

LECTURE

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Not for Turning: The Life of Margaret Thatcher

Dr. Robin Harris

Abstract

Margaret Thatcher is one of the most significant political figures of the 20th century, a Prime Minister whose impact on modern British history is comparable only to Winston Churchill's and whose legacy remains a massive political force even today. Robin Harris provides a definitive look at this indomitable woman: her hard-fought political battles, the tribulations of the miners' strike and the Falklands War, her relationship with Ronald Reagan and their shared opposition to Communism, and the reality behind the scenes at Ten Downing Street, as well as one of the darkest hours of her premiership when she refused to alter course, summing up for admirers and detractors alike the determination and consistency of her approach with the words, "You turn if you want to. The Lady's Not for Turning."

Thank you all for coming. Thank you very much to the Heritage Foundation for hosting and organizing this event. A particular thank you to Ed Feulner and Heritage for tolerating me for the last five years or so—an occasionally visiting Brit who loves America and loves Heritage.

Mrs. Thatcher made many good decisions, but one of the best was to become patron of The Heritage Foundation. Another was to promote the foundation of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom within Heritage, which keeps her legacy alive and well, and that's important.

We'll start off with a funeral, Mrs. Thatcher's funeral on Wednesday the 17th of April this year. These grand events are done

KEY POINTS

- Margaret Thatcher was a conservative radical: Unlike the old-fashioned Tories, who want to be something, she wanted to do something, to make a difference.
- She was direct and honest. She believed in character. She believed in the virtues and in many ways represented in her whole life and her style of politics the "vigorous virtues."
- Endowed with great moral and political courage, she reversed Britain's economic decline, worked with American President Ronald Reagan to win the Cold War, and met the challenge of the Falklands crisis.
- She loved America because she thought she understood American values and the American dream, but also because she thought that America represented in many ways the best of the long Anglo-Saxon contribution to the world. But above all, she was a British patriot.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1237>

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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well in Britain—we had an empire, for goodness’ sake; we ought to be able to do them—and St. Paul’s Cathedral is a very impressive building. The political classes were all arrayed there, waiting for the beginning of the funeral. They don’t always behave terribly well, these people; nowadays they text each other, and I’m reliably informed that one woman even sold two Dachshund puppies to a neighbor before the funeral service actually began.

Anyway, the organ started up and we moved into funereal mode, and then something happened. The great doors of the cathedral were flung open, and there was an inrush of what I can only call human noise. I say human noise because just in the same way as you can’t easily distinguish the two words “jeering” and “cheering,” you can’t easily distinguish the two actualities. And if you’ve been in conservative politics, you’re actually often more used to jeering than cheering.

In fact, this vast inrush of sound was cheering. Thousands of people had fought their way through the very tight security which surrounded the cathedral in order to cheer Mrs. Thatcher off, because they loved her and they admired her. I suppose it was expected by me, but it was very pleasant to know it, and it was certainly not expected by the BBC. But it was the truth, and it was then ratified in a statistical manner by a very interesting poll which was done by the *Sun* newspaper.

Remember that people had had many years to work out what they thought about Mrs. Thatcher. After all, she had retired in 2002; she’d left office in 1990; she was then continually discussed, both for and against, in the media, so they’d really had time to reflect. So this poll means more than many polls do.

People were asked who they thought was the greatest of the 13 Prime Ministers Britain had had since the war, and she came top with 28 percent. Second was Churchill, 24 percent; third was Tony Blair, 10 percent—an exaggeration, I think, but there we are; John Major, 1 percent—that’s more or less right, I think; and David Cameron—as they say of almost every British entry into the Eurovision Song contest, David Cameron, *Nul Points*.

The pollsters wanted to know why people thought what they did of Mrs. Thatcher, why they admired her. Seventy-two percent thought that she stuck to what she believed in, and 66 percent thought that she was strong. They also thought that Britain was

much more prosperous, that it was somewhat freer, and above all that its standing was much greater in the world. I wouldn’t say *vox populi* is always *vox dei*, but *vox populi* in this case was clearly right.

Getting to Know Margaret Thatcher

Now, how I got to know her: I was around for a long time. I started working for the Conservative Party in 1978, but I only got to know Mrs. Thatcher herself in the early 1980s when I was a special adviser. As Prime Minister, she used to have a series of rather disorganized and unsatisfactory meetings with the different political advisers, some wanting to curry favor and some just feeling embarrassed and so on.

She and I had an argument. It was not a very important argument. On this occasion, I think she was wrong. It was to do with criminal justice policy, I think. So we had this back and forth, and she took notice that this upstart seemed to have a word or two to say for himself. That was often the way you got Mrs. Thatcher’s notice: You had an argument with her. She was a good arguer. She liked an argument, and if you said something that interested her, she took an interest in you.

And so from time to time, we did come across each other. I was in the Treasury, and then I was in the Home Office at the time of the miners’ strike, which was an important and difficult time, and then in 1985, the directorship of the Conservative Research Department fell vacant.

The chairman of the party and the other senior people in the party very sensibly didn’t really want me, so they said that they wanted to be transparent, as the word is, and they must advertise the post. So she said OK, you can advertise the post. You can interview all the people you want as long as, in the end, Robin gets the job. So of course Robin did get the job, and Robin was very grateful for getting the job, and from 1985, when he got the job by this equal opportunities process that I have just described, she and I did grow quite close. I grew particularly close, really, through helping her with her speeches.

Now, with Mrs. Thatcher, speechwriting was very important—not just that she thought that speeches were important, as Ronald Reagan thought they were important because they knew it was important to communicate and to persuade people, but also because she used these speeches to have wide-ranging arguments in order to work out what she really thought. And not just about the particular subject

of that speech. Let's say it was a domestic policy speech; she could suddenly start talking about, as I remember she did, the Strategic Defense Initiative, or whether interest rates were really right, and so on, and you learned a great deal.

So I got to know her well, and of course I was there when she was removed, and I made her ejection my own because I wasn't prepared to serve under anybody else. So we both left Downing Street at broadly the same time, and after that, I helped her write her memoirs.

Now, this was an important experience—not only financially useful, which is important to all of us, but important because she discussed, again in that way that she had with speechwriting, her early life. She also discussed what she really thought of various individuals. So although I really knew “late Thatcher,” as it were, from 1985 on, personally, I also got from her a pretty good insight into her early life, what had brought her into politics, what she did in those years.

Margaret Thatcher was a radical. She was not a left-wing radical, but she was a conservative radical, and radicalism upsets people.

This explains the balance of my book where there is obviously more on the late Thatcher period than from the early period before 1985. On the other hand, you'll find an account of the Falklands and what she thought about the war and about some of those who let her down during it, and you'll find many of those things, as it were, from the “horse's mouth.”

This, I think, does mark a difference between my book and Charles Moore's biography. Charles, who is the official biographer of Mrs. Thatcher—a good journalist, a good friend of mine, and a fine conservative—has produced volume one of a magisterial work. The first volume is, I think, 860 pages, and that only goes up to 1982. I would certainly commend this huge enterprise to you, but my own book is different. It is based on the personal experience of knowing her and sharing with her some triumphs and some disasters as well, because they both go together in politics.

Understanding the Reality of Margaret Thatcher

It's also *true*. I think that the role of a biographer is not very different from that of the role of an historian, and an historian should, above all, write the truth. Obviously, he can't tell every aspect of the truth because a book would be too long, and also—legitimately, I think—if some people are still alive, there are some things a biographer should not say: not many things in my case, because I think many of them deserve to be said, but there are still a few things that you won't say. As far as Mrs. Thatcher's later illness, which I deal with frankly, is concerned, I would never have breathed a word of that while she was alive, but when people are dead, the situation is different, and generally, as I say, I think it was very important indeed to have a proper reckoning and a true understanding of the reality of Margaret Thatcher.

I'll tell you why. I was never very worried about the left-wing image of Thatcher as a mad axe woman who was destroying public services, following blindly in Reagan's wake, and generally behaving in a peculiar manner under the influence of foreign, particularly American, ideologues. That is just nonsense, and nobody really believes that now, apart from a few immature students and old Commies. So that distortion is of no great interest.

There is also what I would call a right-wing view. This is good about her motives and understanding her but sometimes doesn't grasp the limits to what she did and the degree of prudence and pragmatism which she showed in practice.

And then there is a more insidious view, which I think was very evident in the wake of the funeral. That was the way in which the Establishment—including many senior people in the Conservative Party—which had really never liked her, and indeed on many occasions, as over the turbulent miners' strike, had rather disowned her, and which was really glad to see the back of her in 1990, as soon as she was dead wanted to absorb her, to own her, to sanitize her, and to make her part of them. Well, she wasn't part of them. She was a radical. She was not a left-wing radical, but she was a conservative radical, and radicalism upsets people.

The great difference between radicals in politics and old-fashioned Tories in politics is that the old-fashioned Tories want a quiet life. They want to *be* something. But the radicals don't expect a quiet life,

and they want to *do* something. She wanted to *do* something. She wanted to make a difference, and my goodness me, she did make a difference.

Margaret Thatcher's Character

In the rest of what I want to say, I want to talk a little about her character, and I want to talk a little of her achievements and her legacy.

Her character was in some respects simple, in some respects complex. That's to say that she was a very direct person. She was a very honest person. She nearly always said what she thought—sometimes too often—and she would say it in her own language. When she was away from a speechwriter, she spoke in a very direct manner. That was how she was brought up. She wasn't a London girl; she was a very well-educated and clever woman, but she wasn't a metropolitan, and she didn't affect a sophistication that she didn't possess.

She was a good judge of events, but not always such a good judge of people.

She was a good judge of events in two respects. First of all, it's very important in politics to distinguish the big things from the small things. You have to know what's really essential, what you just have to get through. That's the first thing.

Secondly, you also have to understand timing. You have to understand that you can't fight every battle at the same time, because you'll lose. She was very good on timing, for example, in dealing with the miners.

The National Union of Miners had brought down the previous Conservative government. It was thought that it was impossible to bring any kind of economic rationale to mining, and also there was a tradition of violence, which is quite contrary to the rather cozy image of "life down pit"—which was also pretty unpleasant, actually—and the NUM were a very dangerous opponent. It was quite clear that you were never going to reform the trade unions as a whole, and you were never going to make Britain a place that could be prosperous and attract investment from the world as a whole, until you could deal with the miners.

But in 1981, a slightly inadequate Minister of Energy found himself at loggerheads with the miners and on the eve of an imminent miners' strike. He expected her to go ahead and back him, but she would not go ahead because the preparations had not been made.

The important thing is that the coal, coke, or whatever the fuel is that you're going to use has to be close to where you need it. The idea that you've actually got some great big pile of coal so you're safe is just rubbish. Mass picketing would actually stop you being able to move that fuel, so you actually have to have the coal at the place that you're going to use it. The other thing is that the police have to be equipped to deal with what they're going to face. We weren't prepared or equipped in 1981, so she totally backed down. Totally backed down. And it was not until 1984 that she was ready.

She didn't provoke it, but she knew it would happen, and so for a year there was a miners' strike which in the end failed. And if that miners' strike had not failed, Britain could not have succeeded economically.

She took a very, very hard line in the early '80s about getting back at least a share of what we were contributing to the European budget. In fact, she compromised, and she compromised just at the right moment so that we got two-thirds of our contribution back.

I'll give you another example: the battles with Europe over "our money," as she described it. She took a very, very hard line in the early '80s about getting back at least a share of what we were contributing to the European budget. They hated it; they were frightened of it. The Europeans said that it was a disgrace that she should talk about our British money when it was really theirs, and she then threatened to legislate against the payment of this money.

In fact, she compromised, and she compromised just at the right moment so that we got two-thirds of our contribution back. Until Tony Blair threw much of that away, it was the basis of our financial relationship in Europe. She succeeded; she was a good negotiator.

Personal Relationships

As for people, well, I think that sometimes she had favorites. I suppose you might say I benefited from that, but I wasn't really a favorite in that sense. She just liked discussing things with me. But she did

have favorites, and she did take against people, and when she took against people in the Cabinet, it was very difficult from then on because she sometimes treated them badly. If you and a senior Cabinet colleague have had a long-standing disagreement over some matter, and you've had a sharp argument, and probably your supporters have been briefing against each other, I'm afraid these tensions do grow. It was a weakness of hers, I think, that she allowed that sometimes to become too personal.

But having said that, she was also herself very kind. She was one of the kindest people I've ever met, and she was thoughtful.

I'm never a great admirer of people who are always going around the place smiling and saying, "Is there anything I can do for you?" The answer most of the time is, "No, just let me get on with life." But an intelligent person who's kind really tries to find out what is wrong if somebody is looking glum or you've seen the wife is no longer around. You ask about it and do something, and she was very good at that.

She was extremely kind to the most humble people. If you were important, watch out. If you were an equal, then you had to look after yourself. But if you were not an equal, she was extremely considerate and kind.

She was extremely kind to the most humble people. If you were important, watch out. If you were an equal, then you had to look after yourself. But if you were not an equal, she was extremely considerate and kind, and she was very, very fond of children.

She was also extremely kind to people who made a mess of their lives. In politics, people are very good at making messes of their lives. I'm told it even happens in Washington. It certainly happens in London. And so often, let's say at Christmastime, there were people who because their personal arrangements had all collapsed, as happens in life, were on their own. She would find out who those people were—politicians, obviously—and she would see that they were invited to Chequers, the Prime Minister's country residence, for Christmas, and they would find that they had Christmas presents as well. That was the sort of person she was.

The "Vigorous Virtues"

But, of course, kindness isn't actually what you require to run a country. You've got to have other qualities, and she did have those qualities. As well as judgment, I would say that her main quality was courage. She was one of the bravest people that I've ever encountered. I think it's Aristotle who says somewhere that the bravery of a woman is different from the bravery of a man, and there is something in this, but it's also true that the bravery of a politician is different, let's say, from the bravery of a frontline soldier. It's a different sort of bravery, but it's a real bravery.

I should say of her also that she had physical courage and not just moral courage. It took a lot of physical courage to go to Northern Ireland at the time of the Troubles, down to South Armagh when you could well be—probably were—within range of a sniper, and she was wearing fatigues and so on. These were very dangerous times.

It was extremely dangerous in October 1984 at the Grand Hotel in Brighton. At 2 a.m. approximately on the 12th of October in Brighton, she was working in her suite of rooms with her private secretary on the next day's party conference speech. She would work and work all night until she was completely fatigued, have a bath and a two-hour sleep, and then get up and deliver the speech. This crazy woman and this crazy lifestyle! That's just how she lived.

Anyway, she was working like that on her speech, and suddenly there was an almighty bang. When there's a bomb, it makes a crack, and obviously inside the Grand Hotel it was a particular crack and then silence, and then you hear the falling masonry, so you know it's inside.

Well, crack, bang; she put down her draft and her pen, got up and to her private secretary's horror walked straight into the dark bedroom, the sound of all the masonry falling, to see that her husband was all right. If in fact she had been sitting in the bathroom, and she might have—any sensible person would've been cleaning their teeth and about to go to bed—she would've been dead. She showed complete self-possession; she was only interested in whether her husband was all right. That takes guts.

In politics, you've got to have guts. You've got to have character. She believed in character. She believed in the virtues. She sometimes spoke about the Victorian virtues. Somebody who wrote about her and knew her, Shirley Letwin, in an interesting

book about Mrs. T, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, talks about the “vigorous virtues,” and Mrs. Thatcher in many ways represented in her whole life and her style of politics these vigorous virtues.

That character really saw her through. Moral courage was required in trying to get through what even most of the Cabinet thought was a crazy experiment in monetarism. They didn’t believe in it; they wanted to obstruct it. Moral courage was required over the Falklands, and I should say something more about that.

The Falklands Crisis

It’s often suggested that it took a great deal of courage to send the task force to the Falklands, and it is quite true that if she had listened to the advice that came from the Ministry of Defense, naturally, and the Foreign Office, even more naturally, she would not have sent the task force.

But I say that that was not really the proof of her courage. The courage lay in seeing that the task force kept en route 8,000 miles into the storm-tossed South Atlantic. That was what took courage. Then it took courage to use the task force, because all of these blowhards in the House of Commons, including even Michael Foot, Labor Leader and Leader of the Opposition, one of the biggest blowhards of them all, were in favor of sending the task force. Let’s never forget that. The Union Jack was flying, Jack Tar was on the deck, everyone was ready to back Britain—until, of course, you have to spill blood. Until you have to take a risk.

She was not somebody who had a hard heart. She wept about the loss of our troops, and she feared for the young men. She knew the impact their loss would have on their families. It’s a total, final impact when somebody dies, irremediable. So she felt all that, but she used the task force.

The pressure—not least, of course, pressure from the United States, but from elsewhere too—was not to but instead to have our men bobbing around in this fleet, bobbing around and round and round, blockading, of all places, the Falklands. As if Britain from 8,000 miles away could actually blockade that place against Argentina! Blockade while the storms got worse, the waves grew higher, the men grew more and more sick, and your weapons became less reliable!

Well, she didn’t wait. She said, “Go ahead, take it!” And we did. That took courage.

Curing the Sick Man of Europe

So we come to the legacy. Britain in 1979 was an economic basket case. It was known widely as the sick man of Europe, and we were almost as sick as the Ottomans. We were sick to such an extent that people believed that nothing could be done. Britain could not be run without the agreement of the trade unions. It was impossible to control inflation without a prices and incomes policy. It was impossible to denationalize areas of British industry. It was impossible to reduce subsidies. It was impossible to compete in world markets. It was just impossible, impossible, impossible.

In fact, worse than anything else was the culture of excuses—that culture of excuses, which I think the Anglo-Saxon world specializes in somehow, and it’s probably our worst enemy, even worse than al-Qaeda.

In the Falklands crisis, she didn’t wait. She said, “Go ahead, take it!” And we did. That took courage.

That attitude had to be defeated, and she believed that it was possible to defeat it, and of course, by our policies we did. We denationalized, we cut taxes, we cut regulation, we did bring down inflation through controlling the money supply. We did all the things which were “impossible,” and as a result, Britain did reverse its economic decline.

There is no doubt about that: Even the Left now accepts that the statistics show it. I’ll just give you one. Compare the 1970s and the 1980s. This is judging one economic cycle with another, so we’re talking, as far as the ’70s are concerned, of ’73 to ’79. In the 1970s, the British economy grew by less than 1 percent a year on average. In the 1980s, it grew by 2.25 percent. That may seem a very small difference, but anybody who knows anything about compound interest and the J-curve effect knows that that is a dramatic turnaround with a large effect. That was against the international trend, because world economies did not generally grow faster in the ’80s than in the ’70s, and the basis of this transformation was an upsurge in productivity.

Winning the Cold War

The final thing I must mention is victory in the Cold War. Margaret Thatcher might've claimed that she, herself, won the Cold War. It's been said by others but not by her. She said that she had played a useful role in helping Ronald Reagan, the Pope, and all the imprisoned members of the captive nations to win the Cold War.

That slightly underrated, I should say, her contribution because it was, in fact, large. It was very important to Reagan to have her support, and it wasn't just that Britain had its upgraded nuclear deterrent, that we were spending the right amount on weaponry, that we allowed the Americans to use our bases in order to bomb Libya in 1986, and so on. It was much more, I think, the moral and intellectual support that she gave Reagan on the international stage that was crucial.

The moral and intellectual support that she gave Ronald Reagan on the international stage was crucial.

If I were to compare the two, I would say that Mrs. Thatcher was nimbler in her approach and that Reagan was steadier. I think you need both nimbleness and steadiness if you're going to win battles in international arenas, and she provided the nimbleness.

They were political friends. Political friendship is an odd concept. We can understand personal friendship, but political friends have not only to like one another, but also to share a very similar ideological outlook. And they did. They both were real conservatives, both committed Cold Warriors who hated Communism and socialism. They were also outsiders in their parties. The Republican establishment was very wary of Reagan, let's remember, and the Conservative Party establishment was very wary—even warier—of Mrs. Thatcher. Yes, they had a lot in common.

But she was different in one respect, which it is important that Americans should understand. Although she loved America, she loved Britain more. She was a British patriot. She loved America because she thought she understood American values and the American dream, but also because she thought that America represented in many ways the best of the long Anglo-Saxon contribution to the world. But when it really came to it, it was British national interests that mattered most to her, and the clashes that she had with Reagan—sometimes he was right, sometimes she was right—are the proof of that. We in Mrs. Thatcher's day were nobody's patsy and nobody's poodle. Nor should Britain be anybody's patsy or poodle.

There was unfinished business by the time she left office, particularly as regards Europe. She regretted that. But I think that in those 11 and a half years—those turbulent, difficult, triumphant, sometimes sad and disappointing, but in the end satisfying 11 and a half years—she did enough to justify what the crowd outside St. Paul's clearly felt and what those who answered that opinion poll clearly felt: She won for herself the title of the greatest postwar British Prime Minister.

—*Dr. Robin Harris served during the 1980s as an adviser at the United Kingdom Treasury and Home Office, as Director of the Conservative Party Research Department, and as a member of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Downing Street Policy Unit. He continued to advise Lady Thatcher after she left office and has edited the definitive volume of her Collected Speeches. Dr. Harris is now an author and journalist. His books, in addition to Not for Turning: The Life of Margaret Thatcher (Bantam, 2013), include Dubrovnik: A History (Saqi Books, 2003); Beyond Friendship: The Future of Anglo-American Relations (The Heritage Foundation, 2006); Talleyrand: Betrayal and Saviour of France (John Murray, 2007); and The Conservatives: A History (Bantam Press, 2011).*