

## **Common Denominators in Successful Female Statecraft: The Political Legacies Of Queen Elizabeth I, Indira Gandhi, And Margaret Thatcher**

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### **Abstract**

Standard literature on female leadership styles posits that successful women deny their inherent feminine characteristics in favor of masculine attributes. Sara Louise Muhr (2011) counters this view, asserting that successful female leaders are androgynous “cyborgs” who transcend gender to combine male intellectual attributes with an intense feminine appearance. Case studies of Queen Elizabeth I, P. M. Indira Gandhi, and P. M. Margaret Thatcher apply Muhr’s theory to demonstrate its validity.

### **Introduction**

The issue of whether women are suited to lead nations is largely one of perception and pre-conceived cultural constructs relating to the gendered natures of women and men. Literature on female and male leadership styles, of which Carol Gilligan’s *In A Different Voice* is an early example, posits specific male and female behavioral characteristics and suggests that in western patriarchal society women’s more nurturing, consensus-building skills are not valued in high stakes positions, particularly as a heads-of-state. Those women who attain upper level leadership rank in the political or corporate arena are said to have denied their feminine characteristics in favor of masculine attributes.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, Swedish researcher Sara Louise Muhr suggests that women who make it to the top are more than masculinized women. They are androgynous, or, in Muhr’s words, “cyborgs” who transcend gender; outsiders who use their alienation from the dominant cultural-political context to develop a specifically individual leadership style—one that combines male attributes of efficient, intellectual ability and shrewdness while cultivating a feminine persona through their appearance and commitment to motherhood. A sort of male mind within a female body.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, few women have exercised leadership power in their own right, without male supervision or association. They thus present anomalies within heavily patriarchal political structures. These women seized opportunity when it appeared, exercised skill in political maneuvering, and negotiated their public image as strong, unique, capable individuals. Most importantly, they were single-minded and successful as national leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> SEE: Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind: Women & Leadership*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). S. Trevis Certo, Catherine M. Daily, Dan R. Dalton. "A Decade of Corporate Women: Some Progress in the Boardroom, None in the Executive Suite," *Strategic Management Journal* 20, No. 1 (1999) 93-100. Cecilia L. Ridgeway, "Gender, Status, and Leadership," *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 4 (2001) 637-655.

<sup>2</sup> Sara Louise Muhr, "Caught in the Gendered Machine: On the Masculine and Feminine in Cyborg Leadership." *Gender, Work & Organization* 18, No. 3 (2011): 337-57.

This paper looks at three such women: one from the sixteenth century, two from the twentieth; one from South Asia, two from England. Elizabeth I, Indira Gandhi, and Margaret Thatcher were each unique in their time and place. Yet, they had more in common than it initially appears. All had strong fathers and comparatively passive mothers. All ruled without a politically active male consort. All pursued domestic and foreign policies that were mutually reinforcing to leave their nations on a stronger international footing when they left office than when they entered it. And all had two key elements to their political careers: duty and survival.

## **ELIZABETH I**

### **(1533-1603), Ruled 1558-1603**

The issue of survival was particularly acute for Elizabeth I. Life started out badly, simply because she was born a girl. It got worse when her father Henry VIII (1491-1547) decided not simply to put his wife Anne Boleyn (1507-1536) aside but to execute her for adultery. After which Elizabeth was demoted from Princess to Bastard, and Henry took a third wife, Jane Seymour (1509-1537), who had the good luck to produce the desired son and die. In due course, Henry died leaving a physically weak son to become Edward VI (1537-1553). Before the young king's death at age 16, his advisors enacted harsh policies to eradicate the Catholic religion. In 1553 Elizabeth's older sister Mary became queen and developed a reputation for burning Protestants at the stake. Mary perceived that her half-sister was a focal point for the Protestant cause, at one time holding her in the Tower charged with treason. Elizabeth persuaded Mary of her loyalty and survived until Mary died in 1558. The new queen immediately moved to distance herself from extremism, utilizing two mottos: *Semper Eadem* (Always the Same) and *Video et Taceo* (I Observe and I Keep Silent).

In the sixteenth century it was aberrant to the natural order of things for a woman to remain unmarried. And, Elizabeth was the last of the Tudor line. It was important for Elizabeth to produce an heir, but she remained single her entire life. Certainly, her family's marital experiences had not been good. Her father went through another four wives after killing her mother. Her sister married Philip II of Spain, a marriage that proved extremely unpopular at all levels of English society and unhappy on a personal level. Elizabeth herself had lived a shadow existence her entire life. Finally, ascending the throne at age twenty-five, she was truly free for the first time. Biographers suggest she was not in a rush to lose that freedom through matrimony.

But if it was unnatural for a woman to remain unmarried, it was equally aberrant to have a female ruler. In the sixteenth century people believed, as many still do in the twenty-first, that while men were naturally endowed with authority, women were temperamentally, intellectually, and morally unfit to govern. There had, of course, been outstanding exceptions, such as the biblical Deborah who served a forty-year term as judge over ancient Israel, but Elizabeth's detractors were not persuaded.

Fortunately, there were more acceptable grounds to support Elizabeth's ability to rule: the Doctrine of the "King's Two Bodies." Developed during the Middle Ages, the theory, as articulated by the Archbishop of York, separated the ruler's mortal, physical body from his role

in the realm. Thus, the queen was both male and female; both female and king. The queen's mortal "body natural" was subject to all physical imperfections, including those of her sex. However, it was joined to an immortal, timeless "body politic." That being so, Elizabeth's gender was not a threat to national stability. She was God's anointed sovereign, and her ability to rule unquestionable.

But, theory alone was not enough. Throughout her reign, Elizabeth used visual and written imagery to support her royal majesty, and many of these depicted a sort of hyper-femininity. Elizabeth recognized that many of her subjects still revered the Virgin Mary as the Queen of Heaven, so she took on that role, using Mary's symbols of the rose, star, moon, phoenix, ermine fur, and pearl jewelry, as well as the color blue. As it happened, Elizabeth's birthday on September 7<sup>th</sup> was the day before the Feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary. The queen declared it a day of national celebration. Soon, disobedience to the queen became linked to defying Christ's mother—an imagery that encouraged loyalty.<sup>3</sup>

Elizabeth also placed great emphasis on pageantry and ritual. Her coronation on January 15, 1559 was an orchestrated event to usher in a new age. Leading a large procession into London the day before, the queen sat upon a golden litter that wound its way through the streets, stopping for five pageants. The first emphasized Elizabeth's English lineage; the second, her commitment to true religion; at the third the Lord Mayor of London gave Elizabeth a gift of gold; in the fourth, a nation in decay was contrasted with the thriving one being born; and finally, Elizabeth was depicted as Deborah, ruler of Israel. In her coronation portrait, the new queen held the scepter for justice and the globe showing England's empire. Attired in rich ermine robes, the queen wore a crown as a diadem of glory. Elizabeth's coronation was rich in symbols and ritual suitable for every social station.

Throughout her reign Elizabeth continued to cultivate her persona, appearing in public wearing rich fabrics and opulent jewels. The queen prided herself on her fair complexion, augmented with white lead paint covered with an egg wash. She wore her hair loose, as a sign of youthful virginity. As her red hair turned grey, Elizabeth resorted to wigs and continued to wear low cut dresses. But the real key was the monarch's continued energy as she grew older, the result of a life of activity and light eating.<sup>4</sup>

When the occasion called for it, Elizabeth personified masculine imagery. For example, facing Spanish aggression at Tilbury in 1588, the fifty-five year old queen appeared before her troops in martial breastplate mounted on a charger, extolling them to courageously meet the Spanish. One eyewitness described Elizabeth "riding about through the Ranks of Armed men . . . with a Leader's Truncheon in her Hand, sometimes with a martial Pace, another while gently like

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<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the queen's death on March 24<sup>th</sup> was on the Eve of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, further cementing Elizabeth's reputation as Mary, incarnate.

<sup>4</sup> As Governor of the English Church, she actively participated in the Maundy ritual during Holy Week by washing the feet of as many poor women as her age, and drawing a cross on each foot. She enthusiastically exercised the so-called "king's touch" to cure people suffering from the "king's evil," or scrofula, a painful swelling of the lymph nodes caused by tuberculosis. Sufferers believed in the royal touch, because the monarch was God's anointed. Petitioners also received a gold coin.

a Woman, incredible it is how much she encouraged the Hearts of her . . . Souldiers by her presence and Speech to them.” Bit tricky for a female monarch to lead her troops into battle, but Elizabeth seized the moment to depict her strength, not her gender. “I have,” she said in perhaps her most famous speech, “the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm . . . I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.”<sup>5</sup> The English, with help from the weather, defeated the Spanish Armada, making England a permanent presence on the European stage of power. The event marked Elizabeth’s reign and made her reputation, but it came about as a result of the queen’s shrewd, intuitive exercise of power.

Thirty years before, England was an economic and military backwater, suffering from years of religious and political extremism that had taken the nation to the brink of civil war. Externally, the religious controversy mired England in draining wars with France and Scotland. Elizabeth took immediate action, participating in the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis (1559) to end war with France. A piece of paper, however, did not end speculation that Catholic nations would mount a coalition against England in conjunction with domestic plots to restore a Catholic monarch.<sup>6</sup>

Elizabeth moved immediately to restore domestic unity and build an economy that could support defense initiatives. Dealing with the issue of religious politics and her own legitimacy as a legal Christian monarch, Elizabeth assumed the title Governor of the Church by the Uniformity Act of 1559, inaugurating the so-called Elizabethan Compromise on religious practice.<sup>7</sup>

Elizabeth then turned to economic matters, recognizing that a prosperous nation would be a loyal one. She faced an empty treasury, a large debt, and an unstable debased currency. The monarch raised money by selling crown lands, borrowing £247,000, and reissuing new currency at a profit of £45,000. Through her direction England’s credit rose, and by 1562 Elizabeth could rely on historic sources of income with little aid from Parliament.<sup>8</sup>

Politically, by turns, Elizabeth cajoled and browbeat Parliament and her nobility to establish solid rule with the cooperation of the landed and governing classes. She encouraged loyalty and obedience at all levels, submitted legislation agreeable to Members of Parliament, and distributed patronage where it would do the most good.

An adequate defense and foreign policy required equal shrewdness. England’s population was smaller than that of potential enemies France or Spain, which made a standing army a practical impossibility. Available English troops were behind in technology and training

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<sup>5</sup> Description by William Camden IN Carole Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995). pp144-145. Elizabeth I. "Speech to Troops at Tilbury." (1588), <http://www.nationalcenter.org/ElizabethITilbury.html>. Accessed June 27, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> The Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis marked the end of 65 years of warfare between France and the Hapsburgs over Italy. The English joined in intermittently in opposition to France.

<sup>7</sup> The queen did not meddle in her subjects’ personal beliefs, but as an act of loyalty expected them to be present at Sunday services in an Anglican church.

<sup>8</sup> The debt is estimated at £227,000. Crown land sales valued at £90,000 pounds. Lacey Baldwin Smith, *This Realm of England*, (Toronto: D C Heath and Company, 1988). pp169-170.

compared to their peers. Elizabeth embarked on a modernization program that introduced the new weapons of pikes and harquebuses, and supported an army of about 11,000 men, with an additional 62,000 troops available for home defense. As funds became available, Elizabeth sponsored naval construction for a new generation of ships with sleeker lines and longer gun decks that gave them more speed, maneuverability, and firepower. While revolutionizing her defense capability, Elizabeth bought time by pursuing intricate marriage negotiations with the Spanish, French, and Hapsburg Royal Houses.<sup>9</sup>

Relations between England and Spain deteriorated as Elizabeth supported Dutch rebellions against Spain and sponsored private raids on Spanish treasure ships and ports.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, Philip II moved directly against England, planning a combined naval and military action. In July 1588 Spain launched the largest Armada in world history with 130 ships, carrying 31,000 men and 2,431 cannons. The plan was to pick up ground troops in the Netherlands and land south of London. The rendezvous failed; the weather intervened, and Elizabeth's ships outmaneuvered the larger Spanish galleons. It was a spectacular victory that established England as a world power, and Elizabeth as an outstanding Monarch on the European stage.

Throughout her reign Elizabeth ruled alone. At the same time, she surrounded herself with good advisors, courted public support and approval at all levels, and made herself into a national symbol. Elizabeth brought England forty years of peace and prosperity, while thwarting domestic and foreign enemies. In doing so, Elizabeth I presented the world with the model of a woman who was not a dependent female but a "king of England," a ruler who left the nation more prosperous and secure than she found it.

## **INDIRA PRIYADARSHINI GANDHI**

### **(1917-1984) Prime Minister of India, 1966-77, 1980-84**

Like Elizabeth I, Indira Priyadarshini Gandhi came to power at a time of political transition in a culture that viewed women as unlikely leaders. And though Mrs. Gandhi expressed devotion to her two sons, Rajiv and Sanjay, she did not remain at home. "I do not regard myself as a woman," she said in 1966. "I am a person with a job."<sup>11</sup>

Indira grew up the only child of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), India's first Prime Minister. The Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) was often at the house, and the family was intimately involved with the Indian National Congress and the struggle for independence from Great Britain. In one anecdote, a young Indira told a guest that she was the only one home. Everyone else was in jail. In keeping with the Mahatma's admonition, the family wore

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<sup>9</sup> Marriage negotiations were carried out at various times with Philip II of Spain, Archduke Charles of Austria; Prince Eric of Sweden; Henry, Duke of Anjou; Francis, Duke of Alençon, later, Francis, Duke of Anjou. Negotiations foundered primarily on issues of religion, and how much authority the queen's consort would exercise in England.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Drake and Henry Hawkins were particularly active in these private joint stock endeavors. The queen was an investor and reaped the associated profits.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Mary C. Carras, "Indira Gandhi: Gender and Foreign Policy," IN *Women in World Politics*, edited by Francine D'Amico and Peter R. Beckman. pp 45-58. (Westport CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1995). p. 56.

indigenous dress; Indira wore saris her entire life. Though not specifically groomed for a political life, Indira grew up surrounded by political discourse.

Indira's mother Kamala was committed to independence and women's rights, but also very traditional. She did not get on well with other women in the family, and Indira often defended her mother—perhaps determining that she herself would not be in such a position. Kamala suffered from tuberculosis and died in 1936. As a result, Indira acted as her father's hostess and representative when he became Prime Minister and this kept her involved in political issues.

In 1938 Indira matriculated at Somerville College at Oxford University to read modern history. Three years later, she returned to India with Feroze Gandhi, a student at the London School of Economics. They married in 1942 and started a family with Rajiv and Sanjay joining the household in 1944 and 1946, respectively. When her father became Prime Minister in 1947, Indira moved to New Delhi with her sons, leaving her husband to pursue his journalistic career. Feroze did not interfere in his wife's growing political role and died in 1960, before Indira took political office.

Nehru suffered a stroke in 1964 and died. His successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, appointed Mrs. Gandhi to a Cabinet position as Minister of Information and Broadcasting, but she did not simply take a passive role. Mrs. Gandhi continued morning *darbar*, a custom begun by her father, and welcomed anyone into her home. She also staked out her own authority, publically criticizing what she perceived as a drift to the political right, and taking advantage of opportunities that presented themselves. For example, arriving in Kashmir in 1965 at the same time Pakistani infiltrators were discovered, Mrs. Gandhi immediately went to the military control room to communicate the situation to the Prime Minister. The result was public admiration for her courage, and a reputation as the “only man in a Cabinet of old women.” Mrs. Gandhi emerged as more than Nehru's daughter.<sup>12</sup>

When Shastri died the next year, Congress Party President Kumarasami Kamaraj orchestrated Mrs. Gandhi's election as Prime Minister. “Kamaraj felt that a woman would be an ideal tool for the Syndicate, especially Nehru's daughter. He had watched her; gentle, sedate, obedient to her father, properly courteous to her elders.” Kamaraj thought the Syndicate could dominate Mrs. Gandhi, yet she would be strong enough to defeat the Party's right wing led by Morarji Desai as well as attracting voters through her family connections. Mrs. Gandhi and the Congress Party won the 1967 elections by a slim margin, and the following 1971 elections by a large majority.<sup>13</sup>

As Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi developed a unique style, to support her political survival. When existing rules did not work for her, she changed the rules. When Congress Party political leaders challenged her, she formed a new Party. Pragmatic and reactive, Mrs. Gandhi campaigned on a populist platform of empathy with the poor, and remained popular with them,

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<sup>12</sup> Jana Everett, "Indira Gandhi and the Exercise of Power., IN *Women as National Leaders*, edited by Michael A. Genovese, 103-34. (London: Sage, 1993). p112.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p110. The Syndicate was composed of Party bosses in the Indian states.

though she did relatively little for them. Mrs. Gandhi saw her goals of unifying India and expanding its regional autonomy and hegemony as ones benefiting all Indians. “We want India to be self-reliant and to strengthen its independence so that it cannot be pressurized by anybody,” the Prime Minister said in a 1977 interview. “This cannot be done unless we solve our own problems and the major problem is poverty and economic backwardness.” At the time, India suffered from food shortages, wage freezes, and inflation. Indira herself was found guilty of election violations in her 1971 campaign. In response, Mrs. Gandhi invoked Emergency Powers in 1975 and ruled by decree for two years. For the only time, voters turned their back on her in 1977 and elected the Janata Party to office. By 1980, voters were ready to change again, bringing the Congress Party (I) back to power and the withdrawal of all charges against Mrs. Gandhi.<sup>14</sup>

Indira Gandhi was no less controversial in foreign affairs where she emphasized Non-Alignment and regional issues to avoid entanglement in Cold War confrontations. As the United States befriended Pakistan, Mrs. Gandhi moved closer to the Soviet Union, which became India’s most important weapons supplier by 1967. In 1971, Mrs. Gandhi signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation as a counter to the growing closeness of the United States, Pakistan, and China. After she returned to office in 1980, an American reporter asked Mrs. Gandhi why Indian policy tilted towards the Soviets. “We don’t tilt on either side,” she replied, “we walk upright.” It was, however, a bit more complicated than that.

In December 1970, the Awami League of East Pakistan swept the elections in its campaign for the region’s autonomy. In response, the Pakistani government ordered a brutal military repression of East Pakistan dissent, commencing March 25, 1971. The Awami League went underground and declared East Pakistan to be the independent state of Bangladesh. Meanwhile, some ten million refugees made their way into adjoining Indian states. After an early visit to the refugee camps, Mrs. Gandhi declared her intentions. “The world must know something about what is going on here and must do something about it. In any case, we cannot let Pakistan continue this holocaust.”<sup>15</sup>

It was not simply a matter of refugees, though they represented a potential domestic crisis, it was concern that the Pakistani civil war could destabilize the region. If India became directly involved, China might also intervene, and the United States under President Nixon was inclined to support Pakistan. Mrs. Gandhi embarked on an international diplomatic campaign to pressure Pakistan into a negotiated settlement while also supplying covert aid to the rebels of East Pakistan, building a national consensus for action, and preparing for a military solution. Specifically, Mrs. Gandhi sent thirteen delegations to seventy countries, and wrote personal letters to heads of government, to apprise them of the situation. Receiving little response, Mrs. Gandhi embarked on a twenty-one day diplomatic tour through Europe where she visited Belgium, Britain, and Austria before arriving for meetings with President Nixon in Washington D. C. in November. Everywhere her message was the same. This crisis was not between India

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p114.

<sup>15</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2006). p76

and Pakistan; it was to prevent the destruction of East Pakistanis by their own government, and India could not continue to cope with the influx of refugees without assistance.

In her meetings with President Nixon, the Indian Prime Minister attempted to persuade the president to use his influence to end the crisis, but he declined to do so. Nixon believed good relations with Pakistan were essential in his pursuit of normal U. S. relations with China. On a personal level, Henry Kissinger observed, “Mrs. Gandhi’s assumption of almost hereditary moral superiority and her moody silences brought out all of Nixon’s latent insecurities.” In their initial meeting, Nixon did not mention the real reason for the Prime Minister’s visit, but offered sympathy for flood victims in Orissa. In response, Mrs. Gandhi chided him on his omission of the refugee situation and treated the president to a history lesson. The next day, the president kept Mrs. Gandhi waiting for forty minutes before meeting with her. Such are the niceties of high-level diplomacy. Speaking to Kissinger later, Nixon pronounced Mrs. Gandhi to be “a cold blooded practitioner of power politics.” The assessment was meant to be unflattering, but points out that Mrs. Gandhi knew how to play the international game. And she played it well, because she knew what she wanted and was determined to get it.<sup>16</sup>

Mrs. Gandhi’s diplomatic efforts bore little fruit other than United Nations Secretary U Thant’s plan for a mutual withdrawal of forces. This the Prime Minister declined, because she thought it deflected from the real issue of Pakistan’s repressive response to legal elections. By the fall of 1971, it was clear international opinion wanted India to stand down. Mrs. Gandhi disagreed, and began increasing support for Bangladeshi guerilla fighters, securing India’s western border with Pakistan, and increasing military forces in the east.

Pakistan launched a surprise air strike on India on December 3, 1971. The Indian army responded immediately. On December 6, India recognized the new state of Bangladesh. Pre-emptively, President Nixon ordered the Seventh Naval Fleet, including the nuclear aircraft carrier *Enterprise*, into the Bay of Bengal. Mrs. Gandhi was not intimidated. On December 12<sup>th</sup> Pakistani forces surrendered. Mrs. Gandhi immediately declared a ceasefire before public and parliamentary opinion could apply pressure for additional operations against Pakistan. India had achieved regional hegemony and international respect. Indians celebrated Mrs. Gandhi as the warrior goddess Durga, an incarnation of *Shakti*. It seems a good analogy. Durga represents both the universe’s infinite power and female energy. Like Indira Gandhi, Durga triumphed over her enemies.

President Nixon’s naval demonstration during the brief Indo-Pakistan War led directly to the Smiling Buddha project to detonate a nuclear device. Mrs. Gandhi began the nuclear program in 1967 after China tested its first device in 1964. Researchers successfully tested the device in a contained underground explosion at Pokharan in the Rajasthan desert on May 18, 1974. Having made her point, Mrs. Gandhi did not pursue further nuclear research other than to develop a delivery system.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Kalyani Shankar, *Nixon, Indira and India: Politics and Beyond*. (New Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India Ltd, 2010), pp 8, 17

<sup>17</sup> Pakistan exploded its first nuclear device in 1987.

Mrs. Gandhi's confrontational style, while very successful in foreign policy and political infighting, did not always work. Its failure resulted in her assassination. The short explanation is Mrs. Gandhi's harsh response to Sikh extremists demanding an autonomous Punjab state. In 1983, Mrs. Gandhi imposed Presidential rule on Punjab after Sikh militants killed several Hindus. The rebels established their center at the Harimandir (Golden Temple) located at Amritsar. In June 1984, Mrs. Gandhi ordered their eviction. More than 450 Sikhs were killed in the ensuing firefight and much damage done to the Sikh's holiest shrine. The separatists were defeated, but the enmity ran deep. Two of Mrs. Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards took revenge by killing Mrs. Gandhi as she walked in her garden on October 31, 1984.

Mrs. Gandhi held national office for fifteen years and remains the world's longest serving Prime Minister. Only two years out of office between 1966 and her death, Mrs. Gandhi served her own interest in political survival while serving India's need, in her opinion, for stability. She established India as a player on the world stage. But, unlike Elizabeth I, Indira Gandhi did not endear herself to her people. India, perhaps a far more diverse country than even sixteenth century England, did not unite behind the imagery of Indira, Nehru's daughter, or Indira, an incarnation of Durga. Such identities were short-lived. Yet, Indira Gandhi also qualifies as a cyborg, a female leader who transcended strict Hindu gender expectations to stand alone, ruling as she saw fit. And, though domestic economic and social issues have continued to plague her successors, and Indira Gandhi did not make India a world power, no one doubts India's important regional role established under Mrs. Gandhi's governments.

## **MARGARET THATCHER**

### **(b. 1925) British Prime Minister 1979-1990**

Unlike Elizabeth I and Indira Gandhi, Margaret Hilda Roberts Thatcher did not come from an upper class, politically active family. As her opponents, and she herself, often pointed out, Margaret was a grocer's daughter, born in Grantham, Lincolnshire in 1925. A female who attended the village school. A scholarship student to Somerville College, Oxford, who received a mere upper second-class degree in Chemistry. Margaret had no social right to participate in politics, let alone achieve its highest office. A woman whose legal participation in political life had been won on her behalf by the women's rights movement, Margaret once famously said, "I owe nothing to Women's Lib."

Margaret did owe a lot to her father, once mayor of Grantham and active in public affairs. She attributed her commitment to hard work, duty, and doing what was "right" rather than "popular" to Alfred Roberts. To her mother, Beatrice, Margaret attributed nothing at all, once saying that after she reached the age of fifteen, the two women had nothing to discuss.

Margaret loved politics, getting her first taste at university as president of the Oxford Conservative Association in 1947. Two years later, the Conservative Party named Margaret as candidate for Dartford, a "safe" Labour seat. She lost the election but won something much more important. During the campaign, Margaret met Denis Thatcher, managing director of a family owned paint and chemicals business. In 1951, they married. One observer later

commented, “Thatcher, incidentally, made her money the old-fashioned way: she married a man who inherited it.”<sup>18</sup>

Denis Thatcher provided Margaret with opportunities to pursue her dreams. He funded his wife’s law studies; Margaret became a barrister specializing in tax law. Margaret gave birth to twins Carol and Mark in 1953. Margaret was a mother, but with resources to hire nannies, housekeepers, and pay boarding school tuition; domesticity did not restrict her career. In 1959, Margaret grabbed her first brass ring. She entered Parliament, representing the Conservative Party’s “safe” seat at Finchley, North London. Here the new MP began to establish herself.

Roy Langston, who served as Thatcher’s agent in Finchely, remarked, “Normally, women in politics are a bloody menace. But she is the most fantastic person I’ve ever worked for...She gets more done in a day than most MPs do in a week.”<sup>19</sup> In 1961, Harold MacMillan appointed Thatcher as Parliamentary Undersecretary at the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance. In 1970, Edward Heath awarded Thatcher her first Cabinet position, Secretary of State for Education and Science. As Secretary, Thatcher picked up her first negative image, “Thatcher the Milk Snatcher,” because she ended the free school milk program.

Labour won the 1974 elections. In February 1975 the Conservative Party met to elect the leader who would take them into the 1979 elections. There was a shortage of qualified applicants willing to run against Heath. Thatcher had no such scruples. She was ready for the challenge, and was elected the Conservative Party’s first female leader on February 11th. On May 3, Labour lost the election. Margaret Thatcher became England’s first female Prime Minister. She continued in office until 1990, winning the elections of 1983 and 1987 by wide margins.

Thatcher began crafting her public image in 1976, in response to the tag “Iron Lady” given her by the *Red Star*, the Soviet Army newspaper. The term was not meant as a compliment, but Thatcher made it an asset. At a dinner speech in her constituency in February 1976, Thatcher remarked, “I stand before you tonight, in my Red Star chiffon evening gown, my face softly made-up and my fair hair gently waved—the Iron Lady of the western world, a cold war Warrior, an Amazon Philistine, even a Peking plotter.”<sup>20</sup>

During the 1979 campaign, Thatcher took lessons in speech delivery from Gordon Reese, Conservative Director of Publicity. She lowered her voice, spoke more slowly, and cultivated a less strident image. Nevertheless, “Mrs. Thatcher behaved from first to last as if the opening bars of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony were constantly ringing in her ears. She was determined to follow the beat of her own destiny whatever the external or internal circumstances.”<sup>21</sup>

Margaret Thatcher took great care with her dress, conservative but colorful. The only bright color, often red, in a sea of males in grey and blacks. When photographed at international

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<sup>18</sup> Kurt Jacobsen, "Stiff Upper Lip," (1989), <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/stiff-upper-lip/Content?oid=873868>. Accessed June 29, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Hennessy, "The Last Retreat of Fame: Mrs. Thatcher as History." *Modern Law Review* 54, No. 4 (1991): 492-98. p493.

<sup>20</sup> Heather Nunn, *Thatcher, Politics and Fantasy: The Political Culture of Gender and Nation*. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2002). p70

<sup>21</sup> Hennessy. p494.

meetings, Thatcher placed herself either in the middle, or near President Reagan. As needed, the Prime Minister took on various roles: Boudicea, the Mother of the Nation, the Flirt, the Matron, the Housewife, or the Screeching Harriidan. She played on an upper class, male, discomfort with all women, especially women with power. “My experience,” Thatcher observed in her memoirs, “is that a number of the men I have dealt with in politics demonstrate precisely those characteristics which they attribute to women—vanity and an inability to make tough decisions. There are also certain kinds of men who simply cannot abide working for a woman. They are quite prepared to make every allowance for ‘the weaker sex’: but if a woman asks no special privileges and expects to be judged solely by what she is and does, this is found gravely and unforgivably disorienting.” And disoriented men can be persuaded. “I tend to look at things more logically than do my colleagues.” Thatcher once said they eventually came around to her point of view, “because there aren’t any other ways to go.” Thatcher used any tool at hand to get her point across, willingly browbeat her Cabinet, and asserted her will. She was not an easy Prime Minister to work with, because Thatcher consistently and truly believed she was right.<sup>22</sup>

When Thatcher took office in 1979, England was in a period of transition. Since 1945 both the Labour and Conservative Parties enacted a consensus agenda employing government management to achieve full employment, a rising standard of living, social welfare benefits, and the public ownership of industry. It was a failed policy. During the Seventies, Britain increasingly suffered from inflation, unemployment, and an inability to compete effectively on world markets. The British Empire had imploded. Britain became dependent on the U. S. for advanced military technology. Détente was fading as the Cold War entered a new stage. And under the outgoing Labour Government, Britain, a financial center, had applied for a loan from the International Monetary Fund. “Britain,” Thatcher reported, “is now seventh out of nine nations of Europe and among the poorest after Ireland and Italy. This is no place for Britain.”<sup>23</sup>

Like a new broom, Thatcher swept out consensus policies in favor of industrial privatization and monetary reform. By 1982 there were signs of economic recovery. Inflation fell from 18 per cent to 8.6 per cent, the lowest since 1970. Mortgage rates fell. Thatcher reformed the taxation system to lower direct income taxes while increasing indirect taxes. But many Britons failed to see the benefit. Unemployment remained high, reaching 3.3 million in 1984. Government services and budgets were reduced. In 1985, Thatcher broke the coal miners’ strike led by the National Union of Mineworkers, her greatest victory over any union.

It was in the international arena, however, that Thatcher had her greatest impact. “I know nothing about diplomacy, but I just know and believe that I want certain things for Britain.”<sup>24</sup> She wanted acknowledgement that Britain was still a world power with a seat on the United Nations Security Council and nuclear capability. The Prime Minister set out to revive the

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<sup>22</sup> Thatcher’s roles identified by Claire Berlinski. *There Is No Alternative: Why Margaret Thatcher Matters*. NY: Basic Books, 2008. Quoted in Anthony King. “The Outsider as Political Leader: The Case of Margaret Thatcher.” *British Journal of Political Science* 32, No. 3 (2002): 435-54. p 45 from Thatcher. *The Downing Street Years*. 1993. Quoted in Nunn. p33.

<sup>23</sup> IN Paul Sharp. *Thatcher's Diplomacy: The Revival of British Foreign Policy*. NY: St Martin's Press, 1997. p25.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Sharp. p80.

“special relationship” between Britain and the U. S., and she refused to put up with pretensions of European unity. Along the way, Thatcher also revived Britain’s reputation by defeating Argentina in the Falklands War—in what may have been her “finest” hour.

Foreign Secretary Francis Pym once suggested that Thatcher looked at “international problems as she looks at domestic problems and has the approach to them of an extremely practical, down-to-earth housewife who wants to get on with the job.” No doubt meant as a negative assessment, Thatcher would have viewed it in a positive light. To Thatcher, the purpose of foreign relations was simple. “The priority of any government should be to defend its citizens from external threat or actual aggression.”<sup>25</sup> To achieve this goal, Thatcher worked to restore Britain’s place as a liberal great power, committed to a few vital international interests as well as its own national interests. Thatcher’s policy became clear when Britain faced Argentina over possession of a small group of islands in the South Atlantic.

Britain had a long association with what they called the Falkland Islands, most recently dating from 1833. Argentina had an equally long-standing claim to the territory they referred to as the Malvinas. In the 1960s and 70s, economic and political links between the contested islands and Argentina increased. Though still British territory, the islands relied on Argentina for services, including communications and petroleum products. In 1976, a military *junta* took control of Argentina, and covertly established a military base on the island of Southern Thule. The British filed a diplomatic protest and sent a naval task force that included a nuclear submarine to the region.

Though the Falklands had useful resources, the British government had not been committed to keeping them. If the Falkland Islanders became convinced that the best way to continue their lifestyle was for sovereignty to be ceded to Argentina, the British government would not block the transfer. But, the Islanders were not convinced. As diplomacy continued, there were two messages: first that there would be no change without popular consent, but also continuing discussions with Argentina regarding sovereignty.

The Argentine government became convinced that the British were not negotiating in good faith, and that if Argentina seized the islands, Britain would not be able to defend them. The latter conclusion related to defense cuts in summer 1981. Cuts to the naval surface fleet included the only two amphibious assault vessels and an ice patrol ship that operated between the Falklands and Antarctica. This left a small garrison of Royal Marines to provide defense. So, the *junta* decided to seize the islands, a move that would be domestically popular.

As conditions deteriorated, Britain issued credible diplomatic and military threats to head off the crisis. Thatcher sent nuclear powered hunter-killer submarines to the South Atlantic as part of a publicity initiative. The Prime Minister also asked President Reagan to intercede with the Argentine government, but it was too late. Argentine forces invaded the Falkland Islands on April 2, 1982 and South George Island on April 3. British forces on site offered brief resistance

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Kenneth Harris, "Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher: The Influence of Her Gender on Her Foreign Policy," IN D'Amico and Beckman, 59-69. p66. Pym, about 1986, quoted in Michael Clarke, "The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe." IN *British Foreign Policy under Thatcher*, edited by Peter Boyd, 54-75. (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1988). p61.

and managed to inflict casualties before surrendering to superior forces. Photos of prostrate British troops face down on the ground went around the world. British Foreign Secretary Peter Carrington immediately resigned, much as a Roman officer might fall on his sword, and held himself responsible for the crisis. Thatcher pressed ahead. To succeed in her foreign policy goals, war was the only possible response.

Speaking to the House of Commons before British forces recaptured South George, Thatcher emphasized, “You have to be prepared to defend the things in which you believe and be prepared to use force if that is the only way to secure the future of liberty and self-determination.” After British fighters secured the island on April 26, she went back to emphasize her war aims. “I’m standing up for the right of self-determination. I’m standing up for our territory. I’m standing up for our people. I’m standing up for international law.” British guarantees of liberty and self-determination would be enforced. If they weren’t, Britain would lose international standing.<sup>26</sup>

The campaign to recapture the Falkland Islands began May 21; Argentina surrendered June 14. “We have ceased,” Thatcher said, “to be a nation in retreat. We have instead a new found confidence—born in the economic battles at home and found true 8000 miles away.” And, Thatcher had learned lessons about international relations similar to those experienced by Indira Gandhi. When something went wrong, other nations would not come forward. Fortunately, Britain had the prosperity to stand-alone. Thatcher, like Boudicca, could lead Britons in battle.<sup>27</sup>

But could she lead them in peace? In these matters Thatcher relied on Britain’s “Special Relationship” with the U. S., especially American support in nuclear technology. After his election in 1980 President Ronald Reagan and the Prime Minister developed strong personal and professional ties. According to presidential aide Michael Dever, one of the reasons Reagan liked Thatcher was that “she carried a purse, and wore funny hats, and was a lady.” He also respected her intellect and appreciated her unfailing public international support. “I regarded it as my duty to do everything I could to reinforce and further President Reagan’s bold strategy to win the Cold War, which the West had been slowly by surely losing.”<sup>28</sup>

Thatcher’s association with Reagan contributed to her prestige. American missile delivery systems contributed to Britain’s. In 1979 the Thatcher government announced Britain would accept 160 new American Cruise missiles as a counter to Soviet SS-20 missiles. The new missiles had the ability to strike targets in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The process went off track a bit when President Reagan announced his ‘zero option’ initiative in which the new missiles would not be deployed if the Soviets destroyed their SS-20s. Thatcher was not pleased by this possibility. She saw nuclear weapons as instruments of last resort, and their deployment as a demonstration of resolve. Further, the Prime Minister believed it was important that Britain keep control of her nuclear force. Reagan’s offer was not accepted, and the deployment went forward.

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<sup>26</sup> Sharp, pp 74, 210.

<sup>27</sup> IN Eric J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism*, (NY: Routledge, 1997). p96

<sup>28</sup> Harris, p67. Berlinski, p157.

Then in March 1983, Reagan announced the Strategic Defense Initiative to support research that could destroy attacking missiles before they reached their target. Thatcher was not enthusiastic about SDI, because it was purely about defense, not deterrence. In Camp David talks held in December 1984, Thatcher and Reagan agreed that American nuclear policies were guided by four basic principles: the U. S. and its allies were not seeking superiority over the Soviet Union; any SDI deployment would be subject to negotiation; the U. S. would do nothing to undermine the principle of nuclear deterrence; and arms control talks would continue in an effort to reduce existing levels of nuclear offensive systems.

Thatcher did not enjoy the same cordial relations with the European Union as she did with the U. S. Britain entered the European Common Market in 1973, a move that was necessary for continued access to European markets. By 1975, the British contribution to the EC budget was £150 million; by 1980 it had risen to an estimated £1,124 million. Britain was supplying about 20 per cent of the EC budget, but only getting about 5 per cent in return benefits.<sup>29</sup>

Thatcher objected to this inequitable distribution. At the EC meeting in Strasbourg in 1979, the Prime Minister announced that she could not “play Sister Bountiful to the Community while my own electorate are being asked to forego improvements in the fields of health, education, welfare and the rest.” What she wanted, Thatcher said at the Dublin meeting that same year, was “to have our own money back.” Finally after battling for five years, the Fontainebleau Summit of 1984 granted Britain an annual rebate amounting to 66 per cent of the difference between British contributions and receipts.<sup>30</sup>

In her determination to maintain the integrity of British national identity, Thatcher vehemently opposed EC efforts to bind member states in closer unity. She flatly opposed the concept of a single currency and further efforts to centralize policy. Addressing the EC at Bruges, Thatcher stated her position: “My first guiding principle is this...willing and active co-operation between independent sovereign states is the best way to build a successful European Community. To try to suppress nationhood and concentrate power at the centre of a European conglomerate would be highly damaging and would jeopardize the objectives we seek to achieve.”<sup>31</sup>

In 1986, Thatcher visited British troops at a NATO training camp in Germany, and took the opportunity to test-drive the new British-built Challenger. A classic photo opportunity for Thatcher’s platform. Wearing a scarf and goggles, with a Union Jack flag on her right side, she drove with confidence, defender of her realm. There she stood, neither female, nor male, but a symbol of Britain. The picture, perhaps, encapsulates her triumphs.

But all success is fleeting. Margaret Thatcher’s approval rating seldom rose above 40 per cent. Opinion polls taken in September 1990 indicated that Labour had built a 14 per cent lead over Thatcher’s Conservatives. Thatcher’s refusal to support a single European currency lost her

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<sup>29</sup> In comparison, in 1979, Germany donated 30 per cent of the budget, and France 19 per cent.

<sup>30</sup> Evans. p82. Berlinski. p316.

<sup>31</sup> Sharp. p168.

support. Long time supporter Geoffrey Howe resigned from the Cabinet on November 1. Michael Haseltine initiated a party leadership challenge. Thatcher won on the first ballot, but Haseltine had enough support to call for a second. Before the vote took place, Thatcher gave in to pressure and resigned. In the end, Haseltine did not lead the party. Instead, Thatcher's protégé John Major took the Conservatives to victory in 1992.

Margaret Thatcher retired from public affairs. She received the title Baroness of Kesteven. She wrote her memoirs. When Thatcher left politics the world was a different place than when she entered, as was Britain. In a documentary interview in 1996, the interviewer asked Thatcher if she thought criticism of her style and politics was fair, to which Thatcher responded: "Life isn't fair." As to the issue of women's exercise of power, "Come into politics if you have a passion for politics. Because you believe in certain things. That's the only reason for coming in... It's a tough life, particularly when you start to climb the greasy pole to get to the top. And you'll only be sustained because of what you believe."<sup>32</sup>

Like Elizabeth I and Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher blended together personal and national interests to nurture her identities and accomplishments. She was a player on the world stage. She was a confidant of some national leaders and an enemy of others. She rolled over her political opponents. Perhaps, like Gandhi, her failing at the end was that she started to believe her own image too strongly. Perhaps Thatcher's conviction of British integrity at the expense of further European integration was too much at odds with other perceptions of Britain's economic interest. Perhaps, her time was simply over. But, when she stood with her international peers, Thatcher did not stand as a woman. She stood as a world leader.

### ***Assessment***

A "cyborg" is "a fictional or hypothetical person whose physical abilities become superhuman by mechanical elements built into the body." Muhr took the definition a step further when she posited that successful female managers are "tough gendered machines fighting their way to the top." Women who "fight for gender equality by employing masculine strategies within a female body," and do so by engaging in behaviors that make them both "excessively masculine and excessively feminine."<sup>33</sup>

The single common denominator between Elizabeth I, Indira Gandhi, and Margaret Thatcher is this "cyborg" identification. Beyond this, they share specific behavioral and character traits: strong fathers, passive mothers; lack of an active male consort to deflect attention from them; public images linking them with national symbols, and a single defining event that confirms they are more than women, more than national leaders. They are players on an international stage. Elizabeth I faced down the Spanish. Indira Gandhi oversaw the birth of Bangladesh. Margaret Thatcher led Britain to victory over Argentina. These three women prove that, in the end, leadership is less a function of gender than of determination.

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<sup>32</sup> Laura A. Liswood, *Women World Leaders: A Documentary Film*, UK, 1996.

<sup>33</sup> Definition take from <http://www.google.com/search?q=cyborg+definition&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a>, accessed June 30, 2011. Muhr. p1.

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