



Controversy precedes Obama Germany visit

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July 10, 2008 07:58 PM EST

Barack Obama's planned visit to Europe later this month has thrust him into a diplomatic kerfuffle that threatens to undercut one of the cornerstones of his foreign policy: the notion that, unlike President Bush, he will listen to and work harmoniously with governments allied with the United States.

The controversy began when word leaked that the Obama campaign, during the candidate's first trip abroad as the presumptive Democratic nominee, was considering Berlin's historic Brandenburg Gate as the backdrop for a major address on transatlantic relations.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has said she opposes the idea, referring to the highly symbolic landmark as an "inappropriate" setting for a speech linked to a domestic American political campaign.

But Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who represents an opposing party and who may be Merkel's rival next year for the chancellorship, has expressed his support for the Brandenburg staging. Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit, who like the foreign minister also belongs to the Social Democratic Party, has offered even more enthusiastic backing for the idea, and told reporters that it was the Obama's campaign's decision to make — a veiled swipe at Merkel.

"Obama thinks he is coming to an historic spot, but it's the center of a nasty internal battle," said an American in Berlin with high-ranking diplomatic experience. Like several other officials interviewed for this story, he spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the transatlantic political sensitivities surrounding Obama's visit. "It embroils Germany in the U.S. election campaign."

"If he comes here, and does something like [speak at Brandenburg] against the wishes of the head of Germany's government, he could be seen as somewhat arrogant, as presumptuous, that he disregarded her wishes and went ahead to do this anyway," said another American in Berlin advising the German government on the matter.

That possible affront to a German head of state, said a Democratic official familiar with the Obama campaign's deliberations on his visit, made it unlikely Obama would choose the Brandenburg Gate location.

"Obviously Brandenburg is the sexiest option," the official said, but it would "undermine the message that Obama can work with U.S. allies and offers McCain evidence of Obama's diplomatic inexperience."

The Democratic official also said that wherever Obama speaks, “it will be probably the biggest pure campaign event ever held outside the United States” and that it would be “absolutely significant” because it’s taking “campaigning to a public gathering overseas.”

At the moment, presumptive Republican nominee John McCain’s campaign is keeping a distance from the issue. McCain recently completed his own overseas trips, to Colombia and Canada, though the speeches were held in relatively small and less evocative venues.

The Brandenburg Gate, once a symbol of the Cold War division of Germany, was the backdrop of one of President Ronald Reagan’s best known international addresses in 1987. It was there that he famously implored Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to “tear down this wall!”, a reference to the barrier that separated West and East Berlin.

German Chancellor Merkel’s office argues that allowing Obama to speak before the gate, long a setting for speeches by heads of state, would be tantamount to offering the Democrat the endorsement of the German government.

A German foreign ministry official said that Merkel “likes Obama” but “she can’t say it. She’s not allowed to mix in interior American affairs.”

“The Brandenburg Gate is too important to also misuse it for internal American affairs,” the German official continued.

Michael Stelzer, the head of Democrats Abroad in Berlin, said in German that “Germany is Obamaland.” But he added that Merkel’s position on Obama’s coming visit is understandable.

“She doesn’t want to mingle inside American election politics. I can respect her position because up to now only heads of state have spoken before the Brandenburg Gate and here is someone who has not even been selected the nominee yet,” he said, noting that he was speaking only for himself. “He’s a candidate. He’s not a president. This would be unprecedented.”

Internal German politics have exacerbated the situation. Steinmeier, the foreign minister who supports a potential Obama speech at the gate, is a political protégé of Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, Merkel’s predecessor, and a potential rival to Merkel next year. Like most Germans — one recent poll showed 72 percent of Germans would vote for Obama if they were able to — he is an Obama fan.

The two spoke by phone during a visit to Washington earlier this year and, in a speech at Harvard University, Steinmeier reportedly invoked Obama’s catchphrase “Yes we can.” Politico reported last year that the German ambassador to the United States in Washington, Klaus Scharioth, had attended an Obama fundraiser.

According to the Obama campaign, as of yet no decisions have been made on the speech

location. He is expected to visit Berlin on July 24.

In response to inquiries by Politico and the Associated Press, Obama's campaign released a statement Wednesday on Obama's pending trip to Europe.

"Senator Obama looks forward to his visit to Germany and his opportunity to meet with the Chancellor. He has considered several sites for a possible speech, and he will choose one that makes most sense for him and his German hosts," the statement read.

Other potential locations for the speech could be Tempelhof airport, the launch point for the Berlin airlift. Obama could also choose to speak at Schöneberg Town Hall, where in 1963 President John F. Kennedy famously delivered a speech with the line, "Ich bin ein Berliner," an expression of solidarity with the citizens of Berlin.

A less controversial option might be the open grassy area before the Reichstag, Germany's parliament.

Regardless of where Obama speaks, there is little disagreement that he will likely attract a crowd of unprecedented size for an American candidate for office.

In Germany, "there is a major antipathy to Bush," said John Kornblum, a former Clinton-era U.S. Ambassador to Germany. "The use of antipathy is a mild description. But it's not just that. The Europeans and Germans have taken us over as part of their culture, part of their DNA, but they have taken us over in an idealized way. And one reason they get mad at us is that they realize we are not the perfect society they want us to be. Obama feeds their great idealism about America."