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Merkel leads Germany to a new history

By Keith Spicer

PARIS. A bouncy 52, with stylish Udo Walz hairdo and wide-set, laughing blue eyes, Angela Merkel is a charmer. She's no longer the frumpy Frau from East Germany detractors mocked when she became Germany's first female chancellor. She's also a wily politician, holding together an impossible left-right German coalition for 14 months. She pulled it off by first impressing foreign opinion with frank, friendly talk. Now, as she steps into world leadership in 2007, her success marks Germany's long-delayed post-1945 emergence as a confident great power.

Two lucky events are catapulting Merkel into the spotlight. For the first half of 2007 Germany holds the rotating presidency of the 27-member European Union. Merkel's priorities: better relations with the U.S., a businesslike partnership with Russia, progress on global trade, energy security, climate change and Mideast peace. Warning against "historic failure," she also wants a new stab at writing a simpler constitutional treaty to replace the draft sunk by French and Dutch referenda in May-June 2005.

Merkel's second chance to shine is Germany's hosting of the June-6-8 G8 summit of industrialized countries at the German Baltic resort of Heiligendamm. She will play a powerful role as the only major leader with growing economic clout, an obvious personal future, fresh ideas, and almost universal trust. French President Jacques will be gone by June. followed by British PM Tony Blair weeks later. George W. Bush comes crippled by his Iraq fiasco. An increasingly distrusted Putin – barring a manoeuvre to change Russia's constitution – will be within 11 months of leaving the Kremlin.

Merkel's style is not Bismarck's, but she shows lots of the Iron Chancellor's clear-headedness and backbone. Disarming interlocutors with openness and simplicity, Merkel never holds back blunt truths. She told George W. Bush to his face that she disliked his secret CIA jails and said *nein* to German soldiers in Iraq. She confronted Valdimir Putin on Chechnya, and last week denounced his political manipulation of energy exports as "unacceptable."

Strategically, Merkel sees Germany as the main motor of Europe, with the fundamental Franco-German alliance becoming only one policy foundation among others – mainly central Europe and Britain. More broadly, she sees Germany as the European anchor for the old German-favoured Atlantic Bridge with North America. Her breathtaking proposal for a transatlantic common market will need years to marinate. But with fast-rising China and India, and a likely endless terrorist threat, such solidarity makes commanding sense.

A strong, united Europe, Merkel argues, is America's best friend and vital to a chaotic world. Hence her push to revive the "Quartet" (U.S., United Nations, Europe, Russia) to try to settle the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- which, she thinks, increasingly threatens world peace by portraying the West, as Israel's friend, as complicit in "colonial oppression."

Germany's credentials for pushing Mideast peace are irreproachable. While expressing Germany's sympathy for the Palestinians' suffering, Berlin maintains unshakable support for Israel. Germany's welcome to Jews has allowed its Jewish population to soar from almost zero in 1945 to over 200,000 today. This month the first German-trained rabbis took up their duties. And Berlin just announced that it will push its 26 European partners to accept a common EU law against denying the Holocaust.

But the big-picture for Germany is Atlantic solidarity. Putting Germany at its heart is Merkel's *Westpolitik* – as radical an approach as Chancellor Willy Brandt's east-leaning 1960s *Ostpolitik*, which began nibbling away at Soviet sway over central Europe. Merkel's opportunity is huge. An Iraq-weakened Bush badly needs to at least to look like he has more allies than his cowering poodle, Tony Blair. France's new president (April-May) will need time to rebuild France's credibility. Into the vacuum of ideas and dynamism afflicting both U.S. and Europe, a fast-rebounding Germany can stake out real leadership.

Germany – so long a postwar "economic giant but political dwarf" – is fast putting paralyzing memories of Hitler behind it. Following decades of banning Nazis and even their symbols, Germany is now serene enough to watch powerful anti-Hitler movies (*The Downfall*, *Sophie Scholl*, *Mein Fuehrer*) and to deal with revered author Guenter Grass's admission that he once briefly wore an S.S. uniform. Today's youth, deeply indoctrinated in anti-Nazi education, know their country's moral burden but don't feel personally guilty for grandparents' crimes or complicities.

A similar, but slower, escape from a totalitarian past has happened in the former East Germany. "*Ostalgia*" (nostalgia for communist culture) has tickled many *Ossis* (old East Germans) destabilized by hard-driving West Germany. The film *Goodbye Lenin!* Made all Germany laugh.

Merkel, partly raised in East Germany, is not nostalgic for communism. She's a prophet of freedom, determined to inject liberty into minds, institutions and western civilization. She condemns totalitarians to history's trashcan: Angela's ashes.