

Politics never trumped my 40-year friendship with Madeleine Albright (*The Hill* by Brian Atwood, March 22, 2022) -- It shouldn't be shocking when a well-known public servant passes at an advanced age. But [Madeleine Albright](#) never faded into obscurity. She remained active, writing, commenting on international issues, standing up for human rights and democracy to the very end. Only her passing from this earth would quiet her voice. And when it happened, I and many others who knew her well, were shocked.

Even in death, [her story](#) will inspire. She was a refugee from tyranny, both Fascism and Communism. She was an immigrant who embraced the principles that made America a nation that sought to "bend the arc of history toward justice." And this thoroughly American woman broke barriers as she became the first woman secretary of State. But there was more to her story.

I started working with Madeleine in the late 1970s when she was in charge of congressional relations for President Carter's National Security Council, and I was in the same position at the State Department. We plotted together to convince Congress to ratify the Panama Canal Treaty, the Strategic Arms (SALT) treaty with the Soviet Union, to support requests for the resources needed for diplomacy and development, and we dealt with the frustrations of the Iran hostage crisis. It was a crucible that forged a lasting friendship.

She rarely shared stories of her childhood, her escape from Czechoslovakia, her time as a refugee in Paris and London. She wanted to be treated like any other American. Yet, as we discovered in her [memoir](#), where she wrote about her fascinating childhood, she was driven by her experience to absorb the new American culture, to work harder than anyone else and to pursue her passion to promote democracy.

After the Carter years, she devoted her time to teaching at Georgetown and when the National Democratic Institute (NDI) was created by Congress in 1984, she saw it as a vehicle to combine her love for politics with her passion to help other countries become democracies. NDI was the representative of the Democratic Party overseas and it worked with political parties, parliaments, elections and democracy advocates to build viable democracies.

After the 1984 election when Walter Mondale lost to Ronald Reagan, Madeleine, as NDI's vice chair, asked me to consider taking over as its director. With her strong support, we created an organization that led a resurgence of democracies in places like the Philippines, Chile, Argentina and Panama. Then the wave hit Central and Eastern Europe, the place of Madeleine's origins, and the Soviet Union. Former Vice President Mondale became our chair and he and Madeleine gave NDI instant credibility around the globe.

When [Bill Clinton](#) was elected, we would both be called upon to serve in government again, she as United Nations ambassador and I as head of USAID. I visited her in New York and watched her as she easily interacted with her counterparts on the Security Council. She not only spoke several languages, but she also had a political bearing that served her well. She was comfortable explaining the Clinton administration's policies, not only for her diplomatic colleagues but for the public as well.

Two days before she was nominated to be secretary of State, we had lunch together at the State Department. She expressed doubts that she would be selected as secretary. The position had been reserved in history for men and she was candid in expressing her worry that a woman, an immigrant no less, would be chosen. I told her that not only had she done an outstanding job at the U.N., but the president wouldn't miss a chance to choose the first woman secretary of State. Two days later she and President Clinton made history. We traveled together to Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia during our time of service. At one point in the midst of a statement in Serbo-Croatian by President Slobodan Milosevic, she interrupted him as he attempted to ascribe views to the American public. Countering his assertion even before hearing the translation, she said in English that he "had no right to describe American attitudes, that is my country." Dictators brought out the best in Madeleine!

Our friendship survived institutional tension as the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), and the Republican Senate tried to merge USAID into the State Department. Helms had a great deal of leverage over the State Department as he could hold up its appointees, stop action on important international agreements and reject requests for resources.

I strongly opposed merging USAID into State which created a potentially awkward situation in our relationship. Madeleine may have been frustrated by my stance, but we never had an uncivil conversation over the matter. In recent years and in a joking manner, she liked to say, illustrating the tensions that sometimes exist in government, that "we fought like cats and dogs" over the issue. Rarely do these kinds of battles end well, but thanks to a relationship forged over many years, we did not allow Congress to step in between us.

We were in Ukraine together to observe the election in 2014. There we saw a nation that wanted desperately to elect a leader who would fight corruption and build on the democratic gains made since independence in 1991.

No one could have been as distraught as Madeleine Albright over the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It sparked the worst memories of her childhood. Those children escaping the Russian bombing were reminders of the fears she must have felt in her youth.

On the other hand, she must have been very proud of those brave people fighting hard to hold on to their democracy. Her contribution to that imbued spirit, even more than her being the first woman to be secretary of State, is the essence of her very distinguished legacy.

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