

The Evolution of the Image of the First Lady

Reagan N. Griggs

Dr. Rauhaus

University of North Georgia

The role of the First Lady of the United States of America has often been seen as symbolic, figurative, and trivial. Often in comparison to her husband, she is seen as a minimal part of the world stage and ultimately of the history books. Through this research, I seek to debunk the theory that the First Lady is just an allegorical figure of our country, specifically through the analysis of the twenty-first century first ladies. I wish to pursue the evolution of the image of the First Lady and her relevance to political change and public policies.

Because a woman has yet to be president of the United States, the First Lady is arguably the only female political figure to live in the White House thus far. The evolution of the First Lady is relevant to gender studies due to its pertinence to answering the age old question of women's place in politics. Every first lady has in one way or another, exerted some type of influence on the position and on the man to whom she was married to. The occupants of the White House share a unique partnership, with some of the first ladies choosing to influence the president quietly or concentrating on the hostess role. While other first ladies are seen as independent spokeswomen for their own causes of choice, as openly influencing the president, as well as making their views publicly known (Carlin, 2004, p. 281-282). As Carlin states, from one to the next, not every First Lady has been politically active or has sought to maintain a political face other than by backing her husband but some have, and those women are the ones that are changing the face of the First Lady from just a woman in a pretty dress to a woman with an agenda to seek change. This evolution arguably did not occur until the twentieth century, a century when women everywhere, not just by the President's side, sought to have rights, vote, and gain political power. Perhaps this feminist movement helped empower women of the White House as well to change the Separate Spheres Ideology that surrounded the First Ladies. Separate Spheres Ideology is a theory that centers around women in the private sphere of the

home and men in the public sphere. This is built solely on the basis that men and women are perceived differently (Ford, 2011, p.188). This study is seeking to debunk the Separate Spheres Ideology theory attached to the image of the First Lady. Due to the fact that First Ladies have only been that cliché face of the White House, I believe gender inequality has been at work, but through their own hard work, determination, and effort, the First Ladies of the twentieth and the twenty- first century have sought to change the stereotypical role of yesteryear and become active and empowering women in the White House.

As early as 1870, the term “first lady” was being used in journalistic references to the president’s wife, but it can be traced back to the eighteenth century when the crowds of the new country were accustomed to the “royal pomps of Britain” and heralded the wife of the first president of the United States as “Lady Washington.” During the nineteenth century the role seemed to evolve into a position where the first lady was the head of the female society of the country. The first ladies became a true icon of American femininity, maybe in part to the fact that their role was simply undefined by any type of document or ruling. As time moved forward and throughout the twentieth and twenty first century, the first lady stood as a status of the American womanhood of her time, shaping what expectations women were capable of based on her time in history (Anderson, 2004, p.20). This stood true for some of the first ladies like Mrs. Mamie Eisenhower, who during the 1950s took on a more traditional role as first lady. She was a motherly vision of a wife who stood beside her president husband, perhaps showing through her the face of the 1950s woman as a typical wife and mother, a true testament to her decade in history. Whereas, a woman like Eleanor Roosevelt perhaps broke the glass ceilings of her time, showing more than just the support of a wife while her time in the White House (Anderson, 2004).

Unfortunately, according to a former national archivist Donald Wilson, “the first lady remains one of the most fascinating and unexplored facets of the American presidency and the history of women in the United States (as cited in Wertheimer, 2004 pg. 8).” Slowly this is changing though, because more authors are recognizing the significantly changing role of the first ladies. Based on a dissertation by Myra Gutin, “The President’s Partner: The First Lady in the twentieth century,” the argument can be made that by studying speeches, radio, television broadcasts, interviews, press conferences, and newspaper articles by the First Ladies, one is able to distinguish that an evolution has taken place over the last century. The role these women play is becoming less a formality of just facial presence and more of an activist approach to the position she holds in the White House. Gutin labels this evolving role of the first ladies into different faces such as ceremonial presences like Mrs. Mamie Eisenhower, emerging spokes women such as Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy, or even as political surrogates and independent activists like Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and Mrs. Lady Bird Johnson.

Taking the research back in time, at the turn of the twentieth century, the country was still in the hands of a first lady that has been described as being ill and self centered. Ida McKinley was the face of the first lady like many that preceded her, often very withdrawn from the public eye. In steep contrast however, many terms of presidency would not go by before a first lady would start changing the image. Although an unpaid position, Edith Wilson was described as being the very first to start the quasi-institutionalized position, often being hailed as the first lady that took a more substantive approach to the role of first lady (Caroli, 2010). Though lacking impressive schooling or credentials, she was the first that began to do things outside the norm of her role. She hired a private staff of her own, and was the first that began to make more public roles in policy. Again referencing time, Mrs. Wilson can be described as a possible product of

her era, as she was first lady when the country was going through such changes like Women's suffrage. It was her husband's administration that saw the ratification of the nineteenth amendment to the United States Constitution, which gave women the right to vote. Though she was often criticized for things like exercising "petty coat government," she ultimately did not let this criticism stop her. Her change in the image of the first lady at the time was seen as an anomaly, but history would see it as a growing trend among many women of the White House in the twenty and twenty first centuries. Perhaps this growing trend can be seen as indirectly related to the importance of the United States on the world stage and the executive branch's dominion over one of the most powerful legislatures in the world (Caroli, 2010).

Another notable first lady and revolutionary woman of the role was Anna Eleanor Roosevelt. History simply knows her as Eleanor Roosevelt. She was the First Lady of the United States from 1933-1945. This made her the longest running First Lady in the post. At an early age, Eleanor gained acknowledgement for being a staunch and dedicated worker. At just the age of eighteen, she joined the National Consumers League, and while being a member of the Junior League for the Promotion of Settlement Movements, she volunteered as a teacher for the College Settlement on Rivington Street in New York. After her marriage to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and after the birth of their children, the political career of her husband took off and in a sense, so did her own (Gould, 1996, p. 431-432). While in New York, she held positions with Democratic National Committee, the Todhunter School, the League of Women Voters, the Non-Partisan Legislative Committee, and the Women's Trade Union League. Before the 1932 presidential election had even began, Eleanor Roosevelt made it clear she did not intend to follow precedents if her husband won the presidency. Unfortunately however, the American press, like that of the

American public of that decade, was divided in their opinions of how professionally active a prospective or an active First Lady should be.

After the election of her husband, Eleanor refused to take a sedentary role as First Lady. First, she approached her husband to be his administrative assistant, and when she was turned down for that role she took her endeavors elsewhere. In a New York Times Interview, she announced that she planned to cut White House expenses by twenty five percent, “simplify” the White House social calendar and serve as Franklin’s eyes and ears. In the next few years that followed, Eleanor took an active approach with the press, even holding her own press conferences. Her goal was to meet with the women reporters of America once a week. In this goal she hoped to make America’s general public more aware of White House activities, and to increase the understanding of the political awareness. Her true goal in all this was to get American women understanding the role of the Executive Branch and the mechanics of national politics (Gould, 1996, p. 433-434).

Along with wanting the public to understand the inner workings of politics, Eleanor Roosevelt longed to find a place in her husband’s political world of the New Deal policies. Unfortunately, she was having to be creative in her effort to be a part of the New Deal. After accepting an offer for a monthly column from Woman’s Home Companion, she asked readers of the column to write to her with the problems that faced their life. She wanted a free exchange of ideas and discussions from readers all around the United States, and by 1934, about 300,000 Americans had responded to her request. This as well as other actions helped to further Eleanor’s New Deal agenda. A rebel of her time, she also regularly refused secret service protection, converted the Lincoln bedroom into a study, and pushed for women to be appointed to influential positions among the government agencies surrounding the New Deal. When the Washington

Press Corps refused to admit its women press to its famous Gridiron dinner, Eleanor Roosevelt joyously went to planning her own “Gridiron Widows” banquet to honor the women of the press (Gould, 1996, p. 435-436). Eleanor Roosevelt was also a champion for America’s youth. She personally pushed for social changes to camps like the Civilian Conservation Corps, as well as having a direct affect over her husband’s establishing the National Youth Administration. The National Youth Administration provided work projects, vocational guidance, apprenticeship training, educational and nutritional guidance for unemployed women and student aid for those wishing to further their education (Gould, 1996, p.438). Also a champion of race advocacy, Eleanor Roosevelt was also an equal opportunist First Lady. Throughout her time in the White House, she hired almost an all African American domestic staff, something that shocked Washington Society. She also spent her time advocating to help African American miners in West Virginia, and to help housing conditions of those even closer to home in Washington D.C. She is even quoted as saying that, “There could be no democracy in the United States that did not include democracy for African Americans” (Gould, 1996, p.442). Into the 1940s and beyond she worked to advocate for those that she saw as underrepresented, impoverished, or deserving of aid and care. Even after Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s death in 1945, she continued this work, proving that she did not need her husband to make a difference. After the White House, she even proved to have a political career. President Truman appointed Eleanor Roosevelt to the United States Delegation to the United Nations, where she served a seven year run. She also served on the boards of the NAACP, CORE, and and other major civil rights organizations. Even into the last two years of Eleanor Roosevelt’s life, she continued to be an activist for racial justice, world peace, and women’s rights (Gould, 1996, p. 445-446). Eleanor Roosevelt may have been a

pioneer on the First Lady's scenes in politics and active roles, but she would not be the last First Lady to seek active change while in the White House and beyond.

Though a few decades of First Ladies passed with little change to the title or office, another First Lady decided to make her presence known in the world by seeking change. Lady Bird Johnson, the First Lady of the White House from 1963-1969, from the beginning had her own priorities in order (West, 1973, p.283). Mrs. Johnson primarily advocated conservation and beautification during her extent in the White House (Watson, 2000, p.86). The natural beauty campaign proved to be a legislative battle of he husband's presidency (Gould, 1996, p.508). The Highway Beautification Act of 1965 proved to be a true project of Mrs. Johnson's and a massive undertaking. Her pushing for a bill that would control billboards along the nation's highways and promote scenic enforcement was controversial but her involvement with getting United States House Representatives on board for the legislation represented a significant expansion of the overall role of the First Lady. Never before had a president's wife sought to get legislation moved through the chambers and exercised her influence directly with lawmakers. Lady Bird Johnson seemingly had done something never seen before by pushing out the boundaries of what First Ladies could do in Washington regarding actual legislation (Gould, 1996, p. 508-509). The law cleared both the House and the Senate and was signed into law by her husband, President Johnson on October 22, 1965. Lady Bird Johnson's success with the Highway Beautification Act represented a new and unique achievement in the historical evolution of the institution of the First Lady of the United States (Gould, 1996, p.510).

The end of the twentieth century would bring even larger amounts of leadership to the post of the first lady. More recent first ladies like Nancy Reagan and her political activism had paved the way for a whole new face of the first lady. The end of the century brought us a first



lady known as Hillary Clinton (Watson, 2000, p.100). Hillary Rodham Clinton stood by the side of her husband, the 42 President of the United States of America from 1992 until the year 2000. Before assuming the post of President and First Lady, she was asked during the campaigning process about her potential conflict of interest between being a lawyer, the First Lady of Arkansas, and being a mother. Perhaps her answer can further explain the different strokes of the first ladies of the twenty first century. She replied that she wished to still “have an independent life and to make a difference.” She is also quoted as saying, “ I suppose I could have stayed at home and baked cookies and had teas but what I decided to do was fulfill my profession which I entered before my husband was in public life.” This early statement by Mrs. Clinton was cited as her indication of choice that she was going to depart from the historical traditional roles by first ladies, in favor of more activist ones, like that of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt (Anderson, 2004, p.17).

Hillary Clinton spent her time in the White House as one of the most politically active first ladies that the public had ever seen. Called a “transitional figure in history” by her press secretary Lisa Caputo, Hillary Clinton is an example of a multitude of perspectives on American womanhood (Mattina, 2004, p.418). With an undergraduate degree from Wellesley and a Juris Doctorate from Yale Law School, Hillary Clinton was not your average first lady of decades ago. A well educated woman, she represented all that was possible in debunking the Separate Spheres Ideology. Before becoming the First Lady of the United States and even during her time as the First Lady of Arkansas, she maintained a healthy law career as well as chairing the state of Arkansas’ Education Standards Committee. She even founded the Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. In 1983, she was named Arkansas’ Woman of the Year and in 1985 she was named in the top 100 lawyers in America by American Lawyer magazine (Mattina, 2004, p.

422). Once her husband was elected president, Hillary Rodham Clinton made the role of first lady her own (Mattina, 2004, p. 424).

Early in his presidency, President Clinton appointed his wife the chair of his task force on National Healthcare Reform, and though this would prove to be a difficult task for Hillary, she never did back down from the persistent problems that the position entailed. During her time as first lady she also worked closely with the Department of Education, Interior, and Housing and Urban development. With help from the Attorney General Janet Reno, she helped to develop the Department of Justice's Violence against Women office. Additionally, she formed the Vital Voices of Global Democracy Initiative with the help of Secretary of State Madeline Albright. Hillary Clinton proved herself a tireless advocate for a plethora of causes, with a particular interest on issues involving women and children. As well as all the positions she held, she also maintained a daunting public speaking schedule. This schedule would take her to over fifty one countries, while she sometimes even delivered multiple speeches in a day (Mattina, 2004, p.426). Such a perceived public figure of the first lady shows that Hillary was in the public sphere and not just in the private sphere of the home. Perhaps again, her representation of the woman in the White House was a representation of her time in history. Her time was the in the year of the woman, a time when her husband was bringing in more diversity to the political sphere, and a decade that was seeing more opportunities being offered to women than ever before. Whether perceived as good or bad, Hillary Rodham Clinton seems certain to be rated as one of the most important, influential, and controversial first ladies of the twentieth century (Gould, 1996, p.648). Such a strong role of first lady also set precedent for the first ladies of the twenty-first century.

Another educated lady of the post, Laura Bush will be remembered as a first lady that used the “magic of words” to educate and advocate. Though not to the extent of Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush also made her mark in the books of history as being an advocate for issues near and dear to her heart. During her time in the White House she made many public appearances proving herself in the public sphere, some of those being on television shows such as *Good Morning America*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and *60 Minutes*. A graduate of Southern Methodist University, Laura Bush was a teacher and librarian in Texas before becoming the First Lady of the United States. Even during her time as First Lady of Texas, Laura was making a name for herself as a public speaker and advocate for education, something she would carry with her to the nation’s capital (Wertheimer, 2004, p. 439-440). Mrs. Bush created a “Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Initiative,” something that was her chief area of advocacy. She sought to recruit more teachers, spotlight early childhood programs, and give parents accurate information about learning and development. She traversed the nation making public appearances in favor of education reform. Perhaps however, her greatest hour in the public sphere would also be a result of her time in history. Possibly her defining moment was how she treated the position of first lady in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. After learning of the planes striking the two towers, but before being taken to a secure location, she made a statement to the press, “ Our hearts and prayers go out to the victims of terrorism, and our support goes to the rescue workers (Wertheimer, 2004, p. 450).” Mrs. Bush took the time to console children around the nation after September 11. She also visited survivors of the Pentagon attack only two days after the attack at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Washington Hospital. She made a public speech thanking blood donors at the Eisenhower Executive Building, helped her husband choose speakers for the National Prayer Day, and only six days after the attacks she visited Shankesville,

Pennsylvania to offer solace and to publicly speak to the family and friends of the victims of United Airlines Flight 93. Before the end of the month of September of that same year, she visited New York City to publicly speak to an audience of teachers, children, and firefighters (Wertheimer, 2004, p. 450-451). For the next several months, Laura Bush was a public figure to Americans in the consoling process of a grieving nation. After that year, she resumed her push for education and literacy and is even quoted as being her husband's political partner on the nation's education (Wertheimer, 2004, p. 460). Laura Bush truly served as a forging role model for her succeeding first lady, Michelle Obama and for those beyond in the twenty-first century.

In 2008, the first African American woman took the role as first lady. Michelle Obama is a well educated first lady. Just as Hillary Rodham Clinton, Michelle Obama possesses a Juris Doctorate from Harvard Law School. Having an active law career in the years following her graduation, Michelle Obama continued that hard work into the White House (Caroli, 2010, p.354). An active campaigner for her husband during the 2008 presidential campaign, she has continued an active role as first lady. Supporting initiatives like helping military families, encouraging women's equal rights, and promoting the arts and education just as her predecessor Laura Bush had. A national campaign, "Let's Move" was Michelle Obama's first lead role in administration-wide initiative. This campaign was jump started by the planting of the White House Kitchen Garden, and furthered by Michelle Obama's push and support for reversing a growing trend of childhood obesity (Caroli, 2010, p.354-355). Her active role in this fight of obesity continues today, as does her public appearances in favor of her personal initiatives. Though not as politically active as some of her predecessors, Michelle Obama continues the growing trend of first ladies being more in the public than private sphere as is the backbone of the separate spheres ideology.

Through the centuries many different first ladies have graced the image and figure that surrounds the position. Some have chosen a more active approach than others, and those are the ones that are setting precedent for the first ladies of the future. Women like Lady Bird Johnson that enacted political bills to further change to women like Hillary Clinton that chose to work for a specific cause after being assigned to the position by her husband are putting themselves in the public sphere. They're breaking the glass wall that surrounds them as just the "first lady," in favor of positions that present them as active policy changers of our nation.

No longer is the first lady just a figurehead. Thanks to the women of the twentieth century that made the changes necessary to grasp for an active approach to being first lady, the twenty-first century first ladies are powerful. No longer hidden within the walls of the White House, these women have their own staff, their own schedules, their own public appearances and speeches, and their own personal agendas in mind. These educated women are making the image of the first lady something to be envied by women all over the world for her empowerment and assent into a political approach to a once inactive role in American politics.

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