



Nancy Reagan: On the White House Stage (Modern First Ladies)

James G. Benze Jr.

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Many thought of her as Queen Nancy. Others as the Dragon Lady. But for millions of Americans, Nancy Reagan was the always-smiling and deeply admiring presidential spouse who stood by her man; that image lingers still in the touching picture of a bereaved widow at her husband's casket.

Nancy Reagan has stirred passionate defenders and acerbic critics in many books and the media. James Benze, however, is the first biographer to discuss the effect of her acting background on her tenure as first lady. Unlike earlier biographers, he focuses on the way she applied her acting skills to meet the demands of her greatest supporting role.

As part of a movie troupe, Nancy Davis often had the job of flattering the lead actor or helping a star create an outstanding performance. As first lady, Nancy Reagan did all of this and more, whether supplying the president with a missing line at Bitburg or steering him away from the abortion controversy. Always outspoken and a target for feminists and others, she remained the consummate supporting actor, always helping the star.

Benze portrays Nancy Reagan as a forceful presence behind the Oval Office's closed doors, unafraid to take on Donald Regan or Oliver North. He documents her clear influence on presidential appointments, links her quirky penchant for astrology to her show-business past, and traces the creation of the "Just Say No" program to her years in Sacramento, showing that it far exceeded the public-relations motivation that her detractors claimed.

Benze reveals how living on a public stage exacerbated the problems in the Reagans' relationship with their children, which went from bad to worse during the White House years. He also covers Nancy Reagan's post-Washington life, including her vigilant care of the president as he struggled with Alzheimer's disease and her subsequent advocacy of stem-cell research that put her at odds with the GOP.

While Ronald Reagan was the star performer of his presidency, his wife glided elegantly at his side as an accomplished co-star. Benze's book strikes a balance between the images of adoring helpmate and manipulative manager, showing us the woman behind the stereotypes and offering a more objective understanding of her place in the history of presidential wives.

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