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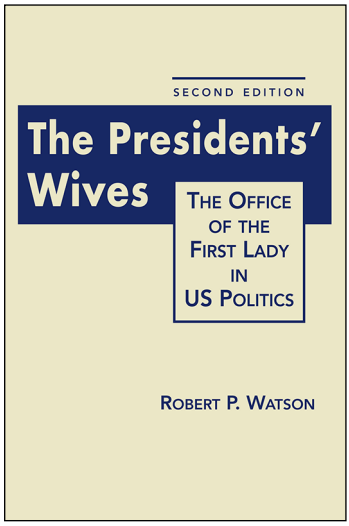
The Presidents' Wives: The Office of the First Lady in US Politics

SECOND EDITION

Robert P. Watson



ISBNs: 978-1-62637-162-0 hc

LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Suite 314
Boulder, CO 80301 USA
telephone 303.444.6684
fax 303.444.0824

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Behind Every Successful Man

The failure of political scientists and historians to consider the political role of first ladies neglects the role of a key player in the president's inner circle.
—Karen O'Connor, Bernadette Nye, and Laura Van Assendelft,
Presidential Studies Quarterly

Conventional wisdom has suggested that first ladies have not occupied a central position in political affairs or American history and have functioned as little more than feminine window dressing to the presidency. This notion, of course, could not be further from the truth. Case in point: in the early 1920s, long before the country experienced Hillary Rodham Clinton, the epitome of the modern, activist first lady, and a dozen years before the reign of Eleanor Roosevelt, widely considered to be the first influential White House spouse, there was Florence Harding.

The Power Behind the Throne

History has recorded many bold—even shocking—comments made by Mrs. Harding. For instance, on the eve of Warren Harding's ascension to the nation's highest office, it is said that she remarked to her husband, "Well, Warren, I have got you the presidency, what are you going to do with it?"[1] On another occasion, she quipped within earshot of reporters and the public, "I know what's best for the President, I put him in the White House."[2] Consequently, during Harding's presidency, political cartoonists depicted the couple as "the Chief Executive and *Mr.* Harding." If these quotes are accurate—and there is reliable documentary evidence that they are—then it

Frances Cleveland and the ladies of the cabinet, 1897 (collection of the Library of Congress).

is time to reassess the roles and influence of first ladies. Or are Mrs. Harding's words and the actions underlying them simply gross aberrations in American history?

One does not have to look far for the answer. Consider the administration of President Harding's predecessor, Woodrow Wilson. At the close of World War I, President Wilson, accompanied by his wife, Edith, traveled to Paris to sign the Treaty of Versailles. After signing the treaty on June 28, 1919, Wilson sought to establish the League of Nations, an organization that he hoped would ensure world peace. He took with him for the task his wife and not key members of Congress. Although the president was successful abroad, he encountered opposition back home from isolationist Republicans in the US Senate, a group whose support he would need if the treaty were to have any chance of being ratified. Therefore, in an effort to build popular support for the League and counter Republican opposition, Wilson, again accompanied by his wife, initiated a whistle-stop campaign across the country in September of that year.

The president approached the task with vigor. The League of Nations was, after all, his baby; he was the chief architect and visionary at Versailles. However, already weak and exhausted by the hectic schedule, the president suffered a stroke on October 2, 1919, after a speech in Pueblo,

Colorado, and nearly died. The debilitating stroke left Wilson partially paralyzed, largely bedridden, and unable to perform the duties of the presidency for many months. The treaty languished and ultimately failed to be ratified. The United States would not become a signatory nation of the very institution it promoted.

But, rather than resign the presidency or pass the powers of the office to Thomas Riley Marshall, his politically weak vice president, Wilson turned to his wife. Edith Wilson discouraged her husband from resigning and not only supported him morally and physically but also carried out many of the tasks of the presidency during his long, slow convalescence. President Wilson remained in office but also remained in almost complete seclusion through the year 1920. In fact, it was not until April 1920 that the president met formally with his cabinet. During this time, Edith screened her husband's visitors, served as an intermediary between the president and his cabinet, and consulted with Wilson's advisers and cabinet secretaries about policy matters. In short, the first lady functioned as a co-president and associate commander-in-chief during a critical period in world history.

Ignoring public epithets of "Her Regency" and "President-in-Fact," Edith withheld the severity of her husband's illness from the public, denied government officials and the press access to the president, and continued functioning as surrogate president.[3] The many denouncements of her actions do, however, serve as testimony to the central role this first lady played during her husband's critical rehabilitation. Yet the story that history has overlooked is that, even before the stroke, Edith functioned as Woodrow Wilson's most trusted adviser and member of "The Inquiry," Wilson's inner circle of advisers and policymakers.

Despite his lifelong opposition to women's suffrage, Wilson appears to have softened on the issue because of his wife's support for women's rights. Ironically, even while he and Edith were dating, only months after the death of his first wife, Ellen, the president showed great carelessness and risked controversy by revealing secrets of "The Great War" to his new companion. He even enlisted her assistance in encoding and decoding sensitive White House wartime correspondence, which violated national security protocol and law.[4]

There are some noteworthy ironies and important lessons behind Edith Wilson's story, one of them being the fact that Woodrow Wilson is widely viewed to have been a stubbornly independent individual and a strong leader. He was the president, after all, and preferred rather to not join his brainchild—the League of Nations—than to compromise with his Republican opponents in the Senate on "his" vision for "his" organization. Considered one of the ten greatest presidents by most historians,[5] Wilson was not

known for taking the advice of others or for being much of a team player. Yet he regularly took his wife's advice and briefed her on the most intimate details of public policy and the war. Perhaps the most compelling irony of Mrs. Wilson's role in her husband's presidency is that her stewardship of the office during Woodrow Wilson's difficult convalescence occurred in 1919, the year *prior* to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which gave women the legal right to vote.

Long before Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, Bill and Hillary Clinton, or Barack and Michelle Obama, the Wilsons emerged as a political team and partners in the presidency. The lesson of Edith Wilson's actions is that, although hers are just the most obvious example, first ladies have often functioned as a power behind the throne of the US presidency. Indeed, many first couples have functioned as "presidential partners," and these partnerships have played a profound role in shaping American history. It is undeniable that the first ladies' fingerprints are all over American history.

A New View of the Presidents' Wives

Broad public interest in the first ladyship grew during the tenure of the popular Jacqueline Kennedy. Serious scholarly attention to the institution and those individuals occupying what has emerged as an unofficial "office" took longer; it started in the late 1980s and has grown during subsequent years.[6] For instance, in April 1984, a conference titled "Modern First Ladies: Private Lives and Public Duties" was held at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. This groundbreaking scholarly meeting turned into a three-decade series of events dedicated to honoring and studying the first ladies, with the library's sister institution, the Ford Presidential Museum in Grand Rapids, hosting a recent program titled "America's First Ladies: An Enduring Legacy" in April 2013.

In 1985, NBC aired a one-hour prime-time special on Nancy Reagan's life as first lady. Today there are a growing number of video, television, and online documentaries of the first ladies to complement the vast collection of presidential documentaries. As part of its "Biography" series, for instance, the A&E network produced video biographies on the lives of several first ladies, including Jackie Kennedy and Hillary Clinton. The following decade—on June 8, 1998, to be exact—the National First Ladies' Library opened in Canton, Ohio. The library's main office was the historic Saxton McKinley House, the former residence of First Lady Ida Saxton McKinley. This facility is dedicated to the lives and legacies of America's first ladies and houses a growing collection of archival data on its shelves and website. And such events, institutions, and programs are no longer unique. Indeed,

in 2013 and 2014, C-SPAN aired a successful series titled "First Ladies: Influence and Image" that devoted an entire episode to every first lady.

Today the First Lady Portrait Gallery, located on the ground-floor corridor in the White House, is a popular attraction for visitors to the White House, and a tribute to the lives and service of the presidential spouses. But perhaps the most telling testimony to the changing public and scholarly perspectives on the first lady exists at the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History.

The old exhibit showcased the inaugural gowns of first ladies. Ironically, this original display was itself somewhat trailblazing, being one of the first and only exhibits in the Smithsonian dedicated solely to women. The Smithsonian dress collection was begun in 1912 by Cassie Myers James and Rose Gouverneur Hoes (a descendent of James Monroe), when they began tracking down the gowns worn by first ladies. The Smithsonian Department of Conservation then undertook a major examination of how the gowns were used by each first lady, the types of fabric in the dresses, and the details of their design. The gowns were restored to their original look. It was an instant hit. From the date of its unveiling, crowds flocked to the display.

They still do. But the Smithsonian's long-standing, popular First Ladies Exhibit was revised in 1987 to capture the essence and complexity of the first ladyship by documenting the many roles of the first lady and highlighting the political activities and achievements of these women.[7] Yet, the popularity of the original Smithsonian display endures and is a tribute to the duality of the institution as both a political and a social office, one simultaneously bound by history and tradition, yet evolving with women's roles in society and the necessities of presidential politics.

Near the Smithsonian's first ladies' exhibit, during Hillary Clinton's first term as first lady, a $1,000-a-plate fundraiser was held at the US National Botanical Garden in honor of the new National Garden in Washington, DC, a monument dedicated to the first ladies. Former first ladies Lady Bird Johnson, Betty Ford, Rosalynn Carter, Nancy Reagan, and Barbara Bush joined Mrs. Clinton in a media ceremony that was a showcase for the first ladies as much as a dedication for the new National Garden. The garden has now taken its place on the capital city's Mall near Independence Avenue in a city full of monuments to national achievements, public service, and political leaders.

When the William J. Clinton Presidential Library opened in Arkansas in 2004, the event was attended not only by living presidents, but by their wives as well, and the library and museum boasted photographs, collections, and exhibits not only on President Clinton, but on Mrs. Clinton's life and years in the White House as well. The same can be said of the opening of the George W. Bush Presidential Library in 2013 in Texas, where former

presidents as well as first ladies again gathered to commemorate the occasion. The Bush Library also contains extensive information on First Lady Laura Bush's life and public career.

Educators slowly began to take an interest in the wives of the presidents. For example, Louisiana State University at Shreveport dedicated its 1997 American Studies Summer Institute to the topic "First Couples in the White House: Presidents and Spouses." The theme for the institute in 1998 was "George *and* Martha Washington."[8] In the first decade of the twenty-first century, professional academic conferences in the fields of political science, history, communication, and women's studies began to include an occasional presentation on the first ladies, and scholarly journals in the same disciplines are now publishing articles on the topic.[9]

The first lady long ago arrived on the public stage. She has finally followed suit in the eyes of scholars and, ever so begrudgingly, in the American political establishment.

Worthy Public Figures

This interest in the first lady's roles and activities was seen during the 1988 presidential campaign when a "forum" between the prospective first ladies was proposed early in the campaign season, signaling the political relevance of candidates' spouses. Political pundits even joked that the two presidential candidates—George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis—were nowhere nearly as interesting or as capable as their wives. In fact, the entire field of prospective first ladies in the 1988 presidential race was so impressive that the public and media outlets took notice. It even occasioned a rethinking of how we viewed these spouses' early predecessors.

Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis's wife, Kitty, had lectured at Harvard University. Both Hattie Babbitt, the wife of Bruce Babbitt, former Democratic governor of Arizona, and Jeanne Simon, wife of Senator Paul Simon (D-IL), were lawyers. Al Gore's wife, Tipper, was an author, and Jill Jacobs, the spouse of Joseph Biden, a senator from Delaware (and future vice president), was pursuing her second master's degree during his candidacy and retained her maiden name then. After the campaign, Dr. Jill Biden, a career teacher, worked as a professor at a community college. Contrary to conventional wisdom, it was not only the Democratic wives who wowed audiences. Elise du Pont, the spouse of Pierre "Pete" du Pont, who entered the Republican presidential race in 1988, was also a lawyer.

The 1988 field was no anomaly in American history. The pages of this book are filled with stories of active, accomplished wives of the early presidents. In recent years, many other spouses of presidential hopefuls have

had successful careers of their own and lived noteworthy lives. Another tip-of-the-hat to first ladies came in 1996, when a second debate was proposed between the presidential candidates' wives. Both spouses—Hillary Rodham Clinton and Elizabeth Dole—were well-known and powerful public figures who held law degrees from prestigious universities. Elizabeth Dole was a former cabinet secretary in both the Reagan and Bush administrations, and Hillary Clinton had been recognized as one of the nation's most influential attorneys. And the trend has continued. The Yale-educated attorney Hillary Clinton was followed in office by Laura Bush, a woman with a master's degree from the University of Texas, and, after her, Michelle Obama, another Ivy League attorney and former hospital vice president.

The interest in the presidents' wives continues to grow as the public, the press, and scholars realize the social and political influence first ladies have wielded throughout history. The growing body of scholarship on the first ladies (which will be discussed in Chapter 2) has revealed the trials and tribulations of being wife to the president, shed light on the role of the first lady in presidential decisionmaking, and offered some insightful tales of the shaping of the nation. In the lives of the presidents' wives we find tragedy as well as triumph, and extraordinary feats as well as ordinary events, in their performance of what is perhaps the second most difficult job in the world—and the most difficult unpaid position.

Given the media's superficial coverage of the first ladies, it is doubtful that the public has fully appreciated the extent of influence and sacrifice of the women of the White House and the degree to which first ladies have shaped American history. Unfortunately, accounts of first ladies by the media have focused almost exclusively on scandal and controversy, their taste in clothing, or the traditional functions of the office such as social hosting. First ladies typically have been portrayed as little more than an ornamental part of the presidency, presented simply as social hand-shakers and loyal wives. The public therefore often knows more about the first lady's latest hairstyle and taste in fashion than about her political beliefs and official influence in Washington.

Scholars have not helped. Much about the lives and contributions of the nation's first ladies historically has gone unreported. The lion's share of presidential biographies and studies of the White House have viewed the presidents' wives as trivial and not worthy of serious scholarly attention.[10] Yet, dating back to Abigail Adams, spouse of the second president, or perhaps even to Martha Washington, the influence of first ladies on national events and presidential decisionmaking has been much more profound than we have been led to believe. Many capable and influential women have resided in the White House. They have functioned as the presidents' most trusted political confidantes and policy advisers, hosted formal affairs of

state and renovated the White House, and raised families and supported their husbands through the challenges of the presidency. Even Hillary Clinton, widely described in the media as a "brand new" type of first lady, was less the trailblazing activist than simply the latest in a long line of White House spouses who have served their husbands and nation as presidential partners.

First Ladies Around the World

Eva "Evita" Duarte Perón (1919–1952)
The infamous Evita was born of very modest means in Argentina. Highly ambitious even at a young age, Eva moved to the capital city, Buenos Aires, where she embarked on a career as a film and radio actor. Eva caught the attention of several rising political and military leaders, including Juan Perón, who became president of Argentina in 1945, in part because of Eva's determination and political acumen. As first lady, Eva championed the "shirtless" masses of Argentina and asserted herself as the power behind the Perón administration. Eva traveled around the nation building her husband's popularity and her own base of support, which exceeded that of her husband among the middle and lower classes. Her obsession with power and hard work succeeded in forming the Feminist Peronist Party, which promoted women's suffrage, gave voice to the downtrodden masses, and established Eva's own welfare foundation as the largest in the country. Upon her untimely death in 1952, she was seen as a saint by Argentina's poor, who identified with Evita's rags-to-riches story.

Princess Grace of Monaco (1929–1982)
Grace Kelly was already famous when she married Prince Rainier in 1956. A wealthy, glamorous figure, Kelly was a successful Hollywood actress who had an Academy award to her film credits. After becoming Princess Grace of Monaco, she immediately made her presence known, becoming a leader in the cultural life of the principality, a champion of many charities, including several children's organizations and the famous Princess Grace Foundation, and head of Monaco's Red Cross. Although not born of royal blood, Grace successfully performed her duties as a princess. Because of her work, Monaco achieved fame as an international cultural center. Unfortunately, Princess Grace's story met a tragic end when she died in a car accident.

Madame Chiang Kai-Shek (Soong Meiling) (1897–2003)
Perhaps the most powerful woman in modern China, Soong Meiling received an education in the United States, graduating from Wellesley College in

(continues)

First Ladies Around the World Continued

1917. In 1927, Soong became the second wife of Nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-Shek. Throughout their long marriage, Soong served as his most influential adviser, softening his militaristic ambitions and introducing him to Western culture and politics. She even served in a formal capacity as head of the Chinese Commission on Aeronautical Affairs. Madame Chiang Kai-Shek's influence extended beyond the Great Wall when, during a 1943 visit to the United States, she became only the second woman and the first person from China to address a joint session of the Congress. Soong was intelligent, the author of numerous works, and dedicated to the support of wounded soldiers, women, orphans, and war relief. But perhaps her most remarkable accomplishment came in 1936 after her husband was kidnapped in Xi'an, when she risked her life by personally negotiating with Chiang's kidnappers for his release. She was successful.

Imelda Romualdez Marcos (1930–)

A former beauty queen, Imelda married Ferdinand Marcos in 1954. As first lady of the Philippines during her husband's rule from 1966 to 1986, Imelda was widely recognized as one of the most powerful politicians in her country and its leading diplomat during her extensive international travels. She served her country in several formal positions, including as governor of Metro Manila and as an elected member of the National Assembly. She oversaw government spending on a variety of projects and, like her dictator husband, became embroiled in scandals of fraud, corruption, and worse, which ultimately caused the couple to flee their country. After Ferdinand's death in 1989, Imelda returned from her exile in Hawaii, whereupon she ran unsuccessfully for the Philippine presidency but successfully for a seat in the legislature.

Raisa Maximovna Gorbachev (1932–1999)

Whereas the wives of previous Soviet leaders were rather unremarkable, drab women who served in obscurity, Raisa Gorbachev was a media-savvy, "Western-style" woman who earned an advanced degree at Moscow State Pedagogical Institute and even taught at Moscow State University. As was true of many of her American first lady counterparts, Raisa came from a powerful family. Her marriage to Mikhail in 1954 helped advance his career, as Raisa accompanied her husband during his travels and appears to have been one of his most trusted confidantes. While he is remembered for presiding over the collapse of the Soviet Union, during which time his actions quite possibly averted a nuclear confrontation with the United States, his wife is remembered for her modern approach to the office and for providing counsel to her husband during the critical closing chapter of the Cold War.

The Title of "First Lady"

Until relatively recently, little study focused on the basic questions surrounding the first ladyship, including who can technically be considered a first lady. Moreover, the origins of the title remain unclear. Indeed, the genesis of the title "first lady" remains a point of contention, with competing theories and arguments surrounding its development.[11]

Origins and Early Usage

There are numerous claims as to the exact date of the first use of the term "first lady" in the United States. These tend to encompass four basic arguments, each of which corresponds to a different period in time, with the first three centering around the Civil War. First is the "prewar thesis," which points to the year 1849 as the time the title was first used. Second is the "Civil War thesis," an argument that questions the veracity of the prewar date and its alleged usage, and generally places the initial use of the title around the time of the war itself (1861–1865). Third is the "postwar thesis," which places both the origin of the title and its growing popularity in the decade of the 1870s. And fourth is the "twentieth-century thesis," which identifies the early 1900s as the period when widespread use of the title began.

According to advocates of the prewar thesis, the earliest reference to the first lady dates back to 1849 when, at the death of Dolley Madison, President Zachary Taylor referred to her as "our first lady for a half-century" during her eulogy.[12] Although Taylor did use the term, it is believed by some scholars that he did not intend for the expression to be used as a title, but simply as a description of Mrs. Madison's esteemed status. If this was in fact the origin of the title, it appears not to have gained widespread acceptance for some time. Nor was the title "first lady" used during Dolley Madison's service in the White House.

There are few historical accounts of the title being used during the period leading up to and during the Civil War. On May 8, 1858, the magazine *Harper's Weekly* published a likeness of Harriet Lane, niece and White House hostess for bachelor president James Buchanan, with a caption reading "Our Lady of the White House."[13] However, *Harper's* did not used the title "first lady," and the term "lady of the White House" did not endure.

On March 31, 1860, Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper* used the term "first lady" in reference to Miss Lane. This may mark the first time the title was used to describe the hostess of the White House while she was living. Yet, because Harriet Lane was the niece of the president, the title had not yet been used for a living wife of the president. The latter usage would

occur a year later, in 1861, when both the *New York Herald* and *Sacramento Union* newspapers spoke of Mary Todd Lincoln as "First Lady."[14] According to scholar Betty Boyd Caroli, the title may ironically have first been used during the Civil War by British journalists in describing Jefferson Davis's wife, Varina, as "First Lady of the Confederacy."[15] The Civil War thesis is also supported by historian Gil Troy, who places the date for the first use of the term at 1863.[16]

In 1870, journalist Emily Briggs, writing under the pen name "Olivia," called Julia Grant the "First Lady" in a newspaper column.[17] This occurrence is mentioned by presidential historian Stephen Robertson as a possible point of origin for the title.[18] Still other scholars of the presidency and first ladyship identify 1877 as the year the title was initiated.[19] Proponents of this thesis claim that reporter Mary Clemmer Ames, in an article about Rutherford B. Hayes in the newspaper *The Independent,* referred to Lucy Hayes as "First Lady of the Land" in reference to a recent cross-country trip Mrs. Hayes had taken.[20]

Historian Stanley Pillsbury, writing in the *Dictionary of American History,* also uses 1877 as the date of origin, but maintains that the term "first lady" was first used to describe Lucy Webb Hayes at her husband's inauguration.[21] The advocates of the postwar thesis maintain that, even though the words "first lady" may have occasionally been mentioned prior to the 1870s, it was in the 1880s that the title appears to have gained some degree of popularity.

Arguments for the twentieth-century thesis often credit a 1911 play by Charles F. Nirdlinger, *The First Lady of the Land,* about First Lady Dolley Madison, for popularizing the title "first lady" among the general public and in the press.[22] Another theater production, in 1935 by Katherine Dayton and George S. Kaufman titled *First Lady,* further solidified the term's acceptance by a wide audience. And the title stuck.

If Not "First Lady," What?

Prior to use of the title "first lady," the presidents' wives were known by a variety of formalities. For example, Martha Washington was addressed as "Lady Washington," a term reflecting the period's popular equivocation to royalty. The second presidential spouse, Abigail Adams, was called "Mrs. President" or "Her Majesty," titles that were, at times, used disparagingly by the political enemies of John and Abigail Adams.[23] Mrs. Adams was, after all, a very early partner in her husband's presidency and a role model for much later activist spouses. As is still the case today, many people were simply uncomfortable with assertive, political first ladies. Dolley Madison was occasionally called "Lady Presidentress," which was widely used as a

term of endearment and honor for this very popular first lady. And Harriet Lane, though technically not a first lady (she was bachelor president James Buchanan's niece), was even known as the "Democratic Queen."

With the exception of the last title, such royalist terms disappeared in the 1830s with the rise of Jacksonian democracy and the era of the "common man." This period favored more humble terms for the spouse of the president, such as simply "Mrs.," in keeping with the democratic spirit of the young nation.[24] Contemporary critics of "activist" first ladies, such as historian Gil Troy, echo these sentiments, seeing the title and office as too regal, especially for what is essentially an "extra-Constitutional improvisation."[25] The list of critics also includes several first ladies who have been uncomfortable with the title. For example, despite the image of the American Camelot she and her husband projected, Jacqueline Kennedy so disliked the title "first lady" that she forbade the White House staff from using it altogether.[26] However, first ladies such as Barbara Bush preferred "first lady" to other titles, while Michelle Obama humbly joked that she was just the "first mom."[27]

Irrespective of the origins of "first lady," today the title is commonly used by the public, the press, and even the White House. Beginning with Webster's *New International Dictionary* in 1934, dictionaries began acknowledging the title. By the 1960s, the title was even used to refer to leading or powerful women in a variety of professions and to the spouses of state governors. Today, the title is also used internationally to describe the spouses of male political heads of state.

Interestingly, however, the *Congressional Directory,* a who's who listing of everyone working in official Washington politics, published every year since 1834, did not even list the first lady until the March 1965 edition. Even more remarkable is that the 1953 edition lists a secretary named Mary Jane McCaffree as the "Acting Secretary to Wife of the President," although it omits First Lady Mamie Eisenhower from the directory.[28] Such examples point to the uphill struggle first ladies have faced in gaining respect for their public service, and to the general neglect historically of the office by the press and the political establishment.

Despite widespread use of the title "first lady" today, it may be in need of another change. In modern times, the term "lady" is almost never used in day-to-day conversation, in print, or even in formal settings, especially in the United States. It is a dated term that conjures up images of a privileged, primping aristocracy and the Old World. In such times, "lady" carried with it a set of expectations, including that of refraining from any sort of political activity, an arrangement quite at odds with the realities of modern society. Moreover, it appears inevitable that a married, heterosexual woman will one day be elected to the presidency, and thus her husband's service

will make the title obsolete. It seems that the title "presidential spouse" or "first spouse," or even "presidential mate" or "presidential partner," may soon by necessity replace "first lady." In this book, the title "first lady" is used for historical accuracy and familiarity, but the title "presidential spouse" (or even "partner" if an unmarried president serves) is recommended for future adoption.

In Service of Their Country

Among the first ladies of the United States have been women of affluence and high social standing, individuals well educated for their times, and those with a variety of talents, musical, linguistic, artistic, and otherwise. There have also been mothers, grandmothers, and women of modest birth. Some first ladies have been unlikely public figures; others seem to have lived a life designed to prepare them for the office. Of course, there have been successes and failures, both in and out of office. There are also many fascinating, unusual, and inspiring accounts of real women facing seemingly insurmountable challenges.

A total of five presidential spouses have died prior to their husband's tenure in the White House: Martha Jefferson, Rachel Jackson, Hannah Van Buren, Ellen Arthur, and Alice Roosevelt. All of these deceased spouses, however, had spent many years married to their husbands and were helpmates in their husbands' lives and careers. Three first ladies have died in the White House during their first ladyships: Letitia Tyler, Caroline Harrison, and Ellen Wilson.

Interestingly, all three of these widower presidents would later remarry, two while still in the White House: John Tyler and Woodrow Wilson. Two first ladies who outlived their president husbands would also remarry in the years after the White House: Frances Cleveland and Jackie Kennedy, both of whom were considerably younger than their first husbands.

There have been a total of five incidents of divorce associated with the presidential marriage, all occurring before the couples' presidential years. Three eventual first ladies—Rachel Donelson (Jackson), Florence Kling (Harding), and Betty Bloomer (Ford)—were divorcees when they married their second husbands. President Ronald Reagan's first wife, Jane Wyman, was previously divorced. Reagan and Wyman later divorced before Reagan married Nancy Davis and went on to become the president. This makes Reagan the only divorced president in history.

Three first ladies, the early "Founding Mothers" of the nation, were widows when they met their future-president husbands: Martha Washington, Martha Jefferson, and Dolley Madison. Some first ladies, such as these

three, and the divorced Florence Harding, brought children from previous marriages into their presidential marriages. Most first ladies have outlived their husbands. Four first ladies were widowed as a direct result of their husbands' service as president (Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, and Kennedy were assassinated in office). Four others were widowed perhaps as an indirect result of that service (W. H. Harrison, Taylor, Harding, and F. D. Roosevelt died in office of natural causes).

The Price of Service

First ladies do not receive a salary for their service. The idea has, however, been proposed from time to time and was even championed by Rosalynn Carter and Betty Ford. Such efforts, including a 1946 proposal by Representative James G. Fulton of Pennsylvania, have been defeated. Still, first ladies enjoy many tangible benefits during their service, not least of which is living in the White House, a mansion filled with historical works of art and Americana and staffed with skilled chefs, butlers, and a number of personal attendants. There is also the fame that comes from being the spouse of the president, even though this fame is often a mixed blessing. Dolley Madison, even after her husband's death, was invited by a unanimous vote in Congress to be seated on the floor of the legislature rather than in the visitor's gallery during her visits to the Capitol.

One form of official recognition for a first lady's service is a government pension. Interestingly, the first lady's pension predated the granting of pensions to presidents. The first presidential spouse to receive a pension after her husband's death was Anna Harrison, who, on June 30, 1841, received $25,000, an amount equal to the president's salary at the time. Mrs. Harrison received this onetime payment because her husband had died in office.

Before President Harrison's death, widowed first ladies had been forced to support themselves. Martha Washington, who outlived her husband by two years, was fortunate enough to inherit great wealth and landholdings. After the death of James Madison, Dolley organized her husband's papers that she had earlier saved from a fire at Montpelier (the Madison home) and appealed to President Andrew Jackson and the Congress to purchase the Madison presidential papers for the National Archives. The papers were bought for $30,000, in part because of their historical importance, but also in part because of Dolley's popularity and powers of persuasion.

Mary Todd Lincoln also received a onetime pension, in the amount of $25,000 on December 21, 1865, also because her husband had died in office. After her subsequent bankruptcy, this amount was amended to $3,000 per year on July 14, 1870. The fight for Mary's annual pension was led by the powerful senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. The $3,000

The Presidential Marriage: Number of Years Married Prior to Serving in the White House

You can't have been together for almost thirty years without being an influence on each other.
—President Ronald Reagan speaking of his wife, Nancy

George and Martha Washington: 30.3
John and Abigail Adams: 32.3
Thomas and Martha Jefferson: (10.5 prior to Martha's death)
James and Dolley Madison: 14.5
James and Elizabeth Monroe: 41
John Q. and Louisa Adams: 27.5
Andrew and Rachel Jackson: (37.5 prior to Rachel's death)
Martin and Hannah Van Buren: (12 prior to Hannah's death)
William and Anna Harrison: 45.25
John and Letitia Tyler: 28
John and Julia Tyler: 0 (married while John was president)
James and Sarah Polk: 21
Zachary and Margaret Taylor: 38.75
Millard and Abigail Fillmore: 24.5
Franklin and Jane Pierce: 18.3
Abraham and Mary Lincoln: 18.5
Andrew and Eliza Johnson: 37.75
Ulysses and Julia Grant: 20.5
Rutherford and Lucy Hayes: 24
James and Lucretia Garfield: 22.25
Chester and Ellen Arthur: (20 prior to Ellen's death)
Grover and Frances Cleveland: 0 (married while Grover was president)
Benjamin and Caroline Harrison: 35.25
William and Ida McKinley: 26
Teddy and Edith Roosevelt: 14.75
Howard and Helen Taft: 22.75
Woodrow and Ellen Wilson: 27.6
Woodrow and Edith Wilson: 0 (married while Woodrow was president)
Warren and Florence Harding: 29.6
Calvin and Grace Coolidge: 18
Herbert and Lou Hoover: 30
Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: 28
Harry and Bess Truman: 26
Ike and Mamie Eisenhower: 35.5
John and Jackie Kennedy: 7.3
Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson: 29
Richard and Pat Nixon: 28.5
Gerald and Betty Ford: 23
Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter: 30.5
Ronald and Nancy Reagan: 29
George and Barbara Bush: 45
Bill and Hillary Clinton: 17.25
George and Laura Bush: 24
Barack and Michelle Obama: 17

pension was increased to $5,000 annually on February 2, 1882. Former first lady Julia Tyler, after her husband died in 1862, struggled financially while supporting the South during the Civil War. Julia lobbied Congress for a pension in 1879, and received a monthly allocation in 1880.

The issue of financial support for first ladies arose again in 1881 with the assassination of President James Garfield. Congressional action on March 31, 1882, granted $5,000 annual pensions to living, widowed former first ladies, including Lucretia Garfield, Sarah Polk, and Julia Tyler. The pensions were administered by the US secretary of interior. This established the precedent of granting pensions to all widowed first ladies, regardless of the cause of the president's death or whether it occurs in or out of the White House. (Frances Cleveland, who remained quite wealthy and remarried after the death of Grover Cleveland, turned down her $5,000 annual pension.) This practice has continued through the twentieth century. In 1958, Congress passed legislation that reinforced the granting of pensions to presidential widows. On January 8, 1971, the pension for a widowed first lady was increased to $20,000 per year, an amount that becomes void if she remarries before the age of sixty.[29]

There are other examples of formal recognition of the office of the first lady. A congressional act on April 3, 1800, provided presidential widows with use of free mail for life. This has since been amended; yet, through special legislation, several former first ladies have been granted what is known as the "franking privilege," or free use of public mailings.

The first lady and first family also receive Secret Service protection both in and out of the White House, as well as after their presidential years. In 1965, widows of presidents and their children under the age of sixteen were also granted Secret Service protection. In 1968, the Secret Service started guarding presidential candidates and, since 1976, the candidates' wives and families have been included in this detail. In 1996, the coverage was amended so that former presidents, first ladies, and their children under the age of sixteen receive protection for ten years only rather than for life. Bill Clinton, because he was the sitting president at the time of the change, was the last president to receive lifetime protection. However, any former president or first lady can request additional protection, just as sitting presidents can order protection for former occupants of the White House or other senior officials.

Some first ladies, such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Rosalynn Carter, were displeased with the constant security attention and therefore attempted to reduce their Secret Service contingency in the name of privacy. In recent years, Secret Service detachments have been increased, testimony to, ironically, both the importance of, and the dangers inherent in, the office of the first lady.

Service Since the Founding

The exceptional women who have served as first ladies date to the founding of the nation. Martha Dandridge Custis was a very wealthy and well-known widow, estimated to have been worth approximately $100,000 (a considerable amount of money in the mid–eighteenth century) at the time of her marriage to George Washington. Her second husband-to-be was an ambitious soldier, but he lacked a formal education and his social graces were somewhat unrefined compared to the standards of the very same Virginia aristocracy to which he aspired to belong. In marrying the widow Martha Custis, George Washington thereby gained considerable wealth, vast landholdings, and access to the upper echelons of Virginia society—the very connections he would later need to lead the nation.

Throughout their lives together, the Washingtons shared a partnership based on mutual respect and admiration. Whether it was at Valley Forge during the most critical moments of the Revolutionary War or while hosting the formal events of the inaugural presidency, one person was always beside George Washington, serving as a constant source of financial, social, and moral support. Indeed, Martha's fingerprints are all over George Washington's career and, thus, the founding of the nation. She was the central figure in his historic life, to the extent that, had they not married, George Washington might never have gone on to help found the new nation, lead the colonial militia in the Revolutionary War, or serve as the first president. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Notes

1. The quote by Florence Harding is discussed in C. S. Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga,* vol. 1, 1990. See also R. K. Murray, *Warren G. Harding,* 1969, which includes some general discussion of First Lady Florence Harding's influence and role in her husband's career and administration.

2. See Anthony, 1990; and Murray, 1969.

3. Edith Wilson faced severe criticism during the period after her husband's stroke. Mrs. Wilson discussed her decision to hide the severity of her husband's illness from the public and to carry on in support of him in her book *My Memoir,* 1939. In the book, she denies that she ever made a significant decision on her own. J. L. Weaver, in her article "Edith Bolling Wilson," 1985, provides an interesting assessment of Mrs. Wilson's personality and her ability to carry on despite the crisis and criticism.

4. Edith Wilson's role in such sensitive matters is discussed in Wilson, 1939. See also the informative chapters on Edith Wilson in Anthony, 1990; and L. L. Gould, *American First Ladies,* 1996.

5. There have been numerous presidential rankings, and most of them place Wilson near the top. For a discussion of these ratings, see J. P. Pfiffner, *The Modern*

Presidency, 1993; or D. A. Lonnstrom and T. O. Kelly II, "Rating the Presidents," 1997. The presidential rankings are discussed further in Chapter 7.

6. There have also been several important books written about the first ladies since 1987. Perhaps the first groundbreaking analysis of the first lady's power was B. B. Caroli, *First Ladies,* 1987. Other important books since 1987 include Anthony, 1990; C. S. Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga,* vol. 2, 1991; Gould, 1996; M. G. Gutin, *The President's Partner,* 1989; and G. Troy, *Affairs of State,* 1997.

7. The new exhibit is titled "First Ladies: Political Role, Public Image" and provides an excellent look at the many roles and contributions of the first ladies. The exhibit is also home to the always-popular collection of first ladies' gowns. Edith Mayo served as curator for the original exhibit.

8. William Pederson served as the institute's director at the conference. The event, held from June 24 to July 17, 1997, was sponsored by the Louisiana Endowment of the Humanities and provided training for educators.

9. Since 1990, a few scholarly journals have devoted articles to the first ladies, most notably *Presidential Studies Quarterly,* which dedicated half of its Fall 1990 issue (vol. 20, no. 4) to modern first ladies, and has since published a few other articles on the topic. A few other journals have also published studies of the first ladies, such as *Social Science Journal* in its 2000 special issue "The First Ladies at the Turn of the Century" (vol. 37, no. 4). Similarly, some academic conferences, such as those of the Western Political Science Association in 1996 and 1997, the Midwest Political Science Association in 1997, and the Southwestern Political Science Association in 1999, have included presentations on the first ladies.

10. Several scholars of the first ladyship and the presidency have commented on the lack of scholarly research on the subject. These include L. L. Gould, "Modern First Ladies," 1990; R. G. Hoxie, "About This Issue," 1990; E. Mayo, "The Influence and Power of First Ladies," 1993; Troy, 1997; and R. P. Watson, "The First Lady Reconsidered," 1997.

11. The Constitution does not mention the title and there is no law or job description that mandates the use of a specific title for the president's spouse.

12. This eulogy is presented and discussed as part of the Smithsonian Institution's First Ladies Exhibit at the Museum of American History.

13. As found in the Smithsonian Institution's First Ladies Exhibit.

14. Ibid.

15. Caroli, 1987.

16. Troy, 1997.

17. Emily Briggs was a journalist who covered First Lady Julia Grant and is thought to have been one of the first to use the title. A history of Grant's writings appears in Briggs's book *The Olivia Letters,* 1906.

18. S. L. Robertson, "The First Ladies," 1996.

19. Among those who point to the year 1877 as the possible origin of the term (in describing First Lady Lucy Hayes) are Caroli, 1987; D. C. Diller and S. L. Robertson, *The Presidents,* 1997; Gould, 1996; and J. S. Rosebush, *First Lady, Public Wife,* 1987.

20. Mary Clemmer Ames used the title in a newspaper column titled "A Woman's Letter from Washington," 1877.

21. See S. R. Pillsbury, "The First Lady of the Land," 1976.

22. Ibid.

23. See B. A. Weisberger, "Petticoat Government," 1993.

24. Caroli, 1987.

25. Troy, 1997.

26. Caroli, 1987; Rosebush, 1987. Several of the biographies written on Jackie Kennedy also discuss Mrs. Kennedy's distaste for the title "first lady."

27. I conducted a survey/interview with former first lady Barbara Bush on February 18, 1997, through Mrs. Bush's aide Quincy Hicks.

28. The *Congressional Directory* is published by the US Government Printing Office in Washington, DC. See the directories published in 1965 and 1953.

29. Courtesy of the White House Information Office.

President and Ida McKinley on the reviewing stand at a parade, 1899 (collection of the Library of Congress).