

BARBARA & NANCY: THE FROST THAT NEVER THAWED

Excerpted from The Matriarch: Barbara Bush and the Making of an American Dynasty

By Susan Page

[July 17, 1980]

Nancy Reagan was nowhere to be seen.

It was the morning after Ronald Reagan's surprise announcement to the Republican National Convention that he was choosing George Bush as his running mate. In Detroit, the Bushes took the half-mile drive down East Jefferson Avenue from the Pontchartrain Hotel, where they were staying, to have breakfast with the Reagans at their hotel at the Renaissance Center. In the Reagans' suite on the sixty-ninth floor, with its panoramic view of the Detroit River, the governor and his top aides waited in the living room to greet them.

The awkward moment was eased a bit by Barbara Bush's directness. "Governor, let me promise you one thing: We're going to work our tails off for you," she told him as they walked in.

Ronald Reagan wasn't enthusiastic about choosing Bush, but it became the necessary political move. That said, he would be won over by the deference and loyalty his vice president and his wife would show. But Nancy Reagan was another matter entirely.

That Thursday morning in the Detroit Plaza Hotel suite, she lingered in the bedroom before making an entrance into the living room, a frosty beginning to a relationship that would never thaw. She eventually would reach a sort of accommodation with George Bush, although she could never be counted as a reliable ally. But Nancy Reagan's antipathy for Barbara Bush, hidden from public view, created grievances behind the scenes that would persist for the rest of their lives.

Decades later, some of Barbara Bush's heat toward Nancy Reagan had cooled, but she hadn't forgotten their friction. "She really hated us," she mused in an interview with me. "I don't know why, but she really hated us."

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They were so alike, and so different.

Indeed, the two women were distantly related, although there are no signs that either of them ever realized it. Their common ancestors were Edward and Margaret Marvin, a sixteenth-century couple from Essex, England. The Marvins' son Matthew, Nancy's direct ancestor through her biological father, immigrated to America in 1635 or 1636. His brother Reinhold, Barbara's direct ancestor through her father, followed about a year later. That made the two women tenth cousins.

Even without that obscure connection, Nancy Davis and Barbara Pierce could have been sisters. Both were born in hospitals in Manhattan, and almost exactly four years apart, in 1921 and 1925. (As an adult, Nancy routinely shaved two years off her age, making the two seem even closer.) Both would ruefully remember themselves as chubby little girls. Both were no better than middling students at private all-girl high schools—Nancy at the Chicago Latin School for Girls, Barbara at Ashley Hall in South Carolina. Both attended Smith College, one of the elite Seven Sisters schools in New England, though their paths never crossed on campus. Nancy graduated from Smith in the spring of 1943; Barbara arrived at the Massachusetts school that fall.

Both married men they adored—Barbara at age nineteen, dropping out of college when she did; Nancy at age thirty, after pursuing an acting career in Hollywood. And both served as unswerving defenders of and true believers in their husbands. During the long political journeys that took Reagan and Bush to the White House, Nancy and Barbara each emerged as a trusted sounding board, an influential adviser, and, at times, a feared enforcer.

And both stood on the same side of a generational divide and the limitations of its expectations for women—that a political wife should never appear to be too powerful, too pushy. That traditional definition didn't really fit either of them, though both avoided openly defying it.

Somehow, too, each managed to feel superior to, and also threatened by, the other.

Nancy Reagan's personal insecurities were legendary and understandable after a childhood that did little to foster a sense of stability. Her parents had separated by the time she was two. They divorced a few years later, at a time when divorce was rare, because her father wanted to remarry. Her colorful and ambitious mother, Edith Lockett, parked the toddler with an aunt and uncle in the Washington suburb of Bethesda, Maryland, while she tried to break into the theater world. When Nancy was seven—her legal name then was Anne Frances Robbins—her mother married a wealthy Chicago neurosurgeon, Loyal Davis. When his stepdaughter was in high school, the austere Dr. Davis agreed to adopt her, and she legally changed her name to Nancy Davis.

While Barbara Pierce's childhood had challenges of its own, she had clear advantages that Nancy Davis didn't. Barbara was raised in a stable family, anchored in an affluent New York City suburb, surrounded by siblings and particularly close to her father. There was never any question about what her name would be. She was part of a New England aristocracy that dated its direct ancestry to the Mayflower and had no doubts about its rank in society and in the world, even when the bank accounts were stretched thin. She was comfortable in her skin and certain of her place.

Nancy was disdainful of Barbara for her sturdy figure, her matronly clothes, and her blunt manner. To Nancy's amazement, Barbara didn't bother to dye her white hair, wear much makeup beyond a slash of lipstick, or worry about the wrinkles that lined her face. But Nancy also was envious of Barbara's self-confidence, her social standing, and her close-knit family,

attributes that hit Nancy at some of her greatest vulnerabilities. "I think she just was insecure," Barbara Bush told me.

Barbara was disdainful of Nancy as brittle and shallow, and as a mother who had failed to forge a close or even functional relationship with her children. In Barbara's book, that came close to being an original sin. But she also admired Nancy's slender figure, the grace with which she wore stylish fashions, and the open devotion she commanded from an adoring husband. While George loved nothing more than being surrounded by as many people as possible, Ronnie favored evenings at home alone with Nancy. Barbara would have liked to share more of those with George, and for him to want to have them.

And there was the legacy of Barbara's mother, who put such a premium on appearance and style, on beautiful things and social status. In her priorities and pleasures, Nancy may have had more in common with Pauline Pierce than Barbara did. Was Nancy, like Barbara's sister, Martha, the sort of daughter that her mother would have preferred to have?

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[January 20, 1981]

Victory [in the 1980 election] did nothing to ease the tensions between Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush.

Almost immediately, there was the crisis of the coats. At her husband's urging, Barbara Bush had gone to New York to splurge on designer clothes for the inaugural events ahead. "George told me to go to New York and buy," she told me, "because he kept reading how frumpy I was. It didn't do much good, but he said, 'Just go to New York.'" She bought clothes from designers Bill Blass, Adele Simpson, and Diane Dickinson, choosing a purple dress and red coat for the inauguration.

Until, that is, Nancy sent a message. "The word came that just said, 'I'm going to wear red,' and I thought, Oh, my gosh," Barbara Bush told me. She understood that it was an order for her to wear a coat of some other color, regardless of what she had planned. "I wasn't stupid," she said.

She wore a new blue coat instead, saving the red coat for occasions Nancy Reagan wouldn't be attending. Indeed, she so carefully avoided "Nancy Reagan red" at joint appearances from then on that a bright "Barbara Bush blue" became her signature color. After she became First Lady herself, Barbara Bush began to wear red more often again, her wardrobe choices no longer hostage to Nancy Reagan's edicts.

George and Barbara Bush found themselves frustrated and flummoxed about why relations with Nancy Reagan continued to be so problematic, especially since their interactions with President Reagan were cordial. Everything Barbara Bush did seemed to annoy Nancy Reagan. Not even Reagan's White House chief of staff Jim Baker, one of George Bush's closest friends from

Houston and his former campaign chairman, could smooth things over. Baker repeatedly found himself caught in the middle. "It put me in one hell of a tough spot," he told me.

In another early sign of what was ahead, Nancy Reagan relayed a blunt message to the Bushes through mutual friends. William Wilson, a Los Angeles businessman and member of Reagan's kitchen cabinet, was on the board of Pennzoil; Hugh Liedtke, a Texas oilman and former business partner of George Bush, was the company's chairman. Wilson sent Liedtke a letter written in a crude but clear code that said "the top lady"—that would be Nancy—wanted him to tell his friends that they should keep a lower profile in the press. Nancy referred to the Bushes disparagingly as "the Shrubs." Barbara never saw the letter, but Hugh's wife, Betty, one of her closest friends from their Midland days, did. "That wasn't very nice," Barbara Bush told me.

Again and again, Barbara Bush said, she lowered her profile and took pains to defer to Nancy. Faced with what she saw as exasperating demands and disparagement, Barbara Bush would limit her venting mostly to her husband and her diary. "I tried very, very hard, truthfully," she told me.

At one point, Lee and Walter Annenberg, who were friends of the Bushes and the Reagans, tried to figure out why Nancy had such a visceral dislike of Barbara. A mutual friend relayed their thoughts to the vice president. "Nancy does not like Barbara," Bush then dictated to his diary. "She feels that Barbara has the very things that she, Nancy, doesn't have, and that she'll never be in Barbara's class...Bar has sensed it for a long time. Barbara is so generous, so kind, so unselfish, and frankly I think Nancy Reagan is jealous of her."

"I think it was a class thing," said conservative writer George Will, who regularly met with President Reagan at the White House and had lunch with Nancy Reagan at the Jockey Club. He was not a fan of Bush, as he made clear in his syndicated column, once memorably referring to the vice president as a "lap dog." (Insiders suspected he was channeling Nancy's view with that.) Nancy felt Barbara looked down on her, he said, that she viewed Nancy as not in her league.

The Bushes insisted they were noncombatants in a war Nancy Reagan was waging against them. Still, Nancy Reagan had reason to suspect that she was the occasional target of Barbara Bush's sharp tongue.

Lou Cannon, a White House correspondent for the Washington Post and the reporter with the deepest sources in the Reagan White House, was covering a vice presidential trip to New Hampshire in 1986. Barbara Bush, who could be a gifted mimic, came to the back of the small plane to chat with the handful of reporters aboard, as she sometimes did. "She did some imitations of Nancy that were funny but they were also cutting," Cannon recalled. "It was like watching a person saying things they shouldn't say."

None of the reporters wrote about it, but few episodes that tantalizing were likely to stay secret for long. A few weeks later, Nancy Reagan asked Cannon, "Were you on that plane, Lou?"

“I said I was, but I refused to get into that thing with the wives, and she knew that,” Cannon told me. “She didn’t press me. She knew damn well what happened on that plane.”

When Kitty Kelley’s tell-all biography of Nancy Reagan was published in 1991, gossip columns reported that Barbara Bush, then First Lady, was reading it with apparent relish, albeit with the cover masked by a jacket borrowed from some less provocative book. When Kelley’s tell-all book about the Bushes was published in 2004, it reported that Nancy Reagan had delighted in dishing the details of George Bush’s alleged marital infidelities.

For Nancy Reagan, there were other sources of resentment. “A lot of Reagan people think that George Bush wouldn’t have become president without Ronald Reagan, and that wasn’t ever quite appropriately credited,” said Mark Weinberg, a White House press aide who regularly accompanied the Reagans to Camp David on weekends and became close to them. Nancy Reagan smoldered when she heard Bush in his acceptance speech at the 1988 Republican National Convention promise a “kinder and gentler” America. “Kinder and gentler than whom?” she asked pointedly.

And there was this: Barbara had been collecting friends and allies in Washington from the time her husband was a member of Congress to his days as Republican chairman. She had the comfort and support of an expansive and trusted network. But Nancy’s small circle of confidants was centered in California. She often felt lonely and embattled in the White House, especially when she was criticized in news stories about commissioning new White House china or borrowing designer dresses or inserting herself into controversies over her husband’s schedule or staffers. The same characteristics that had burnished her status in Los Angeles—her exquisite clothes, her taste for the finer things, her celebrity friends—became a source of derision in Washington.

From Nancy’s point of view, that may have been the most exasperating thing of all. No matter what she did, she always seemed to get negative stories while Barbara Bush always seemed to get positive ones. That was “one big difference,” Sheila Tate [Nancy Reagan’s press secretary in the White House] said. “Barbara was so good with the press. Nancy was very wary of the press.”

Both women wielded influence with their husbands behind the scenes, for instance, but those close to Nancy complained that she was more likely to be portrayed as meddling and shrewish.

“Barbara Bush was just as devoted to her husband, just as calculating and loyal,” George Will said, “but she never got the reputation that Nancy had to live with, that Nancy was, (a) a cold and calculating operator, but also (b) a kind of parvenu with the clothes and the china and all the rest, whereas no one, probably for class reasons, suspected that of Barbara Bush.”

Nancy Reagan never disparaged Barbara Bush in front of the East Wing staff, Tate said. But Nancy Reagan did unload to friends—perhaps not realizing that Barbara Bush’s formidable

network often was relaying what Nancy was saying back to her. "Friend after friend would report that at small dinner parties in NYC she would say, 'I don't know why the press lets Barbara Bush get away with designer clothes,'" Barbara wrote in her diary, adding, "I wonder if it ever occurred to her that George Bush paid for my clothes."

Barbara Bush described efforts to avoid inciting Nancy Reagan's ire that verged on the comic.

In September 1983, George and Barbara Bush were attending a reception at the White House for the presidents of historically black colleges. "I had gotten the word that of course, Mrs. Bush, you are welcome to go, but Mrs. Reagan won't be there," she wrote in her diary. "I said fine, feeling a little uncomfortable about it."

When they arrived at the reception, a White House aide told her she wouldn't be onstage. "I said, that's perfectly all right, I'll just stand in the back," she replied. That didn't sit well with the vice president's domestic policy adviser, Steven Rhodes, apparently unaware of the risks of allowing a White House spotlight to fall on the Second Lady. He came up to her and announced he had arranged for her to stand onstage. She refused. "I said don't be ridiculous, if Mrs. Reagan is not there, of course I am not going to stand on the stage...We have not pushed ourselves up on the stage and I certainly don't want to start it now." She told Rhodes: "You butt out of this."

"Then they said Mrs. Reagan was coming, so once again I was up on the stage," she said. When the Reagans arrived, she recalled, the two women kissed.

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[November 9, 1985]

Nancy Reagan seemed determined to include the Bushes at White House social events only when she had no other choice.

Protocol required that the vice president and his spouse be included at state dinners, so they were. But during their eight years of residency at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, the Reagans invited the Bushes upstairs to the private family quarters of the White House only a time or two before Bush had been elected to the presidency himself. They never invited the Bushes to accompany them to Camp David. And the Bushes didn't receive one of the most sought-after invitations of Reagan's presidency, to a glittering White House dinner in honor of the Prince and Princess of Wales on November 9, 1985.

Documents in the Reagan Library archives track Nancy Reagan's apparent determination to make sure they were excluded.

The first draft of the invitation list, dated October 2, 1985, shows the names of Vice President and Mrs. Bush on the second line, just below the Reagans themselves. But the Bushes' names

have been crossed out with the slash of a black pen. Also scratched out on the paper were plans for the Bushes to greet guests in the Red Room while President and Mrs. Reagan welcomed Prince Charles and Princess Diana at the North Portico.

There was no indication who made the changes, but the universe of those empowered to do so wouldn't extend much past the president and the First Lady.

On a second draft of the plans for the dinner, dated one day later, on October 3, the Bushes' names don't appear on the guest list. But below the approved names is a section labeled "Suggested additions"; Vice President and Mrs. Bush are at the top of that category. Some of the others listed below them have been marked by hand to add to the guest list; the Bushes aren't.

On a third draft of dinner plans, dated October 7, the Bushes again appear at the top of the list of "Suggested additions." Once again, their names were slashed out by pen. When deputy White House chief of staff Michael Deaver cautioned Nancy Reagan against excluding the vice president and his wife from the dinner, saying it would be a breach of protocol, she reportedly responded, "Just watch me."

That night, Princess Di arrived resplendent in a midnight-blue velvet dress and pearl choker; Nancy greeted her in the beaded white Galanos gown she had worn at the inaugural balls earlier in the year. Legendary soprano Leontyne Price sang in the East Room after dinner. On the dance floor, actor John Travolta twirled Princess Di. Nancy's interior designer, Ted Graber, and her pal Betsy Bloomingdale were invited, along with an astronaut, a ballerina, an artist, an architect, the commissioner of baseball, and her stepdaughter Maureen—but not the vice president and his wife.

A year later, there was a similar drama behind the scenes over whether the Bushes would receive another prime invitation, to President Reagan's seventy-fifth birthday party.

Lee Verstandig, who had a short and troubled stint as Nancy Reagan's chief of staff, described his almost farcical efforts to include the Bushes in the president's birthday party in 1986. The invitation list he presented to Nancy Reagan for review included them, but when Verstandig showed it to her, the first lady picked up a pen and with a dramatic flair crossed out their names. He took credit for slipping the Bushes back onto the guest list, on the grounds that it was the appropriate thing to do, although it's not clear whether his boss realized he had done that.

Coincidentally or not, Verstandig announced his resignation from the first lady's staff on the day of the birthday party, February 7, 1986. He had been on the job just twenty-four days.

George Bush kept struggling to understand, and to defuse, the acrimony.

He hired Sheila Tate, who was close to Nancy, as his press secretary for the 1988 campaign. "By the way, my wife is 100 percent supportive of this," he told Tate when he offered her the job.

She took the peculiar comment as a reference to reports of tension between Barbara and Nancy, although she said she hadn't been aware of any problems while she was in the White House. When Air Force Two landed at the first stop of the first campaign trip Tate took with Bush, the vice president signaled her to join him in his car. "Come ride in my limo with me," he said. Then he immediately asked: "Why was Nancy so mean to my wife?"

In November 2017, I asked Bush if he ever figured out a satisfactory answer to that question. "Why was Nancy Reagan so mean to Barbara?" I asked when we met in his office in Houston. The former president, battling vascular parkinsonism, could understand and respond to questions, although speaking more than a few words at a time was difficult.

"I don't know," he said finally. "I don't know."

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[January 21, 1993]

Now they [George and Barbara Bush] were back home in Houston, following an eviction from the White House courtesy of Bill Clinton and the American voter. They woke up that morning [after President Clinton's inauguration] to an infuriating story in the newspaper, thanks to an old nemesis.

Nancy Reagan had made what seemed to the Bushes like yet another unprovoked assault. A New York Times column by Maureen Dowd and Frank Rich reported that during coverage of Clinton's inaugural parade, as the Bushes were flying to Texas, Nancy Reagan had called ABC News to deny an account of how she had treated the Bushes.

"It was the political equivalent of the hand-from-the-grave punchline of the Stephen King novel 'Carrie,'" the reporters wrote. Nancy Reagan had been trying to reach correspondent Barbara Walters to complain about something that had been said the day before. She was connected to anchor Peter Jennings on the air, then insisted that she talk with Walters. A bemused Jennings and David Brinkley, and a national television audience, sat by and listened.

"She insisted that, no matter what Barbara Bush said, she had given Mrs. Bush a full tour of the White House, including laundry chute, during the 1988 transition," the story said. "And she complained bitterly that the Bushes had never invited the Reagans back for a state dinner."

The Bushes were aghast. At the low point of their political lives, Nancy Reagan had made one more petty dig. "It was ugly," Barbara said. The next day, on January 22, 1993, Nancy tried to call her; Barbara made herself unavailable. But she picked up the phone when the White House operator called again, a day later, on January 23, and asked, wasn't she going to take Mrs. Reagan's call? Reluctantly, she did.

“She started out by saying that she knew that this was a hard time with packing boxes and all...but...and here I interrupted her and said that all was well,” Barbara Bush recalled. “I told her that our friends and family had given us such a good welcome home and that they had pretty much unpacked for us, BUT that the thing that made it tough was having her say all those ugly things about me on the air. She said that she was just trying to explain. I asked her not to explain about me anymore.”

The grievances of a decade, submerged for so long, finally erupted.

“I told her the press was outside my door yelling questions about her statements and that I was not answering, but that she had hurt me badly and I just could not understand it,” Barbara Bush said. In fact, there were no reporters outside her door; that was a falsehood designed to give Nancy Reagan heartburn. Barbara reminded Nancy that they had invited the Reagans to the White House just ten days earlier, to present the Medal of Freedom to the former president—a ceremony that became maddening for the Bushes because of Nancy’s machinations over the guest list, by the way.

Barbara was sure Nancy was calling for the same reason that she usually had reached out over the past twelve years: to make sure Barbara would back up Nancy’s version of events, whether it was true or not, and to shield her from bad publicity of her own making. But Barbara was done with all that. Not again, she railed in her diary, punctuated by a trio of exclamation points: “Since I had said nothing and since I don’t do that and since she had not thanked us for the reception, I just didn’t feel like playing her game any more!!!”

Decades later, Barbara Bush told me the story with the energy of that moment. She may have been ninety-two years old and in the final stages of congestive heart failure, but she was still more than capable of getting steamed as she recounted their conversation from 1993.

“And we did have your wonderful husband to the White House,” she remembered saying, “and don’t you ever call me again!” Another phone line was ringing, Barbara informed Nancy. Then she hung up.

The confrontation was cathartic. “I have not talked to her since, but I certainly felt better,” Barbara Bush wrote in her diary more than a year later. Nancy Reagan never called again—who would have dared?—and the two women never had another extended conversation, though they did see each other in passing at the funeral of former president Richard Nixon in April 1994.

There, Barbara Bush thought both Ronald and Nancy Reagan looked worn. “I was dreading seeing her, but she caring what people think gave me a kiss and we did not spend too much time together,” she wrote afterward.

She added: “I better watch out I might get feeling sorry for her.”

Footnotes

“She really hated us”—Author interview with Barbara Bush.

“I think she was just insecure”—Author interview with Barbara Bush.

“George told me to go to New York”—Author interview with Barbara Bush.

“Thank heavens Nancy Reagan slipped the word to me”—Barbara Bush: A Memoir, by Barbara Bush, p. 160.

Not even Reagan’s White House chief of staff Jim Baker”—Author interview with James A. Baker III.

Barbara never saw the letter—Barbara Bush diary entry, April 11, 1994.

“That wasn’t very nice”—Author interview with Barbara Bush.

“Nancy does not like Barbara”—George Bush diary entry on June 12, 1988, after a conversation with Tom Arnold. He was a friend who had spoken with Lee and Walter Annenberg, who were close to both the Bushes and the Reagans. Quoted in DP, p. 324.

“I think it was a class thing”—Author interview with George Will.

“She did some imitations”—Author interview with Lou Cannon.

When Kitty Kelley’s tell-all biography—“Barbara Bush: The Steel Behind the Smile,” by Ann McDaniel, Newsweek, June 21, 1992. Kitty Kelley’s book was titled Nancy Reagan: The Unauthorized Biography.

When Kelley’s tell-all book about the Bushes—The Family, by Kitty Kelley, pp. 375–76.

“A lot of Reagan people”—Author interview with Mark Weinberg, author of Movie Nights with the Reagans.

That was “one big difference”—Author interview with Sheila Tate.

“I think Mrs. Reagan felt”—Author interview with Mark Weinberg.

“Barbara Bush was just as devoted”—Author interview with George Will.

Nancy Reagan never disparaged—Author interview with Sheila Tate.

“Friend after friend”—Barbara Bush diary entry, April 11, 1994.

“I had gotten the word”—Barbara Bush diary entry, April 11, 1994.

The first draft of the invitation list—Guest List and Seating Chart, Prince and Princess of Wales Dinner, October/November 1985, Box OA 18719, White House Office of Social Affairs Records 1981–1989, Ronald Reagan Library.

When deputy White House chief of staff Michael Deaver—Interview with Deaver by Kati Marton, quoted in Hidden Power, by Kati Marton, p. 264.

The invitation list he presented—Adventures of a Boy on the Bus by Carl P. Leubsdorf, p. 199. (Note: Leubsdorf is author’s spouse.)

“I don’t know”—Author interview with George H. W. Bush.

“It was the political equivalent”—New York Times, by Maureen Dowd and Frank Rich; January 21, 1993, p. A11.

“It was ugly”—Barbara Bush diary entry, January 1993.

“I told her the press”—Barbara Bush diary entry, January 1993.

“And we did have your wonderful husband”—Author interview with Barbara Bush.

“I was dreading”—Barbara Bush diary entry, April 25, 1994.
