

Albright Deployed Snake, Missile Pins Against Putin, Hussein

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After being called an “unparalleled serpent” by the Iraqi press in 1994, Madeleine Albright met the country’s officials wearing a snake brooch.

Albright, then the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, used the pin to send a message to Saddam Hussein’s government. The incident marked the beginning of an original approach to diplomacy.

“Before long, and without intending it, I found that jewelry had become part of my personal diplomatic arsenal,” Albright writes in her book, “Read My Pins: Stories From a Diplomatic Jewel Box” (HarperCollins). Used at the right time, the symbol “can add warmth or needed edge to a relationship.”

Now more than 200 bugs, reptiles, crustaceans and other jeweled accessories from Albright’s collection make up a new exhibition at New York’s Museum of Arts and Design.

Albright continued using jewelry to send messages to world leaders, foreign governments and the press when she became the first female U.S. secretary of state in 1997.

“A foreign dignitary standing alongside me at a press conference would be happier to see a bright, shining sun attached to my jacket than a menacing wasp,” she wrote.

Russia’s Vladimir Putin told then-President Bill Clinton that he routinely tried deciphering the meaning of Albright’s brooches, Albright writes in the book.

Sometimes, she offered the interpretation. She wore an arrow-like pin during talks with Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov.

“Is that one of your interceptor missiles?” he asked.

“Yes, and as you can see, we know how to make them very small. So you’d better be ready to negotiate,” Albright replied.

Mood Signals

As the pins became part of her public persona, the collection grew. There were numerous ladybugs, butterflies and hot-air balloons to express her good mood. Spiders, snakes and flies came in handy for more combative occasions. Turtles marked slow negotiations and owls sought wisdom.

She wore a very large American flag brooch when meeting North Korea's Kim Jong-Il and stuck on her favorite zebra pins for a get-together with Nelson Mandela at his estate in South Africa.

Some accessories in the show have a more personal meaning for the former head of the State Department. One looks like interconnected shards of broken glass. A symbol of Albright's professional accomplishment, it represents the shattered glass ceiling.

"Read My Pins: The Madeleine Albright Collection" runs through Jan. 31, 2010, at the Museum of Arts and Design; 2 Columbus Circle. Information: +1-212-299-7777; <http://www.madmuseum.org>

(Katya Kazakina writes for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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