

A Letter to My German Friends

From the Vietnam War to the eurozone crisis: What today's Germany must learn from LBJ.

By [Denis MacShane](#)*

As a former Europe Minister in the UK, I count myself among those Brits who are true friends of Germany. Indeed, there is much to admire about the achievements of what must be considered the most successful social democratic country (certainly among Europe's large countries) – and notwithstanding the fact that Germany has a Christian Democrat as Chancellor.

At the same time, I am pained by the fact that the Germans currently give off too much of an impression of being like Frank Sinatra: “I did it my way” (read “It’s my way or the highway.”)

Germans would be much better advised if they followed the example of another American – less of a global icon, but no less than an American President.

Lyndon Baines Johnson, the 36th President of the United States, knew a lot about being vilified worldwide. After all, he personally had to confront most of the charges leveled against the United States for its pursuit of the American War on Vietnam.

LBJ's example of strategic detachment

In particular, Johnson was not just criticized, but patronized endlessly, by his French counterpart, Charles de Gaulle. He relished in attacking the United States' involvement in Vietnam.

Despite all this haranguing, which caused great irritation in private, LBJ gave strict orders to his entire administration **not to reply or counter-attack**. France was still a vital U.S. ally and friend — and disagreements with de Gaulle **could not be permitted to reach a rupture**.

Publicly, Johnson only said, “I would like to see him more in agreement on matters with us than he is... [but] it is a matter for him to determine.”

Unfortunately, there is no German LBJ right now. And there has not been one since the days of Kohl, who knew how to reach out.

In making this suggestion – not just for a “thicker skin,” but more strategic-minded magnanimity – I am well aware of the fact that some charges leveled at Germany, by people who definitely are in a position to know better are wildly misleading.

For example, Germany's Finance Minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, has never said that every nation must be an exporting nation – even though such a statement is often attributed to him (and other German policymakers).

Impressions matter

As things stand, there is a clear sense outside Germany that a long-lasting CDU-led government really thinks it can decide who should govern other EU nations and will tolerate any alternative.

The underlying assumption is that 85 million Germans feel entitled to kicking out 10 million Greeks. Forget the Ugly American, it is now the Ugly German.

The criticism is unfair. After all, Germany will accept as many as 400,000 asylum seekers this year, while right-wing populists in Britain and France are getting worked up about just 1,500 people at Calais.

And it is not Germany, **but rather the Tsipras government's blundering** that caused the the major fall in the Athens stock market when it re-opened this week and which will see Greece's economy shrink by as much as 4% this year.

But tone, finger-wagging and self-righteousness from Germany is grating across the rest of Europe, atlas all the countries located outside of what must by now be considered the Greater German Economic Zone.

The point is not whether this or that particular charge raised against Germany is on target – or justified. What matters is that it is being leveled. U.S. Democrats, at the time of their pursuit of the American war against Vietnam, had some reason to feel unjustifiably targeted. After all, it took some chutzpah on the part of France's De Gaulle to advance all those charges directed at Washington.

It was an act of astounding arrogance on the part of the president in Paris! Vietnam had landed like a hot potato in the lap of the Americans who – if anything – had stumbled into this French post-colonial minefield way too naïvely.

Still, LBJ held the line. He resisted the temptation to give back in kind. Lyndon Johnson could serve as an example that Wolfgang Schäuble should take to heart.

A vital lesson to learn

An LBJ would not have patronized or sneered at Yanis Varoufakis, his former Greek counterpart. That Schäuble did so just shows that the German finance minister, despite his long experience in politics, still has vital lessons to learn.

True leaders just don't retort in kind.

For all the obsessing about Greece, larger issues need to be properly considered by the Germans as well. That may still be somewhat unfamiliar territory to them, given that their **leadership role in Europe is still a newish thing to them.**

Effects on Britain

In that context, consider this latest development: The disastrous way in which the eurozone has managed the Greek crisis plays into all the Brexit proponents' arguments in the UK.

The heavily anti-EU Chancellor at the time, Norman Lamont, is now the new best friend of Yanis Varoufakis. He regales anybody and everybody in the UK that the eurozone cannot work.

For more effect, Mr. Lamont also reminds everybody of his conviction that the German bullies are back in business (just as they were [in 1992 when UK was expelled from ERM](#)).

Not to be left behind, Britain's Labor party may be poised to elect a leader who is very anti-eurozone discipline. For the first time since 1950, it is quite fashionable again in British political discourse to be anti-German.

This is not all poor Wolfgang Schäuble's fault, far from it. All I can say as a friend of Germany (and of the Greek people), as well as someone who does not want the UK to quit Europe, is that I am very worried.

I find no language emanating from Berlin that is reassuring. And yet, reassuring others at moments of crisis, and showing at least a modicum of magnanimity toward those in serious trouble is precisely what a leading nation must do.

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