

The Odd Trans-Atlantic Couple

By JOHN KORNBLUM

Is the West facing economic decline? Hard to tell. Much depends on two very dissimilar people on opposite sides of the Atlantic, [Barack Obama](#) and [Angela Merkel](#). Fate has placed much of the future of the Western world in their hands.

The leading role of the U.S. president is pretty much a given. Germany, by contrast, is inexperienced and uncomfortable in the leadership role it has now assumed, but its industrial and logistic strengths have made it one of the winners of globalization. Where Europe is concerned, Germany is in charge. And Germany increasingly speaks with a single voice, that of Angela Merkel.

And so the son of an itinerant Kenyan scholar and the daughter of a Lutheran pastor who grew up in Communist East Germany find themselves assigned the task of putting capitalism back together.

Their backgrounds could not be more different, but both are outsiders. Neither comes from the traditional leadership elite. Neither is an easy communicator, in the spirit of Bill Clinton or Helmut Kohl. In fact, they seem to have a hard time even getting through to each other. Instead of the bonhomie of, say, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, Obama and Merkel need to work hard to find common ground. To make matters worse, each faces massive economic and political problems not of their making. Neither the U.S. Congress nor the European Union seems able to find the strength, or perhaps the wisdom, to make the decisions necessary to put things back in order.

And in some strangely identical way, each seems unable to seize the moment they find themselves in. Obama came into office promising a new beginning, but his dreams have been shattered by economic crisis and a voters' revolt. His politics of consensus — or leading from behind, as some of his supporters call it —

have been blocked continuously by the unwillingness of the opposition to find common ground.

Merkel is a physicist who grew up in an atmosphere of fear and distrust. She hates “visions” and only reluctantly takes initiatives of any kind. Her economic views are influenced as much by Germany’s past as by its future. But she is a devout believer in the future of a democratic Europe.

She rankles at Obama’s repeated calls for action, claiming he simply does not understand what she is facing each time she tries to find consensus among 27 nations. He, in turn, finds it incomprehensible that Merkel does not see how desperately decisive action to end the euro crisis is needed if a global fiscal collapse is to be avoided.

Obama worries that a collapse of the euro could cost him re-election. Merkel is concerned that America’s demand that Europe spend more to help weak economies could lead to rampant inflation and weaken European democracy.

Ironically, neither is really in political trouble. Merkel is a sure bet for re-election in 2013 in a field without real competitors. Obama seemed at times to be weakening, but renewed growth and Republican disarray appear to be playing strongly in his favor.

That means they could risk decisive steps if they had the internal motivation to do so. Merkel could rise above the swamp of E.U. ideology and demand a new sort of European revenue-sharing which would ensure stability for Greece and others. Obama could deliver a stirring message of reform which would silence his critics by putting the U.S. government on the road to fiscal responsibility. A commission he appointed for this purpose gave him an excellent bipartisan starting point; its recommendations were ignored.

Recent history reminds us how important political friendships can be in helping build resolve in times of crisis. Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill are an example, as are George H.W. Bush, Kohl and Gorbachev. This time we seem fated to

depend more on cool political calculations rather than friendships among the guys.

Is this an unfortunate historical accident? Not necessarily. However frustrating their approaches may be, Merkel and Obama represent a new kind of Atlantic community, bound together more by hard economic interests than by the visions of past eras. Europe and America find themselves in the middle of a fundamental “reset” of their economic and social systems which cannot be pushed ahead in a phone call or two.

Rather than bemoaning the deliberateness of our leaders, we should probably be grateful that even if they aren't really friends they work carefully and honestly with each other. We will continue to wonder how Obama and Merkel will deal with the demons their unique roles have awakened, and hope that each will succeed in rising above them. But in times like this, the lack of emotion is probably not so bad.

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