously deeply rooted anti-Americanism that had literally exploded after George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq. When Obama delivered his first “Berlin” speech in mid-2008 during his international campaign tour more than 250,000 people enthusiastically celebrated him like a pop-star. Headlines in the German news corroborate this perception: “Obamania! Amerika’s Hoffnung heute in Berlin” or “Barack Obama – Retter in der Not” (Schneeweiß; “Barack Retter”). In a *Pew* opinion poll taken in mid-2009, 93% of the German population claimed to have “confidence in Obama to do the right thing in world affairs” (Kohut,

“Confidence”). All reactions to Obama summoned here seem to zero in on one central assumption about Barack Obama: he appeared to be the “savior” of the transatlantic relationship. Roughly the same can be noted with regard to overall European perceptions: In 2009, 86% of the respondents to a *Pew* poll focusing on global opinions on Obama claimed to have “confidence in Obama” (Kohut, “Global”). Europeans seemed to believe that the transatlantic relationship was bound to improve thanks to the incoming Obama administration. The overwhelming reaction to the appearance of Barack Obama on the international political stage, therefore, without a doubt, can be seen as the most recent shift in the German-American relationship.

Taking a closer look at the German media’s interpretation of Barack Obama’s positive impact on transatlantic relations, a number of different explanations for this circumstance can be found. One very popular explanation of Obama’s success brought forth by the German media, was seeing it as rooting in his charismatic personality, as, for example, the *Spiegel* indicates with its title: “Der Messias-Faktor - Barack Obama und die Sehnsucht nach einem neuen Amerika” (“Messias-Faktor”). On a more practical level, *Bild* took up a similar perspective with regard to the question of Obama’s campaigning techniques, titling “Macht uns den Obama,” while a *Focus Online* article labeled Barack Obama “Mr. Charisma” in mid-2008 (“Macht uns”; Steinlein). Closely related to this interpretation of the Obama hype, the German media also traced Obama’s success back to his “Generation-Pop-Campaign.” Obama was seen as the “Pop-President.” This perception of Barack Obama is most prominently reflected in the July 2008 *Spiegel* cover with the title “Deutschland trifft den Superstar – Barack Obamas Auftritt in Berlin” (“Deutschland Superstar”). This play on Germany’s music casting show “Deutschland sucht den Superstar” was accompanied by Obama being the first politician to whom Germany’s most successful youth magazine *Bravo* devoted a poster to (Albers). A third reading of the German “Obamania” considered it as an expression of a long-lasting German desire to be allowed a new beginning with its transatlantic love affair: While even the left-leaning and America-critical *TAZ* paternally declared Barack Obama a good choice, *Bild* exuberantly cheered over the relieving certainty that - “Yes We Can be Freunde” (“Gute Wahl”; “Yes We Can”). The last very popular explanatory model summoned in the German media seemed to be the most obvious one: “Obamania” was simply the logical

consequence out of the Anti-Bush-Years and Obama primarily embodied the “Triumph des Anti-Bush” (Follath).

All these explanatory attempts have one major aspect in common: at first sight they could allow the precipitate assumption that the German media considers “Obama’s America” a sure path for Germany to fall in love with America again. This way of looking at the matter however carries one central weakness: it would be perfunctory to merely reduce the German media’s initial positive interpretation of Barack Obama, and its swiftly following shift in interpreting Obama “in office” in negative terms, to blind naïveté. At a second glance it becomes clear that this reading would not sufficiently take into consideration a, as Andrei Markovits and Ruth Hatlapa convincingly argue, continuous ubiquity of strong anti-American strands in German discourse accompanying Obama’s initially positive perception on the international political stage. Frank Plasberg, a German TV talk master, for example, announced on occasion of a shooting rampage at a German Highschool in 2009: “Fassungslosigkeit nach dem Amoklauf: [...] Müssen wir uns an amerikanische Verhältnisse in Deutschland gewöhnen?”(Plasberg). In a similar vein the *Spiegel* commented in 2011: “Soziale Ungleichheit: Deutschland wird amerikanischer” (Böcking). German reporting on the world economic crisis arising in 2008 is also revealing in this context. The German media seems to have collectively agreed that it was America’s rampant and disinhibited “Kasino Kapitalismus” (Jakobs) that plunged the whole world economy into disaster. That way negative perceptions of “Americanness” in Germany integrate well into a, at the present, globally persistent perception of America’s cultural and political influence as something negative. According to Historian Jessica Gienow-Hecht current views of the United States around the world are increasingly defined by a wide-spread feeling of apprehension and skepticism towards “the global political implications of American power” (32).

Taking a closer look at the German media landscape it becomes clear that even with the perceived dawning of a new political climate around the globe initiated by Barack Obama’s appearance in the international arena, negative perceptions of “Americanness” per se

remained firmly in place.²³ This circumstance undoubtedly requires consideration when aiming at understanding the seamless transition of German estimations of the transatlantic relationship from “Obamania” to a “New Ice Age.”

As it seems, it misses the question to reduce the “Phenomenon Obama” to a blind European desire wishing back its “beloved America” or to a thoughtless veneration of Obama’s enigmatic personality. In line with Markovits and Hatlapa, who claim that Obama’s popularity was based on him being seen “as a de facto European,” I suggest seeing Obama’s “otherness” as *the* central aspect in this context (86). Over the course of the 2008 American presidential campaign, the German media developed a clear-set definitorial narrative constructing “their own” Obama: the better America evoked in Obama was driven by a Eurotopian fantasy of self. By declaring Obama, as Jeff Weintraub has termed it, an “honorary European,” excitement about Obama could easily be brought in line with negative perceptions of the U.S. and its culture (“Blind Spots”). As could be read in the *Spiegel* in early 2008:

Obama [...] er wirkt so schön europäisch: nicht Cowboy aus Texas, sondern Harvard-Absolvent mit städtischem Hintergrund, statt "straight shooter" einer, der auf Dialog setzt und gegenseitiges Verständnis. (Beste)

Obama with his “European” traits thus was not only what “we wished for”—he was “like us.” Even in 2012, when “Obamania” seemed to have been replaced by disillusionment, Obama the “honorary European” remained in place. The *Zeit*, for instance, commented on Obama’s television debate with Mitt Romney:

² see: “Die Welt erwartet eine „neue Ära.“ FAZ Online. FAZ, 05 Nov. 2008. Web. 22 Feb. 2013.; or: The Nobel Peace Prize for 2009 to President Barack Obama - Press Release". *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014. Web. 15 Apr 2015: Press Release Nobel Peace Prize Committee 2009: “Obama has as President created a new climate in international politics. Multilateral diplomacy has regained a central position, with emphasis on the role that the United Nations and other international institutions can play. Dialogue and negotiations are preferred as instruments for resolving even the most difficult international conflicts.”

³ also see German/European media discourse on TTIP & Ukraine crisis: Luenen, Chris. “Europa muss seine Beziehungen zu den USA neu Justieren.” *Die Zeit Online*. Zeit 9 Jun. 2014. Web. 6 Aug. 2014.; Klingst, Martin “Ukraine-Krise – Ein Keil zwischen Merkel und Obama?.” *Die Zeit Online*. Zeit 9 Feb. 2015. Web. 12 Feb. 2015.; for a closer reading of the aspect of recent anti-Americanism in Germany also see: Markovits, Andrei, and Ruth Hatlapa. “Obamania and Anti-Americanism as Complementary Concepts in German Discourse.” *German Politics and Society* 28. 1 (2010): 69-94.

Aber bei der Debatte war er [Barack Obama] wie gelähmt oder abwesend – als fühle er sich tief unwohl auf diesem Podium, in seinem Amt und in der ganzen lästigen, schmutzigen, undankbaren Politik. (Klingst)

Obama is clearly described here as feeling uncomfortable in the triteness of these dirty American politics. As the article goes on to argue:

Dass Barack Obama so neben sich zu stehen schien, ist kein bloßer Unfall, es gehört zu seinem Wesen [...]. Er ist ein Intellektueller, ein Beobachter, auch ein Selbstbeobachter – kein instinktives Machttier, dem es in seiner Kämpferhaut behagt und das auf seine Reflexe vertraut. (Klingst)

Obama, from a German perspective, is perceived as an intellectual – not as the typical American “political animal.” The *Zeit* article makes clear that Obama epitomizes “the reflective president.” This image of Obama is emphasized when the article contrasts Obama with Mitt Romney’s “rückwärtsgewandten Gewissheiten über die Wiederentdeckung amerikanischer Stärke und die ungebrochenen Kräfte des freien Marktes,” Obama allegorizes “the reflective president.” Thus Obama – unlike the average American politician out in the Washington frontier—is portrayed as an enlightened thinker. Obama offers the America we want: a “European” America shaped by a self-perceived European Enlightenment intellectualism and political sophistication.

What further accentuates this perception of Obama’s Europeanness was the harsh rejection he experienced in the United States with regard to many of his political decisions, as for example his healthcare reform. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented on this discrepancy in mid-2010:

Keine europäische Gesellschaft könnte solche Zahlen politisch ertragen. [...]Aber jene Art von zivilem Krieg, in dem sich die Amerikaner im Streit um banalste Details ihrer Gesundheitsreform niedermachen, würde die Berliner Republik nicht aushalten. Man stelle sich vor: In Quakenbrück oder Hoyerswerda kämen Merkel-Gegner mit geladenem Gewehr zur Versammlung. In Flensburg, Stendal und Rosenheim brüllten Protestler die Regierung mal als Nazis, mal als Kommunisten nieder. Oder irgendwo sonst würde sich im Gemeindesaal ein Wähler als "rechtsextremer Terrorist" hervortun, worauf ihm der Herr Abgeordnete entgegenruft: "Gott segne Sie, Amen!". So geht es zu in dem Amerika, das nun Barack Obama regiert. Nicht um die blutigen Kriege im Irak und in Afghanistan ringt die Nation bis aufs Messer - da kennt man nur

Patrioten. Nein, Rechte und Linke zerfleischen sich über Versicherungspflicht und öffentliche Ersatzkassen. (Wernicke "Gesundheitsreform")

Reading German media coverage of "America's" reaction to Obama's healthcare reform as primitive chaos and uncivilized barbarism, Obama appears as even more alien in this environment. This imagination of "Obama the European" reveals a new dimension of the German-American relationship: The "European Obama" opened up the much-desired space, making possible the realization of the often-claimed "European self's" superiority. Obama seemed to physically embody a "Eurotopian fantasy" of self that so far had remained too elusive to gain traction. Reading the following editorial in the *Zeit* on occasion of Obama's victory in 2008 this becomes very clear:

Fünf lange Jahre waren die USA uns Deutschen fremd geworden – wenn nicht feind. Nun kehrt das Land zurück in den Westen. [...] [D]ie moralische Würde Amerikas vermag Barack Obama aber wiederherzustellen. Er wird die Welt nicht führen können, zum mächtigsten Moderator jedoch kann er werden und zum wichtigsten Anwalt der Freiheit. (Ulrich)

Obama's election is interpreted as allowing America's re-acceptance into a community of political values and traditions actually at home in Europe. Praising him for his withdrawal from a dominant position on the international political stage, Obama is seen as leading America into a "post-American Age" (Zakeria). The much longed-for replacement of the "American century" by a "European Century" seemed to form itself in Obama's Europeanness. The leitmotif of Germany's perception of the transatlantic relationship up to this point had been a mixture of admiration, rejection, envy, resentment, and self-doubts. These perceptions had so far decisively determined the dynamics of the transatlantic relationship to an extent that could seemingly not be overcome. The decoupling of Obama from "the real" America, in my perception, can however not, as suggested by Hatlapa and Markovits, only be seen as a perpetuation of an already existent "idealized European self-perception" (90).

The role Obama plays as narrative projection surface in this context goes considerably beyond simply perpetuating an already stably existent European self-image. As I suggest here it, Obama triggered an imaginative self-empowerment that, up to this point, had not existed in the space of the transatlantic relationship in that form. Obama appeared to be the

physical proof of what Germans, as the rest of Europe, had not been able to independently convince themselves of ever since the end of the Second World War: namely, that the European self was the *truly* superior one (Gienow-Hecht 37 2008). In this early phase, the construction of Obama functioned as catalyst for a sustainable and firm establishment of a “Eurotopian” narrative of Europe’s superiority as “sanft und stark” (Ulrich, “Europa”) world power. Obama’s appearance on stage thus constitutes less a shift in transatlantic perceptions, then much more an emancipatory threshold moment fundamentally restructuring the transatlantic relationship per se.

What, under these circumstances, therefore requires further attention, is the smooth and seamless transition from “Obamania” to a “New Ice Age” between Germany and the U.S.. As an *ARD-Deutschlandtrend* poll in late 2013 claims, the U.S. under President Obama’s administration is as unpopular as under President Bush’s time in office (Schönenborn). Was it merely, as often assumed, the unavoidable disappointment and disillusionment striking after Obama had turned into an “actual” American president? Triggered by the so-called “Drone Wars” in 2011 and confirmed by the NSA Scandal in 2013, a severe shift in the media’s construction of Obama took place. Slowly but steadily a seemingly “re-Americanized” Obama took center stage in the German discourse on the U.S.:

Weil Obama aber nicht der rehägige Bürgerrechtler ist, [...] sondern ein Machtpolitiker aus Chicago – einer der kältesten, härtesten und übrigens auch korruptesten Städte der USA –, hat er sein Versprechen mit dem Sicherheitsbedürfnis seiner Landsleute in Einklang gebracht. (Fleischhauer)

From the German media’s perspective the most powerful American office—“the American Presidency”—had obviously tainted and turned Obama—“the better ‘European’ American”—into an average American president.

In the course of the so-called “Drone Wars,” Obama was then increasingly turned into a “Bush-like” warlord by German media: While the *Zeit* pondered about “Der Bush in Obama” who is a warrior with shooting slits as eyes, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* accused Obama of acting as “Herr über Leben und Tod” (Ladurner; Wernicke, “Herr”). According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, all “European qualities” left in “President Obama” seemed to be his James Bondish qualities. While James Bond the “good”

British spy is out to prevent evil-doers from taking over world domination and plunging politically estranged countries into war with each other, Obama is accused of self-righteously appropriating the “Lizenz zum Töten” with no moral qualms about civil and human rights questions (Kornelius; Rüb). Interestingly the TV series *Homeland* now frequently popped up in the German media in context with president Obama. While the *Welt* proclaimed “‘Homeland’ ist für Obama, was ‘24’ für Bush war” (Waak) a commentator in the *Spiegel* a few months later interpreted Obama’s love for the series *Homeland* as highly problematic:

Die Lieblingsserie Barack Obamas ist *Homeland*. Es ist eine befremdliche Vorstellung, dass er im Sessel sitzt, sich von Carrie Mathison unterhalten lässt und dabei für einen Staat verantwortlich ist, der so paranoid handelt wie diese Frau. (Kurjuweit)

The message in this context is clear: the “European reflective president” had obviously turned into an “American Mathisonian paranoiac.”

Another facet in Obama’s construction brought forth in the German media over the course of the NSA scandal was the newly discovered imperialist nature of the Obama administration, as a commentator on *Spiegel Online* claims:

Am Dienstag kommt der Chef des größten und totalsten Kontrollsystems zu Besuch das je von Menschen erfunden wurde. Wenn Barack Obama unser Freund ist, brauchen wir uns wegen unserer Feinde tatsächlich keine Sorgen zu machen. (Augstein)

Underlining this perception the *Zeit* commented a month later that “die offenbare Geringschätzung und Verachtung der deutschen Eigenstaatlichkeit” feels like “Kolonialisierung [...] – man wird vom Subjekt zum rechtlosen Objekt” (Jessen). At the same time, Hans-Peter Uhl, a prominent member of the Christian Democratic Union, stated in a *Deutschlandfunk* interview: “Wir wollen keine digitale Besatzungsmacht USA in Deutschland” (qtd. in Heckmann). The now omnipresent narratives constructing the transatlantic relationship under the Obama administration had taken a decisive turn: it was increasingly perceived as being a relationship between a pawn without any rights subjected to a willful and unbridled regime.

Unsurprisingly, another narrative frame re-surfaced in the German media in this context. Cold War tropes became ubiquitous in the characterization of the German-American

relationship: The *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*, for example, declared “Eiszeit zwischen Deutschland und den USA” and, as many others, it summoned John Le Carré’s cold war thriller *The Spy who came from the Cold* in context of Obama’s never-ending espionage affair (DPA). Gaining momentum, this narrative construction of Obama was quickly taken into a connotatively even more powerful context: Obama was now even dubbed “Der Spitzel” (“Spitzel”). Alternatively alluding to the Gestapo or the Stasi, Obama was stylized into a more than questionable “Orwellian” leader (Kister) in a global witch-hunt reminiscent of a cold war thriller. Assessing Obama’s role in the NSA’s spying on European partners and the Snowden affair by associating him with totalitarian methods of total surveillance in the style of George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* or Nazi Germany’s secret state police Gestapo, is clearly supposed to set off Europe’s moral integrity against America’s moral and political decay. A similar narrative is put forward on the July 2013 *Spiegel* cover, where Edward Snowden is celebrated as the lone fighter against America’s surveillance state, while president Obama is represented as gloomily hovering over Edward Snowden and the American Congress (“Allein Gegen Amerika”). In this context Obama is clearly depicted as a dictator reducing Congress to a mere assembly of powerless political statist.

At a first glance the impression obtrudes in this context that this shift in the German media’s representation of Obama has to be considered the end point of the “Eurotopian narrative,” just recently mustered in the imaginative space of the transatlantic relationship. In contrast, however, to the often conjured image of Germany as Obama’s disappointed supporter, the German media discussion of these developments, in many cases, offers a rather “positive” reading of these circumstances. The following comment by economist and commentator Klaus Klocks in his media blog puts this forth very clearly:

Das demokratische Europa ist, wie die aufgeklärte Moderne überhaupt, ein zivilisatorisches Wunderwerk. [...] Wir werden den europäischen Geist gegen den amerikanischen Ungeist stellen müssen. (Klocks)

As it becomes evident here, the German media discourse promotes a positive conceptualization of Europe as stronghold of democracy’s future. Also, as the following commentary from the *Zeit* illustrates, it re-defined the superpower image of Obama’s United States in favor of claiming European ascendancy in this context:

Mit anderen Worten: Der jüngste Spionage-Skandal ist nicht etwa Ausdruck amerikanischer Übermacht, sondern das genaue Gegenteil. Er macht schlagartig klar, wie orientierungslos, wie schwach, ja wie hilflos die Vereinigten Staaten geworden sind. So hilflos, dass sie für vermeintliche, kleine Informationsvorteile sogar die Beziehungen zu ihren besten Verbündeten aufs Spiel setzen. (Bittner)

Fueled by the “Eurotopian fantasy” brought to into being in the narrative space Obama had offered during his first presidential campaign, the here given self-affirmative interpretation of the transatlantic relationship on European terms seems to serve two major functions. Not only did the media’s reading offer a way to re-channel disappointment over Obama into a source of positive self-affirmation, but it also proved and validated the fantasy of a European Century as a pressing necessity. An interesting development in this context is the supersession of Barack Obama by a new “anti-American American hero” in the German media discourse dealing with the transatlantic relationship: the rise of Edward Snowden. In late 2013, the *Spiegel*, for example, declared Snowden the “new Hero” who embodied the “Geist von Freiheit und Aufklärung” (Brussig). What becomes obvious in this context is that the “Geist von Freiheit und Aufklärung” is clearly considered a European quality. Corroborating this alternative narrative space, the newly won hero of “Eurotopia”—Edward Snowden—was quickly “Europeanized” by adopting him into the line of German heroes of civil disobedience. Not only did the *Frankfurter Rundschau* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* ennoble Snowden by declaring him the “Deutsche Vorfahr” of Weimar Republic pacifist Carl von Ossietzky (Prantel, “Nothilfe”). They also ranked him among the “heroes” of the Stauffenberg resistance group (Prantel, “Aufstand”). Snowden taking over Barack Obama’s role of the “un-American American hero” seems to be further proof for the mechanism I consider the underlying principle of the post-Bush transatlantic relationship.

Having, in no time, gone from celebrating Obama’s claims in titles like “I have a Dream” and “Yes, We Can” to accusing him of “I have a Drone” und “Yes, We Scan,” the question whether or not the nature of the German-American relationship really changed at all under Obama remains legitimate (Hahn; Killy). After my close reading of the German media’s involvement with President Obama I argue that a reduction of Obama’s impact on the transatlantic relationship to a love-blinded hype that turned sour and threw German-

American relations back to the status quo under George W. Bush's presidency has to be deemed shortsighted.

Instead of explaining recent media interpretations of the transatlantic relationship as being the result of a naïve and premature misjudgment of the United States itself, shifting perceptions of the transatlantic relationship have to be acknowledged in terms of a transformed European self-conception finally figuring and entrenching itself on the breeding ground of the narrative of the "Americanized" Obama. As has been commented on *Spiegel Online* in June 2013:

[D]ieses unerwartete Aufblitzen des amerikanischen Imperialismus erinnert uns an die Notwendigkeit Europas. [...] Nur Europa kann die amerikanischen Allmachtsphantasie brechen. (Augstein)

Concluding, it can thus be said that Germany, as the rest of Europe, was not intrigued by Barack Obama as offer to fall in love with the "Brand America" again. It was intrigued by the notion of finally getting the chance of proving to itself the reality of the "Eurotopian" fantasy it had been chasing after for so long. We should thus refrain from merely speaking of a renewed shift in the perception of the transatlantic relationship during Barack Obama's presidency. Rather these recent developments should be understood in terms of a cardinal redefinition of the transatlantic relationship per se.

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