THE FIRST LADY'S INFLUENCE

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Like many students of politics, I was not initially attracted to the prospect of writing a paper on presidents' wives. What value could there be in studying a group of women united only by the fact that their husbands had held the same job? The 1970's and 1980's had finally focused attention on women who achieved on their own. Who, then, would want to read about women who owed their space in history books to the men they married?

My curiosity was piqued when I looked at what had been published on the subject. Even a cursory reading of the standard reference work on women revealed a striking pattern among presidents' wives. Most of them came from social and economic backgrounds significantly superior to those of the men they married. Many of the women wed in spite of strenuous parental objection to their choices, and some of the men were younger than their brides. Recurring phrases hinted that the women assumed more control over their lives than I had imagined, and I began to wonder if I had mistakenly assigned them a free and easy ride alongside their prominent husbands. Several of the wives had eased the financial burdens of their households by managing family farms, teaching school, and working as secretaries after their marriages. Other information pointed to a pattern of early exposure to politics, and I was struck by the number of uncles, fathers, and grandfathers who had at one time held political office. Perhaps the women deserved a closer look.

I did not suspect that a First Lady's opinion had much effect on the
conduct of the presidency. Certainly nothing that I read credited the First Ladies with much more than setting new fashion trends, giving elaborate parties, and being a "good wife and mother."

I began to wonder what distinguished roles First Ladies played as partners to their President-husbands. The Constitution has little to say about the scope of powers and limitations of the presidency. It has even less to say about the duties and privileges of being a First Lady.

Woodrow Wilson said, "The President is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can." The same assertion can be applied to the potentialities of the role of the highest-ranking woman in the nation. Of course, the law eliminates her from the administration of government, but what man has not found it expedient to listen to his wife's opinions?

As soon as I started examining the literature, I was intrigued. I was encouraged by the amount of material available. Because of the prominence of their husbands, First Ladies left more complete records than most of their contemporaries. Evidence of mid-nineteenth century presidents' wives is rather scant, but even the little-known Eliza Johnson, wife of the only president to be impeached, had a biographer. Several First Ladies, including Julia Grant, Helen Taft, Edith Wilson and most who lived in the White House after 1963 published their memoirs. I was convinced that all this record keeping could help find not only the First Ladies' lives but also the lives of their countrywomen. A few dozen examples from two centuries of American history cannot be taken to represent all women—no one would claim that they do—but where else could a researcher find so much material about women who moved consecutively through American history?
A handful of presidents' wives achieved great fame, but others of equal or greater interest and significance have been allowed to drop into obscurity. Nearly 170 years before Jackie Kennedy charmed Paris, James Monroe's wife was dubbed "la belle Américaine" in the French capital. Abigail Adam's injunction to John to "remember the ladies" became a familiar feminist refrain in the twentieth century, while her daughter-in-law, Louisa, wife of John Quincy Adams, was almost forgotten. Yet Louisa Adams showed considerable courage when she set out to travel alone from St. Petersburg to Paris during the Napoleonic Wars. Eleanor Roosevelt's break with precedent is well documented, especially her agreement to meet regularly with women reporters, but her predecessor, Lou Hoover, gained little credit for the feminist speeches she delivered on national radio or for the fortitude she showed in her personal life. Living in China during the Boxer Rebellion, she witnessed gun battles in front of her house but refused to show fright or to flee. Such courageous women surely deserved more attention than they had received.

I was also fascinated by the evolution of the title "First Lady." In 1789, crowds accustomed to the pomp of royal persons heralded the wife of their new president as "Lady Washington." Usage soon changed, however, because in its younger decades, when the United States reaffirmed its democratic vows and "plain folks" politics, a "First Lady" made no sense at all. Presidential campaigns that boasted of candidates' humble origins, including log cabin births and little formal schooling, could hardly fasten noble-sounding titles on the wives of the winners. The women were addressed as "Presidentress" or "Mrs. President" or, as frequently the case, not mentioned at all outside Washington.
with its chief executive grew and expectations changed. Poverty and
inexperience became somewhat less valuable stepping-stones to the highest
office; railroads and mass circulation magazines made presidents more
familiar figures across the continent. In response to a firm preference
in the United States for married men at the political helm, wives began to
travel with their husbands on official trips, and they assumed a popularity
of their own.

It is not insignificant that Lucy Hayes accompanied her husband on the
first trip a president ever took from the Atlantic Coast to the Pacific and
also heard herself hailed by a contemporary journalist, Mary Clemmer
Ames, as the "First Lady of the Land."6

George E. Reedy, Lyndon Johnson's press secretary in the 1960's, underlined
the changed focus toward interest in the first lady when he recalled a trip
to Washington D.C. he had taken in his youth. Although Calvin Coolidge
was president, Reedy admitted he had not yet heard of him, and the only
lasting memory young Reedy took away from that visit to the White House was
of having viewed Grace Coolidge's portrait.7

Aside from being there as a symbol, what is the role of a First Lady?
The Constitution mentions no assignments for the chief executive's spouse,
and yet she has become a prominent part of the presidency. Most Americans
presumably know better than the 1920's immigrant who, when queried about
who stood to succeed the president, responded "the president's wife."8
But anyone who watched television coverage of the 1985 Geneva Summit Conference
might wonder why Nancy Reagan received so much attention or why President
Reagan appeared in front of the United States Congress at the summit's end and
thanked his wife for being "an outstanding ambassador of good will for us all."
As though to lend importance to all the questions about White House
wives, the ladies have expanded their roles, while the office of vice­
president continues to have a rather ill-defined and somewhat obscure profile
and has become the subject of many jokes.

Putting such jokes aside, the First Lady, with little public debate
and no constitutional amendments, evolved a role of considerable power.
Both outspoken Eleanor Roosevelt and reticent Bess Truman were named during
their husbands' administrations as among the "most powerful people in
Washington," while the vice-presidents were conspicuously absent from such
lists. President Ford, whose wife, Betty, explained that she resorted to
"pillow talk" to convince her husband of her point of view, and admitted that
she was frequently successful. Her opinion had carried weight, he said, on
some very controversial issues, including the pardon of Richard Nixon. Rosalynn Carter admitted that the enlistment of a president's wife in
almost any project is of inestimable value. By 1986, Nancy Reagan was
credited with elevating the job of First Lady to a kind of "Associate Presidency."

Since the institution of First Lady is an American one, it seems reasonable
to ask what in the United States provided for such growth. Did a quirk in
the presidential system nurture it? Or did it develop out of American
attitudes about leaders? The answer probably lies in both areas.

The United States' presidency, that unique assignment hammered out in
the Constitutional Convention in 1787, includes two jobs that are performed
by separate individuals in other types of representative governments:
a head of state who presides over ceremonial functions, and a head of
government who makes major appointments and takes a decisive role in
legislation. The American president, charged with both tasks, frequently
resorted to sending substitutes on ceremonial and other occasions when a mere physical presence was required. Members of the president's household made excellent surrogates—they signaled the president's approval and also his continued control of government. Martha Washington began what became a tradition when she attended a New York church service while George was ill, and her example inspired her successors.\textsuperscript{11} Nearly two hundred years later, Nancy Reagan left her husband's hospital room to return to the White House and announced to guests assembled for a large reception that she was "the President's stand in."\textsuperscript{12} Political wives substituted in other ways for their spouses, sometimes maintaining a facade of civility while their husbands feuded. John Quincy Adams observed in 1824 that Andrew Jackson and William Crawford, contenders for the presidency, were avoiding each other socially but "the ladies have exchanged visits."\textsuperscript{13}

The president's living arrangements also increased his wife's role. Once the decision had been made to combine the president's official residence with his private quarters, his spouse dealt with more than just guest lists at official dinners. With a husband who "worked at home," she could not, as John Quincy Adams's wife, Louisa, liked to point out, escape knowing something about his job.

The election process provided another push into prominence for candidates' wives. Although it was considered inappropriate for women to campaign openly until well into the twentieth century, the groundwork was laid much earlier. Since presidents must seek a popular mandate rather than the approval of their party caucus as a prime minister does, they cannot rely on the contacts and trust accrued from years of working with colleagues but must go to the population at large. A stand in campaigner is always useful and enjoys
some advantages over the candidate. Rosalynn Carter went off on her own in quest of votes for Jimmy fourteen months in advance of the 1976 nomination because she recognized the need to reach many voters. Lady Bird Johnson, confident that southern chivalry would accord her courtesies not granted her husband, campaigned on her own through several states in 1964. She called campaigning "one of the bills you have to pay for the job your husband has."

Inspired by Mrs. Kennedy, I have selected other First Ladies who played vital roles in shaping their husbands' lives and, tangentially, their nations destiny. A few were responsible for prodding their reluctant husbands toward the White House. Our wartime First Ladies gave their husbands the kind of wifely support which made it possible for them to carry out their awesome responsibilities. One became "acting President" during her husband's serious illness and another became her crippled husband's "eyes and ears" during the White House years.

The one person who understands the President's every mood, and who is closest to him personally, is the First Lady. Some First Ladies did not often try to press their opinions on their husbands, especially in the early years of the nation's history when women were expected to be seen but not heard. But many did, and the ones to follow in this paper are women of strong will and nimble wit, and they made their presence felt.

The wife of a President of the United States had better have the smile of a toothpaste commercial, the endurance of a combat soldier, a strong stomach, and the patience of a saint. She must be feminine but strongminded. She must be chic but modest, nothing way-out. Impossible as it sounds, the First Ladies I have researched embodied these qualities.

I began my research looking for information on informal advisors to
the last several Presidents. What I found in every case was that the
President's wife was probably the greatest informal advisor, the head of
the "kitchen cabinet." Thus, my research changed from looking for
information on men to looking for information on these amazing First Ladies.

There seems to be a new interest in the role of First Ladies.
This was highlighted recently by the controversy that followed when Nancy
Reagan ventured her opinion of how her husband might improve his staff
after the Iran-contra story broke. Among those who weren't unduly surprised
was Professor Lewis L. Gould of the University of Texas, a nationally
recognized authority on the Presidents' wives. "Because of the historical
contributions of Eleanor Roosevelt, Lady Bird Johnson, Betty Ford, and
Rosalynn Carter the activist model for First Ladies seems firmly in place.
Mrs. Reagan's causes are conservative and less feminist, but the means by
which she follows them builds on the example and techniques of her predecessors."

Over the years the responsibilities of the First Lady increased. How did
it happen that modern Presidents' wives became more than hostesses and
passive helpmates? Each of these modern First Ladies in her exchanges
with the public chose a characteristic way in dealing with her responsibilities
despite outside criticism. At the same time, each contributed to the
growth of an evolving federal bureau, the "Office of the First Lady."

I would now like to change gears and look at some of the accomplishments
and influence of some modern First Ladies and some of the not so modern.

It was more than slightly frustrating to be a woman in America in the
eighteenth century. At least it was to a woman with a deep knowledge of
the political realities and a firm philosophy for the conduct of mankind, a
woman whose intelligence far surpassed that of most men she knew. Abigail
Adams was such a woman. If she had been born a man, the colonies would have
still another hero. And no less a student of history than former President
Truman said, "She would have made a better President than her husband."

Of all our First Ladies, Abigail Adams was the most uniquely qualified
for the job. Yet she lived in an era when women were not supposed to
have opinions about their government or the exciting events around them; or,
in any case, if they had opinions, they weren't supposed to express them.
Abigail Adams, self-taught, outspoken, incredibly brilliant, chafed all her
life under the arbitrary limitations put upon her by her femaleness. She
was the wife of a President and the mother of one, but she could not even
vote. And the law did not permit her to hold public office, or become
President herself (something she would have dearly loved, had she dared
confess such an outrageous notion). Rarely in history has a wife so completely
shared government secrets and understood so well the complicated and brutal
mechanics of politics. Abigail Adams contributed, through her own stimulating
mind, an enormous amount to the success of her husband and son. Abigail
Adams had plenty of ideas the Founding Fathers would have done well to
adopt. She freely offered advice to her husband at the Continental Congress,
where he was helping to draw up the first code of laws. She prodded him to
"remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your
ancestors . . . Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the
husbands . . . Remember all men would be tyrants if they could."16 Besides
advocating votes for women, the trailblazing Mrs. Adams suggested doing away
with slavery, a vastly expanded program of education for the young, and an
excise tax on liquor "as too frequent use of spirits endangers the well being of
society."17 There was scarcely a subject on which Mrs. Adams did not have a
reasonably well-informed opinion.

As First Lady, Mrs. Adams was aware of nearly everything that went on in the government. So much so, in fact, that she became a campaign issue. One of the charges which helped to defeat John Adams in his 1800 bid for re-election was that Mrs. Adams had "a degree of influence over the public conduct of her husband." 18

In the drawing rooms, Mrs. Adams insisted upon taking her place among the men, discussing political affairs and current events. She was careful not to express an opinion which would reflect upon her husband, but she refused to take refuge in the meaningless small talk relied upon by most fashionable ladies in the company of men. 19 This is not to imply that Abigail Adams was unfeminine; indeed, she had strict ideas about womanly conduct and manners.

Fortunately, one of the few men whose views she respected above her own happened to be her husband. Their continuous lively exchange over the years benefited them both greatly.

President James K. Polk once remarked that if he had remained clerk of the Tennessee state legislature his wife would never have consented to marry him. That she did consent proved to be a lucky development. For certainly the eleventh President of the United States brought with him to the White House a woman just as politically astute, hard-working, serious-minded, and ambitious as himself. And as another asset, she was a stunning beauty. Sarah Polk saw his work as her work, and left most of the social and household chores to others in order to be his private secretary. 20

The Polks were not really unsociable, although most people in Washington thought they were. It was just that they felt they were, as Polk put it,
"hired to work," and each reception and party meant hours lost from working. Often, after a party, both Polks sat up far into the night working on projects they felt they should have addressed while they were carrying out their duties as host and hostess.21

Sarah's concept of ladylike propriety forbade her to speak out in public. She took great pains to inform herself on complicated political questions, but she discussed her own views upon them only with her husband in private. Whenever she discussed government issues in public, she habitually prefaced every comment with "Mr. Polk believes . . ."22 Much later, as an eighty-year-old widow, having lived alone in retirement for decades, Sarah would sign that although age somewhat "toned down my ardor," she still took a "deep interest in state and national affairs."23 Franklin Pierce, who was later President himself, is recorded as saying that he much preferred to talk politics with Mrs. Polk than with anyone else, including her husband.

In 1861, when Mary Todd Lincoln heard that a young soldier, William Scott, was to be shot for falling asleep on picket duty, she grew so nervous that the President actually told General McClellan that "the Lady President" greatly hoped the man would be pardoned, and he was.24

President Woodrow Wilson lay helpless in his bed, his entire left side paralyzed by a sudden stroke. His mind did not seem impaired, but he had great difficulty speaking and moving; the doctors warned he might not have long to live.

The President's handsome second wife, Edith, and Dr. Grayson decided that the truth should be kept from the people. They also determined to hide the President's condition even from his cabinet members and closest advisors. And so began one of the strangest periods in American history-for six weeks
nobody but Edith Wilson and Dr. Grayson went into the sickroom, and for a long time after that, Joe Tumulty, the President's secretary, was the only other person allowed to see the President about government matters. Even then Edith Wilson stood at the head of the bed to shake her head at Tumulty when she thought the President had had enough.

Mrs. Wilson screened every government problem. She would weigh each one for its importance and effect upon the President's mental state, and discuss with him only the most vital of matters. "Every time you take him a new anxiety or problem to excite him you are turning a knife in an open wound," Dr. F.X. Dercum warned her.

In her memoirs Edith Wilson claimed that she suggested her husband resign. The doctors told her that as long as his mind remained clear, his responsibilities as President were the greatest incentive to recovery; that jobless, he would lose his will to live. It was Mrs. Wilson's final responsibility, then, to decide upon a course of action. She chose to hide her husband's disability and take upon herself those Constitutional burdens of the presidency which could not be set aside.25

At least two First Ladies were responsible for talking their husbands into running for the office of President. Helen Taft persuaded her husband to go for the presidency over the chief justiceship, and Florence Harding pushed her husband, by historians' agreement, our worst President, into office.

On the day of his election Florence Harding turned to her husband and boasted, "Well Warren Harding, I have got you the presidency; what are you going to do with it?"

Mrs. Harding meddled constantly in official White House business. She did not like to let the President out of her sight, it seemed. She
rewrote part of his inaugural address. She was consulted on the major federal appointments. It was she, not the President, who insisted that Charles Forbes, a member of the Ohio gang, be appointed Chief of the Veterans Administration. Forbes was eventually charged with stealing and wasting millions appropriated for crippled or sick veterans, and was sent to prison for bribery and conspiracy. As a Christmas present their first year in the White House, Harding let her choose which of the convicts in penitentiaries should be given holiday pardons. An acquaintance later observed, "He allowed her great latitude in this, as in other official matters."

Some people hold to the idea that a woman's place is in the home, but to Eleanor Roosevelt, home was the land, the sea, and the air. She was the First Lady for twelve years, longer than any other. And she is the only First Lady who increased her own prestige and her efforts on behalf of mankind after her husband's death. More than any other First Lady, she was a full partner in the tasks of the presidency, deeply involved in politics, in the operation of government agencies and in the conduct of public affairs. She was the eyes and ears and conscience of a man who is considered by historians one of the nation's greatest Presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. She shattered all precedents in her energetic efforts to represent the President where his own crippled limbs could not carry him. She voiced always the ideal of government for the many rather than for the few.

The nation in the 1930's wasn't used to a First Lady with a mind of her own and the courage to express her views openly on controversial issues.

She earned the enmity of a large section of the South by her championing of Negro rights, and the anger of Catholic Church groups by adding her voice to the parochial versus public school controversy and by calling divorce
"necessary and right, when two people find it impossible to live together."

Mrs. Roosevelt merely ignored her critics, and persisted in saying and doing what she felt was right. She was never inhibited by her austere position as First Lady; and President Roosevelt never seemed to mind having a controversial wife. "Lady, it's a free country," he used to tell her. "I have my own way of getting my views across to the American people. If you get me in hot water, I'll manage to save myself."

Eleanor Roosevelt received a note from a black private who had at first been refused service at a People's Drug Store counter in Washington, D.C. Finally he was served his drink in a paper cup while the white man next to him received his soda in a glass. The private wrote Mrs. Roosevelt that when he might see a white boy dying on a battlefield, he hoped to God that he would not remember People's Drug Store on January 11th. In fury he attached the offending receptacle and added: "Here is the cup. Too bad some negro boy couldn't give a dying white boy a cooling drink on a battlefield."

Mrs. Roosevelt's response was sympathetic yet crisp: "I can quite understand how what happened to you made you feel as bitterly as you do feel. There are many things of that kind which many of us in this country deeply regret. The only thing I can say to you is that under the Germans or the Japanese you would have very little freedom, and you certainly would not have the freedom to write to me as you have. You are free to go on working for the betterment of your people and you are gradually gathering behind you a larger and larger group of white people who are conscious of the wrongs and who are helping to correct them."

This President's wife fully recognized the importance and the methodology of correspondence from the East Wing. "Out of my response to an individual develops an awareness of a
problem to the community, then to the country, and finally to the world. In each case my feeling of obligation to do something stemmed from one individual and then widened and became applied to a broader area."  

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis dominated fashion and she launched a historic restoration of the White House. Rediscovering old treasures—she rescued Lincoln's china and Monroe's flatware from the cellar—Mrs. Kennedy transformed her temporary home into a showcase for American art and antiques.  

What the people who had elected John F. Kennedy to the highest office in the land hadn't counted on was a bonus. This was a First Lady of such beauty, elegance, taste and culture that her effect during her husband's tragically brief time in office was to influence, for the better, the culture of the country. Politics never really held her attention, but on trips with her husband she stole the show. Late in accompanying him to breakfast while visiting Texas, President Kennedy said, "Mrs. Kennedy is busy organizing herself. It takes a little longer, you know, but then she looks much better than we do."  

When visiting Paris, President Kennedy introduced himself as the man who accompanied Mrs. Kennedy. He said, "I could do that any place because nobody's interested in what I or Lyndon wear."

President Kennedy once said, "A man marries a woman, not a First Lady. If he becomes President, she must fit her own personality into her own concept of a First Lady's role. People do what comes naturally best." When asked what she would do if her husband was elected President, Jacqueline said, "I'd be a wife and mother first, then a First Lady."

In summing up the brief Kennedy period in the White House all of us will remember the elegance and the meticulous attention to the fine art of living as well as the arts themselves that pervaded the White House. But what
we will perhaps best remember is that the symbol of the nation in the second half of the twentieth century was personified in a gay, worldly young couple, who brought order and beauty and a dedication toward peace to the country, and from whom we learned that it is through our youth that we perpetuate ourselves and our dream. I think Jacqueline was at least partly responsible for this new found feeling.

Another example of wifely involvement is a draft of a statement that Lady Bird Johnson wrote for possible presidential use at the critical time when the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenged the seating of an all-white, regularly elected Mississippi delegation at the Democratic National Convention of 1964. Asked for advice on this thorny problem, she counseled her husband to express himself as follows, "I believe that the legal delegation ought to be seated. I am not going to bend to emotionalism. I don't want this convention to do so either. The election is not worth that." 34 Lady Bird Johnson's most striking intervention was when her husband's chief White House assistant—in mid-political campaign—was arrested and charged in a men's room homosexual encounter. This, at that still reticent and relatively straight-laced time, was the equivalent of a 1,000 pound bomb. Her husband and his assistants were still plotting their strategic response, when Lady Bird on her own issued a White House statement on the subject, expressing sympathy for the family and compassion for the man and a desire to help these old time friends in any way they could. It transformed the event itself and some public attitudes as well. 35 Mrs. Johnson, in her ecology movement and beautification campaign, logged 200,000 miles in 40 cross country trips. She had two million daffodils planted in the U.S. capitol. 36 She once observed, "The First Lady is, and always has been, an
unpaid public servant elected by one person, her husband."^37

Pat Nixon, it seems, was overshadowed by Watergate. I was shocked to read of all of the things that she did while her husband was President. When Richard Nixon decided to run for President in 1960, she became the most active and visible wife of a presidential candidate in American political history. When her husband was elected, she did even more. Julie Nixon Eisenhower said, "She did so much. She has been one of the most unique First Ladies in the history of the country, only not a lot of people realize it. She never tried to create an image for herself by doing it in Madison Avenue style, publicizing herself. She did so much quietly. Dr. Kissinger considers her a diplomat without peer. Since 1953 she traveled everywhere with my father as an ambassador for the United States and she never made a mistake."^38 Julie said besides crisscrossing the country more than a dozen times, since 1953 her mother had traveled some 500,000 miles in trips to 74 foreign countries, plus Hong Kong. She had supervised the redecoration of fourteen of the thirty-six rooms in the main house, raising all of the money herself from private sources because no government funds are available for this purpose. ^39 Her journeys around the world and the nation, together with her exposure to the game of politics for so long, developed in Pat Nixon some shrewd judgements. As one close friend put it, "She didn't like it, never would, but she had gotten the feel, the instinct that all political people need to possess if they want to survive."^40 The irony is twofold: she was not asked to contribute her judgements, nor did she volunteer them because she acted on the principle that Richard Nixon knew best. And, when she did finally take her husband aside and offer him some wise counsel, her advice went unheeded and the house came crashing down around his head.
First Lady Betty Ford had the courage to develop her own voice. She realized the power of the role of the First Lady, but wishes that she would have realized it sooner. She said, "You can with very little effort get a lot of things done. You can get support for legislation." She was famous for her work on the Equal Rights Amendment and her statements on abortion.

Rosalynn Carter did not limit herself to social amenities. She was one of the most politically active Presidents' wives in history. Focusing on the problems of the mentally ill, she testified before a congressional committee, pushed her pet projects during working lunches with her husband, and became the first Presidential wife to sit in on Cabinet meetings. She said, "In the White House my relationship with Jimmy was the same as it had always been. We discussed business and strategy when we were working together in the warehouse, or campaigning, and when he was serving as governor, the way most husbands and wives do when they take an interest in each other's work. I often acted as a sounding board for him. While explaining a particular issue to me, he could think it through himself."

While on her Latin America tour, one critical U.S. reporter persisted, "You have neither been elected by the American people nor confirmed by the Senate to discuss foreign policy with foreign heads of state. Do you consider this trip an appropriate exercise of your position?" Carter snapped, "I am the person closest to the President of the United States, and if I can explain his policies and let the people of Latin America know of his great interest and friendship, I intend to do so!"

Nancy Reagan is stronger, more confident and savvier than when she first came to Washington. And after the Iran-contra nightmare, which she
blames on her husband's staff, she is more determined than ever to protect
the President, his image and his place in history. Donald Regan was
barely out of the White House before critics began to chastise the First
Lady for her role in the ouster of the Chief of Staff. One blast came
from New York Times columnist William Safire, who accused Mrs. Reagan of
"extraordinary vindictiveness" and argued that "at a time when he most
needs to appear strong, President Reagan is being weakened and made to appear
wimpish and helpless by the political interference of his wife." Supporters
argue that her role in the replacement of Regan was not a sudden grab for
power on her part or a sign of weakness on Reagan's. It was simply a matter
of her protecting her husband in a time of crisis, as she has always done.
Since Reagan abhors confrontation, that protection often requires an indirect
approach. Then Mrs. Reagan turns to her "kitchen cabinet," a tight network
of close friends and longtime advisors to get the message to the President.
Key members include Michael Deaver and California political consultant
Stuart Spencer. The First Lady also turns to columnist George Will.45
One close friend recalls how Mrs. Reagan used sign language during a White
House dinner party to remind the guests to compliment the President's
fresh-from-the-shower hair, she was trying to persuade Reagan to use less
hair lotion but wanted to avoid an argument with her husband.46 The First
Lady has little interest in involving herself in complex policy issues.
Aides insist she does not give orders or make decisions for the President on
substantive matters. Aides do, however, try to enlist her support because they
recognize she is an important part of the process of persuasion. "If this is a
city of power and access," says one staff member, "Nancy Reagan has the
ultimate access."47
We know that she reinforced her own attempt to influence President Reagan by "leaking" to favored journalists and meeting with at least one columnist whose subsequent strongly expressed views were undoubtedly called to the President's attention. Does that go beyond what a wife should do? Yes, said right-wing columnists and TV personalities like Robert Novak who screamed that she had no right to a stand because she was not elected, and that she had abused her "power." The fury of these critics was fueled by their opposition to any arms control agreement and their perception that the effect of the Reagan dismissal would be to further Nancy Reagan's supposed plans to secure one and make her husband a "peace President." Seasoned political reporter, Ken Bode made the point on the Today Show that First Ladies may not be elected but that the voters know that they will get the wife with the husband and, if they don't want her, they don't have to elect him. They have plenty of time to see what they're getting. Furthermore, he noted, most presidential advisors aren't elected. Why should only the President's wife be precluded from advising on that account?

The problem is that we as a nation are very ambivalent about what we want from the First Lady. Although she is not elected or appointed we expect her to work for us. Being First Lady is not a casual or part-time job, but a full-time occupation. The wife who campaigns on her own, makes speeches on the issues, holds press conferences, assists in fundraising, and rallies support when her husband is running can hardly be expected to withdraw her interest once her husband has achieved office. Her participation once he is in office must be limited by her own interests and her husband's acceptance of her participation, not by any stereotypical prescription of role.

There is both good and bad in today's acceptance of First Ladies.
What's bad is that the gradually enlarging cadres of assistants to the First Lady may eventually turn this nonoffice into just another government bureau. What's good is the recognition that First Ladies can usefully serve in their individual ways and from their special positions as invaluable listeners, protocol setters, and spokespersons.

Taking stock of the record of First Ladies at this point does not imply that their job will remain static. It will surely continue to change. If a married woman achieves the presidency, her husband will have to consider how to fit his life to the role. A woman whose husband becomes chief executive while she remains dedicated to a career of her own will have to formulate her own answers. Whatever the future, each woman is given "a magic wand," it has been said, with no instructions on its use—each woman has to figure that out for herself.
NOTES


2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 15.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 16.

8 Ibid., p. 17.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., p. 18.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

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