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Lady Thatcher; a legacy to be judged by history



On Wednesday, in London, the British Royal Family, a host of former prime ministers and political leaders of all parties and heads of state and government from across the globe will meet at St Paul's Cathedral for the ceremonial funeral, with military honors, of Lady Thatcher. She was the United Kingdom's first female Prime Minister and one of the most prominent world leaders of the 20th Century. Lady Thatcher's grandchildren, Michael and Amanda, will carry cushions bearing the insignia of the Order of the Garter and the Order of Merit. Up to 2,000 guests will hear music and readings from great British artists such as William Wordsworth, TS Eliot, Edward Elgar and Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Lady Thatcher's death produced a vast array of tributes from political leaders of her own party and others, in the UK and overseas: from her successors, John Major –“her outstanding characteristics will be remembered by those who worked closely with her: courage and determination in politics, humanity and generosity of spirit in private,” and Tony Blair –“a towering political figure. Her global impact was vast.” Mikhail Gorbachev also made a statement– “Margaret Thatcher was a great politician. She will remain in our memory and in history,” as did Angela Merkel –“she shaped modern Great Britain as few have before or since. She was one of the greatest leaders in world politics of her time... I will never forget her contribution in overcoming Europe's partition and the end of the Cold War.”

Thatcher's impact

For anyone who grew up in Britain in the 1970s and 80s, Margaret Thatcher's impact is indelible: at home, political struggles over trade union reform, privatization and the search for peace in Northern Ireland; overseas, her role in the Falklands and US nuclear deployments in Europe, the Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong and the debate over Europe's future –from the Single European Act to the fall of the Iron Curtain or the Bruges speech. Whatever your view, these were pivotal moments.

For many in Britain these memories remain remarkably fresh. There is no question that views over Margaret Thatcher's policies and legacy vary widely. But even those who disagree sharply do not underestimate her stature in the UK or beyond: from Alex Salmond of the Scottish National Party –“a truly formidable prime minister whose policies defined a political generation,” to Hans-Dietrich Genscher, German Foreign Minister from 1974 to 1992 –“a great European personality has gone from us. For Germany, she was not always an easy partner but always a reliable one.”

In the Middle East, Margaret Thatcher was certainly a friend of the Gulf. From her resolute response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, her close relations with and regular visits to Saudi Arabia and her journeys throughout the 1980s to Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the UAE, this much was clear. At least one GCC Ambassador was moved to tears as he came to the British Embassy in Doha last week to sign the Book of Condolence for Lady Thatcher. (I read equally moving tributes from Ambassadors from across Asia, from North and South America, from West Africa and Eastern Europe.) Elsewhere in the region, one newspaper declared on its front page: “Kuwaiti hearts at half-mast.”

The first female PM

Perhaps most striking among all these tributes is how little attention they pay to what is arguably Margaret Thatcher's most singular feature as Britain's first woman prime minister. In the summer of 1970, relatively early in her political career, Lady Thatcher told an interviewer that there would not be a woman Prime Minister in her lifetime; “the male population is too prejudiced.” On that point, at least, she was proven wrong. On other issues, history and future generations will judge. But no-one will dispute Margaret Thatcher's unique status in modern British, European and world history.

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