

March 6, 2016

NANCY REAGAN – A REMEMBRANCE

By

Ken Khachigian

As Ronald Reagan headed toward his landslide win over Jimmy Carter, every liftoff aboard our campaign aircraft, LeaderShip '80, began with Nancy Reagan ceremonially rolling an orange down the aisle toward the press section. As the Boeing jet rumbled down the runway, she steadied herself against the staff table where we sat, and each time I could not help but think how tiny she was.

But her frame was the only thing small about Mrs. Reagan. For the next eight years, I learned how large her presence was. And through all those years, through all the criticism she endured, she had only one interest in mind, and that was for her husband to be the greatest and most successful US president in our history. It still seems odd to me that so many in those years found it difficult to accept that in the Reagan partnership, her devotion was single-minded – that she had a constituency of one.

I learned very early to pay attention to her opinions, because each time she expressed them, it turned out they were usually the president's. President Reagan often could not bring himself to be critical of his staff or question the collective opinion of "the fellas." So, he would frequently express his doubts or concerns to Mrs. Reagan. It soon became clear to me that "Mommy," as he called her, was the president's interpreter and message-carrier. There was many a speech that had her imprint by way of channeling the president's thinking.

In August of 1986, I sat down for lunch with the president and Mrs. Reagan to discuss their collaboration in a national speech against drug abuse, and to promote her "Just Say No" campaign. It was one of those occasions where I regret there was no secret recording to verify the tremendous emotional impact the drug abuse epidemic had on the first lady. I couldn't write notes fast enough as a soulful pain poured forth from her about the 9-year old girl she met whose life was twisted with drug use in her home. Or the passion that spilled out when she grabbed my shoulder to emphasize that she wanted to tell young people

“there’s a great big wonderful world out there for you ...exciting, stimulating and rewarding. Your country needs you to be clear-eyed and clear-minded.”

Then, for the last 10 years of the president’s life, hers was turned upside down. In 1996, I accompanied the GOP presidential nominee, Bob Dole, for a courtesy call on President Reagan and Mrs. Reagan. Unlike previous occasions, only Mrs. Reagan joined this conversation while the president sat quietly apart. As I listened, my memory turned back to the summer of 1984 at Camp David when we were filming the now iconic campaign documentary titled “Morning Again in America.” I sat across from him as his interlocutor, discussing issues and events of his presidency. The subject turned to Mrs. Reagan, and as he completed the portrait of her role in their marriage, he paused, rested his chin against his hand, looked away and said softly: “I can’t imagine life without her.”

That terrible disease had left Ronald Reagan empty of so many things in the remaining years of his life, but to the end he had Nancy. She became his caretaker and fiercest protector as the disease sapped his memory. After he died in 2004, she not only kept his legacy alive, but entered a new chapter in her own life, raising funds and advocating for Alzheimer’s patients with breakthrough research. It was another way of carrying on the lifetime partnership she had forged with her husband – still a First Lady by any definition.

Ken Khachigian served as special consultant to the president and chief speechwriter. He is senior partner at Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck in California.