

Jeane Kirkpatrick: from “social democrat” to champion of death squads

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Jeane Kirkpatrick, the acerbic right-wing former US ambassador to the United Nations, died December 7 at the age of 80.

Having begun her politically conscious life as a self-described socialist, Kirkpatrick ended up an advocate and apologist for military dictators, right-wing death squads and CIA-backed terrorists.

She gained national prominence as both UN ambassador and a prominent foreign policy advisor and spokesperson for the Republican administration of Ronald Reagan, on whose National Security Council she served as the only woman and the only Democratic Party member.

Her deliberately cultivated image at the UN was that of an American chauvinist bully, unashamedly threatening smaller nations with the cutoff of American aid and even military aggression if they failed to toe Washington’s line. She was equally unabashed about defending the crimes of America’s anticommunist allies, from the mass killings and torture carried out by Latin American military regimes, to Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the South African apartheid regime’s use of force against both neighboring African states as well as its own oppressed black majority.

Kirkpatrick’s entree into the inner circle of the Reagan administration came as a result of her scathing criticism of the Democratic administration of President Jimmy Carter, whose election she had supported in 1976.

Then a political science professor at Georgetown University and member of the American Enterprise Institute, the right-wing think tank from which some 50 members of the incoming Reagan administration were drawn, Kirkpatrick blamed the Carter administration’s rather tepid advocacy of human rights—a foreign policy ploy aimed at forestalling revolution—for the 1979 overthrow of the US-backed Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua and that of the Shah in Iran.

In an essay written that year for the neoconservative magazine *Commentary* entitled “Dictatorships and double standards,” she denounced Carter for failing to prop up Somoza and the Shah, both of whom were responsible for massacring thousands in their efforts to remain in power:

“The rise of violent opposition in Iran and Nicaragua set in motion a succession of events which bore a suggestive resemblance to one another and a suggestive similarity to our behavior in China before the fall of Chiang Kai-shek, in Cuba before the triumph of Castro, in certain crucial periods of the Vietnam War, and more recently in Angola. In each of these periods, the American effort to impose liberalization and democratization on a government confronted with violent internal opposition not only failed, but actually assisted the coming to power of new regimes in which ordinary people enjoy fewer freedoms and less personal security than under the previous autocracy—regimes, moreover, hostile to American interests and policies.”

The policy implications of Kirkpatrick’s thesis were unmistakable. Washington should seek to keep in power right-wing dictatorships, so long as they suppressed the threat of revolution and supported “American interests and policies.” Moreover, the limits placed by the Carter

administration on relations with regimes that had carried out wholesale political killings and torture, as in Chile and Argentina, for example, should be cast aside.

Reagan and his advisors were reportedly impressed with this line of argument and recruited Kirkpatrick’s support in the 1980 election. She subsequently became part of the incoming administration’s foreign policy advisory team, where she developed the argument that the US was confronting a “domino effect” in Central America that threatened it with being “surrounded by Soviet bases on our southeastern and southern flanks.”

Once the administration took office, Kirkpatrick became a leading advocate and architect of a policy of intervention in Central America that embraced robust US backing for dictatorships that massacred hundreds of thousands in an attempt to suppress revolutionary movements in El Salvador and Guatemala as well as an illegal CIA-funded war of terror against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

Likewise, she backed the 1983 US invasion of Grenada, the bombing of Libya and the multimillion-dollar support for Islamist guerrillas—Osama bin Laden among them—battling the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan.

This policy became more generally known as the “Reagan doctrine,” which represented a shift from the “containment” policy adopted by the Truman administration toward the “roll-back” strategy advocated within right-wing Republican circles since the 1950s. A National Security Directive issue in 1983 declared that Washington would “contain and over time reverse Soviet expansionism,” and that it would back “Third World states that are willing to resist Soviet pressures or oppose Soviet initiatives hostile to the United States.”

This explosive development of American militarism represented a conscious attempt by the most ruthless sections of the US ruling establishment to reverse the defeat suffered in Vietnam and reassert imperialist interests in the oppressed countries through naked force. It coincided, however, with the economic decline of American capitalism, with the US being turned for the first time into a debtor nation, rather than the world’s principal creditor, in 1985.

Kirkpatrick participated in the discussions that gave rise to the so-called Iran-contra scandal, a covert operation that funneled millions of dollars in aid—in defiance of a Congressional resolution barring such funding—to the CIA-trained mercenary army attacking Nicaragua.

Though she left the administration before Congressional investigations led to resignations and criminal indictments against leading officials, she was clearly implicated as well.

In its obituary on the former UN ambassador, the *New York Times* cited her statement in favor of the covert funding, “We should make the maximum effort to find the money.”

During the same meeting, the *Times* noted, Secretary of State George Shultz commented that the contra-funding scheme constituted “an impeachable offense,” while Reagan himself warned that if news of their decisions leaked to the press, “we’ll all be hanging by our thumbs in front

of the White House.”

This exchange is itself a measure of how much further to the right the government has moved in the intervening two decades, with the Bush administration openly launching illegal wars and flouting laws passed by Congress.

The limits of Kirkpatrick’s influence within the administration—as well as of her own geopolitical conceptions—made themselves clear during the 1982 war between Britain and Argentina over the Malvinas (Falkland) Islands.

Based on her close relationship with the military dictatorship in Buenos Aires, Kirkpatrick attempted to shift Washington’s policy in favor of Argentina, maintaining that the country had a right to claim sovereignty over the islands.

Both Secretary of State Alexander Haig and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, however, opposed her views and demanded that Washington stand with the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, a position more consistent with the global drive to reassert the unfettered domination of imperialism in the oppressed countries. US aid, including arms and satellite intelligence, proved crucial to the subsequent British victory.

Haig, whose position prevailed, subsequently commented that Kirkpatrick was “mentally and emotionally incapable of thinking clearly on this issue because of her close links with the Latins.”

Having completed her four-year term as ambassador to the UN, Kirkpatrick was proposed for both secretary of state and National Security Advisor, but was rejected for both posts and left the administration. She formally changed her party affiliation to Republican in 1985 and was briefly touted as a possible presidential candidate for the 1988 election. She remained over the course of the past 20 years a propagandist for the Republican right.

Kirkpatrick’s political development followed a path worn by a generation of intellectuals who, while initially attracted to the ideals of socialism, had no genuine association with the working class or confidence in its revolutionary capacities and bowed before the anticommunist onslaught of the American political establishment.

In 2002, Kirkpatrick explained her own early attraction to socialism while participating in a forum with other former members of the Young People’s Socialist League (YPSL) and the Social Democrats USA, including figures ranging from Sandra Feldman, president of the American Federation of Teachers to Marshall Wittman, the former spokesman for the Christian Coalition.

She recounted that her introduction to the ideas of socialism came from her grandfather in Oklahoma: “My grandfather explained socialism to me as a very small child as a system that was more fair than other systems, and more fair than the system we had in Oklahoma at that time. I hadn’t the slightest notion what system we had in Oklahoma, I might say. But my grandfather did, and I was prepared to take his word for it. The distribution of everything, he said, was more fair. It sounded good to me.”

She explained that years later, as a college student in Missouri in the mid-1940s, she joined the YPSL and, as a graduate student, studied under the German social democratic émigré and member of the Frankfurt School, Franz Neumann.

Kirkpatrick said that her own subsequent evolution away from socialism was grounded on the conviction that it is impossible to “change human nature,” the most commonplace bourgeois cliché utilized to justify everything from sweatshop exploitation to wars of aggression.

Nonetheless, she adds, “I was an active Democrat.” She continued: “At the same time I was studying German social democracy, I formed the view that the New Deal and its various forms, the Fair Deal and Hubert Humphrey’s style of democratic politics, was of the same sort of species as German social democracy. I still believe that, somewhat.”

Prominent among the figures within this layer of right-wing American

social democrats was Max Shachtman, who was to have an influence on Kirkpatrick and others who became identified with the neo-conservative movement.

A founder of the American Trotskyist movement, Shachtman broke with Trotsky in 1940. Under the pressure of public opinion generated by approaching war and in particular the Stalin-Hitler pact, he and a petty-bourgeois layer within the movement, then the Socialist Workers Party, rejected the defense of the Soviet Union against imperialism and developed the position that a new form of exploitative class society had arisen in the USSR.

From an opponent of Stalinism from the left—from the standpoint of socialist internationalism—Shachtman became an opponent from the right—from the standpoint of US imperialism—a position that he consummated 10 years later with his public support for US imperialism’s war against Korea. Over the course of the next two decades, Shachtman moved steadily to the right, adopting positions of extreme anti-communism and acting as an advisor to the AFL-CIO labor bureaucracy. Meanwhile, he dissolved his organization—as well his politics—into the right-wing remnants of social democracy, ultimately ending up in the Social Democrats USA, with which Kirkpatrick was herself once affiliated.

This organization and its supporters were oriented toward a bitter factional struggle within the Democratic Party that was directed against the influence of the movement against the Vietnam War, expressed in the 1972 presidential candidacy of George McGovern.

Kirkpatrick participated—together with a number of ex-Shachtmanites—in the Committee for a Democratic Majority (CDM), a right-wing coalition founded by Democratic Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson of Washington, who was a leading Democratic advocate of an aggressive US military buildup against the Soviet Union.

The AFL-CIO bureaucracy was also an active supporter of this organization. Included on the CDM’s board of directors was American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker, who was also a vice president of the AFL-CIO, along with several other national union leaders.

The ideological affinity between the likes of Kirkpatrick and the union bureaucracy was to find concrete expression in the bureaucracy’s collaboration with the Reagan administration’s bloody repression in Central America through the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), a CIA labor front.

Moreover, the virulent anti-communism that the AFL-CIO hierarchy shared with Kirkpatrick made it a willing accomplice in the drive by the Reagan administration to suppress the militancy of the American working class and begin a vast transfer of wealth upward to the corporate and financial elite. This was inaugurated in the 1981 government breaking of the air traffic controllers’ strike—unopposed by the bureaucracy—and a subsequent wave of union busting that swept the country, decimating the ranks of the unions and driving down the wages and conditions of American workers.



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