

Introduction

Why First Ladies Matter

First ladies have been a topic of interest for the press and public in the United States since Martha Washington's time. They are among the most highly recognizable figures of any presidential administration and are often treated as celebrities, making them some of the most prominent women of their eras. Yet, over the years, many of their stories and contributions have been forgotten. They are rarely discussed in history classes. Many presidential biographies devote just a few lines (if any) to the wives of their subjects. President Harry Truman once said, "I hope that someday someone will take the time to evaluate the role of the wife of a president, and to assess the many burdens she has to bear and the contributions she makes."¹ But it wasn't until the 1980s that serious scholarly attention was given to presidential spouses. Since then, interest in researching first ladies has increased, resulting in a robust body of literature that spans the fields of history, political science, communication, and women's studies.² Most articles and books focus on the individual women who've served as first lady, resulting in works heavy on biography. There are very few works that approach first ladies from a thematic perspective that looks at both the development of the first lady institution and the political, social, and cultural influence of the women who've served in this role, which is arguably one of the most prominent political positions in US history. *The Cambridge Companion to US First Ladies* seeks to address this gap in the literature. There is much that can be learned about US history, political communication, gender roles, social advocacy, media, celebrity, and popular culture from analyzing the development and

evolution of the first lady position, how the role has been performed by its various holders over the years, and the impact of these women on history, politics, and culture.

The first lady position itself is a conundrum since it is not defined anywhere, yet expectations exist that presidents' spouses perform a variety of duties from hostess and helpmate to advisor, advocate, and surrogate. In nearly every book or article written about first ladies, authors note the unique nature of the position. There's no mention of the president's spouse in the Constitution and there are no official guidelines. The role has been described as "a paradox,"³ "a peculiar job,"⁴ "an improvised throwback of a position,"⁵ "ill-defined,"⁶ "anachronistic,"⁷ "highly malleable,"⁸ and "a highly individualistic office."⁹ First ladies themselves have expressed mixed feelings about the ambiguous yet demanding requirements of the role. In 1789, just a few months into her tenure, Martha Washington complained, "I am more like a state prisoner than anything else. There is certain bounds set for me which I must not depart from – and as I can not doe [*sic*] as I like I am obstinate and stay at home a great deal."¹⁰ In her autobiography, Grace Coolidge reflected, "There was this sense of detachment. This was I and yet not I. This was the wife of the president of the United States, and she took precedence over me. My personal likes and dislikes must be subordinated to the consideration of those things which were required of her."¹¹ Eleanor Roosevelt had a similar experience, saying in her memoirs, "On the whole, I think I lived those years [in the White House] very impersonally. It was almost as though I had erected someone outside myself who was the President's wife. I was lost somewhere deep down inside myself."¹² Pat Nixon called it "the hardest unpaid job in the world."¹³ Michelle Obama described being first lady as "a job that's not officially a job, but that nonetheless has given me a platform like nothing I could have imagined. It challenged me and humbled me, lifted me up and shrank me down, sometimes all at once."¹⁴

In spite of this lack of clarity, first ladies have become "a political celebrity,"¹⁵ "a key player,"¹⁶ and "part of our national folklore."¹⁷ It is a "role without a rulebook" that is "defined by flexibility and opportunity on one hand, and constraints on the other. It is continuously defined and redefined by the unique personalities, capabilities, and active

engagement of the women who serve in the office.”¹⁸ The holders of the title are unelected and they are also unpaid. For many years, the first lady’s staff and office expenses were a line item in the larger White House budget. The Office of the First Lady finally received funding in 1978 after Congress recognized a spouse’s role in “the discharge of the president’s duties and responsibilities,” but first ladies still remain uncompensated for their work.¹⁹ In 1993, the US Court of Appeals ruled that presidential spouses should be considered “de facto” federal officials on their own merit because of “a longstanding tradition of public service by First Ladies.”²⁰

The lack of definition gives first ladies a great deal of flexibility in how they approach the role. Roosevelt initially dreaded becoming first lady, which she viewed as an endless stream of teas and receiving lines based on her experience watching her Aunt Edith, Teddy’s wife. Once she realized there was no rulebook, Roosevelt revolutionized the role through her extensive travel on behalf of the administration as well as her social advocacy efforts and savvy media usage.²¹ Meanwhile, her successor, Bess Truman, was relieved to find out that she was not required to hold press conferences or keep the same active schedule as Roosevelt. She chose to spend most of her time back home in Independence, Missouri. Yet she was still one of her husband’s most trusted confidantes and played a key role behind the scenes.²² Since then, each woman has taken their own approach to the role, with some opting to be more active than others.

But because the position is so deeply rooted in tradition, it comes with certain expectations based on how previous first ladies have performed their duties.²³ This leads to an extraordinary amount of scrutiny from the public, political foes, and the press. Presidential spouses are expected to fulfill multiple roles flawlessly. Any departure from perceived standards is often met with disapproval.²⁴ The first lady position is further constrained by its gendered nature and is deeply connected to an era’s cultural norms regarding women’s “proper” behavior. Held up by the media and public as models of American womanhood,²⁵ first ladies serve as sites for the “symbolic negotiation of female identity”²⁶ and “lightning rods for social arguments over competing and confusing expectations for women in general.”²⁷ The term itself is a gendered throwback to a bygone era that smacks of elitism, yet

it persists – at least until the first male spouse assumes the role.²⁸ While some first ladies were criticized for overstepping the perceived (and ever-shifting) boundaries of the unelected position, others were critiqued for not being active enough. As one scholar noted, “Often it seems that a first lady cannot do anything right: Nancy Reagan was too trendy, Barbara Bush, too frumpy; Rosalynn Carter was too powerful, Pat Nixon, too passive; Betty Ford was too outspoken, Bess Truman, too discreet.”²⁹ It’s a classic catch-22: damned if you do, damned if you don’t.³⁰

In spite of all this, most of the women who found themselves in the White House accepted their role. Some, like Julia Tyler and Nellie Taft, enjoyed the spotlight, while others, like Elizabeth Monroe and Melania Trump, were more reluctant.³¹ Through their service, they created the first lady institution, which has evolved both with the times and with each individual who has taken up its ever-expanding responsibilities. The first lady is an integral part of the US political system. First ladies are often more popular than presidents, according to public opinion polls. Laura Bush had an 82 percent job approval rating in 2006, while her husband’s stood at 43 percent. Even first ladies who faced criticism still polled higher than their husbands. For example, Hillary Clinton’s 64 percent approval average compares with Bill Clinton’s 55 percent average rating while in office. When Rosalynn Carter had a 59 percent approval rating in 1979, her husband Jimmy Carter was at 32 percent.³² First ladies’ memoirs have outsold those written by presidents, a pattern that started with Lady Bird Johnson’s *A White House Diary* and continued through Obama.³³ Spouses are not-so-“secret weapons” in campaign strategy and typically viewed as assets to their husbands’ administrations. Lucretia Garfield was the first to campaign with her husband in 1880. Caroline Harrison (1888), Ida McKinley (1896), and Florence Harding (1920) took part in their husbands’ “front porch campaigns.” The Cleveland campaign took advantage of Frances’ popularity by putting her image on a variety of campaign memorabilia.³⁴ Jacqueline Kennedy used her language skills to make an impression on world leaders, prompting her husband to open a Paris press conference by saying, “I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris, and I have enjoyed it.”³⁵ Nixon similarly charmed the Chinese premier, resulting in the gift of two pandas and the start of

“panda diplomacy.”³⁶ Since the 1990s, first ladies have made more public remarks than vice presidents, both on behalf of their husband’s political agendas and in support of their own causes.³⁷

Through marriage, first ladies have intimate access to the inner workings and highest levels of the US government. Ford called it the power of “pillow talk.”³⁸ They wield influence, both political and cultural, from their so-called “white glove” or “velvet pulpit.”³⁹ They have a platform that allows them to call attention to social issues and advocate for causes. They are celebrities, trendsetters, and role models. They are wives, mothers, and grandmothers who continue to take care of their families, like Obama’s focus on being “mom in chief,” while often extending their nurturing to the nation, as with Laura Bush taking on the “comforter in chief” role following the events of 9/11. They give up their privacy and are subject to the intense glare of the public spotlight, often in service to someone else’s ambitions. Yet much of their work has been forgotten or reduced to one or two memories because presidential spouses and stand-ins – and the first lady institution – have received relatively little attention from scholars, something this collection of essays aims to address.

In *The First Ladies* podcast that accompanies this book, host Teri Finneman asks the contributors to this volume, “Why do you think studying first ladies matters?”⁴⁰ Most authors agree that studying first ladies is critical for understanding American history and the evolution of women’s roles in society. According to Tammy Vigil, whose chapter looks at first ladies as political assets and liabilities, studying first ladies provides insights into American politics, particularly the influence of non-elected individuals. First ladies hold significant soft power, making their study essential for understanding past and present gender roles and political influence. She says, “They do things the president can’t actually do, and they help and they hurt in ways that are important to understand. And so I think understanding who they are, what they’ve done is important because the influence that they have should be interrogated both to understand our past, but also to try to inform our future in terms of the first ladyship, in terms of how we think about people, power, gender roles.” She also argues that they’re fascinating historical figures and deserve attention in their own right. Likewise, Sarah Fling notes that first ladies are a unique example of women with

influence in the United States. Especially at times when other women did not have the same access to political power, first ladies had the “opportunity to influence politics, to influence culture, and to set an example for American women” on topics including slavery and civil rights, which she examines in her chapter.

Elizabeth Natalie, who wrote the chapter on first ladies and international diplomacy, points out that “first ladies are a part of the presidential administration in spite of what the Constitution does not say about them. And so, first ladies contribute in a very powerful way, and they need to be documented.” Natalie believes that understanding first ladies’ impact as “*de facto* leaders” is crucial for a comprehensive record of American governance, as they significantly contribute to the functioning and effectiveness of the presidency. MaryAnne Borrelli, author of the chapter on representation of first ladies in films, offered a similar answer, saying, “I think that if you care about transparency and responsiveness and accountability and effectiveness in the presidency, then you need to recognize and respect and delve into the work of every member in the presidential administration, and I think that first ladies have been far too often overlooked, marginalized, [and] ignored.” In his response, Thomas Balcerski underscored first ladies’ importance, stating, “They are right alongside with the presidents as some of the most important, significant, and powerful people in the nation at any one time. They can affect policy changes and cultural and social changes with whatever program or cause they take up.” And during times of war, which Balcerski examines in his chapter, first ladies “are literally the person most directly sustaining the commander in chief. They are there every day, every hour of every day, in some cases, literally holding up, propping up, supporting emotionally and physically the president of the United States in one of the most solemn and important duties that he has, and that is having to be a leader during wartime.”

In summary, first ladies matter for a multitude of reasons. What follows is a collection of thematic essays examining the development of the first lady institution and the political, social, and cultural influence of the women who’ve served in this role. Some chapters trace the evolution of various first lady roles, such as hostess, campaigner, surrogate, diplomat, and social advocate. Others consider how first ladies have been political assets and liabilities, including their views on

women's rights and the complicated historical relationship between first ladies, slavery, and civil rights. The book includes chapters on first ladies' speeches and media usage, their role as trendsetters, and how presidential spouses have been represented in films. We remember the stand-ins – the women who were not wives but performed the first lady's duties – who often get left out of other first lady collections. There are chapters devoted to the important role these women have played during specific historical moments including first ladies in wartime and wives who've led the nation in mourning after a president's death. Finally, we consider these women's legacies and how they are memorialized and remembered – or forgotten.

Since the purpose of this series is to introduce readers to the subject and serve as a starting point for deeper research, most chapters are based primarily on existing first lady scholarship. The endnotes in each chapter and the Further Readings section are key resources for those who want to learn more about particular first ladies and/or topics. Some chapters also include archival research, analysis of media coverage, and information from museum and memorial sites dedicated to preserving the public memories of these women. In sum, this book offers a thorough introduction to US first ladies for anyone interested in learning more about the impact of these women on history, politics, and culture while also providing detailed analysis of the various contributions of presidential spouses that will be insightful to even the most seasoned scholars.

Listen – The First Ladies podcast: Episode 1

<https://www.quinnipiacpodcasts.com/the-first-ladies>



In this podcast episode, Lisa Burns discusses why the public is so interested in first ladies and how their influence endures 235 years after Martha Washington began the role.

Notes

- 1 Robert P. Watson, *The President's Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000), 19.
- 2 Most researchers point to Lewis Gould's 1986 article "First Ladies" (in *American Scholar* 55: 528–535) as the publication that launches first ladies studies as a serious area of scholarly study. Other significant books focused on multiple first ladies include Carl S. Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power*, vol. 1: 1789–1961 (New York: Morrow, 1990); Carl S. Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power*, vol. 2: 1961–1990 (New York: Morrow, 1991); Carl S. Anthony, *America's First Families: An Inside View of Two Hundred Years of Private Life in the White House* (New York: Touchstone, 2000); Maurine Beasley, *First Ladies and the Press: The Unfinished Partnership of the Media Age* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005); MaryAnne Borrelli, *The Politics of the President's Wife* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2011); Kate Anderson Bower, *First Women: The Grace and Power of America's Modern First Ladies* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016); Lisa M. Burns, *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of Presidential Wives* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008); Lisa M. Burns, ed., *Media Relations and the Modern First Lady: From Jacqueline Kennedy to Melania Trump* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020); Diana B. Carlin, Anita B. McBride, and Nancy Kegan Smith, *Remember the First Ladies: The Legacies of America's History Making Women* (San Diego, CA: Cognella, 2024); Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Lewis L. Gould, ed., *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Myra G. Gutin, *The President's Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989); Jill Abraham Hummer, *First Ladies and American Women: In Politics and at Home* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017); Kati Marton, *Hidden Power: Presidential Marriages That Shaped Our Recent History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001); Katherine A. Sibley, ed., *A Companion to First Ladies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2016); Gil Troy, *Mr. and Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000); Tammy R. Vigil, *Moms in Chief: The Rhetoric of Republican Motherhood and the Spouses of Presidential Nominees, 1992–2016* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019); Robert P. Watson, *The Presidents' Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000); Robert P. Watson and Anthony J. Eksterowicz, eds., *The Presidential Companion: Readings on the First Ladies* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003); Molly Meijer Wertheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice: The Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, MD:

- Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Lauren A. Wright, *On Behalf of the President: Presidential Spouses and White House Communications Strategy Today* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016).
- 3 Watson, *The Presidents' Wives*, 31.
 - 4 Hummer, *First Ladies and American Women*, 1.
 - 5 Troy, *Mr. and Mrs. President*, x.
 - 6 Beasley, *First Ladies and the Press*, 5.
 - 7 Bower, *First Women*, 7.
 - 8 Vigil, *Moms in Chief*, 8.
 - 9 Watson, "About the Report," in *Laura Bush: The Report to the First Lady*, ed. Robert P. Watson (Huntington, NY: Nova History Publications, 2001), 7.
 - 10 "Letter, Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, October 23, 1789," George Washington's Mt. Vernon, accessed June 16, 2024, www.mountvernon.org/education/primary-source-collections/primary-source-collections/article/letter-martha-washington-to-fanny-bassett-washington-october-23-1789/.
 - 11 "Grace Coolidge," White House Historical Association, accessed June 16, 2024, www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/grace-coolidge.
 - 12 Eleanor Roosevelt, *This I Remember* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 350–351.
 - 13 Hummer, *First Ladies and American Women*, 1.
 - 14 Michelle Obama, *Becoming* (New York: Crown, 2018), x.
 - 15 Gould, "First Ladies," 528.
 - 16 Wertheimer, "First Ladies' Fundamental Rhetorical Choices," in Wertheimer, *Inventing a Voice*, 12.
 - 17 Marton, *Hidden Power*, 7.
 - 18 Natalie Gonnella-Platts and Katherine Fritz, "A Role Without a Rulebook: The Influence and Leadership of Global First Ladies," George W. Bush Institute, March 28, 2017, www.bushcenter.org/publications/a-role-without-a-rulebook-the-influence-and-leadership-of-global-first-ladies.
 - 19 Public Law No. 95-750, 92 Stat. 2445 (1978), www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-92/pdf/STATUTE-92-Pg2445.pdf.
 - 20 Olivia B. Waxman, "Behind the Law That May Keep Donald Trump's Children from White House Jobs," *Time*, November 18, 2016, <https://time.com/4574971/donald-trump-transition-jared-kushner-legal-anti-nepotism-law/>.
 - 21 Roosevelt, *This I Remember*, 74; Beasley, *First Ladies and the Press*, 24–25.
 - 22 Carlin, McBride, and Smith, *Remember the First Ladies*, 153–154.
 - 23 Watson, *The Presidents' Wives*, 7.
 - 24 Gould, *American First Ladies*, xv.
 - 25 Burns, *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate*, 4; Hummer, *First Ladies and American Women*, 1–2; Vigil, *Moms in Chief*, 2.
 - 26 Anderson, "The First Lady: A Site of 'American Womanhood,'" in Wertheimer, *Inventing a Voice*, 18.

- 27 Beasley, *First Ladies and the Press*, 4.
- 28 For a discussion of the origins of the term “first lady,” see Watson, *The Presidents’ Wives*, 7–11.
- 29 Troy, *Mr. and Mrs. President*, 4.
- 30 Burns, *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate*, 149–152.
- 31 For more details, see Caroli’s *First Ladies*.
- 32 Jeffrey M. Jones, “Laura Bush Approval Ratings Among the Best for First Ladies,” Gallup, February 9, 2006, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/21370/laura-bush-approval-ratings-among-best-first-ladies.aspx>.
- 33 Wright, *On Behalf of the President*, 3; Melissa Young, “Barack vs. Michelle Obama: Who’s Sold More Books?,” *The Things*, September 19, 2021, www.thethings.com/barack-vs-michelle-obama-who-sold-more-books-Dreams-from-My-Father-The-Audacity-of-Hope/.
- 34 Watson, *The Presidents’ Wives*, 84.
- 35 “News Conference 12, June 2, 1961,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed June 16, 2024, www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-press-conferences/news-conference-12.
- 36 “Pat Nixon and Panda Diplomacy,” Richard Nixon Foundation, February 1, 2011, www.nixonfoundation.org/2011/02/pat-nixon-and-panda-diplomacy/.
- 37 See Wright, *On Behalf of the President*, 23–26.
- 38 She used the phrase in an interview with McCall’s magazine when discussing how she lobbied her husband to appoint women to key cabinet posts and support the ERA. See Burns, *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate*, 113.
- 39 Gil Troy, “Looking Back: Lessons for the First Lady – And Her Husband – From History,” in Watson, *Laura Bush*, 106.
- 40 QR codes for the episodes can be found at the end of each chapter.