

SILENT COM(PIN)CITY: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF ALBRIGHT'S PIN DIPLOMACY AND THE U.S. ROLE IN THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE

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This paper examines Madeleine Albright's practice of "pin diplomacy" as a form of soft power, with particular attention to her rhetorical response to the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Drawing on Keith Grant-Davie's concept of the rhetorical situation, Richard Buchanan's theory of design rhetoric, and Joseph Nye's framework of soft power, this study analyzes how Albright used her jewelry as rhetorical artifacts to engage exigencies, address audiences, and navigate the constraints of international diplomacy. Examining three key artifacts: the serpent pin, the blue bird pin, and the golden dove pin, this research explores how visual rhetoric functioned in some of America's darkest moments. As I found in this study, Albright's pins demonstrate both the potential and the limits of symbolic gestures—such artifacts only gain true persuasive force only when paired with meaningful political action. Ultimately, this study shows that Albright's tactics illustrate that diplomacy is most effective when rhetoric, symbols, and actions align to embody moral responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

The Rwandan genocide, lasting from April 7 to July 15, 1994 — only a span of one hundred days (about three and a half months) — resulted in the massacre of up to 800,000 Rwandans. It has been described as one of the "highest casualty rates of any population in history from non-natural causes," (Hintjens 242). The Rwandan genocide, or the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda, was a systematic extermination led by Hutu extremists against the Tutsi, the ethnic minority. This research acknowledges that external forces played an important role leading up to and during the

genocide but does not ignore the crimes committed against its own people. For example, when the Hutu Power government encouraged citizens and local officials to take arms against their neighbors with crude, agricultural tools, creating a Hutu Ten Commandments— a form of anti-Tutsi propaganda and countless cases of genocidal rape (Berry 113-115).

Central to this moment is Madeleine Korbel Albright, who was commissioned by the Clinton administration to represent one of the greatest superpowers in the world, the United States of America. She was selected to represent America as an ambassador to the United Nations—an organization the United States

helped found (Amrith and Sluga 251). As head diplomat, she was responsible for conveying the United States of America's position on peace and security while collaborating with the UN and its Member States.

With the aim to explore the context and limitations of Madeline Albright's diplomacy tactics during the Rwandan genocide this research first rhetorically examines Albright's "pin diplomacy." Then, this paper will discuss the rhetoric of fashion, symbolic communication, and soft power diplomacy. Finally, we will investigate how soft power diplomacy, a tactic studied by U.S. officials and utilized by Ambassador Albright during her tenure as U.S. Ambassador and U.S. Secretary of State, benefitted Albright's image as she catered to leaders worldwide but, most importantly, to Rwanda. Drawing from Albright's book *Read My Pins: Stories from a Diplomat's Jewel Box*, this research elucidates the effectiveness of Albright's verbal and nonverbal apology to the Rwandan public three years after the genocide.

My purpose in this essay is to analyze Albright's soft power "pin diplomacy" through the concept of a rhetorical situation to show that symbolic gestures like pin diplomacy only gain persuasive power when paired with meaningful political action. Albright's use of soft power and rhetoric in fashion, such as her iconic golden dove pin during her apology speech in Kigali, conveyed a message of peace and remorse in ways that resonated deeply with survivors and the international community. This blend of symbolism and sincerity demonstrates how soft power diplomacy, when used effectively, can bridge emotional and cultural

divides and begin the process of reconciliation. The global community's reception of these symbolic efforts underlines the importance of combining moral accountability with meaningful action.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To assess Albright's rhetoric in her pin diplomacy, I reference Keith Grant-Davie's rhetorical situation, Annina Schneller's design argument, and Joseph Nye's soft power diplomacy.

RHETORICAL SITUATION: FROM CHAOS TO CAUSALITY IN ALBRIGHT'S PIN DIPLOMACY

When looking at historical events through a rhetorical lens, we must ask ourselves not what happened but *why* it happened. Keith Grant-Davie, a rhetorical theory educator at Utah State University, highlights the importance of understanding the "why." He states, "Understanding the rhetorical situations of historical events helps satisfy our demand for causality [and] helps us discover the extent to which the world is not chaotic but ordered, a place where actions follow patterns and things happen for good reasons" (Grant-Davie 264).

In "Rhetorical Situations and Their Constituents," Grant-Davie discusses how to identify rhetorical situations, analyze them, and understand why they occurred. He believes that at its core, a rhetorical situation is "where a speaker or writer sees a need to change reality and sees that the change might be effected through rhetorical discourse" (Grant-Davie 265). This change is brought about by the

three constituents which Grant-Davie lists as: exigence, audience and constraints.

The first constituent, rhetorical exigence, refers to an issue that calls for resolution through discourse (Miller 111). Next, the audience is described as “a group of real people within a situation both external to the rhetor and to the discourse,” which serves as an agent capable of enacting change (Grant-Davie 270). The third constituent, constraints, encompasses factors such as beliefs, emotions or situational limitations, which influence the audience’s response (Grant-Davie 272). In short, a rhetorical situation is the context of any communication, including the factors that influence how the message is crafted and received.

These elements assist with analyzing Albright’s pin diplomacy and her role in the Rwandan genocide. The exigence is the Rwandan genocide itself, demanding a moral and political response. The audience included Rwandan survivors, the American public and a broader global community. Constraints involved Albright’s political position, the emotional weight of the subject, and sensitivity surrounding U.S. inaction. Understanding these elements helps reveal the rhetorical purpose behind her decision to wear the dove pin during her speech at Kigali, an emblem of remorse and accountability.

DESIGN RHETORIC: ARGUING THROUGH ARTIFACTS

Previously, rhetoric was discussed and researched as a primarily verbal phenomenon. It was not until 1965 when Bonsiepe used the term rhetoric in the context of visual communication. The concept of “design argument”

establishes the idea that every day industrial objects incorporate modes of influence, negating the key verbal aspects that played a role in the rhetoric of visual communication previously (Schneller 334). Richard Buchanan’s “design rhetoric” introduces an important distinction in design. The formal aspects of design possess the ability to influence people and to be applied fully. In this sense, formal aspects of design are more evident and straightforward than semantics of rhetoric in objects, adopting an “implicit nature”. Schneller describes it as, “...design artifacts can be seen as attempts to catch the attention and goodwill of a public, to entertain, amuse, shock, or surprise, to create feelings, to influence opinions, values or actions” (Schneller 336). This can be applied to any tangible object, including clothing or accessories such as lapel pins. When Albright was asked what lapel pin was her favorite, she described a hand-made brooch crafted by her five-year-old daughter. She has an emotional connection to the object, which brings up a good point of design rhetoric, “...it tells a story about how an inanimate object can have meaning” (“Madeleine Albright’s Famous Serpent Pin”). Clothing is undoubtedly a form of self-expression. How we decide to appear to others is the straightest line to nonverbally communicating our identity, motives, and disposition.

SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY: TURNING ACCESSORIES INTO ARSENAL

Using clothing as a form of communication is not a foreign concept to most women. As an international leader, Albright understood how her appearance could play into different aspects of her work. Part of Albright’s per-

sonality and diplomacy practices is a strategy known as “soft power diplomacy”. This phrase was coined by former United States Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Joseph S. Nye Jr., after the Cold War (Gauttam et al. 2). According to Nye, soft power is attracting or “seducing” one to influence their behavior to want what they want (Nye 95). Another author who agrees with Nye’s views but views it from a manipulative aspect and applies it on a more internationalized scale is Siniša Vukovic. He challenges the common perceptions of international mediation, and explains the biases and manipulation involved in these tactics. Vukovic views soft power as a form of “leverage” and claims it “enhances a mediator’s ability to influence an outcome” which, essentially, is an exercise of power (Vuković 416). Through the lens of these definitions of soft power diplomacy, we will examine Madeleine Albright’s memoir *Read My Pins*.

Madeline Albright says that her jewelry, particularly brooches, had become a part of her “personal diplomatic arsenal” and that “former President George H.W. Bush was known for saying ‘Read my lips’. [She] began urging colleagues and reporters to ‘Read [her] pins.’” Saddam Hussein inspired this diplomatic messaging system when his poet in residence referred to her as “an unparalleled snake” (“Iraqi Issues Hate Poem”). Soon after, Albright had to meet with Iraqi officials and decided to choose her clothing wisely to make a statement for her. She chose a golden snake pin to wear on her lapel, a clear reference to the slander from Hussein’s poet. When asked by a UN press corps member why she had worn the serpent pin,

Albright replied, “it is just my way of sending a message” (Albright 1).

Albright later became famous for her strategic pins, wearing insects and animals when feeling particularly upset or displeased with the situation at hand, and opting for flowers, bees, and hot air balloons to symbolize her “high hopes” (Albright 8). Although her pins are obvious, or not-so-obvious clues to what she is thinking, Albright confirms that this ties into soft power diplomacy at a lecture she gave at Georgetown University. She says, “I tell my students that the purpose of foreign policy is to persuade others to do what we want, or better yet, to want what we want” She admitted that compared to military force, pins and brooches may seem trivial but still added the warmth or edge required of her at times.

METHODS

To understand how Madeleine Albright utilized fashion rhetorically, I consulted a range of primary and secondary sources in which she discusses the significance of her pins. One of the most valuable resources was her autobiography, *Read My Pins: Stories from a Diplomat’s Jewel Box*, which offers personal reflections and contextual background on many of the pins she wore. After I collected this, I triangulated my analysis using different data sources to examine and understand how things played a role rhetorically. Specifically, to understand soft power in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. In addition to the autobiography, I read transcripts from interviews collected from sources such as *PBS Frontline*, Art Jewelry Forum, and articles from the National Museum of American Diplomacy. These pro-

vided further insight into how Albright interpreted and explained the symbolic meaning of her accessories to the public. Photographs of Albright wearing the pins were also instrumental in contextualizing their use, revealing details such as the setting, the individuals present, and the occasion. Each of which contributed to understanding her rhetorical intentions. The pins I analyze include the snake brooch that launched Albright's famous pin diplomacy, a blue bird pin worn during her "Cowardice vs. Cojones" speech at the United Nations, and finally, the golden dove pin she wore at the Kigali apology speech. These pins each signify important moments in Albright's rhetoric as a diplomat. The snake pin helped Albright realize the power behind what she wore. The blue bird pin was chosen since it is a great example of design rhetoric. Finally, to complete my argument, the gold dove pin reveals how fragile words can be when action does not arise to the occasion.

RESULTS

As mentioned above, I will be analyzing Albright's soft power diplomacy using the rhetorical situation.

AN UNPARALLELED SNAKE

Albright's decision to wear the serpent pin could not have occurred at a more perfect time rhetorically. She had been directly insulted by Hussein's poet-in-residence when she served as an ambassador in 1994 (Burack). Later, in 1997 as Secretary of State, she recalled the pointed words from the Baghdad paper and despite her adverseness to snakes, wore the

pin to "send him a message" (Albright, "The Serpent Strikes Back") (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Serpent Pin. Photo source: <https://readmypins.state.gov/see-the-pins/sending-messages/serpent-pin>



Fig. 2 Albright as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. Photo source: <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/style/jewelry-and-watches/g39526103/madeleine-albright-brooch-tribute/>

Using the rhetorical situation, we can see that the exigence of this situation is the insult directed at Albright by Hussein's poet, which created a rhetorical need for her to respond. By wearing the snake pin, she transformed the affront into a calculated message of defiance and control, reclaiming the symbolism of a snake on her own terms. The audience in this circumstance operates on three levels. Level one is her immediate audience, the Iraqi officials, who were directly receiving her message as if having a silent conversation. The secondary audience is the press who spotted her pin, and questioned her about it, since they took her pictures and broadcasted her message more widely. The third level would include a broader audience such as the international community, and the American public who could have interpreted the message as a callback to America's Revolutionary War message, "Don't Tread on Me!" symbolizing her strength and resolve in the face of threats on liberty and individual freedom. The constraints in this situation are factors that shape how the audience could interpret Albright's choice of attire. Constraints could include cultural differences, her diplomatic position, political constraints, and even constraints from the media. Her diplomatic position as Secretary of State means she could not respond with aggression without risking escalation. Albright still had to maintain an attitude of diplomacy, and since ties between the Iraqi and American governments were strained, any gesture, memento, or interaction would be heavily scrutinized, politicized and even demonized. Snakes carry negative connotations across many cultures, and the constraints of media could complicate the message she was sending out. Albright was careful in using their

own words against the Iraqi officials without being perceived as petty or unprofessional and instead was praised and celebrated for her wit and courage. Rather than weakening her, these constraints actually amplified the rhetorical force of her actions. By choosing the serpent pin, she embraced a symbol meant to tear her down. The formal aspects of the pin itself communicated meaning without words, turning her accessory into argument, thus flipping the narrative. Within the constraints of diplomacy, the pin became an intentional artifact of persuasion, illustrating how design rhetoric can complement "soft power" allowing objects to speak for themselves.

COJONES VS. COWARDICE

Albright owned a blue bird pin that she always wore faced upwards, as if flying into the sky. This could have signified her high hopes, as she also wore hot air balloons when she felt negotiations were going well. Albright also favored nature-inspired designs such as flowers, birds, and even ladybugs to reflect elation or add a touch of warmth to her presence. However, on February 24, 1996, when two unarmed civilian aircrafts were shot down over international waters by Cuban fighter pilots, Albright wore the bird brooch facing downwards as if flying to her feet (see *Fig. 3*). In their official transcripts, the fighter pilots bragged gleefully about crushing the "cojones" of their victims. Albright publicly condemned their actions by stating that it was "coldblooded murder" and "this is not cojones, this is cowardice" (Crossette).



Fig. 3. The blue bird brooch. Image source: <https://readmypins.state.gov/see-the-pins/sending-messages/blue-bird-pin>



Fig. 4. Albright wearing the blue bird brooch facing downward. Image source: <https://www.townand-countrymag.com/style/jewelry-and-watches/g39526103/madeleine-albright-brooch-tribute/>

The exigence of the downward facing blue bird brooch was the fighter pilots' attack on the civilian planes and the boasting that followed after. This blatant cruelty demanded a response from the American government, not only because it occurred over international waters between Florida and Cuba, but because Americans were murdered. Albright had to deliver a political response that both condemned the violence and upheld U.S. diplomatic authority. The audience included the Cuban fighter pilots themselves, the American public and the international community. As chief

American diplomat, her response to the death of Americans would be representative of America as a whole and it was important for Albright to abhor these crimes to the fullest. When taking into account that the Cuban fighter jets did not warn the U.S. aircrafts, and the civilian pilots were shot down at least 12 miles into international waters, it was important for Albright to have these murders recognized as a violation of international law (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights). The constraints were many due to the sensitive nature of the U.S.-Cuban relations at the time, caused by events such as President Clinton's abrupt change in immigration policy, and tightening embargoes on Cuba (Council on Foreign Relations). The pilots' insulting remarks of the "cojones" of their victims also intensified the emotional stakes for Albright and the American public as it was dismissive of the men who lost their lives. Soft power diplomacy and design rhetoric played a key role in responding to this issue without complicating foreign matters. By simply reversing the direction of the pin, Albright silently honored the lost lives of the American peoples and condemned the crimes of the fighter pilots. What was normally a sign of high hopes, and ambitions instead visually communicated her sorrow and anger, a tangible reminder of what had happened to unarmed American pilots. Orienting the pin downwards allowed Albright to chastise their cowardice not only verbally but through the expression and symbolic persuasion of design.

DOVE OF PEACE

In December 1997, three years after the Rwanda genocide, Albright traveled to Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, to deliver her apology speech. She was not speaking as the U.S. Ambassador present during the genocide, she was apologizing as the Secretary of State carrying the full weight of American responsibility. The pin she chose to wear that day was a glittering golden dove pin (see *Fig. 5*).



Fig. 5. The Dove of Peace brooch. *Image source:* <https://readmypins.state.gov/see-the-pins/milestone-moments/peace-dove-pin>

In her book, Albright remembered this pin as one of her favorites, holding special meaning to her. The pin was gifted to her by Leah Rabin, widow of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and outspoken critic of impediments to peace processes. Former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who worked tirelessly on peace efforts between Palestine and Israel, was assassinated at a peace rally by a far-right extremist for his diplomatic efforts. Rabin won a Nobel Peace Prize and successfully signed a peace treaty between Israel and Jordan a year before his death. Albright worked closely with him up until his death and fondly remembers him and his wife by the dove pin. Albright writes, “The pin is of a dove, symbolizing the goal—peace in the Holy Land—for which the prime minister had given his life” (Albright 7).

The exigence in this circumstance is the emotional weight of the Rwandan genocide and the absence of the United States intervention. An entire nation was now scarred by mass violence, which demanded accountability from bystanders, an acknowledgement of Rwanda’s suffering and an apology at the least. Albright was now faced with the challenge of rising to these demands rhetorically. Her apology could not merely be a speech. Words would do nothing without action to show genuine remorse. By wearing the gold dove pin given to her by a dear friend that held personal emotional weight, Albright was symbolically bridging the gap between her inaction as an ambassador and her actions as Secretary of State.

Albright wearing a gold dove pin would have sent the Rwandan public an unmistakable message of peace. It is important to note

the difference between “symbols” and “symbolism.” A symbol is “that which stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention or accidental but not intentional resemblance, especially a visible sign of something invisible as an idea, a quality or totality.” Whereas symbolism is the “art or practice of using symbols; the use of conventional or traditional signs,” (“Symbolism,” *Merriam-Webster*; “Symbol,” *Merriam-Webster*; Munro 152).

Throughout history, across many cultures, doves are commonly associated with being symbolic of peace, freedom, or love. This is prominent in many different religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and paganism. Roman catacombs depict doves occasionally accompanied by the words ‘in pace’, which is Latin for peace and dates all the way to the end of the first century (Allen). In early Christian art, doves are present in representations of baptism or a personal experience of peace, but later on are used as a symbol of peace during conflict, such as in Noah and the Ark, three men in the burning furnace, and Daniel in the lion’s den. Picasso’s ‘La Colombe’ or ‘The Dove’ was used as the World Peace Council’s emblem in Paris. In Judaism, souls are imagined as birds that fly away once it has been given up. It is speculated that this ties in with Scripture, which says that the dead cry out from their graves (Isa. 29.4; “Doves as Symbols”). Doves have also been used as a sign of compassion during difficult transitions, such as in Incan cultures. For Incans, doves symbolized those who have passed or dead ancestors. Buddhists view doves as the embodiment of compassion

and kindness (Kirsten). This universal symbol would have spoken volumes regardless of religious and cultural background.

The audience for Albright at the most immediate level was the survivors of the genocide, grieving families, and new leaders charged with building their country from the ground up, all who were faced with unimaginable loss. However, her message had to extend beyond the borders of Rwanda to those who witnessed complacency in the murders of millions firsthand. After the genocide, the international community and the American public may have viewed America's diplomacy and intentions with skepticism. By wearing the dove pin, Albright was communicating to every member of her audience simultaneously, offering a visual rhetoric of peace and grief that would be accessible and easily understood regardless of language, culture, nationality or religious background.

Even the gold in Albright's pin also has meaning and symbolism. Although gold is commonly associated with fortune, wealth, royalty, and success, amulets discovered in Greco-Roman antiquity were believed to have protective powers to shelter them from injuries or illness (Hughes). In today's medical field, gold relieves pain in rheumatoid arthritis patients (Donohoe 167).

In the context of Albright, this could be symbolic of protection, well-being, and good fortune. Albright could have chosen any one of her pins to represent sorrow, compassion, or peace, such as flowers or olive branches. But the pin's sentimental connection to the Israeli Prime Minister, the symbolism behind the

dove, communicated Albright's feelings about her culpability for the Rwandan genocide better than any apology could.

The constraints of this rhetorical situation were equally significant. Albright's position of Secretary of State demanded that she avoid any political or legal ramifications while maintaining authenticity and an attitude of diplomacy. The biggest constraint on her rhetoric was the enormity of the genocide, creating a situation where no words could express, heal, or change what had happened. No apology would fix the damage that had been done, or bring the lives back that had been lost. This severely limited her expressive speech and created a minefield of emotions for her to navigate in the aftermath. Her message needed to transcend the boundaries of language and politics while maintaining a personal connection with the Rwandans. Given these limitations, the dove pin offered a powerful solution: a universally recognizable artifact of peace and compassion. By utilizing design rhetoric, Albright pushed against these constraints, and allowed her pin to speak volumes of sincerity and remorse when no other words could.

Albright wore the dove pin not only during her speech in Kigali but also as she spoke with the new president of Rwanda, visited mass grave sites, surveyed the skeletons of the brutally murdered innocents, and made a show of getting her hands dirty while digging a new grave (see *Fig. 6*). Her actions intersect with her 'pin diplomacy' and soft power tactics and conveyed to the public that she regretted her actions toward Rwanda. To some extent, her actions and her soft power diplomacy suggest

authenticity. Her visit gives her more favor with the community in Rwanda and internationally, and Albright is showing that her dove pin speaks louder than words.



Fig. 6. Albright placing a cross at a grave of a victim of the genocide. *Image source:* <https://readmypins.state.gov/see-the-pins/milestone-moments/peace-dove-pin>

Madeleine Albright's use of the golden dove pin during her apology in Kigali demonstrates how soft power, design rhetoric, and symbolic communication can intersect to create a profound impact. Through the lens of a rhetorical situation, the exigence, the moral and

emotional demand created by the Rwandan genocide, required a response that words could not say. Her audience, including grieving survivors, new Rwandan leaders, the international community, and the American public, demanded both acknowledgment and accountability. The constraints she faced, political, cultural, and ethical—had hindered traditional rhetoric, revealing a crucial truth: that rhetoric alone is inadequate when it is not matched by meaningful action.

CONCLUSION

Madeleine Albright's diplomatic career demonstrates the nuances between rhetoric, symbolism, and action. Through her strategic use of pins, Albright transformed her jewelry into a diplomatic arsenal. Examined through the lens of Grant-Davie's rhetorical situation, the concept of design rhetoric, and soft power diplomacy, these artifacts were not merely decorative. They addressed urgent exigencies, engaged multiple audiences, and navigated the constraints of international diplomacy.

As I found in this study, Albright's pin diplomacy also reveals the limits of rhetoric when it is disconnected from meaningful action. In Kigali, the golden dove pin on its own did not suffice as an effective apology. Her accompanying actions such as apologizing, visiting mass graves, and engaging with survivors ensured that her symbolic gestures were grounded in authenticity. In my analysis, this demonstrates that soft power is most persuasive when rhetoric is inseparable from moral responsibility. Diplomacy is not about what is

said but about ensuring words and symbols are reinforced through thoughtful, deliberate, and meaningful action.

Moving forward, it is critical to learn from the mistakes and failures of the past. My study shows how rhetorical strategies can both illuminate and obscure responsibility in moments of crisis. More importantly, it underscores how future leaders and nations might use diplomacy not only to prevent tragedies but to repair relationships in their aftermath. Soft power, when wielded with authenticity and care, is a reminder that even amidst the gravest failures, there remains the potential for human connection, healing, and progress. It is our shared responsibility to ensure these tools are used to uphold humanity's highest ideals and to ensure that genocide never happens again.

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