

Janet Reno: A Life

Judith Hicks Stiehm

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Judith Hicks Stiehm's thorough biography covers the legal career of the United States's first woman attorney general.

Reno grew up "deeply rooted in Miami" at a time when the future metropolis retained a small-town feel. Her family members are a colorful backdrop to her tale, including her journalist mother and her close-knit siblings. Even early in her life, she racked up impressive achievements. She made plans to go to medical school but shifted to studying the law while at Cornell; she excelled at Harvard Law at a time when women students were still few in number.

Threading memorable details throughout its pages to flesh out its familiar career details with life, the book includes stories of Reno dealing with a bear attack and about Harvard having only one women's restroom. And its career elements are interesting in their own right too: Reno's early career cases make for good stories, showing her willingness to meet with her critics and learn from them, including after her early prosecutorial work over a case of police misconduct failed to win a conviction. At each step, Reno dealt with political third rails, and the book does an expert job of putting these issues in the context of their times, showing why Reno's work on them mattered. Reno's time as attorney general is also covered in great detail, including high-profile moments like the Whitewater investigation that led to the appointment of a special prosecutor and Bill Clinton's impeachment; and the Elian Gonzalez case, in which a Cuban boy became party to an international custody battle.

Janet Reno is the warm biography of a consequential attorney general—a trailblazer whose singular experiences helped her to navigate some of the country's thorniest legal challenges.

JEFF FLEISCHER (May / June 2023)

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