

Madeleine Albright
Erica Wagner

I'm FaceTiming with Madeleine Albright, which I think is pretty cool. I'm in London; she's in her dining room in Washington DC and has been packing for a flight to Brussels she'll be hopping on after our chat. The truth is that I expected to be in awe of Secretary Albright, as she is still known; in 1997 she was named the first female Secretary of State by President Bill Clinton and became, at that time, the highest-ranking woman in the history of the U.S. government. In the years before that she served as the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations and was a member of the President's Cabinet; she had been a member of President Jimmy Carter's National Security Council. These days, she's a Professor at Georgetown – and in 2012 she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honour in the United States, from President Obama.

But her warmth and sense of humour turn awe into admiration almost instantly – not least because she's so open about her own moments of self-doubt. She recalls the days when she first started working at the United Nations in the 1990s. "Most of the meetings don't take place in a fancy room," she says. "They're in a kind of back room. And I'm sitting there, and there are 14 men looking at me from everywhere around the world. I thought to myself: 'Well, I won't talk about this today... why don't I find out if they like me and what the mood is?'" It's so easy to imagine myself in that same situation – okay, not at the U.N., but you know what I mean, and I bet you can imagine it too. "But then I saw the sign in front of me that said *United States* and I thought if I don't speak today the voice of the United States will not be heard. I still had these doubts," she says. "But we are who we are, and we just have to work hard to overcome certain aspects that make us less effective in public discussion. It's an act of will for most women."

Her will has got her a long way. When she was just a child, her family fled Czechoslovakia shortly after the country was invaded by the Nazis; she would learn in later years that three of her grandparents had died in concentration camps during the Holocaust. And so her new book has an extra resonance, thanks to her very particular understanding of the subject. *Fascism: A Warning* is a swift and trenchant history lesson which traces the rise of fascism and those who aspire to the control fascists can exert. The reader is led on a grimly logical trail from Mussolini and Hitler to Chavez and Putin – and right on to America's 45th president, Donald Trump, who's been heard to express admiration for the way in which President Xi Jinping of China is setting himself up as a ruler for life ("maybe we'll give that a shot," Trump said)¹.

She's careful to note that she was writing this book when she thought Hillary Clinton would be elected president. It's not just the United States but the world that seems to be falling prey to demagogues. "There's no question that this has been a particularly tumultuous period," she says of the past few years. "But as I was writing this, I was looking at what had happened in other countries historically, and I kind of had moments of: 'Really? That sounds a little familiar.'" She makes two points very strongly, and they are connected. First, the leaders she discusses were elected – no use thinking democracy is a failsafe. Second, those leaders rose thanks to kind of boiling discontent among the electorate. "It's a bottom-up movement that is then hijacked or exploited by a leader who wants to control things and, in various cases, use violence to get what they want. What I find, every time I re-read the book,

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/mar/04/donald-trump-praises-xi-jinping-power-grab-give-that-a-shot-china>

is that I keep seeing sign posts to the present day. That's where the urgency now comes in," she says.

That same bottom-up, inchoate anger can be seen in the question of Brexit too, she says, not least because it was brought about by a referendum. "I think there is a sense that a referendum is a very democratic forum; but most people do not believe in a direct democracy. What they really want to see is a representative democracy, which is what we have. Frankly, referenda bring up all kinds of things that don't really represent everybody, despite the fact that it sounds as though they do."

The solution, as she sees it, has to come from a new generation of good leaders. I ask her what makes a good leader – indeed, what made her a good leader. She laughs. "You're just assuming that I think I was a good leader!" But then she speaks seriously. "Being a woman, you always go over everything and doubt whether you are. Believe me, I go through that. But what I do a lot is listen, and try to find friends and colleagues in whatever work I'm doing. Also – I hate to tell you -- I work hard. I am not somebody who goes into a room and thinks 'I've got it all under control' and doesn't do her homework. I do think that there's plenty of room in the world for mediocre men, but there's no room for mediocre women. We have to work exceptionally hard but not alone: listening, I think, is the thing."

Madeleine Albright turned 80 last year – which seems incredible to both of us, it seems. "I'm calling my book tour 'the Antique Roadshow!'" she giggles. To say the least, she's not resting on her laurels. When I ask what she does to relax, it's the only time she's a little brusque. "I knit. I have a farm. I like to go out there," she says. "I obviously read a lot. I try not to spend my time cleaning out drawers." I'm thrilled to discover we share a displacement activity. "In case you hadn't noticed, I truly am an extrovert. I love being with people. The truth is, and I don't want to sound like a nutcase, but I actually *like* everything that I do."

That's the secret to an engaged and fulfilling life, it seems to me, even if you've never been and never will be called Madame Secretary. Her latest book is a warning – but she herself is a true inspiration.

Fascism: A Warning by Madeleine Albright is published by William Collins