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DO THEY HAVE ANY ROLE TO PLAY IN THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT? – ANALYZING THE MEMOIRS OF MODERN AMERICAN FIRST LADIES

Introduction

The abundance of scholarly works and media coverage devoted to the subject of American first ladyship shows that presidents' wives have always been the center of people's attention. But with the definition of this institution virtually non-existent, it has also invariably been a source of public controversy. At the core of the dispute about the roles and powers of any first lady lies her unaccountability to the nation through electoral process or through the system of checks and balances. There is no legislative framework to establish the limits for her office (CAROLI 1995 : xxii). If she is assigned a political task and is unable to complete it, the president's wife cannot be held formally responsible for her actions. Her office is therefore unlike that of all other presidential advisers who are liable to dismissal in the event of a failure. This question of political responsibility is no longer a fiction, as the examples of Rosalynn Carter or Hillary Clinton show.

The memoirs of presidential wives have been growing in popularity as the office of the first lady has been gradually evolving to become an essential part of the administration. With the assumption that these first-hand accounts are the best source of information about this vaguely defined institution, the author of this paper attempts to analyze the ways in which the two contemporary first ladies, Rosalynn Carter and Nancy Reagan, explain or justify the part they played in making history. The titles of the books analyzed here are respectively *First Lady from Plains* and *My Turn*.

First Lady from Plains

First Lady from Plains describes in exhaustive detail Rosalynn Carter's life and her White House years (1977-1981). The explicitness of her account leaves little, if any, room for interpretation. The narrative here is used as a tool for legitimization of the first lady's powerful position in the Carter administration and the following become the motifs of the style of her first ladyship: partnership, influence, activism, self-discipline, ambition, self-betterment, and effectiveness.

Rosalynn Carter's overt refusal to be diminished to a purely decorative role can be seen in her reaction to being given a traditional tour of the mansion by the former first lady of the state after her husband was elected the governor of Georgia: "I didn't want to spend all my life taking care of that big house. That's not what I had campaigned for. (...) I had become very involved in the issues and had projects of my own lined up" (CARTER 1994 : 74); the words which could easily be used as a motto of her years in the White House.

It seems that "Mrs. President", as she was called by the press, extended the agenda for the office of the first lady beyond the capacities of any public figure. She was helped by the staff of only twenty-one people, insufficient, she complained, to complete all the tasks, thus undermining her husband's relentless stance on economizing. Years later her successor, Nancy Reagan, confused about how to run the office of the first lady, complained that she had to fill all the positions available in the office by herself (REAGAN 1989 : 226).

Rosalynn Carter's main project was the betterment of the mentally disabled. She made a campaign promise, an uncommon practice for a candidate's wife, that she would make this unpopular issue one of the president's major domestic priorities so that it would not be "dismissed as a First Lady's *pet project*" (CARTER 1994 : 293). Providing the detailed social and historical background to the problem, she comments on the measures she took to eradicate the stigma of mental illness and how she lobbied the Congress in favor of passing her legislation, the Mental Health Systems Act.

Determined not to let the legislative process falter, the first lady interfered in the personnel decisions. Dissatisfied with the lack of co-operation with the Secretary of Health, Joseph Califano, she worked hard but successfully to have him resign. In her memoirs the author does not try to play her role down:

"I wanted Jimmy to fire Joe Califano long before he ever did, and my reasons were purely political" (CARTER 1994 : 173).

Her disappointment when, in 1980, the Act lost most of its funding thanks to "the new philosophy of a new President [Ronald Reagan]", Rosalynn Carter calls a shameful and wasteful pity (CARTER 1994 : 301).

Rosalynn and Jimmy were partners throughout all the stages of their political activism. She gradually became a skilled campaigner, which intensified their effort and

doubled their chances of getting to the White House. About the 1976 campaign, she wrote:

“I traveled with my press secretary (...) most of the time in my own chartered aircraft. (...) we covered sometimes three, four, five, even six states a day (...)” (CARTER 1994 : 147).

By her own admission, she was much more political than the president himself! While he was unafraid to take unpopular and controversial decisions because it was “the right thing to do”, she worried about the possible political damage that could result, like the drop in the polls and losing some of the electorate (CARTER 1994 : 172-177).

Both Carters hardly ever disagreed on the matter of political substance. It was the wrong timing that was often the source of arguments. Although she admits her advice was always considered in earnest, the first lady blamed her husband for not following some of it. Referring to the lost 1980 campaign, for instance, when Carter took anti-inflation measures cutting some social programs, she complained:

“Instead of announcing the federal cuts that directly affected the Democratic constituency in New York City the week before the New York primary (...) couldn't he wait until the following week?” (CARTER 1994 : 174).

She had long been considered the president's political alter ego but her active role in the government came to be exposed to criticism for excessive ambition and too much power for someone who was not elected to the office. The controversy emerged when she started to sit on the Cabinet meetings as in the public eye it was the first step to policy making. In her book the author claims that it was on the president's suggestion that she started attending the Cabinet sessions; but the reader gets acquainted with her own motivation:

“I couldn't sit in front of television every day and wonder and worry about what I was hearing. I wanted to know the truth” (CARTER 1994 : 185).

She also stresses that despite the strong opposition from political adversaries and the press, she found the Cabinet meetings very informative and did not intend to quit because of the criticism.

Ronald Reagan's victory came as a blow to Rosalynn Carter, who was confident of success in the general election. The failure was all the more bitter for it was the first lady who carried the whole burden of the 1980 campaign while Jimmy Carter decided that the economic recession and difficult international situation demanded he stayed in the White House rather than on the campaign trail. Overtly disappointed with the way citizens voted, she blamed the lack of publicity for her husband's legislative achievements. She summarized her disillusionment in the following words: “I'd like people to know that we were right (...) and that people made a mistake by not voting for him” (CARTER 1994 : 383). Rosalynn Carter remained the extension of her husband's presidency. There are no suggestions in her book that seeking an elected office herself was ever considered

an option. Nonetheless, considering the following comments, the reader might think otherwise: "I would be out there campaigning right now if Jimmy would run again. I miss the world of politics. Nothing is more thrilling than the urgency of a campaign (...) – and the tremendous energy it takes that makes a victory ever so sweet and a loss so devastating" (CARTER 1994 : 383).

Her successor in the White House would give an entirely new dimension to the institution of the first lady. There were many premises during the 1980 campaign, however, that the development of the office would gain new direction but in many respects would be halted completely.

My Turn

The adverse publicity Nancy Reagan (1981-1989) received, especially during her first year in the White House, forced her later to use her memoirs largely for one purpose, to dispel the rumors about her. The very title of her memoirs, *My Turn*, already bears the symptoms of public confrontation. In the foreword to her book she comments:

"[The first lady] – on a personal level (...) loses her freedom of speech. There were so many things that I longed to say but couldn't (...). Although there is a certain dignity in silence, which I find appealing, I have decided that for me, for our children, and for the historical record, I want to tell my side of the story" (REAGAN 1989 : viii).

But "this side of the story", by centering largely on the controversies that surrounded the first lady in the White House, merely inflames the debate and by trying to shake the elitist image enhances the image problem.

Despite the triviality of the subject matter of the early press criticism, the former first lady seems to feel obliged to respond to all of the accusations of exorbitant spending she faced. The commonly used response: "That's just the way I am" (REAGAN 1989 : 23) convinces the reader that the criticism concentrated on the question of extravagance of style or character only and should not be regarded as concealed political attacks. There is little evidence here that the first lady is aware of being a political lightning rod. She does admit, however, that the reports of the renovation and the new White House china were contrasted with rising unemployment and homelessness, and, having provided the details concerning the acquisition of the White House china, she eventually concedes: "(...) the timing was unfortunate: The new White House china was announced on the same day that the Department of Agriculture mistakenly declared ketchup to be acceptable as a vegetable for school lunches" (REAGAN 1989 : 29).

Similarly, the prolonged discussion in the media about the designer clothes the first lady wore during a recession in 1981 deserves an equally long treatment in *My Turn*. The difficult economic situation which was the background for public disapproval appears to have sunk into oblivion completely as the first lady proceeds to submit the intricacies of

borrowing the designer dresses. The fashion subject continues for over six pages and the self-centered remarks employ the disarmingly simple logic:

“(...) if I had suddenly started dressing differently, how would that have helped the economy?” (REAGAN 1989 : 33).

Finally, an economic argument is at hand to justify her tastes:

“I was told that (...) I provided a great boost for American designers. The fashion business is our seventh-largest industry, and in New York city it employs more people than any other business. If anything, the case could be made that I *helped* the economy by putting so many people to work!” (REAGAN 1989 : 33).

This final conclusion unequivocally contradicts the initial aim of the chapter, the dispelling of the elitist image. And by quoting so much of the media criticism, the first lady prolongs ad *infinitum* the transient newspaper articles.

A similar inconsistency characterizes Nancy Reagan’s account of how the controversy about astrology dominated the press in 1987. The misleading assurance of the statement:

“(...) I don’t run my life by astrology, and no, I don’t go around asking people what sign they were born under” (REAGAN 1989 : 50)

is challenged by what follows, a twenty-page long explanation of how the first lady did come to rely on an astrologer to reschedule the president’s day.

Eventually, the first lady admits to having become a political liability to her husband, making *him* first and foremost the source of public ridicule and making the presidency look weak. But she promptly adds:

“Of course Ronnie easily could have said ‘I told you so’ – but that just isn’t like him. He was angry, but not at me” (REAGAN 1989 : 53).

Thus, the irrelevance of the question of the responsibility for political damage is imposed on the reader. Romantic chivalry prevails over political pragmatism.

For Nancy Reagan the role of the first lady is above all to be the president’s wife and all the other duties are marginal. About her privileged position she says:

“I was the only person in the White House who had absolutely no agenda of her own – except helping him” (REAGAN 1989 : 60).

She postulates including the first lady as part of the presidential team, not for reasons connected with political agenda but because she is the only person who sees the president as “an individual with human needs” (REAGAN 1989 : 64). Her willingness to protect her husband is inseparably connected with the traumas of the two-term administration – the attempt on Reagan’s life early into the presidency, his operation after being diagnosed

with the colon cancer and prostate operation that followed next year. Reagan's major surgery made him incapacitated for a number of hours during which her only obligation was to protect the president from overwork, thus from some of his advisers.

With the conspicuous exception of presidential chief of staff, who allegedly left Reagan's administration due to Nancy Reagan's interference, *My Turn* contains little commentary of the president's political adversaries when compared with *First Lady from Plains*. In the absence of any substantive critique the reader must accept the description of the Carter White House and its hostess when the author visited the mansion after the 1980 election; the selection of vocabulary indicating the first lady's emotions in place of political analysis of the preceding administration :

"(...) *the chill* in [Rosalynn Carter's] manner matched the *chill* in the room", *the hostess herself was reluctant and the White House struck the visitor as cold and bare, dreary and uninviting, run-down, shabby, a mess and low rent* (REAGAN 1989 : 225, emphasis mine, A.D-Ł).

Both for scholars and for the general readership, the first ladies' memoirs have come to be considered as the primary source of information about the project the president's wife was involved in. In that respect this book is highly unsatisfactory. The anti-drug project for which Nancy Reagan came to be appreciated and is nowadays remembered, and which, after all, she continued after the White House, is barely alluded to. Nor is it clear how the *Just Say No* anti-drug campaign was constructed. The whole book contains only about eight very brief references to the subject, e.g.:

"I was prepared to tell Raisa [Gorbachev] about our drug program (...) [but] she promptly dismissed the subject" (REAGAN 1989 : 338),

or:

"I met in the Red Room with a Japanese man who gave a large donation to the Drug Abuse Foundation" (REAGAN 1989 : 289).

The readers learn therefore that there was an anti-drug project, there was a Foundation propelled by large donations and that the first lady visited schools on that occasion. It is uncertain why the author allowed only the ghost-like appearance of the subject in her memoirs failing to appeal through this popular medium to a larger audience.

The inconsistency of the way in which Nancy Reagan presents her role in the advisory or the decision-making process is perceptible in the chapter devoted to Reagan's summit meetings with Mikhail Gorbachev. Her initial involvement is expressed by the statement:

"I encouraged Ronnie to meet with Gorbachev as soon as possible, especially when I realized that some people in the administration did not favor any real talks. So yes, I did push Ronnie a little. But he would have never met Gorbachev if he hadn't wanted to" (REAGAN 1989 : 337).

The rest of the chapter is devoted entirely, however, to tea receptions, sightseeing tours, elaborate menus during state dinners and, by what today could hardly pass under the name of “politically correct”, the description of the first lady’s meetings with Raisa Gorbachev. While the first lady admits that the success of any negotiations depends largely on the personal rapport between the political leaders, she entirely diminishes her share in the success of the talks by exploring the theme of the antagonism between herself and Raisa Gorbachev. Her accomplishments are in the ceremonial department because, as she admits, the state dinner the Americans organized for the Russians in Moscow in 1988 was “by far the most complicated project [she had] ever been involved with” (REAGAN 1989 : 356).

Conclusions

The risk of narrowing the analysis of American first ladyship to the political involvement of the president’s wife is two-fold.

First, the political activism of a first lady, *if* there was any, cannot be dissociated from a specific set of historical and political circumstances. The memoirs, nonetheless, while providing a fascinating narrative of history in the making, cannot be relied on to give the reader a balanced view of contemporary events. In that respect the two books differ completely. *First Lady from Plains* does not only offer an in-depth analysis of the institution of the first lady and the intricacies of the American political system but it is also a fascinating campaign narrative with a comprehensive description of the political events of the period. *My Turn*, on the other hand, successfully manages only to echo the newspaper articles which focused on the controversies, or chooses to discuss only the most splendid successes of the administration. Is it fair of the reader, after all, to assume that the first lady will dwell longer on the subjects of the Iran-Contra affair or the difficult social situation at home?

Second, where there are few overt traces of political activism, as in the case of *My Turn*, the analyst is left with a suspicion that the first lady exerted her influence as the “power behind the scenes” and other sources must be considered or even given priority. These should include: the memoirs of the president and presidential advisors, the abundance of which is published with every finished administration. Furthermore, the official papers of the first lady will provide an undisputable source of objective facts, especially about the projects completed in the White House. Paradoxically, by interpreting the content of the memoirs, by searching for the signified meaning, a researcher might be unable to escape questioning the objectivity of the primary source. In telling their stories the authors did not attempt to void the memoirs of the human aspect and consequently analyzing political motivation is not possible without the understanding of human motivation (ANTHONY 1991 : 18).

It can be predicted that with the increased popularity of the genre and growing demands for a more exhaustive content, the memoirs will bring additional perspectives to the discussion of the role the first lady plays in the system of government. It is also very difficult, but at the same time intriguing, to speculate about how this debate will be conducted when the first woman becomes President of the United States.

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