

WHITE HOUSE WOMEN

'First Lady' is a title, not a job description. Some presidential spouses have played the role with great gusto, while others have been happy to simply sit back and watch, writes **Jennifer Hahn**

Technically, there is no such thing as a First Lady. The role is not defined in the constitution or by statute. She is neither elected nor paid and, as such, the position has evolved with the women who have inhabited it. Beyond being a helpmate and hostess, many modern First Ladies have been the public face of their husband's administration, his sounding board and a champion of their own issues.

However, the ambiguity of the office, and the gender norms that arguably still permeate American society have made the post a tightrope to walk. Damned if she does, damned if she doesn't, the presidential spouse cannot be politically apathetic but she mustn't seem too power-hungry; she must humanise her husband but not make him look weak or dependent. So how did some of the most influential First Ladies master this balancing act?

1 Eleanor Roosevelt (1933-1945)

An influential member of the League of Women Voters and the Democratic Party, Eleanor established her political agenda before Franklin D Roosevelt took office and pursued it tenaciously during her tenure in the White House. "She used her position to advance issues she cared about, namely rights for women and African-Americans," explains Susan Swain, author of *First Ladies: Presidential Historians on the Lives of 45 Iconic American Women*. "So, for example, she would empower other women by holding her own press conferences, which was unprecedented in itself, and only female reporters were allowed to attend."

Despite receiving multiple death threats from people enraged by her political meddling, she became FDR's eyes and ears when he was struck down by polio, touring the country and reporting back on people's problems during the Great Depression. While the two subsequent First Ladies reverted back to the image of a quiet housewife, Eleanor continued her public role as a delegate to the United Nations General Assembly, a position she held from 1945 to 1953. She also helped to write the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which she considered to be her greatest achievement.

2 Jacqueline Kennedy (1961-1963)

Although Jackie rarely talked politics with her husband, she flexed her intellectual muscles in other areas. "She had been a writer and reporter," says Robert P Watson, a professor of American Studies at Lynn University and author of *First Ladies of the United States*, "so she had a real eye for publicity. She would be strategic about her family's public image, deciding what they should wear and where they should make appearances."

Similarly, she initiated the refurbishment of the White House. She believed the president's home and office should represent his power and celebrate American tradition. With the help of the first White House curator, she sought out and acquired original 19th-century furnishings and art. Her guided tour of the final result was broadcast and watched by 56 million people. Her dedication to a sense of American historical identity went so far that, in the days before her husband's funeral, she took time out to arrange a switching of art pieces on the second floor from European to American ones for when the foreign leaders arrived.

3 Betty Ford (1974-1977)

A counterweight to the previous administration of Richard Nixon, Betty was more publicly candid than any other First Lady. Less than two months after her husband Gerald's inauguration, Betty was diagnosed with breast cancer and, rather than protect her privacy, she shared her story and experience of a mastectomy with the American people to fight the stigma surrounding it.

"Women simply did not get breast cancer screenings before Betty Ford," says Watson. "She changed countless lives by being that role model. Letters poured into the White House from women, husbands and children, thanking her for saving them or their loved ones." She also spoke publicly about her addiction to pain medication and alcohol, and lobbied for women's issues and the Equal Rights Amendment, a move that is widely thought to have lost her husband the support of his Republican base. After leaving office,

“Women weren't screened for breast cancer before Betty Ford

she went into rehab and later founded her own non-profit addiction clinic. Ultimately, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honour.

4 Nancy Reagan (1981-1989)

Nancy was another story entirely. A former Hollywood actress with a glamorous California lifestyle and expensive taste in clothes, she was considered out of touch with the American public. Where other First Ladies were lynched by the press for their political involvement, Nancy was critiqued for her sphere of influence as a protective housewife.

"Their relationship was close almost to the exclusion of everyone else," says Swain. "She got the nickname of 'personnel director' because she kept a close watch on everyone that was around him to make sure they were loyal. For example, she was behind the

firing of Donald Regan, the president's chief of staff, for his handling of the Iran-Contra scandal. After the attempt on Ronald Reagan's life in 1981, she kept a very tight grip on his schedule."

5 Hillary Clinton (1993-2001)

Although a young Hillary Rodham gave up the opportunity to work as a lawyer on the Senate Watergate Committee in order to support her husband's run for Congress in Arkansas, their relationship always remained what Bill Clinton called a "two for the price of one" deal. Hillary became America's most overtly political First Lady as she was appointed chair of the Task Force on Health Care Reform and, unprecedentedly, set up her own office in the West Wing, the executive office building.

"While some First Ladies lobbied for causes they cared about in a subtle way, Hillary did it in public testimonies and in front of the media," Watson says.

"Because she expanded the role beyond what some thought it should be, she, unlike any other presidential spouse, became a frequent target for her husband's political opponents." Nonetheless, she went on to become the only former First Lady to run for elective office. Working her way up from senator to secretary of state, she finally became America's first female presidential nominee by a major party in 2016.

6 Michelle Obama (2008-2017)

As the first African-American First Lady, a Harvard-educated lawyer and, in the days before his political career, her husband's superior at law firm Sidley Austin, Michelle did much to challenge gender and racial stereotypes, and acted as a role model to many. After seeing the backlash directed at her predecessors, she was careful not to appear political in the issues she chose to support. "Rather than push the

president's legislative agenda," Watson says, "she matched his push for health care reform by choosing to tackle the issue of obesity through encouraging healthy school lunches and exercise. She put her activism through the filter of a safe, traditional, motherly role of caring about children's wellbeing."

7 The Trumps (2017-)

With Melania Trump saying she will remain in New York until her son Barron finishes school, and Trump's daughter Ivanka sitting in on meetings with foreign officials and allegedly eyeing up an office in the East Wing (which is traditionally reserved for First Ladies), change is afoot. "We could have an influential 'First Daughter,'" says Swain. "And a First Lady who chooses to focus on her family. Both of those things point towards the evolving role of women in our society and the growing number of options available to them."



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