

# **The President's Other Half: Power, Politics, and America's First Ladies**

*A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Bachelor of Arts Degree with Honors in History*

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April 8, 2019

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks to all that people that helped with this thesis. Professor Molly Michelmore served as my primary reader. She patiently read all my drafts and promptly answered many frantic, late-night emails. Serving as my second reader, Professor Sarah Horowitz provided her deep insights on gender history. Professor Mikki Brock supervised all the honor thesis writers, constantly providing us humor and snacks throughout the process. In the library, Emily Cook truly went above and beyond helping me locate obscure primary and second sources. She also introduced me to Zotero, which has quickly become one of my favorite software programs.

I would like to thank my family and friends who learned more than they probably ever wanted about First Ladies during this process. They helped encourage me to write and research but also reminded me to stop writing every now and then. I appreciate all their patience, reassurance, and support.

Finally, I would like to thank all the amazing women who have served as First Ladies. I have enjoyed getting to know all of them: their strengths, weaknesses, personalities and times. They have done so much to craft our nation and our history. I hope that I have done them and their stories justice.

## INTRODUCTION A JOB WITHOUT A JOB DESCRIPTION

During his 1992 campaign, Bill Clinton famously told the American people that electing him also meant electing Hillary Clinton as First Lady, effectively a “buy one, get one free” deal.<sup>1</sup> This has always been true. Though the Constitution makes no reference to the job of the First Lady and it has no official job description, there are unwritten rules and expectations for the First Lady’s performance of the office. The First Lady is expected to perform traditional duties alone and is essential to the President’s effective performance of the duties of his office. Living in the White House beside the President, the First Lady is often the only female adult resident of the People’s House. The presidency is a two-person job requiring both the services of the President and the First Lady. Both the President and the First Lady shape evolving American expectations of masculinity and femininity, respectively. Running the White House and serving as the national hostess, the First Lady increases and exercises the soft and informal powers of the presidency. Uniquely capable of yielding certain kinds of power, the First Lady’s use and shaping of the private sphere is critical to helping her husband achieve public sphere goals. Finally, the First Lady is a key political surrogate of the President, able to enter physical and emotional spaces that the President is either unwilling or unable to enter. By accepting Paula Baker’s expanded definition of politics as “any action, formal or informal, taken to affect the course or behavior of the government or community,” it becomes clear that the First Lady is an essential component of presidential power.<sup>2</sup> Each constrained and empowered by their genders, the President and First Lady must rely on one another to fully exercise the powers of the presidency.

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<sup>1</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Living History* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Paula Baker, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920,” *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (1984): 622, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1856119>.

It is first important to define who is a “First Lady.” In most cases, the First Lady is the wife of the President but that has not always been the case. Four Presidents entered the White House as widowers: Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, and Chester Arthur. Another three Presidents lost their wives while serving in the White House: John Tyler, Benjamin Harrison, and Woodrow Wilson. Two Presidents entered as bachelors: James Buchanan and Grover Cleveland (he married a year into his first term).<sup>3</sup> In addition, several Presidents’ wives have either been unable or unwilling to fulfill the office due to suffering from poor health, being in mourning, or lacking interest in hosting. In each of these cases, a surrogate First Lady served as “White House hostess.” In total, sixteen women have served as surrogate hostesses, usually close female relatives of the President.<sup>4</sup> Though not married to the President, these women have also served to help shape and define the office of First Lady.

Over time, the Office of the First Lady transformed from an informal to a formal institutional structure. In 1844, Julia Tyler became the first First Lady to hire a press agent though she used private rather than public funds. Not until Jackie Kennedy over a century later did the First Lady have a press secretary paid for with tax payer money. Florence Harding was the first First Lady to openly answer questions from the press and Eleanor Roosevelt the first to hold formal press conferences. Following a 1901 White House expansion project, Edith Roosevelt was the first First Lady to have a physical office space set aside for her and her staff though a more formalized staff for the First Lady did not developed until the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> The 1978 White House Personnel Authorization Act first included specific provisions for the First Ladies’

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<sup>3</sup> Robert P. Watson, *The Presidents’ Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady* (Boulder: L. Rienner, 2000), 58–59.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>5</sup> Karen O’Connor, Bernadette Nye, and Laura Van Assendelft, “Wives in the White House: The Political Influence of First Ladies,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1996): 852–53.

staff, stating that “Assistance and services ... are authorized to be provided to the spouse of the president in connection with assistance provided by such spouse to the president in discharge of the president's duties and responsibilities.”<sup>6</sup> These developments mirrored increased interest and power of the presidency and the growing acceptance of women in politics.

Despite modern First Ladies having a professional paid staff, they themselves go uncompensated. Representative James G. Fulton launched a campaign to pay the First Lady during the Truman administration. Fulton called her job the “only case of involuntary servitude in the USA.”<sup>7</sup> First Ladies do not apply for the office nor do they run for it; they become First Lady by virtue of the man that they married. Fulton failed in his attempt and, after the passage of the 1978 “Bobby Kennedy law,” members of the President’s family are no longer legally allowed to hold salaried positions in the government. However, despite this law, the courts still consider First Ladies government employees. In 1993, a federal court accepted the government’s position that the First Lady is a government employee because of the “traditional, if informal, status and ‘duties’ of the president’s wife as ‘first lady’ [that] gives her *de facto* officer or employee status.”<sup>8</sup>

These informal duties of the First Lady are unclear and the public’s expectations of the First Lady are difficult to decipher and often contradictory. Rosalynn Carter’s former Press Secretary summed up the challenges facing the First Lady: “Nobody has figured out what the public wants or expects from a president’s wife.”<sup>9</sup> First Ladies and their staffs struggle to determine how best to execute the office. Writing about Melania Trump’s tenure in the office,

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<sup>6</sup> Maryanne Borrelli, “Competing Conceptions of the First Ladyship: Public Responses to Betty Ford’s ‘60 Minutes’ Interview,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2001): 398–99.

<sup>7</sup> Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama*, Rev. and updated ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 212.

<sup>8</sup> O’Connor, Nye, and Van Assendelft, “Wives in the White House,” 839.

<sup>9</sup> Borrelli, 127.

*New York Times* writer Frank Bruni wrote “It’s a ludicrous job. You’re supposed to make a difference without making waves, find a passion while veiling your convictions and smile blithely through a ceaseless forensic examination of your every accessory.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the best description of the public’s expectations of the First Lady came from a letter written to Betty Ford. Unironically, this letter writer told Ford “You are constitutionally required to be perfect.”<sup>11</sup> First Ladies themselves have written about their difficulties of performing the office. In her memoir, Hillary Clinton reflected on the early days of her husband’s first presidential campaign, “if my husband won, I would be fulfilling a position in which the duties were not spelled out, but the performance was judged by everyone. I soon realized how many people had a fixed notion of the proper role of a President’s wife.”<sup>12</sup> The public has strong but undefined expectations of the First Lady.

First Ladies do not choose their job, but they are subject to intense scrutiny. Especially modern First Ladies know that every move they make has the possibility of igniting a media firestorm. After Betty Ford gave a controversial interview on *60 Minutes*, CBS received more pieces of mail than ever before in the history of the program.<sup>13</sup> Clinton lamented that, after her husband Bill Clinton declared his candidacy, “we had to endure exhaustive inspection of every aspect of our lives.”<sup>14</sup> Starting with the Presidential campaign, every part of the Clintons’ lives were thoroughly dissected by the media and consumed by the public. Michelle Obama echoed this sentiment. She wrote that during her husband’s first presidential campaign “It was like

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<sup>10</sup> Frank Bruni, “Opinion | Melania Trump Could Be Our Greatest First Lady - The New York Times,” accessed November 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/opinion/melania-trump-could-be-our-greatest-first-lady.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Kate Andersen Brower, *First Women: The Grace and Power of America’s Modern First Ladies* (New York City: Harpers Collins Publishers, 2016), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 110.

<sup>13</sup> Molly Meijer Wertheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice: The Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century*, Communication, Media, and Politics (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 334.

<sup>14</sup> Clinton, 102.

having your soul X-rayed every day, scanned and rescanned for any sign of fallibility.”<sup>15</sup> Melania Trump has learned that, even when she remains silent, her silence is interpreted as a statement. In a letter to the *New York Times*, reader Lisa Shoglow wrote “this least active, influential or engaged (but always dressed to the nines) first lady should be judged by the company she continues to keep and — despite her own considerable bully pulpit — her resounding silence.”<sup>16</sup> Regardless of their desire or interest in the office, First Ladies are subject to constant public inspection and judgement. First Ladies are such public figures that, according to the Secret Service, there are more threats against the First Lady than against the Vice President.<sup>17</sup> Lady Bird Johnson described the office as “one of your biggest roles in life.”<sup>18</sup> To Johnson, “It would be sad to pass up such a bully pulpit. It’s a fleeting chance to do something for your country that makes your heart sing... and if your project is useful, and people notice it, and that reflects well on your husband.”<sup>19</sup> Forced into the spotlight by virtue of their husband’s career, First Ladies endure and capitalize on constant media attention.

First Ladies do not pose a threat to their husbands politically. In Washington politics, alliances are constantly shifting, and Presidents can never be sure of whom to trust. As political analyst Jeff Greenfield once quipped, “There is no such thing as paranoia in politics, because they really are out to get you.”<sup>20</sup> In Washington, the First Lady is one of the only major actors who does not jockey directly with her husband for power and influence.<sup>21</sup> As members of the

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<sup>15</sup> Michelle Obama, *Becoming*, First edition (New York: Crown, 2018), 252.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Shoglow, “Opinion | We Shouldn’t Really Count on Melania Trump,” *The New York Times*, August 25, 2018, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/24/opinion/letters/melania-trump-donald-trump.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Bush, *Barbara Bush: A Memoir* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1994), 267.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 278–79.

<sup>20</sup> Ron Faucheux, *Winning Elections: Political Campaign Management, Strategy & Tactics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 100.

<sup>21</sup> Kathy B. Smith, “The First Lady Represents America: Rosalynn Carter in South America,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1997): 541.



same team, the First Lady's power contributes to or harms the President's and vice versa. This idea of the wife as a substitute and helper of her husband developed from the colonial concept of wives as "deputy husbands." As deputy husbands, women were treated as deputies who could step in for their husbands in legal and financial matters when needed.<sup>22</sup> Considered completely under their husbands' authority, women were trusted to work in their husbands' interests because they were their interests as well. Furthermore, for the first century and a half of American history, under the concept of coverture, married women were considered to be under the legal identity of their husbands. As Lord William Blackstone articulated in 1765, upon marriage "the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended."<sup>23</sup> This same strand of thinking continues for First Ladies. The position of First Lady is, as Hillary Clinton wrote, "by definition, a derivative position."<sup>24</sup> Though Clinton was uncomfortable with this realization, she understood that the First Lady's power is part of the President's, not independent of it. The President has the ability to grant and deprive her of this power. In addition, this historical and cultural tradition means that the public expect First Ladies to act as extensions of their husbands.

To ensure that First Ladies do not overshadow their husbands, administrations endeavor to avoid depictions of overly powerful First Ladies. When the public perceives that a First Lady has become overly powerful, she and her husband are lampooned by the media. During the Harding administration, political cartoonists depicted images of the "the Chief Executive and *Mr. Harding*."<sup>25</sup> A husband who cannot "control" his wife is seen as weak and unable to lead. Edith Wilson was accused of running a "petticoat government" in the White House, a "withering

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<sup>22</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 170.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>24</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 111.

<sup>25</sup> Watson, *The Presidents' Wives*, 1.

insult” in Victorian society.<sup>26</sup> But the antipathy to strong First Ladies is not merely a Victorian phenomenon. As masculinity has become a key part of modern presidential campaigns, candidates seek to avoid being labeled a “wimp.” One contemporary political communications strategist said, “powerful first ladies are still portrayed as intrusive and their husbands as henpecked.”<sup>27</sup> As a result, Presidents and First Ladies go to great lengths to avoid that appearance.<sup>28</sup> Remembering the criticism aimed at Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt expressed concerns of ever being accused of leading a “petticoat government.”<sup>29</sup> Serving in the 1980s and 1990s, both Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush never publicly revealed their influence. One senior Reagan administration official noted, “I’d go so far as to say that Nancy Reagan was the most powerful First Lady of the last 35 to 40 years. And she went about it the right way, the appropriate way – entirely behind the scenes.”<sup>30</sup> Once, when asked about her popularity, Bush credited it to the fact that she “threatened no one.”<sup>31</sup> This was particularly important because her husband, George H.W. Bush, was often critiqued for being “wimpy” due to his aristocratic background.<sup>32</sup> It is important that First Ladies do not appear overly powerful and threatening to the public.

This bipartisan effort to publicly undermine the political importance of the role of First Lady has spanned generations and proven to be highly effective. Political scientists and

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<sup>26</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 188; Caroli, *First Ladies*, 152.

<sup>27</sup> Jackson Katz, *Man Enough? Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and the Politics of Presidential Masculinity* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Books, 2016), 146.

<sup>28</sup> A key exception to this was Bill Clinton’s 1992 campaign, but even the Clintons learned to deemphasize Hillary Clinton’s influence. At first, Bill Clinton heavily emphasized the role Hillary would play in his administration. However, this was controversial. Former President Richard Nixon chimed in saying, “If the wife comes through as being too strong and too intelligent, it makes the husband look like a wimp.” Though Bill did win the election, his comments on Clinton hurt him politically. Clinton, *Living History*, 105-106.

<sup>29</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 127.

<sup>30</sup> Wertheimer, *Inventing a Voice*, 371.

<sup>31</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 348.

<sup>32</sup> Katz, 104.

historians often neglect to realize the full influence of the First Lady. For instance, Lucretia Garfield was once described as “a quiet and non-committal little moon revolving around a great luminary.”<sup>33</sup> First Ladies are treated as secondary actors to or simply props of their husbands. Peggy Noonan, a *Wall Street Journal* columnist, wrote First Ladies should be “slightly dazed, mildly inscrutable, utterly supportive. It is the only job in the world where ‘seems slightly drugged’ is a positive job qualification.”<sup>34</sup> According to Noonan, the President is an active agent while the First Lady is merely a background prop. Political scientists disregard the influence of First Ladies on the policy making process and in American politics. Literature on the presidency all but ignores the office of the First Lady; a review on the major textbooks on the presidency reveals that most fail to even list the First Lady in their indexes.<sup>35</sup> Jackson Katz’s *Man Enough?* discusses the gender dynamics of the presidency. Yet, in this nearly three-hundred-page book dedicated to understanding the gender dynamics of the presidency, “The Role of First Ladies” only merits about eight pages.<sup>36</sup> Again, like many other works on the presidency, “First Lady” does not appear in the index.<sup>37</sup> Even in works dedicated to the gender politics of the presidency, First Ladies are given a merely cursory overview. As historian Edith Mayo said, “It is sad and telling that the press and public alike are unaware that Presidential wives since Abigail Adams have been wielding political influence.”<sup>38</sup> Historians, the public, and the press have too long ignored the influence of the First Lady.

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<sup>33</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 103.

<sup>34</sup> Katz, *Man Enough?*, 146.

<sup>35</sup> Robert P. Watson, “The First Lady Reconsidered: Presidential Partner and Political Institution. (Rules of the Game: How to Play the Presidency),” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1997): 807.

<sup>36</sup> Katz, 140–47.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>38</sup> Watson, 805.

Rather than looking at First Ladies as props in the performance of the office of the Presidency, First Ladies should be seen as active partners of their husbands. In recent scholarship, “a new view of an ‘activists political partner’ is emerging as possibly the rule rather than the exception for the female occupants of the White House.”<sup>39</sup> Rather than looking at the presidency as a single person job, the presidency should be treated as a team effort between both the President and the First Lady.<sup>40</sup> Personally, First Ladies serve as foils to their husbands. For example, Abigail Adams helped her often tone-deaf husband navigate social norms.<sup>41</sup> In addition, she steadied her “mercurial” husband throughout his political career.<sup>42</sup> Catherine Allgor even titled her biography on Dolley Madison *A Perfect Union*. Dolley Madison’s vivacity contrasted with and complimented her husband’s aloofness and, at times, his social awkwardness.<sup>43</sup> This type of partnership was hardly confined to the early republic. Historian Doris Goodwin describes Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt as making “an extraordinary team.”<sup>44</sup> Franklin’s labor advisor, Anna Rosenberg, reflected on the Roosevelts years after his administration ended. Rosenberg said, “He would never have been the kind of President he was without her.”<sup>45</sup> This is not only true for the Roosevelts but for all Presidents. To truly understand the presidency and its impact on American politics, culture, and society, scholars must begin to acknowledge First Ladies as perhaps not an equal but highly influential partners of Presidents.

Since the nation’s founding, First Ladies have served as female gender role models while Presidents have served as male role models. Jackson Katz discusses presidential elections as

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<sup>39</sup> Watson, “The First Lady Reconsidered,” 805–6.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 806.

<sup>41</sup> Jeanne E. Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic: Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and the Creation of an Iconic American Role* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 165.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>43</sup> Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*, 1. ed (New York: Holt, 2006), 251.

<sup>44</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 629.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 629.

“symbolic contests over competing definitions of manhood.”<sup>46</sup> Presidents embody a version of American masculinity. As historian Kate Anderson Brower wrote, First Ladies “embody American womanhood and American motherhood.”<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the First Lady’s performance of femininity is often controversial and political, especially since the start of the twentieth century. Debates over the First Lady’s femininity reveals larger divides in American culture over the proper role of the women in society. For example, the controversy over Barbara Bush’s invitation to give Wellesley College’s commencement address reflects the nation’s anxiety and questioning over the changing role of women in the final decade of the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, the wife of her husband’s opponent, Hillary Clinton represented in her own words “a fundamental change in the way women functioned in our society.”<sup>49</sup> At times, the 1992 presidential election became a fight over which woman best embodied the ideal version of American womanhood.

In addition to serving as gender role models, each member of the presidential couple can enter different physical and metaphysical spaces. In both Western political theory and American separate spheres ideology, the world is divided between two spheres: the private and the public.<sup>50</sup> As the most powerful politician in the country, the President serves as the head of the public sphere. On the other hand, the First Lady heads the private sphere. As “a public national woman,” the First Lady bridges the public/private divide.<sup>51</sup> For most Americans, the home

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<sup>46</sup> Katz, *Man Enough?*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Brower, *First Women: The Grace and Power of America’s Modern First Ladies*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Rosanna Hertz and Susan M. Reverby, “GENTILITY, GENDER, AND POLITICAL PROTEST: The Barbara Bush Controversy at Wellesley College,” *Gender & Society* 9, no. 5 (1995): 594, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124395009005006>.

<sup>49</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 110.

<sup>50</sup> Rosemarie Zagari, “Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother,” *American Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1992): 193, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713040>.

<sup>51</sup> Betty Houchin Winfield, “Anna Eleanor Roosevelt’s White House Legacy: The Public First Lady,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1988): 343.

epitomizes the private sphere. During wars and crises, the White House serves as a model of how the home front should despond. Serving as First Ladies during World War I and World II, Edith Wilson and Eleanor Roosevelt changed White House food and entertaining practices to be an example of wartime sacrifice.<sup>52</sup> By making their own sacrifices, these two women helped to convince other women to join the war effort and provided a model for wives around the nation. When Mary Todd Lincoln failed to curtail her high spending during the Civil War, she was roundly criticized.<sup>53</sup> By not making the sacrifices that the rest of the nation was forced to, Lincoln appeared out of touch and frivolous, hurting her husband's image.

By creating and controlling private spaces, the First Lady can help her husband achieve key public sphere objectives. The First Lady is the head of Washington society. For example, Dolley Madison and Barbara Bush, two First Ladies separated by over a century and a half, hosted regular lunches for the wives of Cabinet officials while their husbands orchestrated the affairs of state.<sup>54</sup> The First Lady – both before and during her husband's presidency – creates private spaces to achieve public goals. Hosting dinners and parties, elite Washington women's event create unofficial spaces which allow "more room to maneuver than the official space."<sup>55</sup> Not only do women create informal physical spaces but women's communication with one another allows for informal communications.<sup>56</sup>

Speaking as women and often as mothers, First Ladies can enter policy discussions dealing with women and children's issues with a greater authority than their husbands. First Ladies often portray themselves and act in a mothering way. Abigail Adams couched her interest

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<sup>52</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 150; Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 316.

<sup>53</sup> Martha Weinman, "First Ladies -- in Fashion, Too?," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, 1960.

<sup>54</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 153; Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 517.

<sup>55</sup> Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*, Jeffersonian America (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 87.

<sup>56</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 269.

in politics around her role as a mother. She said that her political interests were only to ensure her children's happiness.<sup>57</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt turned her status as a mother into a political tool during World War II. With the increase in women war workers, Roosevelt led the call for day-cares for the children of working mothers.<sup>58</sup> With her powder white hair, Barbara Bush strove to appear like "everyone's favorite grandmother."<sup>59</sup> First Ladies can also highlight women's issues with a different authority than their husbands. Hoover dramatically increased White House outreach to women and children.<sup>60</sup> Serving as representatives of America abroad, First Ladies can bring attention to the conditions of women around the world. Attending a conference on the status of women in Beijing, China, Clinton led the cry for international women's rights.<sup>61</sup> First Ladies can speak on issues facing women and children with a distinct moral and personal authority.

First Ladies contribute to and, at times, can detract from Presidents' informal powers. With her public profile, the First Lady is a co-star in presidential imagery. First Ladies of the early republic had to walk a thin line between a republican and monarchical image. Like so many expectations of the First Lady, they were caught between two antithetical and competing notions. First Ladies are forced to find the right balance between representing republican values of simplicity while also signaling the power and prestige of the nation.<sup>62</sup> This conflict is particularly evident in the First Ladies' clothing. Upon Martha Washington's arrival in New York (then the nation's capital), the *Gazette* newspaper drew contrasts between her plain

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<sup>57</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 154–55.

<sup>58</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 416.

<sup>59</sup> Brower, *First Women: The Grace and Power of America's Modern First Ladies*, 265.

<sup>60</sup> MaryAnne Borrelli, *The Politics of the President's Wife*, 1st ed, Joseph V. Hughes Jr. and Holly O. Hughes Series on the Presidency and Leadership (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2011), 63.

<sup>61</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 305.

<sup>62</sup> Abrams, 229.

clothing and the gold cloth used for the British Queen's coronation.<sup>63</sup> This dichotomy did not end with the early republic. First Ladies continued to be judged on their clothing and struggled to find the "the hazy demarcation between the abyss of being too a la mode and the chasm of being too plain."<sup>64</sup> Jackie Kennedy's style was subject to intense praise and criticism. During her husband's 1960 campaign, the campaign received numerous letters complaining about her style and the amount of money she spent on her clothes.<sup>65</sup> As the wife of the President, the First Lady's clothing has political significance.

The First Lady serves as the national hostess and runs the White House, a national symbol of the United States. Traditionally, women's lives center around their homes and the private sphere. For First Ladies, however, their home is the White House. Therefore, actions that would normally be considered private, especially decorating and entertaining, take on a prominent public role. As the First Lady practices her domestic role in the White House, it is inherently political. How and who the First Lady hosts can have far reaching political and cultural consequences. Madison and Kennedy were both famous for re-decorating the White House. Madison worked to turn the White House into a national symbol with which the American people could identify.<sup>66</sup> Kennedy, an expert image maker, made the White House the set for her and her husband's performance of the Presidency.<sup>67</sup> Each of these women understood the significance of the White House as a symbol and a means of achieving political ends.

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<sup>63</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Weinman, "First Ladies -- in Fashion, Too?"

<sup>65</sup> Nan Robertson, "Mrs. Kennedy Defends Clothes; Is 'Sure' Mrs. Nixon Pays More," *New York Times*, September 15, 1960, [timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1960/09/15/99802760.pdf](http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1960/09/15/99802760.pdf); Associated Press, "A Portrait of Mrs. Kennedy: Spirited, Shy and Chic," accessed September 24, 2018, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1960/11/10/99963589.html?action=click&contentCollection=Archives&module=ArticleEndCTA&region=ArchiveBody&pgtype=article>.

<sup>66</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 59.

<sup>67</sup> Michael J. Hogan, *The Afterlife of John Fitzgerald Kennedy: A Biography* (New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 20.



Hosting state dinners, the White House is also an effective way to highlight American talents and showcase American culture to foreign visitors. Barbara Bush considered these dinners “a wonderful opportunity to showcase American hospitality, cuisine, and entertainment.”<sup>68</sup> The Kennedy White House was criticized for not doing this enough. Critics complained that under Kennedy, the White House became “too frenchy.”<sup>69</sup> What the First Lady serves can also make political statements. For example, Lucy Hayes was known as “Lemonade Lucy” because she insisted on hosting dry dinners at the White House.<sup>70</sup> Hayes used her position as White House hostess to signify her support of temperance.

In addition to *how* the First Lady entertains, *who* the First Lady entertains is also politically important. Lou Hoover made a political statement about race by asking an African American Congressman’s wife to the White House for tea.<sup>71</sup> Due to the fact that the First Lady is the nation’s hostess, her entertaining takes on a national political significance. However, while First Ladies yield significant informal power, it is important to remember that symbolic power is different from formal power. First Ladies are limited in their ability to make change in this way.

Finally, First Ladies serve as a key political surrogate of the President. Candidates’ wives often play important roles in campaigns and serve as the campaigns’ principle surrogates. In addition to representing the President at home, the First Lady also represents the President abroad. As Franklin was wheel-chaired bound, Eleanor Roosevelt acted as his eyes and ears, traveling around the world where he was physically unable to go.<sup>72</sup> The Clinton State Department joked that “If the place was too small, too dangerous, or too poor – send Hillary.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 289.

<sup>69</sup> Hogan, *The Afterlife of John Fitzgerald Kennedy*, 36.

<sup>70</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 95.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>72</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 27.

<sup>73</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 341–42.

If the President is unavailable, the First Lady is often an ideal alternative. When the President physically cannot be somewhere, the First Lady serves as his substitute. The First Lady can also occupy emotional and political spaces that the President cannot. As it is harder politically for men to express feminine emotions like compassion and empathy, the First Lady serves as a valuable consoler-in-chief.<sup>74</sup> Following 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, Laura Bush took on this role to reassure a shaken nation.<sup>75</sup> Laura Bush could occupy this position that would have been harder, if not impossible, for her husband George W. Bush to fill.

While traditional scholarly literature has neglected the office, the First Lady has tremendous power and plays a pivotal role during her husband's administration. In the public/private and masculine/feminine dualities, First Ladies compliment their husbands. First Ladies navigate the private sphere to help their husbands achieve political ends. As the national hostess, the First Lady crafts and directs presidential imagery. How and who the First Lady entertains matters as it is a reflection of national values. Finally, First Ladies are key surrogates of the President. Since First Ladies are women, they are able to occupy different emotional space than men and speak with a different kind of authority about issues dealing with women and children. Rather than being a single person job, to fully exercise the power of the presidency, the President needs a First Lady.

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<sup>74</sup> Katz, *Man Enough?*, 163; Borrelli, *The Politics of the President's Wife*, 137.

<sup>75</sup> Borrelli, 137.

CHAPTER 1  
THE FIRST LADY AS A FEMALE GENDER ROLE MODEL

On the day of her husband's Inauguration, Laura Bush's organized "a group of authors to read from their works at Constitution Hall" and then to children around Washington.<sup>1</sup> According to a 2001 *New York Times* article, this was the start of Bush's eight year "crusade for national literacy."<sup>2</sup> Throughout her term, Laura Bush focused on traditionally feminine issues centered around children and dedicated her first ladyship to combatting illiteracy. As the magazine *American Libraries* noted, Bush was "the first librarian who has ever been the nation's First Lady."<sup>3</sup> In her first year in the White House, partnering with the Library of Congress, Bush opened the first national book festival. The former librarian kicked off the event reading to a group of fourth-grade students.<sup>4</sup> As the Congressional librarian said at the time, "Illiteracy is a persistent problem in America, and its steadily growing.... Thirty-eight percent of fourth graders don't have very much of an understanding of a simple, ordinary paragraph."<sup>5</sup> Bush used her pulpit to focus media and public attention on this growing issue.

The American President has come to serve as one embodiment of American masculinity and the First Lady as one embodiment of American femininity. Serving as gender role models, the President and the First Lady can both reflect and shape changing societal and cultural ideals. Of course, the meanings of femininity and masculinity are contested, political, and subject to change. As female role models, First Ladies also serve as examples of how women are both limited and empowered by their gender in political conversations. The evolving role of First

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Sciolino, "First Lady Opens a Festival To Promote National Literacy," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, 2001; Leonard Kniffel, "First Lady, First Librarian," *American Libraries* 32, no. 2 (2001): 50–51.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; Kniffel, "First Lady, First Librarian."

<sup>3</sup> Kniffel.

<sup>4</sup> Sciolino.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Ladies in politics often mirrors the rise in women's role in politics. Finally, as the President's wife, the First Lady provides the President with support, comfort, and protection. More intimate with Presidents than anyone else, First Ladies are key advisors. For the powers of the presidency to be fully realized, it is crucial that the President leverages the First Lady's unique power and authority as a female gender role model.

The American President is one of – if not the most – recognizable man in America. For today's children, he is the first politician that they can recognize.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, he is, as one historian has argued, “the living embodiment of the nation.”<sup>7</sup> At the pinnacle of American society and government, the President represents the essence of the United States. As a result, the choice of president goes beyond policy considerations. Not only do Americans choose the chief politician, they also choose a representative of America. Presidential elections, therefore, are “symbolic contests over competing definition of ‘real manhood’ and thus over what kind of man can, and should, be in charge.”<sup>8</sup> With various examples and ideal forms of manhood, candidates attempt to cast themselves as the type of man that the nation needs at that moment in time. In this way, presidential politics is inherently gendered. Before solidifying around one choice of President, the nation must first be pulled apart during the election cycle. “American society” James McLeod has noted “is disarticulated metaphorically every four years and then rearticulated through the election/inauguration cycle.”<sup>9</sup> While the nation may be divided over what type of manhood it prefers, once the president is determined, he comes to symbolize one

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<sup>6</sup> Michael A. Genovese, “Presidency Watching,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 2/3 (1977): 90.

<sup>7</sup> Katz, *Man Enough?*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> James R. McLeod, “The Sociodrama of Presidential Politics: Rhetoric, Ritual, and Power in the Era of Teledemocracy,” *American Anthropologist* 101, no. 2 (1999): 360.

authoritative version of “American manhood.”<sup>10</sup> Coming out victorious from presidential elections, the American President has historically represented the ideal American manhood.

Just as the President embodies American manhood, the First Lady can serve as an embodiment of “American womanhood.”<sup>11</sup> By virtue of her position, the First Lady too “functions as a representative of the nation.”<sup>12</sup> She, along with the President, is charged with representing the United States both at home and abroad. First Ladies and hopeful First Ladies themselves understand this. Remembering her husband’s 1992 campaign, Hillary Clinton reflected, “a First Lady’s appearance matters. I was no longer representing only myself. I was asking the American people to let me represent them in a role that has conveyed everything from glamour to motherly comfort.”<sup>13</sup> The First Ladies’ performances of femininity have political consequences and are part of the larger conversations about the President. Presidential scholar Jackson Katz argues that “cultural conversations about First Lady femininity ... [are] by definition, conversations about the president’s manhood, because the woman he is partnered with says a great deal about *him*.”<sup>14</sup>

The importance of First Ladies as gender role models is reflected in Americans’ considerable interest in candidates’ wives during elections. During its first century, America was only sporadically interested in candidates’ wives. For instance, rumors surrounding Andrew and Rachel Jackson’s marriage ran rife during his 1828 electoral campaign. Washingtonians alleged that the Tennessee woman would smoke a corn-cobb pipe in the White House and questioned her

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<sup>10</sup> Katz, *Man Enough?*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Kate Andersen Brower, *First Women: The Grace and Power of America’s Modern First Ladies* (New York City: Harpers Collins Publishers, 2016), 4., 8.

<sup>12</sup> Betty Houchin Winfield, “Anna Eleanor Roosevelt’s White House Legacy: The Public First Lady,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1988): 343..

<sup>13</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Living History* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 111.

<sup>14</sup> Katz, 140.

character.<sup>15</sup> Though Andrew won the presidency, Rachel Jackson died in January 1829, allegedly killed by the weight of these rumors.<sup>16</sup> As interest in the presidency increased, so did interest in candidates' wives. During her husband's 1896 campaign, Ida McKinley earned the distinction of being the first wife of a candidate with her own campaign biography. The campaign wrote and circulated the biography to introduce the public to her and combat harmful rumors about the causes of her ill-health.<sup>17</sup> One newspaper defended Florence Harding's involvement in politics during her husband's administration by writing "When the people elect a President they at the same time elect a President-tess."<sup>18</sup> About four decades later, the Republican National Committee issued a press release during the 1960 campaign saying, "When you elect a President you are also electing a First Lady."<sup>19</sup> Reflecting Betty Ford's popularity, one campaign sticker read: "Keep Betty's Husband in the White House."<sup>20</sup> President Gerald Ford's electoral success was bolstered by his wife's presence and public appeal. As the President's wife or appointed hostess, the First Lady represents the ideal American woman. In the annual Gallup poll of the "Most Admired Woman," the First Lady or a former First Lady have held the top spots for much of its over half-century history.<sup>21</sup> In 2018 for example, three of the five most admired women

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*, 1. ed (New York: Holt, 2006), 197, 226.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*, Jeffersonian America (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 196–97.

<sup>17</sup> Molly Meijer Wertheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice: The Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century*, Communication, Media, and Politics (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 34.

<sup>18</sup> Katherine A. S. Sibley, *First Lady Florence Harding: Behind the Tragedy and Controversy*, Modern First Ladies (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 85.

<sup>19</sup> Robert P. Watson, *The Presidents' Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady* (Boulder: L. Rienner, 2000), 30.

<sup>20</sup> Allida M. Black, "The Modern First Lady and Public Policy: From Edith Wilson through Hillary Rodham Clinton.," *OAH Magazine of History* 15, no. 3 (2002): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/maghis/15.3.15>.

<sup>21</sup> Watson, 75.

were First Ladies (Michelle Obama in first place, Hillary Clinton in third, and Melania Trump in fourth).<sup>22</sup> For the seventeen years prior, Clinton held the top spot on this list.<sup>23</sup>

As gender norms shift, First Ladies both reflect and help shape changing American ideals. Historian Edith Mayo argues that “The First Ladies’ lives provide a unique historical window to the realities of women’s lives at any given period in the American past.”<sup>24</sup> While Mayo neglects to point out that all First Ladies are, by definition, members of the most elite class in America and, with the notable exception of Michelle Obama, white women, she is right that their lives can illuminate larger changes in women’s roles in society. For example, the actions, clothing, and public persona that Lady Bird Johnson took as First Lady would hardly have been allowed when Dolley Madison served in the same role. Often, First Ladies are expected to err on the side of conservatism. Historian Lewis Gould makes the case that “First ladies are not a leading indicator. They are a lagging indicator. Social change will happen and about 15 years later, we’ll say it’s okay for first ladies too.”<sup>25</sup> However, some First Ladies have helped drive social change. Harriet Lane, James Buchanan’s niece and surrogate First Lady, made lower and less physically restricting necklines fashionable in the 1850s.<sup>26</sup> After her death, *The New York Times* credited Eleanor Roosevelt as being “The Symbol of the New Role Women were to Play in The World.”<sup>27</sup> As cultural expectations of the roles of women have evolved and changed throughout American history, so too have America’s expectations of its leading women.

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<sup>22</sup> Gallup Inc., “Michelle Obama Ends Hillary Clinton’s Run as Most Admired,” Gallup.com, accessed January 6, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/245669/michelle-obama-ends-hillary-clinton-run-admired.aspx>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Edith P. Mayo, “From the Editor: Teaching a First Ladies Curriculum in the Classroom,” *OAH Magazine of History* 15, no. 3 (2001): 3.

<sup>25</sup> MaryAnne Borrelli, *The Politics of the President’s Wife*, 1st ed, Joseph V. Hughes Jr. and Holly O. Hughes Series on the Presidency and Leadership (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2011), 204.

<sup>26</sup> Lloyd C. Taylor, “HARRIET LANE—MIRROR OF AN AGE,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 30, no. 2 (1963): 213.

<sup>27</sup> Winfield, “Anna Eleanor Roosevelt’s White House Legacy,” 331.

Jackie Kennedy is another example of a First Lady who helped to change American society and expectations of womanhood. With her brown hair and interest in historical preservation, Kennedy replaced “the dumb blonde” stereotype of the 1950s.<sup>28</sup> According to *The New York Times*, Kennedy showed “It is now alright for a woman to be a bit brainy or cultured.”<sup>29</sup> Kennedy was a stark contrast to her immediate predecessor, Mamie Eisenhower, who thought of her role as secondary to that of her husband’s. As one historian wrote, Eisenhower’s “favorite color [pink] fit well America’s mood in the 1950s when femininity meant optionless dependence.”<sup>30</sup> Kennedy’s departure from the norms of the 1950s served to inspire changing views of American womanhood. This new view of womanhood mattered and affected American women of all walks of life. As a cultural icon, Kennedy inspired American women to change the way they dressed, did their hair, and decorated their homes. American women of the 1960s tried to be just like Kennedy.<sup>31</sup> Kennedy both represented and helped shape changing views on women. In contrast to her more matronly predecessor, Kennedy epitomized a changing American ideal.

Especially as public attention on the First Lady has drastically increased since the start of the twentieth century, many find themselves caught in double binds between competing and, at times, antithetical notions. One historian concisely summed up the problem First Ladies face: they are often “damned if they do, and damned if they don’t.”<sup>32</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, a trailblazing First Lady, found herself “the target of more adverse criticism and the object of more

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<sup>28</sup> Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama*, Rev. and updated ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 228.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>30</sup> Wertheimer, *Inventing a Voice*, 224.

<sup>31</sup> Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, *Jacqueline Kennedy Historic Conversations on Life with John F. Kennedy, Interviews with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., 1964* (New York: Hyperion Audio, 2011), xxvi.

<sup>32</sup> Robert P. Watson, “‘Source Material’: Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2003): 434.



praise than any other woman in American history” according to the Gallup polling company.<sup>33</sup> Roosevelt ignited America’s love and its hatred through her challenges to the traditional norms of American femininity. A few decades later, Lady Bird Johnson too faced criticism for her beautification agenda; billboards around the nation went up saying “Impeach the First Lady.”<sup>34</sup> Even Laura Bush, a generally conservative First Lady, came under criticism. After Bush made a statement in regard to abortion, conservative commentator Robert Novak exploded saying “Well, I’ve been saying on this program since the days of Nancy Reagan that I don’t understand why first ladies have any role in making policy. They can talk about their husbands, but the idea of saying that *Roe v. Wade* should not be overturned is none of Laura Bush’s business, and [she] shouldn’t be talking about it.”<sup>35</sup> These attacks on First Ladies are not simply attacks on the actions of individual women. Rather, as one political communications strategist said, there is “a growing backlash against real and perceived female empowerment that finds easy expression of criticism for our First Lady.”<sup>36</sup>

This is nothing new. The 1896 and 1900 Presidential campaigns presented two very different models of femininity and there was a growing public realization of the impact that the election of either candidate could have on women. William McKinley is credited with running the first modern campaign and his is also the first to widely distribute campaign literature on his wife. His wife, Ida McKinley, was an invalid for much of her adult life.<sup>37</sup> By all accounts, William was loving and attentive to her many needs. His devotion to his wife earned him praise

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<sup>33</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 397.

<sup>34</sup> Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Diane M. Blair, “The Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady: Politics, Gender Ideology, and Women’s Voice, 1789-2002,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 5, no. 4 (2002): 580.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 566.

<sup>36</sup> Katz, *Man Enough?*, 146.

<sup>37</sup> Wertheimer, *Inventing a Voice*, 33.

and women, still denied suffrage in most states, brought their husbands to campaign events to meet him.<sup>38</sup> During the 1896 election, William chose, instead of campaigning around the nation, to run a campaign from his front porch. Among the reasons that he chose this style of campaign was, according to one historian, so that “The image could be projected of the candidate remaining at home with his invalid wife.”<sup>39</sup> William created and fostered an image centered around his role as a husband. Often confined to a wheelchair, McKinley was described by one popular magazine during the 1900 campaign as a “frail form, clad in the rich, ceremonious dress proper to the occasion” who “describes a gentle martyrdom, the indescribable pathos of which is written in the expression of her sweet pale face.”<sup>40</sup> To this magazine writer, the re-election of her husband “would provide the American people a First Lady who exalts mere womanliness above anything that women dare to do.”<sup>41</sup> To William’s supporters, McKinley was celebrated as an ideal wife. Birdelle Switzer, the society editor of a leading regional newspaper, told McKinley that “We cannot all hope to win presidents for husbands, but your example as a wife is before us...”<sup>42</sup> William Jennings Bryan, William’s rival for the presidency, on the other hand, had a very different wife. Mary Bryan was a trained lawyer. The same magazine article that described McKinley dubbed Bryan “a woman of action” who wrote the famous “Cross of Gold” speech that “first brought Mr. Bryan into national prominence.”<sup>43</sup> While McKinley served as “a needed gentle sedative to the typical woman of today who aims to do too much,” if Bryan became First Lady, she “would be a needed stimulant to the woman who aims at nothing at all.”<sup>44</sup> As this

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<sup>38</sup> Wertheimer, *Inventing a Voice*, 33.

<sup>39</sup> William D. Harpine, “Playing to the Press in McKinley’s Front Porch Campaign: The Early Weeks of a Nineteenth-Century Pseudo-Event,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2000): 77.

<sup>40</sup> Wertheimer, 34.

<sup>41</sup> Wertheimer, 34.

<sup>42</sup> Harpine, 81.

<sup>43</sup> Wertheimer, 34.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

article shows, the public started to care and pay attention to competing forms of womanhood and wifehood. Just as the President reflects ideals of American manhood, the First Lady shapes and reflects ideals of American womanhood.

Reflecting on the final decades of the twentieth century, one historian wrote, “We have also experienced a conservative backlash, which has reinvigorated traditionalist conceptions of women as best suited to the private sphere. The first ladies have found themselves in the midst of these debates, their roles and responsibilities subjected to constant comment.”<sup>45</sup> Betty Ford was an early victim of this backlash. During a 1975 interview with popular news program *60 Minutes*, she rejected many conservative notions of femininity with her “unequivocal endorsement of policies that would liberalize women’s gender roles.”<sup>46</sup> During the interview, among other things, Ford said “it was the best thing in the world when the Supreme Court voted to legalize abortion” and she “wouldn’t be surprised” if her daughter had a sexual relationship with a man outside of marriage.<sup>47</sup> Her comments created a national uproar. In the three months following the airing of her interview, the White House received nearly 14,000 pieces of mail in response. In a random sample of the letters, 66.9 percent were critical and 33.1 percent were supportive.<sup>48</sup> Regardless of their views on her interview, most writers addressed Ford as a gender role model. One critical letter writer wrote “I am shocked and grieved that you, the First Lady of the land, should make such a statement. Don’t you realize that you are a leader of the country’s women?”<sup>49</sup> A supporter wrote “Saw you on 60 Minutes and am pleased – as a woman – to be

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<sup>45</sup> Maryanne Borrelli, “Competing Conceptions of the First Ladyship: Public Responses to Betty Ford’s ‘60 Minutes’ Interview,” (*Presidential Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 3, 2001), 397.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>47</sup> Betty Ford, Ford, Betty - General, interview by Morley Safer, August 10, 1975, Ford Presidential Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0204/1511773.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Borrelli, 402.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

represented by your candor, openness & honesty.”<sup>50</sup> Advocating a new model of femininity, Ford was both praised and criticized but always recognized as a gender role model.

While Betty Ford may have presented too much of a challenge to traditional norms, Barbara Bush failed to challenge them enough. Serving as First Lady from 1989 to 1993, Bush portrayed herself as a traditional housewife. She avoided the limelight and wrote in her memoirs, “I honestly felt, and still feel, the elected person’s opinion is the one the public has the right to know.”<sup>51</sup> However, in the rising age of women’s liberation, such a stance brought Bush under fire. During her husband’s first presidential bid in 1980, Bush remembered one college visit where she was “asked all the tough questions and harangued for not speaking out on the issues myself.”<sup>52</sup> Just as her daughter-in-law and many of her predecessors were criticized for being overly vocal, Bush was criticized for being too silent.

The controversy over Bush roared into the center of public debate in 1990. Wellesley College, an elite all-women’s college, invited Bush to give its commencement address.<sup>53</sup> The choice ignited a protest on campus. Within a few weeks of the announcement, 150 seniors signed a petition for the college president. The petitioners argued, “To honor Barbara Bush as a commencement speaker is to honor a woman who has gained recognition through the achievements of her husband, which contradicts what we have been taught over the last four year at Wellesley. Regardless of her political affiliation, we feel that she does not successfully exemplify the qualities that Wellesley seeks to instill in us.”<sup>54</sup> The debate over whether or not

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<sup>50</sup> Borrelli, “Competing Conceptions of the First Ladyship: Public Responses to Betty Ford’s ‘60 Minutes’ Interview,” 405.

<sup>51</sup> Barbara Bush, *Barbara Bush: A Memoir* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1994), 154.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>53</sup> Hertz and Reverby, “GENTILITY, GENDER, AND POLITICAL PROTEST: The Barbara Bush Controversy at Wellesley College,” *Gender & Society* 9, no. 5 (1995): 594.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 596.

Bush was an appropriate commencement speaker turned into a debate over whether or not she, as a non-career woman, was an appropriate gender role model. In response to the petition and the controversy, Wellesley received 452 letters from forty-six states, some condemning Bush and others condemning the students.<sup>55</sup> One 1970 alumna wrote, “The implication that women are worthy of honor only if they have ‘gained recognition’ in the traditional male sense saddens me.”<sup>56</sup> This writer questioned the criteria by which the students were evaluating Bush. Another writer agreed: “To me feminism is more than just finding the women who succeed by male standards: it is also about redefining what is important.”<sup>57</sup> These women – both the students and the letter writers – were engaging in a conversation about how to define and evaluate women’s success, using Bush as a rhetorical example. Other writers merely wrote in support of the students making their voices heard. One Wellesley parent wrote “I admire the ability of Wellesley young women to think for themselves and to speak up for themselves.”<sup>58</sup> A 1955 alumna urged the students to “Please, please, don’t be intimidated into silence or complacency.”<sup>59</sup> By encouraging young women to continue to be politically active, these writers too were engaging in a conversation about femininity. In her memoirs, Bush wrote “The truth is, I did understand what the girls who had protested were saying”<sup>60</sup> Bush addressed the debate in her commencement address. She told the audience “We are in a transitional period right now... fascinating and exhilarating times... learning to adjust to the changes and the choices we... men and women... are facing.”<sup>61</sup> On the eve of a new millennium, Bush stood as a representation of a

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<sup>55</sup> Hertz and Reverby, “GENTILITY, GENDER, AND POLITICAL PROTEST: The Barbara Bush Controversy at Wellesley College,” 597.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 603.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 606.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 601.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 345.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 548.

more traditional view of motherhood and womanhood. Bush told the young women “our conversation is only beginning. And a worthwhile conversation it is.”<sup>62</sup> Acknowledging changes in society and the role of women, she urged the young women to continue to question and develop ideal womanhood. The Wellesley controversy is an example of how First Ladies can spark and participate in much wider conversations about gender roles.

Just like the 1900 election, the 1992 presidential election featured two very different versions of femininity: Bush and Clinton. In the election, the Bushes’ “traditional family values” starkly contrasted with the Clintons’ “life style partnership” between two highly successful professionals.<sup>63</sup> Clinton was, ironically, a Wellesley alumna and a Yale-educated lawyer. She represented, in her own words “a fundamental change in the way women functioned in our society.”<sup>64</sup> Clinton was unapologetic about her break with traditional norms. In a *60 Minutes* interview about Bill Clinton’s alleged infidelities, Clinton referred to a popular country music star saying “I’m not sitting here, some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette,” and cast herself as an independent woman, not one reliant on her husband.<sup>65</sup> Later, Clinton asserted “I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and have teas, but what I decided to do was fulfill my profession.”<sup>66</sup> Rejecting traditional expectations of a non-career First Lady, Clinton presented herself as a distinct alternative model of successful womanhood. This version was greeted with both praise and criticism. Letters flooded into the campaign. Clinton remembered receiving hundreds of letters about her “cookies and tea” statement. Some women thanked her for the courage of demonstrating a different set of choices for women. On

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<sup>62</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 549.

<sup>63</sup> McLeod, “The Sociodrama of Presidential Politics,” 364.

<sup>64</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 110.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

the other hand, “Critics were venomous.”<sup>67</sup> One letter referred to her as “an insult to American motherhood” while another called her the “Antichrist.”<sup>68</sup> This charged rhetoric reveals the importance Americans assign to First Ladies’ and potential First Ladies’ performance of femininity. Another testament to the political importance of this question, *Time* magazine dedicated a cover to “The Hillary factor: Is she helping or hurting her husband?”<sup>69</sup> A smart, highly educated and opinionated woman, Clinton presented a new and, to some, frightening version of womanhood.

The First Lady does not wield her power in the same way as the President. Historian Robert P. Watson describes First Ladies as possessing a “White Glove Pulpit” or “a distinctly feminine means of asserting power, necessitated by the strict gender confines of the pre-suffrage and even pre-modern era.”<sup>70</sup> Though often working in the background and sometime speaking louder with actions than with words, First Ladies exert their influence. As Michelle Obama remarked as she began a program to help tackle childhood obesity, “We were taking on a huge issue, but now I had the benefit of operating from a huge platform. I was beginning to realize that all the things that felt odd to me about my new existence – the strangeness of fame, the hawk-eyed attention paid to my image, the vagueness of my job description – could be marshalled in the service of real goals.”<sup>71</sup> Obama was not the only First Lady to realize the innate power of the position. Even the wheel-chair bound, epileptic McKinley practiced a “rhetoric without words.”<sup>72</sup> Rather than looking at First Ladies as powerless, they might better be viewed as using

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<sup>67</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 110.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> McLeod, “The Sociodrama of Presidential Politics,” 364.

<sup>70</sup> Robert P. Watson, “The ‘White Glove Pulpit’: A History of Policy Influence by First Ladies,” *OAH Magazine of History* 15, no. 3 (2001): 10.

<sup>71</sup> Michelle Obama, *Becoming*, First edition (New York: Crown, 2018), 339.

<sup>72</sup> Wertheimer, *Inventing a Voice*, 40.

a different, feminine form of power in contrast to Presidents' masculine form. While First Ladies may have been "politically and legally disenfranchised" before 1920, they "were not without a voice in civic affairs."<sup>73</sup> As Paula Baker writes, historians "need to go beyond the definition of 'political' offered by nineteenth-century men."<sup>74</sup>

First Ladies have provided models of the ways that women can be involved in politics and public life. For much of American history, women were not expected to operate in the public sphere and the world of politics. Even today, First Ladies still find themselves limited in the types of issues that are considered appropriate for them as women to take on. Yet, First Ladies have long influenced policy. Early First Ladies drew on the ideologies of republican motherhood and later benevolent femininity to bolster their own legitimacy and role in policy making. One scholar wrote that, following the American Revolution, "republican motherhood affirmed that women had a profound influence on the political values of the American Republic. As wives and mothers, women were seen to make an essential, though indirect, contribution to the body politic."<sup>75</sup> This theory had its roots in eighteenth century Scottish thought. These Enlightenment thinkers increasingly saw the family as the basic building block of society and believed that key civic values were passed down through the family.<sup>76</sup> In these family units, mothers became responsible for teaching their husbands and sons how to be virtuous citizens.<sup>77</sup> An eighteenth century philosopher explained the role of women in educating future citizens: "Even upon the breast, infants are susceptible of impressions; and the mother hath opportunities without end of

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<sup>73</sup> Watson, "The 'White Glove Pulpit,'" 9.

<sup>74</sup> Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (1984): 647.

<sup>75</sup> Rosemarie Zagari, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," *American Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1992): 192.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>77</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 35.



instilling into them good principles, before they are fit for a male tutor.”<sup>78</sup> As the educators of the next generation, women had the responsibility of securing the future of republican society which they used to increase their political influence. In addition, starting in the early nineteenth century, female maternalist political advocates “structured their social concerns within the context of their difference from men and shifted a moral vision to political action with their attempts at social reform for women and children.”<sup>79</sup> Combining materialism with republican motherhood, women justified their political activism. Over time, women transformed the ideal of republican motherhood into benevolent femininity, “the idea that women had the duty to promote virtue not only within their families but also in the surrounding community by supporting benevolent enterprises.”<sup>80</sup> Benevolent femininity allowed women to expand their influence from the home into public debates surrounding it.

Building on the ideology of republican motherhood, First Ladies often seek to portray themselves as mothers and connect their interest in policy with their roles as mothers. All but two presidential wives, Sarah Polk and Florence Harding, were mothers.<sup>81</sup> Before becoming and while serving as First Lady, Martha Washington deliberately fostered a mothering image for herself. Visiting her husband during the Revolutionary War, Washington knitted and sewed for her husband’s soldiers.<sup>82</sup> Her successor, Abigail Adams, actively participated in policy discussions. However, like Washington and many other women of her era, Adams justified her involvement by the fact that she was a mother. In a letter to her husband, Adams wrote, “You

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<sup>78</sup> Zagari, “Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother,” 200.

<sup>79</sup> Cynthia Edmonds-Cady, “Mobilizing Motherhood: Race, Class, and the Uses of Maternalism in the Welfare Rights Movement,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3/4 (2009): 207.

<sup>80</sup> Elizabeth R. Varon, “Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too: White Women and Party Politics in Antebellum Virginia,” *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (September 1995): 519, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082184>.

<sup>81</sup> Karen O’Connor, Bernadette Nye, and Laura Van Assendelft, “Wives in the White House: The Political Influence of First Ladies,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1996): 840.

<sup>82</sup> Jeanne E. Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic: Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and the Creation of an Iconic American Role* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 57–58.

know my mind is much occupied with the affairs of our Country. If as a Female I may be called an Idle, I never can be an uninterested Spectator of what is transacting upon to great Theater, when the welfare and happiness of my Children and the rising generation is involved in the present counseling and conduct of the principle [political] Actors.”<sup>83</sup> Adams couched her public sphere involvement in policy considerations with her private sphere duties as a mother.

An early adopter of benevolent femininity, Harriet Lane engaged with two major policy areas both of which she justified through the traditional role of women: helping the poor and promoting health. Lane was especially interested in improving the conditions of impoverished Native Americans. After the Chippewa tribe brought her a petition asking for help ending the illegal liquor trade on their reservation and other abuses by government officials, she remedied the situation. Lane also worked to improve the educational and medical facilities on the reservation. Though her abilities to make long-lasting change were limited, “she was one of the first people of influence to plead [the Native American’s] case in official circles.”<sup>84</sup> In a testament to how appreciated her contributions were, the tribe dubbed Lane “the great mother of the Indians” and many named their daughters for her.<sup>85</sup> Lane’s actions were compared to that of a mother, emphasizing the feminine way that her efforts were perceived. By focusing on moral problems, education, and medicine, Lane stayed within the sphere of issues that were delegated to women. Lane continued her interest in medicine following her time in the White House. Again, using her power and connections, Lane founded the first pediatric medical center at John Hopkins University in 1893.<sup>86</sup> The Harriet Lane Home provided medical care to children of all

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<sup>83</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 154–55.

<sup>84</sup> Taylor, “HARRIET LANE—MIRROR OF AN AGE,” 219.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

races and income levels and researched pediatric diseases.<sup>87</sup> With the focus on children and health, Lane's activities once more fell within the bounds of motherhood. Lane used her position as a woman to frame and justify her involvement in policy issues.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, First Ladies continue to use their gender and roles as mothers to justify their increasingly vocal policy roles and their adoption of "pet projects." One historian noted, "Just as the twentieth century gave rise to a new type of president, it also gave rise to a new, more politically engaged First Lady."<sup>88</sup> However, while women were changing the nature of their engagement in policy, they were still careful to focus on issues deemed appropriate for women. In another example of benevolent femininity, Ellen Wilson became the first First Lady to champion specific legislation. Her bill improved slum housing and provided better living conditions for low-income, urban families.<sup>89</sup> As it deals with domestic spaces, housing is clearly a woman's issue. Wilson was known throughout Washington for "incessantly" lobbying on behalf of the bill.<sup>90</sup> Lady Bird Johnson, often credited as the first First Lady who adopted a modern "pet project," dedicated her term to the beautification of America. Though this was primarily an environmental program, Johnson centered her argument around her desire to create a better world for children to grow up in.<sup>91</sup>

Like Johnson, Barbara Bush also framed her policy goals around her role as a mother and grandmother. Bush worked to end childhood illiteracy in America, founding the Barbara Bush Foundation to focus on "the entire family, to try and break the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy."<sup>92</sup> Bush said, "We wanted to make literacy a value in every single home in

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<sup>87</sup> Taylor, "HARRIET LANE—MIRROR OF AN AGE," 224.

<sup>88</sup> Black, "The Modern First Lady and Public Policy," 15.

<sup>89</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 144.

<sup>90</sup> Black, 15.

<sup>91</sup> Parry-Giles and Blair, "The Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady," 578.

<sup>92</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 254.

America.”<sup>93</sup> Though her work touched on controversial issues including education and poverty, Bush framed her issue as an extension of her role as a grandmother. Bush sought to make herself seem like “everyone’s favorite grandmother.”<sup>94</sup> To prove that she was not challenging her husband or the existing power structure, Bush practiced her power in a grandmotherly and unthreatening way. To raise money to combat illiteracy, she did not host massive rallies or engage in public policy debates. Instead, she “ghostwrote” a book on behalf of the Bush’s dog, Millie.<sup>95</sup> *Millie’s Book* sold 400,000 copies and raised over \$1 million for her Foundation. As George liked to say “it just wasn’t right. He was President of the United States and his dog made more money than he did!”<sup>96</sup> Bush was incredibly powerful and influential, yet she disguised her influence under a veneer of femininity and justified it through her role as a grandmother.

After attempting to reform the American health care industry, Hillary Clinton realized that she would be more successful presenting her work as being centered around women and children. Following her failure to help pass comprehensive health care reform, Clinton wrote “I underestimated the resistance I would meet as a First Lady with a policy mission.”<sup>97</sup> However, Clinton was hardly the first First Lady to take on policy. She was not the first First Lady champion legislation or testify before Congress, both Eleanor Roosevelt and Rosalynn Carter had.<sup>98</sup> What distinguished Clinton from her predecessor was not that she had a policy mission but rather the nature of and manner which she pursued it. When a First Lady tries to take on a policy issue outside of what is traditionally considered “women’s fields of expertise,” she finds herself

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<sup>93</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 254.

<sup>94</sup> Brower, *First Women: The Grace and Power of America’s Modern First Ladies*, 265.

<sup>95</sup> Max J. Skidmore, *Presidential Performance: A Comprehensive Review* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2004), 332–33.

<sup>96</sup> Bush, 364.

<sup>97</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 248.

<sup>98</sup> Black, “The Modern First Lady and Public Policy,” 18.

“on shaky ground.”<sup>99</sup> Clinton’s policy agendas became more successful when she reframed her issues to focus around children. She secured the establishment of the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Covering low income children, CHIP was “the largest expansion of public health insurance coverage since the passage of Medicaid in 1965.”<sup>100</sup> Once she learned how to use the power of her office and her gender, Clinton achieved major policy successes. She successfully advocated for bills dealing with childbirth, childhood diabetes, adoption policies, and childhood vaccination rates.<sup>101</sup> These were hardly unpolitical or nonpartisan issues, but she justified her involvement with her status as a mother. Titling her 1996 book *It Takes a Village* after an African proverb, Clinton wrote the proverb “offers a timeless reminder that children will thrive only if their families thrive and if the whole of society cares enough to provide for them.”<sup>102</sup> In this book, Clinton talked about child care, education, and affordable college tuition. Presenting these issues as women and children’s issues, Clinton received less criticism for her policy advocacy. American public opinion does not condemn First Ladies for taking on policy issues, it condemns them for taking on issues outside of their expected sphere. Hillary Clinton served as an example of how First Ladies’ power is limited but can also be exploited to create real political change.

Coming into the White House with young children, Michelle Obama presented herself as a working mother. Talking with Michelle Obama and reflecting on her time as First Lady, Clinton “was candid with [Obama] about how she’d misjudged the country’s readiness to have a pro-active professional woman in the role of First Lady.”<sup>103</sup> Careful to avoid the same pitfalls

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<sup>99</sup> O’Connor, Nye, and Van Assendelft, “Wives in the White House,” 850.

<sup>100</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 248.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 248 and 365.

<sup>102</sup> Parry-Giles and Blair, “The Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady,” 578.

<sup>103</sup> Obama, *Becoming*, 335.

that Clinton had fallen into, Obama called herself “mom-in-chief.”<sup>104</sup> Obama acknowledge that, as a professional woman with two Ivy League degrees, she “was being watched with a certain kind of anticipation, especially by women, maybe especially by professional working women, who wondered whether I’d bury my education and management experience to fold myself into some prescribed First Lady pigeonhole, a place lined with tea leaves and pink linen.”<sup>105</sup> Many feminists thought that she should be more actively involved in policy. POLITICO even ran a cover article subtitled “How Michelle Obama became a feminist nightmare.”<sup>106</sup> In it, one feminist complained that “She essentially became the English lady of the manor, Tory Party, circa 1830s.”<sup>107</sup> Another said “She is one of the most influential black women on the planet, and I consider it a national shame that she’s not putting the weight of her office behind some of these issues.”<sup>108</sup> These writers failed to realize the Obama was exercising her power.

She did not shy away from tackling pressing policy problems, she simply presented them as an extension of her role as a mother. In her memoir, she writes “I put everything I had into Malia and Sasha [her two daughters] and their development, but as First Lady I was mindful, too, of a larger obligation. I felt that I owed more to children in general, in particular to girls.”<sup>109</sup> While her husband focused on health care reform at the start of his administration, Obama began an initiative to improve health and started a White House garden. According to her, “the garden was a way to offer a parallel message [to healthcare reform] about healthy living.”<sup>110</sup> Obama designed her agenda to go along with her husband’s. Covering her efforts, a contemporary article

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<sup>104</sup> Brower, *First Women: The Grace and Power of America’s Modern First Ladies*, 20.

<sup>105</sup> Obama, *Becoming*, 328.

<sup>106</sup> Michelle Cottle, “Leaning Out,” POLITICO Magazine, accessed March 25, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/11/leaning-out-michelle-obama-100244.html>.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Obama, 355.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 309–10.

wrote “We found a still-evolving legacy that dovetails — by design — with the president’s far more controversial accomplishment, the Affordable Care Act.”<sup>111</sup> Obama used her soft power to encourage children to eat better and exercise more. She “mom-danced” with late-night host Jimmy Fallon on national television and nerf-dunked on professional basketball player LeBron James.<sup>112</sup> These moments became internet sensations, shared and re-shared across social media. Obama understood her target audience and created a communications plan to reach them. She was less concerned with interviews with major newspapers and focused instead of interviews with “influential ‘mommy bloggers’ who reached an enormous and dialed-in audience of women.”<sup>113</sup> Knowing that mothers were often the ones buying the food and making their children’s meals, Obama addressed them as a fellow working mom.

Obama did more than plant a garden and dance on television; she pressured some of America’s largest restaurant chains to cut calories in the food they served.<sup>114</sup> She also “spent hours making calls to senators and representatives” trying to convince them to pass a new child nutrition bill.<sup>115</sup> Her efforts paid off and, in 2010, her husband signed the bill into law.<sup>116</sup> By the end of her husband’s second term in office, “Forty-five million kids were eating healthier breakfasts and lunches; eleven million students were getting sixty minutes of physical activity every day through our Let’s Move! Active Schools programs.”<sup>117</sup> Consistently presenting herself as a concerned mother working to help America’s children, Obama combined the hard and soft

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<sup>111</sup> Helena Bottemiller Evich and Darren Samuelsohn, “The Great FLOTUS Food Fight,” *The Agenda*, accessed March 25, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/agenda/story/2016/03/michelle-obama-healthy-eating-school-lunch-food-policy-000066>.

<sup>112</sup> Obama, *Becoming*, 414.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* 372.

<sup>114</sup> Evich and Samuelsohn, “The Great FLOTUS Food Fight.”

<sup>115</sup> Obama, 348.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

powers of the White House to advance her legislative agenda and make real differences in the lives of American children.

However, Obama's role was controversial. Senator Ted Cruz, a Texas Republican, promised that his wife would restore French fries to school menus if she was First Lady. The hashtag #thanksMichelleObama trended on social media with pictures of unsavory school lunches alongside the viral videos of her dancing. Despite the backlash against some of her proposals, POLITICO deemed Obama's campaign "a modern example of how a White House spouse can use her unelected platform to wage a genuine Washington policy fight."<sup>118</sup> Using their roles as women and mothers, First Ladies are able to create change though they are still limited in the extent of change they can create.

Speaking as women, First Ladies have also broken-down stigmas about other health problems. Concerning the family, health is traditionally considered an appropriately feminine issue. After leaving the White House, Ford went public with her addiction to pain pills and alcohol. Her frank acknowledgement of her illness and her openness in sharing her struggle helped open more conversations about health. Ford used her public profile to raise funds to open a fourteen-acre rehabilitation center in 1982.<sup>119</sup> Then Second Lady and Vice President, Barbara and George Bush helped to amplify Ford's message by attending the dedication ceremony. In this joint appearance, George addressed the audience: "In 1978 Betty Ford discovered that she had become dependent on alcohol and drugs... She transformed her pain into something great for the common good... Our nation has produced great men. It has also produced great women. Our gracious First Lady stands among them."<sup>120</sup> Ford's openness about her addiction and the center

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<sup>118</sup> Evich and Samuelsohn, "The Great FLOTUS Food Fight."

<sup>119</sup> Brower, *First Women: The Grace and Power of America's Modern First Ladies*, 98.

<sup>120</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 180.



she set up helped to bring conversations about addiction into the forefront of American culture. As First Lady, Barbara Bush did her own part to combat myths about illnesses. At the height of the AIDS crisis, many Americans continued to believe that the disease could be contracted merely by touch. In an effort to dispel this misconception, Bush visited an AIDS clinic and held an infected baby.<sup>121</sup> In her own words, Bush remembers “[At the clinic] I held a precious baby who later died. Unbelievably, this photo made news because, even then, people still thought that touching a person with the virus was dangerous.”<sup>122</sup> Through this symbolic action, Bush helped to decrease the fear and misunderstandings surrounding the AIDS epidemic. However, while impactful, neither of these women could fully fix either problem. Opening a clinic does not ensure equal access to health care for all nor does holding a baby with AIDS ensure additional funding for a cure. But, with both addiction and AIDS, these two First Ladies shaped and changed the public conversations.

During times of war and crisis, the First Lady can serve as an example of the role women can play in home-front war efforts. Madison became, in the words of historian Catherine Allgor, the “public personification of the war effort” during the War of 1812.<sup>123</sup> Not only showing her personal heroism by famously saving George Washington’s portrait, Madison was an example of how all Americans – men and women – could support the nation. A century later, Edith Wilson continued this same practice during the First World War, endeavoring to convert “the White House into a model of war time sacrifice.”<sup>124</sup> In addition to observing meatless days like the rest of the nation, Wilson went even further. She borrowed a flock of sheep to trim the White House grass. The sheep had the dual purpose to lowering the cost of grass maintenance and producing

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<sup>121</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 290.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>123</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 95.

<sup>124</sup> Caroli, 150.

wool to be auctioned off to support the war effort.<sup>125</sup> Like Madison, Wilson wanted to provide other women an example of how to support the war effort. During the next world war, Eleanor Roosevelt made the same effort to set an example to housewives around the nation. Just as Wilson had, Roosevelt made sure that what the country went without, the White House would go without. When the Navy and the Army announced they would need sugar, Roosevelt promised that the White House would cut back on sugar usage. When silk was needed for parachutes, Roosevelt joined hundreds of women in putting aside their silk stockings in favor of cotton ones.<sup>126</sup> Roosevelt also reminded Americans at home how important their work was supporting the war. Compared to Wilson, Roosevelt had built her relationship with the American people and her interest in policy over a longer period of time. In addition, while Wilson did not even have the franchise, Roosevelt had a daily column which allowed her to speak directly to the American people in a way none of her predecessors had been able to. In her daily column “My Day” following D-Day, Roosevelt told Americans “The best way in which we can help is by doing our jobs here better than ever before, no matter what these jobs may be.”<sup>127</sup> Roosevelt joined the rest of America in celebrating the heroic actions of the men in Normandy but also acknowledged the often unnoticed actions of Americans, especially women, at home.

Mary Todd Lincoln, on the other hand, failed her role as a model of the wartime woman. As one scholar wrote, “It can easily be agreed... that she was one of the most criticized and disliked first ladies in American history.”<sup>128</sup> Today, historians generally believe that Lincoln had

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<sup>125</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 150.

<sup>126</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 316.

<sup>127</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, “Eleanor Roosevelt’s ‘My Day,’ 6/7/1944,” WHHA, June 7, 1944, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/eleanor-roosevelts-my-day-6-7-1944>.

<sup>128</sup> Jason Emerson, “A MEDAL FOR MRS. LINCOLN,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 109, no. 2 (2011): 204.

a mental illness that she struggled with throughout her life.<sup>129</sup> However, this did not earn her sympathy from Washington elites. From her entrance into Washington, Lincoln was seen as an outsider and was disliked by many Washington insiders. As Virginia Clay-Clopton, the wife of a prominent Southern politician, wrote in her memoirs, “Washington became metamorphosed by the strangers who poured into its precincts following the inauguration of Mr. Lincoln in 1861.”<sup>130</sup> Despite the fact that Lincoln overspent her congressional allocated budget for remodeling the White House, Washington society complained that Lincoln was a poor entertainer.<sup>131</sup> Clay-Clopton quoted a fellow socialite who complained in 1868 that she had not “crossed the threshold of the White House since Harriet Lane went out.”<sup>132</sup> While it is important to remember that Clay-Clopton was a Southerner and would therefore have been biased against Mary Todd Lincoln, she was not alone in her dislike of the First Lady.

Northerners too critiqued Lincoln, in particular for her extravagant spending.<sup>133</sup> Mary Clemmer Ames, a contemporary newspaper reporter, did not hide her distain of the First Lady. Ames wrote, “While [Mary Lincoln’s] sister-women scraped lint, sewed bandages... and gave their all to country and to death, the wife of the President spent her time in rolling to and from Washington and New York, intent on extravagant purchases.”<sup>134</sup> Lincoln refused to share in the rest of the nation’s suffering or curtail her own spending habits. Lincoln was further hurt among Northerners by the fact that she had relatives fighting for the Confederacy. One 1861

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<sup>129</sup>Historians do not know exactly what Lincoln suffered from, but many hypothesize that she had a form of bipolar disorder. A decade after Abraham Lincoln’s death, her eldest son, in consultation with medical experts and his father’s friends, had his mother declared legally insane. Emerson, “A MEDAL FOR MRS. LINCOLN,” 194 and 201.

<sup>130</sup> Virginia Clay-Clopton, *A Belle of the Fifties; Memoirs of Mrs. Clay, of Alabama, Covering Social and Political Life in Washington and the South, 1853-66*, (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1905),119.

<sup>131</sup> Emerson, 199.

<sup>132</sup> Clay-Clopton, 120.

<sup>133</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 74.

<sup>134</sup> Martha Weinman, “First Ladies -- in Fashion, Too?,” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, 1960

Philadelphia newspaper article pointed to Lincoln's brother Captain Todd, as being "the most brutal of the officers in charge of the [Union] prisoners... Todd is such a brute that he would kick the dead bodies of our men and call them Abolitionists."<sup>135</sup> The article connects Lincoln to Todd's brutality, further undermining her position in Washington society and her national reputation. These accusations, compounded with her spending habits and perceived lack of empathy of the nation's suffering, even led to rumors of Lincoln serving as a Confederate spy.<sup>136</sup> Americans were so frustrated with Lincoln's actions that some came to believe that she was deliberately sabotaging the war effort. During the Civil War, one of the few things that Americans in both the North and the South could agree on was a shared dislike of Lincoln. Even following her husband's assassination, Lincoln received little sympathy from the public. Newspaper accused the grieving widow of looting the White House as she vacated it for her husband's successor.<sup>137</sup> Mary Lincoln is an example of a First Lady who failed to live up to precedent and was criticized for her tone deafness.

Finally, one of the key ways First Ladies support the President is in a uniquely feminine way: as his wife or close female relative. First Ladies serve as a sounding board for a President's ideas, are among his most trusted staffers and advisors, and provide key emotional support. According to a 1996 study (excluding the three most recent First Ladies), of the thirty-eight women studied "thirty-one [First Ladies] have discussed politics with the president, twenty-six have been confidants or advisers to the president... and fourteen have 'influenced' the appointment process."<sup>138</sup> Even the courts have recognized the influence of First Ladies. In a 1993

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<sup>135</sup> Philadelphia Inquirer, "Affairs South of This City. an Arrival from Richmond," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 3, 1861, News Bank.

<sup>136</sup> Cokie Roberts, *Capital Dames: The Civil War and the Women of Washington, 1848-1868* (New York City: Harpers Collins Publishers, 2015), 225.

<sup>137</sup> Emerson, "A MEDAL FOR MRS. LINCOLN," 194.

<sup>138</sup> O'Connor, Nye, and Van Assendelft, "Wives in the White House," 846.

federal Appeals Court ruling about Hillary Clinton’s involvement in policy discussions, the Court determined that there existed “a longstanding tradition of public service by First Ladies... who have acted (albeit in the background) as advisers and personal representatives of their husbands.”<sup>139</sup>

As wives, First Ladies are uniquely able to speak directly to the President. Abigail Adams was known for voicing her strong opinions to her husband both before and during his presidency.<sup>140</sup> While John may not have always wanted to hear her hard truths, he recognized their value. After being elected President, John wrote to his wife, “I never wanted your Advice and assistance more in my Life.”<sup>141</sup> According to journalist Bess Furman, Millard Fillmore also relied on his wife’s advice. Furman wrote that he “never took any important step without” Abigail Fillmore’s “counsel and advice.”<sup>142</sup> Andrew Johnson “consulted his wife and daughter more than he did any fellow statesmen.”<sup>143</sup> Like Adams, Fillmore and Johnson, Florence Harding advised her husband. The Secretary of State called Harding “her husband’s most faithful counselor.”<sup>144</sup> Other Harding associates noted Warren’s reliance on his wife. One supporter wrote, “She was his keenest, but at the same time his most sympathetic and constructive critic.”<sup>145</sup> Harding would sit in on Warren’s speech practices and help coach him. Warren once remarked that “The Duchess [his pet name for Harding] is sitting by and listening and censors all that I say.”<sup>146</sup> The public too recognized Eleanor Roosevelt’s policy influence during her

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<sup>139</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 310.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>141</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 159.

<sup>142</sup> Parry-Giles and Blair, “The Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady: Politics, Gender Ideology, and Women’s Voice, 1789-2002,” 570.

<sup>143</sup> O’Connor, Nye, and Van Assendelft, “Wives in the White House,” 846.

<sup>144</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 169.

<sup>145</sup> Sibley, *First Lady Florence Harding*, 51.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

husband's administration. According to *US News*, Roosevelt was "the President's Number One Adviser on Sociological Problems."<sup>147</sup> Harry Truman said that he talked everything over with his wife Bess.<sup>148</sup> Harry found Truman's advice and insight valuable and he grappled with the complex problems of the post-World War II world.

Lady Bird Johnson certainly did not hold back when critiquing her husband. In a tape of one of Lyndon Johnson's practice press conference, Johnson is recorded as telling her husband "In general, I'd say it was a good B+." Despite Lyndon's assertion that "it was much better than last week," Johnson did not revise her grade. She did, however, assure her husband "I love you very much."<sup>149</sup> As Lyndon's wife, Johnson could be candid about her evaluation of her husband's effort but also assure him of her undiluted faith in him. Jimmy Carter said "I trust [Rosallynn Carter's] judgement as well as I do anyone. There are practically no inward thoughts or feelings that I don't share with my wife."<sup>150</sup> Evidently, Carter's opinions were influential. According to White House sources, she would "gently prod and sometimes correct her husband" and these sources claimed to "have listened to her express outspoken views that later prevailed."<sup>151</sup> Though the exact nature of the relationship depends on the personalities of each member of the couple, many Presidents have relied on and trusted their wives' honest opinions and advice. With long-lasting, deep relationships, Presidents trust and rely on their wives for counsel.

In addition to acting as advisors, First Ladies fill other behind-the-scenes support roles. While First Ladies have long served these roles, all but a few operated in the background and

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<sup>147</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 205.

<sup>148</sup> Caroli, 208.

<sup>149</sup> Wertheimer, *Inventing a Voice*, 292.

<sup>150</sup> Jack Anderson, "Rosallynn Carter: Co-President's Role," *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*; Washington, D.C., October 4, 1979, sec. VIRGINIA WEEKLEY Comics.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

outside of public view. However, three future First Ladies were officially on their husbands' Congressional payrolls: Florence Harding, Bess Truman, and Lady Bird Johnson.<sup>152</sup> Most First Ladies have served their husbands in informal, unpaid roles. To help save her husband time, Sarah Polk read and highlighted her husband's papers.<sup>153</sup> Polk's ability to anticipate her husband's interests and matters requiring his attention was invaluable and gave her a significant degree of power in determining what crossed the President's desk. Edith Wilson, Woodrow's second wife, also took on roles usually reserved to senior staffers. In addition to helping translate sensitive wartime documents for the President, she served as a liaison between the White House and Capitol Hill and determined who was allowed an audience with the invalid President following his stroke. Like Polk, Wilson acted as the President's gatekeeper. Unlike her predecessor, however, the role Wilson played became highly controversial as critics alleged that she, rather than her husband, truly ran the government.<sup>154</sup> In addition to coaching her husband, Johnson took detailed notes during Lyndon's conversations with potential supporters and donors.<sup>155</sup> Lyndon would later refer to these notes in conversations and interactions with key supporters. As White House advisor Arthur Schlesinger put it, the Johnsons "were like a hockey team."<sup>156</sup> Both members of the couple worked in tandem to achieve the same goals.

Though abstaining from most policy discussions, Jackie Kennedy provided emotional support to her husband during the Cuban Missile Crisis. With the world on the brink of nuclear war, John leaned heavily on Kennedy. Kennedy remembered them taking long walks around the White House lawns as John attempted to decide how to proceed. Kennedy wrote "sometimes

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<sup>152</sup> O'Connor, Nye, and Van Assendelft, "Wives in the White House," 838.

<sup>153</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 65.

<sup>154</sup> Parry-Giles and Blair, "The Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady," 570.

<sup>155</sup> Onassis, *Jacqueline Kennedy Historic Conversations on Life with John F. Kennedy, Interviews with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., 1964*, 85.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

[John] would take me out – it was funny – for a walk around the lawn, a couple of times.... We just sort of walked quietly, then go back in. It was just this vigil.”<sup>157</sup> Following the successful conclusion of the crisis, John thanked the members of his “Ex-Comm,” the group of senior advisors that advised him through the crisis, by gifting each a Tiffany calendar with the thirteen days of the crisis marked. As a sign of his deep appreciation for Kennedy’s untiring support, John gave Kennedy a calendar as well.<sup>158</sup> While Kennedy had no part in the eventual decisions, she did considerable emotional labor supporting her husband during this trying time. Playing different roles, First Ladies fulfill important staffing roles for their husbands. As three scholars wrote “The failure of political scientist and historians to consider the political role of first ladies neglects the role of a key player in the president’s inner circle.”<sup>159</sup> All this labor provided by First Ladies goes uncompensated and often unrecognized by history and the public.

The presidency is a team. Both the President and the First Lady are required for the effective execution of all of the powers of the office. As Warren Harding’s former secret service agent pointed out “The First Lady is an essential requisite to a successful Presidential Administration.”<sup>160</sup> He continued by describing the presidency as a team with husband and wife relying on one another “for the success of each in his and her sphere of individual activity.”<sup>161</sup> The two serve as their respective gender role models. First Ladies are able to help shape changing expectations of femininity. As a symbol of the politics around their gender role modeling, First Ladies’ performances of femininity can ignite political and public controversy. Their performances can also become campaign issues, for instance as seen in the 1900 and 1992

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<sup>157</sup> Onassis, *Jacqueline Kennedy Historic Conversations on Life with John F. Kennedy, Interviews with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.*, 1964, 264.

<sup>158</sup> Brower, *First Women: The Grace and Power of America’s Modern First Ladies*, 92.

<sup>159</sup> Watson, *The Presidents’ Wives*, 1.

<sup>160</sup> Sibley, *First Lady Florence Harding*, 208.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.



presidential campaigns. Without the role of First Ladies, Presidents would be constrained in their affective use of the office of the Presidency.

## CHAPTER 2 THE SYMBOLIC POWER OF THE FIRST LADY

On the night of her husband's inauguration, Dolley Madison hosted an elaborate ball. At the Inaugural Ball, Margaret Bayard Smith, a long time Washington resident and commentator, observed Madison approvingly: "She really in manners and presence answered all my ideas of royalty."<sup>1</sup> Instead of dressing like royalty, however, Madison wore a simply cut yet beautiful gown with pearl jewelry to evoke at once modesty and elegance.<sup>2</sup> Like First Ladies before her, Madison attempted to mix "simplicity and luxury" in her clothing.<sup>3</sup> First Ladies had to walk a thin line between appearing republican yet refined. Madison's famous turbans are an ideal example of an attempt to find the correct balance. While she was not the first to wear them, they quickly became her signature style. As headdresses, turbans played the same role as crowns by allowing Madison to adorn them with jewels but appeared far more republican. In addition, Madison would often attach feathers to them to increase her height and ensure that she stood out in a crowd.<sup>4</sup> With no official position of her own, Madison had to rely on "public personification" as her main tool to advance her agenda.<sup>5</sup> The ways the Madison choose to dress and entertain were widely observed and commented upon. Private presentation matters in politics.

The pomp and pageantry of the presidency contributes to the President's informal powers. First Ladies are key actors in and directors of this presidential pageantry. Serving as the White House hostess, who and how the First Lady entertains sends important political and social

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*, 1. ed (New York: Holt, 2006), 143.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 238–39.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Allgor, "Margaret Bayard Smith's 1809 Journey to Monticello and Montpelier: The Politics of Performance in the Early Republic," *Early American Studies* 10, no. 1 (2012): 60.

messages to the nation and the world. In the People's House, the First Lady's normally domestic and private affairs, including hosting, decorating, and housekeeping have been carefully scrutinized by Washington elite and, more recently, by the public and the world.

The presidency consists of both formal and informal powers, neither of which ought to be neglected. Scholars Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky define informal institutions as "socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels."<sup>6</sup> These informal institutions and powers operate in parallel with and compliment formal ones.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Presidents since Theodore Roosevelt have used their "bully pulpits" to advance their policy agendas alongside their Constitutionally enumerated powers.<sup>8</sup> Presidential rhetoric is not limited to words but rather combines imagery, words, symbols, and more. The President's State of the Union address, for example, shows the multifaceted nature of presidential rhetoric. The President is constitutionally required to "from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union."<sup>9</sup> Political scientist David Zarefsky argues that "the fact that the State of the Union address is delivered to a joint session of Congress, with the president appearing before a giant U.S. flag in the chamber of the House of Representatives, is as much a part of his speech as the words he speaks."<sup>10</sup> Here, the constitutional mandate combines with presidential rhetoric to enhance the President's power. It is important to remember that, as public's expectations of the presidency have changed over time, so has the nature of presidential rhetoric. For instance, William Henry Harrison benefitted from

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<sup>6</sup> Julia R. Azari and Jennifer K. Smith, "Unwritten Rules: Informal Institutions in Established Democracies," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 1 (2012): 39.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>9</sup> "The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription," National Archives, November 4, 2015, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>.

<sup>10</sup> David Zarefsky, "Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2004): 609.

fostering an image of himself living in a log cabin while William McKinley gave campaign speeches from his front porch.<sup>11</sup> Each of these men created a specific imagery around their presidency to amplify their rhetorical appeal. Though the ways this background can be conveyed to American political elites and the American people have changed over time, the President's ability to wield influence is partly due to the rhetorical stage on which he has performed.

Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once observed, "We live by symbols."<sup>12</sup> Political elites can attain power through their use and exploitation of political rhetoric and rituals.<sup>13</sup> In American politics, symbolism is a politically and historically important part of presidential power. America's enamoredness with political rituals and symbols has been compared to a form of "civic religion" which one sociologist described as the "religious dimension" of a "people through which it interprets its historical experience in the light of transcendent reality."<sup>14</sup> In this religion, the President is the "high priest."<sup>15</sup> The President stands at the pinnacle of the American politics. As one anthropologist argued, "The primary phenomenon of religion is ritual."<sup>16</sup> In America's civic religion, the President commands and orchestrates national ceremonies that, on the surface, can appear to be apolitical. However, as Robert P. Watson argues, "Many of these ceremonies are, in fact, political events."<sup>17</sup> These ritualistic events are

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<sup>11</sup> Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (1984): 628; William D. Harpine, "Playing to the Press in McKinley's Front Porch Campaign: The Early Weeks of a Nineteenth-Century Pseudo-Event," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2000): 75.

<sup>12</sup> Michael A. Genovese, "Presidency Watching," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 2/3 (1977): 90.

<sup>13</sup> James R. McLeod, "The Sociodrama of Presidential Politics: Rhetoric, Ritual, and Power in the Era of Teledemocracy," *American Anthropologist* 101, no. 2 (1999): 362.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, "The Religion of the Lost Cause: Ritual and Organization of the Southern Civil Religion, 1865-1920," *The Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 2 (1980): 221, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2208359>.

<sup>15</sup> Genovese, 90.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, 221.

<sup>17</sup> Robert P. Watson, *The Presidents' Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady* (Boulder: L. Rienner, 2000), 98.

designed to help increase the President's popularity and public standing. Presidential symbolism and the iconography of the presidency are a key part of this power.

First Ladies are a crucial component of presidential imagery. Traditionally, presidential scholars have looked at First Ladies as mere props in presidential image-making. Two presidential scholars for example argued that "their colleagues could learn much about the president by the way he managed the first lady's public image in an effort to reap benefits for his own popularity."<sup>18</sup> While it is true that presidential scholars can learn about the President's image-making by further understanding his First Lady, statements like this remove the First Lady's agency. Rather than looking at First Ladies as props, they should be recognized for what they are: "co-stars on a national stage."<sup>19</sup> In America, First Ladies are what historian Edith Mayo has called "the most visible women."<sup>20</sup> Though many connect the rise of the First Lady's visibility with the modern era, the First Ladies have always been visible and well known for women of their time. Martha Washington was according to two scholars "quite possibly the most admired and well-known woman of her time."<sup>21</sup> Like many precedents set by Washington, this endured.

It is important to remember that, during the Victorian era spanning much of the nineteenth century, women were not expected to have public personas.<sup>22</sup> Edith Roosevelt, Theodore's wife, once quipped that "A lady's name should appear in print only three times: her

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<sup>18</sup> Robert P. Watson, "'Source Material': Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2003): 431.

<sup>19</sup> Kate Andersen Brower, *First Women: The Grace and Power of America's Modern First Ladies* (New York City: Harpers Collins Publishers, 2016), 143.

<sup>20</sup> Edith P. Mayo, "From the Editor: Teaching a First Ladies Curriculum in the Classroom," *OAH Magazine of History* 15, no. 3 (2001): 4.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Robert P. Watson, "Treatment of First Ladies in American Government and Presidency Textbooks: Overlooked, Yet Influential, Voices," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no. 3 (2000): 450, <https://doi.org/10.2307/420863>.

<sup>22</sup> Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama*, Rev. and updated ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 51.

birth, marriage, and death.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that some of the First Ladies during this period did not have a large public profile.<sup>24</sup> However, within the context of their eras and gender, First Ladies were among the most well-known women of their time. Even during the nineteenth century, First Ladies were expected to have at least some public visibility in Washington society or were subject to Washingtonians’ censure. For instance, numerous newspaper covered Julia Tyler’s marriage to the President, commenting on the wedding party and the bride’s family.<sup>25</sup> The public then “watched approvingly” throughout Tyler’s brief White House tenure.<sup>26</sup> When Margaret Taylor did not meet the public’s standards for openness, cruel rumors of her lack of sophistication circulated throughout Washington society, including a particularly scandalous story that she smoked a pipe.<sup>27</sup> Though she preferred to keep a low profile, Abigail Fillmore too attracted public attention and her appearance was described in Washington newspapers.<sup>28</sup> Julia Pierce was more successful in escaping the public’s gaze though for somber reasons. Weeks before entering the White House, Pierce’s son was killed in a train accident in front of his parents.<sup>29</sup> Following Victorian mourning practices, Pierce remained “secluded from the world” according to her aunt.<sup>30</sup> Yet, even though Washingtonians accepted Pierce’s desire for privacy in her mourning, her seclusion was a topic of conversation and Washingtonians openly grumbled about “the President’s House [being] a gloomy place for the entire Pierce administration.”<sup>31</sup> During this period, Frances Cleveland was among the most

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<sup>23</sup> Watson, “‘Source Material’: Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship,” 425.

<sup>24</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 48.

<sup>25</sup> “The President Married,” *Hudson River Chronicle*, July 2, 1844, *America’s Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>26</sup> Caroli, 48.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 49–50.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

popular First Ladies and was frequently approached with requests to champion various reform causes. Cleveland was so popular that women set up “Frances Cleveland Clubs” around the nation. One Omaha writer remarked “There is nothing inappropriate in forming Frances Cleveland clubs. Mrs. Cleveland is a beautiful woman of dignified and yet cordial bearing. She has been accepted as representing the highest type of American womanhood.”<sup>32</sup> In fact, Cleveland received so much attention that her husband set up a second home in Washington to help protect the couple from public scrutiny.<sup>33</sup>

During a time when white upper-class women were not expected to participate in public life, these women were nonetheless thrust into the public spotlight in a way few women were. While modern First Ladies are expected to have nation-wide and even global public profiles, nineteenth century First Ladies were expected, at a minimum, to make regular appearances in Washington social circles. However, even during the Victorian period, these women should not be dismissed as mere props. As was described in the previous chapter, some of these ladies provided important behind-the-scenes advice and support for their husbands. In addition, one of the most recognizable elements of presidential symbolism is due to the influence of a First Lady. Julia Tyler began the tradition of the Marine Band playing “Hail to the Chief” when the President enters the room.<sup>34</sup>

When contributing to and creating the President’s image, one of the most important balances a First Lady must manage is appearing at once refined and dignified yet not aristocratic or monarchical. First Ladies must be at once one of and above the people. First Ladies of the early republic were cognizant of the need to balance republican and monarchical

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<sup>32</sup> “Frances Cleveland Clubs,” *Omaha Daily Herald*, September 5, 1888, America’s Historical Newspaper.

<sup>33</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 106–7.

<sup>34</sup> Watson, *The Presidents’ Wives*, 97.

principles. These early ladies were an essential part of creating the new nation and turning the republican Constitution into practice. Therefore, they worked hard to distinguish the role of First Lady from that of European monarchs.<sup>35</sup>

A key part of all First Ladies' imagery is her clothing. In a 1960 *New York Times* article, journalist Martha Weinman wrote "the President's wife must dress to please everybody."<sup>36</sup> But what the public wants is far from clear. "The constant problem a First Lady faces," Weinman continued, "is the need to toe the hazy demarcation between the abyss of being too a la mode and the chasm of being too plain. If she is overly chic, she may lose the common touch.... If, on the other hand, she is too drab, many will complain that she is not fulfilling her Duty as a Representative of the American Way of Life."<sup>37</sup> Of course, what "the American Way of Life" means and the proper representation of it has changed. Nevertheless, all First Ladies, starting with Martha Washington, have faced this conundrum.

Before the term First Lady was invented, Washington was referred to as "Lady Washington." Upon her arrival in New York City, the then capital, Washington was greeted by crowds, a parade, and a thirteen-gun salute.<sup>38</sup> Yet, despite this nearly royal welcome, Washington made a point of wearing plain clothing.<sup>39</sup> With her husband recently winning a war to free America from monarchy, Washington was careful to avoid aristocratic airs. In 1789, the *Gazette* newspaper favorably drew a comparison between Washington and Queen Charlotte of England, noting the Washington was "clothed in the manufacture of our Country" compared to the gold

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<sup>35</sup> Jeanne E. Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic: Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and the Creation of an Iconic American Role* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Martha Weinman, "First Ladies -- in Fashion, Too?," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, 1960.

<sup>37</sup> Associated Press, "A Portrait of Mrs. Kennedy: Spirited, Shy and Chic," accessed September 24, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Abrams, 65.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.



cloth dresses of the Queen.<sup>40</sup> Washington worked to appear republican and simple while also acknowledging the fact that “elite women’s dress signaled power.”<sup>41</sup> Taking careful note of Washington’s style, future First Lady Abigail Adams wrote, “[Washington] is plain in her dress, but that plainness is the best of every article.”<sup>42</sup> Washington did not sacrifice quality but instead was thoughtful in how she chose to display her wealth and status. Not everyone found her successful in this regard; a contemporary newspaper condemned Washington’s receptions as “tending to her a supereminancy and as introducing the paraphernalia of the courts.”<sup>43</sup> The level of criticism and commentary around the First Lady reveals the national anxiety that it was merely moving from one form of monarchy to another.

The second First Lady, Abigail Adams, tried to follow Washington’s precedent. Having lived in Europe while her husband served as a minister abroad, Adams had firsthand knowledge of European courts. Rather than copying their practices, Adams consciously avoided replicating European ways.<sup>44</sup> Despite her wish “to give offense to no one & satisfaction to all,” Adams endured criticism for appearing too monarchial.<sup>45</sup> Critics referred to her as “Her Majesty,” lampooning her for her alleged abandonment of republican principles.<sup>46</sup> Dolley Madison was more successful in balancing republican and monarchial principles and assuaging these fears. As mentioned above, she used her clothing and appearance to maximum effect. In fact, Madison managed this paradox so well that her admirers dubbed her a “Republican Queen.”<sup>47</sup> But even

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<sup>40</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 2–3.

<sup>41</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 234.

<sup>42</sup> Abrams, 76.

<sup>43</sup> Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*, Jeffersonian America (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 20.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>45</sup> Abigail Adams, “Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Gray Otis, [Post 8 February] 1797,” accessed February 3, 2019, <https://rotunda-upress-virginia-edu.ezproxy.wlu.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=ADMS-search-5-10&expandNote=on>.

<sup>46</sup> Abrams, 181.

<sup>47</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 247.

Madison struggled to maintain this balance. While working on decorating the White House, architect Benjamin Latrobe lamented in a letter to Madison “We are jammed between our republican principles and our aristocratic wishes.”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps learning from the critiques of her predecessors, Madison was careful to check her own impulses.<sup>49</sup>

Until Jackie Kennedy, no First Lady came even close to rivaling Madison’s command of fashion and style as a political tool. However, through the nineteenth century, First Ladies’ clothing and appearance remained a piece of public fascination. Julia Tyler was also celebrated for her simple clothing. Reporting on her 1844 wedding, the *Southern Patriot* newspaper wrote approvingly that Tyler was “a very beautiful and elegantly formed woman” who arrived “robed simply in white, with a gauze veil depending from a circlet of white flowers wreathed in her hair.”<sup>50</sup> Like Washington and Adams, Tyler was celebrated for not appearing too ostentatious. In 1888, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* spoke admiringly of incoming-First Lady Caroline Harrison’s clothing. It wrote Harrison “does not overdress, yet she yields to the dictates of fashion without even endeavoring to become a leader in a small way.”<sup>51</sup> Florence Harding earned praise for her clothing. One journalist wrote that “her clothes are decidedly smart” and were “quiet, but rich.”<sup>52</sup> Harding made other political statements with her clothing as well. An advocate for animal rights, Harding refused to wear peacock feathers.<sup>53</sup> Though subtle, this choice was a political statement made through clothing.

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<sup>48</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 229.

<sup>49</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 142.

<sup>50</sup> “Marriage of the President of the United States,” *Southern Patriot*, July 1, 1844.

<sup>51</sup> Philadelphia Inquirer, “Mrs. Harrison at Home,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 12, 1888, News Bank.

<sup>52</sup> Katherine A. S. Sibley, *First Lady Florence Harding: Behind the Tragedy and Controversy*, Modern First Ladies (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 5.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

Capitalizing on the new medium of television and the mass public interest she and her husband attracted, Jackie Kennedy made her appearance and especially fashion a key element of her first ladyship. As her personal stylist and designer said, “there was nobody to touch Jackie in using style as a political tool.”<sup>54</sup> Kennedy was renowned for “her luminous beauty.”<sup>55</sup> Often described as “chic,” Kennedy’s clothing drew intense media attention and she quickly became a fashion icon.<sup>56</sup> As one *New York Times* article during the 1960 campaign reported, “Several dispatches mentioned this bright red coat worn by Mrs. Kennedy.”<sup>57</sup> These dispatches were not confined to female reporters or to women’s magazines. As the article states, “During the Wisconsin primary campaign, her red coat — a Givenchy copy — was reported by male political correspondents who ordinarily disdain the woman’s angle of a story.”<sup>58</sup>

Not everyone appreciated Kennedy’s chic style. Her hair in particular was subjected to extensive critiques. Another reporter noted that then-Senator John F. Kennedy “has received scores of letters complaining about [Kennedy’s] hair style and urging that it be changed.”<sup>59</sup> He hypothesized that Americans preferred a more “Main Street, apple-pie” image for their First Lady rather than Kennedy’s trendy bouffant hairdo.<sup>60</sup> After facing so much criticism for her hair, Kennedy cut it and the bouffant hairdo disappeared.<sup>61</sup> Others critiqued Kennedy for spending too much money on clothes and for “her avant-garde dressing habits.”<sup>62</sup> Like so many other First

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<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth J. Natalie, *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy* (New York City: Peter Lang Publishing, 2018), 49.

<sup>55</sup> Associated Press, “A Portrait of Mrs. Kennedy.”

<sup>56</sup> Marilyn Bender, “The Woman Who..... Wins High Fashion’s Vote Is Jacqueline Kennedy,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1960, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1960/07/15/105448501.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Associated Press.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Weinman, “First Ladies -- in Fashion, Too?”

<sup>62</sup> Nan Robertson, “Mrs. Kennedy Defends Clothes; Is ‘Sure’ Mrs. Nixon Pays More,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1960, [timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1960/09/15/99802760.pdf](https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1960/09/15/99802760.pdf)

Ladies and potential First Ladies, Kennedy faced criticism for the message her fashion was sending. But Kennedy and John understood the importance of her clothing. At times, John would even help Kennedy pick out outfits for major public appearances. Despite the critiques, Kennedy stayed loyal to her haute couture closet. She believed that, if she dressed well, she would help transform Washington into a social and cultural world capital, on par with her beloved Paris.<sup>63</sup> Kennedy's style and appearance was a key part of the Kennedy couples' image. Kennedy and her husband knew and acknowledged this fact, using clothing as a means to increase their own popularity.

Rather than increasing her husband's power, Barbara Bush's appearance and style was seen as a threat to her husband's political ambitions. When her husband was elected to the Vice Presidency in 1980, she wrote he "generously suggested that I go to New York City and buy some 'designer' clothes. He didn't want me to have to hear about how 'dowdy' I was."<sup>64</sup> While Kennedy had to ensure that she was not too "chic," Bush had to make sure that she upheld the prestige and honor of the United States through her clothing. Eight years later, during the 1988 presidential campaign, Bush again faced criticism for her clothing and pressure to change her appearance. In her memoir, Bush recorded one particularly notable attempt: "My favorite so far was the lady who took the LIFE magazine picture, gave me a new haircut, new earring, necklace, clothes, makeup, and sent me a slide she had taken of her work of art."<sup>65</sup>

Reminiscent of Jackie Kennedy, Michelle Obama also used her clothing to help set the tone of her husband's administration. Complaining that "my clothes mattered more to people

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<sup>63</sup> Michael J. Hogan, *The Afterlife of John Fitzgerald Kennedy: A Biography* (New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 33.

<sup>64</sup> Barbara Bush, *Barbara Bush: A Memoir* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1994), 162.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

than anything I had to say,” Obama decided to use her clothes to make a statement.<sup>66</sup> Obama understood that by doing so “she could plant subliminal cues” about who she was as a person.<sup>67</sup> As a *New York Times* writer noted “her wardrobe was representative of the country her husband wanted to lead.”<sup>68</sup> Starting during her husband’s 2008 campaign, Obama pointedly wore affordable clothing. In an interview with journalist Barbara Walters, she dressed in a \$148 black-and-white dress rather than a more expensive designer one.<sup>69</sup> While stories circulated about how Sarah Palin, the Republican Vice Presidential nominee, had a clothing budget of \$150,000, Obama wore J. Crew for an interview with Jay Leno.<sup>70</sup> Highlighting the differences between her husband and his opponent, she wore things that every-day Americans could afford, including pieces from Gap and Target, both during the campaign and his presidency. As the nation reeled from the worst economic collapse since the Great Depression, Obama sought to find the balance between “being showy and high end” but not “too casual.”<sup>71</sup> Through her clothing, Obama showed the American people that she understood their suffering. She also made a point of wearing up-and-coming American designers, including insisting on wearing the design of a young Latino designer, Narciso Rodriguez, in a *Vogue* photoshoot.<sup>72</sup> To Obama, as the *New York Times* recorded, she worked to make conversations about her clothes and “substance...inextricable.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Michelle Obama, *Becoming*, First edition (New York: Crown, 2018), 332.

<sup>67</sup> Vanessa Friedman, “What Michelle Obama Wore and Why It Mattered - The New York Times,” accessed February 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/14/fashion/michelle-obama-first-lady-fashion.html>.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Obama, *Becoming*, 269.

<sup>70</sup> Friedman.

<sup>71</sup> Obama, 333.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 332–33.

<sup>73</sup> Friedman.

In 2015, on a visit to Asia to promote female education, Obama's clothing drew particular attention. As a *New York Times* writer put it, Obama's outfits during her five-day tour were filled with "full skirts, belts, neat tops" and could best be described as "girlie."<sup>74</sup> On a tour about female empowerment, the author hypothesized that Obama dressed in an unapologetically feminine style as a means to say: "You can dress like a girl and dream about getting a Ph.D."<sup>75</sup> During this visit, Obama used her clothes to challenge the idea that femininity is a symbol of weakness. Instead, she chose to tell the world that "successful, well-educated women" do not just wear pantsuits, they also dress in "Carnations, acacia blossoms, [and] full skirts."<sup>76</sup> Using her clothing, Obama challenged traditional scripts about femininity, power, and fashion.

As the national hostess and the mistress of the White House, the way that the First Lady entertains has important social, cultural, and political ramifications. The White House serves several important purposes: it is the first family's home, the center of the executive branch of the government, and a formal reception space for state functions. However, as historians Shawn Parry Giles and Diane Blair have written, "The White House, located in the nation's capital, was foremost a political space even as it functioned as the first family's home"<sup>77</sup> As such, the First Lady's entertaining and homemaking are at once domestic and political. When First Ladies host parties or receptions at the White House, they do so on behalf of not only the President but of the American people. The First Lady is responsible for organizing and hosting numerous public events. Bush remembered that, during her four years in the White House, she hosted "thirty-two

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<sup>74</sup> Vanessa Friedman, "For Michelle Obama, Girlie Clothes That Lean In - The New York Times," accessed February 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/26/fashion/for-michelle-obama-girlie-clothes-that-lean-in.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Diane M. Blair, "The Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady: Politics, Gender Ideology, and Women's Voice, 1789-2002," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 5, no. 4 (2002): 568.

state dinners, most of which were part of an official state visit that always began with a very impressive, formal arrival ceremony.”<sup>78</sup> Just as First Ladies must govern their own dress, they must also acknowledge the fact that “Time and again, the White House has symbolized both the monarchical qualities of the presidency and its close ties to democratic-republican ideals.”<sup>79</sup>

As a symbol of America, how First Ladies chose to decorate the White House has political and cultural significance. During her husband’s presidency, Madison was charged with decorating the White House.<sup>80</sup> To improve Americans’ connection with their government, she sought to make the White House a national symbol that people would connect and identify with.<sup>81</sup> Due to her efforts, according to one historian, the Madison administration “marks the beginning of the American people’s identification with ‘their’ house.”<sup>82</sup> Based on tradition and cultural ideals, the American people also have strong ideas about how the White House should look. Madison’s successor, Elizabeth Monroe, was criticized for making the White House décor too French.<sup>83</sup>

During her 1960s White House restoration project, Kennedy received hundreds of letters daily. While Kennedy might have called the White House home, it certainly was not her house alone. Kennedy did not begrudge the public’s attention but rather insisted that “The American people should be proud of [the White House].”<sup>84</sup> ABC News aired a show of Kennedy walking through the newly restored White House, effortlessly explaining the history of each piece and her

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<sup>78</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 289.

<sup>79</sup> MaryAnne Borrelli, *The Politics of the President’s Wife*, 1st ed, Joseph V. Hughes Jr. and Holly O. Hughes Series on the Presidency and Leadership (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2011), 59.

<sup>80</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 158.

<sup>81</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 59.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>83</sup> Natalie, *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy*, 7.

<sup>84</sup> ABC News, *Jacqueline Kennedy’s White House Tour*, accessed September 24, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-ZyLJvXQQo>.

choices during the restoration.<sup>85</sup> A record audience of 56 million people watched the show and Kennedy earned an honorary Emmy for her performance.<sup>86</sup> Kennedy understood not only the cultural but the political importance of her choices. During her televised tour, Kennedy said “I think — I feel so strongly that the White House should have as fine a collection of American pictures as possible. It is so important, the setting in which the American Presidency is presented to the world, to foreign visitors.”<sup>87</sup> Kennedy knew that the setting in which foreign visitors were entertained mattered. In her set design, Kennedy hoped that the White House would embody all “the ideas on which American democratic institutions are based.”<sup>88</sup> For her husband’s presidency to flourish, he had to perform the office against the right backdrop. The Kennedys turned the White House into their set on which to perform the office of the presidency.<sup>89</sup> The White House remains an object of fascination and a crucial part of American culture and politics.

Despite her desire to focus on American design, Kennedy’s restoration faced criticism. Reminiscent of the criticisms against Monroe, critics complained that the Kennedy White House was “too Frenchy and international.”<sup>90</sup> Kennedy’s choice to print the White House dinner menus in French also angered some. White House visitors complained that “nobody could read or understand the menus.”<sup>91</sup> Later First Ladies learned from these missteps. For instance, as the American wine industry began to grow, the Johnson, Ford, Carter, and Reagan administrations only served American wines in the White House.<sup>92</sup> California wine aficionados Ronald and

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<sup>85</sup> ABC News, *Jacqueline Kennedy’s White House Tour*.

<sup>86</sup> “Jacqueline Kennedy in the White House | JFK Library,” JFK Presidential Library, accessed January 31, 2019, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/jacqueline-kennedy-in-the-white-house>.

<sup>87</sup> ABC News, *Jacqueline Kennedy’s White House Tour*.

<sup>88</sup> Hogan, *The Afterlife of John Fitzgerald Kennedy*, 24.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Robert Lewis Thompson, “Reds, Whites, but No Blues: The ‘New’ White House Wine Cellar,” *American Bar Association Journal* 68, no. 7 (1982): 859.



Nancy Reagan's decision earned an article in the *American Bar Association Journal*. According to the writer, "[Nancy Reagan has] an unabashedly chauvinistic attitude toward serving the best American wines"<sup>93</sup> The Reagans also believed "good wine also can be good politics."<sup>94</sup> For instance, they chose to serve the Mexican president a wine from a California winery that was built on land originally "purchased from the family of General Vallejo, a famous Mexican leader."<sup>95</sup> Like her predecessor, Bush saw state dinners as "a wonderful opportunity to showcase American hospitality, cuisine, and entertainment."<sup>96</sup> Clinton thought the same. Upon entering the White House, Clinton began to introduce "American cuisine to the menu" because "since the Kennedy Administration, the White House kitchen had been ruled by the French."<sup>97</sup> Clinton designed the White House and state functions to "showcase American food and culture."<sup>98</sup>

By how they chose to entertain and decorate the White House, First Ladies also make important points about who is included in the American story. Writing to wives of Congressmen and Senators around the nation, Madison offered and requested recipes. She used these recipes to literally bring all the regional flavors of the nation to the White House and help foster a sense of America.<sup>99</sup> Harriet Lane was serious art collector, with a special interest in Native American artwork.<sup>100</sup> By celebrating Native American culture, Lane used her symbolic power -- though limited -- in an attempt to better include Native American voices in the national story. Michelle Obama worked to make the White House tell a more inclusive story of America. During her

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<sup>93</sup> Thompson, "Reds, Whites, but No Blues: The 'New' White House Wine Cellar," 858.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 289.

<sup>97</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 139.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 138–39.

<sup>99</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 184–85.

<sup>100</sup> Lloyd C. Taylor, "HARRIET LANE—MIRROR OF AN AGE," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 30, no. 2 (1963): 216.

eight years, Obama focused on “hanging more abstract art and work by African American artists on the walls.”<sup>101</sup> She and her husband strove to “do a better job of democratizing the White House, making it feel less elitist and more open.”<sup>102</sup> By showcasing America, these First Ladies also get to decide what is American. Their choice of food, decoration, and entertainment can go a long way in including or excluding parts of American culture and society.

In addition, how a First Lady entertains matters. During her first ladyship, Eleanor Roosevelt changed her thinking about these matters. Roosevelt later reflected “Certain duties... which I thought at first were useless burdens I later realized had real meaning and value.”<sup>103</sup> While Roosevelt once considered it “utterly futile to receive anywhere from five hundred to a thousand people in an afternoon, shake hands with them, and then have them pass into the dining room to be given a cup of tea or coffee,” she reflect that “though standing and shaking hands for an hour or so, two or three times a week, is not an inspiring occupation, still I think it well worth while.”<sup>104</sup> Speaking to large groups of people and inviting them to the White House, the Roosevelts helped to connect Americans with their government. These types of large receptions are one part of the First Ladies’ entertaining. The tone and messages sent by the White House’s entertaining are symbolic and impactful both domestically and internationally.

Early First Ladies and Presidents quickly came to understand this. When the United States first became independent, it faced great scrutiny from European powers. Foreign visitors to Washington questioned whether or not a republican form of government could work. James Madison understood this and sought to prove the success of constitutional government. He observed that “the honor and dignity of the republic... require[d] some elegance and style in its

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<sup>101</sup> Obama, *Becoming*, 309.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>103</sup> Borrelli, *The Politics of the President’s Wife*, 66.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 66–67.

social life” to reflect “the success of the experiment in republican government.”<sup>105</sup> If the United States could not entertain foreign diplomats and visitors adequately, it would never gain their respect. While both acknowledging the importance of social style, Federalist and Republicans did not always agree about how best to entertain in a republican manner. During his eight years in office, Thomas Jefferson attempted to pioneer a new form of socializing. A widower, Jefferson was without a First Lady, though his daughter Martha Jefferson Randolph and Dolley Madison often stepped in as official hostesses.<sup>106</sup> Jefferson wrote his “Cannons of Etiquette” to ensure that, “When brought together in society, all are perfectly equal, whether foreign or domestic, titled or untitled, in or out of office.”<sup>107</sup> However, as discussed in the next chapter, Jefferson’s radical new approach to social etiquette drew few admirers and he later opted to abandon his “pell-mell” style in the face of criticism from other political and diplomatic elites.<sup>108</sup> The fact that the President took the time to write a manual on the matter is a testament to the political importance of social style.

Once Madison came to the White House as the official First Lady, she reintroduced Washington and Adams’s social gatherings that Jefferson had ended but gave them a more republican name. While the two Federalist administrations named their semi-formal gatherings “levees,” Madison named her events “drawing rooms” in an effort to appear less elitist and aristocratic.<sup>109</sup> Her regular party earned even more informal nicknames and was soon dubbed “Mrs. Madison’s crush” or “squeeze.”<sup>110</sup> When Federalists John Quincy and Louisa Catherine

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<sup>105</sup> Max J. Skidmore, *Presidential Performance: A Comprehensive Review* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2004), 49.

<sup>106</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 31.

<sup>107</sup> Robert R. Davis, “Pell-Mell: Jeffersonian Etiquette and Protocol,” *The Historian* 43, no. 4 (1981): 513.

<sup>108</sup> Allgor, 51.

<sup>109</sup> Catherine Allgor, “‘Queen Dolley’ Saves Washington City,” *Washington History* 12, no. 1 (2000): 62.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

Adams came to the White House, they were determined to introduce more European court practices.<sup>111</sup> In comparison to Jefferson's and the Republicans' style, the Adamses demanded more deference to rank and standing. While the Adamses sought to make the White House more formal, the Kennedys did the reverse. Bringing youthful vitality to the White House, the Kennedys aspired to a sense of "elegant informality."<sup>112</sup> After the staid strictness of the Eisenhower years, the Kennedys wanted to fill the White House with energy, reflecting their ambitious New Frontier agenda. The social style of White House is inherently political.

Some First Ladies have made pointed cultural and political statements through their entertaining. Harriet Lane, as mentioned above, was an avid art collector. Foreshadowing Jackie Kennedy's later work, Lane wanted to elevate Washington to the same social and cultural standards as the great European capitals. Having lived in London while her uncle as served as minister to the Court of St. James, Lane was impressed by the British National Gallery.<sup>113</sup> During her time in the White House, she often invited prominent American artists to her receptions. Her interests in the arts and her patronage of artists helped to prompt a group of artists to begin advocating for the establishment of an American national gallery of art.<sup>114</sup> After her time in the White House, Lane continued to use her status to push for the creation of a national gallery. As she grew older, Lane increasingly traveled to Europe collecting important pieces.<sup>115</sup> In her will, she entailed her collection to the Corcoran Gallery until a national gallery was founded. When

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<sup>111</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 158.

<sup>112</sup> Hogan, *The Afterlife of John Fitzgerald Kennedy*, 30.

<sup>113</sup> Homer T. Rosenberger, "Harriet Lane Johnston and the Formation of a National Gallery of Art," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 69/70 (1969): 410.

<sup>114</sup> Taylor, "HARRIET LANE—MIRROR OF AN AGE," 218.

<sup>115</sup> Rosenberger, 407.

the National Gallery was finally founded in 1906, nearly fifty years after she began the campaign to create it, Lane's gift served as the foundation of the national collection.<sup>116</sup>

Lane's entertaining also had political ramifications. On the eve of the Civil War, while serving as First Lady, Lane worked to ensure tranquility in Washington society. Virginia Clay-Compton, the same Southern memoirists so disdainful of Mary Lincoln, wrote that Harriet Lane's "reign at the White House was one of completest charm."<sup>117</sup> An Alabamian, Clay-Clopton's recollections are often tinged with nostalgia for the antebellum era. Still, she does represent a contingent of political elite women in the nation's capital who would have regularly dealt with Lane, a Pennsylvanian.<sup>118</sup> Clay-Clopton credited "Miss Lane's entrance into life at the American capital, at a trying time, [as serving] to keep the surface of society in Washington serene and smiling, though the fires of a volcano raged in the under-political world, and the vibrations of Congressional strife spread to the further-most ends of the country."<sup>119</sup> Though James Buchanan's policies did nothing to stem the tide of sectional conflict, Lane's entertaining on behalf of her uncle helped to ensure a level of civility was kept in Washington. However, Lane did make her own statement in regard to slavery. Though the White House itself did not own slaves, many White House servants in the antebellum era were actually slaves hired out to the White House. Lane disapproved strongly of slavery and make her opinion known by ending this practice. Lane insisted that only freemen and women would work in the Executive Mansion.<sup>120</sup> Though subtle, Lane's choice sent a clear message throughout Washington society

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<sup>116</sup> Taylor, "HARRIET LANE—MIRROR OF AN AGE," 223.

<sup>117</sup> Virginia Clay-Clopton, *A Belle of the Fifties; Memoirs of Mrs. Clay, of Alabama, Covering Social and Political Life in Washington and the South, 1853-66*, (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1905), 114.

<sup>118</sup> David Anderson, "Down Memory Lane: Nostalgia for the Old South in Post-Civil War Plantation Reminiscences," *The Journal of Southern History* 71, no. 1 (2005): 128, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27648653>.

<sup>119</sup> Clay-Clopton, 114.

<sup>120</sup> Cokie Roberts, *Capital Dames: The Civil War and the Women of Washington, 1848-1868* (New York City: Harpers Collins Publishers, 2015), 42.

about her thoughts on the morality of slavery as the nation tore itself apart over that very question.

Like Lane, Lucy Hayes made a pointed and public political statement with her social style and entertaining. Widely known as “Lemonade Lucy,” Hayes banned alcohol and insisted on dry dinners in the White House.<sup>121</sup> In 1878, the *New York Times* clarified the First Lady’s position on alcohol with a special dispatch. After a “report was circulated some time ago that Mrs. Hayes had relaxed her rigid rule to exclude wine from the White House,” the newspaper assured its readers that there was “no foundation for this story. The rule established by Mrs. Hayes will continue to be rigorously enforced during the coming Winter.”<sup>122</sup> Though Hayes insisted that “It is a mistake to suppose that I desire to dictate my views to others in the matter of the use of wine and other such drinks,” her public actions helped bolster the burgeoning temperance movement and women’s involvement in it.<sup>123</sup> Arguing that they were inherently more morally pure and pious than men, women across the nation were challenging traditional views of public and private by advocating for temperance.<sup>124</sup> As historian Deborah Rotman states, “temperance linked women’s power in the home to their power in the public sphere”<sup>125</sup> By banning alcohol in their homes, women were able to help stem the sale and consumption of

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<sup>121</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 95.

<sup>122</sup> *New York Times*, “Mrs. Hayes’ Temperance Principles.,” *The New York Times*, November 1, 1878, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1878/11/01/archives/mrs-hayes-temperance-principles.html>.

<sup>123</sup> *New York Times*, “Mrs. Hayes and Wine-Drinking.; the Philadelphia Excursion and the Facts Concerning It Hasty Action of a Temperance Society.,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 1878, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1878/04/28/archives/mrs-hayes-and-winedrinking-the-philadelphia-excursion-and-the-facts.html>.

<sup>124</sup> Prudence Flowers, “WHITE RIBBONERS AND THE IDEOLOGY OF SEPARATE SPHERES, 1860s-1890s,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 25, no. 1 (2006): 16.

<sup>125</sup> Deborah L. Rotman, “Separate Spheres?: Beyond the Dichotomies of Domesticity,” *Current Anthropology* 47, no. 4 (2006): 671, <https://doi.org/10.1086/506286>.

alcohol. Nowhere was this truer than in the White House. Through her hosting choices, First Lady Lucy Hayes made a strong point about temperance.<sup>126</sup>

Not only does a First Lady make statements in *how* she entertains by also in *who* she entertains. Hayes invited temperance reformers to the White House. In 1878, *The New York Times* took note when temperance reformer Francis Murphy called on the President and First Lady and was “met with a pleasant reception.”<sup>127</sup> First Ladies also decide how open the People’s House is to the people. In an effort to make her husband’s administration appear less elitist and more republican, Abigail Adams maintained an open-door policy. As she wrote, “On Monday Evenings Our House is open to all who please to visit me.”<sup>128</sup> By doing this, Adams ensured that she remained accessible and connected to the average American.

Florence Harding too made a point of opening the White House to visitors. Since it had been closed during World War I and President Woodrow Wilson’s convalescence, Harding made a campaign vow to re-open the doors to the people. During her short tenure, a million people visited the White House. As one man wrote to the *Washington Post*, “Hats off to Mrs. H!... Let us have the gates thrown open, and the men and woman who make up the great body of the nation given a show.”<sup>129</sup> Harding understood the public’s desire to see the White House and the positive impact opening its doors would have for her husband’s administration. Journalist Evelyn Hunt noted that the White House “grounds are constantly filled with people hoping to catch a glimpse of the Chief Executive and the First Lady” and that their “popularity... is growing by

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<sup>126</sup> Ironically, during Prohibition, the White House was not always dry. According to Warren Harding’s Secret Service Agent, “plenty of liquor” was served in the Prohibition White House. Sibley, *First Lady Florence Harding*, 95.

<sup>127</sup> New York Times, “Notes from the Capital,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 1878, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1878/02/05/archives/notes-from-the-capital.html>.

<sup>128</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 151.

<sup>129</sup> Sibley, 76.

leaps and bounds.”<sup>130</sup> By making the White House accessible to the people, Harding worked to further forge the bounds of affection between her husband and his constituents. Though Warren’s administration is largely remembered today for being beset by scandals, both Hardings worked hard to be more accessible to the public than their predecessors earning them public support and almost-celebrity status.<sup>131</sup> According to *The New York Herald*, “Their humanness is the Hardings’ most appealing quality.”<sup>132</sup> The Clintons hosted events aimed at bringing more and a more diverse group of Americans to the White House. Under the Clinton administration, the White House lit its first Hanukah menorah and hosted its first Eid al-Fitr.<sup>133</sup> By adding these two events to traditional Christian holidays celebrated at the White House like Easter and Christmas, the Clintons showed that the White House was open to all Americans, regardless of religious affiliation.

Though many First Ladies did nothing to reject the racial status quo, since the Civil War, some First Ladies have used their symbolic powers to support civil rights efforts. Following the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, Julia Grant made a point of inviting former slaves to the White House.<sup>134</sup> By inviting former slaves to a house built and served by generations of enslaved workers, Grant’s actions, in conjunction with her husband’s policies, socially elevated these former slaves and reaffirmed their new-found citizenship and freedom. Lou Hoover faced a politically and socially difficult question. Normally not a newsworthy event, the First Lady traditionally hosted a tea for the wives of newly elected Congressmen. However, when Oscar DePriest became the first African American Congressman since Reconstruction, Hoover had to

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<sup>130</sup> Sibley, *First Lady Florence Harding*, 76–77.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>133</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Living History* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 205.

<sup>134</sup> Robert P. Watson, “The ‘White Glove Pulpit’: A History of Policy Influence by First Ladies,” *OAH Magazine of History* 15, no. 3 (2001): 11.



decide whether or not and how to entertain his African American wife. Though Hoover understood the potential ramifications of entertaining the first African American at the White House in roughly three decades, she was determined to appropriately honor Mrs. DePriest.<sup>135</sup> After speaking with several Congressional wives, Hoover organized a separate tea with a group of twelve white women who would agree to socialize with an African American. Critics swiftly objected to the invitation. The *Mobile Alabama Press* wrote that “Mrs. Herbert Hoover offered the South and the nation an arrogant insult yesterday when she entertained a negro [sic] woman at a White House tea. She has harmed Mr. Hoover to a serious extent.”<sup>136</sup> As this article shows, the First Lady’s entertaining does not go unnoticed and it can have important political ramifications.

Like Hoover, Eleanor Roosevelt also used her pulpit and White House access to help advance civil rights. Frequently helping to arrange meetings and pass along messages, Roosevelt was crucial in helping African American civil rights leaders be heard in the White House. Roosevelt was untiring in her advocacy. When one of her husband’s advisors complained about being bombarded with messages from an African American activist about federal antilynching legislation, Roosevelt replied, “If I were colored, I think I should have about the same obsession that he has.”<sup>137</sup> Roosevelt’s actions endeared her to the civil rights community so much that Franklin Roosevelt turned to her as the administration’s main civil rights interlocutor.<sup>138</sup> During her husband’s presidency, Roosevelt invited hundreds of African Americans to the White House

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<sup>135</sup> In 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt entertained African American leader Booker T. Washington in the White House. This was the first time in history that an African American had been invited to a White House dinner. The President issued the invitation though his wife Edith Roosevelt was also present at the dinner. John K. Severn and William Warren Rogers, “Theodore Roosevelt Entertains Booker T. Washington: Florida’s Reaction to the White House Dinner,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (1976): 306.

<sup>136</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 186.

<sup>137</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 164.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

and posed for pictures with them. When a segregation ordinance in Birmingham would have required her to sit separately from her African American guests, Roosevelt moved her chair to sit in the aisle between the white and black sections of the auditorium.<sup>139</sup> Roosevelt once again proved her commitment to civil rights in 1939 when the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) prevented African American singer Marian Anderson from performing in its auditorium. In a widely publicized move, Roosevelt resigned from the DAR in protest.<sup>140</sup> Six years later, *The Washington Post* remembered Roosevelt's activism. In an article on the DAR's decision to continue its whites only policy in 1945, it wrote that the 1939 barring of Anderson "caused a national furor and the resignation of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt from the DAR."<sup>141</sup> While symbolic, these actions sent a strong message about standing up for civil rights and served as an example to other women on how they too could take a stand. While becoming more overtly and openly political, Roosevelt joined other First Ladies in using her symbolic powers to make cultural and political statements.

When called upon, First Ladies have symbolized physical courage in the face of danger, serving to reassure and inspire the nation. As the British troops marched on Washington during the War of 1812, Madison refused to leave the capital without her husband. Instead, she stayed at the White House, gathering up important government documents and a portrait of George Washington until the last feasible minute.<sup>142</sup> Perhaps due to the fact that the War of 1812 was otherwise humiliating for the young nation, Madison's bravery and flight from Washington soon gained legendary status. Despite concerns about sabotage, Eleanor Roosevelt insisted that the

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<sup>139</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 163.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Washington Post, "DAR to Keep Ban on Negro Use of Hall," *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*; Washington, D.C., October 13, 1945.

<sup>142</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 2.

White House remain open during World War II.<sup>143</sup> Knowing that closing the White House would alarm the public, Roosevelt wanted to project an image of security and strength during the war. Jackie Kennedy followed Madison's example during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Despite the urging of her husband's advisers, Kennedy refused to leave Washington despite the imminent threat of nuclear war. Kennedy told her husband, "I just want to be on the lawn when it happens — you know — but I just want to be with you, and I want to die with you, and the children do too."<sup>144</sup> When further pressed, Kennedy responded, "If the situation develops, I will take Caroline and John [her two young children], and we will walk in hand out the south grounds. We will stand there like brave soldiers and face the fate of every other American."<sup>145</sup> Though nuclear war never materialized, in a typical Kennedy-esque fashion, Kennedy had carefully planned a poignant scene. Barbara Bush played a similar though less dramatic role in alleviating national security fears. During the Gulf War, many Americans became fearful of the threat of terrorism and stopped flying. To show that air travel was still safe, Bush, accompanied by the press, took a commercial rather than her usual chartered flight. In her memoirs, Bush wrote "Fortunately, the trip got good news coverage, and the airlines said that people responded."<sup>146</sup> Through the simple act of taking a flight, Bush helped to reassure the American people and help restore a sense of normalcy to American life during the war. By risking their health and well-being and, at times, that of their children and families, First Ladies' acts of physical courage help to prevent panic and reassure a frightened nation.

First Ladies are among the most recognizable and most admired women in America and are both blessed and cursed with intense media scrutiny. As such, they play a key role in creating

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<sup>143</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time* 299.

<sup>144</sup> Brower, *First Women*, 87.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>146</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 401.

and maintaining the President's image. In a political culture filled with imagery and iconography, the pomp and circumstance surrounding the President has important informal political powers. Far more than props, First Ladies are co-stars and directors of this image. Through their clothing and appearances, First Ladies help to set the tone for the administration and endear their husbands to the public. In addition to helping to build the President's informal powers, the First Lady wields informal power of her own. Serving as the national hostess, how and who the First Lady entertains, including the design and décor of the White House, can send important societal and political messages from the support of temperance to support of civil rights. However, there are limitations for the symbolic power of First Ladies. Inviting an African American to tea does not end Jim Crow policies and wearing non-designer clothes does not end income inequality. Yet, these actions can be catalysts for larger conversations. These are all ways that First Ladies as women can make political statements and serve as models for other women to do the same. Wielding immense symbolic power, First Ladies can complement and increase their husbands' standings both inside and outside of Washington.

CHAPTER 3  
HALF OF A WHOLE, THE FIRST LADY AS POLITICAL SURROGATE

In 1842, a series of complicated negotiations between the United States and Great Britain over the Maine border stalled. Serving as White House hostess and surrogate First Lady during her father-in-law's administration, Priscilla Tyler knew she needed to act to help save John Tyler's accidental presidency. So, she did what First Ladies and elite Washington women had done for decades: she organized a party. In April of that year, Tyler hosted a White House reception in honor of the British negotiator, Alexander Baring, Lord Ashburton.<sup>1</sup> During this reception, John was able to, in the words of his grateful Secretary of State, engage in "exceedingly obliging and pleasant intercourse" which gave "every possible facility to [his] agency in this important transaction."<sup>2</sup> Following the reception, the negotiations were rekindled and, a few months later, America and Britain signed the Webster-Ashburton Treaty, peacefully settling the border dispute. The treaty is the sole diplomatic success of John Tyler's administration.<sup>3</sup> Without Tyler's creation of the social event, this conversation would not have occurred, and the treaty might not never have been completed. As Tyler had learned upon her arrival in the capital, "in Washington social life was essential to politics."<sup>4</sup>

In the world of Washington politics, First Ladies serve as Presidents other halves, substituting for them when required. First Ladies use their unique position as head of the private sphere to exert political influence. By virtue of their gender, First Ladies are able to create and manage informal, unofficial spaces for the practice of politics. In addition, these women serve as informal conduits of information. First Ladies work inside female networks to privately

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher J Leahy. "Playing Her Greatest Role: Priscilla Cooper Tyler and the Politics of the White House Social Scene, 1841–44." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 120, no. 3 (2012):, 257–58.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 257–58.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

exchange information both at home and abroad. Especially as the power and the profile of the presidency and the United States has increased since the twentieth century, First Ladies have learned to use their own celebrity to help Presidents during campaigns and serve as diplomatic representatives abroad. Finally, as women, First Ladies speak with greater authority on matters facing women and children and can enter different emotional spaces than their husbands. The First Lady is often a key political surrogate and is able to enter physical and metaphysical spaces that the President cannot.

First Ladies can exercise power and influence that Presidents cannot. Eighteenth century Americans maintained an ideology of “separate spheres.” In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville described it writing, “In no country has such constant care been taken as in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes and to make them keep pace one with the other, but in two pathways that are always different.”<sup>5</sup> He later continued, writing when a woman marries “the inexorable opinion of the public carefully circumscribes [her] within the narrow circle of domestic interests and duties and forbids her to step beyond it.”<sup>6</sup> While politics existed in the public/male sphere, according to this view, it was banned from the private/female sphere.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in this segmented society, the President serves as the head of the public sphere but must rely on his First Lady to be the head of the private sphere.<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, due to this ideology, historians have viewed nineteenth century women as having no part in politics.

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<sup>5</sup> Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1889653>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Rosemarie Zagari, “Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother,” *American Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1992):193.

<sup>8</sup> MaryAnne Borrelli, *The Politics of the President’s Wife*, 1st ed, Joseph V. Hughes Jr. and Holly O. Hughes Series on the Presidency and Leadership (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2011). 5.

However, while the separate spheres curtailed women's ability to contribute directly in politics, they also "allowed [them] to wield power of a sort."<sup>9</sup>

Confined to the private sphere, First Ladies have used this to their advantage in achieving political aims. In fact, women's "exclusion from the public realm," as historian Sarah Horowitz has written about elite French women, allowed them to "play such a vital role in politics."<sup>10</sup> By virtue of their gender, First Ladies are able to inhabit and create spaces that the President cannot. As women, only First Ladies can create and navigate private and unofficial spaces which are crucial for the full realization of presidential powers. Instead of accepting the premise of an apolitical private and political public sphere, historians should acknowledge that politics and political power has always existed and been used in both spheres.

For First Ladies and elite white political women of the early republic, the two spheres "were often connected, interrelated, and operated simultaneously."<sup>11</sup> These elite women, with First Ladies foremost among them, orchestrated domestic performances, defined as "a performance by a woman or women the showcases private virtues for public uses."<sup>12</sup> By inviting others to their homes, political wives displayed typically domestic virtues for political gain.<sup>13</sup> While husbands operated in the public sphere, wives operated in the private sphere. Both, however, focused on achieving the same political goals. These early republic women were not seen – and did not see themselves – as gender radicals. Rather, they saw themselves as conforming to both gender and class expectations.

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<sup>9</sup> Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (1984): 635.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Horowitz, "The Bonds of Concord and the Guardians of Trust: Women, Emotion, and Political Life, 1815-1848," *French Historical Studies* 35, no. 3 (2012): 578, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00161071-1574196>.

<sup>11</sup> Jeanne E. Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic: Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and the Creation of an Iconic American Role* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 12.

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Allgor, "Margaret Bayard Smith's 1809 Journey to Monticello and Montpelier: The Politics of Performance in the Early Republic," *Early American Studies* 10, no. 1 (2012): 30.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

With Presidents unable to access these spaces, early First Ladies exerted their political power through the private sphere and in private spaces such as parlors and ballrooms. In the early republic, the center of elite white women's power existed in, as historian Glenna Matthews termed it, the "sacred precinct of the parlor."<sup>14</sup> Filled with elite women, these parlors turned into employment agencies where women used their connections to attain government jobs and opportunities for relatives or political allies.<sup>15</sup> These women exerted significant influence in Washington parlors.<sup>16</sup> By the 1830s, as the power of American political parties solidified, political patronage became a crucial part of partisan power.<sup>17</sup> Until then, however, women held the keys to the halls of power. In the theory of separate spheres, men and women developed "distinct political subcultures, each with its own bases of power, modes of participation, and goals."<sup>18</sup> Living and hosting in the White House, the First Lady is the most powerful political wife and a major power base in female society. For instance, while the husbands met separately, Madison hosted regular "dove parties" with the wives of cabinet officials.<sup>19</sup>

George and Martha Washington were the first to recognize the need for both private and public spaces to pursue the affairs of state. Once a week, George hosted his own receptions, appearing as a public personage symbolized by him carrying both a hat and sword. However, Martha Washington also hosted her own weekly receptions. At these receptions, George appeared as a private citizen, *without* either a hat or a sword.<sup>20</sup> George knew that political

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<sup>14</sup> Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Diane M. Blair, "The Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady: Politics, Gender Ideology, and Women's Voice, 1789-2002," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 5, no. 4 (2002): 568.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*, 1. ed (New York: Holt, 2006), 226.

<sup>16</sup> Deborah L. Rotman, "Separate Spheres?: Beyond the Dichotomies of Domesticity," *Current Anthropology* 47, no. 4 (2006): 666, <https://doi.org/10.1086/506286>.

<sup>17</sup> Baker, "The Domestication of Politics," 327.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 622.

<sup>19</sup> Allgor, 153.

<sup>20</sup> Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*, Jeffersonian America (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 19.



meaning of his clothing choices and deliberately decided what to wear to each occasion. The fact that the Washingtons hosted both official and unofficial receptions shows that they did not use the two events in the same way. Rather, the Washingtons recognized the basic truth: “The unofficial space, outside of the legitimate public forum, allows more room to maneuver than the official space.”<sup>21</sup> In particular, these spaces allow for informal discussions and negotiations, impossible to pursue under public scrutiny. In addition to their more formal gatherings, the Washingtons also had more intimate gatherings with other political elites. For instance, in one 1789 letter addressed to Abigail Adams, Washington wrote, “I will my dear Madam—doe myself the pleasure to dine with you on satterday with my famly and shall be very happy with Geneal Knox [George’s Secretary of War]—and the Laides,—mentioned or any others you plase.”<sup>22</sup> The President had regular contact with his Vice President and his Secretary of War yet he and his wife also made a point of socializing with them and their wives privately. The Washingtons regularly entertained, knowing that some goals are easier to pursue navigating in the unofficial (or private) than the official (or public) spheres.

Madison was particularly adept at creating private spaces and using the private sphere to project and expand the power of the presidency. In a letter to her husband, Madison wrote “You know I am not much of a politician.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, historian Catherine Allgor writes that Madison’s work “expands our definitions of the political.”<sup>24</sup> Madison’s famous parties or “squeezes” brought together men and women from various political factions together.<sup>25</sup> There were no other

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<sup>21</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 87.

<sup>22</sup> Martha Washington, “Martha Washington to Abigail Adams, 4 November 1789,” November 4, 1789, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-08-02-0237>.

<sup>23</sup> Dolley Madison, *The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison*, ed. David B. Mattern and Holly Cowan Shulman (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 70.

<sup>24</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 278.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

informal, fluid places like them in Washington for the conduct of politics.<sup>26</sup> For instance, at one of these events, John Quincy Adams, a member of a rival Federalist Party, found himself in a “considerable conversation... on the subjects most important to the public” with Republican James.<sup>27</sup> In the safety of Madison’s parlor, Congressional alliances were formed and legislative compromises forged.<sup>28</sup> Potential compromises that could not be proposed on the floor of Congress could be floated in Madison’s parlor with less risk of public censure.<sup>29</sup> A testament to the importance of these parties, even journalists took note of what was said and who was spoken to during them. The *New York Evening Post*, for example, reported that “Mr. Madison and Mr. Foster [the British minister] were in very familiar chit-chat at the levee tonight.”<sup>30</sup> At another party, when Madison and Henry Clay shared a snuffbox following his election to Congress in 1810, political elites took note of their newfound intimacy and questioned the political implications of this potential new alliance.<sup>31</sup> During these parties, James garnered support for the War of 1812. *The Alexandria Gazette* charged that, it was through his “extravagant imitations of a royal court, levees... at which so many congressional attendants bow and cringe, and dangle and play the parasite,” that James had convinced Congress to declare war.<sup>32</sup> As this excerpt shows, there were drawbacks to using private spaces. Hidden from the public’s gaze, to some observers, these closed-door parties and the intimacy between political elites overly resembled aristocratic structures in Europe. However, the federal government in the early republic had not yet developed bureaucratic and organization structures and these regular events at “the Madison

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<sup>26</sup> Catherine Allgor, “‘Queen Dolley’ Saves Washington City,” *Washington History* 12, no. 1 (2000): 63.

<sup>27</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 73.

<sup>28</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 81.

<sup>29</sup> Leahy, “Playing Her Greatest Role,” 243.

<sup>30</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 80.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

home supplied some of that needed structure.”<sup>33</sup> During her time as First Lady, Madison was particularly astute in creating private spaces for the business of politics, earning her both praise and criticism.

The two largest political and social scandals in early Washington history, the Merry and Peggy Eaton Affairs, happened under the watch of widower Presidents. Adopting a new form of etiquette, Thomas Jefferson caused an international incident. At an 1803 White House reception honoring the newly appointed British ambassador and his wife, Anthony and Elizabeth Merry, Jefferson chose to discard proper etiquette by escorting Madison to the table rather than Mrs. Merry, the guest of honor. The entire dinner party, including Madison, was dumbfounded and, without a proper procedure, did not know how to seat themselves. The wife of the Spanish minister was correct in her whispered warning to Madison: “This will be the cause of war!”<sup>34</sup> At the next reception hosted by the Madisons, James, following Jefferson’s new etiquette, insulted Elizabeth Merry by escorting a different woman to the table.<sup>35</sup> As the wife of wealth Maryland planter wrote, these changes from etiquette “made a huge uproar – as much as if a treaty had been broken!”<sup>36</sup> Correctly realizing that they were being intentionally slighted, the Merrys entered into a full-on social war. In a letter to the British Foreign Office, Anthony Merry wrote that this new etiquette had been adopted by “design and not from ignorance or awkwardness.”<sup>37</sup> Merry wrote to London asking for advice moving forward while the Merrys and the Spanish minister and his wife began to refuse all invitations.<sup>38</sup> London was not the only foreign capital to hear of the scandal. The Spanish minister wrote to Madrid about this “unexpected conduct

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<sup>33</sup> Allgor, “Margaret Bayard Smith’s 1809 Journey to Monticello and Montpelier,” 61.

<sup>34</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 37.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Madison, *The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison*, 45.

<sup>37</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

[which] produced at first some confusion, during which the wife of the British minister was left without any one giving her his hand, until her husband advanced, with visible indignation, and himself took her to the table.”<sup>39</sup> Likewise, the French minister reported that James’s actions was done “in order to make Mr. Merry feel more keenly the scandal he had made; but this incident increased it.”<sup>40</sup> The fact that other foreign ministers commented on the affair shows that this was not a simple matter of Merry overreacting but rather an incident with true diplomatic consequences. Eventually, with the assistance of Dolley Madison, the affair fizzled out and the Republicans returned to traditional etiquette rules. Though it is easy to dismiss this affair as being simply about social matters and a few hurt feelings, it had lasting consequences on Anglo-American relations. Anthony Merry continued to serve as the British minister until 1806 and his official advice back to London was negatively colored by the treatment of him and his wife.<sup>41</sup> Social practices and personal relationships matter in diplomacy.

Andrew Jackson learned that they too mattered in domestic politics. Jackson’s failure to fully understand the importance of Washington society and Washington politics resulting in what has been come to be known as “the petticoat war” or, more simply, the Peggy Eaton Affair. Jackson was a widower; his wife Rachel had died before he took the presidency. Peggy Eaton was a poor bar maid who had earned herself an even poorer reputation. After the death of her first husband and long rumors of an affair between Peggy and Senator John Eaton, the two married in 1829. An example of the prevailing opinion in Washington society, one politician wrote upon their marriage: “Eaton has just married his mistress, and the mistress of eleven doz. others!”<sup>42</sup> Though Washington society was scandalized by the marriage, it would likely have

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<sup>39</sup> Robert R. Davis, “Pell-Mell: Jeffersonian Etiquette and Protocol,” *The Historian* 43, no. 4 (1981): 522.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 522.

<sup>41</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 41.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

been forgotten had Jackson not selected John for his cabinet, putting him and his new wife “into direct social contact with the prominent ladies of Washington.”<sup>43</sup> As Jackson wrote, “I did not come here to make a cabinet for the Ladies of this place.”<sup>44</sup> However, these ladies had a mind of their own: they refused to call on or interact socially with Eaton. With the wife of the Vice President, Floride Calhoun, leading the way, parlors throughout Washington, including those of other Cabinet Secretaries, closed their doors to Eaton.<sup>45</sup> Considered by themselves and the rest of Washington society as the arbiters of morality, these Cabinet wives refused to endorse Eaton’s scandalous behavior by socializing with her.<sup>46</sup> Jackson was livid. He called his Cabinet and informed them “those of my Cabinet who cannot harmonize with [Eaton] had better withdraw for harmony I must and will have.”<sup>47</sup> But Jackson would have to wait for that harmony. Washington became divided into pro and anti-Eaton camps and society slowly ground to a halt. Calhoun was so disgusted with Eaton that she returned home to South Carolina, declaring herself “a stranger” to the capital.<sup>48</sup> Understanding the necessity of maintaining a private sphere, one hundred Congressmen warned Jackson that he had to find a solution to this social nightmare.<sup>49</sup> As a former Secretary of the Navy wrote in a personal letter, “You ask how are things in Washington, and I reply perhaps the strangest in the world, because for the first time, I believe the destiny of the nation hangs on a *woman’s* favor, and yet strange, ‘tis true.”<sup>50</sup> Despite the President’s protestations and urgings, the Cabinet wives refused to budge on the issue. Unable to find a

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<sup>43</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 201.

<sup>44</sup> Kirsten E. Wood, “‘One Woman so Dangerous to Public Morals’: Gender and Power in the Eaton Affair,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 17, no. 2 (1997): 238, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3124447>.

<sup>45</sup> Allgor, 207.

<sup>46</sup> Wood, 250.

<sup>47</sup> Allgor, 207.

<sup>48</sup> Wood, 250.

<sup>49</sup> Allgor, 206–8.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

solution, for the first and only time in American history, all of Jackson's Cabinet resigned.<sup>51</sup> The resignation of Jackson's cabinet shows how important the private sphere is in politics. This is a case where a private dispute – whether or not Peggy Eaton would be entertained in Washingtonians' homes – resulted in repercussions at the highest level of American politics. The private sphere, the domain of women, clearly had repercussions in the public sphere.

Elite political women, and especially First Ladies, also serve as informal channels of communication. In the early republic, political elites could informally communicate with one another through women's letters.<sup>52</sup> While political men's letters to one another were often considered public correspondence, women's letters were almost invariably considered private communication. Therefore, when engaging in sensitive communications or passing along confidential information, political couples opted to use the wives' letters. For instance, after a political scandal instigated by an enemy of the Madisons forced James to send an official letter of reproach to America's minister to France, Madison sent a personal letter to the minister's wife. In this letter, Madison wrote to “prepare” the couple for the public “disapprobation” aimed at the husband.<sup>53</sup> This private warning effectively softened the blow of the official censure. In letters and face-to-face interactions, elite women in the early republic “provided the perfect solution to the problem of disguising the personal in the political.”<sup>54</sup>

First Ladies can serve as key diplomatic backchannels. During Thomas Jefferson's administration, as the wife of the Secretary of State, Madison often served as surrogate First Lady to the widowed Jefferson. When American relations with Spain began to sour following the Louisiana Purchase, Madison was the logical choice to help repair them. Once the Spanish

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<sup>51</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 208.

<sup>52</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 269.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>54</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 189.

minister broke diplomatic protocol by leaving Washington to protest the Purchase, Jefferson and James relied on Madison's good relationship and letters with the Spanish minister's wife to ensure that, to at least some degree, diplomatic relations could continue with Spain.<sup>55</sup> Writing to her younger sister, Madison urged her to "Remember me ... to Sally [the minister's wife] say a great deal for I feel a tenderness for her & her husband independent of circumstances."<sup>56</sup>

Although diplomatic relations had significantly deteriorated, Madison's letters and her network of other women served as a means of backchannel communications between the administration and Spain and helped to ease the tense relationship.<sup>57</sup>

With the United States becoming a superpower in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, First Ladies continue to play an active role in personal diplomacy. Barbara Bush cultivated her personal relationships with the spouses of world leaders. At an Economic Summit in Paris, Bush attended a luncheon with "About sixty wives of Chiefs of State or Heads of Governments.... I saw many old friends from around the world."<sup>58</sup> These women, with the ears of some of the most powerful men in the world, regularly gathered together and built friendships through decades of shared public life. Though Bush shies away from claiming responsibility for any diplomatic successes as a result of these relationships, Hillary Clinton is less reluctant. In her memoir, Clinton writes "I realized that forging good relationship with my fellow spouses provided convenient low-key communications among heads of states."<sup>59</sup> At these luncheons, dinners, and receptions, First Ladies can quietly and covertly gauge the reactions of fellow spouses. Like Bush, Clinton made a point of attending spouses' events. Every year, Clinton

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<sup>55</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 62.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Barbara Bush, *Barbara Bush: A Memoir* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1994), 307.

<sup>59</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Living History* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 410.

attended the annual meeting of the First Ladies of the Western Hemisphere.<sup>60</sup> The simple fact that these meetings occur on an annual basis shows the importance of First Ladies' personal relationships in diplomacy. In particular, Clinton points to her relationships with Middle Eastern political wives as being especially influential. In tense, long-term, and highly-charged diplomatic negotiations, Clinton built informal communication networks between the White House and Middle Eastern capitals through her relationships with these women.<sup>61</sup> Uniquely able to build and maintain these relationships with other spouses of world leaders, particularly other wives, First Ladies are able to utilize and exploit informal communication networks for diplomatic aims.

During campaigns, First Ladies are essential to helping their husbands win the presidency. First Ladies of the early republic worked closely with their husbands to ensure electoral success. Dolley Madison was key in achieving her husband's presidential ambitions. According to Louisa Catherine Adams, future First Lady and wife of James's political rival, Madison was incredibly popular in Washington society. Adams observed in 1805 that Madison was "well known and... much admired....She seemed to combine all the qualification requisite to adorn the Station which she filled [serving as Jefferson's surrogate First Lady] to the satisfaction of *all*: a most difficult performance."<sup>62</sup> Using her popularity and skills in creating private spaces, Madison engineered campaign events for her husband. In addition to participating in the normal rounds of social calling required of Cabinet ladies, Madison hosted lavish weekly parties at their Washington home for politicians and their wives across the political spectrum.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 331.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>62</sup> Louisa Catherine Adams, Margaret A. Hogan, and C. James Taylor, *A Traveled First Lady: Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams* (Cumberland, UNITED STATES: Harvard University Press, 2014), 118, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/wlu/detail.action?docID=3301390>.

<sup>63</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 137.



Charles Pickney, another Presidential hopeful, credited Madison with James's victory. Pickney said he "was beaten by Mr. and Mrs. Madison. I might have had a better chance had I faced Mr. Madison alone."<sup>64</sup> Pickney credited Madison's untiring social campaign as securing James the White House. Madison's attempts were not confined to James's first presidential run; she revived her starring role in his 1812 re-election campaign. A contemporary politician observed in a letter that Madison "saved the administration of her husband. But for her, DeWitt Clinton would have been chosen President in 1812."<sup>65</sup> Other political elites recognized Madison's positive impact and importance during the campaign.

Learning from Madison's successes, Louisa Catherine Adams was also deeply involved in her husband's campaign. Before her husband, John Quincy Adams, was elected President, he served as Minister to Russia. While living in St. Petersburg, Adams "charmed nobles and diplomats... even wining the favor of the tsar."<sup>66</sup> Adams hosted weekly parties at their stately Washington home. "Tuesdays at the Adams'" became known throughout the city as prime opportunities for politicians across the political spectrum to advance their agendas.<sup>67</sup> As the hostess of these gatherings, Adams controlled and presided over these spaces. In the run up to her husband's presidential election, Adams's gatherings became campaign events. John Quincy acknowledged the importance of these events for his political future. He urged his wife that, even though the evenings were "fatiguing," to continue her "Tuesday Campaigns."<sup>68</sup> John Quincy understood and valued the efforts put forward by his wife. Entertaining Washington elites, Adams helped her husband access and communicate with potential political allies and

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<sup>64</sup> Allgor, *A Perfect Union*, 137.

<sup>65</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 238.

<sup>66</sup> Adams, Hogan, and Taylor, *A Traveled First Lady*, xii.

<sup>67</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 173.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

supporters.<sup>69</sup> While John Quincy was “very doubtful” about his election prospects in 1821, after three years of constant entertaining, John Quincy “seemed to be more gay and animated than I have ever seen him, which is a pretty good symptom that he is satisfied with his prospects.”<sup>70</sup>

Historian Catherine Allgor credits John Quincy’s victory in the 1824 presidential election to the entertaining skills of his wife. In a moment of political genius, Adams hosted a ball in honor of General Andrew Jackson, the foremost rival to John Quincy’s presidential ambitions. Adams recorded in her diary on December 20, 1823: “It was agreed this day that we should give a Ball to General Jackson on the eight – I objected much to the plan but was overpowered by John’s arguments and the thing was settled.”<sup>71</sup> With the election likely to end in the House of Representatives, John Quincy understood the importance of a public relations coup among Washington elites and needed his wife to help achieve it.<sup>72</sup> Spoken of for years following the event, the Jackson ball was, in the words of one historian, both “a social event and political phenomena.”<sup>73</sup> Nearly two century later, Laura Bush remarked “Looking back from the twenty-first century, her party was worthy of any modern White House event.”<sup>74</sup> The ball showcased the Adamses’ prominence and popularity in the city. One newspaper wrote after the event, the night of the ball “the people” had “all... gone to Mrs. Adams’s.”<sup>75</sup> It is important to note that the newspaper pointed to Mrs. Adams – rather than Mr. Adams – as the host of the occasion. While the event was clearly to help her husband’s political ambitions, it was Adams who deserved the credit for orchestrating it. Writing to her son on the eve of the 1824 election, Adams spoke of the

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<sup>69</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 168.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>71</sup> Adams, Hogan, and Taylor, *A Traveled First Lady*, 320.

<sup>72</sup> Allgor, 177.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>74</sup> Adams, Hogan, and Taylor, xii.

<sup>75</sup> Allgor, 181.

election as a shared enterprise between her and her husband. She wrote, “A Presidential Election is becoming so fiery an Ordeal ... but conscious rectitude is a brazen shield which will equally support us in publick and private and enable us to live through the hurricane which at present beats upon our devoted heads.”<sup>76</sup>

During the later nineteenth century, the role of First Ladies and potential First Ladies in campaigns waned. But, as the Victorian era drew to a close and the press increasingly covered presidential candidates in minute detail, potential First Ladies slowly returned to the center of campaigns.<sup>77</sup> Because of his pioneering use of rhetoric, William McKinley’s 1896 campaign is often considered the first modern campaign and, as mentioned in the first chapter, is the first campaign to circulate a biography of the candidate’s wife.<sup>78</sup> Edith Roosevelt, Theodore’s wife, wrote during his 1904 campaign that she “think[s] of little but the election.”<sup>79</sup> This only intensified as the twentieth century went on and has continued into the twenty-first. Campaigns, especially modern ones, are all consuming events. Stepping in for their husbands, First Ladies are valuable campaign surrogates.

Lady Bird Johnson campaigned for her husband. In 1960, with her husband running for Vice President, Johnson travelled 35,000 miles and attended 150 events, tirelessly championing the Johnson-Kennedy ticket. Robert F. Kennedy, brother and future Attorney General of President Kennedy, acknowledged Johnson’s help during the campaign especially in winning her

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<sup>76</sup> Louisa Catherine Johnson Adams, “Louisa Catherine Johnson Adams to Charles Francis Adams,” November 4, 1824, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-4465>.

<sup>77</sup> William D. Harpine, “Playing to the Press in McKinley’s Front Porch Campaign: The Early Weeks of a Nineteenth-Century Pseudo-Event,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2000): 74.

<sup>78</sup> Molly Meijer Wertheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice: The Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century*, Communication, Media, and Politics (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 74; Harpine, 74.

<sup>79</sup> Parry-Giles and Blair, “The Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady,” 569.

home state, saying “Lady Bird carried Texas for us.”<sup>80</sup> During the 1964 campaign, Johnson became the first First Lady to campaign without her husband. Covering 1,628 miles and talking to half a million voters, Johnson’s “Lady Bird Special” stopped in eight Southern states.<sup>81</sup> Her nineteen-car train traveled throughout the South and pulled “into each of the 41 stops on the route with the whistle blowing and the song, ‘Hello Lyndon,’ blaring from the loudspeakers.”<sup>82</sup> Since her husband had only recently signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, this was no easy task. Johnson, however, refused to back down. One historian noted that “An advantage in using the first lady as a representative is the possibility that a tense situation may be defused by someone other than the president.”<sup>83</sup> This was certainly true with Johnson. Born and raised in a small-town Texas, Johnson was the logical choice to serve as “the administration’s emissary to the South.”<sup>84</sup> A Southerner herself, Johnson had a special way of connecting with Southern voters. Johnson said “I wanted to make this trip because I am proud of the South and I am proud that I am part of the South.”<sup>85</sup> At one stop, she told the crowd hurling insults that their words came “not from the good people of South Carolina but from the state of confusion.”<sup>86</sup> She assured Southerners that their response to the Civil Rights Act convinced her “of something I have always believed, that there is in the Southland more love than hate.”<sup>87</sup> One aide told her, “They may not believe what you’re saying, but they sure will understand the way you’re saying it!”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Kate Andersen Brower, *First Women: The Grace and Power of America’s Modern First Ladies* (New York City: Harpers Collins Publishers, 2016), 146.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>82</sup> “Lady Bird Special Blows Whistle: Toot-Toot, Chug-Chug,” *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973); Washington, D.C.*, October 6, 1964, sec. For And About Women.

<sup>83</sup> Kathy B. Smith, “The First Lady Represents America: Rosalynn Carter in South America,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1997): 541.

<sup>84</sup> Brower, 151.

<sup>85</sup> William Chapman, “Lady Bird Starts Train Rolling,” *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973); Washington, D.C.*, October 7, 1964.

<sup>86</sup> Brower, 151.

<sup>87</sup> Chapman.

<sup>88</sup> Brower, 151.

The Johnsons' hard work paid off. That November, despite having just signed the most sweeping civil rights bill since Reconstruction, Lyndon won re-election, carrying most of the South.<sup>89</sup>

Rosalynn Carter took on a very prominent role during Jimmy Carter's failed 1980 re-election campaign. While her husband stayed in Washington to fulfill his vow to end the Iran hostage crisis, Carter did most of the campaigning for the couple.<sup>90</sup> For example, over a two month period, she "made half a dozen campaign appearances" in Virginia alone.<sup>91</sup> During her campaign stops, she talked about her husband's loneliness in his job and assured the public that he was "wiser than he was four years ago."<sup>92</sup> Though the campaign was ultimately unsuccessful, Carter was crucial in simply keeping the campaign going and, as the candidate's wife, she was able to speak about him with a different degree of sincerity. Over ninety years after Edith Roosevelt, Hillary Clinton remembered serving as "Bill's principle surrogate on the campaign trail" and "crisscrossing the country on a campaign marathon" in the fall of 1996.<sup>93</sup> Serving to double the amount of time and geographic distance a campaign can cover, First Ladies have become invaluable members of the modern campaign circuit.

In addition to representing their husbands domestically during campaigns, First Ladies also represent the nation diplomatically and create emotional ties between the United States and its allies. During the twentieth century, personal relationships between First Ladies and foreign leaders have also helped to advance cultural diplomacy. After hearing that Helen Taft had enjoyed the cherry blossoms she saw on a state visit, the city of Tokyo sent saplings to the First

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<sup>89</sup> Brower, *First Women*, 153.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 231–32.

<sup>91</sup> Denis Collins, "Rosalynn Carter Takes Campaign To N. Virginia," *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*; *Washington, D.C.*, October 17, 1980, sec. METRO Federal Diary Obituaries Classified.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 111 and 481.

Lady.<sup>94</sup> A 1910 *New York Times* article reported, “Two thousand Japanese cherry trees, the gift of the corporation of Tokio to Mrs. Taft and the City of Washington, arrived here to today.”<sup>95</sup> It is important to note that the trees were presented as a personal gift to the First Lady to foster ties between the two nations. Taft had the trees planted throughout the capital and the White House grounds.<sup>96</sup> Today the annual cherry blossom festival continues to draw visitors to Washington and serves as a celebration of Japanese-American relations. During the 1980s Japanese-American trade disputes, the *New York Times* used the fact that “the cherry trees... are now riotously abloom all over [Washington]” to remind the nation “of a time when the friendship between the two countries was in full blossom.”<sup>97</sup>

Jackie Kennedy likewise used her personal relationships to strengthen cultural relations. French President Charles de Gaulle was enamored with the francophone Kennedy. Kennedy used this relationship to secure the loan of one of France’s most prized possession to the United States: the *Mona Lisa*. This trans-Atlantic voyage was the first and only time Leonardo Da Vinci’s masterpiece came to America.<sup>98</sup> At the 1963 unveiling, the French Minister of Culture praised Kennedy for being “always present when art, the United States and my country are linked.”<sup>99</sup> With her husband working to open China, Pat Nixon accompanied him to on a state visit to China and received a symbolic gift. Originally, Nixon was not supposed to go on the trip but, according to then National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, “[Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai] wants Mrs. Nixon, he wants her on the trip.”<sup>100</sup> During the visit, Nixon and the Premier

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<sup>94</sup> *New York Times*, “The Tokyo Mayor’s Two Gifts,” *New York Times*, 1985.

<sup>95</sup> “TOKIO’S GIFT TO MRS. TAFT.: Two Thousand Cherry Trees from Japan Arrive at Washington.,” *New York Times*, 1910.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *New York Times*, “The Tokyo Mayor’s Two Gifts.”

<sup>98</sup> Brower, *First Women*, 195.

<sup>99</sup> Marjorie Hunter, “President Attends Debut of ‘Mona Lisa,’” *New York Times*, January 9, 1963.

<sup>100</sup> Brower, 178.

enjoyed one another's company, and, at one dinner, Nixon commented that the pandas on the Chinese Premier's cigarette holder were cute. In response, he offered Nixon and the United States a gift of several pandas. Nixon accepted them and they were sent to live in the National Zoo, immediately becoming tourist attractions.<sup>101</sup> Like Taft's cherry trees and Kennedy's *Mona Lisa* visit, Nixon's pandas helped to strengthen cultural and popular bonds between the nations. These three First Ladies have all used personal relationships and the acceptance of gifts on behalf of the nation to strengthen bonds between countries. While First Ladies of the early republic practiced personal diplomacy in private, these twentieth century First Ladies were more public with their efforts.

Since Eleanor Roosevelt's term and World War II, First Ladies have increasingly represented the country independent of their husbands. In addition, as the United States has grown more powerful internationally "contemporary presidents have routinely used their spouses as official representatives of the United States at state and political functions."<sup>102</sup> Making trips the President is either unwilling or unable to make, First Ladies extend the reach of the White House, humanize America's image abroad, and can use their gender as both an asset and a shield from criticism. During World War II, Eleanor Roosevelt pioneered this role. With her husband occupied in Washington and mobility-impaired in a wheelchair, Roosevelt did a good will tour of Britain. Roosevelt's trip was a roaring success in the war-weary country. One British reporter wrote, "Mrs. Roosevelt has done more to bring a real understanding of the spirit of the United States to the people of Britain than any other single American who has ever visited these islands."<sup>103</sup> Roosevelt's visit went a long way in reassuring the English people that their ally

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<sup>101</sup> Brower, *First Women*, 179.

<sup>102</sup> Smith, "The First Lady Represents America," 540.

<sup>103</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 391.

would stand beside them throughout the war. As America became a superpower, First Ladies have taken increased responsibility for publicly representing the United State abroad.

Championing the use of soft power, Jackie Kennedy helped “to create the architectural plan for how a president’s spouse can effectively support a government within the global context of the presidency.”<sup>104</sup> Political scientists define “soft power” as the use of non-military and non-coercive means to strengthen ties between nations, usually focused around culture and ideology.<sup>105</sup> A key way Kennedy showed appreciation for different peoples and cultures was through her knowledge of five languages.<sup>106</sup> Visiting Latin America with her husband to help champion his new Alliance for Progress, Kennedy delivered short remarks in perfect Spanish.<sup>107</sup> Her interpreter wrote, it “wasn’t so much what she said but that idea of here is an American who has bothered to learn our language.”<sup>108</sup> With John fluent only in English, Kennedy’s ability to communicate with people in their native tongue was a major asset that humanized America’s image. In addition, due to the low public perception of the United States, the White House hoped that Kennedy’s presence would help avoid a potentially poor reception in Latin America. John told his advisor that Kennedy “was insurance of both a big crowd and safe treatment.”<sup>109</sup> This proved to be true. To the surprise of the Kennedys and their aides, “nearly half the population of Bogota,” some 500,000 people, greeted them in the Columbian capital.<sup>110</sup> Kennedy was part of the attraction. One handmade sign in the crowd read, “Welcomes, Sir John Kennedy and

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<sup>104</sup> Elizabeth J. Natalle, *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy* (New York City: Peter Lang Publishing, 2018), xii.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>110</sup> Tad Szulc, “500,000 IN BOGOTA GREET PRESIDENT ON ALLIANCE TOUR: Aide Calls Crowd Biggest to Welcome Kennedy on Any of His Trips,” *New York Times*, 1961.



Lady.”<sup>111</sup> France too appreciated Kennedy’s fluency in French. The French Ambassador in Washington wrote “she speaks our language.... I think her influence was extremely efficient as far as Franco-American relations were concerned.”<sup>112</sup> Kennedy was so popular that her husband jokingly introduced himself to a Parisian audience as “the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris.”<sup>113</sup>

Unaccompanied by her husband, Kennedy visited Pakistan and India in 1962.<sup>114</sup> Her trip was considered an unequivocal success and, once again, her gender was a diplomatic asset rather than liability. Upon her arrival, 100,000 Pakistanis lined the streets from the airport to the home where Kennedy was staying.<sup>115</sup> Kennedy was tremendously popular abroad. America’s Ambassador to Pakistan wrote to John that Kennedy “had an impact well beyond another a man could have achieved.”<sup>116</sup> Kennedy popularity and international image helped to improve relations with not only other governments but people around the world. These relations served to strengthen America’s soft power. After Kennedy’s visit, the Indian Prime Minister said that the “psychological pull” between the United States and India was the most important factor in the two nations’ relationship.<sup>117</sup> Kennedy’s daughter and eventual Ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy reflected “My mother played a critical role in the development of what is now called ‘soft diplomacy.’”<sup>118</sup> Though undoubtedly Caroline was affected by a degree of family loyalty, Kennedy helped to increase the public diplomatic role that First Ladies had.

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<sup>111</sup> Szulc, “500,000 IN BOGOTA GREET PRESIDENT ON ALLIANCE TOUR

<sup>112</sup> Natalie, *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy*, 67.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>115</sup> Paul Grimes, “PAKISTAN GREETES PRESIDENT’S WIFE: Mrs. Kennedy Hailed After Colorful Farewell in India,” *New York Times*, 1962.

<sup>116</sup> Natalie, 129.

<sup>117</sup> Grimes.

<sup>118</sup> Natalie, 10.

Rosalynn Carter played a similar role representing the United States diplomatically. When a schedule conflict prevented both the President and Vice President from greeting the Pope upon his arrival to America, Carter was sent instead.<sup>119</sup> By sending the First Lady, the United States avoided the potentially humiliating situation of snubbing the Pope while also not having to adjust the President's and Vice President's schedules. In June 1977, Jimmy asked Carter to represent the United States on a thirteen-day tour of seven Latin American countries.<sup>120</sup> Already committed to an economic summit in London, Jimmy was unable to take the international trip but wanted to show America's appreciation for its southern neighbors.<sup>121</sup> Like with the Papal visit, Carter seemed to be the perfect solution to this problem. American-Latin American relations in the 1970s were on rocky ground. Jimmy sent Carter to "express friendship" and discuss "subjects of interest" with foreign leaders.<sup>122</sup> Before leaving, Carter said she hoped that, during her trip, she would "establish a personal relationship" with these leaders and that it would "be more than a goodwill trip."<sup>123</sup> Just as the Kennedys had done, the Carter State Department hoped that Carter would use her gender and apolitical status as a shield to avoid some of the criticism the President would not be able to escape. Finally, as a woman, Carter softened and humanized America's image in the region.<sup>124</sup> In this way, rather than being a liability, Carter's gender was an asset for America's diplomatic goals.

Due to security concerns, the State Department and Secret Service are often wary of sending the President and Vice President to potentially unstable nations. However, the Clinton

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<sup>119</sup> Faye Lind Jensen, "An Awesome Responsibility: Rosalynn Carter as First Lady. (Modern First Ladies)," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1990): 771.

<sup>120</sup> Smith, "The First Lady Represents America," 542.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 542-43.

<sup>122</sup> Susanna McBee, "Mrs. Carter in Jamaica: Latin Tour Begins Rosalynn Carter Begins Latin Tour," *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*; *Washington, D.C.*, May 31, 1977, sec. General.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> Smith, 547.

administration wanted to build relationships with these developing countries and believed high-profile visits would help to achieve this goal. The First Lady proved to be the ideal solution to this conundrum.<sup>125</sup> For instance, when the State Department wanted to encourage Mongolian development, Hillary Clinton traveled to Ulaanbaatar.<sup>126</sup> Clinton's staff joked that the State Department "had a directive: If the place was too small, too dangerous or too poor — send Hillary."<sup>127</sup> Clinton's jet-setting is a perfect example of another advantage of using First Ladies in diplomacy: First Ladies help "to extend the arms of the presidency to cover diverse events around the nation and the world."<sup>128</sup>

First Ladies in recent years have been particularly useful in advancing diplomatic agendas center around women and women's rights. Serving as Second Lady from 1981 to 1989, Barbara Bush experimented with a role that she would later revisit as First Lady. Bush accompanied her husband to Pakistan to meet with refugees. In accordance with local custom, it would be inappropriate for a man to address to a mixed gender assembly. So, when George wanted to speak to the refugees, he could only speak with the men. However, while her husband spoke to the men, Bush spoke to the women in a separate venue.<sup>129</sup> During her husband's presidency, Bush repeated this same tactic. In a state visit to Saudi Arabia, the couple again split up with George attending a working dinner with Saudi male leaders and Bush attending a reception with Saudi women. At this reception, Bush was able to meet with four hundred Saudi women and talk to them about their lives and experiences.<sup>130</sup> While in a perfect world, women would not be subjected to sex discriminatory bans, this allows the United States to operate within

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<sup>125</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 207.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 341–42.

<sup>128</sup> Smith, "The First Lady Represents America," 541.

<sup>129</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 194.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 382–83.

the bounds and customs of host societies while also showing the value of women's voices and subtly chipping away at patriarchal norms.

Hillary Clinton used her first ladyship to amplify the voices and experiences of women around the world. Clinton noted that "the role of the First Lady is deeply symbolic" and understood the power of symbolic actions in diplomacy.<sup>131</sup> Clinton made a point of bringing her teenage daughter, Chelsea, with her on foreign visits. By demonstrating her and the President's dedication to Chelsea's education, Clinton hoped to show the importance and value of educating daughters. Clinton visited with low income women abroad. Once again, by including these stops on her itineraries, Clinton told the world that America valued these women's experiences and wanted to hear their voices.<sup>132</sup> On September 5, 1995 Clinton delivered remarks on behalf of the United States at the United Nation's Fourth World Conference on Women.<sup>133</sup> As the First Lady of the most powerful nation on earth, Clinton's attendance and speech brought global attention to the Beijing conference. Clinton wanted the conference to focus "world attention on issues that matter most in [women's] lives" and "to give voice to women everywhere whose experiences go unnoticed, whose words go unheard."<sup>134</sup> As First Lady, Clinton was able to use her global pulpit to spread the message that "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights once and for all."<sup>135</sup> With the increased global power and the growing international profile of the United States and the President, First Ladies' diplomatic pulpits have grown. Wielding their diplomatic power, these recent First Ladies have expanded their influence to the international stage.

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<sup>131</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 263.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>133</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Women's Rights Are Human Rights" (Speech, September 4, 1995), <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/hillaryclintonbeijingspeech.htm>.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

Like her mother-in-law and her predecessor, Laura Bush used her gender to give credibility to and advance her husband's foreign policy agenda. The first time a First Lady delivered the president's weekly radio address, Laura Bush addressed the nation on the war in Afghanistan on November 17, 2001. In a later interview, she said "I wanted Americans to know the circumstances of the lives of Afghan women. And I hoped that Americans would help."<sup>136</sup> During her address, Bush discussed "the brutality against" and the "plight of women and children in Afghanistan."<sup>137</sup> Bush directly tied the American war effort with the effort to liberate Afghan women. She said, "the fight against terrorism is also the fight for the rights and dignity of women."<sup>138</sup> By justifying the war with appeals to human rights and women's liberation, Bush provided a moral justification for the war. Once more, this was a logical extension of the role of First Ladies in policy making. Since the time of the early republic, societally women have been considered the more moral sex and therefore, as a woman, Bush had more authority to talk on moral issues. Therefore, it is only logical that, as a contemporary *New York Times* article wrote, Bush became a "leading voice in the information campaign."<sup>139</sup> At the time, Bush's interest in Middle Eastern women was controversial. In a 2005 speech at the World Economic Forum in Jordan, Bush called for women's suffrage and education, prompting the Saudi Arabian

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<sup>136</sup> Laura Bush, Mrs. Bush Discusses 15th Anniversary of Radio Address on Afghan Women | Bush Center, interview by Brittney Baine, Website, September 17, 2016, Bush Center, <http://www.bushcenter.org/publications/articles/2016/11/mrs-bush-discusses-15th-anniversary-of-radio-address.html>.

<sup>137</sup> TheBushCenter, *Mrs. Laura Bush Delivers the President's Weekly Radio Address - November 17, 2001*, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31a-oLJ2N2s&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, "A NATION CHALLENGED: SHAPING OPINION; First Lady to Speak About Afghan Women - The New York Times," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/16/us/a-nation-challenged-shaping-opinion-first-lady-to-speak-about-afghan-women.html>.

delegation to walk out.<sup>140</sup> Bush used her unique pulpit as a woman to bring attention to and to legitimize the United States' foreign policy.

During her first state visit abroad, Michelle Obama continued this tradition by stopping at “a government-funded inner-city second school” for girls in Islington, England.<sup>141</sup> As Obama observed, “Traveling abroad I had opportunities that Barack didn't. I could escape the stage-managed multilateral meetings and sit-downs with leaders and find new ways to bring a little extra warmth to those otherwise staid visits.”<sup>142</sup> Like Carter had in South America, Obama humanized the United States' image abroad. And, like Clinton had in Beijing, Obama used her global recognition to bring attention to important international conferences focused on women. For instance, she gave a keynote address at a leadership conference for young African women.<sup>143</sup> Working with her husband, Obama also began “Let Girls Learn” which “was an ambitious, government-wide effort focused on helping adolescent girls around the world obtain better access to education.”<sup>144</sup> When Boko Haram, a Nigerian terrorist group, abducted nearly three hundred Nigerian school girls, Obama joined international cries for their release. Just as Laura Bush had given her husband's weekly radio address on the state of Afghan women, Obama substituted for her husband for the only time during their eight years in the White House to talk about the plight of the Nigerian girls. Obama remembered “speaking emotionally about how we needed to work harder at protecting and encouraging girls worldwide.”<sup>145</sup>

First Ladies have turned what is traditionally seen as a societal disadvantage, their gender, into a potent political tool. Though still limited in the range of appropriate behaviors and

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<sup>140</sup> Natalie, *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy*, 218.

<sup>141</sup> Michelle Obama, *Becoming*, First edition (New York: Crown, 2018), 318.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

issues open to them, First Ladies, using the ideological foundations set by maternalism, are able to speak as women and often as mothers with an added authority in domestic policy discussions regarding women and children. In 1776, Abigail Adams urged her husband “in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make” to “Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors.”<sup>146</sup> Adams reminded John “all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Reblion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.”<sup>147</sup> In this instance before her and her husband entered the White House, Adams pushed her husband to support women’s rights. Though we do not know how, if at all, this letter effected John’s thinking or his policies, Abigail Adam’s emotional letter is just one of many examples of First Ladies privately lobbying their husbands on behalf of women issues.

As the other adult resident of the White House, First Ladies from the second half of the nineteenth century are able to provide White House access to female activists.<sup>148</sup> In the later nineteenth century, women approached Lucy Hayes “as their special representative” in the administration.<sup>149</sup> As the public profile of the First Lady grew and Americans became more accepting of First Ladies’ role, they began to use their influence more publicly. When John Hopkins approached Caroline Harrison to help fundraise for their new medical school in 1890, Harrison agreed but on one condition: the school would have to admit women.<sup>150</sup> Harrison agreed to trade her influence and popularity to help advance educational and professional

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<sup>146</sup> Abigail Adams to John Adams, “Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776,” March 31, 1776, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0241>.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Borrelli, *The Politics of the President’s Wife*, 73.

<sup>149</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 96.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 111.

opportunities for women. After working hard to increase the public presence of the first ladyship, Florence Harding likewise used her pulpit to advance women's interests. The first First Lady to serve after the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment told one reporter "I want to help the women of the country to understand their government... I want representative women to meet their chief Executive and to understand the policies of the present administration."<sup>151</sup> With women still only recently enfranchised, Lou Hoover made sure to increase White House outreach to women and children by hosting events catered to them and their issues.<sup>152</sup> Hoover also wanted to enact cultural change: in an attempt to lessen the social exclusion many acceptant mothers faced, Hoover made a special point of inviting pregnant women to the White House.<sup>153</sup> Expanding the traditional power of First Ladies as hostesses, they began to serve as champions of women.

Eleanor Roosevelt built on and revolutionized this traditional role of First Ladies when she began to more publicly champion policies relating to women. Few First Ladies come close to rivaling Roosevelt's interest in and knowledge of the intricacies of policy. During World War II, Eleanor Roosevelt vocally supported women working in factories.<sup>154</sup> To provide more support for working mothers, she called for and helped establish day care centers for their children. She used her role as a mother to highlight the problems faced by working mothers as they sought to support the war effort.<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, as First Lady, Roosevelt pronounced that "women are as fully capable as men."<sup>156</sup> While her predecessors too had dealt with advancing women's issues,

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<sup>151</sup> Katherine A. S. Sibley, *First Lady Florence Harding: Behind the Tragedy and Controversy*, Modern First Ladies (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 86.

<sup>152</sup> Borrelli, *The Politics of the President's Wife*, 63.

<sup>153</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 185.

<sup>154</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 365.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 416.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 557.



Roosevelt's deep interests and passions expanded and extended this role to engage in specific policy discussions, providing precedent for future First Ladies.

Betty Ford used this traditional role of First Ladies to justify her interest in the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Ford was a vocal champion of the ERA and a self-described feminist.<sup>157</sup> After the amendment passed Congress, Ford called state legislators around the nation lobbying for them to approve the measure.<sup>158</sup> In the interview with *60 Minutes* described in the first chapter, however, Ford argued that the ERA and other issues she had spoken about “were issues pertaining to women. I'm not getting into the political issues.”<sup>159</sup> Even when the interviewer pointed out the ERA “was a very hot political issue,” Ford continued to argue that it was an appropriate issue for a First Lady since it dealt with women.<sup>160</sup> Ford attempted to draw a line between “women's issues” and “political issues” where none truly exists. Rather, the line she drew was between issues deemed appropriate and issues deemed inappropriate for First Ladies. Ford attempted to defend her political involvement by returning to the precedent set by former First Ladies of only publicly involving themselves in “women's issues.” Later in the interview, when asked about what issues she most advocated for behind the scenes, Ford said “it had to do with, perhaps, putting a woman in the Cabinet.”<sup>161</sup> Framing her political activism within the traditional role of the First Lady, Ford publicly called for equal rights for women and a greater role for them in the Cabinet.

As women themselves, First Ladies in the past few decades have also played a key role in shaping political and cultural conversations around women's health. Starting with Betty Ford,

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<sup>157</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 263.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>159</sup> Betty Ford, Ford, Betty - General, interview by Morley Safer, August 10, 1975, Ford Presidential Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0204/1511773.pdf>.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

several First Ladies have led the campaign for increased breast cancer awareness. When Ford underwent a mastectomy in the White House, she went public with the news against the advice of her husband's advisors. After learning how many women suffered from breast cancer, Ford was determined to bring the issue to light rather than hide behind vague terms such as "health issue."<sup>162</sup> In the 1970s, breast cancer and especially mastectomies were considered a taboo subject but Ford's announcement encouraged many women to visit their doctors for a mammogram.<sup>163</sup> Hundreds of letters flooded into Ford's office crediting her with saving their lives.<sup>164</sup> In a later interview Ford said "I was in the hospital [following the mastectomy]. And I thought that there are women all over the country like me. And if I don't make this public, then their lives will be gone, they're in jeopardy. And I think it did a great deal for women as far as the cancer problem is concerned."<sup>165</sup> Inspired by Ford's precedent, Nancy Reagan also went public with news of her breast cancer and again encouraged many other women to get mammograms.<sup>166</sup> By openly talking about their experiences, Ford and Reagan helped to increase awareness and break down stigmas attached to breast cancer. Hillary Clinton did not have breast cancer, but she was intent on working to prevent it. Clinton helped to champion the Medicare Mammogram Awareness Campaign to encourage women to go through this simple yet potentially life-saving screening.<sup>167</sup> Using the traditional pulpit and powers of the first ladyship, these modern women have begun to use it in new ways.

In addition to fulfilling their roles as the nation's mother, modern First Ladies are also able to fill emotional spaces that their husbands cannot. Starting with Lyndon Johnson's visit to

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<sup>162</sup> Brower, *First Women*, 98.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>165</sup> Ford, Ford, Betty - General, interview by Morley Safer.

<sup>166</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 216.

<sup>167</sup> Clinton, *Living History*, 292.

New Orleans after the 1965 Hurricane Betsy, Americans look to the White House for reassurance and empathy during times of crisis.<sup>168</sup> Emotions are a key part of politics. As one twentieth century political strategist observed “if you want to motivate people to vote, or take any kind of action, you’ve got to touch them not only rationally but emotionally.”<sup>169</sup> Voters are not always rational actors; their choices are defined by candidates’ personalities as much as by their policies. Presidents need to touch people’s hearts as well as their heads. In the past two decades, this precedent of an empathetic White House begun by Johnson has increased exponentially. In 2001, a journalist observed that Americans now expect their President to serve as “empathizer-in-chief;” in addition to being Commander-in-Chief, Chief Diplomat, Head of State and the myriad of other roles that the President is expected to perform.<sup>170</sup> A Congressional Research Service writer defined empathy as “feeling what another person feels. It is the perception of another person’s emotions.”<sup>171</sup> As the nation has expanded, it has become more important for citizens to feel reassured that their leaders understand their plights and needs. However, it is impossible for one person to “represent the varied, competing interests of 327 million citizens.”<sup>172</sup> While two people still cannot do the job, including the First Lady in the job of consoling decreases the President’s work load. As a contemporary journalist wrote, Lady Bird Johnson served “as the President’s most personal link with the American people.”<sup>173</sup> First Ladies are able to serve as bonds between the President and the people.

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<sup>168</sup> John Dickerson, “Hardest Job in the World,” *The Atlantic*, accessed November 8, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/05/a-broken-office/556883/>.

<sup>169</sup> Jackson Katz, *Man Enough? Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and the Politics of Presidential Masculinity* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Books, 2016), 162–63.

<sup>170</sup> Colleen Shogan, “The Contemporary Presidency: The Political Utility of Empathy in Presidential Leadership,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2009): 860.

<sup>171</sup> Shogan, 859.

<sup>172</sup> Dickerson.

<sup>173</sup> Dorothy McCardle, “Mrs. LBJ: A View Of America: ‘Lady Bird’ Leaves as Most-Traveled First Lady in History,” *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973); Washington, D.C.*, December 29, 1968, sec. For And About Women.

Betty Ford's press secretary once described the West Wing of the White House as the head while the East Wing was the heart.<sup>174</sup> First Ladies are able to display and act on emotions in a way that their husbands cannot. Constrained by expectations of masculinity, male politicians have a harder time expressing "feminine" emotions such as compassion and empathy. When men display these emotions, especially when they cry "outside of the ritualistic circumstance where it is permitted for men to do so, he 'unmans' himself and risks sacrificing his credibility as a leader."<sup>175</sup> When emotion is required and Presidents feel constrained by gender expectations, First Ladies are able to fill in the void.

The three twenty-first century First Ladies have built on the scattered precedents set by their predecessors. For instance, during World War II, Eleanor Roosevelt paid visits to troops stationed overseas in England and the South Pacific. At each of these stops, she fulfilled a distinctly feminine role. In England, Roosevelt spoke with the soldiers and asked them what sort of support they needed from their government. Their overwhelming reply was simple: they needed warmer socks. Working with General Dwight Eisenhower, Roosevelt helped to secure socks for the troops.<sup>176</sup> Just as Martha Washington had sewed for soldiers at Valley Forge, Roosevelt was also serving a mothering role to soldiers far from home. While soldiers in the South Pacific were less concerned about warm socks, they too appreciated Roosevelt playing a distinctly feminine role. As one soldier remarked after her visit, "after a year of listening to nothing but bassoning top sergeants and officers, it was a good thing to hear a kind lady saying

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<sup>174</sup> Brower, *First Women*, 167–68.

<sup>175</sup> Jackson Katz, *Man Enough? Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and the Politics of Presidential Masculinity* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Books, 2016), 163.

<sup>176</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 380.

nice things.”<sup>177</sup> Coming to the soldiers, Roosevelt was able to convey a sense of warmth and kindness that many of them found difficult to come by.

In the twentieth-first century, the First Ladies role as consoler has exponentially increased and solidified. Following 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, Laura Bush served in the role of Consoler-in-Chief.<sup>178</sup> As the *New York Post* wrote in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Laura Bush was “the First Mom, comforting and reassuring the entire nation.”<sup>179</sup> The role of consoler is a further expansion of the First Ladies’ role as a mother. Obama too felt the expectations to provide empathy and compassion during times of national grief. She remembered that, “as First Lady, I had consoled often. I’d prayed with people whose homes had been shredded by a tornado in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, huge swaths of the town turned to matchsticks in an instance.”<sup>180</sup> In addition, she remembered supporting injured veterans and their families as well as victims of mass shootings around the nation.<sup>181</sup> During times of crisis, people turn to the White House to provide hugs, tears, and words of support and First Ladies have stepped in to fulfill these expectations. Obama and other First Ladies understand the limitations of their power in this regard. Remembering visiting a Chicago school ravaged by gang violence, Obama wrote “I will never pretend that words or hugs from a First Lady alone can turn somebody’s life around... But I was there to push back against the old and damning narrative about being a black urban kid in America.”<sup>182</sup> Obama sought to instill hope in these children and assure them that their nation and their President cared about their challenges and their lives. First Ladies have no control over federal hurricane relief, funding to disaster sites, or gun legislation. But, by visiting sites of

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<sup>177</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 463.

<sup>178</sup> Borrelli, *The Politics of the President’s Wife*, 137.

<sup>179</sup> Caroli, *First Ladies*, 326.

<sup>180</sup> Obama, *Becoming*, 378.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 387–88.

national tragedy, First Ladies can provide a human and emotional connection between the people and their President.

Critics have claimed that Melania Trump fails to properly display the empathy the nation has come to expect from its First Lady. While visiting Texans recovering from the devastation of Hurricane Harvey, she wore designer stilettos. Many commenters wrote that Trump's choice of wearing designer clothing to visit hurricane victims did not display a proper degree of empathy with the citizens' suffering. A year later, instead of wearing a designer outfit, Trump elected to wear a \$39 jacket to visit with immigrant children on the nation's southern border. The jacket came under criticism not for its price tag but for the words "I really don't care. Do u?" emblazoned on its back.<sup>183</sup> The jacket set social media alight. *Vogue* called the words a "Marie Antoinette–esque millennial-speak message."<sup>184</sup> Amnesty International in America tweeted that they were shaken "by the blatant lack of empathy" in the choice of jacket.<sup>185</sup> Though the First Lady claimed there was no hidden message in the jacket's writing, it left some questioning her ability to share in and understand the children's problems. Trump's perceived rejection of the developing custom of First Ladies serving as chief consoler leaves the future of this role in question.

Though the exact nature of their roles has changed over time, First Ladies serve as surrogates of Presidents both at home and abroad. First Ladies are able to create and manage the private sphere. Though the nature of campaigning has changed significantly throughout American history, First Ladies play a key role in winning the White House. First Ladies step in

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<sup>183</sup> Bridget Read, "Melania Trump Just Went to Visit the Border in a Jacket That Literally Says 'I Really Don't Care,'" *Vogue*, June 21, 2018, <https://www.vogue.com/article/melania-trump-visits-border-i-really-dont-care-jacket>.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Sam Wolfson, "Melania Trump Wears 'I Don't Care' Jacket on Plane to Visit Child Detention Center," *The Guardian*, June 22, 2018, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jun/21/melania-trump-jacket-i-dont-care-child-detention-center-visit-clothes>.

as surrogates when the President is unavailable. From serving as campaign surrogates to, starting in the twentieth century, going on international trips alone, First Ladies are able to extend the presence of the White House around the country and the world. In addition, First Ladies create personal relationships with other world leaders that they can translate into cultural diplomacy to benefit the United States. Due to their gender, First Ladies fulfill roles that the President cannot. With their moral and societal position as women and often as mothers, First Ladies are able to speak on policy issues directly affecting women and children. For instance, Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush were able to speak with a different authority on women abroad due to that fact that they too are women. Becoming increasingly vocal and direct with their policy goals as time went on, First Ladies have long championed political issues but with different levels of publicity. Though Eleanor Roosevelt drastically changed the public nature of First Ladies involvement with policy consideration, “many First Ladies have made policy, even if they did not write policy themselves.”<sup>186</sup> First Ladies are also able to enter emotional spaces that Presidents, as men, have a harder time accessing. In the twenty-first century, Americans have increasingly expected the White House to prove its empathy for the suffering of the American people. First Ladies help humanize the White House and prove that the nation’s government does care about and understand the plight of citizens in need. First Ladies are able to double the presence of the White House, enter spaces the President cannot, and allow the White House to touch the lives of more people.

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<sup>186</sup> Allida M. Black, “The Modern First Lady and Public Policy: From Edith Wilson through Hillary Rodham Clinton.,” *OAH Magazine of History* 15, no. 3 (2002): 15.

## CONCLUSION THE PRESIDENT'S HUSBAND

The First Ladies are a diverse group. They come from across the country. Some are older than the President, others are considerably younger. Some had decades long relationships with the President before entering the White House, other met and married the President while he was serving. They come from different parts of the country and have diverse socio-economic, educational and professional backgrounds. But there is one thing that all First Ladies have in common: they are women. As Bill Clinton joked “I am tired of the stranglehold that women have had on the job of presidential spouse.”<sup>1</sup> What will happen when the “First Spouse” is a man? The first President with a husband could either be the first gay or the first female President. In either scenario, the first presidential husband will have to recreate a distinctly feminine institution and find new ways to support his spouse in the White House.

The first task of the first presidential husband will be to determine his title. Presumably, the first man in the White House will adopt the title “First Gentleman.” This seems to be the most equivalent term to “First Lady” and is what husbands of Governors use.<sup>2</sup> However, like the term First Lady, some Americans may find this title “a little too British and manorial for the United States.”<sup>3</sup> A few other more democratic titles have been suggested. The husband of Trinidad and Tobago’s first female Prime Minister used his professional title “Dr.”<sup>4</sup> When his wife was Governor of Alaska, Todd Palin preferred to go by “First Dude.”<sup>5</sup> Tim Maitheson, the

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<sup>1</sup> Sarina Finkelstein, “10 Role Models For Bill Clinton If He Becomes ‘First Gentleman,’” *Money*, accessed March 20, 2019, <http://money.com/money/4430035/bill-clinton-first-gentleman/>.

<sup>2</sup> CBS, “The Role of First Gentleman,” CBS News, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-role-of-first-gentleman/>.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Talbot, “What Bill Clinton Should Do as First Gentleman,” November 2, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/what-bill-clinton-should-do-as-first-gentleman>.

<sup>4</sup> Finkelstein.

<sup>5</sup> Kate Zernike and Kim Severson, “Todd Palin: ‘First Dude’ and Right-Hand Man,” *The New York Times*, September 3, 2008, sec. Americas, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/03/world/americas/03iht-dude.4.15874987.html>.



common law partner of former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, adopted a “First Bloke” persona.<sup>6</sup> Both of these men attempted to stress how down to earth and approachable they were. Bill Clinton is the closest man to ever becoming First Gentleman of the United States. During her 2016 campaign, Hillary Clinton joked that her husband would be the “First Dude” while Bill professed allegiance to the title “First Laddie.”<sup>7</sup> Despite this debate, unless another term gains prominence, it seems safe for now to assume he will go by “First Gentleman,” at least officially.

First Ladies, with over two centuries of precedent, have a hard time determining their role. The first First Gentleman will have an even more difficult time. Domestically, the first First Gentleman could look at the examples of husbands of Governors. Several American Governors have been women and their husbands have had to navigate the complicated role of being First Gentlemen of their respective states.<sup>8</sup> There is only one example of a same-sex couple in a Governor’s Mansion. In 2018, Jared Polis was elected Governor of Colorado, making him the first openly gay governor in American history. At his election party, he introduced his long-term partner (but not legal husband) as “Colorado’s first man” but later clarified that his official title would be “First Gentleman.”<sup>9</sup> Polis and his partner Marlon Reis have not been in Denver long enough to determine what lessons, if any, can be drawn from their experiences.

However, being the figure head of a state is very different from leading a nation. The first First Gentleman will also have some global examples to look to. Most First Gentlemen around the world have had a very quiet role. For instance, a German newspaper called Joachim Sauer,

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<sup>6</sup> Finkelstein, “10 Role Models For Bill Clinton If He Becomes ‘First Gentleman.’”

<sup>7</sup> Emily Schultheis, “What Role Would Bill Clinton Play as ‘First Gentleman’?,” accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-role-would-bill-clinton-play-as-first-gentleman/>.

<sup>8</sup> CBS, “The Role of First Gentleman.”

<sup>9</sup> Nic Garcia, “How Should We Refer to Governor-Elect Jared Polis’ Longtime Partner?,” *The Denver Post* (blog), November 8, 2018, <https://www.denverpost.com/2018/11/08/jared-polis-partner-marlon-reis-official-title-first-man/>.

German Chancellor Angela Merkle’s husband, as “invisible as a molecule.”<sup>10</sup> Sauer has taken such a private role that he even skipped Merkle’s inauguration and instead watched it on television. The husbands of Britain’s two female Prime Ministers have also stayed out of the spotlight. During Margaret Thatcher’s tenure, Denis Thatcher was widely portrayed as dim by the British press though he did reputedly build good relationships with other spouses of world leaders. He and Barbara Bush in particular built a strong friendship. She called him a “good sport” who often “found himself the only male in a roomful of ‘spouses.’”<sup>11</sup> Teresa May’s husband, Phillip May, is likewise camera shy and has avoided media attention.<sup>12</sup> Internationally, Reis has a few prominent role-models including the husband of Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel, Gauthier Destenay. In English, his title is “First Gentleman” of Luxembourg.<sup>13</sup>

The first First Gentleman will also have a few global cautionary examples. Asif Ali Zardari served twice as First Gentleman of Pakistan: from 1988 to 1990 and then again from 1993 to 1996. He became widely known for corruption and was dubbed “Mr. Ten Percent” for the amount he would pocket through graft.<sup>14</sup> While serving as First Gentleman of the Philippines, Jose Miguel Arroyo became embroiled in corruption surrounding the 2005 Southeast Asia Games. He later left the Philippines to live in voluntary exile in the United States.<sup>15</sup> The First Gentleman will do well to remember not to abuse his position and learn from these mistakes.

The roles of President and First Lady are very gendered. As Lisa Kathleen Graddy, the curator of the Smithsonian’s First Ladies exhibit, said “almost all of [our expectation of the First

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<sup>10</sup> Schultheis, “What Role Would Bill Clinton Play as ‘First Gentleman’?”

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Bush, *Barbara Bush: A Memoir* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1994), 190.

<sup>12</sup> Declan Walsh and Yara Bishara, *Video Feature: First Gentlemen Around the World*, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/03/world/americas/video-feature-first-husbands-around-the-world.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Garcia, “How Should We Refer to Governor-Elect Jared Polis’ Longtime Partner?”

<sup>14</sup> Walsh and Bishara, *Video Feature*.

<sup>15</sup> Finkelstein, “10 Role Models For Bill Clinton If He Becomes ‘First Gentleman.’”

Lady's role] has to do with our expectations of gender!"<sup>16</sup> Will the First Gentleman carry out traditionally feminine tasks that First Ladies preform such as decorating the White House for Christmas, deciding on menus for state dinners, and managing floral arrangements? Though Graddy does not "think that people are necessarily going to expect a first gentleman to do the Christmas decoration tour," she argued that "maybe we should."<sup>17</sup> If the First Gentleman does not carry out these tasks, it is not clear who will, if anyone.

Looking abroad, the Thatchers provide an interesting example of combing many elements of traditional gender roles within an atypical first marriage. While visiting them in 1984, Barbara Bush remarked on how well she thought Margaret Thatcher handled being both a hostess and head of government. Bush remembered, upon arriving, "Margaret made sure that I was comfortable and had plenty to read; gave me the guest list for dinner, saying that she had picked dinner partners that she thought I would; then rushed off to discuss armaments."<sup>18</sup> To Bush, "she combined all that was good about being a woman in public life. She was proud of both her ability and of being a woman."<sup>19</sup> In her own marriage Bush had a more conservative view of wifehood, her approval of the Thatchers' example shows that it could be an interesting template for more traditionally-minded first couples.

However the couple chooses to arrange their marital and official responsibilities, it will be unique and different from all the first couple before them. The idea of a wife being more powerful than her husband goes against centuries of expectations of marriage. Some state First Gentlemen have remarked on how their wives' elections to the Governor's Mansion fundamentally changed their relationship. When Andy Moffit was First Gentleman of Rhode

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<sup>16</sup> CBS, "The Role of First Gentleman."

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 189.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 189.

Island, he remembered, after being introduced with that title, a group of people “laughed and kind of giggled” at the concept.<sup>20</sup> Dan Mulhern, the former First Gentleman of Michigan, said “For a man to see your wife in the position of power and prominence all the time, you have to think about how to manage yourself, and how to manage your ego, and how to play roles that are unusual roles.”<sup>21</sup> Mulhern found his time as First Gentleman “Really confusing. Frustrating. Humbling.”<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, he said they were “Very sweet. Lots of pride in my wife. Extraordinary.”<sup>23</sup> The first First Gentleman will need time to grow into his new position and craft the office to suit his and his spouse’s needs. But, like many of the First Ladies before him, hopefully he will find joy and purpose in his office.

The first First Gentleman will have a complex role to play, one that clashes with years of traditions and gender norms. However, while the gender dynamic will be different and they will have fewer precedents to look at, this first couple will have to navigate the same fundamental questions that every first couple has. Within his marriage, he will need to determine the roles he will and will not play. Like all the marriages before his, the First Gentleman will have a unique relationship with his spouse. The first couple will determine duties and responsibilities that work for both of them within the context of their time and their marriage. Depending on his interests, passions, and skills, the first First Gentleman will take on greater or smaller roles in policy and pageantry. Like many First Ladies, he may have to juggle raising children in the White House along with his responsibilities as First Gentleman and the spouse of the leader of the free world. But, if the first First Gentleman is anything like the women that came before him, he will be smart, energetic and passionate. His actions and his tenure will be marked by love of country,

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<sup>20</sup> CBS, “The Role of First Gentleman.”

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

family, and his spouse. He will join a long line of incredible women and have his chance to leave a lasting mark on the history of the United States. As Barbara Bush said in her Wellesley commencement address, “Somewhere out in this audience may even be someone who will one day follow in my footsteps, and preside over the White House as the President’s spouse. I wish him well!”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Bush, *Barbara Bush*, 548.

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