

Ambassador Burton Levin

Ambassador Burton Levin died on October 31, 2016 at home in Sherborn, MA with his wife and children in his presence.

Born September 28, 1930 to Benjamin and Ida Levin in Brooklyn, New York, he graduated from Brooklyn College in 1952 with a B.A. in American History then earned a Master's in International Affairs from Columbia University in 1954.

He entered the United States Foreign Service in 1954 and was posted in Taipei, Taiwan. He met Lily Lee in Taiwan and they were married in 1960. Over the course of his Foreign Service career he served in Washington, DC, two tours in Taiwan, Indonesia, three tours in Hong Kong, and tours in Thailand and Myanmar (Burma.) In Hong Kong, he served as Consul General from 1981-86. Between May 1987 and September 1990 he was the U.S. Ambassador to Burma. Along the way he conducted additional academic work in Chinese Affairs at Harvard during 1964-65, was a Visiting Fellow at the Hoover Institute, Stanford University, between 1973-74 and a Harvard visiting scholar between 1986-87. In June of 1993, Carleton College awarded him an honorary Doctor of Law degree.

He was an early critic of the Vietnam War, the Director of the State Department's Taiwan desk at the time of Chiang Kai-shek's death in 1975, and as Consul General in Hong Kong, he offered prescient, calming insight into the transfer of Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule.

He was in Burma during the bloody, student led uprisings of 1988, offering support to student protesters, distributing food to monks, and smuggling needed medications for wounded demonstrators. He said that "for veterans of the Foreign Service, it was a rare and comforting experience to witness admiring rather than hostile crowds gathered before an American Embassy." He persuaded the U.S. to stand with the people of Burma and to withdraw its ambassador from the embassy in Rangoon; he was the last ambassador for more than two decades in Myanmar. In 1999, Aung San Suu Kyi was asked give Bucknell University's commencement speech. Under house arrest and unable to travel, Suu Kyi asked Ambassador Levin to deliver the speech on her behalf.

In October 1990 he retired from public service and became Director of the Hong Kong office of the Asia Society. In 1996, upon stepping down from his duties at the Asia Society, he accepted a position at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota as the SIT Investment Visiting Professor of Asian Affairs. At Carleton he taught courses with titles including The Craft of Diplomacy, U.S./China Relations, and The Vietnam War. He took great joy in teaching and advising students and loved to hear of their worldwide adventures and accomplishments, and he inspired many to enter a life of public service. He split his time between Minnesota and Massachusetts and continued to travel extensively throughout Asia.

He has served as a Director of the Mansfield Foundation, Chairman Emeritus on the Council for the John Hopkins University-Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies, and as a Director of both The China Fund and Noble Group.

He was a man of great wit, self-deprecating humor, and humility. In the words of one of his teaching colleagues, he was “a national treasure.” He loved martinis and the Muppets; the Far East and the Far Side. He was invigorated by long walks and wicked nor’easters. He loved baseball, preferring the Mets over the Yankees and the Red Sox above all (but never got over the Brooklyn Dodgers moving to LA).

Ambassador Levin is survived by his wife Lily Lee, son Clifton, daughter and son in law, Alicia and Patrick Lee-O’Halloran, cherished grandchildren, Quinn and Elliot, and by many other loving relatives.