

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Halting in mid-field

The government's support for the SDI is still very tentative, thanks to the foreign minister's blackmail.

On Wednesday, March 27, Lt.-Gen. James Abrahamson, head of the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative Office, gave a special briefing on the SDI to the inter-ministerial experts' group of the West German government. Several hours later, the weekly session of the Bonn cabinet resolved that the U.S. effort on space-based missile defense was "welcome in principle," but also stated, "There is no pressing need to decide on direct German participation in the program for the foreseeable future."

Very tentative, indeed. The government was expected to be much more outspoken in favor of direct participation after Chancellor Helmut Kohl himself stated his support for the program at the prestigious Wehrkunde gathering of international defense experts and politicians on Feb. 9-10 in Munich.

What has watered things down since then? The inactivity of Kohl's Christian Democrats has allowed their minor coalition partner, the Free Democrats around Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, to rush in with blackmail. Genscher, a reborn Neville Chamberlain, would like to eliminate the SDI altogether, and spared no efforts to force the Chancellor into a position more critical of the SDI. Genscher made a blitz trip to Moscow in early March, meeting with Gromyko and bringing back the message that the Soviets would welcome, if not honor, German inactivity on the SDI—meaning that since President Reagan could not be prevented from marching ahead with the program, at least the Europeans should not march along.

Recent Free Democratic gains in state and municipal elections at the expense of the Christian Democrats provided Genscher an improved position for blackmail. Kohl's party lost the state of Saarland to the Social Democrats and is facing the loss of more states. Waning popular support because of the economy threatens Kohl with losing the majority in the 1987 national elections.

Memories of the December 1966 collapse of the coalition with the Free Democrats are still alive among many Christian Democrats. Facing similar deep economic recession with a dramatic rise of unemployment, Ludwig Erhard's government nearly fell when the Free Democrats walked out over a staged dispute on taxes. The government held on through a "Grand Coalition" with the Social Democrats (SPD), at the sacrifice of many conservative positions. But the SPD walked out after the national elections of 1969, forming a new coalition with the Free Democrats. The Christian Democrats did not see power again for 13 years.

In October 1982, the Free Democrats walked out of the coalition with the SPD under Helmut Schmidt, hoisting Kohl into power. He has depended on Genscher ever since. Every major item of dissent between Kohl and his foreign minister places the Sword of Damocles over the government—and on the SDI, there is total disagreement.

On March 20, the chancellor gave a keynote address to his party's national convention in Essen, stating basic approval of the SDI, but adding, "The government has not yet taken

any firm position. Our decision is open in both directions." He then introduced a notion originating with Genscher, that "agreements at Geneva on reduction of nuclear missiles might make the SDI superfluous."

That, of course, is outright nonsense. The SDI is no bargaining chip. It is the new U.S. defense policy, pure and simple, a complete moral and doctrinal overthrow of Mutually Assured Destruction. Kohl himself emphasized that strongly in his Wehrkunde speech. Has he changed his view only six weeks later?

Kohl's Wehrkunde speech was written by a team around his personal aide, Horst Teltschik, the chief coordinator of the inter-ministerial group whose task is to work out the "base line" position of all relevant government departments on the SDI. This requires a lot of wheeling and dealing with bureaucrats, industries, research institutes, and so on, making the group very susceptible to Genscher's political blackmail. Kohl's March 20 speech, as the March 27 cabinet resolution, reflected the new "base line" compromise of the government.

Knowing of these problems, U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger announced a 60-day deadline for U.S. allies to present detailed proposals on what, where, and how much participation they desired. Kohl has promised a decision within that time frame, and immediately after the special briefing from Lieutenant-General Abrahamson, sent Teltschik to the United States to gather more information on the SDI. The Chancellor will also consult with President Reagan when he arrives in Bonn for the world economic summit in early May.

Until then, the United States will have to live with an ally which, under command of Hans-Dietrich Genscher, has brought its tanks to a halt in mid-field.