

This Day in History... February 25, 1920

Happy Birthday, Philip Habib

American diplomat Philip Charles Habib was born on February 25, 1920, in Brooklyn, New York. He was a respected peace negotiator and special envoy for 30 years and received the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his life's work.

After graduating from high school, Habib worked as a shipping clerk. He then went on to study forestry at the University of Idaho. He graduated in 1942 and shortly after joined the US Army to serve in World War II. Habib eventually reached the rank of captain before being discharged in 1946. Using his G.I. Bill, Habib went to the University of California to get a Ph.D. in agricultural economics.

When Habib was a student at the University of California, recruiters for the US Foreign Service visited the school. Habib had never considered a career in diplomacy, but he enjoyed the challenge of taking tests. He ended up scoring in the top 10% on the Foreign Service Exam and decided to follow that career path.

Starting in 1949, Habib took assignments in Canada, New Zealand, and South Korea. By 1965, he was the chief political advisor to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and was serving in

Vietnam. Habib studied how the war was affecting the country and convinced President Lyndon Johnson to decrease his bombing of North Vietnam. Habib then went on to serve as the US ambassador to South Korea from 1971 to 1974 and assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific affairs from 1974 to 1976.

When Habib was serving in Korea, the opposition leader Kim Dae-jung was kidnapped. Habib managed to intervene and help save Kim's life.

In 1976, Habib was made undersecretary of state for political affairs, with his work's focus on the Middle East. He helped convince Egyptian and Israeli leaders to meet with President Jimmy Carter for a peace summit in 1978. That same year he suffered a heart attack and retired. Habib's retirement was brief – in 1981 he was requested to serve as special envoy to the Middle East. He helped to negotiate a temporary peace agreement in Lebanon that allowed the Palestine Liberation Organization to evacuate Beirut. For his work, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1982 and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Habib attempted to retire again but was once again called into service in 1986. He was sent to the Philippines to convince the president to step down after he'd attempted to steal an election. Later that year he also went to Central America to help create a peace plan to bring an end to the civil wars in the region.

Habib died after suffering from a cardiac arrhythmia on May 25, 1992. He's considered one of the top diplomats of the 20th century.



From the Distinguished American Diplomats Issue



Habib took part in the Vietnam War's Paris Peace Talks for three-and-a-half years.

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