

## ‘Freedom’ gives us clarity of the current world situation

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“Freedom: Memoirs 1954-2021” by Angela Merkel. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press (an imprint of St. Martin’s Publishing Group), 2024, 720 pages, \$40.00 (hardcover).



“We can do this – *Wir schaffen das*,” Angela Merkel writes in the prologue of “Freedom: Memoirs 1954-2021,” her international bestseller. “Throughout the whole of my political career, no phrase has been thrown back at me with quite such virulence as this one. No phrase has been so polarizing. For me, however, it was quite an ordinary phrase. It expressed an attitude. Call it trust in God, caution, or simply a determination to solve problems, to deal with setbacks, get over the lows and come up with new ideas. ‘We can do this, and if something stands in our way it has to be overcome, it has to be worked on.’ That was how I put it in my summer press conference on August 31, 2015. That was how I did politics. It’s how I live. It’s also how this book came about. With this attitude, which is also something learned, everything is possible, because it isn’t only politics that contributes to it – every individual person has a part to play.”

From literally the first page of this amazing autobiography I was hooked. Like many readers, I knew who Angela Merkel was. You couldn’t have been conscious over the last three decades and not known that she was – and is - one of the most important and influential leaders in history. She helped navigate Germany through a critical time, continuing the

successful reunification of a country that had been divided since the end of World War II. Also like many readers, I did not know a lot about Angela Merkel the person. But after making my way through this tome (and clocking in at 720 pages it definitely warrants that designation), I now feel I know her on a personal level. Like many of those who leave an indelible mark on civilization, her story is fascinating, heartbreaking, uplifting and ultimately mesmerizing. So be forewarned, once you begin this journey, you’ll have a hard time taking a break.

Structurally, the book consists of a prologue, 24 chapters arranged in five major sections: Part One: I Wasn’t Born Chancellor (July 17, 1954 to November 9, 1989), Part Two: A Democratic Awakening (November 10, 1989 to December 2, 1990), Part Three: Freedom and Responsibility (December 3, 1990 to November 21, 2005), Part Four: Serving Germany I (November 22, 2005 to September 4, 2015), and Part Five: Serving Germany II (September 5, 2015 to December 8, 2021). The main text is followed by a short epilogue and a list of abbreviations that I found exceptionally helpful as I charted my way through this massive odyssey.

“Freedom” also contains 32 pages of color photographs in two separate albums that flow in chronological order, beginning with her maternal and paternal grandparents as well as her parents, and ending with Merkel visiting an exhibition by the sculptor Thomas Jastram in Berlin in 2019. Honestly, these pictures brought the narrative to life in a visceral way that would not have been possible otherwise. Of course there are the requisite photos of the Chancellor with various heads of state and other easily recognizable

individuals, but as is typically the case with these efforts, I was drawn to those depicting her life before she ascended to the world stage, especially the ones of her climbing the sandstone cliffs in Switzerland in the mid-70s and receiving her doctorate in natural sciences in 1986.

As usual, it was the private insights and observations that made the manuscript most attractive to me personally. Consider the following from “Equal Rights,” the second chapter in Part Three. Here, Merkel is reflecting on a question she was asked while at the podium of the G20 women’s summit: “Do you see yourself as a feminist?”

“How had things been in my family? In terms of our education, my parents hadn’t made any distinction between my sister, Irene, and me, and our brother, Marcus. We were all supposed to develop our gifts to the full. And yet I was aware that my mother had had to fight for her professional independence from my father, and that my sister and I were more involved in household chores than Marcus.”

As many readers know, the relationship between Angela Merkel and Donald Trump was tumultuous (and I’m being kind here). In “An Interconnected World – The Reef Knot,” the second chapter in Part Five, she recounts her first meeting with Trump after he became president for the first time in January 2017. They met in the White House on March 17, 2017.

“During our private conversation, we felt our way slowly. I predominantly spoke English; the interpreter Dorothee Kaltenbach sat with us and translated some of the more complicated passages. Donald Trump asked me a series of questions, including on my East German background and my relationship with Putin. He was clearly fascinated by the Russian president. In the years that followed, I received the distinct impression he was captivated by politicians with autocratic and dictatorial traits.”

“As I flew home, I felt uneasy,” she continues a little later. “My conclusion from the conversations was: there would be no cooperative work for an interconnected world with Trump. He assessed everything from the perspective of the real-estate developer he had been before entering politics. Each piece of property can only be allocated once. If he didn’t get one, he got another. That’s how he saw the world. For him, all countries were in competition, and the success of one meant the failure of another. He didn’t believe that cooperation could increase prosperity for everyone. My example of the mutual advantage which the EU {European Union} and Korea were able to gain from their free trade agreement hadn’t convinced him. He was skeptical toward all agreements that he hadn’t negotiated personally; and he seemed particularly mistrustful of Germany. There would be no TTIP {Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership} with him.”

Turns out Merkel was way ahead of most of us when it came to figuring out Trump’s motives and predicting his future policies.

Merkel was the first woman to become Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany; she occupied that office from 2005 to 2021. Born in Hamburg in 1954 and raised in the German Democratic Republic, she was elected to the German Bundestag in 1990 and served as Federal Minister for Women and Youth from 1991 to 1994. From 1994 to 1998 she served as Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation, and Nuclear Safety. From 2000 to 2018, she served as leader of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany. Few actors on the international stage – especially those in countries with a democratic form of government, can match her longevity and influence on global affairs.

“Freedom needs democratic conditions – without democracy there is no freedom, no constitutional state, no guarantee of human rights,” Merkel asserts in the conclusion of the book. “If we want to live in freedom, we must defend our democracy within and without against those who threaten it. We can do that if we work together. If we commit ourselves together. Everyone for themselves, and all of us in it together. Because freedom cannot only exist for the individual, freedom must apply to everyone.”

I could not agree more. If you want to understand the world we currently live in, together with what’s ultimately at stake, pick up a copy of “Freedom.” You won’t be disappointed. Highly recommended.

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