

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Review Essay

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**Madeleine Albright, with Elaine Shocas, Vivienne Becker, and Bill Woodward. *Read My Pins: Stories from a Diplomat's Jewel Box*.** New York: HarperCollins/Melcher Media, 2009. 176pp. Illustrations, "pindex." \$40 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-06-089918-9..

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Phelps-Albright.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by Nicole M. Phelps, University of Vermont

In public appearances as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and then as secretary of state, Madeleine Albright was almost never without some sort of pin or brooch affixed to her left shoulder, and she encouraged foreign officials, journalists, and other observers to view her pins as consciously chosen diplomatic statements. Many took up her suggestion and closely monitored her jewelry; a "pin watch" Web site focused on interpreting her daily jewelry choice and its diplomatic implications even sprang up. (93) Albright recently agreed to loan some of her collection to the New York Museum of Arts and Design for an exhibition, which was subsequently on display at the Clinton Presidential Library and the Smithsonian. *Read My Pins* is the exhibition catalog. The book is of particular value to scholars of diplomacy and material culture, showing how one practitioner employed jewelry to further her diplomatic agenda. It not only tells us that fashion and symbols can be important diplomatic tools, but it also helps us learn how to interpret those elements.

Albright begins her story of the use of her pins as diplomatic tools in 1994, after Saddam Hussein refused to allow UN inspectors into Iraq. Albright criticized him for it, and an Iraqi poet wrote a scathing poem about her, calling her, among other things, an "unparalleled serpent." When she next met with Iraqi leaders, she chose to wear a serpent pin. While it is not clear whether the Iraqi leaders noticed it at the time, a journalist did and asked her about it; she replied that it was her "way of sending a message." (17) After that, she actively encouraged people to observe her pins and use them a tool for gauging her mood and political stance.

The foreign officials she encountered while ambassador and secretary were certainly a key audience for the pins' messages. She could use the pins to say two things at once, suggesting the limits of her politeness. For example, shortly after a Russian spy had been arrested in Washington for bugging the State Department, she met with the Russian foreign

minister in Europe. Her choice of pin: a bug. She notes in *Read My Pins* that she and the minister “greeted each other as the friends we were,” but adds that he “could not fail to notice” the “enormous bug” on her shoulder (115); the reprimand was there, but she did not have to put it into words. In talks with Middle Eastern leaders, she often wore a dove pin—a gift from Leah Rabin, the widow of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin—but she substituted a turtle when she was frustrated by the slow pace of discussions and the occasional crab or bee to indicate her dissatisfaction with the progress of the talks and the reality of American power. While we cannot be sure if all foreign officials paid attention to the pins, Albright does tell us that Russian President Vladimir Putin reported to President Bill Clinton that he and his staff did so, and the fact that so many foreign officials gave her pins as gifts when she visited their countries indicates that they were aware of Albright’s practices. (110, 81)

The pins were also used to signal journalists, adding transparency to closed-door negotiations while simultaneously protecting their secrecy. She once told the press that a specific set of Middle East peace talks was like mushrooms, “thriving only in the dark”; following that statement, a mushroom pin signaled reporters that she “had nothing revealing to say” to the press. (152) Albright’s signal helped to create a space where she and other negotiators could feel more secure about the relative confidentiality of their conversations and therefore have a greater opportunity to speak with candor. While that space did not produce the ultimate favorable outcome—peace in the Middle East—without it, things might have been much worse.

*Read My Pins* will be of interest to scholars of Clinton administration foreign policy, as it is both a memoir and a guide that could be used to analyze Albright’s daily state of mind during her diplomatic career. Those using the book for those purposes should keep in mind that Albright is not the sole author of the book. While Albright’s name appears alone on the front cover, the back flap and title page acknowledge the assistance of three other writers: Albright’s frequent collaborators Elaine Shocas and Bill Woodward and jewelry historian Vivienne Becker. My sense is that the book reflects compromises among authorial voices, but on the central issue of how Albright herself thought about her use of jewelry, her own voice comes through loud and clear.

The book’s greatest value lies in its contributions to the long-running debates about the relationship between diplomatic practice and American identity. Since the founding of the United States, many American diplomats, politicians, journalists, and members of the public have argued that diplomats who wear clothing and jewelry that signals an elevated social status are betraying the republican and democratic ideas that are at the very core of American national identity. At the same time, American diplomats have been lambasted by people at their posts for dressing poorly, an attitude that has undermined American diplomatic efforts.<sup>1</sup> As one might expect, *Read My Pins* comes out in favor of jewelry as a

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<sup>1</sup> See, in particular, Robert Davis, “Diplomatic Plumage: American Court Dress in the Early National Period,” *American Quarterly* 20, no. 2, part 1 (1968): 164-79.

useful diplomatic tool, even for Americans, and the first chapter of the book includes a discussion of the roles jewels and jewelry have played in politics and diplomacy across the globe over the centuries. Placing Albright's pins in that broader tradition downplays any idea of American exceptionalism or Albright's personal innovation, but, at the same time, it opens the secretary up to the accusation that her jewelry is un-American, since most of that broader tradition involves monarchical government and aristocratic social norms. *Read My Pins* counters charges of un-Americanness by frequently stressing that most of Albright's collection consists of inexpensive costume jewelry that "can delight the eye and still spare the pocketbook." (57) In his introduction to the book, the chief curator of the New York Museum of Arts and Design, David Revere McFadden, notes that the collection is "of modest intent and manufacture" and that "part of Secretary Albright's pleasure in wearing the pins must come from her recognition of their democratic nature." (11) Readers also learn that, when Albright was in office, U.S. officials could not accept gifts valued at more than \$245, dispelling any concerns they might have about corruption or special privilege. (78) That Albright and her authorial team felt the need to address these issues—and to address them in a defensive tone—suggests that they are aware of the continuing salience of debates among certain domestic constituents and foreign observers about how American officials present themselves.

*Read My Pins* is at its most interesting—and its most defensive—when it comes to issues of gender. The second chapter focuses on jewelry Albright received before her public career, including items received from her parents, the fraternity pin she wore as an undergraduate at Wellesley as a marker of her relationship with her future husband, pins received from her husband's family during their 23 years of marriage, and a heart-shaped pin crafted by her five-year-old daughter. This section of the book presents jewelry as reinforcing woman's status as wife and mother and focuses on jewelry received as gifts. For readers (or viewers) who would be turned off by Albright's move beyond "traditional" feminine roles into a career in politics, the chapter serves as a reminder that she is a "regular" woman, too. For readers who have no objection to Albright's decision to pursue a career outside the home, the chapter reminds them that the book is aimed at a broad, popular audience, and that that audience is hardly uniform in its stance on women's employment.

Albright's ultimate purpose with the book is to argue that accessories are significant diplomatic tools. The authorial team, however, anticipated that some people would dismiss that argument because they associate jewelry with women and don't see either as relevant to the masculine field of diplomacy. The jewelry-as-feminine argument is parried by equating Albright's jewelry with masculine traditions such as power ties and military decorations. (23, 63) Albright admits that there are both literal and figurative limits to the power of her pins: the officials she met with did not always notice or take heed, and the pins could break, distracting her with fears of impending symbolism/wardrobe malfunction. She does not tell us, however, about any instances where the pins were misinterpreted or actively caused problems for her diplomatic agenda. That is perhaps where the true beauty of fashion as a diplomatic tool shines through: if it's right, it's important, and if it's wrong, well... it's just a pin, isn't it? Albright concludes the body of the book with that important observation: "One might scoff and say that my pins didn't exactly shake the world. To that I can only reply that shaking the world is precisely the opposite of

what diplomats are placed on Earth to do.” (161) Diplomats are supposed to render the foreign intelligible, fostering good relationships that minimize miscommunication. Her pins helped her communicate with her contemporaries while she was in office; *Read My Pins* allows her to communicate with the future historians and other scholars who will interpret her words and actions—and jewelry—for subsequent generations.

**Nicole M. Phelps** is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Vermont. She received her B.A. in International Affairs from The George Washington University in 2000 and her Ph.D. in History from the University of Minnesota in 2008. Her dissertation, “Sovereignty, Citizenship, and the New Liberal Order: US-Habsburg Relations and the Transformation of International Politics, 1880-1924,” won the University of Minnesota’s Best Dissertation Prize in the Arts and Humanities and received an honorable mention for SHAFR’s Unterberger Dissertation Prize. Her research interests in diplomatic history include U.S.-European relations, diplomatic social and ceremonial activity, and consular services.

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