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## Patricia Derian, 86 Activist was President Carter's human rights chief



*Patricia Derian at her State Department office in 1977. (Craig Herndon)*

by [Adam Bernstein](#)

Patricia Derian, a Mississippi civil rights firebrand who served as the State Department's human rights chief under President Jimmy Carter and helped save thousands of lives by giving humanitarian concerns greater weight in U.S. foreign policy, died May 20 at her home in Chapel Hill, N.C. She was 86.

The cause was complications from Alzheimer's disease, said her husband, Hodding Carter III, the journalist and political activist who served as assistant secretary of state for public affairs during the Carter administration.

"Pat" Derian, as she was widely known, came to Washington with no government or foreign affairs background. Her chief qualification for the human rights job was her effectiveness in combating segregation as an activist and Democratic national committeewoman in the South.

She traced her fiercely independent disposition to childhood. Her parents, she said, were "totally absorbed in their own lives" in the Washington social orbit. She was left to her own devices, and she grew up both bookish and rebellious. On the brink of adolescence, she recalled in an oral history, she announced to her parents that she was fed up with the dainty protocol expected of a girl her age: "I'm 13, I smoke and I'm not going to curtsy anymore!"

Far from a backlash, she was greeted with cheers of approval. As she later said in an [oral history interview](#), "What was transmitted to me, my father's lifetime message to me was, 'You live your life so that you can look any man in the eye and tell him to go to hell!'"



*Patricia Derian, left, with President Carter, Virginia McCarthy and Eleanor Holmes Norton, right. (Douglas Chevalier)*

She was a Mississippi doctor's wife in the 1960s, but she also emerged as a persistent, often effective voice of progressive Democratic politics.

She crusaded against the small-town tyranny of white Citizens' Councils, fought to integrate public schools, helped unseat the all-white Mississippi delegation at the party's national conventions and worked to harvest a new crop of Southern leaders not linked to a stark segregationist past.

For her support of Jimmy Carter, the former Georgia governor who won the presidency in 1976, she was rewarded with a place on his transition team and then the State Department job as coordinator for human rights and humanitarian affairs.

She warned then-Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher: "If you want a magnolia to decorate foreign policy, I'm the wrong person. I expect to get things done."

The coordinator's job — created only a year before she took over — was treated as an afterthought by department officials. She vowed to tackle it with vigor, and she was buoyed when President Carter announced that human rights would be the "soul of our foreign policy."

After Congress upgraded her title to assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs, she saw the change as a powerful mandate to force moral judgments to the table in negotiations with foreign leaders over humanitarian aid and security packages.

"My hardest task was to make that clear to a bureaucracy that for 100 years had been weaned on the idea that American political, commercial or security interests were the only things that counted in diplomacy," she told *The Washington Post* in 1981. "I tried to make them see that human rights was something that wouldn't tarnish their polished and exquisite view of classical diplomacy, but that actually could serve as a powerful new weapon for American interests."



*President Jimmy Carter prepares to sign the American Convention on Human Rights at the Pan American Building, in 1977. Patricia Derian is in the background. (Associated Press)*

Initially, Ms. Derian had some successes. She pushed the president to exert influence over the World Bank and other development banks by voting against or abstaining from loans to Argentina, Ethiopia, Laos and Uruguay and other countries with deplorable human rights records.

Ms. Derian and members of her team traveled widely to assess the human rights situation in countries receiving U.S. aid. Her human rights reports to Congress provided information on such previously overlooked topics as labor, women's rights and such practices as female genital mutilation.

Her reports, which began to embarrass and infuriate many allies, met with resistance from the Pentagon, CIA, National Security Council and even other quarters of the State Department. Cold War hawks on Capitol Hill dismissed her as a troublemaker with a simplistic view of global relations and little understanding of strategic considerations during the Cold War.

In 1977, Ms. Derian provoked an international stir when she gave a speech addressing the Soviet Union's oppression of Jews and dissidents — in violation of the Helsinki accords — and said it showed the Soviet leaders' untrustworthiness on strategic arms limitation talks.

She managed to persuade the governments of Indonesia, Bangladesh and Pakistan to release thousands of political prisoners, but she caused a firestorm in the Philippines by criticizing the authoritarian leader Ferdinand Marcos.

One of Ms. Derian's chief antagonists, Richard C. Holbrooke, then assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, helped arrange for Vice President Walter Mondale to visit and smooth things over with Marcos, an act that Ms. Derian regarded as a betrayal of her office.

Ms. Derian had bitter clashes with other colleagues at State, officials in charge of various regional bureaus who recognized the strategic importance of unsavory allies from Romania under Ceaușescu to Iran under the shah. As the president and other policymakers adopted a country-by-country, case-by-case attitude on aid decisions, she often found herself outmaneuvered.

She lamented to a House foreign affairs panel in 1980, "I often find myself in the decision-making process, not in the majority."

One major test case of Ms. Derian's mixed influence was Argentina, whose right-wing junta carried out thousands of extrajudicial killings, kidnappings and acts of torture with impunity during its 1976-83 rule. She met with members of the regime and later recalled, in particular, an encounter in 1977 with the Argentine navy chief, Emilio Massera, who said he washed his hands of any of the deaths.

She met Massera at the Naval Mechanics School, an infamous detention and torture center near Buenos Aires. She recalled in her oral history: "He and I are sitting in leather chairs, side by side, not facing each other. . . . I said, 'As for torture, I know people are being tortured right here under this roof. I have a map of that floor,' which did cause him to blink. I said, 'In fact somebody's probably being tortured right under our feet right now.'

"He goes, 'You remember Pontius Pilate?' with an enormous smile, rubbing his hands together. . . . It was one of the most unbelievable moments of my life. . . . Here is this bald confession."

Military assistance to Argentina was reduced in 1978, and Ms. Derian continued to play a role in diplomatically isolating the country worldwide.

Jacobo Timerman, the Argentine journalist who wrote the best-selling book "Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number" about his years of being imprisoned and tortured, appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1981 and credited Ms. Derian with helping orchestrate his release and with saving "thousands and thousands of lives all over the world."

In an interview, Juan E. Méndez, an Argentine-born professor of human rights law who serves as the U.N. special rapporteur on torture, said Ms. Derian "represents the highest point of this notion that human rights is central to U.S. foreign policy. That impulse continued through the administrations of both parties, but it never achieved the height of objectivity and rigor of the Patt Derian years."

Patricia Sue Miriam Murphy was born in Manhattan on Aug. 12, 1929, and she grew up in Danville, Va., and in Washington, where her father was a lobbyist for the Anaconda copper-mining company.

In 1952, she graduated from the University of Virginia nursing school and married Paul Derian, a resident in orthopedics. They settled in Jackson, Miss., and later divorced.

Besides Hodding Carter, whom she married in 1978, survivors include three children from her first marriage, Mike Derian of Takoma Park, Md., and Dr. Craig Derian and Brooke Derian, both of Chapel Hill; four stepchildren; a sister; and 12 grandchildren.

Ms. Derian, who served on the boards of humanitarian groups after leaving the State Department, described in her oral history what propelled her into rights work.

“You just have to decide how much you’re going to tolerate,” she said. “It turned out my tolerance was very low, because it seemed to me, here I am facing my children, what will I say to them when they’re adults? And what will I think of myself?”

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