

# Nancy Reagan

THE UNAUTHORIZED  
BIOGRAPHY

# Kitty Kelley



# NANCY REAGAN

## *The Unauthorized Biography*

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • TOKYO • SINGAPORE



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# Acknowledgments

I was once convinced that *His Way: The Unauthorized Biography of Frank Sinatra* (Bantam Books, 1986) was the hardest book I would ever write. Some people were so terrified by the subject that they refused to talk to me for fear of physical reprisals. But that fright paled alongside the terror sparked by Nancy Reagan. This, at first, made no sense. Unlike Frank Sinatra, the former First Lady was not connected to organized crime; nor was she known to fly into violent rages. So I could not understand why people were so afraid of her. Yet anxiety was palpable on the part of many who were more than reticent to talk about her.

"She will ruin me," said a former employee. "She will have me audited," said a former neighbor. "She will get my husband fired," said a former White House secretary.

It seemed preposterous that such power, real or imagined, could be exercised by the wife of the President of the United States, which Nancy Reagan was when I started researching this book. So I dismissed people's fears as unfounded and shrugged off their warnings of intimidation—until July 20, 1988.

On that day I received a strange phone call from Mr. Frank Underwood of the FBI in Washington, D.C. He asked whether I was writing a book on Mrs. Reagan and whether the files requested under the Freedom of Information Act on the late Edith Davis, her mother, were for this book. I was stunned by the call because the FOIA requests had

been submitted by my research assistant under her name. I said that the information was being gathered for this biography, and then asked the reason for such a telephone inquiry, which was highly unusual. "We just want to know if the information is for *your* book," he said. He refused to elaborate. Was he acting on his own initiative or at the behest of his superiors, who may or may not have been reporting to the First Lady? I don't know because he refused to say. After five more letters and two administrative appeals, my assistant's request for information on Mrs. Davis and her undercover police activities was denied. After that, I began paying more attention to the pervasive influence of Nancy Reagan.

Some people's fear of the former First Lady was real and understandable; the fear of others was just plain silly, as in the case of the chief White House usher, Gary Walters. He was called with two simple questions:

(1) What type of lilies did the First Lady use in the White House family quarters?

(2) What kind of white orchid did Mrs. Reagan leave for Mrs. Bush before departing the White House in 1989?

"That information is privileged and private," said Walters. "I am not at liberty to release that information to you."

Thinking the questions harmless, I ventured that the White House belonged to everyone, even those writing biographies. Since our taxes bought the flowers used by the First Family, I didn't feel out of line asking about them. Besides, writers believe—as the architect Mies van der Rohe used to say—that God is in the details, as seemingly insignificant as they may be, but the White House usher was not persuaded.

"This is classified information," he said, "and you have absolutely no right to it."

I wrote to Mrs. Reagan seven times while researching this book, explaining that I was trying to do an in-depth biography that I hoped would stand the test of history. In each letter I requested an interview and even offered to submit questions in advance. I never received a response until last year when the director of planning for the Nancy Reagan Foundation answered my seventh letter by saying: "Mrs. Reagan is unable to comply with your request at this time and we do not foresee a time in the future when an interview could be arranged."

Having been bruised in print myself, I know how it feels to be depicted unfairly and inaccurately, and I would never want to inflict that kind of pain on someone else. To be fair, accurate, and thorough, my research assistants and I tried to interview as many people as possible who had known and worked with Nancy Reagan throughout her life. We contacted friends, acquaintances, relatives, schoolmates, co-stars, neighbors, employees, and political aides of Ronald Reagan in Califor-

nia and Washington, D.C. Some of those who appreciated that history is best served by truthful recollection spoke openly and on the record; others spoke only on condition that their names not be used. In the end, the number of tape-recorded interviews reached 1,002, most of which are documented in the chapter notes at the end of the book.

I drew from presidential documents, FBI files, financial disclosures, IRS returns, letters, diaries, memoirs, oral histories, film archives, personal recollections, calendars, and correspondence. I tried to go beyond "the clothes and buttons of a person," which is how Mark Twain defined biography, to answer that everlasting question: "What's she really like?" Throughout the writing, I followed the creed of the preacher in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* who left the cloth: "There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain't nice, but that's as far as any man got a right to say."

A few years ago Stuart Applebaum, vice president of publicity and public relations for Bantam Doubleday Dell, showed me the value of a publishing *mishpocah* (Yiddish for family), and throughout this project I've been blessed with the best. My gifted researcher, Melissa D. Smalling, coordinated the massive files for this book, and for four years she has worked indefatigably, bringing superior intelligence and immense good cheer to all her tasks. Without this extraordinary young woman, I would have no book. I also received expert assistance from Pamela Warrick on the West Coast and Aura Lippincott, Elena Gleckas, Sam Dixon, and Lisa Melmed in Washington. In New York City, Henri Astier researched old city directories and telephone books while Mervin Block did the research work of ten men. In London I was helped by Angela Murphy; Nicholas Gordon of *YOU* magazine; by my British literary agent, Deborah Rogers of Rogers, Coleridge & White, Ltd.; and my British publisher, Mark Barty-King, managing director of Bantam Press.

Within my literary agency, International Creative Management, I'm most grateful to Wayne Kabak, Sam Cohn, Esther Newberg, Suzanne Gluck, Heather Schroder, and Adele Fisher. At Simon & Schuster I've been buoyed by the support of C.E.O. Richard Snyder, the phenomenal editorial talent of Alice Mayhew, and the marketing genius of Charlie Hayward, Jack McKeown, and Judy Lee; plus Victoria Meyer in publicity; Marcella Berger in subsidiary rights; Eve Metz and Rick Willett in production; Frank Metz, head of the art department; Marcia Peterson, Sophie Sorkin, and Sarajane Herman in copy editing; Marie Florio in serial rights; Washington editor Marie Arana-Ward; George Hodgman, Adelle Stan, and Vincent Virga, who compiled the photographs for the book. Irwyn Applebaum, president and publisher of



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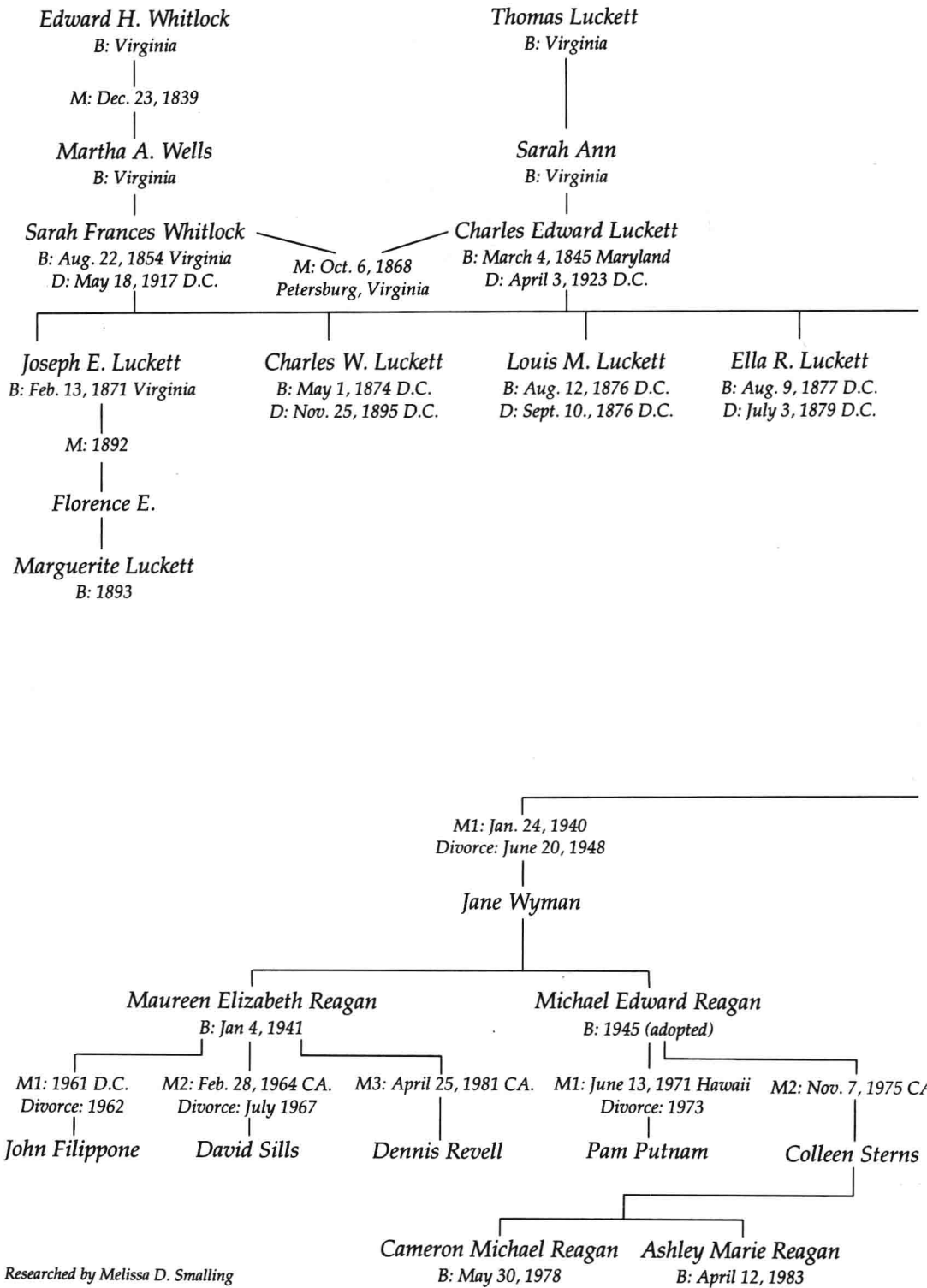
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FOR MERVIN BLOCK AND WAYNE KABAK AND MARVIN MCINTYRE—  
THE THREE MEN MOST IMPORTANT TO THE LIFE OF THIS BOOK  
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Nancy Davis Reagan Family Tree



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