



Forum for talere

Juni 2006

Madeleine Albright

A 20th Century Power Odyssey

Born 1937 in Czechoslovakia, refugee from first the Nazis and then the Communists, moved to America as an eleven year old and becomes a US citizen 1957, wins a Ivy League scholarship, marries and have three daughters, goes through a very sad divorce but still manages while raising her family to get a doctorate in international relations from Columbia University.



■ Madeleine Albright

Then she goes on to become the most powerful woman in the world.

Who she is? Marie Jena Korbelová of course – but much better known under the name she has today: Madeleine Albright, who served as US Secretary of State 1997 – 2001 in the second Clinton administration.

Academics and politics

Madeleine Albright is the daughter of Czech diplomat, Josef Korbel, who after the family's emigration to the US became a professor at the University of Denver (where he incidentally later became a teacher also for the present Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice).

After her PhD she went into foreign policy advising. For two years she served as Chief Legislative Assistant to Senator Edmund Muskie, and after that she worked in the White House for President Carter with formulation of foreign policy legislation

In 1982 she was appointed Professor of International Affairs at Georgetown University. In 1984 she was back in politics as policy advisor to vice-presidential nominee Geraldine



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Ferraro and later to presidential candidate Michael Dukakis. In 1993, shortly after Clinton took office, Madeleine Albright was appointed ambassador to the UN, which was her first diplomatic post.

The UN

Her relation with UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali was rocky at best and his spokesperson was cited as saying: "She's no shrinking violet. She can be biting."

During her time as ambassador her admittedly worst mistake of her career also also was made, not to take action against the genocide in Rwanda. During her time here she also commented on Fidel Castro and his order to shoot down two small, civilian aircraft flown by the Cuban exile group "Brothers to the Rescue" by saying: "This is not cojones. This is cowardice". A comment that reportedly endeared her to President Clinton.

Secretary of State

In 1997 President Clinton appointed Madeleine Albright as the first female Secretary of State, the highest-ranking woman in the history of United States government. As she was foreign-born, she was however not eligible as Presidential Successor and she was excluded from nuclear contingency plans.

As Secretary of State her language abilities came to good use as she apart from English speaks Czech, French, Russian, German, Polish and Serbian. During her four years in office she considerably influenced American policy in Bosnia and the Middle East, she worked for an enlarged NATO and she strongly defended the sanctions of Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

Can a woman do it?

Madeleine Albright has of course faced heightened scrutiny because she was the first woman to hold that post. Many of her critics meant that she would be at a disadvantage when meeting rulers from countries where women had no or low standing, such as the countries in the Middle East.

After several months in office she commented on this in

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a speech: "I have been Secretary of State for almost ten months. After the first day, I was asked what it felt to be a woman Secretary of State. At the time I had to divide the question. I said that I had been a woman for almost sixty years and that it felt fine. But that I had only been Secretary of State for a few hours, and so we would just have to figure out how it all goes together. Of course, a few weeks later when I met a first grade class, the kids all wanted to know how it felt to be Bill Clinton's secretary".

The snake

But after her years in office, few people any longer believed that she was at a disadvantage when meeting world leaders with different views on women. Saddam Hussein for example called her a snake. And as she at that time happened to have a jewellery brooch on her formed as a snake, the incident started her now famous collection of pins, each one with it's own story, that eventually might lead to a book.

Present occupation

After the end of her term as Secretary of State in 2001 she among other things has published her memoirs "Madame Secretary", become Professor of Diplomacy at Georgetown University and has formed her own company "The Albright Group LLC", using her vast personal contact net as a consultant working with brokering agreements with government and business, finding capital, managing crises and building strategic relationships with opinion leaders.

Critical points of view

In later years she has become more and more critical of the way the US is handling foreign relations. Regarding the invasion of Iraq for example, she says, "The purpose of the invasion was to seize weapons that did not exist and to sever a connection between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda that had not been made".

She is also critical of the American almost missionary eagerness to implement democracy in the Middle East, and she means that even though she naturally approves of it, "Democracy is a form of government; it is not a ticket to some heavenly kingdom where all evil is vanquished and everyone agrees with us."



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When it comes to Iran and the term “the axis of evil” as president Bush uses, she is very weary of dividing the world into good guys and bad guys as it is much too simplistic. She means that all this threatening talk of actions against Iran only serves to unite the people there around their leaders instead of letting internal opposition grow.

Diplomacy and religion

In her latest book “The Mighty and the Almighty” she deals with a topic that diplomats normally stay away from: Religion. Madeleine Albright herself has a rather peculiar religious background. She was raised a Roman Catholic, she married an Episcopalian and later found out that she was Jewish (and only as late as 1996 she discovered that her grandparents were murdered in the Holocaust).

A point she makes in her book is that she believes that western leaders and diplomats should have advisors on religion in the same way as they have advisors on economy, military matters etc. The reason she means is fairly obvious. Religion does play an increasingly important role in today’s relation between states and people.

She concedes that during her years as Secretary of State there were situations when the religious issues were not fully considered. For example during the Camp David peace talks where the Americans did not realize that the Palestinian leader Arafat did not have any mandate to make any decisions on how the holy places should be handled. He was not responsible for them.

God’s side

She is also critical to that president Bush is so sure about what his religion is telling him and that he is convinced that God is on his side. Statements such as “God wanted me to be President” only alienate potential allies around the world who disagrees with his religious beliefs and provokes people in the Muslim world. It’s one thing to be religious, she says, but it’s another to make religion your policy.



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She goes on saying that "I have looked at foreign policy and international relations issues all my life and I've never seen the world in such turmoil". She means that as so many of today's problems involves Muslims, it is imperative that people in the west, and particularly in the US, know more about Islam than they do. The majority of people in the Muslim world do not condone or support terror, violence or extremism, she means, and it is important that we don't try to impose our value systems on these people, but rather support changes that comes from within the religion itself so they themselves can get rid of the extremists.

On a different note

Madeleine Albright has been described as determined, charmingly self-deprecating and quick witted with a lot of humour. She also likes to surprise people, particularly those who think her too serious and always thinking about foreign policy. This was the reason why she suddenly appeared as an actor in one episode of the TV-show "Gilmore Girls" and why she recently explained to a reporter that she regularly works out with weights and that she without problem could leg-press 400 lbs.

She also explained that she loved the TV-series "The West Wing" (but convinced them to add both a National Security Advisor and a Secretary of State, which they did) but that "Commander in Chief" was less to her liking. She did not like that the female president in the show was not elected president, but got the job when the elected president (a man) died.

Here it could perhaps be of interest to know that Madeleine Albright cannot in real life be elected President of the United States, as she was not born in America.