



Madeline Albright:

Madame Secretary A Memoir (With Bill Woodward)

Review by Liz O'Donnell

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She served Clinton for eight years during his two terms, firstly as Ambassador to the UN and then Secretary of State. As such she was at the helm of US foreign policy for critical and controversial episodes in recent world history.

She writes with considerable candour as to the complexities and dilemmas faced by a woman in positions of power and authority. It is at times an outspoken work containing frank portraits of the cast of players on the world stage – the Clintons, Vaclav Havel, Arafat, Putin, Milosevic, and Barak.

Madeline Albright was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1937. Her father Joska Korbela a diplomat was a huge influence “to understand me you must understand my father”. Her childhood experiences as a refugee from Nazi and then Communist Czechoslovakia inspired an abiding devotion to democratic values.

Madeline won a scholarship to Wellesley. She married Joe Albright, from a distinguished American publishing family and she combined raising her three children with earning her doctorate from Columbia. Ultimately she worked as National Security Advisor in the Carter administration. She describes the painful break-up of her marriage of twenty three years as the lowest point in her life.

When Clinton was elected in 1992 she was already a democratic insider; and tipped for a top job on the foreign policy side. She was to serve as Ambassador to the UN at a turning point in its own history. She was most surefooted in relation to the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Her personal background and understanding of the issues allowed her to become a key advocate and indeed architect of American foreign policy in the region.

She describes the failure of the United States and of the international community to act sooner in Rwanda where eight hundred thousand people perished in the genocide as “the deepest regret from all her years in public service”. She was not to make the same mistake with Milosevic. At time the burdens of office weighed heavily on her but she notes, “History is written backwards but lived forwards”.

When Clinton was re-elected in 1996 there was fierce competition for the job of Secretary of State. She was in the running but she was a woman pitched against luminaries such as George Mitchell, and Richard Holbrooke. Like so many women she felt inadequate in the face of the top job. My own experience is that, while women question their own competence, men, no matter how untalented, say “when can I start”? Later she heard it was Hillary who pushed Clinton to select her;

“Only if you pick Madeline, will you get a person who shares your values, who is an elegant defender of your foreign policy, and who will make every girl proud”.

She described hanging around in a pink bathrobe with her friend waiting for the phone call from the President. True to her academic past she stayed up all night swotting to prepare herself for the Senate Confirmation Hearing and was duly appointed.

Then came the shock on the morning of the 4th February, 1997. The headlines of The Washington Post revealed that the new Secretary of State’s grandparents were Jewish victims of the holocaust and that she herself was Jewish. One can only imagine having to deal with this life altering news on possibly the most

momentous day of her life. It transpired that altogether more than a dozen members of her Czech family had perished.

She recalls 1998 as a bad year. Wherever she looked she saw either gridlock or peril. During that year she recalls a most peculiar White House Cabinet meeting called to allow Clinton apologise for not being truthful about Lewinsky. She was one of two women in the Cabinet, who had earlier defended him and who now felt distinctively uncomfortable. Even more so, as the meeting turned into a semi-religious 'southern' thing.

It is to my mind the most striking feature of this otherwise frank memoir that whether from squeamishness, loyalty to the Clintons or disinterest she deals so scantily with the Lewinsky affair and subsequent Impeachment. She admits that she was angry with the President that he had risked so much for less than nothing. She had learned from her own marriage not to be surprised when a man lies about sex.

The Twin Towers attack she describes as like a "lightning bolt illuminating much that had previously been less obvious". She was not surprised by the attack or by the use of planes. She was however startled by the level of co-ordination of the plan and that the attackers had trained in the US. It was becoming clear that "unconventional threats like terrorism had created a battlefield populated by civilians".

On the Middle East her account of Wye River and Camp David is insightful. She describes the Palestinian refusal at Camp David to accept the best offer that they would ever get from the Israelis as her "greatest disappointment as Secretary of State" "they wouldn't yield a dime to make a dollar". She also quips that if women leaders had acted in the way that Arafat and Barak did during Camp David they would have been dismissed "as menopausal".

While in government she learned the strength of her own voice in a male dominated and bellicose work environment. Now she is finding a new voice grounded in her experience. She remains true to her central credo inherited from

her father, which is a profound belief in democracy, open markets and the rule of law. She says she would like to be remembered for helping teach a generation of older women stand tall and young women not to be afraid to interrupt.

Overall, this is a compelling read; an easy mix of the personal and the political. At times the detail could lose the wider audience, but that intellectual rigour is predictable given the irrepressible force of the author.