

Big Ideas at 8,000 Feet

What really goes on at the Aspen Institute?
By Susan Skog



MADELEINE ALBRIGHT moves along aspen-lined paths, skirting voluminous white tents that sing to Aspen's blue sky this Fourth of July weekend. The first female secretary of state, Albright is fitter than she was during her Clinton years. She carries a commanding aura as she glides into a packed seminar room and finds a Camelot-round table, surrounded by the exalted and the ordinary.

To Albright's left is a deeply tanned, relaxed Katie Couric, in white sundress and denim jacket, enjoying this mountain hiatus between gigs as host of the *Today Show* and anchor of *CBS Evening News*. A few yards away, former Disney CEO Michael Eisner leans in as Albright warms to her topic, "The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs," one of about 150 panels and discussions at the Aspen Institute's weeklong Aspen Ideas Festival.

Known for her candor and sauciness—and for dancing the macarena at the U.N. Security Council with the ambassador of Botswana—Albright doesn't disappoint on this second day of the event. On terrorism: "While Osama bin Laden is definitely evil, he is not talking about trivial matters." On a polarized nation: "I am very troubled by what is going on in Washington, where you barely speak, in my case, to a Republican or a Republican speaks to me. It is very unusual when you actually get together for a meal and everybody says, 'Oh, isn't this unusual? We are talking to each other,' when we all actually used to talk to each other."

Albright is also the highest-ranking American official to have met with North Korea's elusive Kim Jong Il. Her blue eyes roving the room, she circles back to 2000, taking the crowd with her: "We had a terrible time with North Korea. North Korea is a dangerous place. I don't know how many of you have been to the demilitarized zone, but it is like some remnant of the Cold War, and the south side is like 40 miles from Seoul, the capital of South Korea. There are troops lined up on the North Korea side, and it is scary," she says.

BRAIN STRAINERS Madeleine Albright, Ariana Huffington, Alan Greenspan, Katie Couric, Karl Rove, Queen Noor

George W. Bush's ABC—Anything But Clinton—policies halted the negotiations begun by Albright and the previous administration, putting an end to direct talks with Kim Jong Il. It was a major mistake, says Albright. "You can't deliver any tough messages if you're not talking to the people. I don't think it's appeasement. I don't think it's a gift. We need full-scope talks with Iran and North Korea to explain what they can and can't do."

With Albright holding court, the Aspen Institute's vision—gathering world leaders, thinkers, and artists in a place where they can unwind and reflect—is being perfectly executed. Everyone is suspended in time, until a broadcast producer's BlackBerry jerks the attendees back to reality. "North Korea just launched some missiles," the producer says. "If you were advising Bush now, do we have direct talks?"

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE was created in 1950 by Container Corp. of America Chairman Walter Paepcke and his wife, Elizabeth. Fanning out in the palm of the Roaring Fork Valley, the institute attracts an assemblage of heads of state, commerce, media, and entertainment, who gather at functions large and small to

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engage in nonpartisan discussions on virtually every topic that concerns the geopolitical and economic landscapes. (Its headquarters are in Washington, D.C., with another campus in Maryland and partner institutes in Berlin, Rome, Lyon, Tokyo, and New Delhi.) The Aspen campus is comprised of a cluster of Bauhaus-style contemporary meeting rooms, with simple, clean lines that blend casually with the wildflowers, streams, and native meadows around them. The guest suites, part of the Aspen Meadows Resort, offer floor-to-ceiling mountain views. The Institute may sit on only 40 acres, but its influence spreads far wider. Since its founding, it has become

a venue for ideas and initiatives that have shaped political systems and leading opinions, served as an antidote to the shrill scream-fests that pass for debate in our culture, and given traction to everything from wars to women's rights to the dismantling of apartheid.

And it's a magnet for the powerful. In her early 20s, Jordan's Queen Noor did odd jobs here—a "gofer of sorts," she recently said. Former Chief Justice Harry Blackmun asked that a portion of his ashes be scattered at the institute. Condi Rice and Cokie Roberts are both alums, and Bill Clinton and Karl Rove dropped by this summer.

More than 1,800 luminaries and lesser lights came to this year's Aspen Ideas Festival, cosponsored by *The Atlantic* magazine, to mix and muse on everything from elementary particles to politics. (Up to 4,000 people attended.) The festival is the best window into the institute's considerable gravitas. More than 180 presenters—Noor, Clinton, Supreme Court Justices Stephen Breyer and Sandra Day O'Connor, Colin Powell and Albright, screenwriter Nora Ephron, and scores of religious leaders and gurus—illustrate that civil, nonpartisan discourse is not only satisfying, it also can set the course of world events.



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Or at least how people respond to them, as is the case with Albright, who swings into high gear after hearing of the latest plot twist in our pained relationship with North Korea. With characteristic aplomb, Albright immediately responds to the BlackBerryed producer: "Well, I have to say it's now very hard to have direct talks," she explains. "It looks like we're having direct talks [now] because they launched missiles." Albright stays up late into the night, fielding calls from her office and questions from the press. A flurry of feeds for national TV appearances begins. But the intrusion of technology and world events doesn't spoil the moment. In fact, this is when the magic of the Aspen Institute comes to life.

"When the Korean missile test goes off, we have everyone from Jim Woolsey, former CIA director, to Colin Powell to Madeleine Albright, and they can huddle and not worry about being on a cable TV shout show," says Walter Isaacson, president and CEO of the institute since 2003. "They can get three different perspectives and figure out what it means. When I heard them all talking about the missile tests, I realized they were able to remove themselves from the hurly-burly of instant reaction and think it through carefully. And then I saw them

later in the evening listening to poetry readings with Dana Gioia, of the National Endowment for the Arts, and they can pause and get away from their BlackBerries and debate translations of the *Odyssey*."

The former chairman and CEO of CNN and managing editor of *Time* magazine, Isaacson is known for his prodigious energy, and for his success at the Aspen Institute. He brings "tremendous energy and eclecticism," says Academy Award-winning filmmaker Sydney Pollack (*Out of Africa*). Pollack and other festivalgoers are proof that there's a mighty hunger for meaningful conversation among the Hollywood set. "I'm terrifically starved for this kind of stimulation," says Pollack, walking through a shaded meadow before premiering his documentary about the architect Frank Gehry. "I spend so much time reading rotten scripts. I have a thirst and hunger for more intellectual, political, and social discourse. Not a lot of that happens when I make movies."

Even the biggest stars seem a bit caught up in the event's aura. Katie Couric says she enjoys being here because, "I rarely get time off to actually go to a place in a relaxed setting and listen to highly intelligent people talk on important matters. It's extremely intellectually

stimulating." As CBS's Bob Schieffer puts it: "The greatest advances in the history of civilization came, by accident or by design, when smart groups of people came together." He is quick to exclude himself from the category.

The cabal is typically collegial and casual—heavy on the jeans and khaki—as presenters mix with attendees and reflect, at 8,000 feet above sea level, on ways to ease African poverty, global warming, or religious fundamentalism. The cameos are so endless, you can't possibly take them all in. But it's great fun trying. In a panel discussion on the power of new media, former California gubernatorial candidate and party-defying pundit Arianna Huffington preens over her swelling blog, *The Huffington Post*. Citing a massive breakdown of trust in "old media," Huffington boasts, in her thick Greek accent, "Our blog holds the media's feet to the fire." Later, she says, "It's not as if we have these incredible sources of information we can always trust."

In the middle of all this, Watergate-era *Washington Post* Executive Editor Ben Bradlee—the bastion of old-school, hold-the-government's-feet-to-the-fire media—slips lionlike into the crowd. He points and flashes a smile to another bigwig across the room, legendary



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EVENTS

producer Norman Lear. Deftly homing in on the old versus new media debate, Bradlee grins and calls out, "Washingtonpost.com is very comfortably in the black. So our circulation goes down. That doesn't seem to terrify me as much as it terrifies you. What difference does it make if our circulation is 750,000, not 800,000? And I haven't seen a website doing fabulous investigating reporting." Heads nod vigorously around the room. Then, upholding the civil discourse the institute is famous for, a conciliatory Huffington says, "Actually, that's a very good point. Ben, I hope, can put to bed the old debate about print versus online." And finally, weaving everyone in a closing agreeable spell, *New Republic* Editor-at-Large Peter Beinart says he believes the ultimate luxury will be total disconnection from all media so people can actually be free to think. Satisfied sighs break out across the room.

One evening, the civil, lively conversation revolves around award-winning producer Lawrence Bender (*Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Good Will Hunting*), who rushes to step onto a backlit festival stage. He's here to talk global warming, and to show the Al Gore documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, which he produced. "I felt, 'What can I do? I know the ability of the motion pictures to make a difference,'" he says to the audience, looking more like a lean, passionate college student than a forty-something Hollywood mogul. At the end of the movie, the room erupts in applause. Later, he would say, "I knew there would be a lot of people, a mixture of conservative and liberal opinion leaders who probably had not seen the movie yet. It was a way to get a discussion with people who can make a difference."

OF COURSE, it's easy to dismiss the institute as a self-indulgent highbrow hang. And lid-heavy reporters, somnolent from would-be Tom Cruise baby sightings in Telluride, could see the festival as a dreary affair. But to settle for any of these conclusions misses the much larger story behind the institute itself—a place that, however indirectly, can exact change.

Since the height of the Cold War, the institute has steered some pivotal foreign policy and national security issues. Because of his participation in Aspen Institute events, Reagan administration legend Paul Nitze is said to have reversed his Cold Warrior philosophies. Inspired by his more than 17 years at the Aspen campus, former Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun evolved from a conservative to a champion of the disenfranchised, eventually becoming a staunch *Roe v. Wade* supporter. In '88 the institute brought

together members of Congress to form the Southern Africa Policy Forum. Their conferences were attended by Nelson Mandela and then-President F.W. de Klerk, and are often cited for helping to end apartheid. On Aug. 3, 1990, the day after Saddam Hussein's army swarmed into Kuwait, President George H.W. Bush and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher convened at the Aspen campus for the institute's 40th anniversary celebration. Their meeting led to the creation of a multinational military force—and the U.S. launched Operation Desert Storm in January 1991.

But the Aspen Institute has its critics, too, particularly those who feel that it doesn't quite welcome the local community. Isaacson is working on a solution. During the festival, more than 25 events took place in the town, including a live Public Radio International taping with Roseanne Cash and her husband, John Leventhal. Huffington and others spoke at the Jerome Hotel; KAJX, Aspen's local public radio station, beamed many of the festival's conversations; and GrassRoots TV aired many of the events. *The Aspen Times* noticed the renewed efforts, stating, "The Aspen Idea is alive and well for more people than ever. And that's good news."

MADELEINE ALBRIGHT is fired up. Two days after the missile mess, she is still in high demand. She pauses to reflect during a hair and makeup stop before yet another TV interview. "Here, so many different participants bring different points of view. You have to be open to hearing others' opinions, but you learn more about what you think and how to marshal your arguments better," Albright says as a stylist teases her hair.

Becoming educated on substantive ideas is all part of being a citizen, stresses Albright, who grew up in Czechoslovakia, where her grandparents and other family members were killed during the Holocaust. (Ten days after the Nazis invaded her country, Albright's parents fled with their nearly 2-year-old daughter to London; they eventually were granted political asylum in Denver.)

"All these ideas are ripples in the pool," she continues. "People get educated here on substantive issues and then go outward into their communities. We just can't assume that democracy will take care of itself. Democracy is a very fragile system, and we are very privileged to give back." ▲

Susan Skog's most recent book is Peace in Our Lifetime: Insights from the World's Peacemakers. She lives in Fort Collins.