

Time for Merkel to Say Goodbye

Angela Merkel recently announced she would step down as chair of the Christian Democratic Union but would remain chancellor. The decision doesn't go far enough. It is time to let Germany make a new start.



Greatness often shows itself in moments of parting. Democracy is particularly dependent on the peaceful transfer of power, and on the opportunity for renewal that comes with it. It looks as though Angela Merkel has finally heeded this maxim. After 18 years at the helm of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), she is now stepping down. It's a good move, but why is she only going halfway? Why is she insisting on staying on as chancellor for three more years? For Germany's most important political office, it is particularly important that such departures are successful. In Merkel's case, it has not been. She has failed to demonstrate true greatness.

When she decided to run for another term as chancellor in 2017, she seemed tired and listless, but her supporters hoped she could be a counterweight to Donald Trump and the leader of liberal democracy around the world. They hoped that, together with French President Emmanuel Macron, she could lead Europe out of its stasis. She ultimately didn't manage to do either. She no longer plays an important role in international politics and in Europe, she's actually part of the biggest problem — the divisions between North and South, East and West.

Part of that is because she has lost so much authority here in her own country. Her third grand coalition government — pairing her conservatives with the center-left Social Democrats — was supposed to guarantee stability and restore calm in an unsettled country. It was supposed to deliver sound political leadership. But 2018 has turned out to be one of the most embarrassing years politically in postwar Germany. The main source of that embarrassment was Interior Minister Horst Seehofer and not Merkel herself. He humiliated her with hubris and insolence. It made him look worse than it did her, but she failed to rein him in and stabilize the government. The recent state election results in Bavaria and Hesse, which saw Merkel's conservatives experience huge losses, can likewise be traced back to the chancellor.

A Great Deed and a Failure

She has failed to build on the merits that she has unquestionably compiled. The governments she has led have done a good job of steering Germany through the global financial crisis, cleaning up the budget and staying out of the way of a lasting economic upswing. And they have prudently expanded the welfare state by, for example, introducing the minimum wage.

Her greatest deed remains the humanitarian policy shown toward refugees in late summer of 2015. And her greatest failure remains the fact that she didn't prepare that policy, even though she knew far in advance that many refugees would be coming. She then lost control for a time — and, as has often been the case with her, she failed to explain her policy. Her style has been characterized by a desire to lull people into impassivity rather than foster a debate. That is the greatest sin she has committed against the political culture.

When this year closes, Merkel will be a weak chancellor, both domestically and internationally. And why should things get any better after that? Merkel herself has announced that she will not run for re-election in 2021. She is not the leader of the future. Everyone has begun looking toward the post-Merkel era, and periods of transition are almost never particularly constructive because power struggles dominate everything.

Without the party chair, she will be even weaker as chancellor. She will have to come to terms with the new party chair, which will definitely be complicated and will sap considerable amounts of energy and concentration. One of the candidates to replace her as CDU chair is Friedrich Merz, a man she once stripped of his role as leader of the conservative group in German parliament. He left politics two years later. Merz's decision to run to replace Merkel is in no small part driven by a desire for revenge. Furthermore, he is more conservative and economically liberal than the chancellor. The two of them could never be a dream team.

The same holds true for Jens Spahn, another candidate for the position. He has positioned himself as one of Merkel's most vocal critics within the CDU and as an opponent of her refugee policies. Merkel would have an easier time with the third candidate, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, because the two hold similar political beliefs. But that is no longer the criteria.

The country is now the priority, not her. The truth is that Merkel's not entirely

voluntary resignation as party chair is an egocentric act. By renouncing one power, Merkel wants to retain the other, greater one — the chancellorship. But there's no longer any reason for her to stay. Despite all she has done for Germany, the country no longer needs her. New elections without Merkel would provide an opportunity for a real fresh start.

Veteran chancellors often assume that the others are not yet ready to succeed them, that they aren't yet capable — but that's just the hubris that can come with high office. When Merkel first entered the Chancellery, many thought she wasn't up to it either. But over the ensuing years, she proved them wrong. She should remember that and make a dignified exit. And to do that, she has to go all the way.

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