

BILL O'REILLY

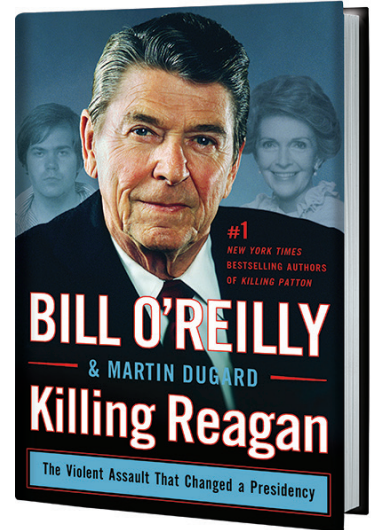
& MARTIN DUGARD

Killing Reagan

The Violent Assault That Changed a Presidency

A HENRY HOLT READING GROUP GUIDE

1. The authors depict Ronald and Nancy Reagan as a power couple. How do you think they compare with two other power couples in the White House: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and Bill and Hillary Clinton? In what ways was Nancy Reagan's public persona the same as the other First Ladies, and how was it different? What do you think of the First Lady wielding public power, even though she is not an elected official?
2. Nancy Reagan had a public image as a "controlling ice queen." She was responsible for getting people fired, such as the president's chief of staff Donald Regan and Secretary of Health and Human Services Margaret Heckler. She consistently claimed that her actions were done for the benefit of her husband. Was that your impression after reading this book? Do you think the popular comparison of her to Lady Macbeth—a wife pushing her husband's ambitions—is a fair one?
3. Ronald Reagan changed his political affiliations over his life: first a Democrat, he then wanted to join the Communist Party before becoming a conservative Republican. Were there consistent principles in each of his political preferences? Do you think he changed his ideas over the course of his life? Were you surprised to hear that he once flirted with communism?
4. Ronald Reagan was famous as president for his charm and his ability to communicate, yet he failed to become a first-rank Hollywood star. What element of "star quality" do you think he lacked as an actor? Do you think his failed movie career was a matter of bad luck?
5. John Hinckley Jr. was the last baby born in Hardy Sanitarium, a mental hospital. Was this the first sign that he was disturbed? He later became a severely withdrawn, isolated teenager. His parents misinterpreted his behavior to mean that he was safe from drinking, drug use, and sexually promiscuous behavior. What signs did they miss? Discuss the difficulties of correctly understanding what is going on with an adolescent.
6. When John Hinckley Jr. began his obsessional pursuit of Jodie Foster, the first anti-stalking laws were a decade from being enacted. Do you think that had such laws been on the books, the danger of Hinckley would have been recognized earlier?
7. Coauthors Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard document that Ronald Reagan had a long history of duplicity. He acted as an informer for the FBI in Hollywood. He pretended to be a loyal Democrat to secretly aid Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential election. He lied to the press about firing two aides when he was governor of California. He received a stolen copy of Jimmy Carter's notes before their presidential debate. Were you surprised at these revelations? Do you think these acts led to Reagan's deliberate violation of the law in the Iran-Contra affair?



978-1-6277-9241-7

8. The authors write that Nancy Davis wanted to marry Ronald Reagan out of a desire for fame, and was so intent to do so that she falsely claimed to be pregnant to get him to the altar. Why do you think Nancy was so focused on marrying Reagan? Do you have an opinion about her deception?
9. The description of the Reagans' wedding sounds anything but romantic: just the couple, the presiding clergyman, and the best man, William Holden, and his wife. There was no reception. Yet over the years, their union became a deeply devoted one. What caused the change?
10. The authors say that the marriage of Ronald and Nancy Reagan "changed the world." Do you agree? If so, in what way did it do so? If not, why do you disagree?
11. Nancy Reagan's life was ruled by her astrologers, even for political issues and matters of state. This can be considered a private idiosyncrasy, but should it be indulged at the presidential level? Discuss how politicians separate private belief from public duty.
12. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher shared an immediate affinity—he called her his "soul mate"—when they met, before either was the leader of their country. What do you think was the basis for this deep attraction? Do you see similarities in their political views and in their characters?
13. Both Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher suffered from failing mental powers in later life. Each was known for having inflexible opinions. Do you think a rigid personality makes you susceptible to failing mental acuity in old age?
14. John Hinckley Jr. was arrested in Nashville when airline security discovered firearms in his luggage. However, state law allowed him to carry guns with a permit, and the FBI failed to note the presence of a gunman near where the president was speaking. Later, Ronald Reagan's press secretary, James Brady, was impaired for life when Hinckley shot at Reagan. Neither incident caused Reagan, whom the authors call a "gun lover," to relax his uncompromising opposition to gun control. Why do you think so? Do you agree?
15. Dr. John Hopper was a psychiatrist who treated John Hinckley Jr. over five months and completely failed to recognize the symptoms of schizophrenia. Dr. Hopper thought Hinckley was not unusual but was being coddled by his parents. Later, Hinckley's gunshot victims sued Dr. Hopper, claiming he should have hospitalized Hinckley. Those lawsuits were dismissed. Do you think this was fair? What should be the guidelines in such cases?
16. John Hinckley Jr.'s parents were distraught by the increasing danger signs about their son's behavior and tried to get him help. They followed a psychiatrist's advice to cut the young man off if he did not achieve independence. This decision had tragic consequences. Do you agree with what they did? Discuss the difficulties in dealing with a troubled adolescent.
17. When President Reagan's faculties began to fail, his wife, Nancy, took over many presidential duties and, in effect, ran the administration. The same thing happened during the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, when he suffered a stroke and his wife, Edith, acted in his name. In neither case was the public informed. Compare Nancy Reagan with Edith Wilson. Should the public be informed about a president's disabilities? Why or why not?
18. Following Mary Jo Kopechne's death when Edward Kennedy's car crashed into a canal, the authors write, "Every effort was made to keep Ted Kennedy's name out of the media." The incident was not reported for nearly twenty-four hours. Can you imagine that happening now? Is there an advantage to the perpetual news cycle of today? Why or why not?
19. President Reagan opposed Prime Minister Thatcher's aggression against Argentina over the Falkland Islands. The authors write that Reagan considered the islands "a vestige of Britain's colonial past." The Monroe Doctrine explicitly forbids European colonialism in the Americas, yet Reagan did not invoke it during the Falklands War. Why do you think he did not? Should he have?

20. The authors write that Britain went to war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands to “salvage national pride.” This rationalization was frequently given to justify the continued American presence in the war in Vietnam. Do you think such reasoning is a valid pretext for war? If so, under what circumstances? If not, why not?
21. The United States invaded the former British colony of Grenada without informing Prime Minister Thatcher; in fact, they knowingly deceived the British government. Why do you think President Reagan did this to his close ally? Do you think this was some sort of payback for British defiance of American wishes in the Falkland Islands war?
22. While President Reagan was undergoing surgery following being shot, Secretary of State Alexander Haig took power, declaring, “I am in control here at the White House.” The action was blatantly unconstitutional, yet there was no protest from other members of the cabinet. Why do you think that was so? Should Haig have suffered repercussions, such as being forced to resign?
23. John Hinckley Jr. was acquitted of attempting to assassinate President Reagan by reason of insanity. Are you shocked that an attempted presidential assassin was let off? Do you think the verdict was in reaction to Reagan’s unpopularity at the time?
24. The authors describe a cabinet meeting in 1987 in which four administration officials secretly observed President Reagan to determine if he was so impaired that the Twenty-Fifth Amendment should be invoked to remove him from office. The observers decided against it. Discuss the difficulties in invoking this amendment and in demonstrating that a president no longer can function properly.
25. President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher have been praised for ending Soviet communism, yet the breakthrough came after Mikhail Gorbachev assumed power and instituted his policies of “glasnost” (openness) and “perestroika” (restructuring). What part did Gorbachev play in the fall of communism?
26. Ronald Reagan is not the first entertainer to succeed in politics, though he obviously reached higher office than anyone else. What part did Reagan’s celebrity outside of politics play in his success? Since his presidency, other celebrities have been elected to office, such as Jesse Ventura and Donald Trump. Do you think Reagan was a trailblazer in this regard?