

The death of Nancy Reagan

David Walsh
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The American political and media establishment has responded in predictably fawning and dishonest fashion to the demise on March 6 of Nancy Reagan, the widow of former president Ronald Reagan, who died in 2004.

Nancy Reagan was heartily disliked by considerable sections of the American population during her eight years in the White House because of her extravagant spending on herself and her aristocratic tastes and lifestyle, which earned her the nickname “Queen Nancy.” The Reagan presidency generally is associated with social reaction and attacks on the working class, military aggression and political conspiracy.

In the interests of continuing and deepening the decades-long, bipartisan policies of social reaction and war, the American ruling elite feels obliged to perpetuate the official mythology about the former president and extend it to his wife. This is no less true for what purports to be the “left” wing of the political establishment, concentrated in the Democratic Party, than for the Republican right. While the effusive and absurd adoration of the former first lady does not come as a surprise, that does not make the spectacle of intellectual cowardice and debasement less repulsive.

Every candidate for the Democratic and Republican presidential nominations chimed in with unstinting praise for the late Mrs. Reagan. The “iconoclast” Donald Trump exclaimed on Twitter, “Nancy Reagan, the wife of a truly great president, was an amazing woman. She will be missed!” His rivals, Texas Senator Ted Cruz and Florida Senator Marco Rubio commented publicly along the same lines. Ohio Governor John Kasich asserted that the relationship between Ronald and Nancy Reagan “was one of our nation’s great love stories and a model of shared devotion to our country.” The nausea rises in one’s gorge...

Bill Clinton’s office released a statement on behalf of both Clintons paying tribute to Reagan: “Nancy was an extraordinary woman: a gracious First Lady, proud mother, and devoted wife to President Reagan—her Ronnie.” The “socialist” Bernie Sanders joined in, declaring, “No matter your party or political ideology, this is a sad day for America. Nancy Reagan was an exemplary first lady. A devoted partner, she was her husband’s most trusted adviser and, as such, served our country well... Nancy Reagan had a good heart, and she will be dearly missed.” The Obama White House expressed similar regrets.

This type of clichéd drivel was repeated in hundreds of

broadcasts and newspaper editorials. A few typical headlines: “Nancy Reagan earned the gratitude of a nation,” “Nancy Reagan set standard for first ladies,” “President Reagan’s irreplaceable partner,” “With grace and love: Nancy Reagan devoted to her husband’s goals as public figure,” etc., etc.

On his program March 6, CNN’s Wolf Blitzer gushed about what “a very sad time” and “really, really sensitive moment” it was. Blitzer could not restrain himself, referring to Mrs. Reagan as “a wonderful, loving wife,” “this loving wife, a wonderful woman,” and further noting that she had led “a wonderful life” and that she and her husband “had a wonderful, wonderful marriage.”

It would not be difficult to prove that the flattery of Nancy Reagan is absurd nonsense. From all objective accounts, and even reading between the lines of some of the more laudatory ones, one obtains a picture of an extremely limited young woman who ultimately became something quite odious as the companion, from the early 1950s onward, of the politically ambitious Ronald Reagan.

Anne Frances Robbins was born in New York City in 1921, the daughter of an itinerant actress and a car dealer, who left the family soon afterward. Nancy, as she was always known, was shipped off to an aunt at the age of two and grew up in unstable, not especially happy conditions. A bit of a female Clyde Griffiths (from Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*), the girl apparently longed for security and social status. Her mother married a conservative neurosurgeon, Loyal Davis, in 1929, and Nancy subsequently campaigned to be legally adopted by him, although her father was still alive. Thus Nancy Davis (as she eventually became) grew up in quite privileged conditions in the Chicago area during the Depression. She never saw “a poor person,” one observer notes, unless she went downtown.

After attending Smith College, Davis, using her mother’s connections in the theater and film world, made her way into acting. She made a dozen or so films in Hollywood, and also appeared in a number of television programs.

Not a terrible actress, but never a dynamic or forceful one, Davis-Reagan played an appropriately minor role in what was probably the most memorable film in which she appeared: *East Side, West Side* (1949), directed by Mervyn LeRoy, with Barbara Stanwyck, James Mason, Ava Gardner, Van Heflin, Cyd Charisse and the soon-to-be-blacklisted Gale Sondergaard (wife of Herbert J. Biberman, director of *Salt of the Earth*,

1954).

By the end of her film career in the mid-1950s, Nancy Davis was already wed to Reagan (they married in 1952). The story goes, although it is disputed by some sources, that Davis met Reagan, who was president of the Screen Actors Guild, in 1949 when she sought his assistance in having her name removed from the Hollywood blacklist. She had apparently been confused with another “Nancy Davis,” with more left-wing proclivities, and was fearful that her career would be harmed.

The union with Reagan at the height of the Cold War anticommunist witch-hunt, whatever its immediate origins, had a social significance. Reagan began political life as a New Deal Democrat. Howard Fast, the left-wing novelist, insisted to Reagan biographer Edmund Morris that the future president had applied to join the Communist Party at one point, but was turned down as too much of a “flake.”

In the postwar period, Reagan, along with many others, shifted rapidly to the right, testifying to his anticommunist beliefs before the House Un-American Activities Committee in October 1947, at the time of the birth of the infamous blacklist. In his testimony, speaking of Hollywood’s Communists, Reagan explained, “I detest, I abhor their philosophy, but I detest more than that their tactics, which are those of the fifth column [associated with internal clandestine attacks and treason].”

Reagan and his wife moved even farther to the right in the 1950s and early 1960s, associating and ingratiating themselves with an extremely wealthy and reactionary set prominent in California Republican politics. Reagan was first elected governor of the state in 1966.

Limited as the Reagans may have been as performers, there is no doubt their skills and film industry experience came in handy when faced with their particular challenge: disguising their ultra-right, antidemocratic views (Ronald Reagan allegedly indulged in racist and anti-gay humor, even jokes about AIDS, in private) and presenting, at least in his case, a folksy, populist visage to the public.

For her part, Nancy Reagan was obliged to pretend for years that she felt something other than a profound antipathy for the mass of the population, from whom she had been trying to separate herself, with considerable success, since her psychologically stressful, economically unsteady childhood. The unceasing need to dissemble helps explain the disingenuousness and artificiality of her public behavior.

In a piece for the *Saturday Evening Post* in June 1968 (“Pretty Nancy”), novelist Joan Didion referred to Mrs. Reagan as having “the smile of a good wife, a good mother, a good hostess, the smile of someone who grew up in comfort and went to Smith College...the smile of a woman who seems to be playing out some middle-class American woman’s daydream, circa 1948.” Didion suggested that Nancy Reagan’s smile was “a study in frozen insincerity.”

As the wife of the president from 1981 to 1989, Mrs. Reagan,

as noted above, made a name for herself chiefly as a spender of money. In January 1981, she and White House Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver staged, one commentator suggests, “the most extravagant inauguration since the Gilded Age.” The *New York Times* noted in August 1981 that “Mrs. Reagan arrived here last January with a \$25,000 [\$68,500 in 2016 dollars] inaugural wardrobe that included a \$10,000 dress and a \$1,650 handbag. Since then, such luxuries have become the First Lady’s signature.”

This was in the midst of a devastating recession and a historic wave of social spending cuts carried out by the administration. The *Los Angeles Times* noted in its obituary, “Reagan was widely criticized for her extravagance during the economic downturn, and she took her biggest drubbing for commissioning \$200,000 worth of china for the White House in 1981.”

Nancy Reagan was also renowned for her famous “Just say no” line, a response in 1982 to a schoolgirl’s question as to what she should do if offered drugs. In the first place, the reply callously suggested that drug abuse was purely a matter of personal responsibility and had nothing to do with the social and economic blight that had descended on the country. In that sense, Mrs. Reagan’s remark was an element of the overall effort to deprecate and demonize the poor.

Furthermore, the “war on drugs” under the Reagan administration took on quite sinister characteristics, both in terms of mass incarceration in the US (the number of arrests for drug offense rose in the 1980s by 126 percent) and the justification for American imperialist intervention in Latin America (in 1982, Vice President George H. W. Bush began pushing for CIA and US military involvement in drug interdiction efforts).

There is nothing to celebrate about this life—and yet it is being widely celebrated. We explained at the time of Ronald Reagan’s death in 2004 that the tributes being paid to him were “in essence, a celebration of the services he rendered to the rich. The overriding goal of his administration was the removal of all legal restraints on the accumulation of personal wealth.”

The genuflection of every American politician before the supposed greatness of the Reagans is an element of the political vetting process, and each figure who aspires to the highest offices knows this.



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