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Let the People In: The Life and Times of Ann Richards

Jan Reid
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When Ann Richards was elected governor of Texas in 1991, she ushered in a “New Texas” by appointing large numbers of women and minorities to government positions. True to Richards’s feminism and progressivism, she “let the people in,” which biographer Jan Reid claims was the politician’s greatest accomplishment. The author presents a compelling history that not only tells Richards’s story but also provides a revealing view of the Lone Star State’s unique brand of politics. The author of eleven previous books, including two award-winning novels, Reid researched this account deeply, plumbing the Ann Richards archives at the University of Texas and conducting more than two hundred interviews with her family members and coworkers.

Born Ann Willis in 1933, her impoverished parents worked hard and, with scholarship aid, sent their daughter to local Baylor University, where Ann’s high school sweetheart and future husband, David Richards, also matriculated. By 1963, Ann Richards was a stay-at-home mom raising their four children while volunteering for the Democratic Party. Reid’s story of how her subject’s alcoholism and failing marriage led to her decision to enter rehabilitation is gripping. This experience later encouraged Richards to introduce rehabilitation programs for prison inmates.

Both Richards’s 1984 nominating speech for Democratic vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro and her keynote speech at the Democratic Convention four years later were career-changing events, claims the author. After squeaking by former governor Clayton Williams in a bitterly fought battle for governor in 1990, Richards’s single term was a success for the first two years followed by controversy during the last two. Prison and insurance reforms and environment preservation highlighted the good years, but scandals and vetoing a bill that would allow citizens to carry concealed weapons made her vulnerable to a Republican challenge in 1994. She was routed in her bid for re-election by George W. Bush, who felt a special vindication for Richards’s earlier remark that George H.W. Bush was “born with a silver foot in his mouth.” Ann Richards died in 2006 at age seventy-three from esophageal cancer and is remembered as a mentor for many women politicians, including Hillary Clinton.

Although Reid at times includes too much detail, mostly about the 1990 gubernatorial campaign, and does not include a summation of Richards’s career and legacy, this account of the woman, her times, and rough-and-tumble Texas politics will engross informed general readers, political junkies, and feminist and political scholars.

KARL HELICHER (Winter 2013)

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