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Jeane Kirkpatrick—Public Diplomacy's Past Master of Shock and Awe ^[1]

Jeane Kirkpatrick, the former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations who died at age 80 December 8, will likely be recalled as the great master of public diplomacy shock and awe during the Ronald Reagan presidency. She was arguably the most effective champion of President Reagan's foreign policy objectives, who rivaled the president himself when it came to working the media.

On TV appearances she could be observed carefully building her case with succinct sound bytes, with authority oozing from each measured word. When finished, she eased forward with chin resting on fist and just a hint of a smirk that seemed to suggest, "Okay, bub.... You got a problem with that?"

There were two high-profile events that I worked on with Ambassador Kirkpatrick in my capacity as director of the U.S. Information Agency's TV and Film Service. One related to the U.S. military invasion of Grenada, the other on the Korean passenger plane, KAL 007, that strayed over Soviet territory during the Cold War and was shot down by a Soviet fighter pilot on August 30, 1983, killing everyone aboard.

Said Ambassador Kirkpatrick at a packed UN Security Council emergency meeting, and to a worldwide TV audience, "Quite simply... the Soviets decided to shoot down a civilian airliner, shot it down, murdering the 269 passengers onboard, and lied about it." The videotape program we had prepared at the U.S. Information Agency had just been played within Kirkpatrick's speech in the Council chamber, with the actual voice of the Soviet fighter pilot stating: "The target is destroyed." The words of the pilot had been analyzed for us in the preparation of our video production by a young State Department officer, Charles Duelfer, who would become the Chief Iraq Weapons Inspector some 20 years later.

Earlier that morning, we finished the final version of the videotape in Washington, D.C. and rushed over to Ambassador Kirkpatrick's office where she gave final approval. Then we piled into her limo for the trip to National Airport, for the flight to New York and the UN. As we walked through the airport terminal, Ambassador Kirkpatrick was recognized by many. President Reagan had told a nationwide TV audience the night before that Ms. Kirkpatrick would present the visual evidence at the UN on the passenger plane's destruction, and people at the airport applauded and cheered. "Give 'em hell, Jeane, they shouted as she walked with us toward the plane. During the flight Kirkpatrick worked on her speech, and together we went over how she would introduce our videotape, with the dramatic words of the Soviet pilot. Ambassador Kirkpatrick's presentation at the UN would become a landmark public diplomacy event in the Reagan administration's painting of the Soviet Union as the Evil Empire.

But President Reagan's foreign policies and Kirkpatrick's communication skills would soon be put to further testing. Memories were still fresh from when American diplomats were held hostage

by terrorists in Iran during Jimmy Carter's presidency, when the U.S. appeared to be virtually helpless.

Soon after the confrontation with the Soviets on the downed Korean airliner, a gunman broke into the Augusta National Golf course on October 22, 1983, where President Reagan was golfing, and took hostages in the pro-shop, including Secret Service agents. The gunman was apprehended and no one was harmed, but the U.S. president was seen as vulnerable.

The next day, October 23, barracks in Beirut, Lebanon were bombed by terrorists, killing hundreds of U.S. Marines.

The day after that, the Soviets announced plans to deploy SS20 nuclear warheads in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, aimed at Western Europe.

At dawn the next morning, October 25, the US invaded the Caribbean island of Grenada. President Reagan had warned that the Soviets were attempting to destabilize the security of Caribbean nations, including the former British colony of Grenada, where some 1,000 Americans lived, including medical students. America was being roundly criticized for sending an invasion force to Grenada, and to answer critics we set up a TV news conference throughout Europe with its featured participant, Jeane Kirkpatrick, who was interviewed via satellite from her perch at the UN, by reporters who packed our U.S. embassies throughout Europe to take part in the news event.

Kirkpatrick was, as usual, tough and glib. From Bonn, a German reporter asked her how the American invasion of Grenada was any different than the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. "That's a really outrageous question," she retorted, and went on to draw the differences between rescuing American students in Grenada and the killing of innocent peasants in Afghanistan. She reminded participants in Europe that in World War II "a good many governments and peoples were rescued from tyranny by force."

Another reporter wanted to know how the United States thought it could justify the invasion of Grenada under international law. Kirkpatrick responded that fear for the safety of the thousand of Americans on the island was justified, "We have not put the whole Iranian hostage behind us yet," she responded. "The memory is still vivid and we were very deeply concerned about those Americans." Ambassador Kirkpatrick's comments were widely carried by the news media throughout Europe, and criticism of the U.S. invasion evaporated virtually overnight.

Jeane Kirkpatrick was the first woman to be appointed as permanent U.S. representative to the UN. She would have been a great presidential candidate in today's world. I'm thinking of those presidential TV debates where she would have made a slam dunk, then smirked just a little.

You got a problem with that?
