Alumni

Madeleine Albright, One of Columbia’s Greatest Ambassadors

In her final years, the former US secretary of state was a campus mainstay.

By
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Madeleine Albright (center) in 2018. (Bruce Gilbert)

“As a former student and current professor, I have always loved Commencement ceremonies, especially the awarding of diplomas, the lovely music, and the multicolored academic robes,” Madeleine Albright ’76GSAS, ’95HON told the SIPA Class of 2021 last year. “And what could be better than when the diploma and

the robes are from Columbia?”

Albright, who died on March 23 at age eighty-four, was a giant of US diplomacy and statecraft. A protégé of Columbia professor Zbigniew Brzezinski (who became national security adviser under President Jimmy Carter), Albright served as the US ambassador to the United Nations from 1993 to 1997 and as the first woman secretary of state, under Bill Clinton, from 1997 to 2001. In the later years of her remarkable life, which began in Czechoslovakia two years before the Nazi invasion of 1939, she was a mainstay in Columbia affairs. She spoke at Low Library in 2018 about her late friend the Czech statesman and political dissident Václav Havel ’90HON; discussed her book *Fascism: A Warning* at the Columbia Club of Washington, DC, in 2019; discoursed with President Lee C. Bollinger for the 2020 Columbia Alumni Leaders Experience (touching on fascism, globalization, and international relations); and recorded a message for Columbia’s 2021 *College Bowl* team (“The whole Columbia community is behind you. Roar, Lion, Roar!”).

Last May, when Albright regaled the SIPA Class of 2021 via Zoom, she listed the hurdles facing tomorrow’s diplomats: the weakening of democracies, the fallout from COVID-19, the impacts of climate change, and the threats of cyberterrorism, regional wars, and hyper-nationalism. “I am now in my ninth decade on earth,” she said. “I’ve seen too much suffering to be naive, too much decency to despair, and more than enough surprises to want money back on my crystal ball.” It was a lot to place on the shoulders of the graduates, Albright conceded, but given the tests of the pandemic and growing demagoguery, she saw her listeners as resilient and well-prepared.

“Ahead of you now is another set of tests even more severe, even more important,” she said. “The question arises: Are you equal to the challenge? I know that you are.”

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