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OF KILLING PATTON*

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& MARTIN DUGARD

Killing Reagan

The Violent Assault That Changed a Presidency



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God had a divine purpose in placing this land between two great oceans to be found by those who had a special love of freedom and courage.

—RONALD REAGAN

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LOS ANGELES MEMORIAL COLISEUM

JULY 15, 1960

8:00 P.M.

The man with three years to live is nervous. Sen. John F. Kennedy steps to the podium and gazes out at eighty thousand Democrats, who are on their feet cheering loudly. The forty-three-year-old patrician from Massachusetts is perspiring lightly. His eyes scan the vast outdoor Los Angeles Coliseum, with its vaulting peristyle arches and Olympic cauldron signifying the Olympic Games held there in 1932. This is a spot reserved for conquering heroes, the same lofty perch where Gen. George S. Patton was welcomed on leave from World War II in 1945.

Just two days ago, the wealthy politician with movie star good looks received the necessary votes to secure the Democratic nomination for president. Now, as the national convention comes to a close with his acceptance speech, bedlam fills the Coliseum. Native Americans in full tribal regalia perform ritual dances on the football field, and low-flying TV news helicopters threaten to drown out Kennedy's words.

With many high-ranking Democrats looking on in person, and famous

Kennedy celebrity backers such as Henry Fonda and Frank Sinatra joining the festivities, John F. Kennedy begins his speech: “With a deep sense of duty and high resolve, I accept your nomination.” Kennedy’s words are clipped, and he speaks too fast. He has slept very little in the past week, filling his days and nights with political meetings, parties, and rendezvous with would-be girlfriends.* “I accept it with a full and grateful heart—without reservation—and with only one obligation—the obligation to devote every effort of body, mind and spirit to lead our Party back to victory and our Nation back to greatness.”

Kennedy now launches into what will become known as the “New Frontier” speech, telling Americans, “Today our concern must be with that future. For the world is changing. The old era is ending. The old ways will not do.” As he outlines his vision for the future, Kennedy launches a series of personal attacks on his likely Republican opponent, current vice president of the United States Richard Milhous Nixon.



A continent away, Nixon himself cannot sleep. The CBS Television network is broadcasting Kennedy’s speech live. Despite its being 11:00 p.m. in Washington, Nixon is riveted to the black-and-white TV in the family room of his Tudor-style home in the city’s Wesley Heights neighborhood.† He endures every one of his opponent’s assaults, taking each slight personally but also knowing that Kennedy does this all the time, as he is fond of hardball politics.

“Mr. Nixon may feel it is his turn now,” Kennedy says somewhat sarcastically. Nixon, an acute observer, notes Kennedy’s lean face is tense, despite the senator’s attempts to appear at ease.

*Among them are Judith Campbell and the actress Marilyn Monroe. Campbell, who once dated Frank Sinatra, will go on to become the mistress of mobster Sam Giancana.

†The official residence of the vice president is now the U.S. Naval Observatory in northwestern Washington, DC. However, Congress did not make this official until 1974. Until that time, vice presidents maintained their own private residence. Nixon purchased the five-thousand-square-foot house on Forest Lane in 1957.

“After the New Deal and the Fair Deal—but before he deals, someone had better cut the cards.”

The audience laughs.

Kennedy continues: “That ‘someone’ may be the millions of Americans who voted for President Eisenhower but balk at his would-be, self-appointed successor. For just as historians tell us that Richard I was not fit to fill the shoes of bold Henry II—and that Richard Cromwell was not fit to wear the mantle of his uncle—they might add in future years that Richard Nixon did not measure to the footsteps of Dwight D. Eisenhower.”

Nixon is forty-seven years old, but his thick jowls and receding hairline make him look ten years older. He is a man of humble beginnings—unlike Kennedy, who was born into great wealth. In truth, JFK is closer to the commonly held image of a Republican—“fraternity presidents, tax-board assessors, community leaders, surgeons, Pullman porters, head nurses and the fat sons of rich fathers,” as one writer described the party faithful.*

Nixon put himself through law school, served in the navy during World War II, then successfully ran for Congress in 1946. He believes strongly in the Republican virtues of fiscal conservatism, small government, and a powerful military. Nixon has a keen political mind. He has watched Kennedy’s rise to power closely, recognizing for almost a year that JFK will be his likely opponent for the presidency. Now, mentally cataloguing each item in Kennedy’s New Frontier agenda, knowing he must co-opt some of these themes and give them a Republican spin, Nixon concentrates heavily upon his rival.

Nixon’s wife, Pat, and two young daughters, Tricia and Julie, are fast asleep, but he has no immediate plans to join them. He listens closely as Kennedy concludes his speech to thunderous applause.

“As we face the coming challenge, we too shall wait upon the Lord,

*The writer was Norman Mailer, in a piece for *Esquire* about the 1960 Democratic National Convention titled “Superman Comes to the Supermarket.”

and ask that he renew our strength. Then shall we be equal to the test. Then we shall not be weary. And then we shall prevail.”

Nixon is not impressed. Those eighty thousand Democrats might seem like a lot, but he well knows the Coliseum can hold many thousands more. Nixon also considers himself a better politician than his rival, and believes he can win the election if he can convince some Democrats to swing away from their party. Nixon needs crossover votes.

“In this campaign I make a prediction,” he will tell the audience when he accepts the Republican nomination for the presidency thirteen days from now. “I say that just as in 1952 and 1956, millions of Democrats will join us—not because they are deserting their party, but because their party deserted them at Los Angeles two weeks ago.”



Another man is also intensely watching John F. Kennedy.

Sitting in the living room of his lavish Pacific Palisades home, Ronald Reagan is disgusted by what he is hearing. At the conclusion of Kennedy’s speech, Reagan gets up and wanders to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the spectacular view of the distant lights of Los Angeles.

Reagan’s mind is made up: he will cast his vote for Richard Nixon.

This will come as no surprise to anyone in Hollywood. While still technically a Democrat, Reagan has been heavily influenced by the more conservative views espoused by his wife, Nancy, who grew up in an extremely Republican household and likes to brag that she has been reading the right-leaning *National Review* since its first issue.*

The motion picture industry is deeply divided between liberals and conservatives. A minority of actors such as Reagan and John Wayne openly espouse anticommunist, small-government views. But a much larger contingent, led by singer Frank Sinatra and his Rat Pack, have fallen under

*November 19, 1955. The *National Review* was founded by William F. Buckley Jr., a wealthy former CIA operative who believed that conservative commentary was all too often missing from American political debate.

John F. Kennedy's spell. This group includes actors Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, Elizabeth Taylor, Cary Grant, and Angie Dickinson. While some keep a distance between their personal and professional lives, Sinatra, in particular, has made it clear that he despises not only Ronald Reagan's views but also Reagan himself. "Dumb and dangerous," Sinatra calls Reagan, "and so simpleminded." The singer takes his vitriol a step further by also attacking Nancy Reagan, calling her "a dope with fat ankles who could never make it as an actress."

Despite his career resurgence on television, and the wealth that has allowed him to build this spectacular four-bedroom, 4,700-square-foot home at the end of a long private road in the Pacific Palisades, Ronald Reagan and his wife have become social pariahs. They are rarely invited to the best parties, and even when a dinner offer comes their way, Reagan has a bad habit of lecturing all within earshot about politics. Nancy, for her part, does not help matters by appearing condescending. "We got stuck with them at a dinner party, and it was awful," the wife of screenwriter Philip Dunne once remembered. "Nancy is so assessing—she always looks you up and down before she deigns to speak."

Turning away from the window, Reagan walks past the large stone fireplace and into his small corner office. He sits down and takes pen and paper from a drawer. General Electric has taken great pride in turning his home into "The House of the Future" and has capitalized on that concept by having Reagan film commercials for the *General Electric Theater* from his own kitchen, surrounded by a GE toaster, dishwasher, and electric garbage disposal. But no modern gadget will help Reagan perform the simple task of writing a letter.

Ronald Reagan is not afraid to mail his thoughts to anyone who will read them—as well as many who don't want to. Letter writing from his home office has become the nexus for Reagan's personal conservative movement, and with each letter he sends, his political ambition advances.

With Kennedy's words still echoing in his mind, Reagan picks up his pen and begins writing a letter to Richard Nixon.

"Dear Mr. Vice President," the letter begins. "I know this is

presumptuous of me, but I'm passing on some thoughts after viewing the convention here in L.A. . . . I heard a frightening call to arms. Unfortunately, he is a powerful speaker with an appeal to the emotions. He leaves little doubt that his idea of the 'challenging new world' is one in which the Federal Government will grow bigger and do more, and of course spend more."

Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon first became acquainted back in 1947, when Reagan appeared before Congress. They rekindled that relationship in 1950, when Reagan campaigned for Nixon's opponent in the race for a U.S. Senate seat from California. They've since become friends, and Nixon is actually the reason Reagan still maintains his Democratic Party membership. When Reagan told Nixon he was planning to switch parties in time for the 1960 election, the canny Nixon said he could do more for the Republican Party by remaining a Democrat and using his fame to convince other Democrats to cross party lines with him.

So Reagan remains a Democrat—at least for now. He has no idea that Nixon actually considers him "shallow" and of "limited mental capacity." But even if he did know that, it might not matter. Ronald Reagan simply wants to see John F. Kennedy and his liberal dogma defeated.

Reagan continues his letter: "I know there must be some short-sighted people within the Republican Party who will advise that the Republicans should try to 'out-liberal' him. In my opinion this would be fatal . . . I don't pose as an infallible pundit, but I have a strong feeling that the 20 million nonvoters in this country just might be conservatives."

But Nixon is not planning to take Reagan's advice. In one week's time, he will fly to New York and meet with Republican governor Nelson Rockefeller. After a dinner of lamb chops in Rocky's Fifth Avenue apartment, the two men will stay up all night drafting a more liberal Republican platform. The "Treaty of Fifth Avenue," as it will be dubbed, is designed to appeal to independent and Democratic voters.

Reagan concludes the letter, scalding John F. Kennedy: "Under the tousled boyish haircut is still old Karl Marx—first launched a century ago.

There is nothing new in the idea of a government being Big Brother to us all. Hitler called his ‘State Socialism.’”*

Signing the letter “Ronnie Reagan,” the actor fervently hopes his offer to campaign for Richard Nixon will be accepted. Though Nixon will lose the 1960 presidential election by less than one percentage point of all votes polled, Reagan will speak on his behalf whenever asked.



“Have you registered as a Republican yet?” shouts a voice from the audience. The year is 1962. As Ronald Reagan predicted, Richard Nixon’s attempt to “out-liberal” John Kennedy is among the factors that cost him the presidency. Now Reagan is once again campaigning for Nixon, this time as the former vice president runs for governor of California.

Reagan stands before a small crowd of Republican supporters. The fund-raising event is being held in a house just down the street from his Pacific Palisades home. Reagan knows many of those in attendance but does not recognize this voice speaking to him in the middle of the living room.

“Have you registered as a Republican yet?” she asks a second time.

“Well, no. I haven’t yet. But I intend to.”

The truth is Ronald Reagan no longer has any reason to remain a Democrat. His conservative affiliations have become so notorious that General Electric recently fired him as a spokesman, under pressure from some powerful liberal concerns. So, once again, Ronald Reagan is an unemployed actor searching for his next paycheck. He has absolutely, positively nothing to lose by switching political parties.

*Reagan’s animosity toward John F. Kennedy will continue even after the young president is shot dead by an assassin’s bullet. Just a few days after JFK is assassinated, Ronald and Nancy Reagan will hold a dinner. “Why should we cancel our dinner party just because John F. Kennedy died? Don’t be silly,” Nancy Reagan told one guest who called to ask if the party was still on. The man, a film producer and former U.S. Army brigadier general named Frank McCarthy, arrived to find Ronald Reagan, John Wayne, and actor Robert Taylor socializing. As a film producer, McCarthy will go on to win the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1970 for *Patton*.

"I'm a registrar," the woman says, standing up and walking toward Reagan with a slip of paper in her hand.

She hands the paper to Reagan. It is a registration form. The woman has already filled in all the blanks, meaning that with a simple swipe of his pen, Ronald Reagan will officially become a Republican.

The registrar hands Reagan a pen.

He signs the form without a moment's hesitation.

As the room erupts in applause, Reagan smiles. There will come a time when few will even remember his thirty years as a Democrat. "I did not leave the Democratic Party," he will tell people, borrowing a line from Richard Nixon. "The Democratic Party left me."

Now, in the first moments of his new life as a Republican, Ronald Reagan gets back to the task at hand.

"Now, where was I?" he asks, before continuing the speech he has been perfecting for the last eight years.



A bitter Richard Nixon strides purposefully onto the stage at the Beverly Hilton Hotel in Los Angeles. The date is November 7, 1962. Despite Ronald Reagan's campaign efforts, Nixon has just lost the election for governor of California, an election he assumed he would win easily.* The governorship was meant to be a job that would keep Nixon in the public eye until 1968. He believed that John F. Kennedy would be president for two terms, so he would wait until then to tender another presidential bid.

Now an exhausted and angry Richard Nixon faces the harsh reality that he is finished. It will be a political near impossibility to recover from this loss.

But before he goes, Nixon has a few words he would like to say.

His face lined with tension, Nixon forces a smile as he looks at the reporters assembled before him. There is no podium, just a cluster of

*Polls showed that Richard Nixon would win the 1962 California gubernatorial election. However, Nixon failed to reach out to the more conservative elements of the Republican Party, a blunder that cost him dearly. The incumbent, Pat Brown, won in a landslide, garnering 52 percent of the popular vote to Nixon's 47 percent.

microphones. He is nervous about the speech he is about to give but is attempting to appear jovial. The forty-nine-year-old Nixon considers the media to be his personal enemy and believes that after years of frustrated silence, the time has come to tell them off.

Nixon digs his right hand deep into the pocket of his suit pants. An elaborate chandelier hovers to one side of the room. Reporters sit at a long table in front of him, poised with pencil and paper to write down his words. To his right, television cameras and newspaper photographers prepare to capture this moment of defeat.

“For sixteen years,” Nixon begins, “you’ve had an opportunity to attack me, and I think I’ve given as good as I’ve taken.”

A hush fills the small ballroom. Nixon has just crossed a line. It is one thing to confront a journalist about his coverage in private, but to do so in public is taboo. And thanks to all those television cameras, this verbal assault is now being filmed for posterity. Pencils scribble frantically as the reporters eagerly await Nixon’s next words.

“I will leave you gentlemen now. And, uh . . . You will now write it. You will interpret it. That’s your right. But as I leave you, I want you to know—just think how much you’re going to be missing. You won’t have Nixon to kick around anymore, because gentlemen, this is my last press conference.”

Fifty-nine seconds. That’s all it takes. Nixon does not field questions. He is whisked from the room and walks quickly out of the hotel, stopping only to shake the hand of a front-desk clerk before stepping into the front seat of a waiting car.

He is thrilled to have gotten the last word.

Yet fate will allow him many more press conferences. And if Richard Nixon thinks the media have gotten the best of him in the past, that is nothing compared to what they will do to him in the future.



Two years later, television cameras again capture a historic moment. The night is October 27, 1964. Ronald Reagan is eagerly anticipating watching himself on television. The occasion is a speech he taped one week

earlier in support of Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater.* At first, Goldwater's people wanted Reagan to deliver the speech live. But Reagan is by now a canny politician, and although he would have liked the spontaneous applause and laughter that he knew each line would engender, he didn't want to take any chances on making a mistake—thus the live scenario was scrapped.

"Nancy and I went to the home of some friends to watch the broadcast," he will later write of the night that changed his life. Reagan's presentation for Goldwater was so successful that scribes simply dubbed Reagan's words "The Speech."

Reagan realizes his career is now in public life. After a seven-year break between films, he has made one last motion picture. He played a villain in *The Killers*, a movie that sank without a trace at the box office.†

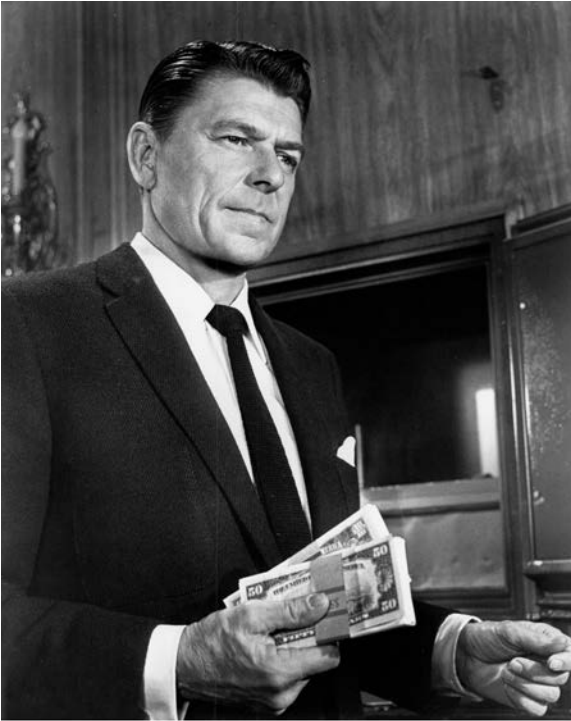
Even though the speech is a sensation, Barry Goldwater's advisers did not want Reagan's talk to air. With the election just one week away, they were terrified that the conservative themes he was espousing would drive some voters into the Democratic camp.

As the Reagans sit side by side before the television set in the den of their friends' home, the black-and-white screen flickers, showing him standing behind a podium draped with patriotic bunting. The edited presentation then cuts to the back of the room, allowing the nation to see the audience awaiting his words. Some hold placards. Others wear cowboy hats. All are dressed informally and are meant to look like a homey cross-section of the American public.

This works perfectly with Reagan's homespun delivery, the gentle,

*One young supporter of Goldwater, and an active member of the Young Republican movement, was a seventeen-year-old Chicago-area young lady named Hillary Rodham. She was fond of wearing a cowgirl outfit and a straw hat emblazoned with the Goldwater campaign's AuH₂O slogan (Au is the periodic symbol for gold; H₂O the symbol for water). Shortly afterward, she would switch her party allegiance to the Democrats, perhaps under pressure from her liberal friends at Wellesley College.

†Reagan's previous film was 1957's *Hellcats of the Navy*, which costarred Nancy Reagan. Their final on-camera performance as a couple was the 1958 *GE Theater* episode with the prescient title "A Turkey for the President."



*Reagan in The Killers,
his last movie role*

parental voice that he perfected at those GE factories, after-dinner speeches, and countless other conservative venues across the country. “Unlike most television programs, the performer hasn’t been provided with a script,” he assures the audience as he begins. “As a matter of fact, I have been permitted to choose my own words and discuss my own ideas regarding the choice that we face in the next few weeks.”

Then Reagan begins a twenty-seven-minute soliloquy on the virtues of the America in which he truly believes. The Republican presidential nominee, Barry Goldwater, is hardly mentioned. Reagan delivers a dazzling speech full of allusions to the American dream, fiscal conservatism, and small government. He speaks of freedom and the Founding Fathers as if they were brand-new concepts that Americans need to embrace immediately. He talks about poverty, farmers, the Vietnam War, Cuban immigrants, and American veterans. There is no hesitation in Reagan’s

voice, no fumbling with the words of his self-written script, for this is the summation of what he has believed for years.

“You and I have a rendezvous with destiny,” he concludes, his voice at its most earnest and inspirational. “We’ll preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth, or we’ll sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness.”



Ronald and Nancy Reagan drive home in their Lincoln Continental after watching the filmed speech. The fifty-three-year-old Reagan is nervous, unsure if his talk has been a success. Others who watched the speech with them insist that Reagan did his job well, but he is still uncertain.

The October night is partly cloudy, with temperatures in the low seventies. The Reagans park their car, then walk inside the house and go to bed, still not knowing if the speech has been a success or a flop.

It is midnight when the bedside phone rings. The Goldwater campaign is on the other end. Reagan’s speech has been such a smash that people from all across the country have called in, pledging support and money for the candidate. “A Time for Choosing,” as the speech will come to be known, will be described by reporters as “the most successful national political debut since William Jennings Bryan electrified the 1896 Democratic convention with the ‘Cross of Gold’ speech.”*

*Delivered at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago on July 9, 1896. Bryan was a thirty-six-year-old former Nebraska congressman when he delivered the address. His oration was so powerful that the audience screamed in agreement, waving hats and canes. Some audience members threw their coats into the air. The speech, which advocated the use of silver coinage to increase American prosperity, was so effective that Bryan won the nomination. He ultimately lost the general election to Republican candidate William McKinley (who was shot by an assassin’s bullet on September 6, 1901, died eight days later, and was succeeded in office by Theodore Roosevelt). William Jennings Bryan ran for the presidency twice more and later in life supplemented his income by delivering the “Cross of Gold” speech during lecture appearances. Bryan is also well known as being the foil for famed attorney Clarence Darrow during the Scopes Monkey Trial, which argued the legality of teaching evolution in schools. Bryan, a devout Presbyterian, argued against the practice. He died in his sleep five days after winning the case.



*Nancy Reagan and Ronald Reagan after winning
the Republican nomination for governor of California in 1966*

“That speech was one of the most important milestones of my life,” Reagan will later remember. Until that day, he had been skeptical of any suggestion that he run for political office. Now that is about to change. “A Time for Choosing” will turn out to be, in his words, “another one of those unexpected turns that led me onto a path I never expected to take.”