

## Phyllis Oakley



Phyllis Oakley, Assistant Secretary of State (ret), died on Saturday, January 21, 2022 at Sibley Memorial Hospital in Washington, DC. She was 87 years old. The cause of death was cardiac arrest. Phyllis Elsa Elliott was born on November 23, 1934, in Omaha, NE. Her husband, Ambassador Robert B. Oakley, died in 2014. She is survived by her son Thomas Elliott Oakley, daughter Mary Oakley Kress and son-in-law, Joseph Kress, and five grandchildren, LT Robert Kress, USN, Andrew Kress, and Peter Kress, Graham Oakley, and Josephine Oakley. Phyllis was always interested in public affairs; she received material from the State Department about job opportunities when she was 12. During World War II, she

followed the battles closely, enthralled with history and geography. She majored in political science and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1956 from Northwestern University. She received her master's degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in 1957 and then joined the foreign service. She was completing her French language training and waiting for her first overseas assignment when she met Robert Oakley, another young officer in training. They were married in Cairo, Egypt, in June 1958. But when she married in 1958, State Department custom dictated that she quit because of an unwritten rule that forbade female foreign service officers from marrying. Their first post was Khartoum, Sudan, followed by three years in Washington DC, then on to Abidjan, the Ivory Coast. When her husband went to Vietnam from 1965 to 1967, she stayed behind and taught American history at Centenary College in Shreveport, La. After her husband's return from Vietnam they were stationed in Paris, France, USUN in New York, Paris and Beirut. In 1974 they returned to Washington. In the late 1960s and early '70s, as women started breaking down barriers in other professions, the handful of female officers in the foreign service challenged this and other antiquated notions that discriminated against them. The department gave way on the unofficial marriage ban in 1971, allowing women to marry and offering to reinstate those who had been forced out earlier. By the time of her return in 1974 she was one of the few left that wanted to return. She had spent the intervening years as the wife of a foreign service officer, Robert B. Oakley, carrying out the myriad social, diplomatic and managerial duties that the department expected of wives under its "two for the price of one" motto. She also raised their two children. Once she was reinstated, she and her husband became one of the foreign service's earliest so-called tandem couples, camping and decamping all over the world – sometimes with each other, sometimes without. In the late 1980s, as the Cold War waned, Ms. Oakley, served as the first female deputy spokesman for the State Department under President Ronald Reagan. Ms. Oakley became a widely recognizable figure delivering televised State Department news briefings in the late 1980s. She held the job from 1986 until 1989, when her husband was appointed ambassador to Pakistan. They did not want to be separated again, so she took a job in Islamabad at the United States Agency for International Development. She later served

as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration (1994-97) and Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research (1997-99), under President Bill Clinton. Her specialties included Arab-Israeli relations and the Panama Canal Treaty. After her federal retirement, Mrs. Oakley was an adjunct professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and a visiting professor at Mount Holyoke College and Northwestern, chair of the Friends of UNFPA (then Americans for UNFPA) Board of Directors between 2003 and 2007. She also served on the boards of the American Academy of Diplomacy, Georgetown University Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, and the Board of Visitors of CIA University. A memorial service will be held at St. Alban's Episcopal Church, 3001 Wisconsin Avenue, NW Washington DC at 11:30 a.m. Saturday April 2, 2022 followed by a reception at the St. Albans School Refectory. The service will be live-streamed and the link is: [bit.ly/PhyllisOakleyMemorial](https://bit.ly/PhyllisOakleyMemorial). Gifts in Phyllis Oakley's honor may be made to ANERA (American Near East Aid), 1111 14th Street, NW #400 Washington DC 20005 or via their donor link: <https://support.anera.org/a/donate-honor>.