



College of Europe
Collège d'Europe



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Opening Ceremony Madeleine Albright Promotion 2023-2024

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U.S. Permanent Representative to NATO

Madam Rector, Mr. President, Mr. President, distinguished guests, faculty, students,

It's such an honor to be here today and have a chance to talk about Madeleine Albright's life and her legacy. But it's not an easy assignment as her achievements as the US ambassador at the United Nations and as our first female Secretary of State were so many, and her achievements didn't stop with her government service. She was an admired and much sought-after professor, the founding partner of her own global consulting firm, a chief adviser on several political campaigns, a devoted mother of three girls, and the author of seven best-selling books.

I'm afraid that ten minutes is just too short, to fully capture the impact that she had on US foreign policy and world affairs. So instead of attempting to list all of her countless contributions, or even just to highlight a few, I thought maybe I talked today about Madeleine Albright's overarching values set. Who was Madeleine Albright as a person? What did she stand for? And what were the themes that ran throughout her entire career? From the time that she entered public service in her late 30s, age 39, to her time in the Clinton administration, serving up in New York at the UN and at the State Department, to her many positions in the private and nonprofit sectors later in her career.

Let me share for you today, six things that stand out for me when I think about Madeleine Albright. First, Madeleine Albright was an Atlanticist and an ardent defender of the transatlantic relationship, in part because her remarkable life history was its own transatlantic story. She immigrated to the United States from then Czechoslovakia in 1948, when she was just 11 years old. She worked hard in those early years to assimilate and adopt many American traditions. She talks about struggling to speak with an American accent and getting rid of her British accent. And she talks about even learning how to chew bubblegum, like a real American. But throughout college, and in her early professional years, she remained a committed Atlanticist, deeply familiar with the histories, languages and cultures on both sides of the Atlantic and determined to maintain close ties even in the darkest times. Much of her ten years as Secretary of State was focused on Europe, which was whole, free, and at peace. She passionately promoted NATO enlargement and was instrumental in the admission of Czechia, Poland, and Hungary. She also spent much of her ten years as Secretary of State bringing peace to the Balkans and implementing the Dayton Accords. While she worked on many other regional issues, transatlantic unity remained the centerpiece of her agenda.

I first met Madeleine Albright in the early 2000s after she had left the State Department as Secretary of State, and at a time when Europe and the United States were deeply divided over the Iraq War, the War on Terror, Kyoto Protocol, and a long list of other issues. She enlisted my help with a new project she was launching at the Aspen Institute in Washington, to try to put the Transatlantic Partnership

back on track. What stood out for me, in those first few days of getting to know her, was her unwavering belief in the transformative power of transatlantic unity and cooperation. It was the guiding light in everything that she did, up until she passed away last year.

Second, Madeleine Albright was a lifelong defender of democracy, no doubt inspired by her father, Yosef Korb, who in his letter to then Secretary of State Dean Acheson, asking for political asylum in the United States in the late 1940s wrote: "I cannot return to the communist Czechoslovakia as I would be arrested for my faithful adherence to the ideals of democracy". His books about the fragility of democracy, and the Albright family's conversations around the dinner table about Stalin, about the Holocaust, and the disruption that war could cause, clearly left their mark on Madeleine Albright. Throughout her career as Secretary of State, as the chairman of the National Democratic Institute, and as an American citizen, defending democracy at home and abroad, became another one of her guiding principles. My friend Bill Antholis at the University of Virginia perhaps captured it best by saying that "Madeleine Albright helped enlarge democracy, following the end of the Cold War, and then defended it further in recent years".

Third, Madeleine Albright was a deep believer in bipartisanship. She saw no value in demonizing the other side, even when she felt compelled to make her own politics known. She actively, and quite aggressively, built relationships across the aisle, as we say, to find pragmatic solutions to a long list of global challenges. Perhaps her most famous exercise in bipartisanship was her surprise friendship with Senator Jesse Helms, a Republican from North Carolina who found little to no value in the United Nations and adamantly opposed one of the Clinton administration's chief foreign policy goals of ratifying the Chemical Weapons Convention. Instead of throwing our hands up and walking away, Madeleine Albright worked tirelessly to gain his support for the Senate ratification of the Treaty. She visited Senator Helms in his home in North Carolina. She sent him a t-shirt that said: "someone at the State Department loves me", and debated the finer points of the Treaty until the senator eventually relented. In that episode, and so many others, she always heralded bipartisanship. She said the ties that bind America are far stronger than disagreements over any particular policy, and far more durable and profound than any party affiliation.

Fourth, Madeleine Albright was a remarkable role model and mentor for women and girls, as we just heard. Wherever she went, she pulled women together and lifted them up. At the U.N., when she was serving there as Permanent Representative, when she realized that out of over 180 countries, there were just six female ambassadors, she formed what she called the G7 caucus, and ensured that they met monthly to not only support one another but to develop important projects. As just one example, the group set up war crime tribunals for the Balkans that declared that rape was a weapon of war. As Secretary of State, she made women's issues central to US foreign policy, pairing it with her other passion for democracy promotion, given her belief that democracies simply didn't work when women were treated as second-class citizens. And just as she did at the U.N., she convened female foreign ministers at UNGA every year that she was Secretary of State.

Beyond the policy work that she did on women's issues, she spoke openly and often about the challenges of finding her own voice, and she encouraged women to not only speak up but to occasionally interrupt.

Fifth, Madeleine Albright was a risk-taker. Ever since she was a young girl, she consistently bucked conventional thinking. The headmistress at her high school cautioned against applying to too many universities, but Madeleine Albright applied to several universities and in fact, received scholarships at every single one of them. During her years at college, women of that era were often encouraged to get married and consider somewhat less ambitious careers, as secretaries. Of course, we know how that ended: she became Secretary of State. At the State Department in 2000, some of her colleagues weren't so sure that she should go and directly engage the North Koreans, but she did it anyway. Similarly, Congress wanted her to skip the Fourth World Conference on Women in China in 1996. Too risky, they said, but she went anyways. Now, if she were here today, Madeleine Albright would be the first to tell you that taking risks doesn't always lead to successful outcomes. She never had trouble admitting that she sometimes got things wrong, but she was fond of saying that taking risks is a precursor to reward even in an increasingly uncertain world. And she lived by those words.

Finally, Madeleine Albright was incredibly generous and outright fun. She had a fabulous dry sense of humor and was never afraid to laugh at herself. She liked to dance, and once taught the Macarena to Botswana's ambassador at the U.N. And if you don't believe me, Google it. She played the drums she had fun with pins on every lapel, sending sometimes blatant, sometimes cryptic messages about her moods to foreign leaders, depending on whether she was wearing a serpent or a butterfly. Her generosity had no balance, she frequently hosted policy salons in her Georgetown row house. She always made time for her students, and she loved, as we just heard, sending personal handwritten notes to thank colleagues for even the most minor contributions to her work.

Again, it's hard to capture the life of a woman who had such a supersized impact on the world of diplomacy, but those are the six traits I will most remember about Madeleine Albright. And the six traits that I hope will continue to inspire the students that are here with us today. I think of Madeleine Albright so often in my current position at NATO, and I sometimes wonder what she'd be doing and saying right now, in the face of so many global challenges and so much uncertainty. I know she'd be incredibly troubled by Russia's ongoing war of aggression in Ukraine. I know she would intuitively understand what's at stake, that Ukrainians are not only defending their territory but also the values that we all hold so dear. She would stress the critical importance of transatlantic unity and she would fight for it. She would be worried about our upcoming election in the United States, but even in our rather toxic political climate at the moment, I know she'd be reaching out to Republicans to find common ground. She would be preparing the next generation of diplomats for new challenges by helping them understand the past. And she would call for a little levity by making a few jokes, telling us one of her hilarious self-deprecating stories, and encouraging us to dance or play the drums.

Thank you.

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<https://youtu.be/kprsX60HVb8>