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## **Merkel's Good Advice for Washington**

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The previous German chancellor, Gerhard Schroder, created quite a strain in German-U.S. relations when he branded the invasion of Iraq a "military adventure" and joined France in ardently opposing it. Now his successor, Angela Merkel, whose ascendancy was welcomed by the Bush administration as an antidote to the more socialist Schroder, has told interviewers that when she makes her first official call on President George W. Bush on Friday, she intends to speak her mind about Guantanamo and say the prison must be closed. This may sound like a prescription for prolonging the American- German chill. It really shouldn't be. What infuriated the Bush administration about Schroder was that he opportunistically used America-bashing to win votes even as he was cozying up to President Vladimir Putin and trying to lift the European Union's arms embargo against China. Merkel has not done that.

If she feels strongly about the disgrace of Guantanamo, as all honest people should, she also feels strongly about the importance of trans-Atlantic relations. The disagreements between Washington and Berlin will not go away. If anything, the list has been lengthened in recent months by revelations of secret CIA prisons in Eastern Europe and the wrongful imprisonment by the United States of a German citizen, Khaled el- Masri, who has now been released. But just as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has helped undo some of the damage of the administration's first-term "bring 'em on" bravado, so, too, has Merkel earned an early round of plaudits for her capable, principled approach to foreign policy. Tone is all-important in international relations, and so far, Merkel seems to get it. It worked for her in Europe when she brokered an 11th-hour compromise on the European Union's budget, and it could work in America. A successful visit by the new chancellor is very much in Washington's interest, too. The Bush administration's "with us or against us" approach has left it quite isolated in Europe. Those who have been "with" America Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, for example have paid a steep political price, while those "against" President Jacques Chirac of France have pretty much burned their bridges to Washington. Merkel could be what Washington needs, a European friend with credibility and clout on both sides of the divide back home. Alas, Merkel will most likely not persuade Bush to close down Guantanamo, but if she can convince him that her advice comes from a friend, the visit will be useful.