

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Margaret Thatcher comes to Springfield

When I first saw that Margaret Thatcher was coming to Springfield, I was proud that Bay Path College President Carol Leary had managed to attract such a world famous speaker to our city. My reading of Lady Thatcher's autobiography had stimulated my interest in seeing the dynamic world leader. Her designation by Time magazine as one of the 100 most influential leaders of the 20th century only strengthened my desire to hear her speak. You can be sure I signed up early for a seat at the Symphony Hall event.

The afternoon address only enhanced my admiration for Lady Thatcher. Other speakers might have used such an occasion to further a personal agenda, presenting a speech developed that fits a number of occasions. Her scripted text, however, had been developed exclusively for her Bay Path appearance.

She expanded on the focus areas of college; leadership, communication, and technology. One idea that struck a chord with me was her declaration that a political leader must stay true to principles even if she loses votes in the process. That is a lesson I will remind myself of anytime a controversial issue arises.

I mention the prepared text as an example of the importance Thatcher placed on a single appearance. Her knowledge of world politics is so extensive that she both expanded on her prepared text and gave extensive answers to questions from the audience. She covered such topics as the single European currency (she is against it), international response to Bosnian strife (it was a disgrace) and the future of China (political freedom will follow economic liberty).

If you followed press accounts of the afternoon events at Symphony Hall, you already know about the protests of Margaret Thatcher's appearance.

Thatcher praised Americans for having the Declaration of Independence as she spoke to 1,800 approving spectators. Its promises of liberty were evidence on the steps of Symphony Hall in a demonstration against Thatcher's policies regarding Ireland. Held behind police lines, demonstrators shouted anti-Thatcher slogans, made obscene gestures and jeered individual members of the audience as we mounted the steps.

The hatred that emanated from the protestors seemed inconsistent with the simultaneous election in Northern Ireland of a unified assembly. As the Springfield demonstrators waved signs of hate, the voters of Ireland were choosing peace, first with the April vote and last week in their choices for the assembly.

The protest of Lady Thatcher's appearance gained more news coverage than the substance of her presentation. That is that nature of the visual protest arena. I wish more people could have shared the inspiration of the "Iron Lady," the dynamic leader who was the longest serving Prime Minister in Great Britain in this century. I regret that the public at large is likely to recall only the angry protest.

My overriding regret of the day came from seeing the transmission of that hate to a new generation. Among the protestors I saw two young children. They were witnessing, learning and participating the protest of British oppression at the same hour that oppression was being dealt with through the peaceful process and the ballot box. I wonder who will teach them to put away the acts of resistance when the "Troubles" are ended.