

INTRODUCTION

“Screeeeeeeck!” The Georgetown dinner party fell silent. Waiters froze. Forks were suspended. Attorney General Janet Reno had imitated a gecko for her dinner partner. She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. For her it was natural to provide the uninitiated with a sample of life in the Everglades. After the nominations of two talented women failed because of issues related to the legal status of their nannies, the William Jefferson Clinton team nominated Miami’s plain, unmarried, 6’3” state attorney for the job. Reno breezed through the confirmation hearings, but Washington would soon find that there was some getting used to to do.

Reno had a Harvard law degree, but she was by no means part of the East Coast elite who participate in federal level politics while rotating in and out of administrations, law schools, and foundations. Reno grew up in a rural setting and attended segregated, public schools in a small southern city. Hers was in many ways an uncomplicated, White middle-class life. Yes, a host of New Yorkers had found their way to Miami Beach; and, yes, illegal alcohol built local fortunes; and, yes, gambling did net \$100 million a year according to reporter Jane Reno, Janet’s mother. Nevertheless, Reno’s daily routine as a girl was prosaic, although, perhaps by some standards eccentric.

This was because mother Jane was a stirrer. After bearing four children in four years, Jane Reno proceeded to personally build the family home. Life there was mostly conducted on a fifty-foot screened porch. In addition there was, originally, a kitchen and two bedrooms (for a family of six), no interior doors, no locks on the exterior doors, and no air-conditioning. There were,

though, peacocks and chickens, donkeys and horses, snakes and dogs. The Reno homestead was literally located where paved roads ended.

There were only two rules for the Reno children, but they were strictly, even physically, enforced: 1) tell the truth and 2) be kind. It would have been easy to be parochial, even narrow, living off the grid as the family did, but Janet's father, Henry, was a crime reporter for the *Miami Herald*, and the variety of people who congregated on the Reno porch on Sunday afternoons conducted energetic and knowledgeable conversations, much of it political.

Janet Reno ventured north for college—to Cornell and then to Harvard Law School. After finishing law school, she turned down opportunities in Washington, DC, to return to her Miami roots. No major Miami firm was interested in hiring a woman, even one with a Harvard degree, but Reno was hired by a firm specializing in real estate law where she developed an effective courtroom style. Prepared, often overprepared, she learned to use her height to intimidate witnesses. A few years later, she set up a practice with a fellow Harvard graduate. It was 1967, an era of political turbulence. Lyndon Johnson had twisted enough arms to win the Civil Rights Bill in 1964; in 1967 Thurgood Marshall was confirmed to the Supreme Court; and in *Loving v. Virginia* that court declared a ban on interracial marriage unconstitutional. In the next year both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinated. Soon thereafter Silent Generation Reno began a most unquiet public life.

Reno went to work for the Miami-Dade state attorney and later became the Miami-Dade state attorney herself, a position she would hold for fifteen turbulent years. These years included killings of Blacks by police officers and riots like that in Liberty City in which eighteen died, hundreds were injured, and thousands arrested.

The call to Washington came in 1993. Attorney generals are often the president's attorney rather than the nation's. Examples would include Jack Kennedy's brother, Robert, and Ronald Reagan's buddy Edwin Meese III. Reno, though, saw her job as the country's law enforcement officer. This would make for an awkward relationship with her president, Bill Clinton, who would soon be besieged by legal problems and by Republicans who hoped to impeach and then remove him from office.

In the first weeks of her tenure, Reno was faced with the siege of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. The next year featured Kenneth Starr's

Whitewater investigation of Clinton investments in a failed real estate venture and other items including his scandalous relationship with Monica Lewinsky. Then there was the horrific Oklahoma City bombing. But perhaps the most agonizing decision came in 1998, which involved Elián González, a Cuban child who survived an attempt to cross from Cuba to Miami, but whose mother did not. Miami's Cuban community insisted that Elián must stay in Miami. Acting against the views of virtually all she consulted, Reno decided that Elián belonged with his father, even if that father was in Cuba. Her decision was not popular.

Returning to Miami after eight years in Washington, DC, Reno found that the Elián decision had made it impossible for Donna Shalala, a fellow Clinton Cabinet member and the new president of the University of Miami, to give her an appointment at the law school. The Elián decision also contributed to Reno's loss in a run for governor. Still, there were numerous "kind" things to do, and lessons to be learned. Her life demonstrated that it is possible for a woman to serve in high office, both elected and appointed, and to do so while scrupulously adhering to a mother's code to "tell the truth and be kind." Both Reno's shattering of glass ceilings and her consistent, ethical conduct reinforce what a good civics class teaches students: that one can successfully engage in the political while remaining both human and honest.