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## Reagan's Budget and Hinckley

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## Reagan's Budget and Hinckley

Is it true that Reagan's first budget would never have passed in the U.S. House of Representatives if he hadn't been shot by John Hinckley?\*

You are correct. Reagan had campaigned on tax cuts and leaner government, but in 1981 he had to deal with a Democratic majority in the House. (In the '81 election Republicans had gained control of the Senate.) True, an incoming president traditionally enjoys a honeymoon period of a hundred days or so, but in his first months in office, Reagan was encountering stiff resistance among House Democrats. After Reagan proposed his Economic Recovery Plan, Speaker Tip O'Neill said, "We're not going to let them [the Republicans] tear asunder programs we've built over the years."<sup>[1]</sup>



The mood changed dramatically after John Hinckley shot his way into history. The would-be assassin shot Reagan on March 30, 1981, barely two months after the 40th president's inauguration. The president's grace and courage during the ordeal raised the esteem in which the American people held him. In such an atmosphere it was difficult for congressional Democrats to criticize the recovering president.

Edmund Morris wrote of this critical period in Reagan's presidency:

*"By April 24, [Reagan] was well enough to walk to the West Wing and chair a full Cabinet meeting. And four days later, live on prime time, he made the most dramatic presidential appearance in Congress since Franklin Roosevelt's return from Yalta.*

*"The millions watching saw a large and splendid man, literally death-defying, appear at the threshold of the House as the doorkeeper roared the traditional 'The President of the United States!' All members rose as required, but their respect on this occasion verged on reverence -- and also signaled a near-helpless capitulation to the message they knew he was bringing.*

*"I walked in to an unbelievable ovation that went on for several minutes," he wrote afterward. His speech -- a call for one hundred percent support for his Program for Economic Recovery -- was interrupted by fourteen bursts of applause and three standing ovations. 'In the 3rd of these suddenly about 40 Democrats stood and applauded. Maybe we are going to make it. It took a lot of courage for them to do that, and it sent a tingle down my spine.'*

*"Not forty but sixty-three Democrats subsequently joined the solid Republican minority, sending Reagan's budget to the Senate with a vote of 253-176. If not quite the total support he had dreamed of, it was a huge victory, and the first official register of his legislative power. As Speaker Tip O'Neill philosophically reminded reporters, Congress was ultimately responsible to the American people, 'and the will of the people is to go along with the President.'"<sup>[2]</sup>*

All through the spring and summer of 1981, Reagan lobbied Congress to cut welfare, the food stamp program, school meals, and Medicare and Medicaid. Congress went along with most of the president's plan, passing the Economic Recovery Tax Act on July 29, 1981. Reagan signed the legislation the next month at his ranch in California, outside on the now-famous tax-cut table. The legislation cut taxes by \$750 billion over five years, making it the largest tax cut in American history.

*(Question from Jon P. of Midland, MI)*

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\* Full question: Is it true that Reagan's first budget would never have passed in the U.S. House of Representatives if he hadn't been shot by John Hinckley? I know that Tip O'Neill had been calling Reagan's budget "Dead On Arrival" before it ever got there.

<sup>[1]</sup> Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), p. 203.

<sup>[2]</sup> Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), pp. 438-39.