

Envoy Pamela Harriman dies at 76

Doyenne of Democrats known for charm, savvy

By Paige Bowers
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She was called everything from "the iron lady in the silk suit" to a modern-day Madame de Pompadour.

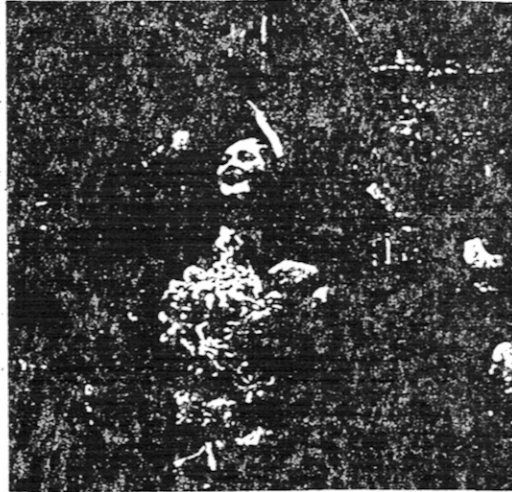
Pamela Harriman, 76, who died yesterday at a hospital outside Paris, was renowned for many things: the lavish parties she hosted on both sides of the Atlantic, her high-profile romances and marriages, her political fund raising, and her knack for smoothing often-prickly Franco-American relations over the last few years.

Mrs. Harriman, the U.S. ambassador to France, died of complications from a stroke she suffered after taking her evening swim Monday. She was rushed to the American Hospital in a Paris suburb, where a dozen relatives stood by her bedside.

"She may have been a playgirl once," a U.S. Embassy official said, "but over here, she has been very serious and extraordinarily hard-working."

"Our country will miss her," President Clinton said.

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A date with history: Pamela Harriman leaves London's St. John's Church with first husband Randolph Churchill, son of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, after their 1939 wedding. The former Miss Digby would marry twice more.

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at the White House. "She was a source of judgment and inspiration to me, a source of constant good humor and charm and real friendship, and we will miss her very very much."

"Amid the high-tech gadgetry of the information age, she was a master of the personal touch that separates simple communications from true diplomacy," said Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright.

A top Democratic Party fundraiser, Mrs. Harriman raised \$12 million for the party over a 10-year period, and \$3.5 million for Bill Clinton in one day in 1992.

She has also raised many eyebrows, dating some of the world's most eligible and powerful men. Among them were said to be the legendary broadcaster Edward R. Murrow, billionaire Aristotle Onassis, entertainer Frank Sinatra, Fiat auto tycoon Gianni Agnelli, Prince Ali Khan, banker Elie de Rothschild and J. Carter Brown, former National Gallery of Art director.

Because of her background, the French at first viewed Mrs. Harriman's appointment as a diplomatic slap in the face.

But those views changed, and officials in France said she had been quite effective in averting several trans-Atlantic crises, noting her ability to get President Clinton on the line at any moment.

She was awarded the Legion of Honor last year as a sign of France's gratitude for her work.

"I am very, very sad about the death of Pamela Harriman," French President Jacques Chirac said in a statement. "She was such a beautiful woman, a beautiful ambassador, probably one of the best since Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson."

Since becoming ambassador in 1993, Mrs. Harriman used that clout to help negotiate a trade agreement without ruffling too many proud Gallic feathers, to organize a joint French-American presence in Bosnia, and to calm relations when the CIA was accused of spying in France.

But others, like the children of her late third husband, railroad tycoon W. Averell Harriman, claimed that clout could be troublesome at times. They accused her of mismanaging his estate and walking away with \$40 million of his money.

Mrs. Harriman later sold some of her high-priced collection of Matisse, Picasso and Cezanne paintings to settle a court dispute with the Harriman family.

She was born in Farnborough, England, the daughter of an English baron, on March 20, 1920. She received a bachelor's degree in domestic sciences at the Downham School in Britain and received a postgraduate degree from the Sorbonne in 1938. She earned a number of honorary degrees over the years.

She became a U.S. citizen in 1971 after marrying Mr. Harriman, her third husband. He died in 1986.

It was through her first husband, Randolph Churchill, whom she met at the age of 19 and with whom she had one son, that she began mingling with many of the powerful people who would later influence her.

Her father-in-law was Winston Churchill, and Mrs. Harriman was known to recount tales of having dinner with the former British leader and Charles de Gaulle.

"You learn from having watched great people in high positions," she once said.

Mrs. Harriman and Mr. Churchill, who were married in 1939, divorced at the end of World War II.

According to some sources, Mrs. Harriman had a flair for adapting herself to any situation.

She reportedly adopted an Italian accent while she was with Mr. Agnelli. And while with producer Leland Hayward, whom she married in 1960, his daughter said Mrs. Harriman knew the box office gross of every show on Broadway.

Mr. Hayward, most noted for producing "The Sound of Music," died in 1971. Mrs. Harriman married her third husband, Averell, later that year.

• This article is based in part on wire service reports.