

## Reagan and Thatcher: A Truly Dynamic Duo

by Loredana Vuoto

Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were a political match made in heaven. So argues Nicholas Wapshott, editor of the New York Sun and former New York bureau chief for the Times of London, in his new biography, *Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher: A Political Marriage*. The author assesses the political relationship between Reagan and Thatcher that made them indomitable allies. By sifting through recently declassified personal correspondence and phone calls and interviewing intimate contacts, he also uncovers the friendship and deep bond that developed throughout their reign.

The unlikely duo of Reagan and Thatcher were a force to be reckoned with during their overlapping years in office. They dominated the political landscape of the 1980s. Despite their different upbringings, the American President and British Prime Minister shared a political philosophy and a can-do attitude that transformed Western foreign policy and sought to enshrine the principles of democracy and freedom around the globe. They shared an unwavering belief in the individual, limited government and free trade. Their staunch determination to end Soviet communism was the enduring legacy of their tenure.

Wapshott thoroughly traces the inauspicious beginnings of Reagan and Thatcher. Both learned about the free market through their fathers' professions. The author credits Reagan's father, Jack, a struggling alcoholic shoe salesman, with imbuing in Reagan a belief in the American Dream. Despite Jack's professional failings, he taught Reagan that hard work is the key to success. Reagan also learned that "individuals determine their own destiny." Thatcher, too, derived much from her father, Albert, who was a pious middle-class shopkeeper with a shrewd economic philosophy. From an early age, she acquired the belief that the unfettered market was "a good and reliable mechanism by which people could be served what they needed and from which a useful and honest living could be made." This would be the foundation of both Reagan and Thatcher's economic understanding of the world and their commitment to free trade.

Reagan's and Thatcher's religious upbringings also played an important role in shaping their outlook. Reagan was deeply influenced by his Protestant mother Nelle's profound belief in God. She taught him to pray and to put his trust in God. Thatcher inherited her God-fearing convictions from her Methodist parents. From a

young age, Thatcher rejected frivolity and embraced a religious austerity rooted in charity. Christianity was central to Reagan's and Thatcher's childhoods and would prove to be an "anchor to their political beliefs."

### Immediate Connection

Reagan and Thatcher pursued different career paths—Reagan aspired to be a Hollywood actor and Thatcher a chemistry graduate—before fate placed them on a collision course to change history. From the moment they first met in 1975, the future President and prime minister immediately felt a connection. When discussing politics, the recently retired governor of California and the newly elected leader of the opposition found they "shared a common conservative perspective." Their friendship and political alliance would continue to grow when they came to power. But the bond that united Reagan and Thatcher was more than just ideological: They were both political outsiders. Reagan and Thatcher challenged the liberal establishment that had emerged (both in America and Britain) since 1945. They became political soul mates. As Wapshott explained in an interview with the *New York Post*, "They forged a close bond on first meeting and became office husband and wife, turning to each other for candid advice and offering each other solace when events turned against them." Throughout Reagan's presidency, he relied so much on Thatcher's counsel that she was considered "an unofficial, unappointed, but wholly effective, additional cabinet member."

The insider perspective presented in this book allows the reader to glimpse Reagan and Thatcher's mutual respect and admiration. Their intimate correspondence reveals how they basked in each other's victories and encouraged one another during difficulties. Reagan was always the first to congratulate Thatcher on her three landslide election victories, while the Iron Lady was always quick to defend Reagan to the press when he was in trouble. During the Iran-Contra scandal, Thatcher refused to condemn Reagan, and consistently affirmed his character and ability to lead the American people.

After having survived assassination attempts, the political soul mates both knew "Providence" had spared them in order to fulfill their mission on earth. Neither John Hinckley, Jr., nor the IRA was going to stop Reagan and Thatcher from toppling the Soviet Union. Reagan was acutely cognizant of God's power in his life and the gift of having Thatcher as a friend and political ally. Days after Thatcher paid tribute to Reagan in a speech for his 83rd birthday, Reagan wrote: "Throughout my life, I've always believed that life's path is determined by a Force

more powerful than fate. I feel the Lord has brought us together for a profound purpose and that I have been richly blessed for having known you.”

But just like in any marriage, Reagan and Thatcher had their squabbles. Despite their deep respect for one another, Reagan and Thatcher were often at odds. During the Falklands War, Thatcher felt betrayed by Reagan’s initial lack of support of the 1982 Argentine invasion. Reagan believed it was better for the United States to be a mediator rather than an active participant. When Americans invaded Grenada 18 months later, Thatcher was dismayed that the United States government had not warned her—especially since she was not in favor of the invasion. During a summit in Reykjavik with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, Thatcher opposed Reagan’s sweeping—and shocking—proposal to the Soviets to abolish their respective nuclear arsenals. Thatcher, with a more realistic view of human nature, did not share Reagan’s optimism and support for a nuclear-free world. She insisted that “there have always been evil people in the world.”

There is no doubt the relationship between America and Britain was closest during the Reagan-Thatcher years—surpassing even the Roosevelt-Churchill partnership of World War II. President George Bush and Tony Blair forged a strong alliance after September 11 to fight global terror. In the aftermath of Blair’s resignation, Bush must now work with Prime Minister Gordon Brown whose Labor Party has deep antipathy towards many of Bush’s policies. Long gone are the Reagan-Thatcher days.

As American and British elections loom, many Republicans and Tories recall the Golden Age of Conservatism that Reagan and Thatcher embodied during the 80s. Voters wonder if current candidates have the strength and resolve to defeat global terrorism as Reagan and Thatcher resolved to end the Evil Empire. Americans can hope only that the ultimate victor will share that resolve and work with Britain to achieve similar success.

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