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Madeleine Albright dead at 84: American imperialism mourns a war criminal

The death of Madeleine Albright on Wednesday was the occasion for an outpouring of praise by the American political establishment and the corporate media, glorifying her role as the first female Secretary of State and covering up her close identification with some of the worst imperialist crimes of the 1990s—and today.



Former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, center, gets briefing on the situation around the border between two Koreas from American Sgt. Tim Ingoldsby, left, during her visit to guard post Ouelletle in the border village of the Panmunjom, north of Seoul, Feb. 22, 1997. (AP Photo/Pool, File)

In the context of the ongoing claims that the US and NATO are leading a worldwide campaign against Russian war crimes in Ukraine, the celebration of Albright's bloody

record is a demonstration of grotesque hypocrisy. Albright was an advocate and apologist for much more brutal actions than any taken so far by Vladimir Putin in Ukraine.

Perhaps the most notorious episode in her career came in 1996, when she was asked on the CBS program “60 Minutes” about the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children because of severe economic sanctions imposed on that country as part of an effort to undermine the regime of Saddam Hussein. More children had died in Iraq than in Hiroshima, interviewer Lesley Stahl said. “The price was worth it,” Albright responded.

It is noteworthy that none of the admiring obituaries of Albright which have appeared in the corporate media makes any mention of this comment or of Albright’s role in enforcing and promoting a policy that resulted in death on such a massive scale.

The colossal death toll among Iraqi children would be repeatedly cited by Islamic fundamentalists like Osama bin Laden as a reason for their shift from an alliance with the United States—during the US-backed guerrilla war against Soviet military forces in Afghanistan—to targeting the US for terrorist attacks on 9/11. The US massacre of innocents became the pretext for Al Qaeda’s.

This comment became a political black eye for the Clinton administration when it began a campaign at college campuses to build support for US airstrikes against Iraq in February 1998. A trio of top foreign policy officials, Secretary of State Albright, National Security Advisor Sandy Berger and Secretary of Defense William Cohen, traveled to Ohio State University, where they addressed a large and—they thought—thoroughly vetted audience.

Some dissenters challenged Albright, however. She was asked how she could justify US support for dictators like Suharto in Indonesia and Israeli repression of the Palestinians and then claim to be opposing Saddam Hussein on the basis of universal human rights concerns. Wasn’t this just a double standard, excusing the crimes of US allies while highlighting those of US targets?

Albright tried to beat down the critics, asking them, in typically McCarthyite fashion, why they were so concerned with the rights of Saddam Hussein. She was booed down by the crowd, which responded enthusiastically to the exposure of the hypocrisy of US foreign policy. That was the end of what had been dubbed, from the officials’ initials, the “ABC”

tour. This episode was reported by the WSWS but is again not mentioned in any obituaries of Albright in the media.

Albright is most closely identified with US policy in the former Yugoslavia, which was dismembered under the pressure of German and US imperialism beginning in 1991, when Germany recognized the breakaway republics of Slovenia and Croatia, followed by the German and American recognition of the secession of Bosnia.

Serbs, the largest ethnic group in Yugoslavia, were transformed overnight into persecuted minorities, particularly in Croatia and Bosnia. Tensions skyrocketed as the Stalinist bureaucrats in each republic transformed themselves rapidly into nationalistic demagogues and, ultimately, into fascistic advocates of “ethnic cleansing,” with the majority in each republic seeking to suppress or drive out those of the “wrong” ethnic background.

Albright, then US ambassador to the United Nations, was a fervent advocate of US and UN intervention in the various civil wars that broke out within Yugoslavia. She initially was unsuccessful in convincing her colleagues in the Clinton White House and the Pentagon that US military forces should be deployed into the region, particularly air power.

In one notorious confrontation with General Colin Powell, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, she declared, “What’s the point of having this superb military you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?”

Ultimately the US did intervene with both air strikes and economic sanctions, forcing Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and leaders of the Bosnian Serbs to accept the Dayton Accords, a tripartite division of Bosnia into zones dominated by Muslims, Croats and Serbs, under the supervision of a UN peacekeeping force.

In 1997, Clinton named Albright as Secretary of State for his second term in office. So right-wing and militaristic was her record that she was confirmed by a 99-0 vote in the Senate, a unanimous bipartisan vote which included such reactionaries as Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond and the arch-militarist John McCain.

One of Albright’s main priorities was the expansion of NATO, which admitted three former members of the Soviet Bloc, Poland, Hungary and Albright’s birthplace, the Czech

Republic, in 1999. This was a brazen repudiation of undertakings Washington had given to Mikhail Gorbachev during the break-up of the Soviet Union, that NATO would not expand into the territory of the former Warsaw Pact.

When a new crisis erupted in Kosovo in 1999, with clashes between Albanians and Serbs, Albright spearheaded a campaign for military intervention, depicting the ethnic strife as a genocide directed by Milosevic, in what turned out to be a gross exaggeration. At a conference at Château de Rambouillet in France, she browbeat the Serb delegation with the threat of US-NATO bombing, while presenting an ultimatum that included accepting the right of 30,000 NATO troops to go anywhere in what remained of Yugoslavia, essentially turning the country into a colony of imperialism.

When the Serbs and Russians walked out, Albright proclaimed the Albanian delegates—drawn from the Kosovo Liberation Army, a gangster outfit linked to drug and organ trafficking—to be freedom fighters deserving international support. Within days, an intensive bombing campaign began which lasted 78 days and killed thousands.

The damage inflicted on major Yugoslav cities, particularly the capital Belgrade, was later estimated at more than \$30 billion, which included more than 20,000 homes, many government buildings, dozens of hospitals and other health care facilities, and much of the country's basic infrastructure—roads, bridges, water treatment and sewage facilities and airports.

Both in its savagery and its brazen violation of international law, the US-NATO attack on Serbia makes a mockery of present-day claims that Putin's reactionary attack on Ukraine is an unprecedented breach of international norms that have prevailed in Europe since the end of World War II.

The imperialist powers dismembered a sovereign country, Yugoslavia, and redrew its borders, recognizing the independence of Kosovo—long a part of Serbia—and endorsing the forced removal of hundreds of thousands of Serbs, first from Croatia, then from Bosnia, later from Kosovo. The unprovoked military assault on a major European city did not begin with Kiev in 2022 but in Belgrade in 1999 (to be followed by Donetsk in 2014, when Ukrainian forces shelled pro-Russian secessionists).

There is not space and time enough to explore every crime to which this “feminist icon” of American imperialism is linked. She was an adamant defender of bloodstained dictators aligned with the United States, like Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Suharto of Indonesia. While UN ambassador, she cast the US veto against any outside intervention to halt the genocide in Rwanda. As Secretary of State, she advocated American supremacy on a world scale, describing the United States as “the indispensable nation,” which had to be the focal point of all major global undertakings.

Albright was the product of a bipartisan foreign policy elite dedicated to the promotion of US imperialism’s world domination. Her father, after leaving Czechoslovakia following the Stalinist takeover, taught international relations at the University of Denver, where one of his graduate students was Condoleezza Rice, National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State for George W. Bush, and one of the principal architects of the Iraq War.

Albright herself studied at Wellesley and then Columbia University, where she took her Ph.D. under the tutelage of Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1976. When Brzezinski became Jimmy Carter’s National Security Advisor in 1977, he brought Albright with him to the National Security Council, where she was his liaison with Congress.

Independently wealthy through her marriage with publishing millionaire Joseph Albright, she became a top fundraiser for the Democratic Party and moved up in Democratic foreign policy circles, advising Carter, then presidential candidates Walter Mondale in 1984, Michael Dukakis in 1988 and Bill Clinton in 1992. It was Clinton who named her UN Ambassador in 1993 and Secretary of State in 1997.

After leaving the White House in 2001, she founded the Albright Stonebridge Group, a management consulting firm specializing in overseas risk assessments, and became the godmother of a slew of foreign policy operatives for future Democratic administrations. As columnist David Ignatius observed Thursday, “Albright’s proteges surround us. Wendy Sherman, her devoted colleague for decades, is Deputy Secretary of State, and nearly every member of the Biden administration foreign policy team can trace a lineage to Albright.”

Even more significantly, Albright became chair of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in 2001 and held that position until her death. The NDI is an arm of the capitalist

state, CIA-financed to promote pro-imperialist political forces and to subvert any radical or oppositionist trend that might threaten US corporate interests in countries around the world.

In that capacity, Albright was deeply involved in every crime of the US military-intelligence apparatus in the first two decades of the 21st century, from Afghanistan to Iraq to Ukraine. The celebration of her life and work by the corporate media, and by Democratic and Republican politicians alike, is a demonstration of the bipartisan consensus that anything goes, no matter how undemocratic and bloody, in the defense of the profits and worldwide global interests of the American financial aristocracy.

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