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## American First Ladies

Although the institution of First Lady has always caused a deep interest in American society, only in the two final decades of the twentieth century serious extensive studies in this field began appearing<sup>1</sup>.

There are some discrepancies in opinion as to the first usage of the term "First Lady". According to Jean H. Baker, the author of the biography of Mary Todd Lincoln (1861-1865), this term appeared for the first time with reference to Abraham Lincoln's wife. She was called First Lady by a correspondent of *London Times*, while some American papers gave her the notion of "American Queen"<sup>2</sup>. Earlier different titles had been used to describe presidents' wives. Mary Washington had gone by the title of "Lady Washington"<sup>3</sup>. Later, in the years of early democracy, the term "Lady", as anything associated with royalty, seemed inappropriate. Thus, Dolley Madison was known as "Presidentress", while Elizabeth Monroe preferred to be addressed simply Mrs. Monroe<sup>4</sup>. Some of First Ladies objected to being

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<sup>1</sup> The following publications on First Ladies should be mentioned here: Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies* (New York, 1987), Nancy Kegan Smith and Mary C. Ryan, eds., *Modern First Ladies: Their Documentary Legacy* (Washington, D.C., 1989); Myra Gutin, *The President's Partner. The First Lady in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, Conn., 1989), Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies. The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power, 1789-1990* (2 vols., New York, 1990, 1991), Betty Boyd Caroli, *Inside the White House* (New York, 1992), Lewis L. Gould, ed., *American First Ladies* (New York & London, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Lewis L. Gould, ed., *American First Ladies* (New York & London, 1996), p. 181.

<sup>3</sup> Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies* (New York 1995), p. XV.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis L. Gould, ed., op. cit, p. 181.

called that title. Jacqueline Kennedy disliked the term intensely, saying that it reminded her of a saddle horse. She even forbade the staff of the White House to use it, preferring to be called Mrs. Kennedy<sup>5</sup>. Betty Boyd Caroli on the cover of her extended edition of *First Ladies* claims that presidents' consorts are supposed to cope with "the most demanding, unpaid, unelected job in America". The great majority of them fulfilled, with greater or smaller enthusiasm, the traditional role of hostess of small meetings and big official parties held in presidential quarters. Among the presidents' wives of the nineteenth century Dolley Madison (1809-1817), Julia Tyler (1844-1845) and Julia Grant (1869-1877) made the most conspicuous hostesses. Dolley Madison, whose term as First Lady extended for over a sixteen-year period<sup>6</sup> "was not merely an appendage to her powerful husband. (...) In society – on those occasions when the government is run through the social forms of dinners, parties and other ceremonial forms of entertainment – she was more important than her husband. The drawing rooms of the White House were *her* rooms and not *his*. She presided over that world as no First Lady had done before, and created a precedent that her successors could follow."<sup>7</sup>

Julia Tyler served for only eight months as First Lady, but she certainly knew how to organise social life in the White House. She initiated the custom of musicians greeting the president with "Hail to the Chief". She introduced the polka and the waltz to her balls, and a New York musician composed "The Julia Waltzes". Still, she was frequently criticised for imitating European court manners in her formal entertainment and in her behaviour<sup>8</sup>.

Julia Grant (1869-1877) was famous for her splendid parties in the White House. The Washington society was especially attracted to 29-course dinners prepared by an Italian cook Melah. A great number of outstanding guests visited the White House at that time<sup>9</sup> and Julia Grant received the praise of restoring "elegance and dignity to the White House".

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<sup>5</sup> J.B. West with Mary Lynn Kotz, *Upstairs the White House: My Life With the First Ladies*, New York 1973, p. 239.

<sup>6</sup> Dolley Madison was asked to help entertain for president Thomas Jefferson before her husband's eight years of presidency.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis L. Gould, ed., op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>8</sup> She enjoyed travelling in a carriage drawn by four horses and entertaining seated on a raised platform with feathers in her hair and long-trained dress: Longin Pastusiak, *Panie Białego Domu*, Warszawa, 2000, p. 122.

<sup>9</sup> Among others Prince Arthur – Queen Victoria's son (1870) and Don Pedro II – the Emperor of Brasil (1876).

Although at the beginning of the twentieth century entertaining ceased to constitute the main field of presidential wives' activities, still, it was often stressed that events in presidential quarters were meant not only to provide entertainment, but also to promote cultural events. Musical events, preceded by dinner for twenty, became a weekly custom during the term of Edith Roosevelt (1901-1909). Grace Coolidge (1923-1929), an avid fan of music and the theater, invited many performers to the White House, and was said to be the most stylish First Lady and the most charming hostess between Edith Roosevelt and Jacqueline Kennedy (1961-1963). Mrs. Kennedy, a great supporter of culture, frequently acted as an unofficial minister of arts. She used to bring to Washington such cultural events as ballets, drama and poetry reading as well as musical recitals.

The scope of First Ladies' responsibilities is not defined anywhere. That is why some presidents' consorts, especially those of the middle nineteenth century decades, delegated hosting to their substitutes. Thus, Anna Harrison, Letitia Tyler, Margaret Taylor, Abigail Fillmore, Jane Pierce and Eliza Johnson turned to their daughters and daughters-in-law to act as chate-laines.

Until the twentieth century there was a social demand for the presidents' wives to be feminine and not to exert any influence on their husbands. No wonder that Abigail Adams (1797-1801), praised by some, basically was strongly criticised for acting as "minister without portfolio"<sup>10</sup>. The fact that she opted for recognition of the rights of women, considering them to be intellectually equal with men, and her strong views on abolishment of slavery, did not add to her popularity. Over forty years later another independently-minded woman Sarah Polk (1845-1849) was deeply involved in her husband's career, and, as Abigail Adams, became the president's partner and closest advisor. However, unlike Abigail Adams, she had a universally good press. "Because she had the self-confidence to relegate much of her job to an insignificant chore – but not neglect it – she achieved remarkable success"<sup>11</sup>.

In the second half of the nineteenth century Mary Lincoln (1861-1865) was not praised for the way she influenced her husband. A reporter for the *New York Times* wrote: "Mrs. Lincoln is making and unmaking the political fortunes of men and is similar to Queen Elizabeth in her statesmanlike tastes." At the same time, however, she could not escape bad press for

<sup>10</sup> Page Smith, *John Adams*, 2 vols. Garden City, 1962-1963, vol. 2, p. 937.

<sup>11</sup> Betty Boyd Caroli, op. cit., p. 65.

being engaged in too feminine activities. As the term of her ladyship coincided with the Civil War she was criticised for paying too much attention to fashion and refurbishing of the White House<sup>12</sup>. Still, it should not be underestimated that Mary Lincoln got also involved in less spectacular undertakings, like visiting wounded Union soldiers in hospitals or taking care of freed African Americans.

While ambitious, independent women had not been frequently seen in the White House until the twentieth century, the situation changed significantly with the beginning of the new age. The position of First Lady started to be restructured and moulded in a more conscious way. In addition to an old ceremonial role considered to be the main duty of each First Lady, gradually, new functions were introduced. An increasing interest in politics, from support and advising the president to independent political activities conveyed by First Ladies, side by side with involvement in social undertakings and cultural events, seem to indicate the most conspicuous trends in the transformation.

Presidents' consorts began employing their personal staff to support themselves in their dealings. Edith Roosevelt (1901-1909) was the first to rely on a social secretary. As she organised weekly official dinners preceding musical events, Mrs. Roosevelt hired professional caterers to fix and serve meals. She also presided over regular meetings with the wives of cabinet members. Although Edith Roosevelt was not involved politically, it was a common knowledge that she often advised the president. Helen Taft (1909-1913) made no efforts to hide her influence on her husband. It is even claimed that "without her ambitions, [William Taft] would probably never have become President"<sup>13</sup>. Ellen Wilson (1913-1914) despite her preference of arts over political and social matters, worked hard on her own legislative projects to improve housing conditions in Washington. However, it was Woodrow Wilson's second wife Edith (1915-1921) who proved to be much more powerful. She was even alleged of functioning as the first woman president during the period of her husband's illness. Although in her memoirs she stated: "I myself never made a single decision regarding the disposition of public affairs"<sup>14</sup>, it is often claimed that the United States did not have properly functioning government in those days.

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Lincoln justified her spending on the refurbishing claiming that the White House was a symbol to foreign ambassadors of the continuing power of the American republic (Lewis L. Gould, ed., p. 181).

<sup>13</sup> Stanley Kutler in biography of Helen Herron Taft in *Notable American Women*, vol. 3, p. 420.

<sup>14</sup> Edith Boiling Wilson, *My Memoir*, New York, 1939, p. 38.

It was Eleanor Roosevelt (1933-1945) who truly revolutionised the institution of First Lady. She held her own conferences – 348 during her husband's presidency. She frequently appeared in radio programmes discussing both "safe" topics, like her ceremonial duties, education or children upbringing and unpopular ones, as prohibition and a whole range of problems gnawing so-called "second-class citizens". She never hesitated to support black people, immigrants, the poor or women. Although Eleanor Roosevelt did not consider herself to be a feminist, she deeply believed that a lot could be done to elevate the position of a woman in the American society: beginning with providing young girls with proper educational background and ending at offering them work posts. In the thirties, with employment opportunities so rare, such ideas of the First Lady were bound to cause, and they did, a wave of outrage among Americans. Daily Eleanor Roosevelt was flooded by countless letters written by people begging for her help. She did not leave a single letter without reply, always trying to find appropriate solutions.

As she often expressed her positive opinions concerning the presidential New Deal, some conservative circles stated that she should take a better care of her home and family rather than get involved in political issues. Still, criticised by some, she was loved by others. Her numerous articles appearing in newspapers and magazines were extremely popular, whereas her column entitled *My Day*, *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt* and *If You Ask Me* all had their devoted readers irrespective of the topic she wrote about, be it a state dinner or a political event. No wonder that, according to a poll held in 1939 the First Lady was even more popular than her husband.

With time Eleanor Roosevelt got involved in international politics, condemning fascism and suggesting American co-operation with the League of Nations. Once more, her views were quite contradictory to the general isolationist trends prevailing at that time in the country.

For some time the First Lady worked for the Office of Civil Defence, and during the World War II she travelled extensively, visiting American soldiers fighting in battlefields scattered all over the world. Even her husband's death did not put the end to her social and political involvement.

After World War II the majority of First Ladies chose to be active during their husbands administrations, often functioning, following Mrs. Roosevelt's example, as presidents' *alter ego*. The number of assistants supporting presidents' consorts also grew considerably. Lady Bird Johnson (1963-1969) underlined the necessity of appointing a larger and better-qualified staff than that serving First Ladies so far. She also named Liz Carpenter as staff director and press secretary, two titles that had not been officially desi-

igned for any aide of the First Ladies before 1963. Bess Abel held a separate position of social secretary<sup>15</sup>. "The First Lady's press section of six full-time employees, under the direction of an experienced Washington reporter, represented quite a change from the preceding administration. A team of four handled details of the social secretary's office, and another four answered correspondence. Two staff members dealt only with beautification issues, and even this entourage did not complete the team since others came from the president's wing to work on temporary assignments"<sup>16</sup>.

Further steps in institutionalising the ladyship were undertaken by Rosalynn Carter (1977-1981). She organised her office into the following divisions: projects and community liaison, press and research, schedule and advance, social and personal. "The initial full-time staff of 18 was increased during the term to 21 employees plus volunteers. Mary Hoyt, who had worked with the First Lady during the campaign, continued as press secretary. Edith J. Dobelle was hired for the newly created position of chief-of-staff for the First Lady. This new senior staff position placed her on the same rank and salary as Hamilton Jordan and as the president's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski"<sup>17</sup>. The necessity of employing such a big staff reflected directly the degree of Mrs. Carter's involvement in her responsibilities. Rosalynn Carter acted methodically from the very beginning. Even during her husband's presidential campaign, she had her own goals clearly defined. She promised to help the mentally ill and it actually happened when Jimmy Carter won the election. Aware of the possibilities lying dormant in ladyship, she worked hard to do as much as possible. In early months of her husband's administration, Rosalynn Carter was sent to Latin American countries as the president's official envoy. "What was interesting in these macho nations was that Mrs. Carter had to serve in the role of surrogate president as well as hostess. It was an interesting insight into what role a woman U.S. president might someday play"<sup>18</sup>. Mrs. Carter acted as the president's closest adviser, and he openly acknowledged his use of her suggestions in making decisions concerning current issues. The president invited his wife to attend the cabinet meetings, to have her fully informed. She was also consulted on major appointments. Jody Powell, the president's press secretary claimed that "everything they've done has not

<sup>15</sup> Lewis L. Gould, ed., op. cit., p. 503.

<sup>16</sup> Betty Boyd Caroli, op. cit., p. 242.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis L. Gould, ed., op. cit., p. 565.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies*, vol. 11, p. 274.

been a case of Jimmy Carter doing it with a *supportive* wife. It had been Jimmy Carter and Rosalynn Carter doing it together as a *team*"<sup>19</sup>.

An even more significant change in the role fulfilled by presidents' wives took place during Bill Clinton's administration. Hillary Clinton (1993-2001) took an office in the West Wing of the White House, indicating in this way that she would like to have policy voice in the White House. Indeed, in January 1993 Hillary Clinton was delegated to prepare a new health care plan for submission to Congress. No First Lady had ever led such an important reform before.

Press was not sure how to deal with the new First Lady: whether to focus on the way she dressed or to consider her professional background and social involvement. Tuning to pressures exerted on her, Mrs. Clinton made efforts, sometimes unsuccessfully, to fit the traditional model of First Lady, producing recipes for cookies, or keeping half step behind her husband. Basically, however, for the first time in the history of the U.S., it was not the president but his wife who supported their family and pursued her own political career.

Hillary Clinton reshaped the institution of First Lady in a significant way. Still, it is hard to predict whether subsequent presidents' consorts will introduce equally dynamic changes.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 275.