

From “America’s Queen” to “Lady Macbeth”: The First
Lady, Feminism, and the Construction of Public
Womanhood

by

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*If you think I'm going to slave
In the kitchen for a man who is
Supposed to be brave,
Then I'm sorry to say
But you're wrong all the way,
Because I'm going to be an astronaut.*

– ANITA BUZICK II, 9 YEARS OLD, JUNE 1975

Introduction

On the sunny afternoon of September 7, 1968, a group of four hundred picketers convened on the Atlantic City Boardwalk. Parading signs that read, “Women are people, not livestock!” and chanting, “No more girdles, no more pain. No more trying to hold the fat in vain!” they staged a fiery counter-demonstration against the annual Miss America Pageant that was taking place in Convention Hall next door.¹ As the beauty contest went on inside, the protesters gathered “instruments of female torture” – bras, girdles, hair curlers, false eyelashes, issues of *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Playboy* – and threw them into a “freedom trash can.”² As midnight approached and the pageant’s winner stepped forward to receive her crystal tiara, the demonstrators hosted their own ceremony in protest of “the degrading, mindless-boob-girlie symbol” of the “beauty monarchy,” which culminated in the coronation of a live sheep.³ They then auctioned off the Miss America effigy: “Gentlemen, I offer you the 1969 model. She’s better every year. She walks. She talks. She smiles on cue. *And she does housework.*”⁴ Although the contents of the freedom trashcan were never set aflame, critical press reports issued in the demonstration’s wake scolded the self-

¹ Barbara Carlson, “There She Is, Miss America, There She Is, Ewe’r Ideal,” *Hartford Courant*, September 8, 1968; Charlotte Curtis, “Miss America Pageant Is Picketed by 100 Women,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1968.

² “Pageant Protest Sparked Bra-Burning Myth,” narrated by Nell Greenfieldboyce, Morning Edition, *NPR*, September 8, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94240375>.

³ Pauline Tai, “Miss America Pageant Chosen as the Latest Target of Protesters,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 6, 1968.

⁴ Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 40.

described “women’s liberation groups” for deciding to “take the law into [their] own hands, . . . burn [their] bra[s . . . and] destroy everything this country holds dear.”⁵

So begets the caricature of the women’s movement ingrained in popular memory. It recalls only angry mobs of “well-meaning but mislead females” marching to the backdrop of Vietnam War protests, radical student activism, and hippie counterculture.⁶ Though this narrative is often reduced to an isolated period of fanatical activity at the end of the twentieth century, history confirms that the American women’s movement occurred in fact in three distinct, yet unified, phases over the course of the last two centuries. It was not until the 1910s that the term *feminism* was brought into common parlance in the United States. Introduced by women’s suffragists, it was used in reference to an ideology underlying the women’s movement that “proclaim[ed] revolution in all the relations of the sexes.”⁷ The word was popularized again in the 1970s as women’s rights activists adopted it as unifying marker of identity. For the purposes of this thesis, *feminism* will be used to describe the democratic mobilization of women aimed to eradicate sexual inequality as well as the egalitarian ideals that inspire it.⁸

Many historians date the start of the first wave of the women’s movement to the formation of the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association in 1869. Feminists of this era rallied around the issue of white female enfranchisement and reached their zenith in 1920 with the passage of

⁵ Art Buchwald, "Uptight Dissenters Go Too Far in Burning Their Brassieres," *Washington Post*, September 12, 1968.

⁶ Tai, "Miss America Pageant Chosen as the Latest Target of Protesters; Buchwald, "Uptight Dissenters Go Too Far in Burning Their Brassieres."

⁷ Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 3.

⁸ Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*, 1-3.

the Nineteenth Amendment.⁹ Two ideological arguments were employed during this period to expose the social and political expediency of women's suffrage. While one upheld man and woman's shared humanity and sought to eliminate systematic discrimination founded on biological difference, the other emphasized women's exceptional maternalism and contended that their enfranchisement would enrich public life with morality and empathy unique to their gender. The movement split in the 1920s as feminists' goals diversified and began to conflict. Some social reformers continued to push for constitutional equality in the form of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), while others, viewing women's suffrage as a single facet of a broader agenda for social justice, redirected their attention to the class-based and economic issues that would constitute President Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s.¹⁰

Feminism reemerged as a significant political and social force in American society during the mid-1960s, thus beginning its second wave. Springing from the leftist social movements of the post-World War II period, this phase of the women's movement revolved around issues of sexuality, reproductive freedom, childcare, and equality in the workplace. It was led on a national level by groups such as the President's Commission on the Status of Women, established by the Kennedy administration in 1961, and the National Organization for Women (1966) and on a local level by grassroots collectives like New York Radical Women (1967) and

⁹ Kathleen C. Berkeley, *The Women's Liberation Movement in America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 199.

¹⁰ First proposed in 1923, the Equal Rights Amendment was designed to guarantee that "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." The amendment passed both houses of Congress and was sent to the states for ratification on March 22, 1972. It failed to receive the approval of the requisite thirty-eight states within its ten-year deadline, however, and was defeated on June 30, 1982. Ibid.; Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*, 6.

Redstockings (1969). Assuming the legacy of their nineteenth century predecessors, the ratification of the ERA was also a leading objective for second-wave feminists. Until the mid-1970s, the movement contained two philosophically and strategically distinct wings – liberal feminism and radical feminism. While both sought to establish a society founded on sexual equality, the former aimed to do so through social advocacy and legal reform, whereas the latter argued for a fundamental restructuring of patriarchal American institutions.¹¹ The movement lost momentum in the early 1980s as cultural tides began to turn against feminist objectives, though no clear terminus to the second wave has been identified.¹²

An organized movement materialized again in the early 1990s and has continued to be active through the present day. Built on the perceived shortcomings of the second wave, the third wave of feminism seeks to develop a feminist theory that deconstructs the categorical “us versus them” (or female versus male) thinking that permeated earlier women’s movements. It rejects essentialist definitions of femininity that hold gender as a fixed human trait and is necessarily concerned with the interconnectedness of oppressive institutions including sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism. Third-wave feminists employ an intersectional, multiperspectival approach to address women’s issues such as rape, domestic violence, abortion, body image, and sex-positivity. Also essential to the movement is the reappropriation of derogatory words, like *bitch* and *slut*, for example, in order to alter their connotation,

¹¹ Berkeley, *The Women's Liberation Movement in America*, 52.

¹² Ann Braude, "Faith, Feminism, and History," in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*, ed. Catherine A. Brekus (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 233.

empower their victims, and ultimately subvert sexist culture.¹³ Unlike the analogous campaigns of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the contemporary movement cannot be divided into two distinct theoretical strains but instead thrives on ambiguity and the continual forging of new alliances to combat all societal systems of oppression.¹⁴

Feminist author Susan Faludi imagines that a charting of the history of women's rights in America would resemble something like a corkscrew. The pattern it follows "tilt[s] slightly to one side, its loops inching closer to the line of freedom with the passage of time . . . drawing ever nearer to [its] destination without ever arriving."¹⁵ From the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls in 1848 to the Supreme Court's landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, as well as at every significant turning point in between, advances in the women's movement have been met with contentious outbursts of resistance, resentment, and counterassault. Faludi traces the course of this cycle in her 1991 book *Backlash* and concludes that the recurring phenomenon of hostility in response to women's progress does not stem from a constant misogynist undercurrent working tirelessly to keep women in subordination, but rather surfaces at specific historical moments in response to perceived attacks against masculine entitlement. Antifeminist crusaders, who envision the fight for gender equality as a zero-sum game in which gains for one sex entail concessions from another, emerge periodically to retract liberties granted during times of great societal turmoil, often employing the same rhetoric that blames feminists for creating a "crisis

¹³ Martha Rampton, "The Three Waves of Feminism," *Pacific*, Fall 2008.

¹⁴ Charlotte Kroløkke and Ann Scott Sørensen, *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses: From Silence to Performance* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006), 15-18.

¹⁵ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 46-47.

of the family” to do so.¹⁶ As each generation of feminists resumes the war for gender equality, it becomes clear that those from whom they inherited it left precious territory to defend and important battles still to wage.

Since its publication, Faludi’s *Backlash* has assumed prominence in the literary canon of the third wave. The text offers an exhaustive study of the events that underlay sensationalist parodies of second-wave feminism and the ensuing backlash inflicted against it. Throughout the 1980s, political and social conservatives, apprehensive about the feminist threat to the status quo, united under the banner of the New Right and launched a comprehensive campaign against the women’s movement that permeated American culture and found expression at every level of society. Whether manifested in the bombing of an abortion clinic or in the tirades of media personalities like Pat Robertson who denounced the ERA as “a socialist anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children . . . and become lesbians,”¹⁷ the backlash is “encoded and internalized, diffuse and chameleonic. . . . [It tries] to push women back into their ‘acceptable’ roles – whether as Daddy’s girl or fluttery romantic, active nester or passive love object.”¹⁸

The notion that certain thoughts, behaviors, and capabilities are exclusively inherent to any one gender has been intricately woven throughout the long history of Western political and social thought and its institutions. In the United States, this culturally imposed dichotomy was first articulated with particular intensity during the

¹⁶ Ibid., 49.

¹⁷ Beverly W. Harrison et al., "Roundtable Discussion: Backlash," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10, no. 1 (1994): 91.

¹⁸ Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, xxii.

nineteenth century when women were pressed to embody the values of the “cult of true womanhood.”¹⁹ Part of a broader ideology that creates, separates, genders, and hierarchizes public and private spheres of activity, this ideal of femininity demanded that women epitomized four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.²⁰ Whereas men were encouraged to engage in the public world of politics, commerce, and civic engagement, women were expected to occupy only the private realm of domestic life and childrearing. This ubiquitous philosophy that relegated women to the home drove women’s lives and work into anonymity, their interests and issues declared unworthy of political attention.²¹ German sociologist Ulla Wischermann observes that an examination of the history of women’s movements shows that “[a]ll political actions, central issues, and scandals of feminists aimed at shifting the gender-specifically drawn boundaries between the private sphere and the public sphere, to the latter of which only men had access.”²²

There is one prominent figure in American society whose existence is situated exactly at the intersection of these two theoretical domains – the First Lady. As the boundaries delineating a woman’s proper place in society have altered with each phase of the women’s movement, the cultural and institutional dynamics of the first ladyship have shifted as well. Following the precedent set in the early years of the Republic by President George Washington and his wife Martha, America’s first presidential couple, it has become customary that when an individual accepts the

¹⁹ Maurine Hoffman Beasley, *First Ladies and the Press: The Unfinished Partnership of the Media Age* (Northwestern University Press, 2005), 37.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ulla Wischermann and Ilze Klavina Mueller, "Feminist Theories on the Separation of the Private and the Public: Looking Back, Looking Forward," *Women in German Yearbook* 20, no. 1 (2004): 185.

²² Ibid., 187.

presidency, his spouse accepts the first ladyship.²³ Though she has no constitutional power or legal obligations to the people and commands clout only by virtue of the man to whom she is married, it has been observed that the first lady serves an integral role in her husband's government and, by extension, the nation.

Unlike other positions in the American political system, the office of the first lady is highly gendered. Political scientist MaryAnne Borrelli describes how the title itself connotes contradictory sex-specific ideals:

The president's wife is a "lady," a term linked to distinctively Anglo-Saxon, white, privileged ideals that confine women to a life of well-mannered civility in the private sphere. . . . [T]his historical and present-day gender ideology calls for a strong, commanding and authoritative, independent and unequivocal president; and a nurturing, other-directed and thoughtful, reflective moral guardian as the first lady. He embodies the best of the public sphere; she embodies the best of the private sphere.²⁴

The first lady, who is married to a man beholden to his country and lives in a house owned by the American people, is expected to participate in the male-coded public sphere in an appropriately feminine way. Because the president relies on her to craft an attractive image of him that can be marketed to the electorate, she exists as a vital symbol of her husband and his administration and serves as a public model of the ideal of American womanhood.²⁵ Occupying this paradoxical space at the intersection

²³ In the case of bachelor and widower presidents or presidential wives unfit to serve the first ladyship (often due to poor health), a close female relative of the president has typically fulfilled its duties. Presidents who have employed surrogate first ladies for all or part of their term in office include: Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Chester A. Arthur, Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, and Woodrow Wilson; Robert P. Watson, *The Presidents' Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 58-60.

²⁴ MaryAnne Borrelli, *The Politics of the President's Wife* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2011), 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

of public and private life (and traditionally male and female activity), the first lady provides an intriguing and unparalleled perspective on American gender relations and how they have developed and evolved throughout history.

In discussing the authority of the figure he dubs “the wild card of American politics,”²⁶ presidential historian and leading first ladies scholar Carl Sferrazza Anthony states: “Her power simply exists.”²⁷ From the time that Martha Washington established the post at the close of the eighteenth century to the present day, the first lady has functioned as a distinguished, contributing force in the executive branch of U.S. government. As the nation has matured, so, too, have the responsibilities and expectations associated with the president’s spouse. Robert P. Watson, professor of American Studies and White House expert, notes six distinct periods within the historical development of the first lady institution that shed light on its progression. The first period spans from the Washington administration (1789-1797) through the Madison administration (1809-1817). The presidential wives of this inaugural era were challenged with having to navigate the developing political landscape of an infant republic. Their duties included directing social life in the capital, maintaining political protocol, and acting as caretaker of the White House.²⁸ Permitted to work only in this traditionally feminine capacity, they forged a lasting connection between the first lady and the ceremonial role of national hostess. Although they offered the president unofficial private counsel, these first ladies did not play a political or policy-making role in their husband’s administrations. Judged on their personal

²⁶ Carl Sferrazza Anthony, "First Ladylike, After All," *Washington Post*, January 31, 1993.

²⁷ Liz Watts, "Magazine Coverage of First Ladies from Hoover to Clinton," *American Journalism* 14, no. 3-4 (1997): 495.

²⁸ Watson, *The Presidents' Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady*, 49-50.

accomplishments, value to the president, and value to the country, three first ladies from this epoch – Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison – are consistently ranked among scholars as exemplary first ladies.²⁹

The second of Watson’s categories extends from the Monroe administration (1817-1825) to the Johnson administration (1865-1869). The “era of the common man presidents,” both the presidential office and the first ladyship during this time were characterized by comparatively little activity and visibility in national culture in relation to their predecessors.³⁰ Many of these women were incapacitated while living in the White House by conditions of poor health or grief over the loss of loved ones. Consequently, the first lady’s roles and responsibilities were not substantially altered or expanded during this period.³¹ The presidential wives from the Grant administration (1869-1877) through the McKinley administration (1897-1901), although generally well-educated and socially gifted, also did not inspire any lasting impressions on the first ladyship or on the status of women in American society. They tended to be more active than the spouses of the second historical period, but similarly did not enhance the institution or make significant contributions to the presidency.³²

Watson’s next classification spans from the administration of Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) through that of Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945). It was during this tumultuous period – one that witnessed two World Wars and the Great Depression – that the foundation was laid for the modern first lady to operate as an

²⁹ Siena College Research Institute and C-SPAN, "Study of the First Ladies of the United States," (Siena Research Institute, 2014).

³⁰ Watson, *The Presidents' Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady*, 51.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 52-53.

active presidential partner. Eleanor Roosevelt, whom Watson posits “did more to change the institution of first lady than perhaps any other single person, event, or historical period,” established the archetype for independent, unreserved, politically and socially active first ladies.³³ The nation also witnessed during the second Roosevelt administration the emergence of the presidential couple, a husband and wife partnership that lead the nation as a team. This style of dual presidential leadership has strengthened with time and has proven to be one of the most significant and controversial developments in twentieth century American political history.³⁴

The presidential spouses from the Truman administration (1945-1953) through the Nixon administration (1969-1974) tended to revert back to a more traditional interpretation of their political role and served first and foremost as supportive wives and mothers in the White House. With the exception of Lady Bird Johnson, who was the first presidential wife to campaign independently for her husband and gained both public notoriety and success from her urban environmentalism initiative, these women did not engage in the political process and were less active and influential than those who served immediately before and after them. Following the advent of television and the subsequent development of the television presidency, these first ladies were treated like celebrities; they graced the covers of popular magazines, were stalked by photographers, and made headlines with mundane behavior (“Mamie Primps Her Bangs and Averts a Coiffure Crisis,”

³³ Ibid., 54.

³⁴ Gil Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 1.

“Mrs. Kennedy Rides Her Horse at Family’s Virginia Retreat”).³⁵ To the great dissatisfaction of very private individuals such as Jacqueline Kennedy and Bess Truman, the first ladies of this era were the object of constant public scrutiny and mass media culture.³⁶

Watson’s final period extends from the Ford administration (1974-1977) through the Clinton administration (1993-2001).³⁷ These very active first ladies functioned as associate presidents in the White House, advising their husbands’ political and policymaking decisions and often surpassing even the vice president and senior cabinet members in terms of visibility and influence in Washington.³⁸ Each of these women had public personas of their own right and championed social causes important to them. ³⁹ Reflecting the impact of the women’s movement on American society, they faced the unique and challenging burden of having to balance, as media studies scholar Lisa M. Burns notes, “the domesticity of true womanhood and the republican mother with the social activism of the new woman and the political visibility of feminists.”⁴⁰

³⁵ Norma Lee Browning, "Mamie Primps Her Bangs and Averts a Coiffure Crisis," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 20, 1953; "Mrs. Kennedy Rides Horse at Family's Virginia Retreat," *New York Times*, November 11, 1963.

³⁶ Watson, *The Presidents' Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady*, 55-56.

³⁷ Only two women have served the first ladyship since the end of the Clinton administration: Laura Bush and Michelle Obama. With time it will be possible to more adequately assess their contributions to the office and place them in historical perspective.

³⁸ First Lady Barbara Bush is an exception to this trend. Projecting the image of a traditional grandmother, she stated publically to have no interest in the policy matters of the Bush administration.

³⁹ Watson, *The Presidents' Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady*, 56-57.

⁴⁰ Lisa M. Burns, *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of Presidential Wives* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 52.

Unlike any other position in U.S. government, the American first ladyship has only been served by women. The dynamics of the institution and its history cannot be understood without considering the gendered implications of this truth. Beyond the fact that its title will need to be changed upon the election of the first married, heterosexual woman or married, homosexual man to the presidency, many of the traditional responsibilities affiliated with the first ladyship are associated with deeply ingrained conceptions of female gender roles. Despite the substantial work modern first ladies have performed in the public sphere, their contributions have consistently been framed by the press as legitimate extensions of their private-sphere obligations in order to downplay their political nature.⁴¹ Pat Nixon's promotion of volunteerism, Nancy Reagan's anti-drug campaign, Hillary Rodham Clinton's healthcare initiative, and Michelle Obama's crusade against childhood obesity, for instance, all tackled appropriately "feminine" issues dealing with health and nutrition, children and families, and caring for others. Lady Bird Johnson, who campaigned extensively for her husband's election, directed a nationwide beautification program, and collaborated with President Johnson on his Great Society reforms, felt obligated to defend her political behavior to the *New York Times* by stating:

I am a private person extended into public life somewhat because of the opportunities and the impelling call of my husband's jobs through the years. The aspect of the role one doesn't forget is that it all hinges upon the man you've married. My needs are groomed into helping him.⁴²

Here, the First Lady justified her untraditional activities by presenting them as obligations she felt compelled to execute as the President's loyal, dedicated wife.

⁴¹ Borrelli, *The Politics of the President's Wife*, 110.

⁴² Lady Bird Johnson, quoted in Liz Carpenter, *Ruffles and Flourishes: The Warm and Tender Story of a Simple Girl Who Found Adventure in the White House* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 56.

Members of the first family have always had to be conscious of how the media and general public interpret their actions. If they are perceived to have transgressed the imagined boundaries of their political or gendered realm, they are likely to be accused of usurping presidential power or manipulating the president to achieve their own goals. In the case of Hillary Rodham Clinton, her especially frequent and substantial gender violations incited a deluge of slanderous comparisons between the First Lady and a grim model for political wives – Lady Macbeth. A September 1992 *New York Times* article reported that in that year alone at least twenty articles in major publications drew comparison between first lady-hopeful Hillary Rodham Clinton and the ruthless, ill-fated Shakespearean queen.⁴³ Though perhaps the most frequently linked to this ominous character, Mrs. Rodham Clinton was certainly not alone in receiving calumnious nicknames, often with regal undertones, from a hypercritical press. Abigail Adams for example, was referred to by opponents as “Her Highness;” Mary Todd Lincoln was “Her Grace;” Edith Wilson was “Mrs. President;” Eleanor Roosevelt was “Empress.”⁴⁴ These journalistic tropes have all been employed for the purpose of evoking the image of a conniving, callous woman in the White House exploiting American democracy, destroying the nation’s families, and corrupting its children.⁴⁵ They serve to remind both women of what character and career traits are disapproved of in their sex and men of what behavior threatens their privileged social status and authority.

⁴³ Robin Toner, "The 1992 Campaign: Political Memo; Backlash for Hillary Clinton Puts Negative Image to Rout," *New York Times*, September 24, 1992.

⁴⁴ Gay Smith, *Lady Macbeth in America: From the Stage to the White House* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 181.

⁴⁵ Charles Paul Freund, "Bush Comes to Shove," *Washington Post*, August 23, 1992.

While the captious media pundits who proliferate these comparisons may have intended to denounce one woman in particular, attacks on the first lady are essentially critiques of the nation's female population as a whole. Both domestically and abroad, the president and his family speak and act in official and unofficial capacities on behalf of the American people. The first lady is at once a representation of American womanhood and a canvas upon which the public projects their visions and ideals of what American womanhood ought to be. As Borrelli notes, when she is addressed as "first lady," "her gender role modeling becomes an aspect of the nation's identity. It is no longer an individual expression of self, but a country's statement about the nature of its female citizens."⁴⁶ She is "a national Rorschach test," providing insight into the state of gender equality and a forum in which to express one's opinion of it.⁴⁷ The fact that Americans regard the first lady as the standard-bearer for all women is evidenced in the vehement letters written to the White House that criticized Jacqueline Kennedy, for example, for allowing herself to be photographed "like a pin-up girl" when she presented "an image of the United States."⁴⁸ Others scolded Betty Ford for condoning premarital sex when, "because of the position your husband has assumed, [you are] expected and officially required to be PERFECT! [emphasis in original]."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Borrelli, *The Politics of the President's Wife*, 147.

⁴⁷ Barbara Burrell, *Public Opinion, the First Ladyship, and Hillary Rodham Clinton* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 2.

⁴⁸ Irving Shulman, *"Jackie"!: The Exploitation of a First Lady* (New York: Pocket Books, 1971), 93.

⁴⁹ Kay M. Knickrehm and Robin Teske, "First Ladies and Policy Making: Crossing the Public/Private Divide," in *The Presidential Companion: Readings on the First Ladies*, ed. Robert P. Watson and Anthony J. Eksterowicz (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 235-36.

Faludi's corkscrew imagery describing the cyclical trend of progress and backlash that has long defined the women's movement is apt in illustrating the development of the modern first ladyship, as well. Frequently a source of controversy and debate, the position's evolution from presidential accessory to political institution has been both gradual and contested. An analysis of the office and the women who served it throughout the height of second-wave feminism's prominence and subsequent decline in American society reveals that cultural shifts in gender relations echo within the walls of the White House.

Throughout the 1970s the women's movement succeed in raising popular consciousness to the oft-ignored issues pertaining uniquely to the female experience in America. By the end of the decade, feminist activism was no longer limited to strong, but scattered, pockets in major urban centers; its organizations could be found in well over forty American cities, with a parallel movement spreading across Canada as well.⁵⁰ The August 1970 Women's Strike for Equality, held symbolically on the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment, marked the first time feminist activity was accorded the respected status of hard news by the press, a feat that speaks to the movement's tremendous growth and national significance.⁵¹ Although their social and political agenda was extensive, second-wave feminists' primary concern during this time was the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. Feminism, understood as a social theory advocating equality between men and women in both public institutions and private life, was infectious in its ability to affect women on a deeply personal level and validate feelings of apprehension

⁵⁰ Berkeley, *The Women's Liberation Movement in America*, 47.

⁵¹ Burns, *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of Presidential Wives*, 106.

theretofore taken for granted as “the way things are.”⁵² As the impediments to women’s professional education and career advancement eroded, women took their particular expertise, perspective, and interests to the streets, the polls, and the workforce and began to remake the nation.

Betty Ford, thrust into the first ladyship when her husband suddenly assumed the presidency after Richard Nixon’s resignation in August 1974, welcomed these groundbreaking advancements in sexual equality. Mrs. Ford’s first ladyship, spanning from August 9, 1974 to January 20, 1977, perfectly mirrored the societal changes of the era, both in terms of the work she performed and the personal growth she experienced while in office. A professional dancer in early adulthood, she abandoned her career upon meeting Republican congressman Gerald Ford in order to raise a family and support her husband in his political ascendancy. As First Lady, Betty Ford is remembered above all for her incredible candor, independence, and highly controversial social and political activism. She was unafraid to publically voice opinions that differed from those of both the President and the Republican Party and took pride in the fact that her lobbying on behalf of the ERA made her the first presidential spouse to have a march organized against her.⁵³ Mrs. Ford contributed to national dialogues on such hotly debated issues as abortion, drug use, premarital sex, and equal pay of equal work in a manner that was unprecedentedly open and honest for a president’s wife. Her feminist legacy was continued through the close of the

⁵² Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*, 41; Berkeley, *The Women's Liberation Movement in America*, 198.

⁵³ John Robert Greene, *Betty Ford: Candor and Courage in the White House* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 66.

decade as Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, a couple both supportive of women's rights, moved into the White House.

Sidney Blumenthal, political journalist and aide to President Clinton, observes that “[p]aradoxically, conservatism requires liberalism for its meaning.”⁵⁴ America's social culture throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, then, provided conservatives with much to draw from. The election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980 welcomed a new era of American history characterized by what feminist activist Starhawk describes as “an organized, well-funded, well-orchestrated campaign to preserve the status quo.”⁵⁵ The conservative ideology propelling this backlash held the women's movement responsible for destroying traditional family values and provoking many of the political, social, and economic woes that plagued the nation. The rightwing coalition united under Reagan and composed of proponents of big business, neoconservatism, and the Religious Right rallied around halting the progress of key feminist issues including the ERA, abortion, homosexuality, and affirmative action. When this alliance succeeded in officially defeating the ERA in June 1982, the women's movement essentially came to an end.

As the political center of the presidency and national culture shifted far to the right upon Reagan's inauguration in 1981, so did that of the first ladyship. Nancy Reagan, a presidential spouse who seemed oftentimes to be a woman of the 1950s injected into the '80s, embodied the feminine ideals espoused by the antifeminist backlash. Proclaiming that her “life really began with Ronnie” and that all she wanted was “to be a wife to the man I loved and mother to our children,” she approached the

⁵⁴ Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, 238.

⁵⁵ Harrison et al., "Roundtable Discussion: Backlash," 104.

first ladyship with much more convention than her feminist predecessors.⁵⁶ Nancy Reagan's priority at all times was ensuring her husband's personal and professional welfare. Her public persona was defined by her nationwide "Just Say No" drug awareness campaign and by the image she projected of a fiercely protective wife. Although she presented herself as an apolitical figure, she wielded considerable influence within the Reagan administration. Conservative values continued to characterize the White House throughout the presidency and first ladyship of George H. W. and Barbara Bush.

With the dawning of feminism's third wave in the early 1990s came arguably the most revolutionizing first lady since Eleanor Roosevelt. Born to the postwar baby boomer generation, Hillary Rodham Clinton was the first presidential wife to have come of age during the era of societal transformation that catalyzed the feminist movement. With both a young daughter and a successful career as an attorney upon her arrival in Washington, D.C., many championed her as the prototype of the liberated woman. Bill and Hillary Clinton, running on a promise of a "two for the price of one" presidency if elected, approached presidential politics as political partners, the President consistently looking to his wife for aid and advice.⁵⁷ While in office, Mrs. Rodham Clinton directed the Task Force on National Health Care Reform, her major initiative, and was instrumental in the passage of other important legislation relating to children and foster care, including the Adoption and Safe Families Act and the Foster Care Independence Act. Highly controversial in the overtly political unorthodoxy of her first ladyship, Hillary Rodham Clinton was, and

⁵⁶ "Reagan Has Had His Family Problems," *Hartford Courant*, June 30, 1980.

⁵⁷ Irwin Steltzer, "Blair Is Thatcher's Child Not a Clinton Clone," *Sunday Times*, May 25, 1997.

remains to the present day, one of the most polarizing figures in American political history.

Even though the office of the first lady has been a constant in U.S. society since the establishment of the presidency, historians and scholars across different disciplines have only in the past few decades begun to regard the study of the first lady as a serious field of work and started to contribute to its literature. Watson writes in his essay “Source Material: Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship” that prior to the late 1980s there existed virtually no scholarly texts addressing presidential spouses.⁵⁸ Historians today still have a long way to go in establishing the legitimacy of first lady studies. One problem that persists in the developing field is that there exists no conceptual framework or “tightly argued thesis” to guide research.⁵⁹ Because the office of the first lady has no clearly defined roles or obligations to the American people and because it is a position that has been filled by a small number of women with wide variance among them, it becomes difficult to identify a standard by which they can all be evaluated objectively. As historians work to formalize first lady studies as a field of academic research they are constantly reminded of this problem. Watson has been one of the most active forces in establishing “developed, tested, and (somewhat) agreed-upon models, theories, and approaches,” something he appropriately considers to be a fundamental element in any serious discipline.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Robert P. Watson, "Source Material: Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2003): 427.

⁵⁹ Robert P. Watson, "The First Lady Reconsidered: Presidential Partner and Political Institution," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1997): 807.

⁶⁰ Watson, "Source Material: Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship," 435.

Though a scholarly appreciation for the first lady has developed only in the last forty years, popular interest in her life has been consistent throughout U.S. history. The first book to be published on the wife of an American president was *Letters of Mrs. Adams, the Wife of John Adams*, issued in 1840. This collection of Abigail Adams' personal correspondence, organized by her grandson Charles Francis Adams, is typical of the work done on first ladies throughout the 1800s in that it is anecdotal and autobiographical. Up until the second half of the twentieth century, the focus on first ladies in literature, in the rare instances that there was any focus on them at all, centered on either memoirs and biographies of specific women or on the material and social culture of the White House. In keeping with the ideals of republican motherhood and the true woman that defined gender relations in early America, the first works written on the first ladyship lack any investigation into the governmental position itself – a discussion that would have been reserved for the public, and by consequence exclusively male, sphere. Instead, they were restricted to commenting on how presidential wives influenced the White House within their rightful domain and thus are most useful in providing insight into the social affairs of Washington, such as the weddings, children, dress, and decorations of the first family, and frequently were “romanticized to the point of fiction.”⁶¹ The subtitle to Laura C. Holloway's 1881 book *The Ladies of the White House; or, In the Home of the Presidents*, for example, reads, “Being a complete history of the social and domestic lives of the presidents from Washington to the present time – 1789-1881.”⁶² While this prosographical study of the capital's social elite was one of the few works of its time to

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Laura C. Holloway, *The Ladies of the White House; or, in the Home of the Presidents* (Philadelphia: Bradley & Company, 1881).

attempt to do more than chronicle the life or fashion of a first lady, its description alone reflects the pervasive, confining gender ideologies that characterized the vast majority of work written during this era.

A substantial growth in the literature surrounding the critical study of both the office of the first lady and the women who have served it occurred in the 1980s. This surge in academic interest was undoubtedly inspired to some extent by the surge in popular interest in presidents' wives that occurred during the decade. Watson attributes this increased attention to the very visible, often controversial first ladyships of women such as Betty Ford, Rosalynn Carter, and Nancy Reagan who served around that time. Additional spotlight was placed on presidential spouses by a series of highly publicized conferences like April 1984's "Modern First Ladies: Private Lives and Public Duties" and NBC's 1985 primetime special on First Lady Nancy Reagan.⁶³ With these in mind, it is probable that the attention brought by the women's movement to women's issues and their role in American society persuaded scholars to reevaluate the cultural and political significance of the president's wife as had never been done before.

Another force that likely ignited historians' interest in first ladies was the emergence in academia of the professional fields of the history of sexuality and of women and gender. The publication of the first volume of philosopher Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* in 1978 and historian Joan Scott's article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" in 1986 contributed significantly to legitimizing these previously neglected disciplines as independent and meaningful

⁶³ Watson, "Source Material: Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship," 424.

historiographic fields. Historian and authority on women, gender, and sexuality studies Joanne Meyerowitz credits Scott's article with promoting the fundamental idea that "the discourse on sexuality, like the language of gender, had served historically not only to constitute sexual relations but also to construct, signify, and legitimate other social and political hierarchies."⁶⁴ As a community of scholars began to think critically for the first time about the roles played by gender and sexuality in the formation of identity and in the construction of social and cultural institutions, it follows that attention turned toward the first lady, who is arguably the most influential and recognizable woman in the United States.

The shift in the scholarship towards a more historical and analytical approach to the study of the first ladyship was led largely by historians Lewis L. Gould and Betty Boyd Caroli. Gould's essays "Modern First Ladies in Historical Perspective" and "First Ladies," published respectively in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* in 1985 and *The American Scholar* in 1986, were some of the first works on the topic to examine the office from a women's studies perspective and to be printed in scholarly journals. Caroli's 1986 book *The First Ladies* provided, according to Watson, the first comprehensive, systematic study of the first ladies.⁶⁵ These scholars and others such as Myra G. Gutin and Edith P. Mayo wrote about the personal and political lives of presidential wives in addition to analyzing the obligations and influence historically associated with the first ladyship. They also strove to understand how specific first ladies have shaped the political office over time.

⁶⁴ Joanne Meyerowitz, "Transnational Sex and U.S. History," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009): 1275-76.

⁶⁵ Watson, "Source Material: Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship," 427.

Towards the end of the 1990s, the historiography of the field took another turn as experts began to introduce a new element to the institution's study – the media. Historian Barbara Burrell's *Public Opinion, the First Ladyship, and Hillary Rodham Clinton*, published in 1997, was among the earliest texts to examine the complex intersection between the first lady, the press, and popular approval ratings. The fact that public opinion polls on the first lady are now taken regularly has made this interdisciplinary area of scholarship possible. The first time a survey of the American citizenry was conducted on a presidential spouse was in 1939 by The Gallup Poll under the first ladyship of Eleanor Roosevelt. The following poll was not administered until 1969 on Pat Nixon. Since then, polls have been taken consistently and with increasing frequency up to the present day.⁶⁶ Presidential historian Jeffrey E. Cohen's 2000 article "The Polls: Public Attitudes toward the First Lady" explores the causal and correlational relationships between job approval poll data on the first lady and public evaluations of the president.⁶⁷ "Polls and Elections: From Hillary to Michelle: Public Opinion and the Spouses of Presidential Candidates," a more recent essay written by political scientists Burrell, Laurel Elder, and Brian Frederick and published in 2011, employs a similar methodology to compare attitudes towards first ladies across different demographics and identity factors and analyzes the impact these attitudes have had on their husbands' popularity throughout their presidential campaigns.⁶⁸ As mass media has come to dominate American culture, academics

⁶⁶ Ibid., 436.

⁶⁷ Jeffrey E. Cohen, "'The Polls': Public Attitudes Toward the First Lady," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2000): 374.

⁶⁸ Barbara Burrell, Laurel Elder, and Brian Frederick, "Polls and Elections: From Hillary to Michelle: Public Opinion and the Spouses of Presidential Candidates," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2011): 156.

have begun to look critically at how media representations of first ladies effect the way their position is interpreted by both the American public and presidential spouses themselves. This effort has been aided significantly by studies like Professor Charlotte Templin's 1999 "Hillary Clinton as Threat to Gender Norms: Cartoon Images of the First Lady" and journalism historian Maurine H. Beasley's 2005 book *First Ladies and the Press: The Unfinished Partnership for the Media Age*.

This thesis contributes to the subfield of first ladies research situated at the intersection of first ladies studies, women and gender studies, and American history. It will explore how impassioned cultural disputes about gender, power, feminism, and American politics are manifested at the national level in the most highly gendered office in the nation. Using an analysis of the first ladyships of Betty Ford, Nancy Reagan, and Hillary Rodham Clinton, this thesis will study the impact of the women's movement on both the office of the first lady specifically and on American women more generally. From the women's movement emerged many diverse strains of feminist thought employed by various women to better comprehend their place in modern society and thrive within it. The three women examined here were chosen both because they each represent a particular feminist ideology and for the unique historical contexts in which they lived and served. None of these former first ladies conform to mainstream models of a feminist and for this reason are ideal in illuminating modern feminism's complexity and multifariousness. The public personas of First Ladies Rosalynn Carter (1977-1981) and Barbara Bush (1989-1993), by contrast, fit more neatly into traditional feminist and antifeminist profiles, respectively, and so will not be studied here.

Some of the questions that will be addressed in this thesis that have yet to be thoroughly engaged in by scholars include: How did the women's movement alter the first ladyship structurally, politically, and socially? How did second wave feminism influence the gendered dynamics of the post and way it is perceived in society? How were individual American women, as represented by the first lady, empowered by feminist thought? In what ways did the women's movement influence the personal, public, and professional relationship between the president and his wife? What role did the movement play in the evolution of the office of the first lady from a private, ceremonial position to a powerful political institution? A case study of the Ford, Reagan, and Clinton first ladyships will attempt to shed light on the answers.

The first chapter begins with the sudden ascendance of Gerald Ford to the presidency in August of 1974 and chronicles Mrs. Ford's two and a half years as first lady of the United States. A transitional figure between the conventional first lady model rooted in White House hostessing and gendered political tradition and the activist, politically-involved presidential spouses of the late twentieth century, Betty Ford turned the executive office into a site of debate over the culture wars that have come to define her era. Focusing on the unwavering honesty, openness, and independence with which she approached the first ladyship and the interplay between her personal character and the political and social climate of the time, this chapter explores how Mrs. Ford developed an empowering feminist consciousness and a lasting dedication to the women's movement while first lady. It also analyzes how this feminist awakening encouraged her to push the boundaries of "appropriate" first lady behavior, increase awareness for issues of women's rights and health, and politicize the first lady's office.

The second chapter resumes the story of the institution at the dawn of the Reagan Revolution. Read in many ways as the antithesis of her feminist predecessors, Nancy Reagan understood her primary duty as first lady to be serving as her husband's ultimate protector. While appealing to President Reagan's conservative base through her advocacy of traditional values, classic femininity, and apolitical façade, Mrs. Reagan consolidated the power of the first ladyship, played a significant role in ending the Cold War, and influenced the administration's policymaking by guarding access to the President. Reflecting the conventional ideals of the rightwing backlash against the women's movement, she drew personal fulfillment and a sense of self from her marriage to Ronald Reagan. This chapter studies her unique brand of conservative feminism and its influence her activity as first lady and as one of the most powerful figures in the Reagan administration.

The final chapter focuses on the polarizing tenure of Hillary Rodham Clinton. A leftist ideologue born of a different generation who built a "peer marriage" with her husband based in an egalitarian partnership and mutual respect, Mrs. Rodham Clinton understood her job very differently from how Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Reagan had.⁶⁹ While campaigning for the presidency, her husband declared: "If I get elected, we'll do things together like we always have." To this statement the prospective first lady added: "We care about the same issues and values and concerns. . . . We are a partnership."⁷⁰ Both vilified and praised for her unorthodox approach to the position, Mrs. Rodham Clinton was the rare presidential wife to cultivate a public identity completely independent from her spouse. Through an examination of her role in

⁶⁹ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*, 351.

⁷⁰ John Dwight Ingram, "The American "First Lady", " *Capital University Law Review* 27, no. 3 (1999): 506.

crafting presidential policy, her efforts on behalf of women and families, both domestically and abroad, and her adept public performance in the Monica Lewinsky scandal, this chapter analyzes the distinct corporate feminist ideology used by the First Lady to effect positive change while working within existing societal structures.

It is not difficult to postulate the arguments likely to be put forward to challenge both the legitimacy and necessity of first ladies studies as an academic discipline and the intellectual value of the first lady herself as an historical subject. The spouse of a U.S. president has no constitutional authority, represents no integral constituency, and has no legal bonds to the American people. Her name is ingrained in popular memory not due to her unequalled merit or valiant heroism but by virtue of the man to whom she is married. Still, the first lady has come to be an enduring figure in this country's political system, a salient cultural icon for generations, and in recent years one of the most important figures in directing the course of American history. In her groundbreaking essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," revered feminist historian Scott declares:

The writing of women into history necessarily involves redefining and enlarging traditional notions of historical significance, to encompass personal, subjective experience as well as public and political activities. It is not too much to suggest that however hesitant the actual beginnings, such a methodology implies not only a new history of women, but also a new history.⁷¹

By redirecting our attention to the first lady, a new history is precisely what we are creating.

⁷¹ Ann D. Gordon, Mari Jo Buhle, and Nancy Schrom Dye, "The Problem of Women's History," in *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 89, quoted in Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1054.

Chapter One: Betty Ford

In 1972, the National Republican Congressional Committee published an exhaustive “Wives’ Manual” detailing the “do’s and don’t’s of ladylike behavior on the campaign trail.”⁷² Commissioned under the supervision of House Minority Leader Gerald Ford and written by a team of five Republican politicians’ wives, the ten-page handbook was distributed to the female spouses of GOP candidates and incumbent congressman. The text offered commentary on a wide range of behaviors, from the proper way to salute the flag to the precise amount of perfume to wear, and featured on the cover a “cute little lady elephant” dolled up with red lipstick and a Shirley Temple ribbon in her hair.⁷³ Cautioning wives to “[n]ever talk loudly or argue about your husband or his political positions” and to “[s]teer clear of controversial statements,” it emphasized that the best way for a woman to publically perform and politically profit from her gender was to be as totally submerged in her husband’s identity as possible.⁷⁴ It was into this archaic sociopolitical culture that hierarchized male desires and idealized female bodies that Betty Ford was thrust when she married Gerald Ford.

In his first address to the people as President of the United States, Gerald Ford made a bold declaration: “Our long national nightmare is over.”⁷⁵ His words were “[n]ot an inaugural address, not a fireside chat, not a campaign speech – just a little

⁷² Janet Staihar, "For Candidates' Wives Manual Warns About Campaign Do's and Don't's," *Daily News*, October 12, 1972.

⁷³ Spencer Rich, "G.O.P. Manual Tips Candidates' Wives," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, October 24, 1972.

⁷⁴ "Political Wives Get Tips on Being a Lady," *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1972.

⁷⁵ Gerald R. Ford, "Gerald R. Ford's Remarks Upon Taking the Oath of Office as President," (Speech, Washington, D.C., August 9, 1974).

straight talk among friends.”⁷⁶ It was this earnest, honest, unpretentious attitude that came naturally to the Fords that endeared Americans to their new First Family in August of 1974. Just before the Fords arrived at the Capitol, President Nixon and the Watergate affair had betrayed the nation’s trust, tarnished American democracy, and shattered the Republican Party.⁷⁷ After five and a half years irreparably stained by secrecy, scandal, and corruption at the highest level of government, the public welcomed the change in leadership. Howard Phillips, a distinguished conservative activist who organized for Nixon’s removal from office, captured the demoralized spirit of the Right in confessing to the press that under him, “our ideological opportunity has been squandered, our loyalties have been unreciprocated, and our party’s reputation for integrity has been virtually destroyed.”⁷⁸ Gerald Ford, by contrast, a “man of integrity”⁷⁹ who came across as “a genuine human being with whom the people can easily identify,” symbolized all the honorable qualities that his predecessor lacked.⁸⁰ A “moderate to the core,” his politics played to neither political extreme, stressed unity and transparency, and appealed strongly to a broken American citizenry praying for a return to stability.⁸¹

Gerald Ford made history when he became the first person to assume the presidency without having been previously voted into the executive branch of government. He made history again when he became the first president to reference

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Lawrence Meyer, "Nixon and Watergate Destroyed Our Innocence," *Washington Post*, June 17, 1982.

⁷⁸ "Conservative Organizes Group for Impeachment," *Hartford Courant*, July 31, 1974.

⁷⁹ Alan Lottien, "Politics & People: Can He Do It?," *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 1974.

⁸⁰ "The Right Medicine," *Hartford Courant*, August 10, 1974.

⁸¹ Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the Republican Right Rose to Power in Modern America*, Second ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 125.

his wife in an inaugural address: "I am indebted to no man and only to one woman – my dear wife, Betty."⁸² An administration whose cultural legacy is linked more than most to the popular impression left by the First Lady, this early tribute was fitting. As her husband worked to dispel lasting perceptions of an imperial presidency and restore public faith in the executive office, Betty Ford, in her honest and sincere approach to the first ladyship, deconstructed antiquated, chauvinistic conceptions of the office and forever altered the way Americans thought about the first lady's cultural and political role. Mrs. Ford arrived at the White House believing that the day of her husband's inauguration was "the saddest day of my life" but quickly blossomed upon discovering her potential as a strong female role model in a position to effect real change in American society.⁸³ A Republican politician's wife and full-time homemaker, she emerged as an unlikely and highly controversial voice for women's liberation. Mrs. Ford developed while in office a budding feminist consciousness that gave her a sense of purpose and self-assuredness with which to thrive as first lady. A public figure with remarkable candor, honesty, and ideological integrity, Mrs. Ford worked to politicize the office of the first lady, expose pervasive double standards imposed upon women in public life, alter misconstrued perceptions of the women's movement, and demonstrate that "being ladylike does not require silence."⁸⁴

When President Nixon was confronted with the task of nominating a vice president after Spiro Agnew's resignation on October 10, 1973, he told the press he

⁸² Frank Starr and Aldo Beckman, "Ford Takes Office: "Nightmare Is over," He Says," *Chicago Tribune*, August 10, 1974.

⁸³ Elisabeth Bumiller, "The White House as Home: Growing up with the World Watching," *Washington Post*, April 21, 1984.

⁸⁴ "A Lady Needn't Be Silent, Betty Tells Feminists," *Chicago Tribune*, October 26, 1975.

sought a candidate who was “capable of being president,” shared his views on foreign policy and national defense, and could work effectively with congressmen from both sides of the aisle. After careful consideration, Nixon turned to Republican House Minority Leader Gerald Ford.⁸⁵ Confirmed to the office by Congress in December 1973, the newly appointed Vice President Ford and his family were transported instantaneously from congressional anonymity to national prominence. Through newspaper headlines, magazine articles, and television specials, a portrait of a wholesome family “as American as a suburban shopping mall” began to emerge.⁸⁶

Just after the Fords married in the fall of 1948, the new bride received a cautionary warning from her sister-in-law: “You won’t have to worry about other women. Jerry’s work will be the other woman.”⁸⁷ Judging by the scheduling of the wedding (it needed to coincide with the date of the congressional primaries), to the muddy shoes he wore to the church (he had come straight from campaigning at a nearby farm), to their less-than-ideal honeymoon (they attended a University of Michigan football game and a speech given by presidential candidate Thomas Dewey), she probably did not need the warning.⁸⁸ When Betty Bloomer began dating her future husband in the late 1940s, she did not suspect that she was getting involved with a politician.⁸⁹ Before long, however, she learned that the young lawyer had

⁸⁵ "Nixon Nominates Ford for Veep: Asks Swift Approval by U.S. Congressmen," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 14, 1973.

⁸⁶ Jane Howard, "The First Lady Next Door," *New York Times*, November 26, 1978.

⁸⁷ Ann Grimes, "The Making of a Bachelor President: Are We Ready for Another Grover Cleveland?," *New York Times*, October 6, 1991.

⁸⁸ Greene, *Betty Ford: Candor and Courage in the White House*, 18.

⁸⁹ Donnie Radcliffe, "Betty Ford: Coping with New Visibility, Not Quite the "Plain Country Girl"," *Washington Post*, July 21, 1974.

dreams of becoming Speaker of the House. Elected to Congress for the first time one year after the wedding, he remained there for the next twenty-five years.

While Representative Ford supported the family financially, his wife worked as a fulltime homemaker and mother of four. Mrs. Ford divided her time between being “an interior decorator and a peacemaker and a zoo keeper” at home and a supportive political spouse everywhere else.⁹⁰ The time she didn’t dedicate to her children she devoted to supporting her husband’s career. She recognized the political expediency of her participation in the hurried social life of Washington’s political elite and performed those duties expected of congressman’s wife accordingly. While attending countless political luncheons and benefits, giving tours of the Capitol to visiting constituents from Michigan, and volunteering with organizations like the Congressional Wives Club, the Eighty-First Congress Club, and the National Federation of Republican Women, Betty Ford maintained that “wives of congressmen look better on a speaking platform when they’re saying nothing.”⁹¹ Confessing further that “politics just don’t exist with eighty-firsters,” referring to the all-female club of which she was president in 1954, Mrs. Ford was politically impartial and at this time in her life had no desire to cultivate a distinct public persona.⁹² The future first lady partook in these political rituals because she understood herself and her husband as “partners in an enterprise . . . that’s what it’s all about.”⁹³ There is little evidence to suggest that her motives for political participation stemmed from any force other than

⁹⁰ Betty Ford and Chris Chase, *The Times of My Life* (New York: Harpercollins, 1978), 93.

⁹¹ Elizabeth Ford, "Meet Capital's Not-So-VIPs," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, April 4, 1954.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Abigail McCarthy, "Political Wives," *Washington Post*, March 17, 1974.

love for her husband. Prior to their marriage, the young woman had minimal interest in government, politics, or the politicians who peddled them.

Born on April 8, 1918 to Bill Bloomer and his wife Hortense, Elizabeth “Betty” Ann Bloomer grew up in a relatively wealthy family – when the Depression hit they only had to “cut back” – in Grand Rapids, Michigan.⁹⁴ She makes no reference in her memoirs to the political philosophies held by her parents or her in her youth, suggesting that they had little impact on her upbringing. Instead, her childhood was colored by dreams of becoming a professional dancer. After graduating high school in 1936, she traveled to Vermont to study at the Bennington School of Dance under the tutelage of modern dance pioneer Martha Graham. She moved from Bennington to New York City, supporting herself by working as a dancer and a fashion model, until returning to the Midwest in 1941 at her mother’s behest. Having now been exposed to the urban bohemian lifestyle of the East Coast, the always precocious Betty Bloomer quickly pushed the boundaries of conservative Grand Rapids’ artistic tolerance upon her return. She was publically criticized for organizing a production of “The Three Parables” with scantily clad dancers in a Baptist church and more privately criticized for giving dance lessons to black children.⁹⁵ Defying expectations for American women in the postwar period, she evolved from a privileged, sheltered child to a professional, independent (both financially and otherwise) woman.

By the time Miss Bloomer was introduced to Gerald Ford in 1947, her life circumstances had changed. A recent divorcée, she had given up her career in dance

⁹⁴ Ford and Chase, *The Times of My Life*, 12.

⁹⁵ Greene, *Betty Ford: Candor and Courage in the White House*, 11.

after her first marriage and was now ready to settle down and begin a family.⁹⁶ As her relationship with the future president intensified and his political commitments grew, Mrs. Ford soon realized that she “would have to grow with Jerry, or be left behind. And I had no intention of being left behind.”⁹⁷ She researched the responsibilities of a U.S. representative in the Library of Congress, sat on Capitol Hill listening in on congressional debates, and even tracked the progress of a bill from the floor of the House, to committee, to vote. She urged Republican wives to participate in the ladies’ fashion shows “because the Democrats always pitch in . . . [and] we must, too.”⁹⁸ Her husband reflected on her efforts with pride in his autobiography: “Although she’d never enjoyed politics, she had a good ear and a remarkable sensitivity for the nuances of what was happening.”⁹⁹

Although outspoken and opinionated in private, Betty Ford did not advocate publically for social causes before becoming First Lady and was concerned with politics only as they pertained to her husband’s career. In fact, when referring to presidential politics in 1948, she admitted she “couldn’t have been less interested.”¹⁰⁰ Although she identified as a Republican, she confessed to the *New York Times* that she had “often been tempted to split my ticket.”¹⁰¹ From the wife of a Republican

⁹⁶ Betty Bloomer married her first husband, Bill Warren, in the living room of her mother’s home on April 23, 1942. The couple divorced in 1947 after what she refers to in her memoirs as a “five year misunderstanding;” *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹⁷ James Cannon, *Time and Chance: Gerald Ford's Appointment with History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 56.

⁹⁸ Jane Howard, "Forward Day by Day: The 38th First Lady: Not a Robot at All," *New York Times*, December 8, 1974.

⁹⁹ Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), quoted in Cannon, *Time and Chance: Gerald Ford's Appointment with History*, 312.

¹⁰⁰ Greene, *Betty Ford: Candor and Courage in the White House*, 30.

¹⁰¹ Howard, "Forward Day by Day: The 38th First Lady: Not a Robot at All."

congressman, this was a bold statement to make. It reflects at once candor, intellectual independence, and a willingness to evaluate individual political issues apart from a party platform. Mrs. Ford lacked a strongly partisan perspective and maintained ideological autonomy throughout her many years in public life, never sacrificing or subjugating her personal opinions for those of the GOP or anyone else, even her husband.

A 1974 *Chicago Tribune* article describes the First Lady before her White House years as “a political widow with four children.”¹⁰² With a husband absent from home for as many as two hundred and fifty-eight days a year, Mrs. Ford was frequently left to play the roles of both mother and father. Feeling lonely, neglected, and unfulfilled, she self-medicated with prescription pills and alcohol and began visiting a psychiatrist twice a week. The demons that haunted Mrs. Ford and the millions of suburban housewives like her were identified for the first time by Betty Friedan in her groundbreaking book *The Feminine Mystique*. Published in 1963, Friedan’s text forced Americans to confront the growing epidemic, “the problem that has no name,” tormenting and crippling women across the country:

It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning . . . Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. . . . She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it. . . . We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.”¹⁰³

These inarticulate feelings of unhappiness and disillusionment led Betty Ford to identify with the nascent women’s movement that Friedan had championed. She

¹⁰² Judith Serrin, "Politics' Biggest Losers Are the Wives," *Chicago Tribune*, November 24, 1974.

¹⁰³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 15-32.

writes in her autobiography: “There was nothing terribly wrong with me. I just wasn’t the Bionic Woman, and the minute I stopped thinking I had to be, a weight fell from my shoulders.”¹⁰⁴ Though it was associated with modern American liberalism and the politics of the New Left, Mrs. Ford understood feminism and the women’s movement as a bipartisan issue. For her, women’s liberation meant bringing respect to any and all work performed by women, whether at home or at the office, and ensuring their agency in deciding their future. “I think it all comes down to freedom of choice,” she explained to the *New York Times* in 1975.¹⁰⁵

Drawing comfort from the growing women’s movement, the First Lady discovered a cause she could support wholeheartedly while in office. In a press conference held on September 4, 1974, the first given by a president’s wife since Mamie Eisenhower two decades earlier, Mrs. Ford remarked before a crowd of one hundred and fifty reporters that she was pro-choice, endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment, and advocated greater female participation in politics.¹⁰⁶ The President, on the other hand, was in favor of the ERA but believed the Supreme Court “went too far” in its 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision.¹⁰⁷ For a presidential spouse to offer such explicit support of such contentious issues, especially when it challenged the views of her husband’s administration, was unparalleled. Her predecessor, Pat Nixon, nicknamed “Plastic Pat” by the media and framed as the embodiment of Cold War domesticity and 1950s ideals of femininity, was by contrast “[a]ccommodating,

¹⁰⁴ Ford and Chase, *The Times of My Life*, 127.

¹⁰⁵ "A Feminist? Definition Varies with the Woman," *New York Times*, November 8, 1975.

¹⁰⁶ "Betty Ford Backs Era, Hints Pro-Abortion Stand," *Chicago Tribune*, September 5, 1974.

¹⁰⁷ James M. Naughton, "Ford Says Court "Went Too Far" on Abortion in '73," *New York Times*, February 4, 1976.

uncomplaining, relentlessly cheerful . . . yield[ing] to no one as the ultimate in self-sacrificing, self-effacing helpmates, the ultimate good sport.”¹⁰⁸ Unlike the social projects embraced by former postwar first ladies like restoration of the White House (Mrs. Kennedy), highway beautification (Mrs. Johnson) and volunteerism (Mrs. Nixon), Mrs. Ford’s work was not limited to extensions of appropriately feminine private sphere duties and meaningfully addressed the burning issues of her day.¹⁰⁹ She identified personally with the grievances and sociopolitical objectives of the women’s movement and became even more radicalized thanks to her new public platform. Mrs. Ford refused to alter the dynamics of her marriage to fit the traditional presidential marital model, having experienced firsthand the damaging effects of constricting, patriarchal gender roles. Thrust into power by “an accident of history,” Betty Ford told her husband that if they had to go to the White House, she would, but she would be going as herself, “and if they don’t like it, then they’ll just have to throw me out!”¹¹⁰

Less than a month and a half into the Ford presidency, a routine physical exam detected a malignant marble-sized lump in the First Lady’s right breast. At the doctors’ insistence, Mrs. Ford underwent an immediate radical mastectomy and had the entire breast removed. From initial biopsy, to surgery, to in-patient recovery, the American public followed the First Lady’s progress through the frequent updates

¹⁰⁸ Judith Viorst, "Pat Nixon Is the Ultimate Good Sport," *New York Times*, September 13, 1970, 27.

¹⁰⁹ Mary Linehan, "Betty Ford and the Transformation of the Role of First Lady," in *The Presidential Companion: Readings on the First Ladies*, ed. Robert P. Watson and Anthony J. Eksterowicz (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 69.

¹¹⁰ Enid Nemy, "A First Lady Who Struggled and Inspired," *New York Times*, July 9, 2011; Betty Ford, interview by Morley Safer, *60 Minutes*, CBS News, August 10, 1975.

provided by the White House to the press.¹¹¹ In the aftermath of Watergate and the extremely unpopular pardon of Richard Nixon, President Ford aimed to mend the hostile relationship between his administration and the media by pledging to maintain “an open, honest government.”¹¹² This public relations principle, which came to be applied to both political and personal matters, in combination with Mrs. Ford’s own inclinations toward outspokenness and veracity, inspired her to be exceptionally open about her experience with the deadly disease.

Prior to September 1974, details about ailments suffered by presidential wives were divulged to the public with the utmost discretion. When First Lady Mamie Eisenhower underwent a hysterectomy not twenty years earlier, citizens were informed only that she was making a “fine” recovery from surgery performed by “a specialist in women’s diseases” that she had undergone “for an undisclosed but not cancerous condition.”¹¹³ Mrs. Ford, to the contrary, welcomed reporters into her hospital room and released daily status reports on her health until her discharge. The impact of the First Lady’s deliberately frank cancer disclosure on the American public and its comprehension of an illness “so scary that many whispered its name” was monumental.¹¹⁴ Contextualizing her actions in the long term, presidential historian Richard Norton Smith proclaims: “When it comes to women’s health issues, . . .

¹¹¹ "Betty Ford Faces Surgery: Breast Cancer Test Set Today," *Chicago Tribune*, September 28, 1974.

¹¹² Carroll Kilpatrick, "Openness and Honest Again Pledged by Ford," *Washington Post*, August 14, 1974.

¹¹³ Robert E. Clark, "Ike Sees Mamie after Surgery: Operation Not Serious, Report," *Daily Defender*, August 7, 1957.

¹¹⁴ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*, 209.

history is divided into two periods – there’s before Betty and after Betty.”¹¹⁵ In an era during which “women’s troubles” were shrouded in stigma and secrecy, and taboos surrounded any public utterance of the word “breast,” the First Lady encouraged American families to discuss the reality of cancer and its treatment.¹¹⁶ The American Cancer Society reported that in the wake of her recovery, the number of women requesting mammograms across the nation increased by 400 percent.¹¹⁷ The “Betty Ford Phenomenon,” as it came to be known by medical researchers, triggered a surge in the breast cancer rate, indicating a significantly higher incidence of early detection of the disease than ever before.¹¹⁸

Mrs. Ford’s very public experience with breast cancer profoundly affected the way she understood both her role as first lady and her relationship with the American women she represented. As she recuperated from surgery, the White House received nearly fifty-six thousand messages of goodwill, gratitude, and renewed hope from the general public, approximately ten percent of which were written by women who had endured similar operations.¹¹⁹ At a time when women across the country were fighting to reclaim authority over their minds, bodies, and choices, Mrs. Ford initiated a national dialogue that encouraged them to seize control over their health and physical wellbeing, as well. She writes in her memoirs:

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

¹¹⁵ “Betty Ford,” *First Ladies: Influence and Image*, first broadcast December 2, 2013 by C-SPAN.

¹¹⁶ “A Welcome Awareness of Breast Cancer,” *Globe and Mail*, October 11, 1994.

¹¹⁷ Linehan, “Betty Ford and the Transformation of the Role of First Lady,” 59.

¹¹⁸ Marilyn Marchione, “Breast, Prostate Cancer Cases to Decline,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 7, 1998.

¹¹⁹ Myra Gregory Knight, “Issues of Openness and Privacy: Press and Public Responses to Betty Ford’s Breast Cancer,” *American Journalism* 17, no. 1 (2000): 59.

the White House. Not *my* power, but the power of the position, a power which could be used to help.¹²⁰

The First Lady was awakened to her own potential to serve as a positive, effective influence in American society. Reinvigorated by this personal epiphany, Mrs. Ford dedicated the remainder of her time in office to “work[ing] effectively for the causes.”¹²¹ She evolved through this experience from a vocal supporter of women’s rights to a dynamic activist for the movement and self-proclaimed feminist.

Two years later, as the President campaigned for reelection in 1976, the First Lady told the press that come November she would be content regardless of the race’s outcome. If her husband lost, she would win more of his time. If he won, she would have the chance “to continue my own work.”¹²² This comment reflects Mrs. Ford’s perception of herself as an advocate independent of the President, one with her own agenda built around her own interests. Early in her term, the First Lady told the White House press corps that she would “not take a political, active part in politics, as far as issues are concerned” but would be “happy to take a part” in the campaign for the ERA.¹²³ Breaking first lady tradition, her contributions to this cause were not limited to scattered verbalizations of support but consisted of substantial politicking for amendment’s ratification as well. When President Ford assumed office in August 1974, the Equal Rights Amendment needed the approval of only three more states in the union to be certified as an operative part of the Constitution. Leading the crusade against the amendment was conservative Republican political activist Phyllis Schlafly

¹²⁰ Ford and Chase, *The Times of My Life*, 194.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Frances Spatz Leighton, "The Race for "First Lady"," *Gadsden Times*, October 24, 1976, 4.

¹²³ Greene, *Betty Ford: Candor and Courage in the White House*, 43.

and her STOP ERA campaign. Schlafly and other anti-ERA activists, who believed “nobody in the world has it better than the American woman” understood the debated legislation as a direct threat to the protections mothers and working women enjoyed in modern American society, such as the right to child support, alimony, and exclusion from the draft.¹²⁴ The First Lady and other proponents of the amendment, on the other hand, argued that the amendment would “not alter the fabric of the Constitution or force women away from their families . . . [but would] help knock down those restrictions that have locked women into old stereotypes of behavior and opportunity.”¹²⁵

The First Lady rediscovered her independence and sense of purpose in campaigning for the ERA. From the East Wing of the White House she led information sessions on the details of the amendment and its repercussions for White House staffers.¹²⁶ She mailed letters and pro-ERA literature to wavering legislators in strategic states and made personal phone calls to politicians on key committees throughout the nation.¹²⁷ In addition, she urged her husband to offer more women important positions in his administration. Mrs. Ford took credit for the appointment of Carla Hills as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, telling the *Chicago Tribune*: “I got a woman into the Cabinet. I never give up. Now I’m working on

¹²⁴ Stan Isaacs, “I Do What I Want to Do,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 1975; Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 218.

¹²⁵ John Spetz, “Equal Rights Amendment Won't Separate Families, Betty Ford Tells Nation,” *Atlanta Daily World*, October 31, 1975.

¹²⁶ Knight, “Issues of Openness and Privacy: Press and Public Responses to Betty Ford's Breast Cancer,” 54.

¹²⁷ Nina S. Hyde, “Phoning for Era Passage,” *Washington Post*, February 15, 1975.

getting a woman on the Supreme Court as soon as possible.”¹²⁸ Though her lobbying for the latter was unsuccessful, President Ford ultimately outranked all his predecessor in the area of female participation in his government, appointing a total of sixty-six women to high office.¹²⁹ The First Lady also became one of the first public figures to openly support gay rights, boldly declaring: “I do think lesbians are entitled to free speech, the same as anyone else. . . . I don’t believe people should lose their jobs because of their sexual preference.”¹³⁰ In a joke revealing both Betty’s commitment to second-wave feminism and her influence on her husband, Gerald Ford teased, “I am the President of the United States and married to one of the most powerful lobbyists in Washington. . . .I say one wrong thing about women’s rights and the next state dinner is at Mac Donald’s [*sic*].”¹³¹

In her political activism on behalf of the women’s movement, the First Lady became an unlikely icon of modern feminism. The wife of a successful Republican politician who had abandoned her career in pursuit of a husband and children, she did not match the typical profile of a “woman’s libber.” As much of the general public had access to the feminist movement only in the terms provided to them by journalists and television reporters, the presence of a woman in the White House who brazenly supported women’s rights and was not delegitimized by an exaggerated association

¹²⁸ "Betty Ford Tells It Like It Is: More "Pillow Talk"," *Chicago Tribune*, August 21, 1975.

¹²⁹ Myra G. Gutin, *The President's Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 142.

¹³⁰ Ford and Chase, *The Times of My Life*, 205.

¹³¹ Gerald R. Ford, “Talking Points: Swearing-in of Rod Hills as Chairman of the SEC,” (Speech, October 28, 1975).

with leftist radicals was welcomed by feminists from coast to coast.¹³² Archivist at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library Leesa E. Tobin celebrates Mrs. Ford's ability "to bring feminist issues within the pale of respectability for the mass of American women" by emphasizing that one "could comfortably support ERA without sacrificing her credentials as a wife and mother."¹³³ As media commentators caricatured, demonized, and reduced women's liberation to its "radical fringes," the President's wife maintained that at its core was a debate over the freedom of choice and a crusade to bring dignity to the entire spectrum of women's work.¹³⁴ The First Lady defined a "liberated woman" simply as one who "feels confident in herself and is happy in what she is doing," and demonstrated to Republican women like her that there was indeed a space for their voice and their values within the contemporary women's movement.¹³⁵

While her admirers fashioned campaign buttons that read "Keep Betty's Husband in the White House," her critics picketed down Pennsylvania Avenue shouting "Betty Ford get off the phone!"¹³⁶ In response to her vehement critics the First Lady stated: "My own support of the Equal Rights Amendment has shown what happens when a definition of proper behavior collides with an individual's right to personal opinions. I do not believe that being first lady should prevent me from

¹³² Karen DeWitt, "What Role Will Women's Issues Play?," *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 1976.

¹³³ Leesa E. Tobin, "Betty Ford as First Lady: A Woman for Women," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1990): 764.

¹³⁴ Deborah L. Rhode, "Media Images, Feminist Issues," *Signs* 20, no. 3 (1995): 693.

¹³⁵ Marlene Cimons, "Profession: Full-Time Homemaker," *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 1975.

¹³⁶ Maria Downs, "Betty Ford: A Very Special Lady," *Whitehousehistory.org* (blog), July 12, 2011, <http://blog.whitehousehistory.org/general/betty-ford-a-very-special-lady/>.

expressing my views.”¹³⁷ In addition to generating a wide range of impassioned responses like these, Mrs. Ford’s unintended emergence as a prominent public face of the women’s movement contributed to the internal polarization of the Republican Party. President Ford’s centrist economic policies, moderate federal appointments, equivocation on abortion, and outspoken feminist wife alienated the growing conservative minority within his party and did little to prevent them from steadily migrating away from mainstream Republicanism to the burgeoning New Right.¹³⁸ A segment of conservative activists, who made no secret of their contempt for Gerald Ford and his moderate politics, pushed for the creation of a conservative third party that would ideally be led by California Governor Ronald Reagan. When Reagan announced his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination in November 1976, President Ford attempted to maintain his shrinking conservative base by moving to the right both in rhetoric and in practice. Even so, the President lost reelection to Democrat Jimmy Carter and, according to political historian Geoffrey Kabaservice, consequently removed the last defense against a conservative takeover of the GOP.¹³⁹

In March of 1975, the First Lady gave rightwing critics of the Ford administration yet another reason to be angry when she solidified her politically divisive reputation for candor and social liberalism on the popular television news show *60 Minutes*. Sheila Rabb Weidenfeld, Mrs. Ford’s press secretary, felt this

¹³⁷ "A Lady Needn't Be Silent, Betty Tells Feminists."

¹³⁸ Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the Republican Right Rose to Power in Modern America*, 124-31.

¹³⁹ Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 346-48.

program provided the perfect opportunity for the American people to become acquainted with a presidential wife who was “not the type to face the nation,” but rather “to chat with it.”¹⁴⁰ In an informal interview with CBS News correspondent Morley Safer, the First Lady rearticulated her pro-choice stance: “It was the best thing in the world when the Supreme Court voted to legalize abortion . . . it was a great, great decision.” She also admitted she wouldn’t be surprised to learn her kids had smoked marijuana: “Children try everything, don’t they?”¹⁴¹ When asked if Betty Bloomer would have been the kind of girl to experiment with the drug, she answered affirmatively as well. The response that ignited a storm of controversy, however, had to do with the Fords’ eighteen-year-old daughter Susan and the socially charged issue of premarital sex. When asked how she would feel to discover Susan was having an affair, Mrs. Ford paused for a moment and replied:

Well, I wouldn’t be surprised. I think she’s a perfectly normal human being, like all young girls. If she wanted to continue it, I would certainly counsel and advise her on the subject. And I’d want to know pretty much about the young man she was planning to have the affair with – whether it was a worthwhile encounter, or whether it was going to be one of those – she’s pretty young to start affairs.¹⁴²

Though a relatively new program when this episode aired, *60 Minutes* reached seventy-six million homes across the country by the fall of 1979.¹⁴³ Those who missed the broadcast were brought up to speed by provocative headlines printed the next morning like “Betty Ford: She’s No Fair-Weather Feminist” and “Susan ‘A Big Girl’:

¹⁴⁰ Beasley, *First Ladies and the Press: The Unfinished Partnership of the Media Age*, 132.

¹⁴¹ "As the First Lady Sees It," *Chicago Tribune*, September 15, 1975; Mary Knoblauch, "Betty Ford Always Did Speak Her Mind," *Chicago Tribune*, August 19, 1975.

¹⁴² Betty Ford, interview by Morley Safer.

¹⁴³ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*, 212.

Affair Wouldn't Jolt Mrs. Ford."¹⁴⁴ Within twelve weeks of the episode's airing, the White House received nearly fourteen thousand pieces of mail addressed to the East Wing, seventy percent of which voiced opinions critical of the First Lady's statements.¹⁴⁵ While some thought it was "marvelous and refreshing to have someone, anyone, in public life speak honestly and candidly about vital issues," others reproached her for her "lack of regard for moral self-discipline . . . [and for] condoning the very evils that have deteriorated this [country's] morality."¹⁴⁶ Representative Philip Crane of Illinois, a leader of conservative forces backing Ronald Reagan, believed Mrs. Ford's "damaging" answers and Safer's "improper" line of questioning would ultimately hurt the President's chances for reelection in 1976.¹⁴⁷ The First Lady writes in her autobiography that after her husband watched her *60 Minutes* performance he figured he had lost ten million votes. When he read about it in the press the next day, he raised the estimate to twenty million.¹⁴⁸

The public uproar Betty instigated was indicative of the broader cultural trend steadily gaining traction throughout the nation. President Ford later identified the *60 Minutes* correspondence as an incident that alerted him to the burgeoning conservative insurgency that would power Governor Reagan's presidential primary campaign in 1976 and carry him all the way to the Washington in 1980. The First Lady was

¹⁴⁴ "Betty Ford: She's No Fair-Weather Feminist," *Chicago Tribune*, August 11, 1975; "Susan 'a Big Girl': Affair Wouldn't Jolt Mrs. Ford," *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 1975.

¹⁴⁵ MaryAnne Borrelli, "Competing Conceptions of the First Ladyship: Public Responses to Betty Ford's '60 Minutes' Interview," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2001): 402-06.

¹⁴⁶ "...And a Few Unsolicited Opinions," *Chicago Tribune*, September 15, 1975; Joseph M. Scheldler et al., "Mrs. Ford's Interview," *Chicago Tribune*, August 17, 1975.

¹⁴⁷ J. F. terHorst, "Mrs. Ford's Right Wing Critics," *Free Lance-Star*, August 21, 1975.

¹⁴⁸ Ford and Chase, *The Times of My Life*, 208.

praised highest by those outside of the traditional Republican support base, including women, young people, political moderates and liberals, the college educated, and those living on the East and West coasts.¹⁴⁹ Those most offended by her remarks – small-town Republicans in the South and West, rural voters, and the elderly – were the same demographic groups fueling the conservative sociopolitical undercurrent and who would soon unite under the banner of the New Right.¹⁵⁰ Though her behavior was not politically advantageous for her husband, Mrs. Ford took pride in the role she played in weaving together national conversations about morality, gender, youth culture, and the American presidency.

When sharing with the people her experience with breast cancer, Mrs. Ford was unanimously celebrated for her courageous honesty. A study conducted by communications scholar Myra Gregory Knight of five of the largest and most influential newspapers from the announcement of the First Lady's biopsy to her return to the White House found that all of the editorials published about her illness were complimentary.¹⁵¹ Tellingly, this same characteristic openness, when applied to such taboo topics as abortion, premarital sex, and drug use, however, became the source of heated controversy. These contradictory responses provide insight into the specific kind of female public sphere involvement deemed acceptable by mainstream America. Her voice was collectively welcomed when discussing uncontroversial, exclusively feminine issues, such as breast cancer, but was met with rejection when

¹⁴⁹ Louis Harris, "Harris Survey: Betty Ford's Popularity Still Rising," *Chicago Tribune*, August 9, 1976.

¹⁵⁰ Borrelli, "Competing Conceptions of the First Ladyship: Public Responses to Betty Ford's "60 Minutes" Interview," 410.

¹⁵¹ Knight, "Issues of Openness and Privacy: Press and Public Responses to Betty Ford's Breast Cancer," 63.

commenting on contentious social and political debates whose outcomes had repercussions for every member of society.

This gender-based paradox can be better understood by analyzing the first lady's existence as a descriptive and symbolic representative of American women. A model as such, the first lady is expected to adhere in all acts of political representation to what political science professor Jill Abraham Hummer has identified as the "cultural everywoman ideal," or the dominant ideology about what American womanhood strives to be. When the president's wife upholds this standard, as Mrs. Ford did when spreading awareness about a deadly female disease, the public is affirming and encouraging. When she deviates from the ideal, as Mrs. Ford did with her nationally televised "endorsement of immortality," widespread dissent ensues.¹⁵² The first lady, Hummer writes, "by not satisfying the cultural everywoman ideal, becomes a political lightning rod, and her status as an accurate or legitimate representative of American women is called into question."¹⁵³ Her ardent ERA advocacy and unapologetic embrace of nontraditional social stances functioned as a powerful act of symbolic representation that conveyed to the citizenry that Mrs. Ford "stood for" women's liberation and did not "stand for" socially conservative women.

Before his death in 2006, President Ford said lovingly of his wife: "When the final tally is taken, her contribution to our country will be bigger than mine."¹⁵⁴ In 1974, Americans suddenly received a first lady whose life experiences and progressive

¹⁵² Borrelli, "Competing Conceptions of the First Ladyship: Public Responses to Betty Ford's "60 Minutes" Interview," 405.

¹⁵³ Jill Abraham Hummer, "First Ladies and the Cultural Everywoman Ideal: Gender Performance and Representation," *White House Studies* 9, no. 4 (2010): 405.

¹⁵⁴ CNN Wire Staff, "Betty Ford's Legacy: Candor and Inspiration," *CNN*, July 9, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/07/09/betty.ford.dies/>.

mentality made her relatable and whose public human struggles, at once personal and universal, mirrored those plaguing much of the nation. Mrs. Ford's power, less political than educational, stemmed not from her capacity to enact legislation or repeal unpopular laws but from her ability to connect intimately with the American people, challenge their pre-existing assumptions, and alter the way they conceive of and interact with the world around them. Through the sense of personal fulfillment and self-awareness she drew from the women's movement and her work on its behalf, she blossomed in the White House from a tormented housewife to a confident, empowered political figure and female role model. Her unyielding and unparalleled candor and courageousness as the president's wife brought issues of women's health, personhood, and social justice to the national stage and a level of integrity, reputability, and unorthodoxy to the institution that has often evaded it throughout American history.

Chapter Two: Nancy Reagan

At the annual dinner of the Conservative Political Action Conference in March 1985, President Ronald Reagan stood before a crowd of right-wing activists and elected officials from across the nation and celebrated that “the tide of history [was] moving irresistibly in our direction.”¹⁵⁵ After spending nearly half a century as a minority faction in a minority party, the Republican Right seized control of the executive office in 1980 and achieved one of the largest landslide victories in presidential history four years later, carrying forty-nine of the fifty states and nearly sixty percent of the popular vote. As the political currents shifted back and forth from the dominant doctrine of modern liberalism throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the burgeoning GOP subgroup discovered in Ronald Reagan a skilled communicator and an adept politician capable of uniting the diverse strains of conservative thought into one powerful political force. Merging fervent antitaxism, free-market economics, and hawkish anticommunism with Christian moral values and traditionalist social views, Reagan forged a right-wing ideology and popularized it using his own broad appeal.¹⁵⁶ From his initial venture into the world of politics with his endorsement of conservative presidential candidate Barry Goldwater’s 1964 campaign to his farewell address in 1989, President Reagan captivated the American public and led them on a crusade to reinstate the nation’s strength at home and abroad and to restore its moral character.

¹⁵⁵ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Dinner of the Conservative Political Action Conference,” (Speech, Washington, D.C., March 1, 1985).

¹⁵⁶ Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the Republican Right Rose to Power in Modern America*, 184.

Throughout his political career, Ronald Reagan made no secret of the value he placed on his wife Nancy's thoughts on the private and professional issues that plagued him. She was his oldest and most trusted advisor, and her influence on him did not subside once the couple moved into the White House. As the former Hollywood movie star reinvented the Republican Party and transformed the landscape of American conservatism, Mrs. Reagan, acutely aware of what was best for her husband's personal and political welfare, operated as his ultimate protector. Her close involvement in the day-to-day workings of the Reagan administration made her the target of incessant criticism from a contemptuous press who attacked her public image, questioned her political motives, and accused her of seeking to "hold court over America."¹⁵⁷ Having developed a unique conservative feminist identity that enabled her to find personal fulfillment and a sense of self through her marriage to the President, the First Lady brought both tradition and progressiveness to the office she served. Nancy Reagan embodied the ideals of the right-wing backlash against the social liberalism of the 1970s and drew from modern conservatism the strength to thrive in a culture in which powerful women were inherently suspect.

In her 1990 memoir *What I Saw at the Revolution*, primary speechwriter and special assistant to President Reagan Peggy Noonan quotes a longtime friend of both the President and his wife as saying, "Listen to me: Without Nancy Reagan, Ronald Reagan would have been nothing but a grease spot on the road."¹⁵⁸ Though probably an exaggeration, Mrs. Reagan was certainly not without ambition for her husband.

¹⁵⁷ Wanda McDaniel, "Nancy Reagan – Born to Be Queen," *Chicago Tribune*, November 9, 1980.

¹⁵⁸ Peggy Noonan, *What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era*, 20th Anniversary Edition ed. (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2010), 162.

From the start of their relationship, she envisioned her destiny intertwined with his. Mrs. Reagan writes in her autobiography that she “didn’t know if it was exactly love at first sight, but it was pretty close.”¹⁵⁹ The couple met for the first time in November 1949 under unusual circumstances. As the American entertainment industry became enveloped in McCarthyite anti-communist hysteria, Nancy Davis, having recently launched a career in acting, was alarmed to discover her name printed on a Hollywood blacklist. In an effort to have it removed from the incriminating catalog of alleged communist sympathizers, film director Mervyn Leroy put the young woman in contact with the president of the Screen Actors Guild, Ronald Reagan. It was soon determined that her blacklisting was the result of an unfortunate coincidence – another Hollywood actress, indeed a Communist, shared her name.¹⁶⁰ With the error corrected, Nancy Davis and Ronald Regan began dating. Their relationship quickly escalated from nightly dinners, to a three-year courtship, to marriage in the spring of 1952.¹⁶¹

The twenty-something actress Leroy had introduced to the SAG president was a newcomer to Los Angeles. Born Anne Frances Robbins to Edith Luckett and Kenneth Robbins on July 6, 1921, the future first lady, nicknamed “Nancy” at birth, split her youth between Bethesda, Maryland and Chicago, Illinois. Because her parents separated before she was born, the young girl lacked a relationship with her father and clung to her mother, a film and stage actress whose career kept her travelling from theater to theater across the country. When Nancy Robbins was eight

¹⁵⁹ Nancy Reagan, *My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1989) 96.

¹⁶⁰ "Blacklist," *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 1987.

¹⁶¹ “Nancy Reagan,” *First Ladies: Influence and Image*, first broadcast January 13, 2013 by C-SPAN.

years old, her mother remarried and relocated the family to Chicago where she could finally offer her daughter the steady home life she so craved. Lockett's new husband, Dr. Loyal Davis, was an eminent neurosurgeon and Northwestern University professor who brought his new family status, stability, and financial security. Mrs. Reagan describes Dr. Davis in her memoirs as "a man of great integrity who exemplified old-fashioned values[,] . . . a classic self-made man."¹⁶² She inherited much of her political perspective from this militant, anti-Roosevelt ultraconservative whom she says she has always considered her true father and whose name she legally adopted when she turned fourteen.¹⁶³ The example set by her mother – one of a happy woman who always put her husband first and who believed wholeheartedly in the goodness marriage – shaped the adolescent's familial ideals. After graduating from Smith College in 1943, Ms. Davis moved to New York City to pursue a career in theater. Her path took a turn in the spring of 1949 when an MGM casting director persuaded her to try her hand in the film industry out West. She was cast for small roles in a number of films almost immediately and had her fateful encounter with the SAG president only a few months later.¹⁶⁴

Ronald Reagan was ten years Nancy Davis' senior and an established Hollywood presence at the time they met. The future president was born on February 6, 1911 in a modest apartment over a general store in small-town Tampico, Illinois (He would later quip during his White House years that he had come full circle and

¹⁶² Reagan, *My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan*, 74-75.

¹⁶³ Pierre-Marie Loizeau, *Nancy Reagan: The Woman Behind the Man* (New York: Nova History Publications, 2004), 1-14.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 25-27.

once again was “living above the store”).¹⁶⁵ The Reagan family lived in quintessential Middle America “where life was wholesome, where people trusted each other, and nobody locked his door at night.”¹⁶⁶ From his parents he acquired a resolute faith in both the goodness of humankind and the Disciples of Christ Church that would serve as the foundation of his conservative political philosophy. Ronald Reagan launched a career in radio broadcasting after graduating from Eureka College in 1932, but before long made the transition to film acting and scored a seven-year contract with Warner Brothers Studios in 1937.¹⁶⁷

As a young adult, Ronald Reagan was a New Deal Democrat and a great admirer of President Franklin Roosevelt. With time, however, his political views evolved as he recognized that his allegiance to the Democratic Party stemmed more from a lasting gratitude for the employment opportunities the New Deal offered his father than from ideological like-mindedness.¹⁶⁸ As he recounted in an interview with the *New York Times* in 1985, he gradually became disenchanted with the Left and came to believe that “government had grown beyond the consent of the governed” and was itself the source of the nation’s economic woes.¹⁶⁹ A growing hatred of communism triggered his political conversion as well. Convinced that Communists were “crawling out of the rocks” in Hollywood, the then SAG president even testified as a friendly witness before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947, providing the

¹⁶⁵ David Shribman, "Reagan, All-American, Dies at 93," *Boston Globe*, June 6, 2004.

¹⁶⁶ Reagan, *My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan*, 105.

¹⁶⁷ Loizeau, *Nancy Reagan: The Woman Behind the Man*, 30-33.

¹⁶⁸ Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 29.

¹⁶⁹ Leslie H. Gelb, "The Mind of the President," *New York Times*, October 6, 1985.

FBI with the names of actors suspected of communist affiliation.¹⁷⁰ According to a 1976 *Washington Post* article, Nancy Davis and her “arch-conservative family” also “helped pull Reagan to the right.”¹⁷¹ The actor’s father-in-law in particular, a highly opinionated man who was very vocal about his reactionary politics, played an important role in shaping the future president’s early conservative philosophy.¹⁷² As Hollywood divided over the 1960 election between Democrat John F. Kennedy and Republican Richard Nixon, the actor officially aligned with the GOP.¹⁷³

When Ronald Reagan arrived at the Capitol on Inauguration Day in 1981, he became the first and only U.S. president to have been divorced. When he was introduced to the future first lady, he had recently terminated his eight-year marriage to another stage and screen performer, Jane Wyman. President Reagan’s second marriage was held on March 4, 1952 in the San Fernando Valley. After exchanging vows, Mrs. Reagan continued her work as an actress, but with far less frequency and enthusiasm. She eventually gave up her career to be a fulltime homemaker. The new bride had it ingrained in her by her mother to simply say, “If you try to make two careers work, one of them has to suffer. . . . Maybe some women can do it, but not for me.”¹⁷⁴ Self-described as “never really a career girl,” this was the path Nancy Reagan

¹⁷⁰ "Red Threat Is Cited: Communists Said to Renew Hollywood Efforts," *New York Times*, May 9, 1961; Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1991), 244-45.

¹⁷¹ Jack Anderson and Les Whitten, "Reagan Conversion Was Sudden," *Washington Post*, August 18, 1976.

¹⁷² Kitty Kelley, *Nancy Reagan: The Unauthorized Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 118-19.

¹⁷³ Greg Mitchell, "When Reagan Became a Republican: Inspired by "Tricky Dick"," *Nation*, February 7, 2011.

¹⁷⁴ Kelley, *Nancy Reagan: The Unauthorized Biography*, 97.

had envisioned her life taking for some time.¹⁷⁵ In fact, on an MGM questionnaire she filled out in 1949, she wrote that her greatest ambition was to have a “successful, happy marriage.”¹⁷⁶ Her cousin Charlotte Galbraith Ramage recalls Mrs. Reagan expressing in her youth to want only “a husband and a house with geraniums at the windows.”¹⁷⁷ When she became First Lady, her family-centered priorities did not change.

The Reagans’ social life was oriented around the wives of the wealthy businessmen whom Nancy Reagan had befriended and who ran Southern California’s Republican Party. These individuals provided the funds for Ronald Reagan’s 1964 speech endorsing Barry Goldwater to be nationally televised, launching his political career. They continued to support the Reagans’ throughout their time in politics, encouraging the future president both to campaign for the California governorship and to challenge Gerald Ford for the Republican nomination in the 1976 presidential primaries.¹⁷⁸ As her husband rose through the ranks of the GOP, Mrs. Reagan remade herself into the perfect political wife, though her motivations for doing so were hardly political. “If Ronnie were selling shoes, I’d be out pushing shoes,” she insisted in an April 1980 *Newsweek* article.¹⁷⁹ Guided by conservative ideals and romanticized portraits of traditional marriage, Mrs. Reagan happily devoted her time and energy to her husband. “I’m sure this may sound

¹⁷⁵ Joan Zyda, "Nancy Reagan Still Clings to the Old Values," *Chicago Tribune* November 26, 1975.

¹⁷⁶ Garry Clifford, "The New First Lady " *People*, November 17, 1980.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Nancy Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, directed by Mary Beth Durkin, (2010; Arlington: PBS, 2011), DVD.

¹⁷⁹ Melinda Beck, Gerald C. Lubenow, and Martin Kasindorf, "The Woman Behind Reagan," *Newsweek*, April 28, 1980.

terribly square and old-fashioned,” she confessed to the *Chicago Tribune* in November 1975, “but I believe a woman’s real happiness and fulfillment come from within her home with a husband and children.”¹⁸⁰

The First Lady often professed antiquated attitudes like these that would have made even tepid “woman’s libbers” cringe. Compounding these antifeminist sentiments, Mrs. Reagan stood in opposition to abortion, gay rights, and the ERA, all contributing factors to what she believed was a “severe moral decline in this country.”¹⁸¹ When Nancy Davis got married, she willingly relinquished her professional ambitions, along with her maiden name. Content with assuming the role of archetypal 1950s suburban housewife, she let her center of gravity shift from herself to her husband and children. While women’s rights activists like Betty Ford believed that it was essential for women to have passions and identities outside of the home, Nancy Reagan asserted that women’s interests “should be done in the framework of marriage, not in competition with [it].”¹⁸² The First Lady regarded marriage as a divine institution in which husband and wife compliment and uplift each other in necessarily gender-specific ways. This perspective was fundamentally at odds with that of feminists like Betty Friedan who saw in the domestic routine of the housewife a “genteel prison” breeding female dependency, dissatisfaction, and subjugation.¹⁸³ The Reagans’ right-wing social doctrine provided the lens through which they understood their marital roles: he was the breadwinner; she was his support system. As their private lives grew increasingly, inextricably intertwined with their public and political

¹⁸⁰ Zyda, “Nancy Reagan Still Clings to the Old Values.”

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Kelley, *Nancy Reagan: The Unauthorized Biography*, 194.

¹⁸³ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 94.

lives, they applied the same gendered structure to their new relationship as politician and politician's wife. Mrs. Reagan's primary concerns expanded to include protecting her husband's professional welfare, in addition to his personal wellbeing.

In her essay "Competing Conceptions of the First Ladyship," Connecticut College professor Maryanne Borrelli examines the spectrum of roles that can be performed by the wife of an American president. On one extreme is "first political wife," the liberal, feminist interpretation of the post that emphasizes the first lady's independence and individuality as a distinct historical and political actor. On the other end is "wife," the traditional, conservative interpretation that stresses her importance in bringing quiet dignity and feminine grace to the White House. Borrelli writes:

[T]he first political wife . . . place[s] a first lady on the public stage as a distinctive and responsible person. She is, through this role, recognized as the president's partner and protector. In contrast, the role of wife is centered in the private sphere and rarely causes the first lady to assume any initiative in the public sphere. Obedient and silent, she merely reflects the power of the president. Where the first political wife begins to debunk the mythology of the autonomous leader, the wife accepts that ideology as reality.¹⁸⁴

Though both of these roles and countless hybrids of the two have been performed by various presidential spouses throughout U.S. history, the "wife" role has been predominant. In the case of Nancy Reagan, these poles of first lady behavior were one in the same. Her perception of her responsibilities as the wife of the President was anchored in her marriage. She detected no boundaries delineating where the obligations of wife and presidential wife diverged. The First Couple cited this

¹⁸⁴ Borrelli, "Competing Conceptions of the First Ladyship: Public Responses to Betty Ford's "60 Minutes" Interview," 411.

conflated understanding of the First Lady's political office time and again to justify her heavy involvement in the executive affairs of the Reagan administration.

Though certainly not a feminist in the same vein as Gloria Steinem or even Betty Ford, Nancy Reagan did approach the first ladyship with her own dynamic kind of female empowerment. While women's liberationists of the 1960s and '70s aimed to empower American women through the destruction of patriarchal ideologies and institutions, Mrs. Reagan achieved this goal through an embrace of conservative Republican philosophy. The First Lady consistently looked to her womanly, private sphere responsibilities of caring for her family in order to defend her presence in the male-dominated world of politics and international affairs. In posturing herself against the women's movement and the New Left counterculture that fueled it, she forged her own conservative feminist identity from which she and other like-minded American women could draw strength.

Nancy Reagan's conservative feminism challenged culturally salient, misrepresentative stereotypes of right-wing women and argued that traditional marriage did not equate to female subservience. This seemingly contradictory philosophy rejected the sexual politics of previous decades that proposed a reconstruction of sex and gender, celebrated the family and biological motherhood, and chided mainstream and radical feminists for deflecting national attention away from more pertinent issues of cultural decadence and moral decay.¹⁸⁵ Though Mrs. Reagan maintained in theory the mutual exclusivity of conservatism and second-wave feminism and did not self-identify with the latter, an analysis of her words and

¹⁸⁵ Catharine R. Stimpson, "Nancy Reagan Wears a Hat: Feminism and Its Cultural Consensus," *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 2 (1988): 233.

behavior during her time as first lady suggests that she strategically, albeit subconsciously, embraced elements of each social doctrine and merged the two in a way that suited her needs. Mrs. Reagan commented on this in an interview in 1985: “Feminism is the ability to choose what you want to do . . . I’ve really enjoyed the best of two worlds. I chose to have a career, and I enjoyed it while I had it. . . . But then I met my husband, and I chose to give it up.”¹⁸⁶ The high-profile example Mrs. Reagan set of a strong, conservative woman who constructed her own functional definition of feminism and found fulfillment without being “liberated” resonated with segments of Republican and was powerful in its implications for both modern American womanhood and the future of the first ladyship.¹⁸⁷

As the President’s wife, Nancy Reagan occupied a space somewhere between the active, involved first lady model of the feminist era and the decorative, detached first lady model of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Conventional in her outward apoliticism and progressive in the substantial power she wielded, the First Lady inspired a variety of nicknames amongst her carping critics in the press, ranging in creativity from “The Evita of Santa Barbara,” to “Mommy Dearest,” to “Little Gun,” the latter a double-entendre referencing both her firings of staff and the “tiny little handgun” she kept at her beside when “Ronnie” was away.¹⁸⁸ The two characterizations that came to dominate her coverage in the media, however, were Nancy Reagan as “Queen Nancy” and Nancy Reagan as “Dragon Lady.” The first a critique of her extravagance and conventional femininity and the second an attack on

¹⁸⁶ Jennings Parrott, "Free Choice Keeps Nancy Reagan Out of the Shadows," *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 1985.

¹⁸⁷ Robert Shogan, "Nancy Reagan Scores 'New Morality'," *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 1975.

¹⁸⁸ Loizeau, *Nancy Reagan: The Woman Behind the Man*, 78.

her supposed manipulation of her husband and usurpation of presidential power, both epithets were a testament to the significant impact the First Lady had on the Reagan administration and the striking imprint she left in popular consciousness.¹⁸⁹

The “Queen Nancy” narrative surfaced early in her tenure and proliferated throughout President Reagan’s first few years in office. Arriving in Washington with her perfectly coiffed hair, wardrobe full of designer gowns, and posh circle of high-profile friends, Mrs. Reagan invited immediate comparisons to first lady royalty Jackie Kennedy.¹⁹⁰ Like the Kennedys, the Reagans hailed from an exclusive world of affluence and privilege to which most Americans did not have access. Nancy Reagan’s trendiness and opulent style prompted favorable comparisons to the fashion icon of the 1960s and avowals from publications like *Ladies’ Home Journal* that she was “doing more for American clothing” than anybody since her glorified predecessor.¹⁹¹ The First Lady saw herself in many ways as a sixty-year-old update of Mrs. Kennedy, although she garnered far more negative press for her equally nouveau-riche style.¹⁹² Whereas Jacqueline Kennedy’s indulgent lifestyle, luxurious tastes, and financial abundance engendered mass adoration, Mrs. Reagan’s infuriated many Americans, especially those on the Left, who believed she was out of touch with the principles and priorities of rest of the population.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Jennifer L. Babcock, "A Tale of Two Women: The Journalistic Narrative of Nancy Reagan" (University of Maine, 2007), 1.

¹⁹⁰ Burns, *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of Presidential Wives*, 148.

¹⁹¹ *Ladies’ Home Journal* quoted in Burns, *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of Presidential Wives*, 148.

¹⁹² Ingram, "The American "First Lady"," 492.

¹⁹³ Chris Sandrolini, "Voice of the People: Nancy Reagan's Wardrobe," *Chicago Tribune*, February 20, 1982.

In the twenty years that had passed between the Kennedy and Reagan administrations, the citizenry had grown increasingly more cynical and critical of their leaders' behaviors. The fact that President Reagan was cutting funds for the nation's social programs while the First Lady walked around in two thousand dollar designer gowns also contributed to popular disapproval.¹⁹⁴ Mrs. Reagan treaded the delicate line between style and elitism and in the minds of the public too often transgressed into the latter. Analyzing her relationship with the press, Maurine Beasley writes that Reagan was slow to realize that female journalists had shifted their focus from fashion to feminism. Many of the scathing portraits were penned by young feminist women who couldn't identify with a first lady who represented the archaic cultural mores they were rebelling against.¹⁹⁵

The image projected by "Queen Nancy" of a devoted, viciously protective wife disconcerted the liberal populace who frowned upon the gendered hierarchy of the First Couple's marital relationship and viewed them as a throwback from an older, less progressive generation. This image appealed, however, to those women who put their family's needs before their own and saw the Reagans' traditional marriage and Christian values as the epitome of morality.¹⁹⁶ When she met with the press, the First Lady politely but firmly evaded political discussions and stated time and again that she "simply [didn't] differ with Ronnie on anything significant."¹⁹⁷ While Betty Ford had been chastised by the media for being overly involved in national politics, Nancy Reagan was scolded for being too far removed. Her physical

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Beasley, *First Ladies and the Press: The Unfinished Partnership of the Media Age*, 167.

¹⁹⁶ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*, 287.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 280.

interactions with the President also betrayed an intense admiration for her husband. Reporters frequently derided what came to be known as “the gaze,” the attentive, glowing way in which Mrs. Reagan affectionately watched the President speak. *Washington Post* correspondent and preeminent Ronald Reagan biographer Lou Cannon describes the look as “a kind of transfixed adoration more appropriate to a witness of the Virgin Birth.”¹⁹⁸ The First Lady offered no apologies for her behavior, proudly defining her personhood in relation to President Reagan. Her husband was her hero and she treated him as such.¹⁹⁹

The second journalistic trope of Nancy Reagan as “Dragon Lady” emerged towards the end of the Reagan presidency. Though this popular caricature of a manipulative White House powerbroker was certainly exaggerated, the First Lady did exert a substantial influence over the administration’s politics, particularly in the area of executive level Cold War strategy. When the President first took office, Mrs. Reagan focused her attention on maintaining her husband’s popularity; by 1985, she had redirected her energies to ensuring that Ronald Reagan be remembered as “a man of peace.”²⁰⁰ Fleeting references to the First Lady are scattered throughout scholarly accounts of the Soviet Union’s collapse only in the interest of softening the President’s persona and to remind the audience of his humanness and dynamism as a historical actor. Mrs. Reagan’s influence on the commander-in-chief during this time, however, echoed around the globe.

Together with Secretary of State George Shultz, Nancy Reagan urged her husband to tone down his rhetoric with the Soviets and press for negotiations with the

¹⁹⁸ Cheryl Lavin, "Runners," *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 1988.

¹⁹⁹ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*, 279.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 297.

Kremlin.²⁰¹ Resentful of the widespread claims that her husband was a warmonger, she exhorted him to move away from hawkish diplomatic policy.²⁰² In response to a plea from Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to “whisper ‘peace’ in [Reagan’s] ear every night” she replied, “I will. And I’ll also whisper it in your ear.”²⁰³ Defying the conventional wisdom of the administration, she promoted the cultivation of a personal relationship between the President and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev that would transcend political differences.²⁰⁴ The resulting friendship allowed for the open dialogue and mutual understanding that was essential to the destruction of the communist empire. Ronald Reagan’s reliance on his wife was evident in former U.S. ambassador to the U.S.S.R. Jack F. Matlock’s characterization of him as a leader “who seemed lost without his wife.”²⁰⁵ Recalling the disappointing outcome of the 1986 Reykjavik Summit between the United States and the Soviet Union, Matlock writes that President Reagan opposed the suggestions proffered by his advisors to prolong negotiations an extra day. Matlock then states: “If [Nancy] had been in Reykjavik, he probably would have been content to continue the meeting another day.”²⁰⁶ The First Lady served as a valuable sounding board to her husband and her opinions carried weight on his decisions accordingly.

²⁰¹ Simon Tisdall and Martin Walker, "Ladies First," *The Guardian*, March 15, 1994.

²⁰² Robert Healy, "Nancy Reagan: Ronald's Personal Agent," *Evening Independent*, July 13, 1985.

²⁰³ Bill Frost, "Nancy Took the Heat While Reagan Sat There Being the Niceguy," *Times*, July 8, 1998.

²⁰⁴ Donnie Radcliffe, "The Influential Nancy Reagan: Time Looks at Her Impact, Image & the Great Birth-Date Issue," *Washington Post*, January 7, 1985.

²⁰⁵ Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004), 232.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

The “Dragon Lady” parody was also triggered by reports of Mrs. Reagan’s serving as the administration’s “de facto chief of staff.”²⁰⁷ Her decades of peripheral involvement in American politics had led the First Lady to develop what she referred to as “political antennae” that were well attuned to detect those who did not have Ronald Reagan’s best interests at heart.²⁰⁸ While in office, Mrs. Reagan often crossed the line from soft to hard issues, most strikingly in the area of White House personnel. Those who wished to speak to the President were filtered through his wife, and those staff members whom she believed to pose personal or political liabilities to the administration were among the first to be dismissed.²⁰⁹

Almost every member of the Reagan apparatus who has written about their experience in the White House has noted the First Lady’s direct involvement in the selection and discharge of personnel.²¹⁰ Though she presented and conceived of herself as an apolitical partner to the President, her interference in his Cabinet staffing had direct implications on the administration’s policymaking and, by extension, the nation. By controlling who had access to her husband she controlled which legislative and strategic perspectives would or would not be heard. Biographers Lou Cannon and James Benze both state, for example, that Nancy Reagan engineered the 1983 removal of National Security Advisor William Clark, who the First Lady felt “was interfering with Reagan’s efforts to open up better relations with the Soviet Union.”²¹¹ A close friend and director of the United States Information Agency, Charles Z. Wick

²⁰⁷ *Nancy Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*.

²⁰⁸ “Nancy Reagan,” *First Ladies: Influence and Image*.

²⁰⁹ Clarence Page, “Let’s Give Nancy Reagan a Break,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 8, 1987.

²¹⁰ James G. Benze, Jr., “Nancy Reagan: China Doll or Dragon Lady?,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1990): 785-86.

²¹¹ *Nancy Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*.

offered a political interpretation of the Reagans' professional relationship: "She's micro and he's macro. He's the big picture in terms of the whole country, while she's very good with the people who are close to him."²¹²

Former White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan, one of the most prominent and highly publicized casualties of the First Lady's personnel interventions, discusses in his memoir the personal victimization he felt from Mrs. Reagan and exposes the extent of her power over presidential affairs. Following an assassination attempt on the President at a Washington hotel in late March 1981, Nancy Reagan's need to shield her husband from harm escalated to near-obsession. In the hopes of ensuring his safety at all times, the First Lady began relying intensely on the divination of San Francisco astrologer Joan Quigley. Regan argues that Quigley's occult astrological recommendations heavily influenced the scheduling of presidential speeches and press conferences and even such monumental diplomatic events as the Geneva and Reykjavik Summits, a claim that Matlock confirmed and that Mrs. Reagan did not refute.²¹³ Although the President assured the public that his wife never told him explicitly what he should or should not do, he did not deny discussing political issues with her or placing high importance on the advice she gave him. The disclosure of this "most closely guarded domestic secret of the Reagan White House" combined with the persistent rumors about Mrs. Reagan's manipulation of the President caused

²¹² Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies Volume II: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power 1961-1990* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 355.

²¹³ Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended*, 80; Benze, "Nancy Reagan: China Doll or Dragon Lady?," 790.

the citizenry to speculate “not so much on whether she had power, but on how much.”²¹⁴

Along with conjecture of presidential encroachment, the First Couple inspired an abundance of derisive, misogynist political cartoons throughout their years in the Washington. These bigoted critiques reveal fears deep-seated in American culture of unchecked female power and inverted gender hierarchies. Comedians referred to the First Couple as “the leader of the free world” and “her husband;” cartoonists depicted an impish Nancy Reagan wearing the President’s pants, holding cue cards as he delivered speeches, and granting him permission to deploy troops overseas. These caustic commentaries on White House proceedings suggested how castrating and unnatural it was for a woman to brandish the power traditionally reserved for men.²¹⁵ They also conformed to a steady trend in presidential history that assumed strength in a first lady inevitably signaled weakness in a president. When the Reagans first arrived in the capital in the early 1980s, Mrs. Reagan was roundly chastised for being overly materialistic, excessively domestic, and exceedingly removed from the pressing issues of the day. Ironically, by the end of her husband’s second term, she received incessant criticism for having become too actively involved in the administration’s social, political, and economic affairs. This shift in public perception evidences the contradictions inherent in the first lady institution; the president’s wife must maintain at all times the perfect, yet arbitrary, balance of politicism, visibility, and conventional femininity.

²¹⁴ Ingram, "The American "First Lady"," 505; Joyce Wadler et al., "The President's Astrologers," *People*, May 23, 1988.

²¹⁵ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*, 302-04.

President Reagan and the First Lady consistently defended their dualistic approach to the presidency by referencing the enduring partnership that underlay their marriage. Whereas President Clinton later justified his wife's involvement in presidential affairs by reminding the citizenry of her extensive qualifications, the Reagans explained their political collaboration by citing the strength of their marital relationship. Before an audience of her critics at the 1987 annual luncheon of the American Newspaper Publishers Association, the First Lady declared:

I'm a woman who loves her husband and I make no apologies for looking out for his personal and political welfare . . . We have a genuine, sharing marriage. I go to his aid. He comes to mine. . . . We don't always agree. But neither marriage nor politics denies a spouse the right to hold an opinion or the right to express it.²¹⁶

Her husband exhibited the same mentality in a *Newsweek* article published six years earlier in which he succinctly stated: "You can't have been together for almost thirty years without being an influence on each other."²¹⁷ Mrs. Reagan's conservative feminist perspective on the first ladyship allowed her to be both her husband's ultimate admirer, idolizing and caring for him at all times, and his chief political confidante, aiding and advising him on all professional matters. As first lady historian Carl Anthony notes, the physical location of Nancy Reagan's headquarters in the center of the White House perfectly illustrated her powerbase: "On the middle floor of the residence, her office was situated halfway between the wings, removed yet precisely in the vortex of it all."²¹⁸

²¹⁶ Reuters, "Nancy Reagan Defends Her Rights in Advising the President," *New York Times*, May 5, 1987.

²¹⁷ Thomas M. DeFrank and Eleanor Clift, "As Reagan Sees Her," *Newsweek*, December 21, 1981.

²¹⁸ Anthony, *First Ladies Volume II: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power 1961-1990*, 368-69.

At the ceremony for the signing of the monumental Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 1987, Mrs. Reagan made a point of shaking Gorbachev's wife Raisa's hand. She later explained, "That was my way of saying we too are part of this history making."²¹⁹ A shrewd exponent of American politics, Nancy Reagan was well aware of her own importance in shaping her husband's presidency and its historical legacy. Scholars have referred to the Reagan years as an "era of Retro Romanticism," an apt title for a period in U.S. history during which the President and First Lady represented a reversion back to an idealized American past characterized by cultural tradition, right-wing ideology, and Judeo-Christian morality.²²⁰ While in office, Mrs. Reagan symbolized a population of American women whose voices were marginalized in the social upheaval of the 1960s and '70s. Though mainstream feminists of her time may have looked upon Nancy Reagan with condescension and contempt for deriving her political power and historical significance from her marriage to a particular man, she extracted a sense of identity, fulfillment, and personal empowerment from her role as supportive wife. There must then be a space for her within feminism as both a social movement and a radical ideology, as well. Mrs. Reagan's conservative feminism enabled her to cultivate a multifaceted female identity in which she could move freely between the roles of maternal, self-sacrificing wife and mother and ambitious, fully actualized human being. As it did with Betty Ford and Hillary Rodham Clinton, second-wave feminism provided Nancy Reagan with an empowering psychological mechanism for thriving within American patriarchy.

²¹⁹ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*, 308.

²²⁰ Anthony, *First Ladies Volume II: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power 1961-1990*, 324.

Chapter Three: Hillary Rodham Clinton

After all the votes had been counted on Election Day 1984, vice presidential hopeful Geraldine Ferraro stood before the nation to deliver her concession speech. The three-term Democratic congresswoman from Queens stated that though her pursuit for the White House had come to an end, this election had “opened a door which will never be closed again.”²²¹ Representative Ferraro made history when she became the first woman on a major party ticket as former Vice President Walter Mondale’s running mate in that year’s presidential race. She went on in her address to declare that the “days of discrimination are numbered – American women will never again be second-class citizens.”²²² Ferraro and Mondale lost in a landslide defeat to incumbent President Reagan and Vice President Bush, but did succeed in forcing some of the first cracks in the country’s political glass ceiling.²²³ Boldly asserting herself into the top echelons of the male-dominated world of American government and unapologetically claiming her right to space within it, Ferraro’s groundbreaking candidacy was a milestone in both U.S. and women’s history. Bravely exposing and fervently combatting the pervasive sexism ingrained for so long in American politics, Ferraro made possible the careers and aspirations of many female politicians who came after her.

Reflecting on the congresswoman’s legacy at her funeral in 2011, then Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton noted fondly, “We owe her so much. She

²²¹ Geraldine Ferraro, “Concession Speech Following the 1984 Presidential Election,” (Speech, New York, NY, November 6, 1984).

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Lynn Sweet, "Geraldine Ferraro, Dead at 75. Tributes from Pelosi, Obama, Clintons' and More," *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 26, 2011.

inspired us women and girls. All of us thought new thoughts and imagined new possibilities because of Gerry.”²²⁴ Having risen to prominence within a decade of one another and been forced to confront the same regressive, patronizing social forces reserved for women in public life, Geraldine Ferraro and Hillary Rodham Clinton are often linked together. As the former first lady readily admits, Ferraro paved the way for her own political career by setting a precedent for female participation in government at the executive level.²²⁵ Though the paths they followed to Washington were very different, Geraldine Ferraro and Hillary Rodham Clinton were both driven by a similar strain of contemporary, corporate feminism that strove to elevate women to leadership positions historically coded as male. In the same way that Ferraro’s candidacy challenged conventional notions of who was best suited to serve the vice presidency, Mrs. Rodham Clinton’s first ladyship provoked a reimagining of the traditional profile of the president’s wife.

Born to the baby boomer generation of the postwar era, Hillary Rodham Clinton came of age during the 1960s, a distinct period in American history characterized by social instability, political activism, and youthful idealism. This unique cultural context in which she was raised came to define how she perceived the world around her and understood her place within it. Unlike Betty Ford and Nancy Reagan, Hillary Rodham Clinton grew up in the age of feminism and encountered its egalitarian ideals in her youth. This early feminist consciousness led her to consider herself an equal within her marriage and to perceive the first lady as a legitimate extension of the executive office. Accordingly, she approached the American political

²²⁴ Jen Chung, "Hillary Clinton on Geraldine Ferraro's Legacy: "She Inspired Us Women and Girls"," *Gothamist*, April 1, 2011.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

system and the office of the first lady with a particular feminist perspective that, rather than emphasizing female solidarity and the dismantlement of oppressive, patriarchal institutions, advocated women's professional advancement and encouraged them to work within existing structures to effect substantial change. Through her participation in executive policymaking, her extensive efforts on behalf of women and children around the world, and her multifaceted public performance in the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Hillary further pushed the boundaries of "appropriate" first lady behavior and reignited debates on what it meant to be both female and a feminist in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century. One of the most polarizing figures in U.S. political history, Mrs. Rodham Clinton's tenure in the White House provides insight into the complexities of public womanhood, second-wave feminism, and the American citizenry's deep-seated ambivalence towards women unafraid to pursue, attain, and exercise power.

Hillary Diane Rodham was born on October 26, 1947 in Chicago, Illinois. She describes her father Hugh in her autobiography as "a rock-ribbed, up-by-your-bootstraps, conservative Republican and proud of it." Her mother Dorothy, by contrast, was a soft-spoken, classic homemaker and "basically a democrat" who instilled in her daughter a strong sense of social responsibility.²²⁶ Growing up in the middle-class, conservative, predominantly white Chicago suburb of Park Ridge, Mrs. Rodham Clinton's early political beliefs mirrored those championed by Hugh Rodham. The young girl and her two brothers lived in a household that set high standards for their children and placed a premium on hard work, self-sufficiency, and academic achievement. As historian Gil Troy writes, the Rodham kids were raised on

²²⁶ Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Living History* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 11.

“family, church on Sunday, respect your elders, do well in school, participate in sports.”²²⁷ From the frequent afterschool lectures and dinner table debates with her highly principled father, Hillary Rodham developed skills that would come to serve her political career well: “I learned that more than one opinion could live under the same roof. . . . I also learned that a person was not necessarily bad just because you did not agree with him, and that if you believed in something, you had better be prepared to defend it.”²²⁸

The future first lady came to reconcile her father’s insistence on self-reliance with her mother’s concerns about social justice through her faith. In 1961, a twenty-six-year-old youth minister named Don Jones arrived at Park Ridge’s First United Methodist Church. Jones’ approach to the study and practice of religion was unlike anything Hillary Rodham had been exposed to before and greatly influenced her perspective on the world. Jones believed that a Christian life should embody “faith in action” and stressed the importance of social awareness and one’s moral obligation to work toward the betterment of mankind. Diverging from the rest of the Rodhams’ neighborhood, the minister’s “University of Life” youth fellowship program offered Park Ridge adolescents a stimulating environment in which countercultural thought and progressive politics were encouraged and explored. Jones’ greatest contribution to Mrs. Rodham Clinton’s developing socio-political philosophy was the exposure he gave her to ideas outside the conservative tradition and to the less fortunate world that existed beyond the confines of wholesome, Midwestern suburbia. At the age of seventeen, Hillary Rodham accompanied the minister to Chicago’s Orchestra Hall to

²²⁷ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*, 349.

²²⁸ Clinton, *Living History*, 12.

hear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak. She was inspired by his talk of revolution and his admonishment of indifference to the plight of others.²²⁹ Though not yet the feisty leftist radical her critics would later frame her as, Mrs. Rodham Clinton's experience with Jones awakened her to the bitter realities of social inequality and inspired in her a commitment to eradicate them.

When Hillary Rodham first arrived on the campus of Wellesley College in the fall of 1965, she identified as a Republican. A self-proclaimed "Goldwater girl" in high school, she had favored Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election and even served as president of Wellesley's Young Republicans during her freshman year.²³⁰ She writes in her autobiography that she liked Senator Goldwater because he was "a rugged individualist who swam against the political tide."²³¹ Not long into her college career, however, Mrs. Rodham Clinton found that her political beliefs were no longer in sync with the GOP; she had transformed into an ardent supporter of Democratic Senator Eugene McCarthy's anti-war campaign by her junior year.²³² At Wellesley, a private women's liberal arts school just outside of Boston with a reputation for radical politics, social activism, and progressive thought, the future first lady majored in political science. Then-president of the university Ruth Adams recalls that she, like many of her classmates, was "interested in effecting change, but from within rather than outside the system. They were not a group that wanted to go out and riot and burn things. They wanted to go to law school, get good

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

²³² *Ibid.*, 32.

degrees, and change from within.”²³³ This compelling sense of social obligation and abiding confidence in the effectiveness of the legal system motivated Mrs. Rodham Clinton to attend law school in the fall and to devote her life’s work to bettering society through government service.

In June of 1969, Hillary Rodham became the first student in Wellesley’s history to be invited to speak at Commencement. Captured in her words were the spirit of 1960s youth culture and the concerns shared by college students across nation:

We are, all of us, exploring a world that none of us even understands and attempting to create within that uncertainty. But there are some things we feel, feelings that our prevailing, acquisitive, and competitive corporate life, including tragically the universities, is not the way of life for us. We’re searching for more immediate, ecstatic and penetrating modes of living. . . . Every protest, every dissent . . . is unabashedly an attempt to forge an identity in this particular age. That attempt at forging for many of us over the past four years has meant coming to terms with our humanness. . . . If the experiment in human living doesn’t work in this country, in this age, it’s not going to work anywhere. But we also know that to be educated, the goal of it must be human liberation. A liberation enabling each of us to fulfill our capacity so as to be free to create within and around ourselves.²³⁴

The provocative address earned her a seven-minute standing ovation and a feature in *Life* magazine, her first mention in a national publication.²³⁵ Ms. Rodham’s speech drew attention to the unique struggle her generation faced in discerning authenticity, compassion, meaning, and trust in a peculiar era that seemed at times utterly indifferent to the humanity and suffering of others. Her remarks also revealed a mature awareness of bitter societal realities and the importance of combatting them

²³³ Charles Kenney, "Hillary: The Wellesley Years: The Woman Who Will Live in the White House Was a Sharp-Witted Activist in the Class of '69," *Boston Globe*, January 12, 1993.

²³⁴ Hillary D. Rodham, "1969 Wellesley College Student Commencement Speech," (Speech, Wellesley, MA, May 31, 1969).

²³⁵ "The Class of '69," *Life*, June 20, 1969.

through the promotion of social justice and self-actualization; mere empathy was not enough.

Hillary Rodham's relationship to the counterculture of the 1960s and '70s paralleled her relationship to the second-wave feminist movement. She supported their overarching philosophies and objectives, but not the radical tactics often used to achieve them. She applied their principles pragmatically to her work and behavior in a way suited for an ambitious young woman with a respect for established institutions and a desire to work within their framework to effect change. As reflected in the acknowledgement of American exceptionalism toward the end of her speech, Mrs. Rodham Clinton maintained faith in the nation and did not share the cynicism that united many of her peers. Esteemed poet Robert Pinsky, a former Wellesley professor who attended the 1969 commencement ceremony, recalls in a 2013 article the incredible poise, cogency, and authority with which Hillary Rodham spoke. Her presence and her words evoked feelings similar to hearing a very young, uniquely gifted musician play: "something in the sheer, expressive *command* . . . was extraordinary, unmistakable, and already formed."²³⁶

This exceptional historical moment in which she was raised distinguished First Lady Rodham Clinton from her predecessors. While Betty Ford and Nancy Reagan were forty-five and forty-two, respectively, when *The Feminist Mystique* – the text widely credited with launching the women's movement – was published, Hillary Rodham was only sixteen. A study administered in 2007 explored the impact age differences like this had on women's senses of identification with second-wave feminism and found that those like Mrs. Rodham Clinton who were raised in the context of the

²³⁶ Robert Pinsky, "When Hillary Was Already Hillary," *Slate*, July 2, 2013.

women's movement currently express fundamental beliefs and expectations that reflect the social environment of their youth and differ significantly from those of older age groups.²³⁷ The investigation, led by Women's Studies Professors Alyssa N. Zucker and Abigail J. Stewart, was conducted across three generations of University of Michigan alumnae. The results reveal a striking contrast between the women of the oldest cohort (Classes of 1951 and 1952) who say they "felt the liberating potential in [Betty] Friedan's ideas but also felt they were not available to [them] personally," and those of Hillary Rodham Clinton's generation (the middle cohort), who believed they "were able to enact new life choices as a result of the accomplishments of the second wave."²³⁸ The younger women were also found to be more likely to hold sympathetic attitudes towards other oppressed minorities facing similar struggles, regardless of whether or not they shared in group membership.²³⁹ The mainstream feminist consciousness that Mrs. Ford embraced during middle age and Mrs. Reagan rejected throughout adulthood was thus a cornerstone of Mrs. Rodham Clinton's worldview when she stepped into political office.

After graduating from Wellesley in 1969, Hillary Rodham enrolled in the prestigious Yale Law School in New Haven, Connecticut. It was there that the aspiring lawyer was introduced to two individuals who would play decisive roles in shaping her future: Marian Wright Edelman and Bill Clinton. In the spring of 1970, the first-year law student, having gained national recognition for her commencement address, was invited to speak at a convention celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the

²³⁷ Alyssa N. Zucker and Abigail Stewart, "Growing up and Growing Older: Feminism as Context for Women's Lives," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2007): 141.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

League of Women voters. The convention's keynote speaker, Marian Wright Edelman, came to be a significant mentor and role model to Mrs. Rodham Clinton. An assiduous proponent of children's rights, Edelman was the first black woman admitted to the bar in Mississippi and planned to launch an anti-poverty advocacy organization in Washington, D.C. called the Washington Research Project. With the help of a private grant, Hillary Rodham Clinton spent that summer working with this budding organization that would later become the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) and developing a lifelong devotion to protecting the rights of children.²⁴⁰

Later that year, the future first lady was fatefully introduced to a "tall and handsome" man with a "reddish brown beard and a curly mane of hair."²⁴¹ He was one year her senior and had recently returned from attending the University of Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship. By both of their accounts, the initial attraction between Hillary Rodham and Bill Clinton was mutual and almost instant. He was captivated by this classmate of his who "conveyed a sense of strength and self-possession I had rarely seen in anyone, man or woman," and she was "astonish[ed] . . . with the connections he weave[d] between ideas and words and how he [made] it all sound like music."²⁴² Among the first things Hillary Rodham learned about the future president were his plans to finish law school, return to his home state of Arkansas, and become governor. As they spent more and more time together, she came to accept the fact that pursuing a long-term relationship with Bill Clinton would eventually entail sacrificing what was sure to be a promising legal career on the East Coast to

²⁴⁰ Clinton, *Living History*, 46-47.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁴² Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 181; Clinton, *Living History*, 53-54.

accompany the would-be politician to the backwoods of Arkansas. After graduating from Yale in 1973, the two briefly went in opposite directions – Bill Clinton to Fayetteville, Arkansas to teach at the University of Arkansas School of Law, and Hillary Rodham to Cambridge, Massachusetts to work at the Children’s Defense Fund. Mrs. Rodham Clinton writes her memoirs that by August of the following year she had realized that she “was always happier with Bill than without him” and, against the guidance of many of those around her, decided to join him in the South.²⁴³ Her boyfriend, just as he had assured her, was elected the country’s youngest governor four years later.

In her 1993 text *Bodies That Matter*, gender theorist Judith Butler challenges traditional essentialist conceptions of sex and gender and argues instead for a performative understanding that views gender as an illusion maintained through “words, acts, and genders” that embody “certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond.”²⁴⁴ Scholar Karlyn Campbell explains further that gendered behavior “will be culturally coded and will vary from culture to culture and through time, and such codes are not mandated by biological sex.”²⁴⁵ The notion that gender is socially constructed through a stylized repetition of acts miming dominant conventions of gender provides insight into why Hillary Rodham was greeted in Little Rock, and later again in

²⁴³ *Living History*, 70.

²⁴⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 173; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 231-32.

²⁴⁵ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Discursive Performance of Femininity: Hating Hillary," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (1998): 2.

Washington, with an exceptionally strong storm of criticism. According to broader society, the First Lady was, in many ways, “not doing gender right.”²⁴⁶

Arkansas residents looked upon Bill Clinton’s dowdy Yankee girlfriend and her unshaven legs, matronly dresses, and long stringy hair with contempt and self-righteousness. Hailing from the Northeast toting an expensive education and progressive ideas, Hillary Rodham was considered at once pretentious and plain. By refusing to publically perform her womanhood in accordance with specific sexist, heteronormative, socially constructed definitions of masculinity and femininity, particularly with respect to her physical appearance and relationship with her husband, she failed to be sufficiently feminine. Consequently, both the press and the general public regarded her as a threat to the cultural foundations of modern American society.

At several strategic moments throughout the Clintons’ many years in public life, Hillary Rodham Clinton has needed to remake herself from “overbearing yuppie wife from hell” to sedated “Stepford wife” in order to placate her husband’s conservative constituents.²⁴⁷ The first of these image makeovers occurred in 1981 after Bill Clinton failed to be reelected to the Arkansas governorship. Campaign analysts detected that his wife’s decision to maintain her maiden name as a married woman was a major issue for many Southern voters who strongly disliked the subversive feminist radical they saw living in the Governor’s Mansion in Little Rock.

²⁴⁶ Judith Butler, "Gendering the Body: Beauvoir's Philosophical Contribution," in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (New York: Routledge, 1989), 255.

²⁴⁷ Maureen Dowd, "The 1992 Campaign: Candidate's Wife; Hillary Clinton as Aspiring First Lady: Role Model, or a "Hall Monitor" Type?," *New York Times*, May 18, 1992; Joan Beck, "Other Women Shine as Hillary Becomes a Stepford Wife," *Chicago Tribune*, July 16, 1992.

In response to the pressure, Hillary Rodham exchanged her clunky glasses for contact lenses, revamped her wardrobe, and became Hillary Rodham Clinton.²⁴⁸ Conflicted, as biographer Joyce Milton describes, with “one foot in Arkansas and the other firmly planted in the world of politically correct leftism,” Hillary agreed to make these difficult sacrifices both because she loved her husband and because she did not want superficialities to frustrate either of their professional ambitions.²⁴⁹

After transitioning from First Lady of Arkansas to First Lady of the United States, harsh public scrutiny of Hillary Rodham Clinton’s performance of femininity recommenced. A *New Republic* article written by social critic Camille Paglia and published on March 4, 1996 describes Mrs. Rodham Clinton as a “genderless” child who “had to learn how to be a woman.” Paglia continues: “[I]t did not come easily or naturally. What we see in the present, superbly poised First Lady is a consummate theatrical artifact . . . She is the drag queen of modern politics.” The misogynist philosophy from which this piece emerges charges that the First Lady, with her bold, assertive professionalism and traditionally masculine ethos, is, as cultural studies scholar Charlotte Templin notes, a “failed woman.”²⁵⁰ Her transgressions of established boundaries of expected female behavior spawned ridicule and disdain from noisy media pundits. Her husband, also scolded by Paglia for his “hostility to conventional masculinity,” was vehemently chastised by the press for allowing himself to be so unnaturally emasculated.²⁵¹ Hillary Rodham Clinton came to represent in

²⁴⁸ Campbell, "The Discursive Performance of Femininity: Hating Hillary," 11.

²⁴⁹ Joyce Milton, *The First Partner: Hillary Rodham Clinton* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 139.

²⁵⁰ Charlotte Templin, "Hillary Clinton as Threat to Gender Norms: Cartoon Images of the First Lady," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 23, no. 20 (1999): 25.

²⁵¹ Camille Paglia, "Ice Queen, Drag Queen," *New Republic*, March 4, 1996.

popular consciousness the fully liberated woman of the post-feminist age who was “neither the emotional core of her family nor the subordinate of her husband.”²⁵² An openly multifaceted woman who was at once woman, mother, worker, wife, politician, and first lady, she refused to abide within the constraints of mutually exclusive female stereotypes and was, like Betty Ford and Nancy Reagan before her, consequently marked deviant, unnatural, and inherently suspect.

With an established career of her own and an active role in the policymaking of her husband’s administration, Hillary Rodham Clinton represented a clearer, more explicit violation of gender norms than any other presidential spouse.²⁵³ As First Lady of Arkansas, she was put in charge by the Governor of an effort to improve the quality of the state’s public education system. Acting as chair of the Arkansas Educational Standards Committee, she waged a strenuous but ultimately successful battle to increase teachers’ salaries and raise school standards across the board.²⁵⁴ Governor Clinton explained his decision to have his wife lead the initiative by saying that her selection guaranteed he would “have a person who is closer to me than anyone else overseeing a project that is more important to me than anything else.”²⁵⁵ The President later used similar reasoning to justify Mrs. Rodham Clinton’s appointment to the head of the Task Force on National Health Care Reform when they reached the White House a decade later.

²⁵² Darlaine C. Gardetto, "Hillary Rodham Clinton, Symbolic Gender Politics, and the New York Times: January - November 1992," *Political Communication* 14, no. 2 (1997): 236.

²⁵³ Campbell, "The Discursive Performance of Femininity: Hating Hillary," 14.

²⁵⁴ UPI, "Arkansas Overhauling Its Education System," *New York Times*, November 20, 1983.

²⁵⁵ Jeff Gerth and Don Van Natta Jr., *Her Way: The Hopes and Ambitions of Hillary Rodham Clinton* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), 70.

When Bill Clinton announced his official candidacy in the 1992 presidential race, he pledged that if he won, America would “get two for the price of one.”²⁵⁶ In their twenty years together, the Clintons had built what first lady historian Robert P. Watson describes as a “co-career marriage.”²⁵⁷ Between graduating from Yale Law School in 1973 and becoming Arkansas’s First Couple in 1979, the President and First Lady had worked alongside one another on Democratic Senator George McGovern’s presidential campaign and as law professors at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. As Bill Clinton transitioned from teaching to politics and Hillary Rodham Clinton from teaching to practicing law, they continued to cultivate an intimate professional relationship, both maintaining active interest in each other’s work. Bill Clinton’s governorship had benefited greatly from his wife’s full participation in it. Her education reforms had been deemed a resounding success, garnered national attention, and greatly enhanced her husband’s attractiveness as a future candidate for federal office.²⁵⁸ The two relied on one another for personal and professional counsel, each seeking out the other in matters relating to their respective expertise, and intended to preserve this winning dynamic in Washington.

Within the first month of his administration, President Clinton announced that the First Lady had been put in charge of healthcare reform, a primary issue in his 1992 campaign for office. Over the course of the next year, Mrs. Rodham Clinton led a network of over four hundred officials in crafting major legislation that would impact the entire nation. With this overt political role in public policymaking she

²⁵⁶ Rupert Cornwell, "Bill and Hillary's Double Trouble," *Independent*, March 9, 1994.

²⁵⁷ Robert P. Watson, "A Review Essay: Hillary's Legacy? Recent Literature on the First Lady," *The Social Science Journal* 37, no. 4 (2000): 655.

²⁵⁸ Milton, *The First Partner: Hillary Rodham Clinton*, 152.

became the most powerful first lady to serve the position. The constitutionality of the First Lady's appointment to the head of healthcare reform became the focus of legal debate when the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons (AAPS) filed a lawsuit against Mrs. Rodham Clinton in February 1993 over the task force's closed-door meetings.²⁵⁹ In a landmark decision for the first lady institution, the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that the President's spouse was the "functional equivalent" of a full-time government officer. In the words of the court: "History, legislative enactments, and practical realities place this First Lady and all First Ladies among the President's closest advisors and government 'insiders.'"²⁶⁰ This federal acknowledgement of the reality of presidential partnership reflected and officially recognized the historical significance of both Hillary Rodham Clinton as an individual and the office of the first lady overall.

Suspensions of a Clinton co-presidency were fuelled not only by campaign rhetoric and Mrs. Rodham Clinton's executive role in crafting policy, but also by the intense politicization and professionalization of the first lady's office that occurred throughout President Clinton's two terms. Gil Troy writes that the term *co-presidency*, which was mentioned by the press in only one article in 1987, would appear in more than ninety-two thousand articles in 1993.²⁶¹ The extent of the Clintons' presidential collaboration, both in private and public, far surpassed that of any other first couple. Comparing his professional relationship with his wife to that of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, President Clinton explained: "They were two great people, but on

²⁵⁹ MaryAnne Borrelli, "The First Lady as Formal Advisor to the President: When East (Wing) Meets West (Wing)," *Women & Politics* 24, no. 1 (2002): 31.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*, 356.

different tracks. If I get elected, we'll do things together like we always have."²⁶² Given fears so intricately intertwined in American cultural tradition of power abuse, nepotism, weak men, and conniving women, this fact was not easily overlooked by media correspondents or by the general population.

Breaking with long-established customs, Mrs. Rodham Clinton moved her office out of the East Wing of the White House and into the West Wing to work alongside the President and his senior staff members.²⁶³ The First Lady and her almost exclusively female group of core advisers came to be known as "Hillaryland." The team included an unprecedented three aides honored with White House commissions (the Vice President's staff, for comparison's sake, only had one).²⁶⁴ On the working relationship between the office of the President and the First Lady, Mrs. Rodham Clinton's chief of staff Melanne Verveer states:

Everything is integrated. We are not only integrated as the First Lady's staff but we are integrated into the president's staff. . . . My colleagues are involved in the domestic policy staff meetings, in economic meetings, in national security meetings depending on what is relevant with respect to any particular issue that the first lady is asked to undertake or has been engaged in. All of that is integrated largely into the wider operations of the White House.²⁶⁵

To a far greater extent than any of her predecessors, Hillary Rodham Clinton took advantage of the first lady's political and physical proximity to the president and

²⁶² Ingram, "The American "First Lady", " 506.

²⁶³ Robert Pear, "Hillary Rodham Clinton Sets up Shop above the Oval Office," *Ottawa Citizen*, January 24, 1993.

²⁶⁴ Bob Sexter and Dawn Turner Trice, "Clinton: Most Famous. Least Known?," *Chicago Tribune*, November 27, 2007.

²⁶⁵ Melanne Verveer, interview with Anthony Eksterowicz and Kristin Paynter, October 19, 1999, quoted in Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Kristen Paynter, "The Evolution of the Role and Office of the First Lady: The Movement toward Integration with the White House Office," in *The Presidential Companion: Readings on the First Ladies*, ed. Robert P. Watson and Anthony J. Eksterowicz (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 224.

the exclusive opportunities that accompanied it. Politicians across the country acknowledged her existence as a powerful, valuable resource within the Clinton administration. Connecticut Senator Chris Dodd disclosed in an interview with CNN that when he needed to get something done that related to children, “I don’t go to the President, I don’t go to the Chief of Staff, I don’t go to the Director of the Office of Management and Budget – I go to the First Lady.”²⁶⁶ Representative and co-chair of the Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues Patricia Schroeder credited the “Hillary factor” with Congress’ incredible and highly unusual success in pushing through thirty bills affecting women and children in 1993.²⁶⁷ As was customary for presidential spouses, Mrs. Rodham Clinton undertook causes such as healthcare, education, and women’s rights that were relatively uncontroversial, historically linked to women’s customary roles as mothers and caretakers, and thought to be inherently “feminine.”²⁶⁸ Unlike her predecessors, however, she approached these issues substantively. Not only did the First Lady raise awareness about matters she cared about, but, as in the case of healthcare reform, she proposed legitimate solutions to them as well.

As the wife of the President of the United States, Hillary Rodham Clinton had the ability to advocate for personally meaningful causes from an unparalleled position of power whose influence was not constrained by national borders. Reflecting both her domestic and international prestige, the First Lady was invited to speak at the

²⁶⁶ Lissa Muscatine, "In the Corridors of Power: Lissa Muscatine Talks About Life as Press Secretary to the First Lady," *The Women's Review of Books* 17, no. 10/11 (2000): 7.

²⁶⁷ ""Hillary Factor" Hailed for Gains in Women's Law," *Toledo Blade*, December 3, 1993.

²⁶⁸ Though specific policy relating to any of these issues can ignite a storm of controversy, the goal of improving conditions for women, children, and families generally engenders bipartisan support.

United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in September of 1995. She travelled to Beijing, China to speak before representatives of over one hundred and eighty countries as the honorary chair of the American delegation. In her highly anticipated address, she boldly declared that “human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights for once and for all.”²⁶⁹ The First Lady, “speaking more forcefully on human rights than any American dignitary has on Chinese soil,” continued to catalogue a devastating litany of physical and psychological abuses inflicted upon women around the world, explicitly condemning such acts as genital mutilation, sex trafficking, ritualized rape, and forced sterilization.²⁷⁰ Her words were not a radical feminist rallying cry, but an impassioned call for the protection of fundamental, axiomatic human rights too often denied to women.

Though it received little press coverage in China, the speech made the front page of virtually every newspaper in the United States and received bilateral support from conference delegates. Geraldine Ferraro, then-U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, celebrated Mrs. Rodham Clinton’s contributions in Beijing as “a win for women throughout the world.”²⁷¹ By addressing these crimes so pointedly in the international arena, she directed domestic and international attention to the issue and helped cement women’s rights as a cornerstone of American foreign policy. In a July 2000 interview, the First Lady’s press secretary Lissa Muscatine discusses how she learned while traveling with Mrs.

²⁶⁹ Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks of First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton at the Fourth Women’s Conference in Beijing, China,” (Speech, Beijing, China, September 5, 1995).

²⁷⁰ Patrick E. Tyler, "Hillary Clinton, in China, Details Abuse of Women: Blunt Speech on Rights," *New York Times*, September 6, 1995.

²⁷¹ "Women Split on First Lady's Trip to Beijing," *Washington Post*, August 28, 1995.

Rodham Clinton of her “almost iconic status” around the globe as a champion of women and democracy. “She really is,” Muscatine declares, “one of a tiny number of people in the world, frankly, with any kind of political stature, who is affirming what these women are trying to say.”²⁷² Hillary Rodham Clinton’s involvement in the Fourth World Conference on Women provides an example of the significant practical applications of corporate feminism; after posturing herself in a position of effective leadership, she used her prestige to bring attention to the atrocities committed against women around the world on a daily basis.

This particular brand of feminism can be better understood by examining its aptitude for managing complex political situations that straddle the fragile divide between public and private life. Throughout her time in government, Mrs. Rodham Clinton used this consequentialist feminist philosophy to defend her substantial efforts in image restoration. In the same way that she was pressed by advisors to soften and effeminate her public persona while her husband sought office in Arkansas, she was urged to again revamp and further feminize her image on the 1992 presidential campaign trail. After a televised, offhand comment in which she condescendingly quipped that as an adult she “could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas” but instead decided to pursue a professional career, she was lambasted by media pundits and American citizens on both sides of the aisle.²⁷³ She recovered from this gaffe by participating in a cookie bake-off with sitting First Lady Barbara Bush and taking every subsequent opportunity from the press to “ooze. . . charm and

²⁷² Muscatine, "In the Corridors of Power: Lissa Muscatine Talks About Life as Press Secretary to the First Lady," 6.

²⁷³ “Making Hillary Clinton an Issue,” *Nightline*, first broadcast March 26, 1992 by ABC News.

femininity.”²⁷⁴ After the failure of her healthcare proposal – rejected in large part because of its complexity and excessive partisanship, the secrecy in which it was crafted, and the First Lady’s own political inexperience – a third makeover was deemed necessary. Mrs. Rodham Clinton thus took a step back from the national spotlight and a retreat from policymaking following the August 1994 legislative defeat.²⁷⁵ Instead of casting herself as an overt political force, the First Lady emphasized her ceremonial functions as White House hostess and presidential helpmate and her womanly roles of wife and mother. She softened her dark wardrobe with inviting pastel suits, took more family photos with the President and their daughter Chelsea, and embraced what many feminists scorned as “the acceptable face of femininity.”²⁷⁶

Hillary Rodham Clinton’s fourth, and for many Americans most memorable, transformation came towards the end of her husband’s second term as allegations of sexual harassment and marital infidelity floated around the nation’s capital. Accounts of the scandal broke in the news on January 20, 1998. The President had been accused of having a sexual relationship with twenty-four-year-old former White House intern Monica Lewinsky and then encouraging her to lie about their relationship under oath. In the days following the story’s leak, Bill Clinton did not make himself available to reporters. His wife, instead, was initially designated as the White House spokesperson for the affair. When asked about the ordeal in an appearance on the morning news talk show *Today*, the First Lady dismissed the whole

²⁷⁴ Beck, "Other Women Shine as Hillary Becomes a Stepford Wife."

²⁷⁵ "The Health Care Debate: In Their Own Words; Why Health Care Fizzled: Too Little Time and Too Much Politics," *New York Times*, September 27, 1994.

²⁷⁶ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*, 374.

investigation as part of a “vast right-wing conspiracy” to sabotage her husband, an act Troy describes as “the most influential action taken by a first lady since Mrs. Kennedy defined her late husband’s reign as ‘Camelot.’”²⁷⁷

As it became evident that the President had in fact lied about the nature of his relationship with Lewinsky, the First Lady and the White House staff wrestled with, as a 1998 article in *Time* put it, “whether it was worse for Hillary to appear as a stupid, duped wife or as a conniving hypocrite who had been covering for her husband all year.”²⁷⁸ She was ultimately portrayed as the former, exactly the kind of woman she had adamantly denounced in a 1992 interview when she declared she was not just “some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette.”²⁷⁹ Discussing the affair in his autobiography, President Clinton recalls his painful appearance before the American people in August of 1998 in which he took sole responsibility for his personal failure and admitted to misleading everyone, “even my wife.”²⁸⁰ Excusing the First Lady’s role in the scandal’s cover-up in this way, he framed her for the public as a wronged woman coping with her husband’s unfaithfulness with strength and dignity.²⁸¹ According to Gallup poll data, it was during this time in late 1998, just after the President’s impeachment, that Mrs. Rodham Clinton’s favorability ratings

²⁷⁷ Hillary Rodham Clinton, interview by Matt Lauer, *Today*, NBC News, January 27, 1998; Gil Troy, “Copresident or Codependent? The Rise and Rejection of Presidential Couples since World War II,” in *The Presidential Companion: Readings on the First Ladies*, ed. Robert P. Watson and Anthony J. Eksterowicz (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 265.

²⁷⁸ Karen Tumulty and Nancy Gibbs, “The Better Half: During Her Husband’s Greatest Crisis, Hillary Has Come into Her Own,” *Time*, December 21, 1998.

²⁷⁹ Bill Clinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton, interview by Steve Kroft. *60 Minutes*, CBS News, January 26, 1992.

²⁸⁰ Clinton, *My Life*, 802.

²⁸¹ Borrelli, *The Politics of the President’s Wife*, 28.

peaked.²⁸² Sadly, it was, as Troy notes, “pity, not respect, that redeemed Hillary Clinton. . . . Jackie Kennedy poise, not Eleanor Roosevelt policy-making, worked.”²⁸³

Surface-level readings of the First Lady’s performance in the Monica Lewinsky Scandal suggest a betrayal on her part of her deep feminist convictions. As the details of her husband’s infidelity were leaked to the American people, she retreated from her independent, self-assured public persona and projected instead the image of an ever-forgiving housewife with an unwavering smile. A more nuanced analysis of Mrs. Rodham Clinton’s actions, however, finds her seemingly contradictory behavior in line with the strain of modern-day corporate feminism she had identified with throughout her adult life. Hillary Rodham Clinton prioritized the power and influence that accompanied the title of First Lady over the emotional and sexual fidelity of her marriage. In discussing her decision to take the President’s name in her memoirs, Mrs. Rodham Clinton writes: “I decided it was more important for Bill to be Governor again than for me to keep my maiden name.”²⁸⁴ Then, as during the final years of the Clinton administration, the First Lady chose conscientiously to make personal sacrifices for the sake of her family, her husband’s career, and her own political ambitions. Divorcing the President would mean jeopardizing her public stature and risking her ability to labor on behalf of women and girls around the world. In the same way that she played by the rules of established institutions throughout her professional life, she worked within the confines of the somewhat unorthodox marital arrangement she built with her husband to achieve her ultimate goals of effecting meaningful political and social change.

²⁸² Burrell, *Public Opinion, the First Ladyship, and Hillary Rodham Clinton*, 51-52.

²⁸³ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*, 381.

²⁸⁴ Clinton, *Living History*, 91.

The Rodham Clinton first ladyship was one of many firsts. It witnessed the first presidential spouse to have a law degree; the first to have an office in the West Wing; the first to have an overt policymaking role. When Hillary Rodham Clinton announced her candidature for a Senate seat in 1999 and the presidency in 2008, she became the first part-time first lady due to her own political career and the first former first lady to campaign for executive office.²⁸⁵ In both of these elections, she received support from men and women across the country who viewed her candidacy as a major milestone in the fight for gender equality. Reflecting on the experience of casting a ballot for would-be president Rodham Clinton, Geraldine Ferraro stated: “She was going to do what I couldn’t do. . . . I felt that the work that had been done for over one hundred years could reach fruition. It was the first time I cried when I voted.”²⁸⁶ It is fitting that Hillary Rodham Clinton’s first ladyship straddled the close of one century and the dawn of another. With her strategic feminism, substantial policy work, and coequal personal and professional relationship with her husband, Mrs. Rodham Clinton contributed significantly to the erosion of sexist cultural ideals and the reimagining of what it means to be both a modern American first lady and a modern American woman.

²⁸⁵ Myra G. Gutin, "Hillary's Choices: The First Ladyship of Hillary Rodham Clinton and the Future of the Office," in *The Presidential Companion: Readings on the First Ladies*, ed. Robert P. Watson and Anthony J. Eksterowicz (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 282.

²⁸⁶ Jill Lawrence, "Hillary Needs Ferraro's Spirit," *Daily Beast*, February 12, 2014.

Conclusion

The August 2001 issue of the political commentary magazine *New Republic* features a cover story on then First Lady Laura Bush. Titled “Portrait of a Lady,” the article explores Mrs. Bush’s personal history and her longstanding commitment to education, the cause to which she has devoted much of her adult life. Throughout the piece, author Sarah Wildman considers how the new First Lady, a professional woman who abandoned her career upon getting married, will approach the ever-evolving office she now holds. She describes Laura Bush as “the Play-Doh first lady: [m]old her into whatever shape you want, then stamp her back down into a pile of putty for her next audience.”²⁸⁷ Wildman does not hold Mrs. Bush’s political malleability against her, however, and is sympathetic to the predicament facing the wife of an American president. She writes:

[O]ver the last few decades, the position of first lady has become an awfully strange job. . . . Before feminism, it was brutally constricting; today it’s simply impossible. The twenty-first century first lady must be poised. Polished but not slick. Accessible but not intimate. Smart but not ambitious. Motivated, interested, an advocate – but never political. Beautiful but uncaring about her appearance. Happy. She must retain her own identity but negate it where it diverges from her husband’s. And if a first lady appears unhappy with those requirements, even a little, she weakens the administration and is pilloried not only by its enemies but by its friends.²⁸⁸

This paradoxical position, fraught with contradiction and gender symbolism, charges the woman who serves it to be all things to all people. First Ladies Betty Ford, Nancy Reagan, and Hillary Rodham Clinton each responded to this challenge by approaching the office with a particular feminist perspective that allowed them to

²⁸⁷ Sarah Wildman, “Portrait of a Lady,” *New Republic*, August 20, 2001.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

mold the first ladyship into a public platform that suited their individual needs. Each ideological strain was unique to the woman who embraced it and indicative of the political and cultural trends of her time. Mrs. Ford's liberal Republican feminism and Mrs. Reagan's conservative feminism reflect the political transformation and social reconstitution of the GOP over the course of the twentieth century.²⁸⁹ Mrs. Rodham Clinton's leftist corporate feminism evidences the need for women to forge a feminist theory with practical applications for success within the framework of contemporary, corporate America. Their diverse first ladyships speak to the dynamism of modern femininity, each presenting a different vision of American womanhood and problematizing mainstream conceptions of a singular feminism. Their experiences in office suggest that while incredible progress towards sexual equality has been made, the first lady, and by extension the American woman she represents, still has a long way to go before being released from her "gossamer shackles, the delicate, exquisitely feminine bind that thrust [her] close to power . . . yet [forbid her] from flexing [her] muscles."²⁹⁰

Next to the rise of mass media, there has been perhaps no force to have a greater influence on the office of the first lady than modern feminism. As the women's movement infiltrated American society in the latter half of the twentieth century and provoked a pervasive reimagining of women's roles and contributions to public and private life, its echo rang through the halls of the White House. The popular movement's message of female liberation permeated national consciousness and

²⁸⁹ Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the Republican Right Rose to Power in Modern America*, 123-52.

²⁹⁰ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*, X.

implored the first lady institution to move beyond archaic banquets and teas and instead serve the country with ungendered substance and ability.

It is clear that the office has benefitted significantly from second-wave feminism. This truth begs the question of whether or not the first ladyship has advanced feminism in return. Certainly there are aspects of the position that are fundamentally at odds with feminist objectives, the most inimical being that she derives her primary importance from the man to whom she is married. Additionally, the post and its relationship to the president enforce patriarchal and heteronormative understandings of marriage. The President, thus far always male, harnesses power and authority and exerts both over the public sphere. The First Lady, thus far always female, tends to the domestic realm and facilitates her husband's ambition. She is evaluated more often by her physical appearance, gender role modeling, and conformance to superficial stereotypes than by her work, intellect, or character. Her public expectations are anchored in generalized, even essentialist, conceptions of women and wives.²⁹¹ As is reflected in its title alone, the office of the first lady accommodates a certain imagined ideal of femininity, one founded in dress, decorum, and humble gentility, that reminds a woman that she is always a "lady" before she is anything else.

There is another angle, however, from which this anomalous and anachronistic, yet enduring, political figure and public symbol can be interpreted. During a time in the nation's past when women were barred or discouraged from participation in public life, the first lady asserted a female presence in the top echelon of American government. Though not all wished or were permitted to engage in

²⁹¹ Borrelli, *The Politics of the President's Wife*, 3.

politics, few first ladies cannot claim some meaningful influence on their husbands and their administrations. The fact that the first ladyship has no formal description allows each woman who serves it to define it however she chooses. She may follow the course of Mamie Eisenhower, who boasted that “Ike runs the country and I turn the lamb chops,” or that of Hillary Rodham Clinton, who crafted public policy and declared she had “absolutely nothing to apologize for.”²⁹² The choice to be political or apolitical, traditional or revolutionary, career woman, housewife, or both, is ultimately left to her.

Legal decisions regarding the president’s wife and her work have had substantial positive implications for American women and the future of the first ladyship as well. The ruling in the 1993 *Association of American Physicians and Surgeons v. Clinton* case, which was provoked by Mrs. Rodham Clinton’s leadership role in national healthcare reform and revolved around the question of the first lady’s federal status, declared the first lady the “functional equivalent” of a full-time government officer.²⁹³ The court recognized that, “[h]istory, legislative enactments, and practical realities place this First Lady and all First Ladies among the President’s closest advisors and government ‘insiders.’”²⁹⁴ In doing so, it confirmed the political value and historical significance not only of Hillary Rodham Clinton and her predecessors but of the work women perform and have traditionally performed within the private sphere as well. Mrs. Rodham Clinton’s post-First Lady political success suggests that

²⁹² Elisabeth Bumiller, "White House Letter; out of Lamb Chop Pan and into Fire," *New York Times*, June 10, 2002; David Maraniss, "First Lady of Paradox," *Washington Post*, January 15, 1995.

²⁹³ Borrelli, "The First Lady as Formal Advisor to the President: When East (Wing) Meets West (Wing)," 31.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

the American people, in addition to the court, have come to acknowledge the importance of the president's spouse. When she announced her historic candidacy for a New York Senate seat in 1999 and for the presidency in 2008, she cited her accomplishments and experiences as First Lady of the Clinton administration as qualifications for holding elected office of her own.²⁹⁵ Her victories reflected a public respect and appreciation for the institution and the skills it demands that has often evaded it throughout history. Legal and popular acknowledgements of the significant impact private sphere work has on public life represent a major step forward towards the realization of feminist goals. The validation and legitimization of duties performed in the home is a necessary foundation for the construction of a truly liberated society.

Since its conception, the American first ladyship has never been static. As the nation's citizens, ideals, and institutions have evolved, so too has it. The public responsibilities, political power, and cultural roles associated with the first lady have all changed with time. Once purely ceremonial, she is now highly politicized; once a private citizen, she is now a federal institution. It cannot be long before America welcomes its first man to the office of the first lady. And when it does, what will that mean for the future of the institution? Will he be expected to serve as the nation's hostess and care for the First Family? Will the media frame him as a malicious Lady Macbeth? Will the post exist at all? Perhaps only once America greets its first male presidential spouse will the gendered constraints on the office be lifted. In a bit of historical irony, it may only be in the power of a man to finally set the first lady free.

²⁹⁵ Raymond Hernandez and Patrick Healy, "The Evolution of Hillary Clinton: From Seeking Major Change at Once to Taking Small Steps," *New York Times*, July 13, 2005.

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