

Margaret Thatcher, nicknamed the "Iron Lady," models a replica armored breastplate in 1978, around the time she became the United Kingdom's first female prime minister.



IRON **AND** METTLE

BY ALAN FEILER

Margaret Thatcher boldly steered her nation on a new course

There's a tense scene in the 2011 film *The Iron Lady* in which Margaret Thatcher, as portrayed by Meryl Streep, is cautioned by U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig against going to war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands. Haig warns the British prime minister that the price for the conflict would be too high and politically risky, especially considering that the Falklands are located thousands of miles from Great Britain.

After noting that Hawaii is thousands of miles from the continental United States but remains vital to American interests, Streep's Thatcher announces she will not bow to the Argentinean "criminals and thugs" who invaded the British-controlled islands. Sounding much like one of her predecessors, Winston Churchill, she proclaims, "We must stand on principle—or we will not stand at all."

That simple, pithy-sounding line might have summed up Margaret Thatcher's general perspective on life—personally, professionally and geopolitically—and serves as a reference point and inspiration for all aspiring leaders. After all, she didn't acquire her nickname (from which the film is titled) for nothing.

Thatcher died recently at the age of 87 after suffering a series of incapacitating strokes. But there was a time when the "Iron Lady" commanded the world stage on a daily basis and was viewed (even by detractors) as a paragon of towering strength and steely determination, for preventing the decline of the British Empire as well as for helping to bring about the fall of Soviet-style communism.

"What people love is the smack of firm government," British writer and broadcaster Gyles Brandreth said in the 2012 documentary *Margaret Thatcher: The Iron Lady*. "And whether it was real or

imagined, people felt Margaret Thatcher gave them the smack of firm government. ... You might dislike her, but you really felt she knew what she was doing."

DRIVEN BY CONVICTION

Lady Thatcher was born Margaret Hilda Roberts, on Oct. 13, 1925, in Grantham, Lincolnshire. Her father, Alfred, was a grocer, local politician and lay Methodist minister. He was also his daughter's primary role model and hero, and the family lived over Alfred Roberts' grocery store/post office. He was known for being a champion of small business and private enterprise.

He was also heavily involved in Grantham politics, and his conservative social and fiscal views deeply affected Thatcher throughout her political life.

A bright, inquisitive girl, Thatcher early on exhibited a strong work ethic, a deep fascination with current events and an uncanny knack for serving ably in leadership roles. At age 16, Thatcher developed a strong interest in chemistry. She applied to Oxford. "I regarded it as being quite simply the best," Thatcher recalled, "and if I was serious about getting on in life that is what I should always strive for."

In her third year of college, Thatcher became increasingly interested in campus politics. She joined the Oxford Union Conservative Association and eventually became the group's president.

In 1947, Thatcher graduated with honors from Oxford with a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry. She then worked as a research chemist for BX Plastics and also joined the Conservative Association in Colchester, Essex.

Four years later, she was selected as a Conservative Party candidate. She lost, but as the youngest (and only female) candidate, Thatcher received a good deal of media attention.

At a dinner soiree during that period, she met Denis Thatcher, a wealthy, divorced businessman. They married in December 1951. Denis Thatcher funded his wife's law school studies, and in 1953 she qualified as a barrister specializing in taxation matters. That same year, she gave birth to their twins, Carol and Mark.

Not even the hectic, frenzied life of a young mother could keep Margaret Thatcher away from the political arena. In late 1955, she was narrowly defeated as a candidate. But in 1958, she was selected as the Conservative candidate for the town of Finchley and was narrowly elected a member of Parliament.

"She was a convictions politician," said Gyles Brandreth. "Right from the beginning, Margaret Thatcher was a woman of convictions and drive, and she was determined to find a seat."

RIISING STAR

Slowly but methodically, Thatcher worked her way up the Conservative Party leadership and learned the craft of politics. "She was a formidable character right from the beginning. She also had good looks and charm, and wasn't afraid to use both of those," said Brandreth.

In the years between 1965 and 1970, Thatcher held numerous key positions while the Tories were in the opposition. In 1970, she was appointed secretary of state for education and science.



Thatcher was elected a member of Parliament for Finchley, North London, in 1958.

In that role, she became a controversial figure when, attempting to cut costs, she abolished free milk for some schoolchildren, thus gaining the sobriquet "Margaret Thatcher, Milk Snatcher" from the media.

"I learned a valuable lesson," Thatcher wrote in her autobiography. "I had incurred the maximum of political odium for the minimum of political benefit."

But Thatcher continued to attract admirers, and she moved up the party ranks. In particular, her criticism of the high tax policies of the Labour government—she branded them as steps "not only towards socialism, but towards communism"—resonated with many in the Conservative leadership. In 1974, she mounted a leadership challenge that defeated Prime Minister Edward Heath, her onetime mentor, and became leader of the Conservative Party.

"She wasn't a far right-wing figure, especially in the early days," said Brandreth. "She was someone who was



Thatcher is pictured here in October 1976, a period when she served as leader of the Conservative Party.

ready to compromise. She appeared to be strident, but ... she was a conciliatory person. She had the style of a leader but the acumen of a politician."

In the 1978–79 political campaign season, Thatcher and her Conservative allies were highly critical of the Labour government's unemployment record and the role of trade unions in the ailing economy. Thatcher was seen as an agent of change, and her message against Britain's socialist infrastructure touched a nerve, particularly with middle-class voters.

The Conservatives won a 44-seat majority in the House of Commons, and Thatcher became the United Kingdom's first female prime minister. Arriving at 10 Downing Street on May 4, 1979, she referenced the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, calling for a sense of healing in her nation: "Where

WORDS FOR THE HISTORY BOOKS... FROM MARGARET THATCHER

“**Socialists cry ‘Power to the people,’ and raise the clenched fist as they say it. We all know what they really mean – power over people, power to the State.**”

“**Popular capitalism is nothing less than a crusade to enfranchise the many in the economic life of the nation.**”

“**BEING POWERFUL IS LIKE BEING A**



In 1987, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher with husband Denis stand at the back end of the Conservative Party “battle bus” with its slogan “Moving Forward with Maggie” on the back window. The bus was touring London Docklands.

there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope.”

‘MRS. THATCHER’S WAR’

In the midst of the economic and social malaise in Britain, Thatcher immediately took on austerity measures, even insisting on frugality in her official residence. She spoke out against trade unions and angered many in 1981 when talking about cuts in public spending during the recession.

But the following year provided Thatcher with her watershed moment. Argentina’s takeover of the Falklands offered her a chance to demonstrate that she lived up to the “Iron Lady” nickname given her by her Cold War rivals, the Soviets. Three days after the

invasion, and much handwringing and deliberation, Thatcher dispatched British warships to retake the islands.

Argentina surrendered on June 14, 1982, and the victory—despite the deaths of 255 British servicemen, 649 Argentineans and three Falkland islanders—secured Thatcher’s re-election the following year, as well as her legacy.

“From June 14, 1982, right up to her last week in office, Thatcher dominated British politics as no one had since Churchill,” writes John O’Sullivan in his 2006 book, *The President, the Pope and the Prime Minister: Three Who Changed the World*. “She had the power and prestige to sustain a bold foreign and defense policy even against strong opposition over the next eight years. ... Thatcher gave an enormous boost to national morale.”

But in March 1984, Thatcher drew the wrath of many of her countrymen when she clashed with striking coal miners and trade unionists. Thatcher refused to meet the union’s demands for pay raises and the prevention of pit closures. The strike went on for a year and greatly hurt the British economy. But in the end, Thatcher emerged victorious as striking miners went back to work and the issues of pit closures and pay raises were virtually abandoned.

Meanwhile, as Britain’s economy started to prosper (with the sale of state-owned industries and the taming of inflation), Thatcher’s stature in international affairs soared. With President Ronald Reagan, as well as the reform-minded Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, she became a leading figure in orchestrating the end of the Cold War.

“They were kindred spirits,” Brandreth said of the Thatcher-Reagan alliance. “It was a partnership that really worked.”

In June 1987, Thatcher became the first prime minister since 1820 to lead a party to three successive election victories. But with the rise of severe economic hardships, Thatcher became a lightning rod for criticism among her colleagues and detractors. She was castigated for becoming increasingly autocratic, isolated and “over the top” in her dealings with cabinet members and others.

Thatcher endured several challenges to her leadership of the Conservative Party, only to prevail. But her approval ratings continued to

“There can be no liberty unless there is economic liberty.”

“Imagine a Labour canvasser talking on the doorstep to those East German families when they settle in on freedom’s side of the wall. ‘You want to keep more of the money you earn? I’m afraid that’s very selfish. We shall want to tax that away. You want to own shares in your firm? We can’t have that. The state has to own your firm. You want to choose where to send your children to school? That’s very divisive. You’ll send your child where we tell you.’”

LADY. IF YOU HAVE TO TELL PEOPLE YOU ARE, YOU AREN’T.”



On June 8, 2010, former British Prime Minister Thatcher waves as she stands with British Prime Minister David Cameron, on the doorstep of 10 Downing Street.

plummet as Labour ascended in the polls.

In November 1990, the resignation of deputy prime minister Sir Geoffrey Howe, the last remaining member of Thatcher's original 1979 cabinet, sounded the death knell for her political career. Although initially vowing to

"fight on and fight to win," Thatcher—after consulting with her cabinet and speaking with the Queen and other world leaders—announced her resignation. She would remain bitter about what she considered her ouster from power.

"We leave the United Kingdom in a very better state than when we came here 11 and a half years ago," Thatcher said a bit tearfully when leaving 10 Downing Street for the last time.

Thatcher remained a vital political figure, working closely behind the scenes for years. In 1993, she wrote a best-selling book, *The Downing Street Years*, about her tenure as prime minister. Two years later, she authored *The Path to Power*, chronicling her life leading up to being prime minister. She also toured the world as a lecturer until a series of strokes in 2002 forced her to give that up.

The following year, Denis Thatcher died. "Being Prime Minister

is a lonely job," Thatcher lamented in *The Downing Street Years*. "In a sense, it ought to be: You cannot lead from the crowd. But with Denis there I was never alone. What a man. What a husband. What a friend."

To her allies and supporters, Margaret Thatcher remained an iconic, heroic figure who restored Britain's economy, political structure, world stature and national pride. To her critics, she was the embodiment of British hubris, intransigence and divisiveness. But all would agree that her era of governance left its mark on Britain forever.

Brandreth believes Thatcher would have been pleased with the acclaimed film made about her life, starring Meryl Streep. "She wasn't vainglorious," he said of Thatcher. "But she was aware of what she achieved, and that it was remarkable and good. ... She was conscious of her place in history." ■

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