

The White Glove Pulpit? The Changing Role of the Modern First Lady

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This paper examines the Office of the First Lady of the United States of America and its relationship to the President's administration. The traditional role of the First Lady as a hostess, mother, and caretaker was played by all First Ladies for many years. During these years, the American public cherished, admired and respected these women as the wives of Presidents. There was a point in history when this began to change, and First Ladies assumed a more active role within their husbands' administrations. I seek to find how these women, who created a more powerful Office of the First Lady, sparked controversy. I will also get to the root of why the American public readily disapproved of the First Ladies who attempted this, and in turn were associated negatively with their husbands' administrations. Finally, I will look to where the Office of the First Lady currently is at and what future changes might need to be made in order to match this modern era.

Since 1789, the United States of America has witnessed forty-two men assume the distinct position of President of the United States of America. The country has also observed their wives, the First Ladies of the United States, who accompanied them to the White House. The position of First Lady is neither constitutionally nor legally defined, and it is a position that has been amended and adapted over the past two hundred and thirty years. As each new First Lady entered the White House, new traditions, roles, and controversies entered alongside each of them. Many of these women adhered to the traditional role of hostess, mother, and wife, and played little to no part in their husbands' administrations.¹ After the Women's Rights Movement in the 1960s, however, modern First Ladies, namely Betty Ford, Rosalynn Carter, Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush and Hillary Clinton, began to play a more active and public role in their husband's administrations. As this occurred, the American public became disillusioned with, and critical of, the women who attempted to engage in a more assertive and modern role in the White House. This criticism not only affected these First Ladies and their public image, but it trickled down to their husbands as well. The American public found themselves questioning the control these Presidents had over their administration,

¹ The two exceptions to this statement are Eleanor Roosevelt and Edith Wilson, who were both active in their husband's administrations, but whose actions were of a different kind when compared to the modern activist First Lady.

and questioning whether the president or his wife was calling the shots. All of these points indicate that there is a need to reexamine the Office of the First Lady. The issues of gender, legality, the growth of the Office over the past fifty years, and the future of the First Lady within the White House all should be considered.

TRADITIONS FORMED

Nowhere in the Constitution of the United States does it mention the position of First Lady. In fact, the President's wife did not have a formal title until 1849 when President Zachary Taylor spoke at the funeral of Dolly Madison and referred to her as, "truly our first lady for a half a century" (Clark 514). The framers of the Constitution could have never envisioned the role women would play in society that they do today. Women in the eighteenth century were considered inferior to men and were thought to not possess the same intellectual capacity as men. As a result, it was common belief that women should be confined to the home to care for their husbands and children, while men entered into the public world. Pamela Conover and Virginia Gray define these traditional sex roles as, "a division of activities into the public extra-familial jobs done by the male and the private intra-familial ones performed by the female" (qtd. in Lawless and Fax 8). In other words, men were responsible for the public domain and women were responsible for the private. Because of these gender roles and spheres, a reference to a First Lady, or any definition of her official duties or powers, was not mentioned when the Constitution was penned.

As a consequence of this ill-defined role, the duties and roles of the First Lady have been established on the expectations of the public and precedent, molding her into a role model. When First Lady Martha Washington entered the White House, the American public did not know exactly what to expect from her because the country had never experienced a president or a presidential spouse. Despite this, they expected what they knew. In her article, "The First Lady's Changing Role," Betty Boyd Caroli writes, "Americans, most of whom knew royalty and their ways only from a considerable distance, could be expected to look for some of the glamour of queens in the woman married to their president, and they trained a critical eye on her clothing, the desserts she served, and the entertainment she favored" (183). Germaine Greer notes, "Because few women appeared in print, the fuss made over Martha Washington... catapulted her to a position of enormous influence. People began to care what she thought about things...and the more people cared what she thought, the more careful she had to be about keeping her thoughts to herself and saying nothing that might complicate her husband's affairs" (521). Barbara Burrell expresses this same idea in her book, *Public Opinion, the First Ladyship, and Hillary Rodham Clinton*. She writes, "The woman who serves as First Lady is there because of her relationship to a man...She is to represent the expressive, supportive traditional role of women as wife, mother, and homemaker."(14). Continuing, Burrell observes that, "The word 'first' suggests that she is to be a role model. 'Lady,' in this context, suggests a 'certain kind of

appearance, manners and demeanor with connotations of middle- upper-class respectability” (14). Thus, the expectation of the First Lady as a true lady and as a role model for the American public was established in the early years of the country and passed forward.

FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC

As years passed, the customs and traditions set down by the first First Ladies were adhered to and respected by those who followed. The women of the White House acted in a way society expected them to act, and maintained the social grace that was characteristic of the President and his White House. As Gary Wekkin says, “The political influence of the first lady is largely a function of which established precedents the first lady chooses to adopt and follow, which is another way of saying that the first lady’s influence is a function of the constraints and capacities posed by the collective understanding of the first ladyship...”(608). When the revolutionary fever of the 1960s hit the United States, however, the expectations and the roles of women in society began to shift; along with it, the expectations and precedents of the First Ladyship did as well.

The Women’s Rights Movement emerged from this era with extraordinary strength. Women activists argued that men, who resided in the public sphere, depended on the work done by women in the private sphere. As Shelley Wright says, “The ‘private’ is necessarily circumscribed by the ‘public,’ just as the ‘public’ realm is partially defined by those areas of ‘private’ rights which are excluded from it” (qtd. in Knickrehm and Robin Teske 239). Therefore, the common belief circulated was that a woman’s work could, and should be, brought into the public (Lawless and Fox 59). The proponents of these movements also argued for the equality of opportunity for both men and women. As this struggle candidly occurred, the country’s eyes were opened to the inequality and injustice women were facing in the United States. It empowered women to go beyond the private realm where they had been confined to for years past, and to enter the public realm, a place previously reserved for men.

With this movement and fever for change in full swing, a blurring between traditional gender roles occurred. As was previously stated, women were liberated and began to see a life beyond motherhood and wifehood. “By the 1960s, the rallying cry for women’s full equality and political integration focused on dismantling the gendered conceptual framework of private (in the home) and public (in politics and industry) spheres” (Lawless and Fox 59). As a result of this, the country experienced confusion between what used to be traditional gender roles practiced by American men and women, and what was occurring in the present day (Burrell 14-15). This caused the stomachs of traditional Americans to churn with fear because traditional roles were upset, and when the First Ladies of the United States caught this feminist fever, they were outraged. The idea of a woman being publicly involved in her husband’s administration was taboo for many Americans

since a woman's place had culturally been in the private sphere for such a long period.

BETTY FORD

After Richard Nixon shamefully resigned from office in 1974, Gerald Ford assumed the presidency and entered the White House accompanied by his wife, Betty. Mrs. Ford was one of the first First Ladies to cross the line drawn between the public and private realms. As Helen Thomas writes in her book, *Dateline: The White House*, "She enchanted reporters from the outset with her frankness and strong stands on controversial issues" (273). Betty was a free spirit who was not afraid to be herself or speak her mind on issues that were not always appropriate for a woman to speak about. She conversed openly with the public about her breast cancer and mastectomy, and the trials and tribulations that accompanied this personal battle. More controversial was her public support and recognition of the Equal Rights Amendment. Mrs. Ford showed her strength as she fought and lobbied for this amendment. Her actions did not fare well with the public though. As Gil Troy says, "Betty's ERA escapades proved to many White House aides that First Ladies should be seen and not heard. When a state did not ratify the amendment, she and her husband looked weak. Even worse, Betty's activities were costing the President votes" (211). Additionally, her stances on sex, marriage, and divorce repulsed many, and her rumored drug and alcohol addiction concerned the public.

Not only was Mrs. Ford failing to adhere to the traditional role of a First Lady, her tenure also influenced the Office of the First Lady, most notably when she increased the size of the Office. As Anthony Eksterowicz and Kristen Paynter write, "She based her headquarters on the second floor of the East Wing of the White House and employed 28 staffers. She was the first occupant of the office to have her own speechwriter, a Deputy Press Secretary, and an Appointment Secretary" (554). This expansion of the office set the foundation for future First Ladies. Eksterowicz and Paynter demonstrate this when they write, "...the upgrades to the Office of the First Lady would serve future activist occupants well" (554). In the public's watchful eye, however, this just added fuel to the fire for Mrs. Ford because taxpayers' dollars were being spent on her staff.

After less than three years of her unelected husband's presidency, Mrs. Ford's outspoken and inappropriate nature caught up to her and more importantly to President Ford. Americans began to associate Mrs. Ford's public displays with her husband and his administration. Her antics angered and disappointed the American public. Troy exemplifies this when he says, "With his wife shooting her mouth off and his son jet-setting, the President no longer seemed commanding. 'Since you can't control your wife, how do you expect to control the country?' one Republican asked" (228). President Ford was in deep water regarding other issues besides his wife and ultimately lost his bid for the 1976 Election. As Troy says, "Rather than repudiating the new values sweeping the nation, she [Mrs. Ford] embraced them. In

so doing, she may have cost her husband the White House in 1976 and the historical respect his administration is now often denied” (207). Perhaps the parting words of a disillusioned Betty Ford sum up the effects of the public scrutiny she endured: “My advice to anyone as First Lady would be to be herself...No one should have to live up to a standard” (Troy 234).

ROSALYNN CARTER

After the Fords left the White House, President James Carter and his wife, Rosalynn entered. Mrs. Carter was another First Lady whose actions had an influence on her husband’s administration. From the beginning, Rosalynn vowed to be a positive influence on her husband’s government. She understood the power the First Lady possessed and how she could use it to help the American public. As Faye Lind Jenson says, “Mrs. Carter described the ‘awesome responsibility’ that she felt accompanied the position of the first lady. Explaining that she had the ability to utilize the finest minds in the country and to influence a great number of people...” (146). Mrs. Carter assumed this responsibility in a great way. As Troy says, “The two biggest symbols of Rosalynn’s influence were her weekly ‘working lunches’ with the President and her attendance at Cabinet meetings” (253). Thus, Mrs. Carter made sure she was an intricate part of the Carter administration, and that she was well informed of issues pertaining to the presidency.

Like Mrs. Ford, Mrs. Carter also made changes to the Office of the First Lady. “Her staff attended daily West Wing briefings and, while her staff numbers were smaller, due to the pressure on her husband to downsize the bureaucracy, she became the first to hire a management consultant to streamline her office” (Eksterowicz and Paynter 555). In addition to this, Mrs. Carter appointed a chief of staff for the First Lady and saw that the office became more professional, organized, and incorporated into the White House as a whole (Eksterowicz and Paynter 555). Most significantly, Mrs. Carter also oversaw the passage of Public Law 95-750 in 1978, which set up a fund for First Ladies to assist the President. No longer did a First Lady have to seek monies from the general White House budget (Eksterowicz and Paynter 556).

This power and influence held by Mrs. Carter was not received well by the American public. As Troy says, “Americans remained unsure what to do with what *Newsweek*’s Meg Greenfield called the ‘unelected kin of elected officials.’ More were grumbling, ‘Who elected her?’ even as others viewed the First Lady as Mrs. President” (255-256). The American public viewed Mrs. Carter as someone who was overstepping her boundaries as First Lady. In addition to this, President Carter continued to publicly support and encourage everything she did as First Lady. This controversy brought a negative image to Carter’s administration and how the public viewed his control of the presidency. Many wondered who exactly was making the decisions, and if it was right for Mrs. Carter to have input on big decisions just because she was the wife of the President. In the end, things did not fare well for President Carter when he was not reelected in 1980. As Troy says, “Sharing power

might help a First Lady make history, but it did not help her- or the president- make any friends. America was not ready for a co-presidency” (272).

NANCY REAGAN

Once President Carter and First Lady Carter left office in 1981 a new presidential couple entered, President Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy. Just like Mrs. Carter, Mrs. Reagan understood how powerful her position as First Lady had the potential to be. A *New York Times* article quoted Mrs. Reagan saying, “If the President has a bully pulpit then the First Lady has a white glove pulpit. It’s more refined, more restricted, more ceremonial, but it’s a pulpit at the same time” (Gamarekian 1998). Taking this motto of the “white glove pulpit” to heart, Mrs. Reagan spoke out on specific issues and made sure she was well informed of the President’s doings.

Soon Mrs. Reagan began to exert more influence over the President and, “without using the term co-presidency,’ Americans began to recognize that the First Lady was ‘part of the deal...’ (Troy 306). Mrs. Reagan demonstrated this after the assassination attempt on the President, when she began to keep a closer watch on his appointments. She also asserted her control when she helped to fire White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan (Eksterowicz and Paynter 556). Mrs. Reagan’s public comments about her place in the White House upset the control President Reagan held, and the American public began to question whether the President or his wife was running the country. As Troy recognizes, “the unelected First Lady had to recognize her limits. Americans did not want a zealot lobbying the president in bed” (307). The First Ladyship of Mrs. Reagan confirmed a fear that many had. She overstepped her boundaries and used her position as the President’s wife to get what she wanted. This once again left the country disillusioned and upset with how the First Lady interpreted her position in the White House.

BARBARA BUSH

Although she was a traditional woman and pledged to be a traditional First Lady, Barbara Bush ultimately could not resist the idea of a co-presidency with her husband, George Herbert Walker Bush. Nicknamed the “Silver Fox,” she used her assertive nature and strong will to shape her First Ladyship and the presidency of her husband. As one *Washington Post* writer remarks, “To ignore the special qualities of Barbara Bush, however, would be to miss one of the most important clues to the character of this new administration.... The strengths Barbara Bush brings to her role are evident to anyone who knows her. She is direct, honest, clear about her loyalties (most importantly to her husband) and her values” (Broder 1989). The Bushes’ co-presidency was not that of the Fords’, Carters’ or Reagans’, but rather one that was less intense and entailed less public scrutiny. As Troy says, “Staffers learned not to underestimate the First Lady or her influence. People she suspected of leaking were first frozen out by her, and then often fired. The President

tried to define the boundaries between their two worlds by saying, “She has been part of everything I do, but she doesn’t try to fine-tune my administration or get into the day-to-day business of the presidency” (333). Hence, Barbara had influence, but stayed out of most matters of state.

Using her “grandmother-like” appeal and traditional qualities, Barbara won the hearts of Americans. As Troy says, “The co-presidency only went so far. She attributed her popularity to the fact that ‘people don’t feel threatened by me....’” (335). This worked to Bush’s advantage and, during his reelection campaign he employed her popularity. She campaigned for her husband with slogans such as “Keep Barbara in the White House” and “Re-Elect Barbara’s Husband,” proving that her husband needed her as part of his image to win (Troy 339).

Thus, although the Bush’s co-presidency was different than the others couples presented, it still proves that the modern president needs his wife to be part of the package; without her he cannot win. As Troy says, “Barbara Bush’s phenomenal popularity- the fact that the less interested she seemed in power, the more she seemed to get- proved that presidential couples have to build a joint image but should beware of power-sharing” (264).

HILLARY CLINTON

With the shock of the outrageous Mrs. Ford and the co-presidencies of the Carters and the Reagans, Americans were uneasy with the fact a First Lady was having such a great influence in the White House. Little did they know, however, that this issue of an active, assertive First Lady would go even deeper with the Presidency of William Clinton and his wife Hillary. During his campaign for the presidency, President Clinton presented himself with his wife alongside, actively demonstrating to the American public why he and Hillary together were better than any other candidate alone. This was a historical and very controversial campaign tactic. For the first time in American history, the wife of a Presidential candidate was incredibly important to his campaign and possibly the future success of his administration. As Burrell says, “She [Mrs. Clinton] promised to be an active, public ‘partner’ in policy making. Clinton’s philosophy is that the public and private are thoroughly interconnected. She thus violates the traditional separation of the masculine sphere and the feminine, domestic sphere that previously defined the role of first lady” (18). At one point in the campaign, President Clinton even remarked, “Buy one, get one free!” when speaking of himself and his wife (Troy 346). As the Clintons actively campaigned they proved Hillary was more than a mother, wife, and homemaker, but rather an instrumental part of her husband’s success and representative of working women in America.

After winning the election and settling into the White House, President Clinton knew he would utilize his wife in the best way possible, and Mrs. Clinton knew that she could handle any task given to her. The task he would assign her was not to campaign for a specific, non-controversial issue, but rather it was to be the chair of his Task Force on National Health Care Reform. With her outstanding

resume and background in the area, she was an ideal candidate for the position. This assignment placed Hillary in a unique position. As Burrell says, “The fact is that Hillary Clinton has gone well beyond all her modern predecessors in her engagement in her husband’s government...She is a strong, separate source of power inside the administration with a mandate of authority from the president and an operational base from which to carry it out”(14). In order to facilitate her large role in the White House, Mrs. Clinton had an office in the West Wing of the White House and also had office space in the Old Executive Office Building (Eksterowicz and Paynter 558). As one would suspect, her expanding of the Office of the First Lady and her role in healthcare reform caused uproar with the American public and the law as well. In 1993, the issue of whether or not she was to be considered a federal employee was brought to a head. In his rulings, a Federal District Court judge stated, “The First Lady is not an officer or employee of the Federal government,” showing she was not in violation of the “Bobby Kennedy Rule” (Troy 358). This was then reversed by a Court of Appeals, which said, “the law funding the East Wing treated ‘the presidential spouse as a de facto officer or employee.’ Given the President’s ‘implicit authority to enlist his spouse in aid of the discharge or his federal duties,’ the sunshine law did not ‘apply to the Task Force merely because Mrs. Clinton is a member” (Troy 359). Therefore, the courts put some legal definition behind a presidential spouse’s initiatives.

Many Americans were angered by the idea of a First Lady taking such an active role within the executive branch, and it led to controversy and questioning of the American Presidency. As Troy says, “...the Clinton’s co-presidency struck some of their fellow citizens as threatening and un-American. Millions still built their assumptions about American morality and destiny on the traditional sex roles” (364). Hillary soon became labeled as dangerous and detrimental to her husband’s success as President. Troy continues, “The warning about Hillary’s ‘dangerous sexuality,’ the attacks on her ‘feminine credentials,’ the trivialization of her motives, and the ‘unnatural’ imagery were classic feminist illustrations of ‘our gendered concept of governance” (364). Charles Clark writes, “The issues that have embroiled Mrs. Clinton in controversy have a common thread: They all reflect a woman who is an independent decision-maker. And the fact that a president’s wife would become a lightning rod for ethics charges and broadsides from the president’s political opponents brings the institution of first lady into new territory” (507). In other words, Hillary Clinton’s role in the executive branch as First Lady was something the American public had never seen before and many were disillusioned by this fact.

THE EFFECTS OF A MODERN FIRST LADYSHIP

Since the Ford administration, the First Ladies have held a great amount of power and influence during their husbands’ terms. Not only has this affected their approval ratings as First Ladies, but it has also affected the public’s approval and opinion of their husbands’ administrations. As these post-1960s women

demonstrated, the more power a First Lady holds or seeks to hold, the more public attention she gets, and consequently the more influence she has on her husband's administration. This acquisition of power has led to issues within the White House and with the public.

The first issue that this new type of First Ladyship has raised is the growth of the Office of the First Lady as an institution within the United States government. For years, beginning with Eleanor Roosevelt, First Ladies have sought to be compensated for their duties, or at least be allocated money in order to perform their duties. In the 79th Congress, Representative James Grove Fulton (R-Pa) proposed this notion when he argued that ten thousand dollars per year should be allocated to the First Lady. This money was, "Not to be expended as the President may determine" (Campbell and McCluskie 177). Thus, Congress proposed to apportion funds to the First Lady for her to use at her discretion. This, of course, would place a great deal of power into the hands of the presidential spouse. Fulton continues and says, "She is the only case of involuntary servitude in the United States of America. She serves completely without pay, completely without expenses, [and] could not resign from the position if she wanted to" (Campbell and McCluskie 177). Fulton's efforts failed, but his spirit lived on in the 95th Congress when it passed HR 11003, where "explicit authorization also was provided for assistance and services for the presidents' and vice presidents' spouses in connection with the discharge of their duties" (Campbell and McCluskie 178). This money that was allocated has produced a large Office of the First Lady. As Robert Watson says, "Not only is the first lady's office budget and staff larger than many of the so-called key advisors and institutions that presidential scholars study, but as presidential spouse she assumes a role vastly more vital to the president's career and the success of the White House than any formal adviser" (28). Gamarekian comments on this as well and describes the Office of the First Lady as becoming a bureaucracy of its own within the White House. She states, "The growth of the institution of First Lady has paralleled the growth of the strong Presidency. She now has a formal staff, a staff director, and you are beginning to get a bureaucracy" (1998). Therefore, this growth has given First Ladies the ability to significantly expand their presence and influence, but at the same time they have yet to acquire the public's approval to take this type of action.

Secondly, it raises an issue of gender and gender roles within American society. The sheer fact that a woman held the amount of power that these past First Ladies held is uneasy for many traditional Americans. It is unproblematic and simply easier for the American public to support a president, whose wife leads the traditional life society once expected of American women, or as Kay Knickrehm and Robin Teske say, "She should be a devoted wife and mother for whom family comes first" (246). As Edith Mayo says, "First Ladies still reflect society's concepts about family, motherhood and femininity. This view is important to the older generation, which is more likely than the younger one to see a conflict between motherhood and career" (qtd. in Clark 513). The wives of past presidents who played the role of a traditional First Lady were never a threat or liability to his

public image. As long as she did what was expected, the American public was pleased and proud of her. When attitudes towards women shifted, modern First Ladies were given some leeway, but still cannot do much without criticism from the public. As an article in the *Baltimore Sun* states, “What public opinion is saying is we want an activist First Lady, but we don’t want her to overstep the bounds. It is O.K. to be your husband’s closest advisor, but don’t push, don’t control, don’t outdistance him, don’t overshadow him” (Steinbach 1992). In other words, Americans still want and expect the First Lady to hold a traditional feminine role.

Thirdly, the issue of the co-presidency and the public’s opinion of it materializes with most of these women. Americans had concerns about a First Lady exerting more power just because she is married to the President and not in an elected position. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell says,

By contrast, candidates’ wives raise the more problematic issue of the relationship between women, *sexuality*, and power. That is, spouses exert their power by virtue of their sexual and marital relationship to the candidates; their influence is indirect and intimate, a subtle intrusion of the private into the public, political sphere... Because of her position in the family, the first lady is not able to act as an independent individual. She may be credited with political influence, but it is an influence hidden behind a mask of domesticity and treated with considerable suspicion (qtd. in Burrell 21-23).

Greer expands upon this and says, “It can no longer be acceptable that a person should achieve high visibility, influence and even a degree of executive power simply because she shares a bed... with a head of state” (521). Maureen Dowd also comments on this when speaking of Hillary Clinton, “When she came to Washington, Mrs. Clinton appeared to willfully ignore the political dangers of assigning herself so much power with no accountability... She thinks Americans fear the partnership with her husband. What they really fear is a bargain that ignores accountability. It’s not about being a woman. It’s about not being elected” (qtd in Burrell 182). Americans do not feel comfortable with First Ladies using their position as the wife of powerful figure to exert control within the government, or over the President himself.

CONCLUSION

Margaret Truman, daughter of President Truman, describes the role of the First Lady as “the world’s second-toughest job” (qtd. in Clark 510). The material presented above demonstrates the massive gray area that surrounds the Office of the First Lady, and exhibits the need for this office to be reexamined. Therefore, considerations of the Office and the future of it must be explored. First, the institution of the First Ladyship might vanish all together. As Caroli says, “Some observers predict that the job as we have known it will disappear as presidential

spouses are more likely to be men or women with professional careers that they cannot- or choose not to- put on hold for four years” (184). This idea materialized with Elizabeth Dole, the wife Robert Dole, the 1996 Republican presidential nominee, who pledged to remain at her post with the American Red Cross and to not fulfill the traditional role of the First Lady if her husband was elected. The United States is more likely to see spouses assume this type of role in the future.

Second, the notion of a female President of the United States is a close reality. If this were to occur, her husband will become the nation’s first First Gentleman. It is hard to believe that Americans would hold a male to the same expectations and standards that female first spouses have been held to all these years. As Burrell points out, “Men who have served as ‘first spouses’ to women governors have not been expected to adopt host roles in the governors’ mansions or limit their own careers” (143). Therefore, serious thought and consideration must be put into these issues of gender and legality of the Office of the First Lady (or Gentlemen).

Finally, the issue of institutionalizing the office and placing some form of legal accountability into it is at hand. Even today in 2008, the First Lady of the United States does not have a role within the White House that is truly grounded in the law. Her duties and powers are based on expectations and precedent. As Lewis L. Gould says, “...there is no consensus on how to characterize the role of the president’s wife. She does not occupy an official position or rank, she receives no salary, and she has an intangible, imprecise, but significant influence on the president. The First Lady is an institution in American government that is as important as it is ill-defined” (3). Despite this lack of legal grounding, the American public expects their First Lady to act in a specific manner. When she defies this role, she is scrutinized and ostracized by many for not doing what she is there to do. The public also takes issue with presidential spouses who use their position in marriage to shape national issues. As Weckin says, “The *Co-President* also collides with the external, political-cultural barrier of public questioning- especially among males- of the constitutionality of such empowerment of a person who is only *married* to the person who was *elected*” (608). In addition to this, the First Lady is not held accountable like other members of the White House staff. As O’Connor, Nye, and Van Assendelft say, “The influence of *unelected* First Ladies as policy makers or influencers also has interesting implication for democracy. Americans have long taken for granted the key roles that unelected advisors including White House chiefs of staff, cabinet members, friends, and other play without questioning their unelected status” (330). Consequently, this is a problem that the executive branch of the United States government faces today, and this struggle must be addressed.

In sum, steps must be taken to resolve the many issues created by the modern, active, and assertive First Ladyship. Perhaps, with a legally defined role, the man or woman who assumes this position will understand their boundaries while in office. In addition to this, perhaps the American public should take greater responsibility in getting to know presidential candidates’ spouses during their

campaigns. By understanding and questioning what type of role he or she wishes to pursue, then the public would not be as shocked when a presidential spouse enters the White House. In all, the issues presented above could possibly be avoided in the future if these measures, or ones similar to them, are put into place.

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