Preserving, Displaying, and Insisting on the Dress: Icons, Female Agencies, Institutions, and the Twentieth Century First Lady

Rachel Morris
College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/289
Preserving, Displaying, and Insisting on the Dress: Icons, Female Agencies, Institutions, and the Twentieth Century First Lady

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in American Studies from the College of William and Mary in Virginia.

Rachel Diane Morris

Accepted for ________________________________

____________________________
Timothy Barnard, Director

____________________________
Chandos Brown

____________________________
Susan Kern

____________________________
Charles McGovern
# Table of Contents

**INTRODUCTION**  
2

**CHAPTER ONE:** Historical Origins of the First Ladyship  
14

**CHAPTER TWO:** Professionalizing a Domestic Role  
19

**CHAPTER THREE:** Jacqueline Kennedy: Dutiful Wife, Glamorous Icon, and Queen of Camelot  
24

**CHAPTER FOUR:** Betty Ford: Finding a Voice for a ‘Powerful Position’  
41

**CHAPTER FIVE:** Hillary Clinton: Revealing the Limitations of the Role  
56

**CONCLUSION:** The First Ladies Enter a New Era: Implications for the Twenty-First Century First Lady  
72

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**  
75
Introduction

“Don’t let it be forgot, that there was once a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.” - Jacqueline Kennedy

“I’d come to recognize more clearly the power of the woman in the White House. Not my power, but the power of the position.” - Betty Ford

“Ever since I was a little girl, I had worked to be my own person and maintain my independence. As much as I loved my husband and my country, adjusting to being a full-time surrogate was difficult for me.” - Hillary Clinton

It is safe to assume that my interest in first ladies began with my childhood visits to the First Ladies’ Exhibit at the National Museum of American History with my mother and my sister. While most children were drawn to that museum to see Dorothy’s Ruby Slippers (and I liked that too), my obsession was with the First Ladies’ Exhibit. The exhibit’s display of beautiful dresses and ball gowns was undoubtedly an important draw for me and many other young girls. I, however, was drawn to something more: I loved the story that the exhibit told.

The exhibit was organized into several different rooms full of wall panels and objects describing various roles of the first lady. I remember entire displays of campaign paraphernalia, brimming with buttons that read “Mamie for First Lady” or “Betty’s Husband for President.” In the same display, I was intrigued by quirky items: a model of the Lady Bird Special train and an odd paper doll of Pat Nixon with a Nixon campaign slogan written on the back. In another section of the exhibit, I remember an audio display of Eleanor Roosevelt’s fireside chats, to which I eagerly listened during each visit although the content never changed. I meticulously read all of the wall paneling and object descriptions, much to the dismay of my mother and sister.

---

who had spent so much time with me in the exhibit that they had become thoroughly sick of it. My father and brother, in fact, refused to visit the exhibit with me and chose to view the pop culture or gun exhibits instead.

The way the exhibit was arranged, the dresses came last after displays about the different roles that the first ladies played. While many visitors made a beeline to the dresses, I reveled in the details of their lives both public and private, prior to treating myself to time with the dresses.

The other displays made me see and appreciate that while these women were glamorous and influential, in other ways they were ‘normal’ women. They were wives and mothers and took care of their families and home, just like my own mother did, only they took care of the ‘First Family’ and the White House. I was also impressed by the publicity that the first ladies generated for their husbands during their presidential campaigns and the influence that they could have on voters, which partly explains why the objects that I most remember from the exhibit were from the campaign section. The exhibit as a whole portrayed a group of women who were traditional and fashionable in their formal dresses, yet they were also mothers and wives, and I could relate to them. The exhibit also told the story of women with a powerful political and public role in the United States. As a young girl constantly being told that “you can do anything you want when you grow up,” this fascinated me.

All of this is not to say that I did not adore the dresses. I loved how the dresses were arranged in chronological order, reflecting fashion changes throughout the ages. I was especially intrigued by the way that the dresses revealed the personality of each first lady: Eleanor Roosevelt’s violet gown was much more conservative and matronly than Jackie Kennedy’s glamorous and chic dress. I also had a personal connection to one of the gowns. Family legend tells that my great aunt, Josephine Lippiello, a distinguished seamstress during the height of
1920s fashion in New York City, helped sew First Lady Lou Hoover’s inaugural gown. During each visit, my sister and I would carefully scan each dress until we found Hoover’s. Then, we would proudly brag about our family connection to other visitors viewing the dresses. Because these dresses had become such a central part of first ladies’ culture, the visitors that we told were duly impressed.

My interest in the first ladies did not end with these visits to the exhibit. With each trip to the museum, I would always stop at the museum bookstore to purchase a new book about the first ladies—some of which I have consulted for this honors thesis. I would pour over these on the car ride home and for days after. The exhibit left a tremendous impression in my mind: I saw first ladies as more than just women with pretty dresses, but as unique figures in American history.

Last summer, I interned at the National Museum of American History under the direction of Lisa Kathleen Graddy, the curator of the First Ladies’ Exhibit. My internship came at a moment of transition in the museum’s history, as it was preparing to reopen after a two year renovation. The First Ladies’ Exhibit was in the process of being redesigned to fit into its new space. While the story told in the new exhibit would not change much from what I remembered as a child, Graddy used the renovation period to check the historical accuracy of the information in the exhibit. Throughout the course of the summer, I had the opportunity to watch the exhibit progress from a design to a physical display of objects. My personal role in the overall creation of the exhibit was relatively small, but I did assist Graddy with various tasks. Graddy was extremely meticulous about verifying that every claim made by the exhibit was completely true to avoid complaints about historical inaccuracies. Therefore, I spent much of the summer researching numerous details within the exhibit: for example, was the bill prompted by First
Lady Ellen Wilson to clean up the slums called ‘Mrs. Wilson’s Bill’ or ‘The Wilson Slum Bill’? (For the record, it was called ‘Mrs. Wilson’s Bill’). I also helped prepare the objects for display, which involved bringing them to the conservators to survey and repair, having them photographed in order to keep proper records, and finally storing them in special climate-controlled cases until exhibit installation could begin. Although, my internship ended just before the actual installation began, my experience preparing the exhibit for its reopening reaffirmed my interest in the first ladies. Because the exhibit had become one of the most popular at the museum, an extensive amount of time and energy was put into its design, all of which caused me to wonder what it was about first ladies that made them generate such strong public interest.

Although Martha Washington set many of the precedents for the first lady, ironically, Dolley Madison, the fourth first lady, was the first woman to receive the title ‘first lady.’ Although Washington originated the role, Madison is remembered for her legacy as a hostess. Madison served as the first official ‘hostess’ of the White House even before her husband took office, filling in for President Jefferson because his wife had died. Thus, before Dolley Madison became a presidential wife, she became the first ‘first lady’ to reside over the White House. She did so not as a family member, but as a quasi-professional (albeit unpaid) laborer, a hostess—a label and identity that describes someone who mediated between the public world of social state occasions and the White House as an ostensible private residence. As first lady and social hostess for President Madison, she even won the favor of both his political allies and opponents. Dolley Madison was also one of the earliest first ladies to reside in the White House—the White House was not built until President John Adams’ term in office—and had a prominent role in decorating the new building. Madison’s interest in caring for the interior of the White House became a duty embraced by other first ladies as well; Jacqueline Kennedy is especially noted for
her impressive White House restoration. Madison’s overall influence on the first ladyship transformed the hostess role into a duty that remains central to first ladies even today. Dolley Madison is often considered the most iconic of the nineteenth century first ladies. According to the Smithsonian’s First Ladies’ exhibit book, the term ‘First Lady’ did not even originate until Dolley Madison’s death in 1849, though the duties of the first lady have existed since the establishment of the presidency.\(^4\) The fact that the term ‘First Lady,’ which is reminiscent of a royal title, originated following Madison’s death shows the public’s admiration for her. The public remembered Madison as a unique and influential woman—not just the president’s wife but also an important figure in his administration. Her hostess duty, in particular, brought her great distinction and even comparison to nobility, a status only shared by Jacqueline Kennedy.

The United States Constitution does not outline the duties of the first lady, in sharp contrast to the president, for whom it carefully delineates roles, rules, and limitations. Instead, it has been up to a combination of individual women, institutions like the Smithsonian, popular culture, and political discourses to define (and constantly redefine) the position. The term ‘First Lady’ itself is problematic because there is, in fact, no specific or fixed definition. Typically, the first lady is the president’s wife. However, throughout the nineteenth century, there were several instances of female relatives other than the president’s wife acting as the first lady because the wife died, was ill, or simply was not interested in politics. President Buchanan, for example, was never married, so his niece Harriet Lane served as the first lady. In other examples, Betty Taylor Bliss served as first lady instead of her mother for President Taylor and Mary Arthur McElroy, Chester Arthur’s sister, filled in for President Arthur’s wife after she died. Nevertheless, though other family relatives have sometimes served as first ladies, the actual list of American first

ladies has varied based on the source. While the White House website merely attributes the title ‘First Lady’ to the wife of each respective president regardless of whether she actually fulfilled any of the duties, other sources like the Smithsonian apply the term to the woman who accompanied the president in the White House and in particular, fulfilled the role of social hostess. The curators at the National Museum of American History decided that the “collection would be composed only of the dresses worn by those who had actually acted as hostesses of the White House.” As a young girl, I developed my own personal understanding of first ladies. Although the Smithsonian insisted that the woman who fulfills the hostess role should be called the first lady, my impression was that she was always the president’s wife, and that her sense of fashion was paramount to the role, an idea perhaps shaped by the collection of dresses at the First Ladies’ Exhibit. However, after years of studying American history and especially after my internship, I realized that first ladies could not be defined by a specific set of criteria, but rather that their role is ever-changing.

Throughout American history, the role of the first lady has manifested itself based on the historical time period and the prerogative of the individual first lady. Twentieth century first ladies, for instance, generally had a greater public role and more opportunities to participate in politics as women gained more rights in society. Even so, Betty Boyd Caroli notes that the term ‘First Lady’ seemed to “reflect a continuing infatuation in the United States with royalty.” Some first ladies have indeed approached the role as a figurehead position, similar to royalty, while others have participated more intimately in their husband’s initiatives or have developed their own political agendas.

---

5 Our First Ladies, http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/firstladies/.
Over the course of the twentieth century, as women gained increased independence and opportunities to act in the public sphere, the cultural and political constructions of the first lady became more restrictively defined to the domestic roles of wife and mother. In the nineteenth century, the role was regularly filled by an alternative family relative, leaving the presidential spouse the option to either accept or decline the position. However, since 1889 the first ladyship has always been held by the wife of the president. It was only in the wake of the founding first lady, a professional hostess who was brought in from outside the family, that the more narrow domestic requirements and eventually even more limited matrimonial dictates were attached to the position. This seemingly retrograde evolution of the first ladyship may have reached its apex with Jacqueline Kennedy in the midst of what is popularly considered among the most politically and socially liberal eras in U.S. history. At the same time that the late twentieth-century first ladyship became more narrowly tied to deferential identities of wife and mother, the individual women who held the position—together with institutions like the Smithsonian museum, charged with publicly exhibiting the history of the position—developed increasingly sophisticated constructions and re-constructions of the first ladyship that managed to foster female power in spite of the position’s conservative cultural trapping and strictures. Jacqueline Kennedy, Betty Ford, and Hillary Clinton function as a revealing trio of late twentieth century first ladies who engaged in what Betty Ford identified as “the power of the position” in ways that simultaneously circumscribed their options as powerful public women while also leaving room for each to pursue personal agendas, initiatives, and agencies. Ultimately all three divulge the challenges, limits, and possibilities in—to paraphrase the subtitle of Hillary Clinton’s final publication as a first lady, An Invitation to the White House—making one’s female self “at home with the history of the first ladyship.”

8 Ford, The Times of My Life, 194.
The ‘modern’ first lady, a term first applied to Eleanor Roosevelt, marked a change in the role set forth by Dolley Madison. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the first lady was limited almost solely to domestic duties. Nevertheless, as the women’s rights movement allowed women greater acceptance in the public sphere, the first lady also gained more influence over her own agenda and could eventually pursue political initiatives. Eleanor Roosevelt is often regarded as the first of the ‘modern’ first ladies because she sought to expand her role beyond the domestic sphere. Roosevelt became extremely involved with the press, set her own agenda for New Deal relief and civil rights, and established the Office of the First Lady, which allowed the first lady a more professional position within the White House. Following Roosevelt’s example, subsequent first ladies accepted new responsibilities as the president’s partner. Roosevelt’s influence on the position, compounded with the increasing acceptance of women in politics, allowed the modern twentieth century first ladies more freedom to aid their husbands both socially and politically, and even to pursue their own agendas. The position even allowed several of the modern first ladies to launch their own careers after their husband’s time in office, capitalizing on the popularity and prestige they gained as first lady. The modern first ladies, however, were not identical in their execution of the position. While some first ladies enjoyed the increased freedom to act upon their own agendas, others preferred the traditional hostess role. Thus, each modern first lady had a great deal of agency in molding the position since the she had the freedom to determine her personal level of involvement with the public and politics. The three women that I will study in my thesis have specific roles in altering and complicating the first ladyship.

Following Eleanor Roosevelt’s example, the first ladies had the opportunity to pursue duties outside of the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, Jacqueline Kennedy’s approach to the first
ladyship reverted to a more domestic role. She focused on the most traditional duties of the first lady—her primary interest was in caring for her two young children. In fact, Caroli explains that “when asked about her agenda, she repeatedly focused on what her predecessors had been doing since the founding of the republic—making their husbands comfortable and their children happy.” Kennedy’s famous White House restoration can even be considered an extension of a domestic duty. While several of the modern first ladies gained popularity from their involvement with the president’s politics and administration (Hillary Clinton for example), Kennedy’s popularity did not come from transforming the role of first lady. Even still, Kennedy is arguably the most influential of all the first ladies, largely because of her role in creating the Camelot myth to conceal her husband’s illicit behaviors and protect his reputation following his death. Throughout her tenure as first lady, she became an American popular culture icon, sometimes referred to as American royalty, partly in response to the legacy of Camelot. Additionally, Kennedy increased the popularity of the first ladyship exponentially because the public viewed her as a celebrity in addition to a first lady. Kennedy complicates the idea of the modern first lady because her actual duties were fairly traditional, yet she is still considered the most influential and popular first lady. Like the other first ladies that I will study, she remained a popular and successful figure even after her term as first lady ended.

Though her actual tenure as first lady was quite short—President Ford’s time in office lasted barely three years—First Lady Betty Ford managed to assert herself as one of the most outspoken and candid first ladies, bringing private issues into the public domain. Betty Ford modeled Eleanor Roosevelt’s activist example, supporting political issues such as abortion rights and the Equal Rights Amendment as well as personal health issues. Ford was not afraid to

---

discuss her own problems with substance abuse and was especially candid about her breast cancer treatment, which occurred during her husband’s administration. Rather, she brought such issues to the public domain, and through her efforts, encouraged people to seek treatment for mental health and especially encouraged women to be vigilant about women’s health issues. She established a position where first ladies could address the public about any issue, no matter how taboo or inappropriate it seemed. Thus, she helped to give the first lady a powerful voice in the media, not just as a spokeswoman for the president’s interests, but also as an activist for her own concerns. Additionally, because of her success as a health advocate while first lady, Mrs. Ford was able to continue her work after her husband’s presidency, establishing the Betty Ford Center for substance abuse treatment.

I will finally evaluate Hillary Clinton’s experience as a first lady, particularly the way that she transformed the position and the way that the position transformed her. At the beginning of her husband’s time in office, Hillary Clinton became involved with her husband’s political initiatives, as well as her own, which was a subject of constant contention. Clinton put more emphasis on the political and advocacy aspect of the first ladyship than on domestic duties. However, after the failure and backlash brought on by her healthcare plan, Clinton altered her image as a first lady, adapting a more traditional role. Nevertheless, Clinton’s influence on the first ladyship is tremendous; however controversial, Clinton pushed the boundaries for first ladies’ involvement in politics, and perhaps opened new doors for future first ladies. Additionally, of all the modern first ladies, Clinton used her power as the first lady most strategically to launch her career—she successfully ran for Senator of New York in her final months as first lady. In fact, at this point Hillary Clinton is arguably better remembered for her service as senator, secretary of state, and 2008 presidential candidate than first lady. Clinton
asserted a tremendous amount of agency on the position of first lady, making it one where the first lady could follow their own political agenda and establish their own career from it. Unlike most first ladies, Hillary Clinton defined herself as a strong, independent woman; her primary interest did not solely revolve around caring for her husband. Though aided by her husband who allowed her to expand the role of the first lady, Hillary Clinton changed the duties of first lady to fulfill her own agenda.

In addition to the experience of the first ladies themselves, recent scholarship on the first ladies has contributed to defining their role. The First Ladies’ Exhibit at the National Museum of American History provides a useful interpretation of the first ladyship because the exhibit reflects contemporary scholarship about the role and makes a strong impression on the public’s understanding of the first ladyship. Thus, this thesis also examines the evolution of the First Ladies’ Exhibit, from its initial collection of dresses in 1914 and evaluates the curators’ role in defining the first ladyship. Through their exhibits, the first ladies’ curators reveal their personal views of the first ladyship, as well as the public’s. Though the First Ladies’ Exhibit has changed several times from 1914 to 1987, and even moved from the Arts and Industries Building to the National Museum of American History, the focus of the exhibit was largely the collection of dresses. Focus on the actual role of the first lady—as hostess, advocate, or political partner—only came when the exhibit reopened in 1992. The 1992 exhibit signaled a significant shift in the interpretation of first ladies—they were not just women in fashionable dresses, but were influential public figures.
Chapter One:
Historical Origins of the First Ladyship

Before exploring the influence of individuals and institutions in constantly redefining the first ladyship, one must understand her historical origins. Although the Constitution prescribed specific duties to government leaders, there was no mention of the role of the president’s wife (or in the case of some presidents, his social hostess), suggesting that our founding fathers did not initially anticipate the importance of the first lady. Throughout American history, however, she has wielded tremendous power, both socially and in some cases politically.

In general, first ladies represented contemporary views about femininity. Each first lady offered “a significant perspective on how their fellow citizens regard marriage, child rearing, women in society, and gender relations within the United States” during the time period of her individual first ladyship.10 The public looked toward the president to protect the nation, but toward the first lady for more domestic concerns. The first lady has been especially idealized for her influence in fashion (the inaugural gown has been the subject of great public interest) and her social graces. The first lady’s role in politics has only become a recent subject of scrutiny. First Lady Francis Cleveland, for example, was adored by Americans because of her tremendous fashion sense and her youth. Even today Cleveland remains the youngest first lady and the only woman to marry a president in the White House. Despite Cleveland’s stature as first lady, she epitomized the traditional role of women in turn of the century America—she was a young wife and mother and especially fashionable—attributes which were especially appealing to the American public. In Cleveland’s case, as in many others, the female population of the United States could relate to the first lady because she also fulfilled the duty of family caretaker. Unlike

the president, whose education, military service, and social position distinguished him from the American public, the first lady’s daily activities often had more in common with the people, increasing her popularity.

Throughout history, the first lady has been a symbol of republican motherhood, a belief which suggested that the primary role of women was to instill democratic values in their families.\(^\text{11}\) Smithsonian curator Edith Mayo explains that “the nation has always expected first ladies to reflect ideals of home, family, and womanhood.”\(^\text{12}\) Though the roles of the first ladies have been innumerable, for many, the most important duty was taking care of the family. As most first ladies were wives of the president, and in the other special cases, were relatives of the president, their foremost concern remained in ensuring the health and safety of their husband and children. For example, Edith Wilson even assumed some of the presidential duties while her husband was ill, a topic of great controversy but nevertheless an example of the first lady’s desire to protect the interests of her family members. In general, the first lady “continued the role of homemaker once in the presidential residence,” balancing her public role with her familial responsibilities.\(^\text{13}\) Thus, the first lady set an example of being a protective mother and raising a virtuous family.

The first lady, however, did distinguish herself from the common people because of her stature. Just as the American presidents were generally members of the upper class, their first ladies also typically grew up with privileged backgrounds. Though the first lady could identify with the lifestyle of the general public, particularly the responsibilities of caring for a family, she was not necessarily a ‘common’ person. Her title, specifically the word ‘lady’, “has


connotations of middle- and upper-class respectability,” according to Smithsonian curator Mayo, and “suggests a certain kind of demeanor.”

Though not all first ladies were debutantes like Jacqueline Kennedy, many grew up in upper class families and some even met their husbands through their family’s elite social networks. Their sense of refinement carried over to the role of first lady. Elizabeth Monroe had almost no public visibility as first lady, yet she was known for her elegance and expensive taste. While living in France during her husband’s appointment as Minister to France, the Parisians referred to her as “la belle americaine.”

Monroe did little in her role as first lady, abandoning the hostess responsibilities conceived by the previous first ladies, nevertheless “her exquisite clothing” created much “envy among her contemporaries.”

While in Elizabeth Monroe’s case, her expensive clothing and general coldness toward the public generated some hostility toward her, her wardrobe also became the subject of public intrigue. The public’s interest in first ladies’ dress and style, particularly the inaugural gowns, has been the subject of great attention from as early as 1809, when the first inaugural ball took place for President Madison. As a result, fashion has become an important component of the first ladyship.

The first ladies’ upper class status has allowed them a unique power. Throughout history, the public has idolized first ladies because of their glamour and refinement, even viewing them as celebrities. Because of their popularity across political party lines, first ladies were sometimes able to bolster the image of their more controversial husbands. Dolley Madison, for example, became incredibly proficient at winning the favor of her husband’s political allies and opponents alike because of her superb social skills.

---

15 Caroli, *First Ladies*, 17.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 24.
from differences in political ideology suggests that first ladies were once viewed as generally apolitical. Though many nineteenth century first ladies, with some exceptions, had a limited role beyond the domestic sphere, first ladies in the twentieth century became increasingly involved in politics. Hillary Clinton’s political involvement during her husband’s administration actually made her almost as controversial a figure as her husband.

While first ladies throughout history have helped to form the role of the first lady, Martha Washington set many precedents for position of first lady. Since the “responsibilities of the president’s wife had not been contemplated, each decision and action performed by Martha Washington served to lay the foundation of the office and establish precedents that are followed to the present time.”18 When George Washington was elected president, his wife had a difficult task ahead. The presidential residency had not yet been established, so Martha Washington had to move her family to a new city while also gaining new responsibilities as a public figure. Washington had no official title, however, from the beginning, she did institute an important role. According to Watson & Eksterowicz, during her tenure, she established three noteworthy characteristics of a first lady: public figure, social hostess, and presidential helpmate.19 Nevertheless, Washington’s role as a social hostess was perhaps her most prominent and influential. From the beginning of his presidency, “Washington had decided that his wife would preside at a weekly drawing room” where she entertained guests traveling through the city.20 The president also relied on his wife to host various events and accompany him at social gatherings. Caroli explains that “since the ceremonial side of the job required presenting a

---

democratic image...a wife who was willing to do so could help maintain a balance."\textsuperscript{21} Therefore, Washington’s social role not only bolstered her own image, but also improved her husband’s, a task that became an important duty of the first lady.

Martha Washington accepted the responsibilities of a public role, however, she did not become involved in the politics of the presidency. While President Washington entrusted his wife with hostess duties, he “gave no evidence of ever requesting that she do more.”\textsuperscript{22} Whether because of her husband’s expectations or her own interests, Martha Washington did not pursue politics. Thus she established a precedent that first ladies tended to separate themselves from the politics of the presidency and instead focused on the social aspect. Despite Martha Washington’s example, not all nineteenth century first ladies were completely disinterested in politics. Abigail Adams, though somewhat of an anomaly among the early first ladies, “was accused of playing politics” because she was so invested in her husband’s political agenda, even encouraging him to extend more rights to women.\textsuperscript{23} Other first ladies have shared Abigail Adams’ interest in politics, however, Martha Washington’s initial precedent became the trend for most first ladies. Until recently, first ladies had only limited opportunities to voice their personal opinions or advocate their own causes.

Regardless of their political involvement, the early first ladies did play a large role in shaping our original understanding of the ‘traditional’ duties of a first lady—qualities that include caring for the president and his family, managing the president’s social affairs, and acting as a fashion icon. Certainly no first lady is identical or fits a prescribed formula, however, each first lady has adapted at least some of the characteristics of the original first ladies.

\textsuperscript{21} Caroli, \textit{First Ladies}, 7.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
Chapter Two: Professionalizing a Domestic Role

In 1914, the Smithsonian Institution opened an exhibit of first ladies’ dresses, which has become perhaps the “best-known historical representation of women’s lives in the United States.”

The exhibit originated from the costume collection of Mrs. Julian James and Mrs. Rose Gouverneur Hoes. Hoes was a descendent of President James Monroe and owned many heirlooms from the Monroe family, including clothing worn by First Lady Elizabeth Monroe. Hoes eventually devised the idea for a collection of dresses which would represent each first lady, and in particular, a venue to display her family relics to the American public. James and Hoes together began contacting family members of previous first ladies, hoping to acquire a gown representing each woman. In 1912, First Lady Helen Taft donated her inaugural dress to the Smithsonian, which contributed to the growing costume collection.

Following Taft’s example, every succeeding first lady has donated her first inaugural gown to the Smithsonian, continuing the exhibit’s legacy as a collection of dresses. The popularity of the exhibit, and especially the display of dresses, has not escaped the notice of the first ladies themselves. Because the initial exhibit focused primarily on the dress of each first lady, rather than her individual story, the dress embodied the woman. First ladies even today are meticulous in their choice of gowns, especially for the inauguration, because our culture has grown to consider the gowns as representations of their personality and fashion sense.

The Smithsonian first displayed the gowns as part of a general costume exhibit in 1914 and by 1931 the exhibit featured a gown from every first lady.\textsuperscript{26} Through the display of dresses, Melosh and Simmons argue that the “First Ladies’ Hall embodies the notion of women as cultural symbols of beauty, graciousness, and service to men.”\textsuperscript{27} The content of the exhibit reflected traditional views of the first ladyship: the public saw the first ladies as beauty icons rather than political figures. The first lady represented the president through the image that she projected to the public, but the president generally valued the first lady for her image rather than her personal opinions. Thus, the first lady’s choice of clothing was essentially her voice in public. For example, the elegant, American-made inaugural gown that Caroline Harrison wore in 1889 was revealing of the president’s upper class social status and interest in supporting American industries (though at that time European gowns were considered more dignified).

At the same time that the exhibit displayed women fulfilling their most traditional roles, which generally limited them to work in the home, the women’s suffrage movement made momentous progress with its campaign to give women the right to vote, culminating in the 19th Amendment in 1920. Besides granting the right to vote, the suffrage movement helped bring women new opportunities beyond the domestic sphere. Despite the exhibit’s discourse about first ladies, the first ladyship responded to changing (and somewhat liberating) views about a woman’s role in society. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt is considered the first modern, activist first lady, and many historians credit her with changing the role.\textsuperscript{28} Eleanor Roosevelt came of age just as women gained greater acceptance in society, a factor which encouraged Roosevelt to

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Melosh and Simmons, “Exhibiting Women’s History,” 205.
seek a career outside of the home. In the same way, as first lady, Roosevelt attempted to expand
the duties of first ladyship beyond the domestic realm and create a more professional role.

Eleanor Roosevelt established the first ladyship as something separate from the
presidency, with its own agenda and staff. Roosevelt expanded the duties of the position and
changed the first lady’s role as a public figure; she directly engaged with the public and
advocated her own personal views, rather than simply espousing those of the president. Her
public duties included authoring the newspaper column ‘My Day,’ speaking on the radio, and
holding regular press conferences, all of which gave the first lady many opportunities to project
her opinions to the public. Roosevelt employed the help of a personal secretary and a social
secretary to organize her various public speaking and political initiatives. The secretaries
“occupied stations on the second floor of the White House in a bedroom suite,” which served as
small offices, and eventually moved into the East Wing following its reconstruction in 1942.
The presence of these offices suggested that the focus of the first ladyship under Roosevelt’s
term shifted away from the household. Roosevelt’s office became a symbol of her altered role
and the site where she accomplished her new responsibilities—acting as an advocate for various
issues and addressing the public, to name a few. While Roosevelt’s involvement in the political
arena indicated that the first ladyship had become more professional, the physical development
of an office devoted to the first lady’s agenda confirmed a change in the position.

Though Black suggested that “the American press, like the American public, was divided
over how professionally active a first lady should be,” Roosevelt gained popular support and

29 Ibid., 214.
30 Ibid., 213.
31 Ibid.
approval for many of her political policies. While many first ladies before Eleanor Roosevelt accepted the somewhat outdated expectations of the role, namely that the first lady’s duties should remain primarily within the domestic sphere, Roosevelt showed that a first lady could be successful in other realms and still fulfill her domestic role. Eleanor Roosevelt pursued a variety of issues, many of them independent of her husband, including “miner’s rights, the plight of the unemployed, women’s rights, youth issues, civil rights, and war relief.” Roosevelt appeared before Congress to testify for her issues—the first time that a first lady would do this—and even “provoked congressional scrutiny by speaking out on matters that many on Capitol Hill preferred to avoid,” such as women’s rights or civil rights. Nevertheless, despite the controversy that Eleanor Roosevelt created because she addressed sensitive issues, she was well-received by the American public and actually boosted her husband’s popularity. Therefore, Eleanor Roosevelt showed that a first lady could be successful as a professional; the role did not have to be completely limited to the domestic sphere.

Historians call Eleanor Roosevelt the first ‘modern’ first lady because she was able to balance her domestic duties along with a newly professionalized role. According to Eksterowicz and Paynter, Eleanor Roosevelt challenged the traditional roles of the first ladyship and “changed forever the public’s expectation of the first lady.” Even so, many of the late twentieth century first ladies did not adapt Roosevelt’s advocate role and instead took on more traditional duties. Though Eleanor Roosevelt gave the first lady the power to pursue political agendas, not all first ladies have accepted this responsibility, which reveals the twentieth century first ladies’ ability to

construct their position based on their personal preferences. Hillary Clinton’s example at the end of the twentieth century, however, revealed that first ladies were limited somewhat in their agendas.
In all of my visits to the First Ladies’ Exhibit as a young girl, one photograph has stuck out permanently in my mind. The gown section of the exhibit featured fashion accessories in addition to the dresses. One particular display included a pair of Jacqueline Kennedy’s costume pearls beside an endearing picture of Jacqueline Kennedy and her son John. In the photo (shown above), young John curiously tugs at his mother’s pearls as she leans her head back with an ecstatic smile showing maternal love and playfulness. While Kennedy appears glamorous in her pearls and elegant jacket, the picture also portrays her as a down-to-earth and affectionate mother. She is not scolding her son for playing with her jewelry, or that he could possibly mess
up her hair or make-up, rather she seems amused by her son’s playful behavior. I was always captivated by Kennedy’s ability to balance her role as an extraordinarily popular public figure and also a mother. Though Kennedy was far from an average American citizen—she was often considered American royalty—she took great interest in fulfilling her duties as a mother, perhaps the most common and traditional feminine role. These contradictions within Kennedy’s image—popular culture icon and devoted housewife—remain an important part of her approach to the first ladyship.

Within her first weeks as first lady, Jacqueline Kennedy sought to transform the role to fit her own identity: a quiet and introverted mother and wife with a particular affinity for fashion and culture. Kennedy understood that as first lady, she had the power to change the role. Sally Bedell Smith wrote that when Kennedy had been told that there were “ninety-nine things that I had to do as First Lady,” she was proud to state that she had not “done one of them.” Unlike many first ladies who built their role upon the precedents of previous first ladies, Kennedy wanted to make the first ladyship her own. Smith notes that “what sounded like stubborn negativism actually allowed her to expand the First Lady’s role beyond its traditional boundaries” because she instead created her own version of the role, which was not confined by expectations for the first ladyship, particularly constant public engagements and parties which Kennedy often avoided. Ironically, though she preferred a private role, Kennedy gained perhaps the most media influence of any first lady, and achieved a status in popular culture that no other first lady has reached yet. Her influence and popularity came from her skill in constructing images and projecting them to both a domestic and international audience—of herself as a celebrity yet dutiful first lady, of her husband’s administration as a beacon of

---

37 Ibid.
democracy at the height of Cold War tensions, and finally of Camelot, the powerful and entirely fabricated final impression that she left of the Kennedy White House. Kennedy changed the first ladyship, not through an expansion of the duties (in fact, she remained fairly traditional and committed to the domestic roles of the first lady—mother, wife, and caretaker of the home), but through the publicity she gained for the position throughout her term and especially after her husband’s assassination and the creation of Camelot.

According to Elizabeth Kane, “the one thing [Jacqueline Kennedy] didn’t want, as she noted in her graduation yearbook, was to be simply ‘a housewife.’” Nevertheless, during her time as a first lady, Kennedy devoted much of her activity toward her family. In fact, Elizabeth Natalle argued that Kennedy “considered her primary roles in the following order: mother, wife, and public life.” Jacqueline Kennedy was an intensely private person and often tried to avoid public engagements. Her emphasis on domestic roles (wife and mother) often excused her from this duty. However, Kennedy also prioritized motherhood for practical reasons as well: her children were quite young during their father’s time in office and required constant attention. Kennedy believed that “if you bungle raising your children…I don’t think whatever else you do matters very much” and therefore took great concern in caring for her children. Because motherhood was an important part of her identity as a woman, she made it a central feature of her first ladyship—she focused on her children over fulfilling many other roles (in particular, attending public gatherings or involving herself in political causes). Interestingly, Jacqueline Kennedy became first lady at the end of the baby boom, during a period when the nuclear family took shape as the quintessential family structure, and the Kennedys embodied this family

---

dynamic. Therefore, much of Jacqueline Kennedy’s appeal derived from the fact that the public could identify with her role as a mother and wife.

Besides her invention of Camelot, Kennedy’s White House restoration was perhaps her most impressive accomplishment during her tenure as first lady because it displayed her ability to balance her public and private (or domestic) role within the White House and brought tremendous media attention to the first ladyship. Upon moving to the White House, President Kennedy described the furniture as being of Sears Roebuck style, certainly not fit for a president, especially one who came from a well-to-do background.\(^41\) Throughout the mid-twentieth century, little attention was paid to the preservation of the White House. The building’s upkeep was poor and the furniture served merely a functional purpose. Additionally, first lady Mamie Eisenhower’s recent decoration efforts had almost no symbolic value, but instead epitomized typical 1950s décor. Though Jacqueline Kennedy did not come to the White House with a political agenda, like other twentieth-century first ladies, she did come with a vision of restoring the White House.

Early in her husband’s term, Jacqueline Kennedy told a family friend that “I want to make the White House the first house in the land…How many people do you think come through the White House every day? We must make this building something they can be proud of.”\(^42\) Kennedy understood the political and historical significance of the White House—since the building is a symbol of American democracy, the interior should reflect its importance and give a sense of broader sense of American history. Additionally, the interior should reflect the styles and tastes of the president that resided within the White House. In Jacqueline Kennedy’s mind, the current White House would not portray the Kennedy family as elegant and stately, but as

---


\(^{42}\) In: Bradford, *America’s Queen*, 174.
tasteless and cheap, which only increased her desire to restore the building. In a *Life* interview, Kennedy said that “everything in the White House must have a reason for being there. It would be sacrilege merely to redecorate it—a word I hate. It must be restored, and that has nothing to do with decoration.”  

Kennedy’s restoration involved extensive research about the White House’s appearance throughout history, as well as the various objects and artwork contained within it. She did not want to simply redecorate the rooms in the latest interior decoration schemes. Rather, she was most concerned with ensuring that the objects and set-up of the rooms were symbolic of the presidency and the White House’s past, and she hired several scholars to verify the historical accuracy of her plans. Kennedy’s restoration emphasized the importance of the presidency and also revealed the influence that came with the first ladyship. In the example of the White House restoration, she could directly affect the image of the White House, and therefore the president, projected to the public: she wanted the White House to appear as a monument to the presidents and a landmark of American history.

The restoration also shaped Kennedy’s image as a first lady. Sally Bedell Smith called the White House restoration the “most obvious symbol of Jackie’s reinvented role” because it combined the traditional domestic element of the first ladyship with Kennedy’s interest in culture and style. The White House restoration was incredibly successful for the first lady: with her power, she was able to lead an approximately 1.5 million dollar restoration project and even obtain some of the most famous presidential portraits, including Thomas Jefferson by Rembrandt Peale. The White House Restoration’s greatest success, however, came with Jacqueline Kennedy’s televised tour, shown on February 14, 1962 by the major networks CBS and NBC (ABC showed the program several days later). The Nielsen ratings indicated that 28 million

---

43 In: Bradford, *America’s Queen*, 177.
44 Smith, *Grace and Power*, 94.
45 Ibid., 96.
Americans tuned into the broadcast, making it one of the most watched broadcasts of its day, revealing America’s fascination with the White House and the Kennedy family.\textsuperscript{46} Because the White House was such a historic yet exclusive space, it has become the source of much public intrigue. During the tour, Kennedy allowed a look at the building’s most private and important rooms, which would never be accessible to the public.

The documentary allowed the public a glimpse of daily life within the home of the glamorous Kennedy family. The popularity of the tour revealed America’s captivation with the Kennedy family. The tour was the first “primetime documentary to explicitly court a female audience” because it appealed directly to the ambitions of the female population.\textsuperscript{47} The female audience took a particular interest in First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy because they could identify with her duties as a housewife. Kennedy also intrigued female viewers because she represented a successful woman in the public sphere. Women gained brief acceptance into the workforce during World War II, when factories and other military industries sought women to help aid the war effort. Following the war, women generally returned to the domestic sphere per antiquated societal expectations that a woman’s job was to raise a family; only men were allowed access to the public sphere. The televised tour transformed the restoration, a distinctively domestic and private venture, into a public affair. Kennedy’s ability to achieve a role in the public domain impressed many American women, who sought the same opportunity for themselves. At first, Kennedy’s White House restoration did not begin as an especially progressive initiative, in fact it reflected the most traditional duty of a woman, caring for the home. Nevertheless, Kennedy’s seemingly conservative project brought esteem and influence to the first ladyship. Through the televised broadcast of the tour, Kennedy portrayed the duties of the first ladyship as familiar to

many women, but also as exclusive and powerful. Kennedy was able to lead this major restoration effort, which subsequently gained great media attention, because of her status as a first lady; the position itself wielded first ladies a certain amount of power to implement their own agendas.

Despite the popularity that the tour brought the first ladyship, Jacqueline Kennedy’s public appeal came largely from her physical appearance and fashion sense. Unlike previous first ladies, who were more matronly and conservative in their dress, Kennedy followed the most recent fashion trends. Through her dress alone, Kennedy changed the image of the first lady to a more modern and fashion-conscious young woman. As a result, the public responded the first lady just as any other celebrity and mimicked her dress especially. Photographer Jacques Lowe includes an anecdote in his book *Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis: The Making of a First Lady* about the public’s obsession with dressing like Kennedy:

She frequently received letters from women who complained that they had purchased ‘exact copies’ of the First Lady’s outfits (usually mass-produced and in the marketplace six weeks after Jackie appeared in them), but ‘When I put on the dress, the effect isn’t as dazzling.’ They simply could not understand why, if they were the same size, roughly the same age and clad in the same outfit, they did not look just like Jackie.48

Similar to First Lady Frances Cleveland, Kennedy transformed the first ladyship into a role that the public could identify with and tried to emulate. Women in America and throughout the world not only adored Kennedy for her style, but wanted to be just like her. Capitalizing on the public’s interest in her dress, the fashion industry commodified the image of the first lady, marketing the Jacqueline Kennedy ‘look’ for the general public to consume. Through these

outfits, however, the public learned that the glamorous Jacqueline Kennedy ‘look’ was exclusive only to her. Jacqueline Kennedy carried a certain aura and style about her that could not be replicated, even if her clothing was. Kennedy’s fashion sense, in fact, complicated her role as first lady. In her domestic activities, Kennedy was much like any other American woman, yet her elegant and often regal appearance drastically separated her from the public.

As a result, Jacqueline Kennedy has been a central figure in the Smithsonian’s First Ladies Exhibit. In fact, the current curator Lisa Kathleen Graddy complains that the modern exhibit must place a disproportionate amount of emphasis on Kennedy because her story and objects draw the greatest exhibit viewership. Other first ladies that have made significant contributions to the position sometimes receive less attention because they have not received the same iconic status in American culture and do not have gowns or artifacts that are as glamorous as those that represent Kennedy.49 From the opening of the National Museum of American History in 1964, the First Ladies’ Exhibit has been one of the most popular displays in the museum. August 1958 saw the ground breaking on the construction of the new Smithsonian Museum of History and Technology. The purpose of the new building, according to Congress, was “to illustrate by means of these [the Smithsonian’s] historic collections the cultural and technological development of our Nation from colonial times.”50 Additionally, the museum would serve as a “permanent exposition that commemorates our heritage of freedom and highlights the basic elements of our way of life.”51 The museum would highlight the achievements of democracy in the United States, an important message to export during the Cold

49 Lisa Kathleen Graddy, discussion with the curator, July 2008.
51 Ibid.
War period. The First Ladies’ Exhibit would be featured as a central exhibition in the museum, just as it had been a prominent exhibit at the previous Smithsonian Arts and Industries building.

The United States National Museum Report in 1964 stated that the new first ladies’ hall continued the “tradition of exhibiting the dresses worn by the wife or the official hostess of each president of the United States.” Just as Jacqueline Kennedy’s famous restoration made the interior of the White House more historically accurate, Margaret Brown Klapthor, the curator of the First Ladies’ Exhibit, attempted to place the dresses in a historical context. The gowns were displayed in period room settings, which arranged the dresses in chronological order and showed the changes from 18th century styles of dress through the modern day. The period rooms themselves resembled the White House at different points in American history. This style of display was useful because it could “demonstrate ideas and relationships pertinent” to the objects within each room and illustrate trends between gowns of a specific time period.

Nevertheless, the exhibit was essentially a collection of costumes, which portrayed the first ladies as little more than fashion icons: it “did not interpret the experiences of the women themselves of their views of the offices of first lady” as subsequent exhibits did. The exhibit’s emphasis on traditional ideas of femininity and the first ladyship coincided with the public’s obsession with Jacqueline Kennedy. Though the museum opened shortly after President Kennedy’s assassination, the public still adored First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy as an American superstar. During her first ladyship, Kennedy reinforced a theme present even in the exhibit that opened in 1914—fashion was an important element of the position. The 1964 exhibit continued to suggest that the first lady’s dress was an important way for her to make a personal statement.

---

54 Mayo and Meringolo, First Ladies, 7.
Though Kennedy’s influence on the first ladyship was more dynamic than as simply a fashion icon, fashion became an important aspect of the public’s memory about her. As the exhibit emphasized, first ladies would be remembered for their dress over their personal achievements.

Despite the exhibit’s implication that first ladies predominantly used dress to shape their personal image, Jacqueline Kennedy used fashion as a political tool. Donald Spoto offered an overly simplistic commentary about Kennedy’s interest in fashion: Jacqueline Kennedy “did not have to accomplish anything of significance. People only required only that she look magnificent.” Much to the contrary, Kennedy was incredibly deliberate in her choice of clothing and designer to make political statements and carefully represent the Kennedy administration at home and abroad. During the 1960 presidential election, Jacqueline Kennedy received criticism for her foreign-made wardrobe, which hurt her husband’s popularity as a presidential candidate. For example, “the ladies’ garment workers union was a key Democratic supporter that lobbied JFK for her to wear American made clothing” to show her patronage of American-made products. Following this experience, Jacqueline Kennedy understood the political ramifications of her clothing and meticulously picked out her outfits to fit in with the latest fashion trends, but also to appeal to the tastes of her guests. Kennedy wore a red wool suit when visiting the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, mimicking their uniforms, and a Givenchy-designed gown at a reception with French President Charles de Gaulle. Though Kennedy was not a particularly outspoken public speaker, she made her statement through her dress. Kennedy understood that all of her actions would be closely analyzed by the public, especially in regards to fashion, therefore when selecting a personal fashion designer, she chose Oleg Cassini because

he represented an American-based designer. By supporting an American designer, Kennedy suggested that American fashion was just as progressive and trendy as European designs, which had been previously considered superior.

Jacqueline Kennedy’s popularity, however, did not completely derive from her fashion sense, but also from her charm in social situations. Though Kennedy was an introverted person and “made every effort not to make the role of the first lady a series of public appearances,” ironically her appeal came from the graceful way that she carried herself in public. During a trip to Paris in May 1961, President John F. Kennedy remarked “I do not think it is altogether inappropriate to introduce myself to this audience. I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris, and I have enjoyed it.” Throughout her tenure as first lady, Jacqueline Kennedy captured the attention and affection of an international audience. In this particular trip to Paris, Kennedy impressed the French public because of her elegance as well as her enthusiasm for French language and culture, and throughout the visit cries of “Vive Jacqui” resounded throughout Paris. In fact, international audiences referred to the first lady as “America’s Queen,” believing that she dressed and carried herself like royalty. Therefore, though Kennedy could never achieve a royal title because of her American citizenship, according to the international audience, she exhibited the characteristics of a queen through her refined dress and behavior. Receiving the title ‘queen’ was a unique achievement for Kennedy, especially since the United States was supposed to be entirely free of royal titles.

Kennedy extended the role of the first lady into foreign policy; the popularity that she gained abroad gave the position an international audience. Because people throughout the world

58 Bradford, *America’s Queen*, 145.
viewed Jacqueline Kennedy with such high regard, and even addressed her with one of the most prestigious title that a woman could achieve—“Queen”—she also aided her husband’s foreign appeal. While in France, Kennedy served as a translator between her husband and French president Charles de Gaulle, “a highly unusual position for a first lady, but which solidified Mrs. Kennedy’s position as the pivot on which French-American relations were strengthened.”

Jacqueline Kennedy’s skill as a diplomat for her husband’s administration was an important contribution to the position. With her superior sense of style and social graces, Kennedy earned the respect of even the most controversial world leaders, including Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev, and helped to ease tensions between the United States and other nations during a time period that endured much international conflict because of the Cold War.

Jacqueline Kennedy’s role as a hostess reflected an understanding that the president and the United States must be properly represented at home and abroad. As hostess, Kennedy also acted as a diplomat or mediator between her guests. In planning parties, Kennedy was known to meticulously “spread out the seating charts on the floor of her sitting room and plan seating” so that that each guest would be comfortable and would sit nearby someone with similar interests and personalities. Just like a diplomat, she sought to foster relations and ease tensions between her guests. Like any good hostess, Kennedy sought to make each party an enjoyable experience for her guests. Kennedy’s intentions as a hostess, however, had political ramifications: in particular, she strove to present her husband’s administration and the United States in the best possible light to foreign visitors. In one example, Kennedy arranged for a state dinner to take place at Mount Vernon because of its significance as an American landmark.  

---

64 Ibid., 255.
United States could not boast the same breadth of history as many European countries, Kennedy emphasized that the United States had its own unique history and culture and that the country had become one of the most successful democracies in the world. During this Cold War period, Jacqueline Kennedy’s attempt to bolster the United States’ image as a refined country and a beacon of liberty intentionally indicated the superiority of a democratic way of life. Just like the White House restoration, Kennedy’s approach to the hostess role transformed the seemingly domestic duty into one with public and political implications. Kennedy’s hostess role was one of her most complicated because it combined the domestic duties of the traditional first lady along with the political and diplomatic duties of the twentieth-century first ladies. Through her hostess activities, Kennedy showed that even the domestic duties of the first ladyship could strengthen the president’s reputation, which in turn also improved her respectability as a conscientious public figure.

Ironically, Kennedy’s lasting impression as a public figure came after husband’s assassination, and once her tenure as first lady ended. During her time as first lady, the press regarded her as “a slender butterfly flittering through the corridors of power” because she dodged political involvement and interaction with the public. Kennedy rather preferred privacy and as the quote suggests, the press viewed her as a delicate figure. Nevertheless, in the moments after her husband’s assassination, Jacqueline Kennedy emerged as a powerful woman. Immediately after gunshots struck her husband, the first lady stoically cradled her husband’s wounded head, acting like a brave protector rather than a delicate butterfly, as she had previously been described. Following the assassination, Kennedy refused to leave her husband’s side. Theodore White wrote that “all through the night they tried to separate him from her, to sedate her, and

---

take care of her—and she would not let them.”\textsuperscript{67} Rather than shying away from the gruesome situation, Kennedy embraced her responsibility to care for and protect the president. Kennedy’s actions signaled the ultimate fulfillment of the duties of a first lady—she literally nurtured and watched over her husband even after his death.

The assassination showcased Jacqueline Kennedy as more than just a fashion icon and the first ladyship as involving more than hosting teas or wearing pretty dresses, rather the first lady projected herself as a woman intensely committed to protecting her husband, and risked her own safety to care for him. Jacqueline Kennedy’s glamorous pink Chanel suit, covered in the president’s blood, best demonstrated this conflicting image. According to David Lubin, “by the early ‘60s, the Chanel suit had become a wardrobe staple of the upwardly mobile American female,” and Kennedy embodied this notion.\textsuperscript{68} By wearing this suit, rather than a dress perhaps, Kennedy wanted to appear trendy but also professional in her role as first lady. Once stained with her husband’s blood, however, what had been a symbol of Kennedy’s fashion sense, was physical proof of the violent assassination and Jacqueline Kennedy’s bravery, or what became “a sacred relic of a national nightmare”\textsuperscript{69} Just as she refused to change out of the dress, she also did not abandon her husband in the hours following the assassination. Instead, she allowed the suit to become stained in the president’s blood and even wore it during Johnson’s swearing-in ceremony; the bloody suit served as a reminder of the violence that caused Johnson to become president. The suit has been effectively locked away by the federal government since the assassination, regardless of its historical significance; it remains in storage at the National

\textsuperscript{67} White, “For President Kennedy,” 158.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
Archives and is inaccessible to the public until the year 2013. While the Smithsonian First Ladies’ Exhibit displays dresses from many important events in American history (inaugurations and state dinners, for example), it does not even own Kennedy’s blood-stained suit. If the Smithsonian were to own the suit, however, it would undoubtedly pose a problem to the story told by the dresses, especially in the 1964 exhibit which opened shortly after the assassination. The exhibit prominently focused on the elegant dresses and represented a euphemistic view of the first ladyship as a highly feminized role, largely characterized by fashion. Much to the contrary, the bloody Chanel suit, and Jacqueline Kennedy’s experience while wearing it, showed that the first ladyship was not as glamorous as it may at first appear, rather the first lady at times put herself in danger when fulfilling this public role.

After the assassination, Jacqueline Kennedy strove to conceal her husband’s immoral private life, tainted with sexual affairs and drug abuse. Just as she protected his actual body during the actual assassination, she attempted to protect his integrity as a political leader in the days following. Though the public adored Kennedy, she generally avoided interaction with the media. Nevertheless, Kennedy understood the power that she had over the public as a first lady and used it to inform the public’s understanding of her husband’s character and presidency. Jacqueline Kennedy constructed a whimsical image of the Kennedy administration in the December 6, 1963 issue of *Life* magazine, which primarily featured articles about President Kennedy’s funeral. Kennedy closely edited the final article in the magazine, “For President Kennedy: An Epilogue,” controlling the magazine’s final judgment on her husband. When asked to leave a quote which best represented her husband, Jacqueline Kennedy admitted that “all I keep thinking about is this line from a musical comedy.”

---

70 Ibid.
71 White, “For President Kennedy,” 158.
president frequently played the record from the popular Lerner and Lowe musical, *Camelot*. Kennedy reported that the lyrics her husband most liked to hear were: “Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.”72 She believed that these lyrics best symbolized the legacy of her husband’s presidency—“there’ll be great Presidents again…but there’ll never be another Camelot again.”73 In this article, Kennedy distinguished her husband as a great American leader. Her allusion to Camelot referenced previous characterizations of the Kennedy family resembling royalty. In the article, she described the president as similar to royalty: King Arthur ruled over the fictitious Camelot, therefore only a king could rule over the American version of Camelot—and as first lady, she would be the queen. Kennedy’s creation of the Camelot myth bolstered her husband’s reputation, while cementing the image of the regal Kennedy family into the American imagination.

Jacqueline Kennedy’s creation of the Camelot myth revealed the tremendous influence of the first ladyship—she had the power to completely transform the public’s understanding of her husband’s presidency with a single newspaper article. Though Kennedy often preferred privacy to a public role, Jacqueline Kennedy learned that attention from the media enhanced the popularity and respectability of the first ladyship: the White House tour demonstrated the first lady’s ability to function in both the public and private spheres, and her experiences abroad showed that a first lady could assist the president with foreign policy. Kennedy understood the power that came with the first ladyship and used it to aid in the efforts of her husband’s administration. Additionally, because many women identified with her domestic roles, they felt a personal connection to the first lady and were in turn more likely to support to president.

72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
Though Kennedy’s agenda as a first lady remained mostly within the traditional, domestic sphere, she still had perhaps the greatest influence over the American people, visible through her creation of the Camelot myth, and also her status as a celebrity and American royalty—no other first lady has received as much public appeal. Unlike most first ladies, Kennedy remained a popular figure in American culture even after the first ladyship. In fact, she is often remembered as “Jackie O” rather than “Jackie Kennedy” because of her famous marriage to the Greek shipping tycoon Aristotle Onassis.

Peter Murray lists Jacqueline Kennedy in his book *The Most Influential People of the Last 100 Years* as among the most notable icons of the twentieth century. He includes Kennedy for her “legacy of charm and grace” which he claims has transcended American culture. In fact, Murray calls Kennedy “Princess Charming,” eluding to the idea that she is referred to as American royalty because of her beautiful appearance and superior social skills. Murray’s inclusion of Kennedy in his book is not particularly surprising—Kennedy’s photograph is the one most often chosen for the cover of books about first ladies. Because of her popularity as a first lady, her image is used as a tool for selling books and attracting public interest. From her time as first lady, Kennedy became the source of much public intrigue because she was young and glamorous and as Murray notes, incredibly charming. Despite the fact that the American public identified with Kennedy because she was a young mother and housewife, she was certainly not an average American citizen. Instead, she achieved a status of American royalty and captivated the attention of both Americans and people across the world.

---

74 Peter Murray, *The Most Influential People of the Last 100 Years* (Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky & Konecky, 2005), 40.
75 Ibid., 42.
Chapter Four:  
Betty Ford: Finding a Voice for a ‘Powerful Position’

The first ladies of the early 1960s, Jacqueline Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson, both made significant contributions to the first ladyship. As the previous chapter discussed, Kennedy created the Camelot myth and entirely shaped the public’s perception of the Kennedy White House. After Kennedy’s term ended, Lady Bird Johnson channeled the progressive spirit of the 1960s, becoming the first advocate first lady since Roosevelt with a particular interest in supporting the environmental movement. Nevertheless, First Lady Patricia Nixon was much more traditional as a first lady. According to John Pope, Patricia Nixon “hated politics and seemed to spend her public time gazing adoringly at her husband.”76 Like Jacqueline Kennedy, Pat Nixon presented herself as foremost a dutiful wife, yet Nixon did not gain the same acclaim as Kennedy and therefore did not have the same public appeal.

The Smithsonian Institution’s representation of the first ladyship during the 1970s presented a traditional interpretation of the position, reflecting Pat Nixon’s approach rather than Lady Bird Johnson’s activist stance, for example. As Barbara Melosh and Christina Simmons have suggested, Smithsonian exhibits of this period, including the First Ladies’ Exhibit “offer an oblique view of popular historical understanding, refracted through the lens of curators’ ideas about their audiences.”77 According to Melosh and Simmons, curators often negotiate between displaying the most current historical trends and creating exhibits which cater to the public’s understanding of a topic in order to maintain public interest. Thus, despite the changing trends within the first ladyship during the 1960s and 1970s, especially with the legacies of Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford, the exhibit remained primarily focused on costume history. Melosh and

77 Melosh and Simmons, “Exhibiting Women’s History,” 203.
Simmons argued that “the actual First Ladies assume second place in an exhibit shaped by conventional political history” since “the ordinary duties of the First Ladies hold no interest from a traditional historical perspective.”78 Though first ladies were becoming more overtly ‘political’ figures, the exhibit continued to embrace the most traditional views of the first ladyship, that the first lady was predominantly a figurehead role and her most important responsibility was to represent her husband through proper dress and genteel behavior. The exhibit espoused the idea that the first ladies did not have a role in America’s political history; rather their most notable contribution to American history was through their fashion choices.

Betty Ford’s legacy in the Smithsonian exhibit is different than many other first ladies. Following Helen Taft’s precedent in 1912, the donation of the inaugural gown to the Smithsonian symbolically swears each first lady into the exhibit. Nevertheless, President Gerald Ford did not have an official inaugural ceremony or ball, thus Betty Ford never had an inaugural gown to donate to the Smithsonian. In the years following her first ladyship, Ford was represented in the exhibit by a neon green dress worn to a state dinner, and while historical, the dress did not hold the same symbolic value as an inaugural gown. According to Valerie Steele, “the gown is significant…because it is the way the first lady presents herself to the world.”79 Just like a coming-out party for a debutante, the first lady similarly introduces herself to the public at the inaugural balls. The fashion statement that she chooses to make through her dress, therefore, indicates the first lady’s personal tastes and personality, all while representing the president. For example, Valerie Steele suggested that Pat Nixon’s 1969 inaugural gown had an “antiquated” look.80 Through her gown, Nixon presented herself as having a conservative fashion sense as well as an understanding of her husband’s political agenda; she chose an old-

78 Ibid., 205.
80 Ibid.
fashioned look instead of a more modern dress fearing that the “hippie-inspired” late 1960’s fashion look would harm her husband’s presidency. Since Betty Ford did not have the opportunity to ‘come out’ to the public in an inaugural gown, she received less media attention for her fashion sense and appearance than previous first ladies. The Smithsonian exhibit has similarly focused less on Betty Ford’s dress than other inaugural gowns.

Betty Ford, however, was a fashionable woman. A former fashion model, in fact, Ford once received public acclaim (and payment) for her glamorous appearance and figure. Nevertheless, while models present themselves as having perfect bodies, Betty Ford’s story reveals the shortcomings of the human body. Through her experience with breast cancer and struggles with addiction, Ford showed the weakness of the human body, but also its potential to overcome physical trials. Ford spoke to the public about her misfortunes, and through her candor about such personal issues, encouraged women to confront their health problems and seek a better life for themselves. An emphasis on ‘candor’ became Ford’s mantra throughout her first ladyship, and as Linehan suggested, Betty Ford “made the personal political, creating new options for women and for political wives. In doing so, she transformed the role of first lady.”

First Lady Betty Ford accepted the first ladyship rather unexpectedly on August 8, 1974, less than a year after her husband became Richard Nixon’s vice president. Betty Ford had years of experience as a political wife, however, and transitioned into the position easily. In her memoir, The Times of My Life, Ford explained, “I wanted to be a good First Lady, I was perfectly willing to be educated about the duties of a First Lady.” At the same time, she also

---

81 Ibid.
hoped to take a different path than previous first ladies, such as the soft-spoken Patricia Nixon. “I didn’t believe,” Ford explains, “that I had to do every single thing some previous President’s wife had done.” Rather Ford intended to engage and use the power of the position on her own terms and as a means of amplifying her own personal voice.

Betty Ford’s exerted much of her influence through her candid speech and willingness to discuss a variety of issues. Within a month of the first ladyship, Ford called the first official press conference initiated by a first lady in twenty-two years. The Fords sought to operate under a policy of honesty and candor, hoping to regain the trust of the American people which had been diminished by the deceitful Nixon administration. Unlike Jacqueline Kennedy, who completely fabricated the Camelot image of her husband’s presidency, Betty Ford sought to be forthright about the inner-workings of her husband’s administration. Betty Ford’s press conference, thus, reinforced the idea of openness within the Ford White House; even from the outset, she was willing to discuss issues with the public. The press conference represented Betty Ford’s approach to the position of first lady—she was comfortable addressing the media and in doing so gave first ladies a greater voice in public.

Betty Ford experienced personal misfortune only months after her husband became president when doctors discovered that she had breast cancer. Through her experience with breast cancer, however, Ford made her personal issues into a public matter. Ford writes in her memoir:


\[84\] Ibid., 157-158.

Lying in the hospital, thinking of all those women going for cancer checkups because of me, I’d come to recognize more clearly the power of the woman in the White House. Not my power, but the power of the position, a power which could be used to help.\(^\text{86}\) Ford understood her unique role as a public figure, particularly the media attention that she received simply because she was a first lady, and hoped to channel it toward improving women’s health. Though many women in the United States were afflicted with breast cancer, the disease was a taboo issue in society because it was associated with a sexual organ, and as a result many women were forced to suffer in silence and secrecy. Therefore, many women were ill-informed about breast cancer detection, and even worse, did not receive proper treatment. Betty Ford, however, elected to make her mastectomy and chemotherapy treatment a public affair in order to increase breast cancer awareness. The public appreciated Ford’s candor and willingness to share her experience. After being released from the hospital, “her office had received more than 50,000 cards, letters, and telegrams—10 percent from women who had had mastectomies—and thousands of dollars, which Mrs. Ford gave to the American Cancer Society.” More importantly, the number of women going in for gynecological check-ups and breast exams increased.\(^\text{87}\) The public’s response to Ford’s breast cancer incident demonstrated the influence that she could have over the American people.

Understanding the breadth of her power and influence as first lady, Betty Ford addressed private and often sensitive issues with the public. The fact that the American people could identify with the first lady’s health problems increased her appeal and success as an advocate for women’s health. Despite the fact that women were generally not supposed to talk about health problems because they were considered personal matters, Ford used her status as first lady, a role

\(^{86}\) Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 194.

\(^{87}\) Pope, “Elizabeth Ann (Betty) Bloomer Ford,” 369.
typically limited by propriety, to bring these matters to the public’s attention. Her interpretations of the duties and limitations of a first lady shifted from traditional ideal that the women simply represented the president's interests. Instead, Ford viewed women's health and welfare as her own priority, no matter the ramifications of her outspokenness on her reputation or her husband's presidency. Betty Ford made women’s issues her primary focus even though sensitive women’s health issues were not necessarily on the forefront of President Ford’s agenda. In her support of women’s health, Ford created her own political agenda, which did not necessarily follow her husband’s initiatives. In fact, Betty Ford’s support of the *Roe v. Wade* court decision, because it allowed women the right to control their bodies, came into conflict with the conservative views of the Ford administration on social issues. Betty Ford was more interested in using the power of the first lady, particularly within the media, to improve the lives of women, regardless of the political implications, particularly on her husband’s popularity.

Through her experience with breast cancer, Betty Ford learned that she could capitalize on her authority as first lady to influence the public good. Ford was able to establish a sense of trust and understanding with many Americans over their shared health problems. Because many Americans identified with Ford’s personal issues and felt a sense of connection with the first lady, they looked to her to represent their needs to the best of her ability, regardless of political ideology. With her success as a woman’s health advocate, she eventually expanded her interests to more general issues regarding women. According to Linehan, “Ford used her office as a forum to express the needs and concerns of American women and to bring those personal issues into the political discourse.”88 With her determination to improve women’s health, Betty Ford demonstrated that a first lady can indeed shape the role to fit her own needs or agenda. In fact, Ford explains in her memoir that she gained the confidence to extend her influence as a first lady

---

following the breast cancer episode. Though Ford was encouraged by the primarily positive response to her health awareness effort, she explains:

I felt I hadn’t even begun to work effectively for the causes—the Equal Rights Amendment, mental health, the fight against child abuse, the fight against the abuse of old people and retarded people—that I cared about. Even so, I’d been given all kinds of credit for such straight talking as I’d already done.  

Thus, Betty Ford took a greater involvement in social issues, particularly those associated with women’s rights.

Betty Ford’s commitment to lobbying for the Equal Rights Amendment was another significant achievement because it broke ground for women and also the first ladyship. While Ford was generally interested in improving the status of women in society, one of her major initiatives was encouraging her husband’s administration to support the ERA.  

She fought for greater female involvement in the government and successfully compelled her husband to appoint one of the first female cabinet members, Carla Hills. Nevertheless, Betty Ford’s interest in the ERA diverted somewhat from her husband’s political agenda. For example, Betty Ford supported abortion, believing that “I feel it is the right of a human being to make her own decisions,” a stance that contradicted the socially conservative Ford administration.  

The significance of Betty Ford’s involvement in the ERA, besides the advancements she made for women, was the fact that she held such a different position from her husband. Rarely had any first lady supported an issue that conflicted with her husband’s policies; usually first ladies advocated policies which either related to or had no bearing on the president’s agenda. Ford established that the first ladyship was its own political entity. In response to any backlash that

---

89 Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 194.
91 Ibid.
she received for her involvement with the ERA, Ford said that “I see no reason why as First Lady I cannot go right ahead like any other woman.”92 Ford refused to be constrained by her role or her husband’s politics, but instead believed that first ladies should have an equal right to voice their opinions.

Throughout Betty Ford’s quest to improve women’s conditions, as a first lady she had to negotiate her own initiatives, the interests of the public, and commentary by the media. Betty Ford overcame traditional gender limitations, particularly the idea that women are supposed to remain silent particularly about private issues. By speaking out publicly about ‘private’ issues, Ford empowered women while also expanding the role of the first lady. Though Ford fulfilled the traditional duties of the first ladyship and took great pride in the parties that she hosted at the White House while also serving as a devoted mother and wife to her family, she also had other ambitions as a first lady. Ford learned that her “power could be used in the service of others” and therefore established that first ladies should be able to discuss even the most controversial matters if they affected the welfare of American citizens.93

Betty Ford clearly understood the influence of her actions on the first ladyship, and her candid discussion of taboo issues was, as Linehan suggests, one step in “changing the role of the president’s wife and opening new options for political wives.”94 Even First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who frequently engaged in public broadcasts, censored in her commentary, avoiding potentially offensive topics. Ford, however, demonstrated that first ladies could talk openly with the public. Despite the inevitable backlash, Ford willingly confronted controversial issues such as abortion, premarital sex, and drug abuse because they were transforming society, particularly the younger generation. Ford “made these private concerns national issues and comforted

92 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
women by assuring them that even the first family faced the same intergenerational strife their families did." Ford’s encounters with the media increased her popularity as a first lady because again, it allowed the American people to identify with her. Thus, the attention that Ford received for her candor and courage helped secure a greater voice for first ladies in the media.

In August 1975 *60 Minutes* aired an interview with Betty Ford that would become a key public episode in the shaping of her unique and uniquely powerful role as a first lady. Nevertheless, Gutgold and Hobgood indicate that Betty Ford was not prepared for the topics that Safer chose to discuss in the interview. Ford herself said that “Morley Safer caught me off balance,” asking more questions about her parenting theories and personal decisions than the political initiatives she had expected to speak about, including her commitment to women’s rights. In fact, Safer discussed potentially incriminating topics with Ford. In one example, he questioned how she would react if her daughter had an affair, a situation that most parents did not even want to consider. Ford responded “if she wanted to continue it, I would certainly counsel and advise her on the subject,” implying that parents must provide their children a strong moral background, but also describing a reality that all parents must face—ultimately children will make their own decisions. The question echoed fears about increased promiscuity and a general loosening of morals among teenagers. Ford’s answer to this question, as well as her open-minded responses to other taboo topics, caused much public discontent. Following the interview, Ford’s “stock with the public did not go up. It went down, rapidly. Letters, wires, phone calls to the White House, two-thirds of them against” the first lady. Despite the ground that Ford broke by appearing on a national television program such as *60 Minutes*, her

---

95 Ibid., 61.
experience on this show revealed the challenges and limitations in holding a public role. Though Ford gained a great deal of power as a first lady, she learned that her power was not boundless; she had to exercise some caution to protect her husband’s and her own reputation.

At the same time, Betty Ford’s 60 Minutes interview and an interview in McCall’s Magazine, released within about a month of each other, expose similar assumptions about the role of the first lady, and emphasize surprise at Ford’s approach to the position. The interviews reveal the media’s construction of first ladies as generally weak figures with a limited voice and an insignificant political role. Throughout the 60 Minutes interview, Safer suggests that first ladies were generally confined by their position. He views the first lady as “surely the most unliberated woman in this—in the world” because she is so limited to the “bonds that tie her (forgive me) to [the president’s] shadow.”

Safer’s statement is particularly condemning to the first ladyship; he suggests that by accepting the position, first ladies surrenders their independence and free will. In particular, he proposes that these women are limited in their public speaking opportunities arguing that “the more power a politician gets, the more of a mouse his wife becomes.”

Ironically, he addresses the perceived weakness of the first lady amidst a national television interview with Betty Ford, nevertheless his comment belittles the influence of first ladies in the public realm. Safer characterizes the first ladyship as a role that is subordinate to the presidency. In his line of questioning of the position, he portrays first ladies as pawns of the president, expected to represent him with dignity but granted little personal power.

During the interview, Safer indicates his surprise at Ford’s candor and strength in her role. Safer admits that he “expected to find, quite honestly, a rather bland and predictable

---

100 “The First Lady,” Safer.
101 Ibid.
political wife,” but found just the opposite in Betty Ford.\textsuperscript{102} Though he censures the first ladyship for traditionally lacking a voice, he acknowledges that “the higher [your] husband’s gotten, the more really controversial things [you’ve] had to say.”\textsuperscript{103} Unlike previous first ladies, Ford became increasingly outspoken as she transitioned from a senator’s wife to the first ladyship and realized the power of her public role. In fact, Betty Ford responds to Safer’s assumptions about first ladies, indicating that she would not accept a passive role. Instead, she believed that “once you’re asked a question, you have to be honest exactly how you feel,” and intended to voice her frank opinions, even if she defied traditional public speaking protocols for first ladies.\textsuperscript{104}

\hspace{1cm} Taken from: http://www.ford.utexas.edu/images/avproj/new-images/A5611-34A.jpg

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
In the same year, Ford participated in an interview with *McCall’s Magazine*. Though not as provocative as *60 Minutes*, the interview also revealed Betty Ford’s willingness to discuss personal issues in the public sphere. The article “The Blooming of Betty Ford,” Myra MacPherson examines Betty Ford’s role as a first lady in comparison to former first ladies. The title, a play on Ford’s maiden name as well as a metaphor for a blooming flower, suggests that Betty Ford too has bloomed from a quiet political wife to an outspoken first lady. The article explores Ford’s negotiation of the role, but also the way that Ford changed public perception about first ladies. Prior to Ford, the public was accustomed to “canned and predictable First Lady comments.”

Through her candor, Ford altered traditional expectations of the first ladyship, largely because she “divested the role of much of its mystery and façade.” Ford rather presented herself as a “real person,” identifying with the public’s interests rather than separating herself from the American people, as Jacqueline Kennedy had previously.

Throughout the interview, Ford explained the evolution of her personal role. As she understood the extent of the first lady’s power and influence, she realized the “positiveness of the position” and the opportunities the first ladyship presented for serving the public good.

MacPherson reveals the public’s enthusiasm for Betty Ford’s approach to the first ladyship, particularly in the wake of Pat Nixon: “her increasing feminism and courage to speak out on issues has brought a totally unexpected bonus to those who prefer activism after years of silence from First Ladies.” MacPherson suggests that prior to Ford, the public generally perceived the first lady as being limited to addressing benign issues only. Though some first ladies were activists for various causes, they were often restricted to projects that furthered the

---

105 MacPherson, “The Blooming of Betty Ford,” 120.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid., 122.
109 Ibid.
president’s interests. Nevertheless, Ford changed perceptions about the first lady—her role could extend beyond simply supporting the president and could instead carry its own influence. Betty Ford’s crusade for women’s health issues, for example, suggested to the public that the first lady could provide reform and aid, just like the president. The first ladyship in some cases could be separate from the president, with the primary interest in serving the public rather than supporting a political agenda.

The 60 Minutes and McCall’s Magazine interviews reveal changing interpretations of the first ladyship. Both interviews highlighted Betty Ford’s unique manifestation of the first ladyship and suggested that her influence could change modern expectations of the role. The interviews also proved integral in allowing her to redefine the position. While both Safer and MacPherson reminded Ford that first ladies typically remained fairly reserved and conservative in their activities, perhaps as a way to provoke her, Ford emphasized the power and independence that she gained from the role. Through media engagements such as these interviews, Ford revealed the power of the position, which she had explicitly realized early in her term. Whereas many first ladies preferred limited media engagement, Ford used the unique powers of the first ladyship to bolster her political and social agendas. Members of the media signaled their approval of Ford’s candid approach to the first ladyship by naming her one of Time Magazine’s ‘Women of the Year’ in 1975. In fact, the magazine explicitly defended Ford as being deserving of the award because she “enlarged the customarily dutiful role of First Lady.”

The media saw Betty Ford as different and as more influential than previous first ladies because she was able to expand a role with strong traditional roots.

Despite Ford’s influence in expanding the first lady’s ability to address the media and confront controversial issues, the Smithsonian’s First Ladies’ Exhibit remained a costume

---

collection which displayed first ladies’ dresses, according to the exhibit book, *The First Ladies Hall*, which was published in 1976, contemporary with Betty Ford’s time as first lady. From the exhibit’s installation in the new National Museum of American History in 1964 until the exhibit closed for renovation in 1987, the hall was organized by period rooms, which mimicked White House décor throughout history and displayed the gowns as the central feature. In fact, the book itself is characterized as a ‘costume history book,’ which reinforces the exhibit’s classification as a display of costume history rather than a political or social history.  

The exhibit’s interpretation of the role of the first lady remained fairly antiquated with the period room exhibit. In fact, the exhibit’s continual emphasis on first lady dress conflicted with changing ideas about the first ladyship in the 1970s. The Smithsonian exhibit did not reflect the fact that first ladies such as Betty Ford were altering public assumptions about the first ladyship; in particular Ford demonstrated that first ladies held a powerful role and could pursue controversial political agendas. However, because of the exhibit’s popularity with the American public and the Smithsonian’s credibility as an institution, the Smithsonian’s presentation of the first ladyship played a part in shaping the public’s understanding of the role.

Following a presidential administration shrouded in secrecy and dishonesty, the American people looked to leaders who were completely candid about their political intentions. Understanding the power that the position granted her, First Lady Betty Ford approached the first ladyship with an aim toward being entirely frank with the public. Through her experience with breast cancer especially, Betty Ford made personal matters topics for public examination, preferring to discuss these issues with the public rather than protecting her own privacy. During her term as first lady, Ford spoke openly about her struggle with breast cancer and urged women to seek treatment for their own health problems. Similarly, following her first ladyship, Ford

---

remained committed to speaking openly about her personal issues in order to increase the awareness of the general public about the respective issue. For example, Ford confronted her own drug addiction and created a clinic, the Betty Ford Center which opened in 1982, to help other addicts with the recovery process. Through her frequent and sometimes controversial interactions with the media, Ford increased the power of the first lady to speak openly in public. Though the Ford did not completely alter the public’s understanding of the first ladyship from the traditional image, as the Smithsonian portrayed, she demonstrated that a first lady could wield tremendous influence over the American people and the press—even without an inaugural dress to initially attract the public’s attention.
Chapter Five:  
Hillary Clinton: Revealing the Limitations of the Role

In 1992, the same year that Hillary Clinton became the nation’s new first lady, the First Ladies’ Exhibit at the National Museum of American History was being reopened after a major transformation. The previous version of the exhibit—which had opened in 1964—had centered on dresses and inaugural gowns. Due to conservators’ concerns about the state of decay of those dresses, the exhibit was officially closed in 1987. Since the dresses were, after all, central to the exhibit, damage to the dresses would be detrimental to the exhibit’s story. When it reopened five years later, it did so under the direction of curator Edith Mayo, who came to the position with a background in women’s history. While the previous curator, Margaret Brown Klapthor, turned the period room display of dresses into what Lisa Kathleen Graddy, the current curator of the exhibit, described as first ladies’ “dynasty,” Mayo sought to change the focus of the exhibit.112

Beginning in the 1980s, “historians, journalists, and popular writers have devoted serious attention to the role of the wife of the president of the United States in national politics and cultural life.”113 Rather than reinstalling the dresses without also telling the experiences of the first ladies, as was the precedent since the opening of the original 1914 exhibit, Mayo used this opportunity to reinterpret the exhibit’s portrayal of the first ladyship. She decided to “incorporate new historical studies on women into the interpretive framework of first ladies.”114

The new title for the exhibit, “First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image,” points to the change in the content and approach to the exhibit. In an attempt to move first ladies beyond their dresses, the new exhibit featured a diminished display of dresses, largely a result of new conservation guidelines which attempted to preserve as many gowns as possible; the lighting

112 Lisa Kathleen Graddy, discussion with the curator, July 2008.
114 Mayo and Meringolo, First Ladies, 7.
levels in the previous exhibit badly damaged the fabric on many of the dresses, rendering many of them too weak to display. Just as the dresses became physically ‘weak,’ they also became materially ‘weak’ for the exhibit because they emphasized traditional views of the first ladyship. Instead the exhibit “included many artifacts from the First Ladies Collection not previously exhibited—from White House programs and invitations to popular culture materials and political campaign items.”

With these items and a limited use of the dresses, the exhibit could tell a new story about first ladies.

Mayo set out to interpret the first ladies not as wives or mothers or icons, but rather as “historical agents in their own right.” Thus, the exhibit studied the contributions that first ladies made to the role, as well as the way that different first ladies interpreted their position. The exhibit examined many different aspects of the first ladyship within the realm of “political role” and “public image.” For example, within the “political role” narrative, the exhibit explored the first lady’s duties as a hostess, advocate, political partner, and political campaigner. The “public image” section studied the first lady’s experience with the press, including the media’s changing interpretation of the role. The exhibit suggested that the first ladyship was an extensive and ever-changing role, which could not be explained by a single definition or description, but that was constantly complicated by the decisions and attitudes of each first lady and each installation of the exhibit—and which could not be conveyed through a display of dresses alone.

After years of touting its famous collection of dresses, the Smithsonian praised its new exhibit in the 1992 annual report, boasting that the First Ladies’ Exhibit was the “first major

\[115\] Ibid.
\[116\] Ibid.
\[117\] Ibid., 3.
\[118\] Ibid.
museum exhibition to study first ladies from Martha Washington to Barbara Bush in the contexts of political history, women’s history, and the American public’s perceptions and evolving expectations.” Though the Smithsonian had remained traditional in its definition of the first ladyship, even after activists such as Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford transformed the role from its domestic focus, the Smithsonian’s report indicated that the institution had finally changed its understanding of the position. Certainly the notion of the changing role was manifested in the exhibit itself, but the annual report also suggested that Smithsonian officials also espoused the change in interpretation.

Just as the First Ladies’ Exhibit at the Smithsonian reopened with a new vision about the first ladyship, Hillary Clinton approached her new role with the goal of reprioritizing the duties of the first lady, emphasizing the political role especially. During Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton told a reporter, “you know, I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas, but what I decided to do was to fulfill my profession, which I entered before my husband was in public life.” Clinton’s statement encapsulated her initial approach to the first ladyship. She sought to separate herself from traditional notions about the responsibilities of wives, and her duties would extend far beyond the domestic sphere. Therefore, anticipating her role as a first lady, Clinton revealed her intentions for the position, with her foremost interest in executing policy initiatives over fulfilling the traditional duties of the first lady as a hostess, mother, and wife. Rather, Clinton sought to use the position to “fulfill [her] profession” as a lawyer and defender of people’s interests and to launch a political career. Following President Clinton’s election, Carl Bernstein described Clinton as “America’s first

---

warrior first lady” because she established herself as an important member of her husband’s staff and created ambitious political agendas almost immediately.121

Even before Clinton’s tenure as first lady, she was met with opposition from the public because of her intense involvement in her husband’s campaign. Clinton’s statement about staying home and baking cookies received as much criticism as it did praise. In her effort to establish herself as a strong female politician, Clinton alienated herself from certain groups of people, suggesting the superiority of her lifestyle and career. She created a stir among the media who censured her for “having demeaned traditional women and their homemaking priorities.”122 Clinton’s insistence that she would have a strong political role was only furthered by the fact that during the campaign, the Clintons presented themselves as a “package deal.”123 Bill Clinton told the press that “I always say that my slogan might well be, ‘Buy one, get one free,’” which raises the important point that first ladies are not paid for their position.124 From the beginning, the Clintons presented themselves as an egalitarian political couple and insisted that Hillary Clinton would share some of the executive responsibilities. In such declarations, the Clintons sought to dismantle the traditional gendered balance of power within the presidency built around a clear division of labor—the president dealt with politics while the first lady took care of domestic duties. Though Hillary Clinton would serve as the first lady and was expected to fulfill the traditional duties, she would also act as a leading member of the Clinton administration with a set of expectations that differed from the traditional first ladyship, including advising the president on both foreign and domestic policy. In March 1992, ABC News Reporter Jackie Judd noted on Nightline, however, that “Americans are most comfortable, for example, with first

---

124 Ibid.
ladies who are gracious, stand-by-your-man wives” and that anything more “makes people uneasy.”

Though Hillary Clinton received support for her attempts to overcome gender limitations in the presidency, her overtly feminist attitude also generated controversy, especially among those who hoped to preserve traditional order in society.

Hillary Clinton, however, complicated her strong, feminist image during a *60 Minutes* interview earlier that year. In response to the Gennifer Flowers affair, a damaging obstacle to the Clinton campaign, Hillary Clinton defended her decision to support her husband and remain in the marriage. Clinton said on *60 Minutes*, “you know, I’m not sitting here, some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette. I’m sitting here because I love him and I respect him and I honor what he’s been through and what we’ve been through together.”

Throughout the campaign and presidency that followed, Clinton rarely “sat” quietly next to her husband, but rather acted as his strong-willed political partner. Following Betty Ford’s lead, Bill and Hillary Clinton used the *60 Minutes* platform to address their personal and potentially politically damaging issues. In this moment, Clinton marked herself as the ‘stand by your man’ political wife that Americans most identified with, as Judd suggested previously. In a country so concerned with family values and morality, Clinton understood the importance of presenting a loving and united couple to the American people. Therefore, while she appeared uncharacteristically vulnerable, Clinton used the interview as an opportunity to bolster her husband’s support as a presidential candidate and thereby her chance to improve her own political position.

From the beginning of her tenure as first lady, Clinton insisted upon separating herself from traditional ideas about the first ladyship, refusing to only serve as a domestic caretaker, a

---

125 Ibid.
role that many first ladies have made their primary duty. In contrast to Betty Ford who understood the great power of the first ladyship, Clinton expressed in her autobiography, *Living History*, an initial concern that the position would limit her as a political figure:

I distrust the way symbols can be manipulated and misused, and I’ve always believed people should be judged on the basis of actions, not just what they claim to stand for. A first lady occupies a vicarious position; her power is derivative, not independent, of the President’s. This partly explains my sometimes awkward fit in the role of First Lady. Ever since I was a little girl, I had worked to be my own person and maintain my independence. As much as I loved my husband and my country, adjusting to being a full-time surrogate was difficult for me.\(^{127}\)

According to this segment from her autobiography, Clinton feared that the connotations that came with the title ‘First Lady’—domestic guardian, hostess, fashion icon, and promoter of the president’s agenda—would hinder her respectability and political influence. Thus, Clinton attempted to dissociate herself from the role at first, hoping to be recognized for her achievements rather than her title. Clinton implied that the first lady held a traditionally weak position, especially in terms of political influence. In particular, she disliked the fact that the Constitution guaranteed the first lady no explicit power or duty, and additionally that the position changed based on the ambitions of each first lady and the amount of power the president was willing to grant her. Therefore, Clinton sought to establish a strong position for herself within her husband’s administration in order to secure a political role often precluded from first ladies.

Hillary Clinton gained a significant amount of political responsibility once her husband was elected president. Just as promised during the campaign, Clinton became her husband’s closest adviser and was the “first presidential spouse to have an office in the West Wing of the

\(^{127}\) Clinton, *Living History*, 264-265.
White House,” complete with her own staff. In fact, Clinton’s staff soon became known as “Hillaryland” because it was its “own little subculture within the White House,” distinguished by its integrity and camaraderie. Clinton’s establishment of a distinct and respected presence in the White House compounded with the fact that she even occupied an office was a remarkable achievement for any first lady, and revealed her success in securing political influence within the administration. Clinton succeeded in carving out a role within her husband’s administration, not simply as a first lady but also as a policymaker and staff member.

President Clinton appointed Hillary as the chair of the newly created Task Force on National Health Care Reform in 1993. The goal of the task force was to create a plan which would provide universal health care to all Americans. The president appointed his wife because she had previous experience “serving on the board of Arkansas Children’s Hospital and chairing a state task force on rural health care,” and understood the burden of medical expenses on many families. Only Eleanor Roosevelt and Rosalynn Carter had been entrusted with such political responsibilities, including the opportunity to testify before Congress. From her previous work, Clinton became interested in health care reform and wanted to use her influence as a first lady to improve the well-being of Americans. This position also presented a chance for Clinton to show herself as a capable politician, reinforcing the notion that she wanted to be seen as more than hostess or domestic guardian and hoped to use the first ladyship as a starting point for a future political career. By granting her such duties, the president only enabled Hillary Clinton’s attitude toward the first ladyship.

Nevertheless, Clinton’s healthcare task force faced several insurmountable obstacles, the plan eventually failed in Congress. Hillary Clinton provided an explanation for the plan’s

---

129 Clinton, Living History, 133.
130 Ibid., 147.
failure, which also exposed limitations within the first ladyship and challenges to her attempt to transcend the position:

Three groups affiliated with the health care industry sued the task force over its composition, claiming that because I was not technically a government employee (First Ladies derive no salary), I was not legally allowed to chair or even attend closed task force meetings. These groups had seized on an obscure federal law designed to prevent private interests from surreptitiously influencing government decision making and usurping the public’s right to know.  

Clinton’s status as first lady precluded her from fully participating in government activities. This example revealed that although the first lady could aid the president in his political pursuits, the first lady was not limitless in her government involvement. In fact, the lawsuit presented a major setback for the position. Clinton was denounced for being a first lady, and even worse, the court essentially judged her at the level of a corrupt private interest group by applying the same federal law to her. The court therefore suggested that since the public does not specifically elect individual first ladies to the position, they cannot be trusted with the same responsibility as other salaried government employees. According to the court, first ladies could not assume political roles (Clinton noted that she was not even allowed to attend committee meetings, much less head the committees), divulging antiquated expectations that the woman’s role belonged only within the realm of the home and family.

Within a few months of the healthcare reform failure, Clinton experienced several other blows to her political career. She became entangled in the Whitewater Scandal, which brought into question her integrity and credibility as a political figure—accusations that she sought to dismiss during the healthcare controversy. Additionally, the Clintons were discouraged by the

---

131 Ibid., 153-154.
disappointing Democratic Party loss of Congress during the 1994 Midterm elections, which partly reflected the healthcare debacle. According to Gould, Hillary Clinton internalized these setbacks and “reassessed her own role within the White House during November and December 1994.” Clinton recognized that her initial attitude toward the first ladyship, particularly her outspokenness and insistence on pursuing political agendas, had been hurtful to her husband’s administration and to her personal reputation. She realized that her ambitions were confined by the first ladyship and by a society that was resistant to change. In fact, a *U.S. News and World Report* poll taken in 1993 reported that only 34 percent of Americans favored Clinton acting as a major advisor to the Clinton administration, while 70 percent favored her acting as a traditional first lady. Though first ladies have gained greater freedoms to pursue personal agendas, Clinton’s intense political involvement was perhaps too radical for an American public that preferred that first ladies primarily fulfill their traditional roles.

In her autobiography, Clinton recalled her eventual appreciation that “the role of First Lady is deeply symbolic and that I had better figure out how to make the best of it at home and on the world stage.” In this moment, Clinton understood that she could only be successful if she accepted the delineated power dynamics of the role and embraced the first ladyship. Clinton therefore adapted a new approach to the first ladyship, imitating other successful activist first ladies. For example, “as Lady Bird Johnson and Rosalynn Carter had done, she intended to be an advocate for specific causes rather than a legislative manner, as she had been in the health care debate.”

Rather than aiming to break new barriers for the first ladyship, as she had attempted before, Clinton adhered to strategies proven successful by other first ladies, while still

---

134 Clinton, *Living History*, 265.
seeking an activist role. Clinton shifted her attention to less controversial issues, focusing on securing opportunities for women and children. According to Burrell, polls by *Time*, the *Washington Post*, and CNN indicated that with such changes, Clinton “seemed to have regained a good degree of her popularity” which had significantly decreased during 1994.

Clinton’s return to a more traditional approach to the first ladyship was manifest in her book, *It Takes a Village*. As Bernstein explains, “the book *It Takes a Village*, conceived at her post-electoral ebb, was intended to define Hillary Clinton as she saw herself and wanted to be seen, and to establish a public persona based on thoughtfulness, seriousness, and traditional family values.”

The book focused on theories about child-rearing, recalling traditional ideas about domesticity and the role of women in society. Clinton used this book to help reinvent her public image. At the beginning of her first ladyship, she sought attention for her role as a politician rather than a mother. However, in *It Takes a Village*, Clinton explains that “one of the honors of being First Lady is the opportunity I have to go out into the world and to see what individuals are doing to help themselves and their children. I have had the privilege of talking with mothers, fathers, grandparents, civic clubs, Scout troops, PTAs, and church groups.”

Clinton’s comments bring to mind the 1950s housewife, who was expected to put her children’s well-being above her own personal development and attend PTA meetings instead of establishing a career for herself. Such a mindset was fundamentally at odds with Clinton’s own, particularly in light of her press statements during the 1992 campaign, where she explicitly declared the importance of her role as a “professional.” Nevertheless, Mary Tabor points to Clinton’s drastic image makeover with the ironic title of her newspaper article, “Meet Hillary

---

136 Ibid.
Clinton, the Traditional First Lady.” In the article, which discusses the release of *It Takes a Village*, Tabor notes that in light of the recent healthcare debacle, Clinton who had once refused to conform to conventional duties of the first lady, “recast herself in the traditional image of nurturing mother and wife.”

Realizing that she could not neglect the domestic aspect of the first ladyship, which defined the original role (Dolley Madison was revered for her accomplishments as a hostess), Clinton reinvented herself as a devoted mother and housewife and returned the focus of the role to the domestic sphere.

Clinton’s choice of gown for her husband’s second inauguration further revealed her intention to avoid negative press and model her decisions on the example of previous first ladies. In 1992 Clinton selected Sarah Phillips, a relatively unknown designer, to create her gown. The result, according to former First Ladies’ curator Edith Mayo, “was a purple crystal-encrusted gown that tipped off a cascade of negative responses.” The dress reflected “someone who knew nothing about fashion and appearance,” but instead was a “modern businesswoman.”

Clinton originally ignored criticism about the dress, following her beliefs that women should be evaluated for their achievements rather than their personal appearance. When revamping her image, however, she sought to overcome the stigma that her choice of inaugural dress implied, particularly that she lacked any fashion sense or that her professional role overshadowed her attention to personal appearance. Whereas Jacqueline Kennedy had problems being too internationally savvy in her fashion tastes, Clinton—in the wake of Kennedy’s influence on the first ladyship—needed to reach past her first domestic choice of a dressmaker and draw on international allure. Therefore, in 1997 Clinton chose a dress by the renowned designer

---

142 Tatiana Morales, “Inaugural Gowns through the Years,” *CBS*. 
Oscar de la Renta. The dress was “sparkly gold-embroidered,” and in contrast to the 1992 gown, described as “sexy and sleek.” With this dress, Clinton achieved her intended goal to paint herself as a fashion conscious and woman. Through this experience, Clinton learned that fashion was not simply frivolous, but rather a set of necessary choices to be carefully considered and a way for women to export ideas about themselves. By wearing a De la Renta dress, she presented herself as glamorous and interested in her personal appearance as well as her work. The image projected by her second inaugural dress supported Clinton’s reinvention as a first lady who took her role in areas other than politics seriously.

Clinton did not entirely retreat to dresses and domesticity during her husband’s second term, but rather asserted her political influence much more subtly. She remained an adviser to her husband and acted as a diplomat on many international trips. She also continued to pursue a political agenda, including “foreign development, immunization in the inner cities and expanding financial credit for women.” Clinton learned, however, to negotiate her power through her role as a first lady, while also fulfilling her own political initiatives. The Monica Lewinsky scandal presented a major challenge to Hillary Clinton, particularly given her new embrace of the role. In that role, she remained devoted to her husband, just as she had with the Gennifer Flowers incident. Thus, Clinton maintained her commitment to the wifely duties of the first ladyship, as they had been defined by Jacqueline Kennedy and her philandering husband, intending to support her husband unconditionally to protect his reputation as a president.

The culmination of Clinton’s eight-year tenure as first lady coincided with the authorship and publication of yet another book that further demonstrated her full embrace of the first ladyship. Ironically, Clinton’s book, *An Invitation to the White House: At Home with History*,

---

143 Morales, “Inaugural Gowns through the Years.”
was published in 2000 amidst her historic senate campaign. In her later autobiography, Clinton explained that the book was intended to be “a tribute to the permanent White House staff and a behind-the-scenes look at the extraordinary job they do everyday.” Nevertheless, the book is reminiscent of Jacqueline Kennedy’s famous White House Tour. While Kennedy was not nearly as involved in politics as Clinton, and her major accomplishments—the White House tour and her hostess role—were more domestic, she achieved a level of popularity and approval greater than any other first lady. Therefore, in publishing the book, Clinton perhaps intended to capitalize upon Kennedy’s success and leave a Kennedy-esque final impression on her first ladyship. The content of the book emphatically reinforces Clinton’s domestic role. The first page of the book features a picture of Clinton standing beside an elegantly set dining room table, an image which essentially captures the stereotype that she was trying to avoid in 1992 when she told the press that she refused to stay home and bake cookies. Even more ironic to that statement, the book actually includes an extensive recipe section; in fact, she writes that readers “may choose to dazzle dinner guest with a stunning display of spun sugar art” or even “present a tray of delicate cookies.” While it may seem that the book contradicts Clinton’s initial approach to the first ladyship, rather, it is an extremely contrived portrayal of Clinton’s success in the traditional duties of the first ladyship: hostess, wife, and mother.

---

145 Clinton, *Living History*, 125.

Taken from: *An Invitation to the White House*
Despite the image which she portrayed in *An Invitation to the White House*, Clinton’s political ambitions did not vanish during her tenure as first lady. Instead, she spent her final months as first lady campaigning for a seat in the United States Senate, the first time any first lady sought an elected political position after fulfilling the first ladyship. Clinton effectively used the publicity and credibility that she gained as a first lady to launch her political career; surely the fact that she had added ‘first lady’ to her resume aided her Senate campaign tremendously. Following her success as a Senator, however, Clinton rarely discusses her role as a first lady. For example, Clinton’s presidential campaign 2008 websites often listed her experience as first lady among the least significant of her achievements.

In the latest iteration of the First Ladies’ Exhibit, opened in 2008 after the entire museum had closed for restoration, does not even feature Clinton’s gown. Admittedly, the new exhibit is much smaller due to constraints with the restoration, vastly reducing the number of dresses on display. Nevertheless, in choosing the dresses to put on display, the First Ladies’ curator Lisa Kathleen Graddy argued that Clinton would be the least offended of the living first ladies if her dress was omitted from the exhibit, since her role as Senator and Secretary of State was her priority at this point.\(^{147}\) Even so, the dresses have become important symbols of the first ladyship, and the dresses displayed in the new exhibit represent the most influential first ladies, including Martha Washington, Dolley Madison, Mary Todd Lincoln, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Rosalynn Carter. Thus, by leaving out Clinton’s dress, her experience as a first lady is diminished by the exhibit. Rather, she is represented in the exhibit by a “Hillary for Senator” bumper sticker, which reiterates the idea that Clinton’s position as a first lady served as a stepping stone for her individual political career.

---

\(^{147}\) Lisa Kathleen Graddy, discussion with the curator, July 2008.
Hillary Clinton has left behind a difficult legacy for first ladies to follow. While the lives of most first ladies were defined by their time in the White House, Clinton used this time to bolster her reputation for her individual political career. Clinton influenced the first ladyship significantly: not only did she have the most impressive political agenda of any first lady, despite the controversy that her political involvement caused, she also made the first ladyship a role that could lead to further political gains.
Conclusion:
The First Ladies Enter a New Era:
Implications for the Twenty-First Century First Lady

When redesigning the First Ladies’ Exhibit, which was set to reopen just after the presidential election in November 2008, Hillary Clinton’s campaign for president caused some concern for the curator of the exhibit, Lisa Kathleen Graddy. The curator was not upset by the potential of a female president, as a woman’s history specialist with a particular interest in the suffrage movement, she praised Clinton’s efforts. What the curator questioned was how the first ladyship would be reinterpreted under a female president. Graddy emphatically asserted that if Hillary Clinton were elected, she would not allow the First Ladies’ Exhibit to become the First “Laddy’s” Exhibit.148 Rather, she was prepared to label someone other than Hillary Clinton’s spouse as her ‘first lady’ (or more likely Bill Clinton would have called himself the ‘first man’ or ‘first spouse’), citing that there has been a historical precedent for a female relative other than a spouse to fulfill the duties of the first ladyship. Graddy suspected that Hillary’s daughter, Chelsea Clinton, might assume the position instead.

Graddy’s attempt to reconstruct the first ladyship reflects the complexities but also the limitations of a role which still roots itself in traditional, domestic ideals. While the controversy caused by the dilemma over who would be assigned to the first ladyship under President Hillary Clinton did not necessarily preclude her from becoming president, the situation reveals certain expectations about the presidency. For example, it underscores the fact that American society considers the presidency an explicitly male position. The title ‘first lady’ suggests assumptions about the gender of the person serving the position, but even more revealing, the media’s mockery of Bill Clinton as the next hostess or happy homemaker further indicate society’s belief that the duties of the first lady could only be fulfilled by a female. Since we have come to expect

148 Lisa Kathleen Graddy, discussion with the curator, July 2008.
that the president and first lady are always a husband and wife pair, respectively, the idea that a married couple might not neatly assume the conventional roles became a subject of contest during Clinton’s campaign. The first ladyship, in fact, engenders the presidency male. Hillary Clinton showed that a female has the capacity to run a strong presidential campaign, yet her status as a woman posted a problem to the first lady counterpart position. Although it was not a major campaign issue, the question of who would act as first lady if Hillary Clinton was elected became the topic of many an energetic discussion. To this day, the office of the American presidency has only one precedent: the president is male and his spouse is female. Many political commentators claim that this precedent hindered Hillary Clinton’s chances. Despite the progress of female politicians in recent years, the presidency remains an elusive position because the position is restricted by society’s concepts of traditional gender roles.

The 2008 election brought instead another first—the first black president and first lady pair, Barack Obama and his wife Michelle. Just as Hillary Clinton reinvented herself in Jacqueline Kennedy’s image midway through her term as first lady, Michelle Obama also has been described as the “new Jackie Kennedy.” Obama’s similarities to Kennedy are indeed striking: both have chosen motherhood as a primary focus of the first ladyship, both have enraptured the media, and both have been targeted as fashion icons. Nevertheless, in respect to Obama’s chic fashion tastes, Andre Leon Talley indicates that “pragmatism, not glamour, is what matters when she gets dressed,” which suggests even a transcendence of the Jacqueline Kennedy model of the first ladyship. Obama is fashionable and frequents the media spotlight, but unlike Kennedy, she has made herself more accessible to the American people with her wardrobe (her affinity for J. Crew, the more affordable yet still trendy name brand) as well as her

---

150 Ibid.
willingness to interact with the public on a day-to-day basis. Michelle Obama’s example shows, yet again, the influence and public acceptance of Jacqueline Kennedy’s brand of the first ladyship. While the fate of the first ladies is ever-evolving, and the problem of the female president looms over the first ladyship, the traditional roles of housewife and fashion icon remain among the most significant duties, and her inaugural gown still remains the way she first presents herself to the world.
Bibliography


Murray, Peter. *The Most Influential People of the Last 100 Years*. Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky & Konecky, 2005.


*Our First Ladies*. http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/firstladies/.


