

Teaching American History
A More Perfect Union: The Origins & Development of the U.S. Constitution

Book Review: Rawhide Down: The Near Assassination of Ronald Reagan
by Del Quentin Wilber

I currently teach “Ancient Civilizations” at the middle school level. Therefore, when given the opportunity to choose a book to review that either assists my teaching or increases my content knowledge, it was an obvious choice for me to select something that will increase my general content knowledge (with the hope that it will someday assist my teaching). I am a child of the eighties, and Ronald Reagan is the first President I remember...vaguely. As we discussed this man and his Presidency in our class, I found myself remembering my childhood interpretations of his personal qualities and events that took place. I was fascinated to learn more about how those interpretations and memories compare with the more experienced perspectives of adults and historians who also remember this time.

With the idea that the book that I chose would someday serve to shape my teaching of this President, I sought one that would provide me with an accurate historical perspective, but that would also somehow “personalize” the information in a way that makes it accessible and interesting to students. In much the same way that Frederick Lewis Allen’s, *Only Yesterday*, offers a detailed, microscopic view of life in the 1920s, Del Quentin Wilber’s, *Rawhide Down*, offers an intricate perspective of Ronald Reagan and those surrounding him on one particular day of his life. Written in the style of a classic soap opera, in which events unfold simultaneously under different plot lines before eventually coming together in a dramatic climax, the book is fast-paced and suspenseful...both valuable qualities in a history text when one is hoping to capture the interest of students reading it!

The narrative begins with a general description of Reagan and the early months of his tenure as President. He is portrayed as a traditional man who revered the Presidency and valued religion; who spent as much time on ceremonial functions and publicity events as he did on official business; who often blended truth and fiction when telling stories during his political career; who worked a “9 to 5” schedule and wasn’t afraid to make fun of himself for this, his age, or anything else that public hecklers and political foes might try to use against him; who acknowledged the country’s problems and believed that through teamwork these problems could be solved; who focused more on tax and spending cuts as ways to improve the country than he did on foreign policy; and who trusted that with a strong military and successful

negotiating, the United States could win the Cold War against the Soviet Union. As the President's day begins, on March 30, 1981, the reader's focus shifts to learn more about some of the others who would prove to play key roles in the progression of this day.

The President's "Troika" is introduced through a description of a typical daily staff meeting with the three men most critical to Reagan's functioning as the Commander in Chief. Deputy Chief of Staff, Mike Deaver, is described as being the man closest to Reagan. Counselor, Edwin Meese, had a more professional relationship with Reagan than personal, but he (like Deaver) had followed Reagan from California to the White House. And Chief of Staff, James Baker, had been a political rival of Reagan's over the previous five years, but he proved to be competent & effective in his role in the Reagan White House.¹ This brief introduction proves to be helpful in understanding the roles played by various individuals as the drama unfolds later in the book.

Agent Jerry Parr is also introduced early on. This 50 year old man, who had been a member of the Secret Service since 1962 (when, as a career-changer, he was the oldest rookie in his class), was in charge of the Presidential protection detail on March 30, 1981. Ironically, he had become interested in joining the Secret Service after watching a Ronald Reagan movie about the job. On this fateful day, he had switched duties with another agent in order to have the opportunity to spend more time with the President and get to know him on a more personal level.²

Nancy Reagan, formerly Nancy Davis, a Hollywood actress, is introduced as well. She is noted for having a strong influence over her husband (even when it came to Presidential decisions), owning a gun, wearing expensive clothing, and refurbishing the White House to suit her tastes. The strong and immediate bond between Ronald Reagan and Nancy is described from their initial meeting—when Nancy was an actress accused of having Communist ties and Reagan was the union representative who helped clear her name—to their marriage three years later, in 1952, through their journey together to the White House.³

Finally, Wilber introduces the reader to John W. Hinckley, Jr. A 25 year old son of a wealthy oil executive who grew up in affluent suburbs near both Dallas and Denver, Hinckley is described as being depressed and disconnected from others. According to the narrative, he

¹ Del Quentin Wilber, *Rawhide Down: The Near Assassination of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011), 26-28.

² Wilber, 16-20.

³ Wilber, 50-52.

was an indifferent student and college dropout, he enjoyed writing poems, stories, and songs, and playing the guitar (though not in public, because he was too shy). After experiencing failure in a variety of forms—including suicide attempts, and following a psychologist’s assessment that he “needed to get his shit together” (as opposed to being deeply troubled) Hinckley’s parents forced him out of their home. He sold his possessions and/or stole things to get by, and began traveling around the country in a misguided effort to win the affection of actress Jodie Foster. With him, he carried a copy of *Catcher in the Rye*, a book about serial killer Ted Bundy, a box of ammunition that included 6 “devastator” bullets, a gun, and an assortment of tape recordings, magazine clippings and other photos of Jodie Foster.⁴ Having said goodbye and thanking his mother for everything she had done for him (as if he would not be seeing her again), and with his obsession with Foster— then a college student—growing to dangerous levels, Hinckley became focused on winning Foster’s attention through a public suicide. A chance article about a Presidential speaking engagement on March 30, 1981, sparked the opportunistic notion that he could kill the President and then get “splattered against the wall in a blaze of Secret Service bullets.”⁵ This, in his mind, would help him to gain Foster’s respect and love.⁶

With these character introductions complete, Wilber’s narrative turns to the series of events of March 30, 1981...the day that John Hinckley attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan outside of a Washington, DC hotel. Reagan was scheduled to deliver a speech to some 4,000 trade union members at 2:00pm. Secret Service preparations (described at great length in this narrative) had begun five days earlier, and included a motorcade 15 vehicles long that would make the 1.3 mile trip from the White House to the Washington Hilton.⁷ Meanwhile, Washington, DC police officers are described as making such decisions as whether or not to wear a bullet-proof vest that day; Secret Service agents are depicted taking their posts to protect the President; and John Hinckley is portrayed as a frustrated member of the crowd, protesting loudly when reporters tried to squeeze past him for a better view.⁸ Wilber then goes

⁴ Wilber, 20-23.

⁵ Wilber, 35.

⁶ Wilber, 58.

⁷ Wilber, 68.

⁸ Wilber, 79.

on to provide a detailed account of the actual events of the assassination attempt, including a specific breakdown of what happened as a result of each of the six bullets Hinckley fired.⁹

In the third phase of Wilber's narrative, the reader follows President Reagan from the scene of the shooting to George Washington University Hospital, where he was treated for a gunshot wound to the chest. Again, the information is provided from an assortment of perspectives, including those of Agent Jerry Parr, who pushed Reagan into the limousine and made the decision to take the President to the emergency room; hospital staff members, who witnessed the President of the United States walking into the hospital's emergency room and then collapsing in the hallway¹⁰, or who had to shake off their own nerves in order to be able to provide treatment to this most important patient; and White House staff members, who had to make instant decisions about how information should be shared with the public and how the government should be run in the event that the President did not survive.

Specifically, Wilber chronicles the critical five hours from the time of the shooting through the successful removal of the bullet from Reagan's lung. The reader sees Reagan's vulnerability when he poses the question to hospital intern, Drew Scheele, "Am I dying?"¹¹ And yet his humor is ever-present, with comments like "I hope they're all Republicans"¹² (in reference to the surgery team about to operate on him) and, "Honey, I forgot to duck"¹³ (when talking to his wife, Nancy, in the emergency room). But regardless of the President's demeanor, the overwhelming theme of this section of the text is the gravity of the situation during those five hours. Ronald Reagan came frighteningly close to death, and the steps that were taken to save his life are described in vivid detail.

Meanwhile, Wilber reminds us that the President was not the only victim of John Hinckley's shooting. Press Secretary, Jim Brady, was shot in the head and had bullet fragments embedded in his brain. Heroic efforts to save his life—even as misinformation publicly declared his death—are detailed in the book. Ultimately, Brady did survive, but was wheelchair-bound and was never quite the same. Secret Service Agent Tim McCarthy was shot in the chest. When hospital staff members asked him what had happened, McCarthy is quoted as saying, "I

⁹ Wilber, 80-87.

¹⁰ Wilber, 95

¹¹ Wilber, 109.

¹² Wilber, 120, 147.

¹³ Wilber, 187.

got in front of the shooter.”¹⁴ And Washington, DC police officer Thomas Delahanty was shot in the back. Nerve damage caused by the bullet forced him to retire immediately, on full disability.

Additionally, there is the follow-up story about John Hinckley, the man responsible for all of this mayhem. He was apprehended at the scene of the shooting and taken to Washington, DC police headquarters. Because all available officers had been called to action in the event that this assassination was a part of a larger conspiracy or terrorist plot, there were few people on hand to receive Hinckley at the station. Detective Eddie Myers and Secret Service agent Stephen Colo began initial interviews to determine if Hinckley had acted alone. Shortly after, the FBI won jurisdiction, and the shooter was transferred to FBI headquarters. Within a few hours of the attempted assassination of the President, FBI agent George Chmiel, along with Secret Service agent Colo, got Hinckley to admit that he had in fact worked alone, and that he had done so in an effort to impress Jodie Foster. No further investigation was needed. Hinckley would later be found not guilty, by reason of insanity. He has spent the years since the incident in a psychiatric hospital. However, Wilber points out that, against the wishes of many people, Hinckley’s doctors and psychiatrists (who believe that his mental health condition is in remission) have convinced a judge to allow him to leave the hospital periodically to visit his mother at her home, and he has been permitted to obtain a driver’s license in order to do so.

Finally, there is the story of the White House staff members, including President Reagan’s “Troika” and other key personnel, as they struggled to make sense of the day’s events, and make appropriate plans to maintain the safety and security of the country. Vice President George Bush was on a plane to Texas when the assassination attempt took place, and although a phone call was attempted by White House staff members, poor reception interfered. Ultimately, Bush learned of Reagan’s condition through a teletype message and television news reports. His plane immediately turned around to return to Washington, DC, but it would take several hours before he could get there. That left the President’s cabinet and White House staff members to make critical decisions that afternoon. Questions about whether to inform foreign governments, raise the country’s DEFCON level, or even transfer authority from the President to the Vice President were hotly debated in the Situation Room of the White House.¹⁵ At one point, when Soviet submarines were detected patrolling unusually close to United States territory, a very specific concern arose that perhaps the Soviets would try to take advantage of a perceived lapse in leadership by launching an attack. Although the decision was

¹⁴ Wilber, 128.

¹⁵ Wilber, 129.

made to refrain from officially raising the DEFCON level, the military was put on alert—though no harm came from the threat.¹⁶ And, while every effort was being made to maintain the appearance of a calm and functioning United States government, the day was not without mistakes. Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, famously announced in front of a group of reporters that he was “in charge”...clearly forgetting the actual order of Presidential succession. Deputy Press Secretary, Larry Speakes, bypassed the group protocol of carefully planning out any communications to be shared with the press when he held an impromptu press conference from the White House. His floundering speech and lack of answers sent the message that the White House did not actually know what was going on that afternoon, and infuriated many of his colleagues.

However, regardless of the chaos and confusion that understandably took place following Ronald Reagan’s attempted assassination on March 30, 1981, the worst of it was over by 7:30pm. Five hours after being shot outside the Washington Hilton, President Reagan was resting peacefully in George Washington University Hospital. The bullet that punctured his lung had been removed, the internal bleeding that had caused him to lose more than half of his body’s normal blood volume had stopped, and he was once again breathing independently...and joking with the nursing staff. This public announcement was made by political aide, Lyn Nofziger: “He is in stable condition, and he is awake.”¹⁷ The following morning, at 7:15am, the “Troika” held their daily meeting with the President in the ICU, and Reagan signed a bill into law from his hospital bed. Twelve days later, Reagan returned from the White House—walking out of the hospital on his own, just as he had walked in.

Following the assassination attempt, Reagan’s popularity ratings soared, and they remained high for his entire Presidency. According to biographer, Lou Cannon,

“Reagan’s actions after the assassination attempt cemented a bond with the American people that never dissolved. And that’s because they saw a genuine person that day. They began to feel for him the way they would feel for a friend or someone close to them, not just some politician.”¹⁸

It is widely agreed that this near tragedy turned into a personal and political victory for President Ronald Reagan, who remains one of history’s most successful Presidents, according to a 2009 survey by C-SPAN historians.¹⁹

¹⁶ Wilber, 175-176.

¹⁷ Wilber, 203.

¹⁸ Wilber, 220.

¹⁹ Wilber, 221.

Without question, *Rawhide Down* could be a valuable tool in teaching American History, particularly at the high school level. If I were to teach such a class, I would likely use pieces of Wilber's text to supplement the standard curriculum. Unfortunately, in many typical high school classes, I don't think that there would be sufficient time to devote several days (or even weeks) to reading a book about one single day in history. However, in order for students to realize that history is "alive" and real and exciting, I think it is critical that they are exposed to primary accounts and real-time descriptions such as this one...in addition to the standard text which supplies the basic facts and general outcomes of such an event as a Presidential assassination attempt. For this reason, I would plan to read excerpts from the book with students in class. By highlighting the pages in which Hinckley is described and his thought process is outlined, students will understand the insanity that led to his homicidal decision. Using the moment-by-moment description of the actual shooting,²⁰ students can visualize and even map out the placement of individuals to better understand the consequences that resulted for each. And, in reading the sections in which doctors and nurses frantically made decisions and took actions to preserve the life of the President of the United States (and others injured that day), students will realize the level of excitement and anxiety that this event generated.

Further assignments could certainly be generated from this narrative, including written responses to various aspects of the text, historical comparisons to other assassinations/ attempts, or "re-writing history" as it would appear if some piece(s) of the story had unfolded differently that day. However, I also believe that sometimes a good discussion following an interesting read can provide all the learning that is required. *Rawhide Down: The Near Assassination of Ronald Reagan* will capture students' attention. It will provide them with accurate facts about an important event in U.S. History. It will make them ask questions and re-think assumptions. It will likely inspire some to want to read more. And it will provide an effective example to illustrate the fact that history is real and exciting. For these reasons, in my opinion, it is a worthwhile contribution to a high school history class.

²⁰ Wilber, 80-87.