

Madeleine Albright: Democracy's beacon

Posted on Friday, Mar 25, 2022

The column below reflects the views of the author, and these opinions are neither endorsed nor supported by WisOpinion.com.

It was the fall of 1988 when we met the first time. I picked up Madeleine at the Madison Airport and we drove to Janesville. She was the foreign policy advisor to the Dukakis for President campaign, and I was the Wisconsin chair of the Campaign.

We were going to a meeting of the United Auto Workers, the union members of the Janesville General Motors plant. The UAW had endorsed Dukakis, and we were to give not a rousing speech but rousing reasons why the members needed to rally their fellow union members, families and the people of Janesville to vote for the Democrats.

I jokingly said, "I will be for American cars. You be against foreign cars".

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

She gave a brilliant talk about democracy and the role of unions. She said it was the union leader Lech Walesa and the shipyard workers at Gdańsk who would free Poland from the Communist puppet government of the Soviet Union.

It was UAW President Walter Reuther who made organized labor a force for civil rights and worker's rights. "You stand on their shoulders", and there was a rousing cheer when she said, "solidarity means that you get out the vote".

Madeleine knew life without democracy as a girl rowing up under the Nazis in Czechoslovakia. The story is told in her 2012 book "Prague Winter; a personal story of Remembrance and War, 1937- 1948".

In the 1992 Clinton for President campaign, we met again. She was a foreign policy advisor, and I was the chair in Wisconsin's. A better result.

In 1993 Madeleine was appointed by President Clinton to be the ambassador to the United Nations, and I was sent to Norway as the Ambassador.

She came to Norway early on. She was our houseguest — OK it was a really big house.

She arrived with one suitcase. Her tutorial on how to pack was a delight. Knits, wraps and scarves that didn't wrinkle, a simple necklace but a prominent pin to draw the attention. An eagle with a pearl in its talons was a favorite.

Norway is one of the ten most important countries in the UN, supporting it with money and talent. However, the underlying purpose of the trip was for Madeleine to get a closer personal relationship with the Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. Gro had the same goal and invited Madeleine to her private home for breakfast. Just the two of them.

Two prominent world leaders determined to shape the post-Cold War order into one of lasting peace. Gro made scrambled eggs.

The issue at the time was the expansion of NATO to include Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia. I told Madeleine of my efforts to persuade the Norwegians this was a good idea. Norway was a founding member of NATO.

I mentioned France always had an alternative to how the process should work that was always opposed by us. France was a member of NATO, but at arms length as they had their own command structure.

Madeleine said, "I know. But they can't always be wrong. Tom, I have a good idea. Let's accept every fifth idea France has regardless of what it is."

My next visit with Madeleine was when she was Secretary of State and I escorted Prime Minister Brundtland to her office in the State Department. The first woman secretary of state and the first woman Prime Minister of Norway.

I did mention that we were a long way from Janesville. "Yes, but remember that Dukakis won Wisconsin."

Madeleine came to head the National Democratic Institute, a foundation created by Congress to promote democracy abroad. The Republican counterpart is the International Republican Institute.

I joined NDI as a volunteer associate and was sent to Turkey, Latvia, Hungary and Macedonia for short stints to be a mentor to new parliamentary leaders.

Neither NDI or IRI can be involved in any partisan activities in the United States. However, each has a role prescribed by Congress to be the host of international leaders invited to the party nominating conventions.

So here we were again tasked to organize the hosting of the several hundred international visitors, mostly members of parliaments, coming to Milwaukee for the 2020 convention. All was in the works and on schedule. Then we had to cancel due to COVID.

Madeleine leaves us as the champion of democracy through the life she lived. And, leaves her 2018 book, "Fascism; a warning". It is a history and a warning that in parts of Europe there were leaders who only used elections to come to power and then the compromises of democracy and its institutions of free press and opposition parties were in the way. Autocracy was their answer.

The heading of her chapter on Putin is "The Man from the KGB".

"Like Mussolini nine decades ago, he is watched carefully by other leaders who are tempted to follow in his footsteps".

Thanks for the warning, Madeleine. Will follow up.