



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the presentation of the Grand Cross 1st Class, special
issue, of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of
Germany to former Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel
at Schloss Bellevue
on 17 April 2023**

All of us who are here today will remember the evening of 2 December 2021. It was dark, it was bitter cold, and it was the day that an exceptional politician was at her own behest taking leave from the political stage. You, dear Angela Merkel, stepped up onto the podium in front of the Bendlerblock building at the Federal Ministry of Defence. To your right and to your left that evening, unexpectedly for most people watching, stood two large vases filled with red roses. The Bundeswehr Guard Battalion had taken up its ceremonial position to bid you farewell with a military tattoo, marking the end of your 16 years as Federal Chancellor.

One need only look at this last day in office to understand why the people in our country placed their trust in you for so many years. Because, that day, you again quite naturally went about your business as Head of Government. When the tattoo began, you had just returned from a conference of Länder Minister-Presidents that you participated in as the caretaker Federal Chancellor. Our country was in the midst of the fourth wave of the pandemic. It was inconceivable that Angela Merkel would not have performed her duties only because of this farewell ceremony.

So once again, also on this farewell day, the German people got a sense of two things that characterised your chancellorship and preserved the most important political capital – trust. First, they could rely on their Chancellor and on her devotion to duty. And, second, the Chancellor never put herself in the spotlight. She intensely disliked all vanity and adulation, or people making a fuss about her.

And now, back to those roses. Indeed, we will remember that the roses were connected to the songs you selected for the military tattoo.

But maybe it was more than that. The roses' being there was an annoyance in terms of what people were used to seeing, of routines always observed at this very masculine ceremony of the military tattoo. Those roses were a visible sign that this was the first farewell to a female Chancellor; a sign that, incidentally, would for many people have been unthinkable at the start of her time in office.

At the end of the ceremony, you, dear Angela Merkel, held one of the roses in your hand. This seemed so natural that one would think it had never been any other way during a military tattoo in Germany. You were, after all, not only the first woman to serve as Federal Chancellor; but, through your chancellorship, you ensured that a female head of government, and a woman wielding power, will always be a matter of course in our country.

Dear Angela Merkel, The special issue of the Grand Cross 1st Class of the Order of Merit that I will be presenting to you today is an exceptional honour. It is awarded so rarely that the statutes at first did not even describe precisely what it looks like. It was last awarded 25 years ago – to Helmut Kohl, for his accomplishments in connection with German unification. I am pleased to today be bestowing this same honour on Angela Merkel. It is in recognition of your exceptionally long time in office and your exceptional political career, during which you so convincingly used the experiences you gained during the dictatorship to strengthen democracy. In the face of unparalleled challenges, you helped our country achieve renewed economic success. We can look back on sixteen years of nearly uninterrupted economic growth, during which the great majority of Germans had less and less need to fear the scourge of unemployment.

Dear Angela Merkel, we know you are very good at dealing with unexpected situations. In fact, you are better at this than most of the associates with whom you have worked, both during your time in office and on your path to the chancellorship. You, after all, knew about the upheaval in the East not only through the front pages of the newspapers. You said so yourself at the ceremony marking the Day of German Unity two years ago: While for the vast majority of people in the West, reunification meant that things continued as they had before, for East Germans, almost everything changed: politics, the workplace, society.

When the Berlin Wall collapsed, you were 35 years old. From our present-day perspective, it seems a simple thing to say that, back then, you made the decision to use the freedom that you had been denied for so long. In fact, however, it was more like this: in an exceptional historic situation, you had the courage to set off into uncertain, indeed into uncharted, territory.

Sixteen years later, you were the first East German citizen to be elected Federal Chancellor, and you were the first woman to hold that office. You never drew attention to this fact – for what you saw as two

good reasons. Not only at the beginning of your chancellorship, you had to learn the bitter lesson of how much East Germans' life stories were diminished, generalised, prejudged and looked down on – and how the same views were held of women in politics more generally. Your response to this during your time in office was, I believe, both pragmatic and smart: you had the strength to exercise personal restraint, and you made skilful use of this ability.

“Isn’t this all happening a little fast?” – that is what the journalist Günter Gaus asked you when he interviewed you on his show in 1991. At the time, you were about to become Vice Chairwoman of the CDU and thereby rise into the leading ranks of a party that, to be precise, you had not even actively joined. In December 1989, not long after the fall of the Wall, you joined Demokratischer Aufbruch (Democratic New Beginning), which then merged into the CDU. Three months later, you were deputy spokesperson of the German Democratic Republic, and a year after that you had a CDU seat in the German Bundestag and served as Family Affairs Minister, becoming the first female East German member of a Federal Government.

For some of the people who were used to the very male-oriented rules governing political life in the Federal Republic, this was a bit too much: a natural scientist from the East, a woman who lacked established networks, hadn’t worked hard to rise up through the political ranks, and did not have a power base – and who was in a predominantly Western party at that. Moreover, one whose efforts had been crowned with such success! During that phase, one of the many things you had to get used to was that there were hardly any role models for you to follow. You had to orient yourself and prevail in a political party without any predecessors, without the help of established networks – and you found your very own way. Maybe that was one reason why you were simply very hard to read for many of your – mostly male – opponents. But I think this did not keep you up at night. You found your way.

Some – and not only those in other parties – may have initially believed that your time in the Federal Chancellery would be a brief interlude. Some were resentful that you had assumed this post; others did not think you were up to the task. Whether for a lack of knowledge, out of envy or due to superficial judgment – at any rate, you were underestimated by many. Those who saw you up close or who worked with you had an entirely different impression: here was someone leading a government with ambition, self-discipline and apparently endless resilience – open to take advice and, most importantly, curious to speak with people. Those who worked closely with you or sat in cabinet meetings with you simply could not underestimate you.

This also applies to election campaigns. More than one pundit expressed disappointment that your campaigns were not filled with more shouting, heavy swashbuckling and fights in the arena. That was true in

2009, as well, when the two of us ran against each other. I must admit that I, too, actually found it difficult to take a confrontational approach. Not only because we shared many views. But mainly because we had just jointly held government responsibility for four years – including when, after 2008, we had to tackle one of the most severe economic crises our country has ever experienced. And of course that made a deep impression.

Those who underestimated you were wrong to pass judgment. Because, right up to the end of your tenure, you managed to shore up Germany's position as Europe's largest economy. That has never been an easy task. Your time in office saw a string of unprecedented situations and crises, some of which overlapped – I will only mention Lehman Brothers, the euro crisis and the pandemic. The list could go on. The way that crises are handled and how we can overcome them is always the subject of – at times intense – debate. However, not many countries emerged from this phase in as good a position as the Federal Republic.

So how did you, dear Angela Merkel, accomplish this feat? When I look at your political prowess, to me three exceptional abilities come to mind: First, your reliance on facts, and your willingness to fully grasp them. Second, your skill as a negotiator, and your ability to reach compromises. And third, the firm and perseverant way in which you upheld the fundamental principles of our state.

First of all, for you, it was crucial to have the facts. The scientist and Chancellor Angela Merkel approached problems by analysing them in a matter-of-fact way, gaining a precise understanding of the arguments, and getting a grasp of the issues. To prepare for a decision, the prospects for, and limits of, compromise needed to be sounded out.

"I simply did a model calculation." That is how you, Angela Merkel, began your statement at a press conference during which you explained in very clear terms the exponential spread of the coronavirus. At the time, people could be forgiven for thinking they were listening to a virologist who is getting right to the point, not losing herself in generalisations. You approached the science – as a schooled scientist – with curiosity and without prejudice. Before you took a decision, you always tried to have as few unknown variables in the equation as possible. But, especially during the pandemic, this was either hardly or not at all possible. Here, you had to take decisions amid uncertainties, with only limited and provisional findings at your disposal, and your calculations needed to be made with many unknown variables. If doubts arose due to new findings, then decisions would need to be corrected. Getting the facts right also means reacting accordingly when they change.

Amending decisions when you realise that they are wrong: not everyone can do that. And that, Angela Merkel, was something you could

do as Federal Chancellor. I would like to add that, in a democracy, self-correction is a valuable – and indeed, an essential – asset. Incidentally, it does not exist in autocracies – and already for that reason it should not be decried.

Not least under the impression of lessons learnt from the financial market crisis, you conducted a reassessment of market regulations and the role of the state – including the welfare state. After the Fukushima nuclear disaster, you reversed your previous policy of not phasing out nuclear power, thereby changing your government's own position. A further example is what was referred to as the prescribed Easter rest period during the pandemic; here, you admitted to having made a mistake and even issued a public apology. Some may have viewed this as a weakness. But is it not actually precisely the other way around? You had the strength to show everyone that you can correct yourself, that you chose to adjust a position or a decision that later turned out to be wrong, or outdated or difficult to implement. This, too, testifies to the significance of your chancellorship, and it was one of the reasons for your long tenure. For this, you deserve not only my personal respect; it also explains much of the gratitude many people have expressed to you time and again during your chancellorship.

The ground has also shifted regarding one of the greatest political challenges both then and in the present day, namely on relations with Russia. On the one hand, Germany in 2014 responded to an appeal issued by the then-President of Ukraine. Thousands of soldiers in eastern Ukraine were in danger of being encircled, or worse, near Debaltseve. You, Angela Merkel, worked exhaustively at the time to prevent the war from engulfing all of Ukraine. That's what Ukraine had asked for, and it was the order of the day. It remains right that Germany at the time – in 2014, at the request of Ukraine – threw its weight behind efforts to achieve a ceasefire agreement and hold subsequent negotiations with a view to restoring the country's territorial integrity.

On the other hand, there was 24 February 2022 – the day Russia launched its brutal war of aggression against Ukraine. This epochal shift requires us all to adopt new thinking; it forces us to reconsider our positions, to also think the apparently unthinkable and, above all, to make democracy more resilient, both externally and internally. Putin's Russia has reduced to ashes the European security order and the peace on our continent that you – like many of your predecessors in the Federal Chancellery – worked for decades to maintain. 24 February 2022 changed not only Europe, but also the world – and with it our perspective on many years of German and European policy efforts. The important thing is for us to draw the necessary conclusions: Today, we have to think differently, we have to act differently – and that is what our country has been resolutely doing since last year, as we have become Ukraine's biggest supporter within the EU.

Dear Angela Merkel, a second key asset of yours was your skill as a negotiator, your ability to reach compromises. You were known throughout Europe and also the world to be a master of these disciplines.

You regularly went into negotiations thoroughly prepared. You knew the other side's positions, as well as their redlines. You had strong nerves – and you kept them, even when many began speaking of defeat. You were able to listen. You knew how to handle impatience and how to respond to the accusation that you were stalling. You were able to hold out – for a very long time – when people showered you with criticism for this, some of it public and some at times malicious.

Just as frequently, however, we saw that as soon as the moment arrived for a decision to be made, and especially when it was urgent, you were ready to act. Then, for example, you and your Finance Minister would declare on live television that citizens' savings were safe, during one of the most difficult crises of your tenure – when the financial, economic and euro crises hit simultaneously.

During this time of crisis, your negotiation skills were especially high in demand. I think it's safe to say that it's also thanks to them that we've retained our common European currency; also thanks to them we emerged from the euro crisis with a black eye, but no lasting damage. Indeed, you fought opposition – in some segments of the public, in parliament, and even within your own party – to help keep the eurozone together, so that no country was forced to exit our common currency. You always knew how important it is to keep channels of communication open, including with difficult partners, and not to bet on your counterpart losing face. To keep Europe united, you intentionally refused to accept accolades from many friends, including some political colleagues. And you did this at a time when our continent threatened to fall apart; you kept the centre and the periphery together, Europe's north and the south, its east and the west. By the way, you also succeeded at this in the midst of the pandemic, when the outlook for many countries was grave and the approval of some EU member states for a COVID recovery fund was by no means certain.

In matters related to Europe, you were always guided by your conviction that the unified Germany needed to be firmly anchored in a united Europe. This places you squarely in the tradition of Helmut Kohl, although during your tenure you had to master entirely different challenges and unprecedented crises of European unity.

For a long time, you were the key point of contact for our most important partner and friend outside of Europe, the United States. Indeed, in difficult times, George W. Bush and Barack Obama praised you as a leader of the Western world, of the free West. Even during the administration of Donald Trump, you at least managed to maintain a dialogue.

For all this, one also needs incredible stamina and a tremendous amount of self-discipline. I dare say that I am not the only one who has great respect for this. Because when the two of us, after extended European Council meetings and long after midnight, were conducting a final press briefing, my desire for sleep generally seemed to be greater than yours. Of course, I held out to the very end – because losing face was not an option.

I have already mentioned, dear guests, that a third key asset of Angela Merkel was how firmly she upheld the fundamental principles of our state.

When during the refugee crisis in the summer of 2015 we noticed how people's scepticism was growing, how their solidarity began to wane, you stood up and said: "We can do it." It is often claimed that you think things through with the outcome in mind. The dimension, however, that the flow of migrants would take on – this is something no one could foresee and that even you could not think through with the outcome in mind. For you, this memorable sentence was of course not an off-the-cuff remark. You were well aware of the suffering that was forcing people to flee through the Balkans and across the Mediterranean. And you were equally well aware of the challenges our municipalities would face to house and integrate the refugees. You had held talks right up until your decision not to close our country's borders. Certainly, you were also asking yourself whether and for how long our country could stand to see people, tens of thousands of people, starve and freeze right at our border. Thinking back to the situation, and comparing it with our present day, I believe we can say that a lot has been accomplished. Thanks to tremendous efforts, accompanied by heated debates. No one underestimates, least of all yourself, what remains to be done.

The Holocaust survivor Ruth Klüger, who gave a speech in the German Bundestag in 2017 on the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism, described your now famous "we can do it" as a "seemingly modest but in fact heroic choice of language". There can probably be no greater tribute to the significance of these three words.

It is with perseverance and a firm attitude that you, dear Angela Merkel, remain committed to protecting Jewish life in Germany – and to further developing German-Israeli relations. Of course, what comes to mind for all of us is the strong, worldwide signal you sent during your speech before the Knesset in 2008: You promised that for you, as German Chancellor, Israel's security will never be open to negotiation.

I have tremendous respect for how, also outside of the limelight that shines on statements making "world news", you worked tirelessly to place Jewish life in Germany on a firm and enduring foundation – with kindergartens and schools, clear legislation on the right to practice one's religion and, indeed, with the protection that unfortunately is needed time and again against antisemitism, hatred and deadly violence. Never

letting up in these efforts was something we shared. I am deeply grateful for your dedication and clarity in this regard. And our country must be equally grateful. One can hardly put it more clearly than Ronald S. Lauder, President of the World Jewish Congress, did in his speech while awarding you the Theodor Herzl Award. Lauder described you as a dam – a dam against instability, irrationality, extremism, hatred and antisemitism.

These assets – your assets – supported you during the sixteen years of your chancellorship. But to be a good politician, something else is needed, as well – namely a confident outlook. At your farewell military tattoo, you described it as the “joy in our hearts”. It is my wish that you may always have this joy in your heart.

Many citizens of this country look back on your chancellorship with a feeling of gratitude. You have left your mark on the office, as a woman and as an East German. You made a lasting impression, and this will encourage others to not shy away from assuming political office. It is also because your style of governing always prioritised the issues at hand over self-promotion.

For a period of sixteen years, you served Germany – ambitiously, intelligently and passionately. For a period of sixteen years, you worked to uphold freedom, democracy, the well-being of our country and the prosperity of its people – through your tireless efforts. And at times you reached the limits of your physical strength.

For your outstanding service, I now have the honour, as Federal President, to present to you the Grand Cross 1st Class, special issue, of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany.