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Outlook

Call Her Angie von Bismarck

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Most of the headlines about Europe in U.S. newspapers these days have been going to Britain's doughty new prime minister, Gordon Brown of Labor, or France's hard-charging new president, the conservative Nicolas Sarkozy. But the most influential European leader, at least for now, is Angela Merkel. The first female chancellor in German history has been having a very nice run as the uncrowned queen of Europe. She is a staggering 40 points ahead of her Social Democratic rival for the chancellorship. So why has Angie, as so many of her 82 million subjects fondly call her, been doing so well?

In part, she has been an accidental monarch: It so happened that the rotating presidencies of the European Union and the Group of Eight major industrialized nations ended up in German hands during the first half of 2007. Henry Kissinger once famously asked whom he should call if he wanted to speak to Europe. Earlier this year, if you wanted a phone number for Europe, you had to ask for Frau Merkel's at the chancellor's office, which hulks like a giant front-loading washing machine over Berlin's Spree River.

Merkel also had the Western stage to herself as her main rivals prepared to shuffle into the wings. Tony Blair was acting out the longest goodbye in British history, his clout waning by the hour. The French were bored by 14 years of royal rule by Jacques Chirac, who took his final bow in June. Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi had no time for foreign policy, not with the kind of coalition around his neck that has blessed Italy with 61 cabinets in as many years. And President Bush could not even give away a used car in Europe.

So Merkel could write her own script, and she put on an amazing performance. Consider that in late 2005, when this ex-physicist from East Germany assumed office, Merkel knew as much about foreign policy as did Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton when they entered the White House. But she took to big-time diplomacy with the sure-footedness of a sleepwalker.

Within months, Merkel had repaired the damage left by her predecessor, Gerhard Schroeder, a Social Democrat who had run a Bush-bashing reelection campaign in 2002 while harnessing Chirac's France and Vladimir Putin's Russia into an anti-American alliance over the Iraq war. As payback, Bush killed Schroeder's bid for a permanent German seat on the U.N. Security Council. Merkel instinctively understood that Berlin could flourish neither in a state of hostility with Washington nor in too close an embrace with Paris and Moscow. "Without America," she argued, for instance, "we are exactly nothing in the Middle East." So a bit closer to George and Tony, a bit farther away from Jacques and Vladimir, and bingo -- Angie was suddenly at center stage.

All this recalls Otto von Bismarck's role as the "honest broker" in Europe's great-power game and the grand design he formulated in 1877: "a general constellation in which all the powers except France [then Germany's nemesis] need us." Having updated the hub-and-spoke model for a new era, Merkel has positioned Germany at the center of a Europe where war is no longer the "continuation of politics by other means," as the Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz famously put it. Call her Angie von Bismarck.

Of course, her approach relies on coddling Europeans, not cowering them. The Financial Times noted that Merkel "is about as far as you can get from the caricature of the jackbooted Prussian." Who would have thought that Europe would worry about Germany spending too little on defense (a measly 1.4 percent of gross domestic product)? Or that Europe would happily leave the Germans in charge of the multinational flotilla patrolling the Lebanese coast to stop arms smuggling by the radical Shiite militia Hezbollah?

Schmoozing is not Merkel's forte; she is as gregarious as a fur-hatted guard outside Buckingham Palace. Perish the thought that she would go fishing with Bush in Kennebunkport, Maine, as Putin recently did in a dubious attempt at bonding. But Merkel toils tirelessly behind the scenes. One adviser recalls her spadework at her first E.U. summit in late 2005, when the most deadly issue of the union was at stake again: the budget for the next seven years. The eternal question was: Who would pay in, and who would get how much from the common kitty?

"Schroeder would have gone off to his hotel in the afternoon to smoke a Cohiba," noted a Merkel aide. "But Merkel called in every one of the 27 heads of delegation, working them over one-on-one." The budget passed. And this summer, she was able to coax the British, the Dutch and the Poles into signing onto a treaty that will replace the E.U. constitution that was torn to shreds by angry electorates in France and the Netherlands in 2005.

Is this true leadership? Yes, given the handicaps. From afar, Europe looks like a union that wants to become ever more perfect. From close up, it is a bunch of nation-states driven by crass self-interest. So if you want to lead, you have to heed. You have to salve national egos, to give a little here so that you can take a little there. This is the essence of good multilateral diplomacy, something the United States did so well in the glory days of the postwar period. Merkel has picked up the ball that Bush dropped. Her maxim is as simple as it is effective: Serve your own interests by serving those of others.

But she has not passed the real test. She is Europe's queen largely by default, and now her rivals for continental leadership are back. Across the Channel, Brown will resume Britain's classic game: a less "federalist" and intrusive Europe, with London balancing against Berlin and Paris. To her west, Sarkozy also has a very different view of Europe. His pitch is 21st-century Gaullism: social protectionism, plus massive government spending, plus a foreign policy geared to reclaiming the mantle that his tired predecessor Chirac let slip into the hands of the German chancellor. To Merkel's east, there is Russia resurgent. Putin is trying to split Eastern Europe from Western Europe and both from the United States. A whiff of neo-cold war is in the air.

In short, Frau Merkel had an easy run in the past. Now it is hardball again. How to civilize Putin's Russia? How to rein in Sarkozy's France? And how to get much done in the world at large with Washington paralyzed until 2009, when it will have a president who can actually get a hearing on the continent? Merkel has excelled as the umpire of a sluggish softball game. But now the World Series is upon her.

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