

JULY 1990. A PRESS CONFERENCE IN BERLIN. East Germany's caretaker government—the last of a country that would soon cease to exist—just signed a major natural gas contract with Russia. Prime minister Lothar de Maizière is keen to be the one to break the news to the media. A young woman in a light blue summer dress hands out press releases to the assembled journalists. The prime minister's deputy spokesperson, she soon has journalists' undivided attention at the post-announcement Q&A. She answers questions left unanswered by the men on the rostrum.

Goodbye, Angela Merkel

Her name is Angela Merkel. This is how we met. I was there that day as a political correspondent for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Germany's premier daily.

Five years later, February 1995 in Chernobyl. Angela Merkel, now Germany's minister for the environment, is inspecting the nuclear power plant. Plans are underway to entomb the destroyed reactor block in a new protective sarcophagus. A few journalists are on board for the jaunt. One, a reporter from the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, poses some rather aggressive questions, infuriating the management of the plant, which is still up and running. The acrimony threatens to derail the fact-finding mission, embarrassing Merkel, who only just took office.

As her reign nears its end, Brunswick's **CARL HOHENTHAL** recalls the politician he knew long before her 16 years as German Chancellor.



Angela Merkel, shown here in 1991, served in the East German government before the reunification of East and West Germany.

Merkel takes the reporter to task at breakfast the next morning. Choosing sharp words and speaking bluntly, she says she will not stand idly by while he ruins her visit. If the grandstanding continues, he will be making his own travel arrangements—and good luck getting back to Germany. Merkel’s entourage is astonished. How could she berate a reporter from a magazine as powerful and influential as *Der Spiegel*? Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who disliked the media and despised *Der Spiegel*, never ripped into a journalist with the ferocity of this young minister from the east of Germany.

These two incidents show the extent of Angela Merkel’s range. Highly intelligent and analytical, she does the grunt-work research it takes to speak with authority. And she is tough and fearless. These qualities also caught the eye of then-chancellor Helmut Kohl in 1990, the year the GDR ceased to exist, when he was looking for resilient politicians from East Germany. Kohl recruited Merkel for his team after Germany’s reunification, assigning experienced staff to advise her. Soon after, in 1991, little-known Merkel became deputy chairperson of the Christian Democratic Union and minister for women and youth, at the time a less important cabinet position, but still a fine opportunity to learn and practice. Many in the party dismissed Merkel—“Kohl’s little girl”—as a featherweight. She registered on no one’s radar as a heavyweight contender.

A group of junior CDU politicians, exclusively male and West German of course, had banded together in the 1980s with the long view of reinvigorating the post-Helmut Kohl CDU. Some members of this self-styled “Andean Pact”—this men’s club had formed on a jaunt to South America—gained influence over the years. Although not immune to the one-upmanship that the male political animal so often engages in, they were determined to support one another and set the course for the Christian Democrats. For these would-be captains, the helm of the CDU was no place for any woman, let alone a Lutheran from the East.

Angela Merkel took measure of the situation, biding her time to study these men’s characters and party etiquette, all the while excelling in her designated cabinet position. Her stellar performance earned her a promotion to minister of the environment in 1994, a far more important position she would hold until the curtains closed on the Kohl administration in 1998. The Social Democrats took over in a coalition government with the Greens, freeing Merkel to focus fully on her party and opposition politics. She stepped up to become the CDU’s



Merkel in 1991, top, with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. The bottom photograph was taken in 2000, the year she became Chair of the CDU.

**MERKEL TOLD
NO ONE OF
THIS LETTER.
INSTEAD, SHE
LEAKED IT TO
US AT THE
FRANKFURTER
ALLGEMEINE
ZEITUNG.**

secretary general under chairman Wolfgang Schäuble, today president of the Bundestag and its longest serving member.

In fall of 1999, events took a turn that would reveal much about Merkel’s nature. Allegations surfaced that Kohl had for years maintained a secret slush fund. These untaxed donations to his party were illicit, yet Kohl broke the law again by refusing to disclose donors’ names. The “black money” scandal rocked the CDU and sent the “black giant”—Kohl’s nickname was a nod to the CDU’s political color—reeling. The uproar echoed nationwide. As secretary general of the CDU, Angela Merkel kept her peace, but quietly wrote a letter two days before Christmas. What began as a hymn in praise of Kohl went on to criticize his behavior and ended with a demand for the CDU to part ways with its almighty patriarch: “The party must learn to walk.”

Merkel told no one of this letter. Instead, she leaked it to us at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. I was the newspaper’s parliamentary correspondent. Merkel knew that my colleague Karl Feldmeyer had reasons aplenty to loath Kohl. Feldmeyer and I talked about the letter, acutely aware of what impact it would have. He chose to publish the mis- sive. It slammed home like the missile that it was. Party chairman Wolfgang Schäuble raged at this betrayal, but lacked the courage or strength to do what duty demanded of him—fire Merkel. Rising from the ashes of the letter bomb, Merkel’s ascent to the top of the party was unstoppable. She took the party chair in 2000, vacating it only of her own volition in 2018.

This story reveals how badly the party’s matadors had miscalculated. The daughter of a Lutheran East

German pastor took over the thoroughly Catholic West German CDU. Merkel has since repeatedly demonstrated her remarkable ability to learn and adapt. A case in point: The CDU needed a chancellor candidate for the 2002 election. Accurately assessing her strengths and options, Merkel shrewdly eschewed this opportunity, leaving it to the leader of the CDU's sister party, the Christian Social Union and stepping aside graciously without rancor or ill will. Edmund Stoiber, then the prime minister of Bavaria, lost the election to Gerhard Schröder by a whisker. Merkel escaped unscathed. Stoiber retreated to Bavaria, a spent political force rendered harmless to her interests.

Merkel again showed her mettle in 2003. The new platform she presented at the CDU party convention in Leipzig put business first, its agenda market friendly through and through. Much to the astonishment of many, Merkel persuaded the party to adopt her platform. It nearly lost her the 2005 election. She was lucky to narrowly oust the SPD's Gerhard Schröder, but the political price for victory was a chancellorship in a grand coalition with the SPD.

Merkel's neoliberal advocacy earned her pointed criticism from within the party's ranks. Those sour notes would not be forgotten. This was the last time she would let ideology get in the way of necessity. Her 16 years of government since have been all about political pragmatism. Her ability to go with the flow has left her open to the accusation that she lacks vision and ideas as to what Germany should be all about. Yet this practicality is the very reason she has remained unchallenged over all these years. It has made Angela Merkel Germany's pre-eminent politician.

Former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt wryly remarked in the late 1970s that people with visions ought to see a doctor. The 20th century's dark legacy has left Germans understandably wary of political visions. But there is nothing wrong with Angela Merkel's eyesight—or foresight. Her powers of observation are keen. Merkel paid her respects to Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey soon after he took office. Upon her return, she attended an intimate dinner party with the executives of a major German corporation. Asked about her impressions, she noted that Erdogan's study lacked something normally seen in every government office—a portrait of Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of modern Turkey. She predicted Erdogan would be one to make waves—this was clearly a man on a new mission centered on himself.

Even after so many years as chancellor, Merkel's

**SHE GETS BY ON
LITTLE SLEEP.
ABLE TO NEGOTI-
ATE FOR NIGHTS
ON END, SHE
CAN HOLD HER
ALCOHOL BETTER
THAN MANY.**



Merkel in 2017 applauds the winning of her fourth term as chancellor. Former US President Obama, below, urged her to run that year to provide stability in the era of President Donald Trump.



remarkable stamina is undiminished. She gets by on little sleep. Able to negotiate for nights on end, she can hold her alcohol better than many. In early 2015, several days of negotiations with Russian president Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart Poroshenko culminated in the Minsk Agreement. The final and decisive session took 17 hours. Merkel then flew from Minsk straight to Bavaria to give her account of the negotiations at the Munich Security Conference. She showed no signs of fatigue or weakness.

One could hardly criticize Merkel's lack of a far-sighted plan for Germany without conceding that the tide of events left scant room for visions. She had three crises to contend with—the global financial meltdown that began in late 2007 and was exacerbated by the European debt debacle of 2009, the 2015 migrant crisis and most recently, the emerging pandemic of 2020. Merkel always keeps her cool and never loses her nerve. Her composure instills confidence. People feel safe with their fate in her capable hands, hence the nickname Mutti, the mother of all misnomers. Angela Merkel is anything but the matronly sort.

The Madonna image faded, giving way to the Woman of Steel during the refugee crisis. Germans, like their neighbors, were hardly jumping for joy at the prospect of a wave of migrants. Yet Merkel's resolve would not be weakened by popular opinion. She saw no other option but to open Germany to the million or so people stuck on southeastern Europe's roads.

A pastor's daughter, Merkel had interacted with disabled persons as a child. Her humanitarian values are genuinely Christian, and she remained true to her beliefs in the refugee crisis. Many people resented

her for that, but her calm, common-sense demeanor prevailed. It won her a fourth term as chancellor in the 2017 elections—with some help from the blundering Social Democrats. Her decision to run again was not taken lightly. Twelve years as head of government is an eternity, and Merkel made no secret of her resolve that she—and no one else—would decide when enough was enough.

Few leaders at the top of the political food chain leave on their own terms. Merkel has always been determined to be the mistress of her destiny. As credible rumors have it, Barack Obama implored Merkel to continue heading up the German government because the West would need an experienced, rational leader with Donald Trump in the Oval Office. Merkel stepped up, but made it clear that this would be her last waltz. She relinquished the CDU party chair in 2018. That is when things started to go downhill for the CDU.

Merkel set great store by a female successor, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (AKK). Elected chairperson at the 2018 CDU party conference by the slimmest of margins, AKK soon proved to be ill-equipped for the role. A rift had cleaved the party in two during the Merkel years. One camp felt that Merkel's pragmatic course leaned too far to the left. The other wanted it to bend even further—or more accurately, go greener. AKK's call for unity went unheard; her efforts to yoke these conflicting forces to the same harness failed.

Facing up to the consequences, she said she would soon resign as party chairperson, the mooted date being February 2020. Her announcement set off another round of infighting as the usual jockeying for position commenced. Even Merkel was unable to call the divided party's baying hounds to heel. To make matters worse, AKK would have to hold out for another year as the wheels ground to a halt with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was not until January 2021 that the party voted in a new chairperson, Armin Laschet.

In 2020, the pandemic would arguably become Merkel's greatest challenge. Germany is a federal republic. The states initially led the fight to contain the disease. They fared quite well until it spiraled out of control last fall. Vaccines were in short supply. The shortcomings of Germany's excessive bureaucracy and sluggish digitalization stood out in stark relief. The states' minister presidents scrambled to shift the blame to the chancellor.

This brings us to 2021 and the business end of the campaign for the next federal election. In January, the Christian Democrats' executive committee chose



Angela Merkel on the campaign trail in 1990, having a drink with fishermen.

I BELIEVE SHE IS SATISFIED WITH WHAT SHE ACCOMPLISHED. PRIDE IS NOT A TERM SHE WOULD USE. IS SHE DISAPPOINTED? PROBABLY NOT. AFTER ALL, SHE LASTED AS LONG AS HELMUT KOHL.

Armin Laschet, the minister president of North Rhine-Westphalia, to chair the party in an election preceded by heated debate. The bickering continued when the executive committee defied the will of most party members to pick Laschet as its candidate for the chancellorship. Such internecine squabbling is likely to dominate the campaign until ballot day in September.

One would think that none of this is Merkel's concern. Yet it is. She helmed Germany and her party for 16 years. For all the global recognition she garnered for her country, her party is in tatters. The Christian Democrats pretend to have a plan, but the lack of substance suggests otherwise. Their call for a new beginning rings hollow; they have had 16 years to make a fresh start. Germany is in desperate need of reforms that went undone under Merkel.

Merkel governed Germany with a steady hand, steering it through many a major crisis. A skillful manager, she husbanded her resources and used her power wisely. That is quite an achievement. But Merkel has left Germany without a compass and map to chart its future in a globalized, digitalized world.

As for how Merkel herself views her legacy, it's hard to tell. She reveals little of her personal views beyond a small circle of trusted confidants. But from what I have observed of her, I believe she is satisfied with what she accomplished. Pride is not a term she would use. Is she disappointed? Probably not. After all, she lasted as long as Helmut Kohl. ♦

CARL HOHENTHAL, a veteran political reporter and editor in Germany, is a Senior Advisor in Brunswick's Berlin office.