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Warm Welcome Awaits Germany's New Leader; U.S. Visit Seen as Chance to Rebuild Ties

Craig Whitlock
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Angela Merkel has been in office less than 60 days, but the German chancellor has already shown she won't hesitate to criticize the United States, calling for the closure of the Pentagon's prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and ruffling a few diplomatic feathers after a meeting with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice last month.

But when Merkel arrives at the White House on Friday on her first official visit to Washington, she is expected to receive first-class treatment from the Bush administration, which has her penciled in for a three-hour session with President Bush and is putting her up at Blair House, the official guest residence across Pennsylvania Avenue.

The Bush administration and the new government in Berlin both see the meeting as an opportunity to rebuild ties between old allies, a relationship that held strong during the Cold War but has frayed badly in recent years. Merkel's predecessor, Gerhard Schroeder, irritated Bush by loudly opposing the war in Iraq and turning toward France and Russia to establish a counterweight to the U.S. superpower.

Merkel, the first woman to lead Germany as well as its first leader to have grown up in the formerly Communist part of the country, is likely to be prevented by domestic restraints from overhauling German foreign policy. The Iraq war remains highly unpopular in Germany, where the public has also become increasingly angry about U.S. tactics in its global fight against terrorism.

Moreover, Merkel's right-of-center Christian Democrats are locked in an uneasy coalition government with Schroeder's left-of-center party, the Social Democrats, who bragged about their opposition to Bush during the election campaign last year. The new German foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, served as Schroeder's chief of staff.

But Merkel's upbringing in East Germany, her free-market leanings and her reassurances that she wants to work more closely with the United States have been noted approvingly by the Bush administration, which so far seems willing to stomach some criticism as long as Germany offers substantive help on other fronts.

"Both sides realize there needs to be a reset button here with the relationship, because of this lack of trust and questioning of motives and hidden agendas that have occurred," said Jackson Janes, executive director of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies at Johns Hopkins University. "But I think the Bush administration is saying that this is a woman with whom we really want to work and with whom we feel we can really collaborate. It's important that they send a signal that they trust her and that they can absorb the criticism."

Merkel, a trained physicist who speaks fluent English and Russian, did not enter politics until after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Her political mentor was Helmut Kohl, the longtime chancellor and close ally of U.S. presidents from Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton.

Polls showed that Germans were dubious about Merkel during last year's campaign, but her party eked out a plurality of the vote. Since Merkel took office in November, however, her approval

ratings have climbed, and voters have given her credit for stabilizing the coalition government and presiding over a slight improvement in the economy.

She has also scored some political victories within Europe, smoothing over tense relations with neighboring Poland and helping to solve a budget standoff in the European Union. "She hasn't made too many mistakes . . . and now she's proving she can do equally well on foreign policy," said Cord Jakobeit, a political science professor at the University of Hamburg.

Some of Merkel's thorniest challenges have come in dealing with the United States. Last week, she told the magazine *Der Spiegel* that the prison camp for terrorism suspects at Guantanamo Bay "cannot and must not exist in the long term."

Last month, Merkel also annoyed the State Department by telling reporters that Rice had admitted in a meeting that the United States had made "a mistake" by abducting Khaled Masri, a German citizen, on suspicion of being a terrorist and detaining him in Afghanistan for several months. U.S. officials said Rice acknowledged that the United States had committed errors in its counterterrorism operations but did not admit wrongdoing in the Masri case.

At the same time, Merkel has moved to reassure the United States that Germany can be a useful partner.

This week, Foreign Ministry officials said Germany was considering offering more assistance in Iraq, either in the form of relief funds or by expanding a training program for Iraqi police officers that it operates in the United Arab Emirates. Schroeder had steadfastly refused to send troops or military aid to Iraq.