

Tom Brokaw Eulogy for Nancy Davis Reagan

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This is a very emotional and evocative for me. I arrived at Los Angeles in 1966 to join NBC News, just three and a half years of South Dakota. I was 26 years old and the geniuses on the NBC News desk said to me, "There is this actor running for governor of California. I don't think he's going anywhere. You're the junior guy so you get on the bus with him." It's also worth pointing out with the current Governor here that was before the Brown family put a semi-permanent lease on the governor's office in California. And so I did and it was such an instructive beginning for me as a political correspondent because I saw the best run campaign I had ever seen up to that point and maybe since. By the time the governor got ready to run for a second term, I knew my way around a little bit so I went to Los Angeles press club where he was going to make his announcement and walked into the holding room early and took a seat in the far corner but then I realized it was kind of reserved for the Reagan supporters and family-friends because they've begun to line the walls, including Jimmy and Gloria Stewart. Nancy came in and she was kind of on autopilot as she made her way around that wall of friends and supporters giving each a kiss, a little squeeze of the hand and a word or two and it dawned on me she was going to get to me. Now I am the outlier at that point. I'm a reporter from the press and she got to me and she leaned back mock horror and I quickly said, "Oh Mrs. Reagan, whatever it is that I have it's not catching. I can promise you that." She laughed heartily, leaned over and gave me a kiss and that was the beginning of a remarkable friendship between the First Lady and a reporter.

It was also a time when I began to appreciate just how much she meant to the man who became the President of the United States, not just as his wife but as his best political adviser is Jim Baker and so many others have pointed out. She could be, as we all saw in those photographs and video of the adoring wife and public, but behind the scenes she was a politically astute analyst and the keeper of the flames. We stayed in close touch but it wasn't always easy.

Shortly after his inauguration as President, I made some public comments about his early years in which I said I thought the poor boy narrative was somewhat overblown. After all, he'd been a successful broadcaster in his twenties and then a movie star under contract before he was thirty. Nancy was furious and the word came from Jim Baker and Stu Spencer and others, "Stay clear of the White House for a while, Brokaw. We'll let you know when it's safe to go back." About two months later, Meredith and I were invited to a state dinner and I was told I would have to think what I was going to say to her when I arrive before her in the receiving line. "Don't say anything to the president. He doesn't care about this but Nancy is still steaming." Well Meredith was very nervous as we continued to make our way toward her in the receiving line because I had not yet come up with anything to say to her. Finally I stood before her and I saw in her eyes that steely glaze that she could have for people who didn't please her. And I spontaneously said, "Nancy, back to square one." She looked at me for moment, broke up laughing and said, "Tom, back to square one." The next day a White House photograph of that very moment arrived with inscription, "Tom, back to square one. Love, Nancy"

That was such a telling moment about how astute she was as a political wife, as someone who knew about personal relationships, how to get her message across and then quickly move on. We also saw those other moments when she was utterly in command. Jim has referred to that awful day when the president was shot. They didn't know what his condition was when the secret service told her in the White House there's been a shooting, the president has been rushed to the hospital and she said, "I must go." They said, "well we don't think that's a good idea Mrs. Reagan and she said quickly to them, "You get me a car right now or I will walk to the hospital."

The president and I shared a birthday, February 6, and over the years in the White House and out it became an occasion to share phone calls and notes, especially between Mrs. Reagan and me. When the president was going through his ordeal after leaving the White House, our calls became more regular and I could hear her loneliness. And so on one of the calls, I suggested that the next time I'm in California we should have lunch and maybe we should invite our

mutual friend, Warren Beatty. "Oh no, Tom." she said, "it's enough to have lunch with you." Until the next day when the phone call arrived and it was Nancy saying, "Oh, Tom do you think Warren might like to have lunch with us?" "Of course" And the luncheon companion star power went up many multiples. What I am here to tell you is, there's nothing like walking into a Los Angeles dining room with Mrs. Reagan on your arm. Brokaw and Beatty were quickly also rans on that occasion. Warren and I treasured those lunches because she always arrived with astute political observations and the best gossip from both coasts. But metaphorically, there was no lunch for me.

As a eulogist at President Ford's funeral, I looked down at the first pew at all the luminaries and decided it was my duty to name them. "President and Mrs. Bush. President and Mrs. Bush. President Carter and Vice President Dick Cheney. President and Mrs. Clinton." I finished my remarks, walked back to sit beside Meredith and she looked at me in a disbelieving way and said, "You did not mention Nancy."

I said, "She's not here."

She said, "Yes she is. She's hidden behind that column over there."

I had not seen her so I immediately called our mutual friend, Stu Spencer who answered simply by saying, "What were you thinking, Brokaw?"

"Stu, do you think she noticed?"

"Are you kidding?! Here's her mobile number. Call her right now."

And I did and I took my medicine from an aggrieved friend for the next full 15 minutes until she accepted my explanation and then it was, "Back to square one, again" and the way I got out of it, is that I agreed with her that she had been given a terrible seat for that funeral. What I was so, what I so admired about Nancy was that ability to do just that. She knew how to protect her husband and her president but also her own place. To stand her ground and when it had been resolved, to move on. That was never more evident on many occasions when I spoke here at the library. We meet in a holding room downstairs to catch up on the latest gossip and what was going on our personal lives. And then after everyone had been seated, especially after she

was confined to a wheelchair, I'd help get her to her feet and with one of her aides we would take her to an entryway that had been curtain off and beyond the entryway, we could hear the music began to swell and an offstage announcer intoning, "Ladies and gentlemen, the former First Lady of the United States, Nancy Reagan and her guest, Tom Brokaw." I'd escort her into the auditorium into the front row and seat her beside Tom Selleck, her friend and then give my lecture. The last time we were there together I received a modestly enthusiastic response from the audience but I wanted to be sure that Nancy approved so I leaned over her seat as the applause continued and I said, "I hope that was ok." She whispered back to me, "Tom, give me a little kiss. They're going to love that." And so I did. And so they did. Our shared editor, Kate Medina of Random House, reminded me that when we lost Nancy last weekend it would have been the 68th anniversary of their marriage, Ronnie and Nancy. So God bless Nancy, Mrs. Ronald Reagan, First Lady, and the unlikely friend of a reporter. Thank you, Nancy.