

a0665-----

¶ r ibx  
¶ AM-Caribbean's Iron Lady, Bjt,0709  
¶ Iron Lady of Caribbean to Retire After 15 Years Leading Dominica  
¶ AP Photo ROS101  
¶ By LISA M. HAMM  
¶ Associated Press Writer  
¶ With AM-Caribbean Leaders Box, AM-Dominica-Elections  
¶ 06-11-1995 16:15

-----  
Doc: 00489155 DB: research\_f\_95\_1\_2 Date: Sun Jun 11 16:15:00 1995

\*\*\* Version history. (\* = this story, F = final, S = semifinal) \*\*\*

aF5VDKTH01 06-11-1995 16:15:00\* AM-Caribbean's Iron Lady, Bjt:Iron Lady of

Copyright 1995 By The Associated Press. All Rights Reserved.

-----  
a0665±-----

r ibx  
^AM-Caribbean's Iron Lady, Bjt,0709<  
^Iron Lady of Caribbean to Retire After 15 Years Leading Dominica<  
^With AM-Caribbean Leaders Box, AM-Dominica-Elections<  
^AP Photo ROS101<  
^By LISA M. HAMM=  
^Associated Press Writer=  
¶ ROSEAU, Dominica (AP) \_ Prime Minister Eugenia Charles answered the door of her third-floor walk-up in a house dress, a mustard-colored scarf covering curlers in her hair, her feet tucked into green terrycloth slippers.  
¶ Her casual image belies the reputation she has built over the past 30 years \_ a politician so tough that she's known as the Iron Lady of the Caribbean.  
¶ But the 76-year-old Charles is about to relinquish her grasp. She's not running in the national elections Monday and will leave her post as soon as a winner is declared, which may require a runoff.  
¶ Charles became widely known when she stood beside President Reagan on the White House steps on Oct. 25, 1983, while he announced the invasion of Grenada. She took much criticism for supporting the invasion, but, she said in a recent interview, "The Grenadians wanted it, and that's all that counts. I don't care what the rest of the world thinks."  
¶ "No decision you make will please everyone. You have to decide what's best for the country and go ahead and do it," she said.  
¶ Mary Eugenia Charles was born May 15, 1919, in the village of Pointe Michel, the youngest of four children of John-Baptiste and Josephine Charles. Despite humble origins, her father amassed a small fortune buying, cultivating and reselling land.  
¶ In 1921, her parents opened a hardware store a block from where she lives now. Her father founded a cooperative bank for peasants, eventually becoming mayor of Roseau and a legislator.  
¶ At lively family dinner table debates, the children were encouraged to express opinions and expected to become professionals. Her two brothers are doctors; her older sister died young.  
¶ John-Baptiste Charles insisted Eugenia learn shorthand and typing. While practicing in the courts at age 14, she decided to become a lawyer.  
¶ She graduated from the University of Toronto and then studied at the London School of Economics before joining the Dominica Bar in 1949.  
¶ Charles practiced law for a couple of decades before the ruling Labor Party passed a law banning criticism of government, which Charles coined the "shut-your-mouth bill."  
¶ "That's how I decided I had to get into politics," Charles said.  
¶ She grabbed a microphone, delivered an impassioned speech on freedom and the ruling party's abuses, and formed what became the Dominica Freedom Party.

¶ Soon elected an assemblywoman, she continued her headstrong ways, once wearing a bathing suit in the House to protest a dress code for legislators.

¶ Dominica declared independence from Britain in 1978 \_ despite Charles' aggressive lobbying for a people's referendum rather than a Legislative Assembly vote. Premier Patrick John resigned under pressure from labor unions in 1979. Charles was elected in 1980, becoming the world's only black female head of a country.

¶ She survived two early coup attempts and had one man hanged for treason, Dominica's first execution in 13 years.

¶ In her last days in office, she looked with disapproval on the political scene around her.

¶ "I'm afraid I don't have too much respect for the other two parties," she said, talking about the ugliness of the campaign. She grimaced in annoyance as a noisy party motorcade circled below.

¶ Charles, who never met anyone she wanted to marry, lived with her father until he died in 1983 at the age of 107. Now her companions are portraits and photos of her father, mother and grandmother; the Queen of England, George and Barbara Bush, British Prime Minister John Major.

¶ She reflected on her Iron Lady label with a soft sigh.

¶ "I think that it's not true ... But all I can say is, you can't run a country and be soft. You have to make your decisions and you have to know where you're going."

¶ Where she is going next is Alaska for a cruise, then Barbados for a computer course. She plans to study international relations at Harvard or Johns Hopkins University "to learn how I didn't do the things I should have done."