

Living a Legacy: Eleanor Roosevelt as a Role Model for Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter

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**Living a Legacy:
Eleanor Roosevelt as a Role Model for Betty Ford and Rosalynn
Carter**

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Introduction

The position of the American First Lady is truly unique within the United States government. The American public looks to the First Lady as an influential member of her husband's administration and, especially in the modern era, as a pivotal political figure with an ever-increasing public role. It is ironic, then, that expectations are set so high for someone whose position depends solely on her spouse, a reality that every First Lady since Martha Washington has grappled with in deciding how best to shape her approach to the office. The list of women who have shared the White House is an illustrious one, but one presidential wife in particular regularly sits at the top of this list: Eleanor Roosevelt.

Eleanor's innovations and precedent-setting actions during the twelve years of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration (1933-1945) set the standard by which all future First Ladies are assessed. While many connections have been drawn between Eleanor and other, very public First Ladies, including Lady Bird Johnson and Hillary Rodham Clinton, two presidential wives are often overlooked. Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter, serving in successive administrations, demonstrated how the legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt manifested itself through the decisions and actions of these two First Ladies. Both Ford and Carter implemented different aspects of Eleanor's legacy and in doing so provide a more comprehensive glimpse into the influence and importance of Eleanor Roosevelt's contributions to the American presidency.

Current scholarship regarding the position of the First Lady, according to political scientist Robert Watson, remains relatively limited. He traces the first significant popular interest and serious studies of the First Ladies to the 1980s although the field "is still in its

infancy.”¹ Watson argues that scholars have neglected the presidents’ wives since the current state of the study of First Ladies lacks substantial attention from the academic community. He points to the challenges of studying these women, which include a lack of primary source material, the political slant of existing documents, and the fact that “there are no clearly defined roles or responsibilities” for the First Lady who “serves at the discretion of the president.”² The existing literature on First Ladies, then, is a “mixed record” with few reliable, comprehensive studies of these women who are often considered as “a ‘partner’ to the president or an ‘associate’ president.”³ The authors discussed here, however, reflect the growing collection of scholarship regarding the crucial position of the First Lady.

While the study of the First Ladies involves substantial constraints, scholars also voice the inherent contradictions present within the office itself. Lewis L. Gould, in his *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy*, points out the “ambivalent” attitude of Americans towards their First Lady since the public’s expectations of the president’s wife vary depending on historical context.⁴ Betty Boyd Caroli presents a similar argument in her reasoning for studying these women in the first place: “What value could there be in studying a group of women united only by the fact that their husbands had held the same job?”⁵ The importance of the First Lady as an institution is evident in the influential roles First Ladies played in their husbands’ administrations and the ways in which these women evoked and challenged society’s expectations, serving as role models for the American public. Scholars have also explored the

¹ Robert P. Watson, “Source Material: Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2003): 435.

² Watson, 432, 434.

³ *Ibid*, 427, 437.

⁴ Lewis L. Gould, *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), xv.

⁵ Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2010), xiii.

First Ladies as individuals with their own unique contributions with none receiving more attention than Eleanor Roosevelt.

In the aptly named *Without Precedent: The Life and Career of Eleanor Roosevelt*, Joan Hoff-Wilson and Marjorie Lightman compiled a series of scholarly articles regarding the various facets of Eleanor's career. According to author Abigail Q. McCarthy, "There is general agreement that Eleanor Roosevelt had a pivotal influence on the role of the First Lady: we measure not only her successors but her predecessors by her character and achievements."⁶ This legacy is an important component to any study of the First Ladies. In Allida Black's biographical sketch of Eleanor Roosevelt, she outlines the many "firsts" that Eleanor accomplished during her First Ladyship, including holding weekly press conferences, traveling to foreign countries as part of her duties, and directing a government agency. Through these and other milestones, Roosevelt "revolutionized the role of First Lady by constantly acting in ways that were new to the position."⁷ As a result, scholars constantly connect Eleanor Roosevelt to other First Ladies, including Betty Ford (1974-1977) and Rosalynn Carter (1977-1981) whose own approaches to the office of First Lady reflected themes from the Roosevelt administration.

McCarthy makes this connection particularly to Rosalynn Carter who she argues "deliberately set out to emulate Eleanor Roosevelt" through her work on her husband's mental health commission and focus on substantive policy issues, including attending Cabinet meetings and weekly working lunches with the president. McCarthy does not make the same argument for Ford, however, saying that her public lobbying on behalf of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)

⁶ Abigail Q. McCarthy, "ER As First Lady," *Without Precedent: The Life and Career of Eleanor Roosevelt*, ed. Joan Hoff-Wilson and Marjorie Lightman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, Inc., 1984), 214.

⁷ Allida Black, "(Anna) Eleanor Roosevelt," *American First Ladies*, ed. Gould, 444.

and women's rights, causes that she supported "by accident," was "a public relations effort that had little practical political effect."⁸ Thus, according to McCarthy's interpretation, Ford did not reflect Roosevelt's legacy in a particularly substantive fashion. Other scholars, however, have a different opinion on Betty Ford's relationship to Eleanor's influence, including this previous First Lady herself.

In Gould's comprehensive biographical work on the First Ladies, a direct link appears between Ford and Roosevelt in a biographical article about Betty Ford written by journalist John Pope. Pope cites an interview with Ford conducted by Carl Sferrazza Anthony, a noted historian of the First Ladies, to support this connection. In the interview, Betty stated: "[Mrs. Roosevelt] eventually became a role model for me because I liked her independence...I really liked the idea that a woman was finally speaking out and expressing herself rather than just expressing the views of her husband. That seemed healthy."⁹ Ford's candor and willingness to share her uncensored opinion became a hallmark of her husband's short-lived administration, a trait that she attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt. Pope's article further solidifies this connection by demonstrating how the public noticed the similarities between Ford and Roosevelt by describing her as "a crusader in the tradition of Eleanor Roosevelt," given her passionate public discussion of her battle with breast cancer and eventually her alcohol and drug addictions.¹⁰

The comparison between Betty Ford and Eleanor Roosevelt appears in John Robert Greene's biography of Ford in which he argues that Ford was "more like Eleanor Roosevelt than any other First Lady" as a result of her public efforts to support her stance on women's rights,

⁸ McCarthy, 221.

⁹ John Pope, "Betty (Elizabeth Ann Bloomer) Ford," *American First Ladies*, ed. Gould, 538.

¹⁰ Pope, 548.

much like Pope's argument.¹¹ Greene also writes that Roosevelt's legacy is apparent in the ways in which "Betty Ford has come to stand for something—a true symbol of an era."¹² According to this interpretation, just "as Mrs. Roosevelt became a symbol of the battle for civil rights," Betty Ford took on the passage of the ERA as a personal mission, even though neither she, nor the First Ladies who followed her, succeeded in the amendment's ratification.¹³ Through this interpretation, then, Eleanor' Roosevelt's legacy in the life of Betty Ford appeared through Ford's personal approach to the office of First Lady.

Historian Gil Troy follows this line of inquiry with a slightly different approach through his study of presidential couples beginning with the Roosevelts, who he believes originated the notion of the "First Couple." Through the manipulation of the media and the formation of a public image, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt forged the way and set the standard for the couples that would follow them into the White House. The Fords were one of these couples whose administration, despite their "often overlooked" contribution to the office, remains a crucial period in presidential history, especially in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal that signaled the end of the Nixon years.¹⁴ In this context, Betty Ford, Troy writes, "became the most controversial First Lady since Eleanor Roosevelt" since she "inserted herself at the flash point of the country's social upheavals."¹⁵ The most salient example of this statement is Betty Ford's interview on *60 Minutes* in which she bluntly stated her acceptance of her daughter's hypothetical affair and implied her support for premarital sex, which angered much of her

¹¹ John Robert Greene, *Betty Ford: Candor and Courage in the White House* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 121

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gil Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 207.

¹⁵ Troy, 207.

husband's conservative support. Ford, according to Troy, fulfilled the role of the modern First Lady as defined by her supporters: "Modern First Ladies, it seemed, were supposed to be fighting for 'human dignity and freedom' rather than simply 'setting fashion trends and...decorating the White House.'"¹⁶ Instead of the traditional social role of the First Lady as hostess, Eleanor Roosevelt began a trend of substantive approaches to this position. Ford followed in this new tradition through her decisions and actions during her husband's administration.

Troy also highlights the importance of the First Lady who followed Betty Ford, Rosalynn Carter. The co-presidency of the Carters is particularly remarkable since the president and his wife operated as a pair with Rosalynn advising her husband on many pertinent topics including social issues, foreign policy, and political strategy.¹⁷ As a result of her prominent role in President Jimmy Carter's administration, the public connected her to Eleanor Roosevelt. Her husband also emphasized the similarities between the two women by highlighting the fact that Rosalynn's actual first name was Eleanor, calling her "my Eleanor."¹⁸ Rosalynn said that she learned "that there was more to being the wife of the President than sitting back in the White House and enjoying the nice life" from Eleanor's example.¹⁹ Troy argues, however, that there are significant differences between these First Ladies and their approaches to both their office and their marriages. He writes that Rosalynn Carter was "more supportive, deferential and powerful than Eleanor Roosevelt had ever been."²⁰ He compares her instead to Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, who wielded considerable, and controversial, power following Woodrow Wilson's stroke in

¹⁶ Troy, 211.

¹⁷ Ibid, 253.

¹⁸ Ibid, 256.

¹⁹ Ibid, 12.

²⁰ Ibid, 256.

1919, “or,” Troy writes, “perhaps [Carter was] a more evolved version of Lady Bird Johnson than Franklin Roosevelt’s independent crusader.”²¹ He believes that the Carters’ close partnership presented a stark contrast to the separate lives led by the Roosevelts, which most scholars argue began after Eleanor’s 1918 discovery of her husband’s long-term extramarital affair with Lucy Mercer. While the comparison between Lady Bird Johnson and Rosalynn Carter is common, other historians argue that important similarities do exist between Roosevelt and Carter.

Betty Boyd Caroli, for example, writes that Rosalynn Carter was the “most influential [First Lady] since Eleanor Roosevelt” and as a result, the comparisons between the two women during the Carter administration were inevitable.²² This influence came with a cost, much like it had with other First Ladies, including Eleanor. The Carters did not diminish Rosalynn’s crucial role and as a result her detractors argued that she had too much power, particularly in a position that operated outside of the established checks and balances within the American constitutional system. Gil Troy writes that Carter came face to face with the same problem that afflicted Roosevelt and others like her— “[Americans’] enduring discomfort with unelected First Ladies seizing power.”²³ The precedents set by Eleanor continued to spark controversy even thirty years after the end of the Roosevelt administration.

MaryAnne Borrelli examines and analyzes these precedents in a very different manner from the other scholars previously discussed. Her work, *The Politics of the President’s Wife*, explores the First Lady’s role as a representative of her husband’s administration, which, Borelli

²¹ Ibid.

²² Caroli, 273.

²³ Troy, 271.

argues, is her most important duty and a common thread connecting all of the First Ladies.²⁴ She chooses to explore these presidential wives through the lens of gender by contrasting the presidency, “the most intensely masculine post in the United States government,” with the position of the First Lady, whose very title reveals her “essentially feminine” role.²⁵

Through a gendered analysis of their representative duties, Borrelli further distinguishes between the presidents’ wives by defining various facets to their First Ladyships through which they presented their husbands’ administrations to the American public. She focuses much of her argument on her “three facets of representation” – symbolic, descriptive, and substantive – which she then applies to the careers of First Ladies from Lou Hoover to Michelle Obama. Symbolic representation focuses on the use of concrete symbols to stand for an abstract entity, such as the White House and its ability to encapsulate the ideals of “leadership, honor, national purpose, and power.”²⁶ Borrelli defines descriptive representation as “communications” that focus on the views presented by the administration. For example, Betty Ford, according to Borrelli, is predominantly an example of a descriptive representative since she focused much of her energies into public discussion of women’s issues, as well as through her *60 Minutes* interview. Finally, a substantive representative strives to respond constructively to “the needs of the represented,” with both Roosevelt and Carter falling predominantly under this category.²⁷

In a similar vein as Abigail McCarthy’s article, Borrelli draws more connections between Rosalynn Carter and Eleanor Roosevelt than between Ford and Roosevelt. She classifies the marriages of the modern presidential couples into two categories: “professional associations,”

²⁴ MaryAnne Borelli, *The Politics of the President’s Wife* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2011), 1.

²⁵ Borrelli, 3,5.

²⁶ Ibid, 198.

²⁷ Ibid.

under which she includes the Roosevelts, Johnsons, Carters, and Clintons, and on the other hand a more traditional, separate spheres grouping including the Eisenhowers, Fords, Kennedys, and Nixons.²⁸ By defining the Fords' relationship as more traditional, she separates Betty from the consideration that Eleanor Roosevelt could have significantly influenced Ford's approach to the position of First Lady. Borrelli further widens the gap between Ford and Roosevelt by placing more emphasis on Carter's substantive representation since she "accepted a responsibility for explaining presidential programs and interpreting the presidential message, in an effort to gain public support for the administration."²⁹ Carter accomplished this task through her work on the mental health commission, being the second First Lady after Eleanor to testify before Congress, and her trip to Latin American as an official representative of the Carter administration. Betty Ford is relatively absent from the discussion of substantive representation, which is dominated by the likes of Roosevelt, Johnson, Carter, and Clinton.

Borrelli's classification of the relationships between presidents and their wives appears in a slightly different form in Betty Houchin Winfield's article, "The Legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt." Winfield uses sociologist Gladys Engel Lang's two categories of the "satellite" wife, who acts as "an appendage" to her powerful husband, and the "sponsored" wife, whose initial prestige comes from her connection to her husband but who then becomes notable in her own right.³⁰ The argument could be made that all three First Ladies under consideration would fall under the "sponsored" category since they forged their own agendas and identities within the context of their husbands' administrations. Winfield reinforces this point by stating: "By her

²⁸ Borrelli, 38-40.

²⁹ Ibid, 181.

³⁰ Betty Houchin Winfield, "The Legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* Vol. 20, No. 4 (1990), 699.

example, Eleanor Roosevelt helped First Ladies be themselves,” an idea that is apparent in the examination of the very public First Ladyships of both Ford and Carter.³¹

As is mentioned in the other works discussed, controversy surrounded these First Ladies as a result of their public stands on a variety of issues. Winfield explicitly connects Ford and Carter to this tradition, stemming from the ways in which Eleanor Roosevelt “violated expected behavior” of American society.³² According to Winfield, Betty Ford’s “candor and public advocacy” were the root causes of the criticisms of her tenure as First Lady while Carter’s insistence on attending Cabinet meetings as well as her testimony before Congress earned her the sarcastic nicknames “Steel Magnolia” and “Mrs. President.”³³ Through their actions, First Ladies have won admiration from the American public as well as disapproval.

In addition to the similarities between Roosevelt, Ford, and Carter, scholars also draw connections between Ford and Carter separately from Roosevelt. The contrast between these two First Ladies is readily apparent due to their starkly different personalities. After the candor and public disclosure of the outspoken Ford, Carter’s privacy and resistance to a stereotypical public image frustrated the media. Despite this resistance, however, Borrelli argues that Ford’s First Ladyship forced Carter to accept an activist role, thus demonstrating the influence First Ladies had on one another in successive administrations.³⁴

Troy further demonstrates the contrast between Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter in his assessment of their different approaches, particularly to the media. After Ford entered a rehabilitation center for her addictions in 1978, Carter “would salute Mrs. Ford for helping ‘make it possible for other spouses not to have to be quite so perfect.’” Troy qualifies this

³¹ Winfield, 702.

³² Ibid, 703.

³³ Ibid, 704.

³⁴ Borrelli, 117, 124.

statement by adding that “‘Sister Rosalynn’” expressed her opinion while she “reveled in her own perfection.”³⁵ This comment reflects the “Steel Magnolia” image of Rosalynn that was popular in the press at one point during the Carter administration. In fact, Troy claims that there is a greater similarity between Carter’s husband and Mrs. Ford, especially since both President Carter and the previous First Lady gave controversial, intimate interviews – Jimmy to *Playboy* and Betty to *60 Minutes*. He writes that “Jimmy could be as open—and indiscreet—as Mrs. Ford.”³⁶ Despite the partisan differences between the Ford and Carter administrations, there is clear evidence that both similarities and contrasts exist in a comparison of these presidential couples.

While this scholarship establishes connections between Eleanor Roosevelt’s tenure as First Lady and the subsequent First Ladyships of Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter, these works do not demonstrate exactly how Eleanor’s influence directly impacted Ford and Carter’s approaches to their office. Since Eleanor Roosevelt remains such a crucial figure in the development of the American First Lady, an exploration of her effects on other presidential wives will further contribute to the study of her legacy as well as the far-reaching impact of her many accomplishments during her twelve years in the White House and beyond. To this point, Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter are neglected in many studies of Eleanor’s influence, especially given the very active First Ladyship of Hillary Rodham Clinton (1993-2001). Current literature focuses on generalized studies of numerous First Ladies with limited attention to detailed studies of individual First Ladies apart from the most famous women to hold the office, including Abigail Adams, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Hillary Rodham Clinton.³⁷ While

³⁵ Troy, 261.

³⁶ Ibid, 236, 245.

³⁷ Watson, Table 4 on pg. 426, 429.

the comparisons between Eleanor and these presidential wives may be more obvious, Ford and Carter's contributions reflected the women who came before them and served as indicators of the effect of Eleanor Roosevelt's approach to one of the most complicated positions in the United States government.

Chapter 1 Eleanor Roosevelt as Role Model

Eleanor Roosevelt's tenure in the White House left an indelible mark on the office of First Lady, serving as an influence for every presidential wife who followed her, including Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter. Just like the ambiguous definition of a First Lady, Eleanor was a woman of contradictions, an idea reflected in contemporary opinions of this First Lady. Some believed that "she changed my life, just by caring" while other contemporaries considered her "too tall, too unattractive, too strident for any man."³⁸ Her personal opinions also sparked similar contradictory statements. Author and activist Upton Sinclair supported her work to alleviate the challenges of poverty that faced so many Americans during the Great Depression. On the other hand, white southerners attacked Eleanor for her support of civil rights, even blaming her for riots instigated by white men protesting the employment of black men in their workplace.³⁹ Her life did not follow the proscribed guidelines for women of the age but instead represented an individual who valued her independence and utilized her talents to the best of her ability, leaving behind an impressive set of precedents. Eleanor's public role, independence, and constant struggle for the betterment of others' lives represent three hallmarks of her legacy that reappear in the lives of Ford and Carter.

The woman who would be the subject of numerous scholarly works began her life rather inauspiciously. Shy and reserved, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt was born into a wealthy and socially prominent New York family on October 11, 1884. She idolized her father, Elliot Roosevelt, who she described as the "love of my life," and maintained a close relationship with him throughout

³⁸ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume One 1884-1933* (New York: Penguin Books Inc., 1992), 1.

³⁹ Joseph Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1971), 386, 673.

her childhood.⁴⁰ Eleanor's ardent devotion to her father could not overshadow the troubling aspects of his character. An alcoholic, Elliot could not maintain a job and his irresponsible attitudes toward his family presented severe challenges to his wife and daughter's wellbeing. Eleanor could not find the comfort and stability she craved in her mother, Anna Hall Roosevelt, who constantly berated Eleanor regarding her homely appearance, calling her "Granny," and generally neglecting her only daughter.⁴¹ Roosevelt continued to seek her parents' approval and love until Anna's death in 1892 left the family stunned, only to be followed two years later by Elliot's death in 1894 leaving ten year-old Eleanor orphaned and starving for attention and love. Given her tumultuous childhood, it is truly remarkable that the daughter of a neglectful and broken family developed into the woman who would become First Lady. After her parents' death, Roosevelt lived with her maternal grandmother, Grandma Hall, who also failed to provide an environment in which her granddaughter could flourish. It was not until she traveled to Europe at the age of 15 to attend Allenswood, a school on the outskirts of London, that Eleanor Roosevelt began to develop into the young woman who would become one of the most influential individuals in American history.

Mademoiselle Marie Souvestre, one of Roosevelt's teachers, served as an important role model at a crucial period of her life. Eleanor, herself, stated that Mlle. Souvestre "exerted the greatest influence, after my father" during her childhood and young adulthood.⁴² She implemented the lessons she learned in England after her marriage to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1905 when he embarked on his political career. It was not until his diagnosis with polio and ultimate paralysis, however, that forced Roosevelt into the spotlight, which she may not have

⁴⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1961), 5.

⁴¹ Lash, 33.

⁴² Roosevelt, 35.

otherwise seized for herself. Suddenly, she became a crucial member of the Roosevelt administration and her actions remain a source of scrutiny and criticism for modern-day historians. While Eleanor's career after Franklin's death is not the primary focus of this study, her contributions, particularly at the United Nations, still played a role in her lasting impact.

While scholars continue to study Eleanor Roosevelt and publish various works on her life and contributions to the United States and the entire world, it was not until the 1970s, thirty years after the Roosevelt administration, that she became the role model we celebrate today. Within the context of the women's movement and the advent of feminism, historians and activists rediscovered this groundbreaking First Lady. As a result of works such as Joseph Lash's *Eleanor and Franklin*, and the release of Eleanor's private papers, the public gained a new appreciation for her innovations to the office of First Lady. In addition to these developments, the presidential wives who immediately followed the Roosevelts, with Lady Bird Johnson as the notable exception, did not embrace the legacy initiated by Roosevelt. Bess Truman, Mamie Eisenhower, and even Pat Nixon did not choose to act as publicly as Eleanor but instead remained behind the scenes of their husbands' administrations. When women began to fight for equality, Roosevelt emerged as a role model for American women to emulate. Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter's First Ladyships both occurred within this historical context, making Eleanor Roosevelt's legacy present in their approaches to the office as well as in the public's consideration of the duties and responsibilities of the director of the East Wing.

Roosevelt herself rarely took credit for her substantial contributions or spoke directly of her legacy. In the preface to her autobiography, she came close to a self-evaluation of her place in history: "Perhaps the most important thing that has come out of my life is the discovery that if you prepare yourself at every point as well as you can...you will be able to grasp

opportunity...when it appears.” She also wrote that “Life was meant to be lived, and curiosity must be kept alive. One must never, for whatever reason, turn his back on life.”⁴³ While she framed this statement as if bestowing advice on her readers, her statement aptly assessed her approach to the opportunities presented to her throughout her life. She certainly never “turned her back on life” but instead initiated radical changes in the office of the First Lady, most notably the very public role of the position, emphasized by the increased importance of the media during the Roosevelt administration.

Before Eleanor Roosevelt, the First Lady’s importance stemmed primarily from her connection to the president. While this was also true during the Roosevelt years, Eleanor used this attention to further her own agenda while in the White House. Through her weekly press conferences for women journalists, her “My Day” columns, and countless speeches and essays, she left some of the most extensive records of any other woman to hold her office. This written record speaks to Roosevelt’s public role and activity in the media spotlight during her First Ladyship, which in turn influenced her legacy. Through her extensive travels and interactions with the American people both at home and abroad, Eleanor paved the way for future women leaders to extricate themselves from their traditional roles and confidently enter the public sphere.

Eleanor Roosevelt did not limit her public life to mere appearances but instead emphasized her ability to act on her convictions, thus establishing the American public’s newfound expectation of a presidential wife who consistently acted in the public eye.⁴⁴ From her beginnings as a member of various women’s charitable leagues to her position as a delegate to the United Nations, Eleanor acted in support of the causes that resonated with her personal

⁴³ Roosevelt, xix.

⁴⁴ Winfield, “The Legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt,” 699.

values. She seized her chance during World War I and became a vital ally to many relief organizations, including the Red Cross. Roosevelt worked tirelessly for civil rights and integration, particularly during her husband's second term, and ultimately became a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In one of her most famous public actions, she resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution because they did not allow Marian Anderson, a celebrated African-American singer, to perform in Constitution Hall. Instead, the First Lady enabled Anderson to hold a concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, thus taking a public stand on a controversial issue and through her actions presenting this controversy to the American public.

Faced with criticism throughout her life regarding her public actions, Roosevelt used the media as a support mechanism. While she grappled with the dichotomy between her personal and public lives, she also understood the importance of her role to garner support for her husband's programs.⁴⁵ It is compelling to wonder if Eleanor Roosevelt would have expanded the public aspect of the First Ladyship as she did if it were not for Franklin Roosevelt's paralysis from polio. In becoming his "eyes and ears," Roosevelt possessed the ability to act independently, an independence that she highly valued.

The first stirrings of independence began after FDR's election as governor of New York. Roosevelt wrote that after the family's move to the state capital of Albany, "I was beginning to realize that something within me craved to be an individual."⁴⁶ This individuality continued to develop throughout the gubernatorial years, pruning her for the role of First Lady. A *Washington Post* article published shortly after FDR's election to the presidency reflected Eleanor's visibility within the administration as an independent political actor. Phrases such as

⁴⁵ Roosevelt, 107.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 65.

“Became Political Force By Strength of Personality,” “Believes in Everyone Speaking Own Mind,” and “Strategic Mind Aided Roosevelt In Climb” highlighted her forceful, public character.⁴⁷ This radically new approach to a woman’s political role contributed to Roosevelt’s overall legacy.

Eleanor Roosevelt herself reflected upon her independence: “As time went by I found that people no longer considered me a mouthpiece for my husband but realized that I had a point of view of my own with which he might not at all agree. Then I felt freer to state my views.”⁴⁸ Her ability to maintain her independence sparked criticisms, as some detractors argued that she acted with more authority than was expected of a First Lady. One critic wrote: “We have already had a woman in the White House. Everybody knows she was president; that was why he was called Franklin D’Eleanor Roosevelt.”⁴⁹ Despite constant critiques, which every First Lady must face, Roosevelt maintained her individual approach to her office and set about using her power and influence to improve the lives of her fellow Americans.

In addition to her public image and independent approach to the First Ladyship, Eleanor worked tirelessly for the betterment of others. Her efforts for social justice and support for democratic principles served as additional components to her legacy. Her work for human rights, which she continued after FDR’s death and her departure from the White House, made up much of her individual contribution to improving the lives of those people she met as well as those who she would never meet.⁵⁰ In addition to her dedicated work on behalf of the civil rights movement, Eleanor focused on the hardships of the everyday American, particularly during the

⁴⁷ Unofficial Observer, “Mrs. Roosevelt a Driving Force in New Deal,” *The Washington Post*, March 4, 1934.

⁴⁸ Roosevelt, 93.

⁴⁹ Cook, 2.

⁵⁰ *Without Precedent: The Life and Career of Eleanor Roosevelt*, ed. Joan Hoff-Wilson and Marjorie Lightman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), xix.

Great Depression. She championed government programs to fight the poverty afflicting countless Americans, both young and old, male and female, which were not initially included in the New Deal.

One of these organizations was the National Youth Administration (NYA), which supported unemployed and impoverished youth by providing education and vocational training. Roosevelt exerted her influence over FDR in order to form the NYA into the organization she envisioned, supporting countless American young people in the process.⁵¹ There were numerous examples on a smaller scale than these federal programs in which Eleanor exhibited her desire to improve the lives of those who she encountered. She published an open letter in *Woman's Home Companion* entitled "I Want You to Write to Me" in which she encouraged the American people to reach out to their First Lady with "the particular problems which puzzle or sadden you, ...what has brought joy into your life, and how you are adjusting yourself to the new conditions in this amazing changing world."⁵² She received thousands of letters during her husband's administration, many of which asked for specific support, whether monetary, material, or emotional, which the First Lady attempted to fulfill as often as possible. She also remarked upon her fellow Americans' willingness to help, recalling letters asking how they could be of service to others.⁵³ Even with Franklin Roosevelt's death in 1945 and the end of her First Ladyship, Roosevelt did not stop her crusade for human rights and democracy.

Eleanor Roosevelt continued to challenge injustice wherever she witnessed it, both in the United States and around the world. The very same year that her husband died, President Harry

⁵¹ Allida Black, "(Anna) Eleanor Roosevelt," *American First Ladies*, ed. Gould, 436-7.

⁵² Eleanor Roosevelt, "I Want You to Write to Me," *Woman's Home Companion*, August 1933," *Courage in a Dangerous World*, ed. Allida Black (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 19.

⁵³ Roosevelt, "I Want You to Write to Me," 19-20.

S. Truman appointed her as a delegate to the newly formed United Nations where she served until 1952. One of her crowning achievements was her contribution to the creation of the Declaration of Human Rights. The document continues to serve as a fitting symbol of Roosevelt's commitment to the dignity of all people. Her work on behalf of the civil rights movement intensified in the decades that followed her stay in the White House and service at the UN. She collaborated with the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) regarding the plight of the Freedom Riders as they encountered violence during their journey to the Deep South in the 1960s, even serving as chair of the Committee of Inquiry into the Administration of Justice in the Freedom Struggle towards the end of her life.⁵⁴ Eleanor's commitment, then, to the causes and people most important to her is an enduring component of her legacy. Her ability to motivate and inspire others enabled her to accomplish her many initiatives to improve the lives of all people.

For a woman who dreaded becoming First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt became the most influential woman ever to hold that title. Upon her husband's election to the presidency, Eleanor wrote that this event signaled "the end of any personal life of my own."⁵⁵ She admitted in her autobiography that "I did not want my husband to be president" but qualified her statement by adding that this opinion "was pure selfishness on my part."⁵⁶ Despite her initial misgivings, Eleanor Roosevelt revolutionized the office of First Lady by rewriting the American public's expectation of future presidential wives. Never before had a First Lady taken on such a public role, which Eleanor accomplished through her close relationship with the media. A prolific writer in her own right, she harnessed the power of newspapers and radio to place herself in the

⁵⁴ Allida M. Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 127-9.

⁵⁵ Roosevelt, 163.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 160.

lives of everyday Americans. This attempt at transparency helped restore faith in government after the stock market crash that ushered in the Great Depression. Eleanor's audacity to claim a place for herself in the public sphere, traditionally a masculine arena, won both critics and admirers but remains a vital component of her legacy, for better or worse.

With this public persona came an increased independence in Eleanor's actions. Partly due to FDR's paralysis, she had to compensate for her husband's inability to complete physical tasks, such as traveling all over the country and the world. Since their marriage was already strained, Eleanor relished this independence and, with her close-knit network of friends, used her ability to act autonomously to her advantage. As she took on more independent initiatives, Eleanor's public role increased correspondingly. The potential of a First Lady to pursue her own projects independently of her husband became a hallmark of Eleanor's tenure in the White House and was reflected in future administrations.

Eleanor's independent projects included a concerted effort to effect social change through relief programs during the Great Depression as well as her untiring support for civil rights. These causes speak volumes to the forceful and compassionate character of this First Lady. Her efforts to improve the lives of everyone she encountered reflect a grand theme of her life and legacy. Eleanor consistently sought out social change in conjunction with her deep belief in the power of democracy. Her loyalty and commitment to democratic principles appear in many of her published essays, such as "The Moral Basis of Democracy," in which she argues that "a dynamic Democracy...is alive and actively working for the benefit of all individuals, and not just a few...It is a method of government conceived for the development of human beings as a

whole.”⁵⁷ Her concept of a true democracy permeated Eleanor’s actions in her public life, informing the causes that she took on as her own personal crusades. This unwavering commitment remains one of the most striking components of her legacy.

It is difficult to summarize Eleanor Roosevelt’s legacy into a succinct account. Yet, certain components of her First Ladyship stand out as particularly crucial in any assessment of her tenure in the White House. Her increased public role, unsurpassed in any previous First Lady, her independence, and her profound attempt for social change provide a working definition of her lasting impact on the office of First Lady. Both Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter incorporated these elements into their First Ladyships and while each woman approached the position differently and with varying priorities and initiatives, Eleanor Roosevelt’s legacy is still visible. Her actions as First Lady forever altered the role of the president’s wife in the United States.

⁵⁷ Eleanor Roosevelt, “‘The Moral Basis of Democracy’: Howell, Soskin and Company, 1940,” *Courage in a Dangerous World*, 50.

Chapter 2 Betty Ford: A Candid First Ladyship

Betty Bloomer: The Dancer from Grand Rapids

Elizabeth Ann Bloomer was born on April 8, 1918 in Grand Rapids, Michigan into a middle-class family who offered Betty, as she was known, a comfortable life, enabling her to explore her love of dance. Tragedy struck the Bloomer family when Betty was only sixteen. Her father, William Bloomer, who, unbeknownst to his daughter, was an alcoholic, died of carbon monoxide poisoning, leaving her mother, Hortense Bloomer, to care for and support her three children. While this loss did not affect Ford as deeply as Eleanor's reaction to her own father's death, she wrote: "It was rougher for everybody after [her father died]."⁵⁸ Despite this hardship, Betty Ford continued to follow her passion for the study of dance, which eventually took her to dance schools in Bennington, Vermont and New York City where she benefitted from the tutelage of Martha Graham, one of the most influential women in the dance world. Ford described herself at this point in her life, revealing traits that became hallmarks of her approach to the office of First Lady: "I wasn't afraid. Not of anything. I was quick, I was intelligent – when you have two older brothers you have to be quick and intelligent – and I was strong-willed. I wasn't going to let anyone walk over me."⁵⁹

Betty Bloomer's outgoing and charismatic personality attracted the interest of Bill Warren, another Grand Rapids native, and the two embarked on a courtship, ultimately resulting in their marriage in 1942, a marriage that Ford described as the "five-year misunderstanding."⁶⁰ She recognized her unhappiness during her marriage and eventually divorced Bill, leaving her free to marry another childhood acquaintance from Grand Rapids the following year. Her new

⁵⁸ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 22.

⁵⁹ Ford, 28.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 39.

husband, Gerald Ford, embarked on his political career shortly after their wedding, leaving Betty in charge of the home in Michigan. The Fords' marriage was the stark opposite of Betty's short-lived relationship with Bill Warren. They supported one another and deeply loved and admired their spouse, a connection that served the Fords well in the White House.

Betty and Jerry, as she called him, were thrust into the presidency rather unexpectedly with the resignation of President Richard Nixon after the fallout from the Watergate scandal. While their stay at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue lasted roughly two years, both president and First Lady had an important impact on their country. Betty Ford, in particular, built upon the legacy established by Eleanor Roosevelt in addition to further contributing to the development of the office and changing the public's expectations of the president's wife. In a 1975 *Newsweek* article naming Ford as Woman of the Year, Elizabeth Peer described her First Ladyship as "a sixteen month saga of courage, candor and exuberance that is changing the way many Americans think of their First Ladies."⁶¹ This statement encapsulated the ways in which Betty Ford approached Eleanor Roosevelt's legacy in the public sphere, operating independently from her husband, and actively championing social change.

A Public Life

The First Lady's role is public simply because she is married to the most powerful and visible man in the United States. Not until Eleanor Roosevelt, however, did a First Lady take ownership of this public role and by doing so encouraged the women that followed her to harness the power of publicity. In the second half of the twentieth century, the ever-increasing presence of the press and the American public's desire for information influenced the First Lady's public

⁶¹ Elizabeth Peer, Jane Whitmore, and Lisa Whitman, "Woman of the Year," *Newsweek*, December 29, 1975, 19.

role. Betty Ford, following in Eleanor's footsteps, handled her moment in the spotlight differently while still embracing the public component of Eleanor Roosevelt's legacy.

An adjective consistently used to describe Betty Ford was candid. Ford described herself with this term throughout her autobiography as she reflected on her work during the two short years that she and her husband, President Gerald Ford, lived in the White House. While Betty had experience in public life as the vice president's wife during the Nixon administration in addition to her husband's congressional career, becoming First Lady was an entirely different story. The dancer from Michigan was suddenly one of the most publicly visible women in the United States. The Fords entered the White House under the shadow of Watergate, facing uncertainty from all sides. Betty Ford reflected this situation when she admitted that "I wasn't sure what kind of First Lady I would be."⁶² While she had no doubts that her husband would make an excellent president, she did not know how she would fit into her new role. All Betty Ford *did* know was that she wouldn't let anyone "make me be somebody I'm not."⁶³ Her candor and outspokenness certainly made it clear to the American public that she would carry out her First Ladyship as only Ford could.

Betty Ford's outspokenness was the hallmark of her public role. While she did not hold regular press conferences like Eleanor Roosevelt, she consistently dealt with the media, becoming both a celebrated figure and a subject of controversy. Shortly after her husband's inauguration, during a routine physical examination, doctors found a lump in her right breast, which ultimately resulted in Ford undergoing a mastectomy. The coverage of her diagnosis and subsequent surgery demonstrated a change in the publicity of the First Lady, even from the Roosevelt administration. The press did not highlight FDR's paralysis, allowing his physical

⁶² Ford, 157.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 158.

weakness to remain in the background of the public consciousness. Thirty years later, however, the reaction of the press was very different.

Ford's willingness to speak out about her fight with cancer had positive effects around the country. The September 22, 1975, edition of *Newsweek*, for example attributed her public statements to "a sudden and far-reaching interest in breast-cancer examinations."⁶⁴ Ford, herself, remained characteristically humble regarding her influence: "I got a lot of credit for having gone public with my mastectomy, but if I hadn't been the wife of the President of the United States, the press would not have come racing after my story, so in a way it was fate."⁶⁵ At the time of her surgery, the public did not understand breast cancer and the disease was rarely discussed. In addition to the public silence regarding cancer, undergoing a mastectomy, and publicly admitting it, carried a social stigma that Betty Ford helped destroy through her open discussion of her battle with the disease. Her ability to speak confidently and comfortably about topics previously misunderstood and ignored lent to the far-reaching positive effects of her public acknowledgement of breast cancer. By recognizing the power of the First Lady's image, Ford continued the legacy begun by Eleanor Roosevelt. She utilized her position and the tools at her disposal to make a positive change, a change documented by the floods of mail she received from other Americans who thanked her for her public stand.

The letters to the First Lady took on a starkly different tone following another of her very public moments when Morley Safer interviewed her for the television news show *60 Minutes*. While discussing Ford's general thoughts about the position of First Lady as well as hot-button issues such as premarital sex, abortion, and drugs, Safer asked the most infamous question of the

⁶⁴ Betsy Carter, Stef Donev, and Eileen Keerdoja, "Women vs. Breast Cancer," *Newsweek*, September 22, 1975, 13.

⁶⁵ Ford, 186.

interview: What would Betty Ford do if she discovered that her daughter was having an affair? The First Lady's response sparked controversy: "Well, I wouldn't be surprised. I think she's a perfectly normal human being, like all young girls. If she wanted to continue it, I would certainly counsel and advise her on the subject. And I'd want to know pretty much about the young man."⁶⁶ Suddenly, Ford's honesty, which won her support from a majority of Americans following her battle with breast cancer, now caused her ratings to plummet. Following the *60 Minutes* interview, she said she was afraid she "might have become a real political liability to Jerry."⁶⁷ Now, she experienced the negative effects of her public role. Despite the fallout from *60 Minutes*, Ford did not let the public's disagreement with her opinions restrain her from maintaining her reputation for outspokenness.

Betty Ford made headlines for expressing her opinions on political issues that often strayed from those of her husband and the Republican Party. From her support for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and abortion rights to her candid acceptance of premarital sex, Ford publicly defended her personal views despite the criticisms she received from members of her husband's administration and political party. Eleanor Roosevelt did not publicly discuss her personal life to the same extent as Ford during her lifetime yet she did express her opinions regarding political causes, such as civil rights. While Ford worried that her public statements might destroy her husband's reputation, Franklin Roosevelt used his wife's actions to his political advantage. Despite the fact that the Roosevelt administration never initiated legislation advocating for civil rights, black Americans still supported the president and First Lady since

⁶⁶ Ford, 206.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 207.

Eleanor Roosevelt demonstrated her fierce loyalty to an end of discrimination.⁶⁸ In this case, Eleanor's popularity reflected well on her husband and in a similar way, Betty Ford's approach to the First Ladyship also helped boost the administration's popularity.

Gerald Ford, himself, according to his wife, "made no effort to muzzle me."⁶⁹ The First Lady's ability to educate the public about her opinions and the causes that were important to her stemmed partly from her own drive and personality but also from her supportive marriage. In contrast with the Roosevelts' strained relationship following Eleanor's discovery of the Lucy Mercer affair, the Fords shared a deep love and mutual respect that transcended the political arena. Betty wrote that her husband "was proud of me and even in cases where he didn't agree with my views, he was all for my spouting them."⁷⁰ President Ford, himself, echoed these sentiments in his autobiography: "Betty has always been forthright in expressing her views—I...admired her candor...and always encouraged her to speak her mind—and we had few disagreements, but when we differed, we respected the other's opinion."⁷¹ This attitude toward their relationship enabled Betty Ford to manage her public role in the only way she knew how—with candor, honesty, and a healthy dose of humility.

These characteristics appeared in her public declaration that she regularly met with a psychiatrist. She struggled to raise her family on her own while Gerald Ford was in Washington, D.C. as a congressman. As a result, she turned to a trained professional for help, an action that carried a social stigma. Instead of shying away from an acknowledgement of her personal challenges, Ford brought this aspect of her life to the public's attention since "I think a lot of

⁶⁸ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1995), 163-165.

⁶⁹ Ford, 206.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 211.

⁷¹ Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 307.

women go through this.”⁷² In typical Betty Ford fashion she stated: “I don’t believe in spilling your guts all over the place, but I no longer believe in suffering in silence over something that’s really bothering you. I think you have to get it out and on the table and discuss it, no matter what it is.”⁷³ This attitude appropriately summarized her approach to her role as First Lady. She was not afraid to address the more divisive and controversial issues of her day, many of which remain the subjects of ongoing debate. She utilized the growing influence of the media to provide an arena to share her views. Even though she did not foresee becoming First Lady, Betty Ford recognized the powers of her office and embraced the public aspect of her role.

Progressive Independence

Betty Ford’s outspokenness is the quality best used to characterize her approach to the second component of Eleanor Roosevelt’s legacy: independence. Eleanor seized the opportunities presented to her and as a result acted on her own volition, separately from and in conjunction with her husband’s administration. Ford certainly drew upon this foundation as she also decided to forge her own identity separate from that of Gerald Ford, even citing Eleanor as a role model: “I liked her independence...I really liked the idea that a woman was finally speaking out and expressing herself than just expressing the views of her husband. That seemed healthy.”⁷⁴ Ford certainly spoke out about the issues that resonated with her, such as the Equal Rights Amendment and other issues facing women in the United States, during the tumultuous decade of the 1970s. By expressing her views, she demonstrated her independence as well as her ability to be a political force in her own right.

⁷² Betty Ford, 125.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ John Pope, “Betty (Elizabeth Ann Bloomer) Ford,” *American First Ladies*, ed. Gould, 538.

Unlike many of the members of the Republican Party, Betty Ford supported the ERA, which vouched for the end of discrimination against women. Ford became a staunch proponent of the ERA when Gerald Ford was vice president under Nixon and continued her advocacy for its passage after she became First Lady. She doggedly pushed her husband to match her support for the ERA writing that “I used everything, including pillow talk at the end of the day, when I figured he was most tired and vulnerable” to influence him.⁷⁵ She believed that eventually she helped Jerry change his mind regarding women’s rights and the appointment of women to government positions, just as Eleanor did. Even when FDR was exhausted at the end of a long day, Eleanor continued to pressure him to consider different initiatives and issues. Despite his attempts at resistance, Eleanor insisted that their partnership continue into the night, even leaving stacks of documents on her husband’s nightstand for him to review before bed.⁷⁶ Both First Ladies utilized the resources available to them, even their husbands’ exhaustion, in order to support their various causes. Ford took it upon herself to “educate” the men in the White House about the ERA, including her Secret Service detail who eventually placed an ERA flag on her car.⁷⁷ Ford wrote that “I did a lot of stumping for ERA” separately from her other duties and her husband’s work in the White House.⁷⁸ Women’s equality, particularly in the working world, served as the instrument for Ford’s establishment of her independence. This was a project that she could take ownership of and rally support for using her connection to the president of the United States while at the same time asserting her own political identity.

Through this independent role, Ford grappled with the conflicting gender roles facing all American women at this juncture in the nation’s history. With the advent of the feminist

⁷⁵ Betty Ford, 201.

⁷⁶ Goodwin, 104.

⁷⁷ Betty Ford, 204.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

movement, she held on to aspects of the traditional view of women and attempted to couple this ideal with the new progressive woman arising out of the feminist platform. For example, her opinions regarding the ERA and women's equality were certainly not as radical as those held by leaders of groups like the National Organization of Women at the time. Ford wrote that "my views on women's rights don't extend to believing all women need to work outside the home." She went on to say: "Maybe some women *aren't* equal to men. I don't say I'm equal to my husband; I certainly couldn't have done what he's done."⁷⁹ For much of her life Ford fulfilled the long-held expectations of women as wife and mother, which she did not regret. As the president's wife, however, she accepted a new role in the public sphere that entailed a new degree of independence from her husband.

Betty Ford's ability to straddle the old and new perceptions of women helped maintain her popularity, which was often rated higher than that of her husband. *Newsweek* reporter Elizabeth Peer remarked upon her connection to the women's movement as "feminists from Eleanor McGovern to Gloria Steinem sprang to her standard."⁸⁰ These women recognized the power of an alliance with the First Lady and her ability to sway public opinion and influence other Americans. At the same time, however, Steinem did not believe that Ford did enough, as Myra MacPherson wrote in *The Washington Post*: "Steinem said it was discouraging knowing how supportive Betty Ford was of the Equal Rights Admendment [sic] and abortion reform, because it pointed up what little influence she had on her husband."⁸¹ Steinem's statement demonstrated the constraints of Ford's independence since, while she could advocate for causes

⁷⁹ Betty Ford, 202-203.

⁸⁰ Peer, 19.

⁸¹ Myra MacPherson, "First Families in the National Eye; The Question of Influence; The Use of the Limelight; First Ladies as Activists; Senate Approves Carter's Natural Gas Bill; Cold February is Predicted; Gas-saving Efforts Stepped Up; Conservation Efforts are Stepped Up in Area," *The Washington Post*, January 20, 1977, 15.

like the ERA without her husband's approval, she required his support to ensure a legislative victory for her work.

While the supporters of the new progressive woman pointed to Betty Ford as an example of a strong and independent role model, others who attempted to maintain the traditional status quo vilified her. Phyllis Schlafly, for example, represented the opposite side of the feminist spectrum and, as MacPherson described in her article, Schlafly “whipped up her anti-ERA crowd by attacking Betty Ford's statements on her daughter as grossly offending ‘family oriented Americans’ by her ‘deliberate statement tolerating fornication.’”⁸² These statements stemmed from Ford's controversial *60 Minutes* interview, which demonstrated her willingness to act independently to support her personal beliefs, beliefs that her opponents viewed as directly contrasting with traditional values. One opponent, in particular, attacked the ability of the First Lady to act independently of her husband by asking “If Jerry Ford can't control his own wife, how can he run the country?”⁸³ In this case, Ford's progressive actions backfired among many of her detractors who did not agree with an independent role for a woman, especially the First Lady.

Whether she was celebrated or criticized, Betty Ford's independence embodied the emerging expectations of women, whose origins can be traced to the trailblazing legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt. A Republican pollster, Bob Teeter, argued that Ford's ability to combine the old and new feminine ideals translated into an invaluable asset to her husband's administration: “She was very popular with people we polled who disagreed with her on abortion or, say, her comments on [her daughter] Susan Ford, because they still felt she was the epitome of what a First Lady ought to be - independent, but a wife and mother. Eleanor Roosevelt was different - a

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Peer, 19.

political entity unto herself. Betty Ford was able to play many different roles and that left the public with the notion that she was a completely modern female."⁸⁴ Teeter made a distinction between the independence of Eleanor Roosevelt and that of Betty Ford while maintaining that both women acted on their own to varying degrees. Eleanor certainly became much more independent after her tenure in the White House, owing largely to FDR's death. Ford, on the other hand, continued to act in conjunction with her husband, while also maintaining her independence, after the completion of the Ford administration with the election of Jimmy Carter.

By building upon the precedents established by Eleanor Roosevelt, Betty Ford and the woman who succeeded her, Rosalynn Carter, were able to exceed the expectations of the First Lady set during the Roosevelt administration. For example, both women were actively involved in their husbands' presidential campaigns. Eleanor Roosevelt believed that "it was [not] good taste to go out and electioneer for my husband, so in none of the campaigns did I take any particular part in the political activities..."⁸⁵ Betty Ford, as well as Rosalynn Carter, demonstrated a change in these attitudes.

Despite struggling with intense stage fright during the gubernatorial election in Georgia, Carter conquered and traveled all over the United States, often separately from her husband, to tell her fellow Americans what she and Jimmy would do to improve their lives. Ford, too, campaigned for her husband and also fought the same public speaking fears. Unlike Carter, whose political acumen served as a vital tool on the campaign trail, Betty worried about her ability to represent her husband in the 1976 presidential race: "I wasn't a good politician, I usually said what was on my mind, and that could cost my husband votes."⁸⁶ Ultimately,

⁸⁴ MacPherson, 15.

⁸⁵ Roosevelt, 186.

⁸⁶ Betty Ford, 257.

however, she grew into this aspect of her role and embraced her own popularity, laughing when she discovered that one of the campaign workers had created “I Love Betty” buttons.⁸⁷ The campaigning of Ford and Carter on behalf of their husbands signaled a change in the expectations of the First Lady, which partly stemmed from the determination of these women to take an active role in their husbands’ political careers. In addition, the American public came to expect that the candidates’ wives would “electioneer” for their spouses. The change in cultural expectations pressured women like Rosalynn and Betty to accept a more public and independent role than even that of Eleanor during her husband’s administration.

“Causes and Effects”⁸⁸: Working for Social Change

Upon entering the White House, Betty Ford immediately began to address the issues most important to her. She wrote about this desire to take on personal crusades in order to improve the lives of those people she met as well as those who she would never meet: “All my life I’ve had to have a project. Suddenly I had more projects than I could handle.”⁸⁹ In addition to her lobbying for the ERA, she worked with numerous children’s organizations, particularly for ill and handicapped children. Ford recognized her unique ability to inspire others to follow her example, in this case at a children’s hospital in Washington, D.C.: “I think, because of the power of the White House, I was able to do more for the Washington Hospital for Sick Children than a private citizen could have done.”⁹⁰ Just as Eleanor Roosevelt championed her own causes and strove to create a better country and world, so too did Betty Ford build upon this legacy, particularly through the events in her own life.

⁸⁷ Betty Ford, 258.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 201.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 150.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 208.

Ford's battle with breast cancer served as a way in which she could positively influence the lives of American women. Her efforts to create public awareness of her disease inspired others to take their own health more seriously. She wrote: "Lying in the hospital, thinking of all those women going for cancer checkups because of me, I'd come to recognize more clearly the power of the woman in the White House. Not *my* power, but the power of the position, a power which could be used to help."⁹¹ Her untiring advocacy for the ERA was yet another way in which this First Lady attempted to implement a strategy for providing equality between the sexes. Her desire to empower other women to support this cause also contributed towards a similar kind of social change that Eleanor Roosevelt fought for throughout her life. The place of women in public life was a cause especially important to these presidential wives who, by nature of their spouse's position, lived in the public eye and, by using their status, hoped to make a lasting and positive impact on their country.

In addition to her battle with breast cancer, Betty Ford also struggled against another major challenge throughout much of her adult life. While living in Michigan during her husband's time in Congress, Ford pinched a nerve in her neck. As a result of this pain as well as arthritis and muscle spasms, she began to take pain medication and ultimately developed a dependency on the pills. Eventually, she coupled the pills with alcohol and for roughly fourteen years managed to fulfill her duties while at the same time becoming addicted to both alcohol and pain medication. Initially, Ford denied her situation by stating: "The reason I rejected the idea that I was an alcoholic was that my addiction wasn't dramatic."⁹² Her problems did not become undeniably apparent to her family until after the Fords left the White House and indications of her addiction began to arouse concern amongst her husband and children. Eventually, in March

⁹¹ Betty Ford, 194.

⁹² Ibid, 285.

of 1978, her family staged an intervention to force Ford to face the issue, ultimately resulting in a stay in the Long Beach Naval Hospital's Alcohol and Drug Rehabilitation Service in California. Despite her anger with herself and her family, Ford ultimately recovered and, true to form, turned her personal struggles into a way to help others facing the same fight.

Following her recovery, Betty Ford decided that she needed to provide a way for other women to receive treatment for dependencies on drugs and alcohol in a place where they would be nurtured and cared for through the healing process. The Betty Ford Center became the answer to her prayer and, since 1982, continues to serve both men and women who suffer from chemical dependency. The mission statement of the Betty Ford Center, located in Rancho Mirage, California, speaks to the mission of the First Lady: "We provide effective alcohol and other drug dependency treatment services, including programs of education and research, to help women, men and families begin the process of recovery."⁹³ Even after her tenure as First Lady, Ford continued to find ways, such as the Betty Ford Center, to create a place in which she could help improve the lives of others.

In a similar vein to her public battle with breast cancer, she publicly acknowledged her addiction and documented her personal journey to recovery in a memoir entitled *Betty: A Grand Awakening*. In an interview with *Washington Post* reporter Donnie Radcliffe regarding the Betty Ford Center, the former First Lady spoke to the importance of her establishment of the treatment center: "The public stigmatizes the alcoholic because it lacks knowledge about alcoholism as a disease...Fortunately, we're getting that across and people are starting to talk about alcoholism the way we talk about cancer now. Remember when cancer was something you didn't discuss?"

⁹³ "About Betty Ford Center: Mission Statement," <http://www.bettyfordcenter.org/about-betty-ford-center/mission-statement.php>.

You might know somebody who had it, but either you never brought it up, or you avoided it.’”⁹⁴ Just as she exposed her personal experiences with previously taboo subjects, such as psychiatry and cancer, Betty Ford brought another important issue to the public’s attention in the hopes of bettering the lives of other American men and women.

In the same interview with Radcliffe, Ford tied together the three components of Eleanor’s legacy that she attempted to live out both during and after her stay in the White House. She commented that “‘I’ve helped others, and there is nothing more fulfilling than being able to help someone else...And I’ve been able to do it on my own.’”⁹⁵ In this one sentence, she combined her desire to effect social change as well as her ability to accomplish this goal in a capacity independent from her husband. Both of these roles were carried out on a very public stage, even more public than the White House of the Roosevelt administration in which Eleanor established the legacy that Betty Ford continued to draw upon while contributing her own lasting impact to the office of First Lady. Journalist Elizabeth Peer drew a direct comparison between Eleanor and Betty regarding these aspects of Roosevelt’s legacy: “Not since Eleanor Roosevelt championed civil rights and organized labor in the 1930s has a First Lady spoken out more freely – or aroused more controversy.”⁹⁶ These three components, then, are inseparable when examining the lives of any First Lady, especially Eleanor Roosevelt and Betty Ford, who utilized the power of their office to improve the lives of others while expanding the expected role of women in the public sphere.

⁹⁴ Donnie Radcliffe, “Betty Ford, After the Battle: Helping Others Learn From Her Experience,” *The Washington Post*, April 24, 1983, G1.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Peer, 19.

Chapter 3 Rosalynn Carter: Political Partner

Growing up in Plains

Born on August 18, 1927 to a middle-class family in Plains, Georgia, Eleanor Rosalynn Smith lived a life centered around her church and school. Her future husband, James Earl Carter, Jr., known as Jimmy, also grew up in Plains and his sister Ruth was one of Rosalynn's best friends during their childhood. Like Eleanor Roosevelt and Betty Ford, Carter's father, Wilburn Smith, passed away when she was only thirteen years old, leaving both an emotional and financial void in the Smith family. Her reflections on her father's death reflected Eleanor's sentiments regarding the loss of her own father: "My childhood really ended at that moment...I had to be very strong...or appear to be strong. But I wasn't. Underneath I felt very weak and vulnerable."⁹⁷ Despite her personal struggles, Carter's mother, Allie Smith, relied on her daughter to help care for her two brothers and sister. The future First Lady accepted this responsibility using the work ethic and personal determination that served her well throughout her tenure in the White House. She described this forceful drive and ambition: "I set very high standards, and although I sometimes found it difficult to live up to them, I could not let up on myself."⁹⁸

Given her close friendship with Ruth Carter, Rosalynn always knew of Jimmy and admitted that she fell in love with his picture before they even began dating. Their courtship, which primarily consisted of written correspondence while Jimmy was off serving in the Navy, ultimately resulted in their marriage on July 7, 1946 in Plains. From the beginning, Carter loved her life as a Navy wife as she traveled with Jimmy around the country depending on his

⁹⁷ Rosalynn Carter, *First Lady From Plains*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984), 17, 19.

⁹⁸ Carter, 14-15.

assignment. Much like Betty Ford, Carter accepted the bulk of the responsibilities at home while Jimmy served his country, offering her the opportunity to develop the sense of independence that would flourish during her First Ladyship. Rosalynn Carter defined her relationship with her husband as a partnership, which carried over into the political arena as Jimmy began his public career: “I was more a political partner than a political wife, and I never felt put upon.”⁹⁹ Their deep connection to one another developed during Jimmy’s stint in the state senate, followed by his years as governor. Rosalynn and Jimmy were both prepared, then, to set their sights on the White House.

From the State House to the White House: Life in the Public Eye

Rosalynn Carter arrived in the White House after her husband, President Jimmy Carter, defeated the incumbent Gerald Ford in the 1976 election. She understood that as First Lady she would conduct her life in the public eye, especially given her previous experience as first lady of Georgia from 1971 to 1975. Much like the Fords, the Carters’ marriage was loving and supportive. Throughout her autobiography, Carter consistently referred to the actions and opinions described from a collective point of view. For example, in her detailed description of her husband’s inauguration she rarely mentioned herself or the president separately from the all-inclusive “we,” even including herself in the administration’s goals: “With Jimmy’s inaugural, we hoped to set a tone for an open inclusive administration, one that would focus on all kinds of people, and to revive some of the older, simpler traditions of the presidency that had gotten lost

⁹⁹ Carter, 53.

in more recent administrations.”¹⁰⁰ From the outset, Carter tailored her life in the public eye to serve the interests of the Carter administration, in which she played a vital role.

Rosalynn Carter immediately established her intention to carry on the public legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt. In an interview with the new First Lady in *Newsweek* shortly after Jimmy’s election, reporter Jane Whitmore wrote that “Rosalynn Carter will not be simply an East Wing ornament, a First Lady content to redecorate the White House or preside over soirees,” demonstrating her intent to focus on substantive issues.¹⁰¹ One of these issues was mental health and Jimmy Carter ensured that his wife would be able to focus her energies on this cause with the establishment of a mental health commission. In her capacity as the honorary chairperson of the commission, Carter testified before Congress, becoming only the second First Lady to act in such a public way. The first presidential wife to testify on Capitol Hill was none other than Eleanor Roosevelt. Carter also acted in the tradition of another First Lady, Claudia “Lady Bird” Johnson, who fought for the passage of the Highway Beautification Act of 1965. While Lady Bird did not testify before Congress like Roosevelt and Carter, her husband’s administration used her as a political tool to lobby for passage of the bill that supported her personal cause, something that Eleanor Roosevelt was never explicitly asked to do.¹⁰² Rosalynn Carter, then, utilized past actions of First Ladies to expand upon the office during her tenure in the White House.

In her autobiography, Carter recognized the power of her visibility as First Lady: “A First Lady can...do almost anything she wants because her name is a drawing card, she is influential, and although legislators may not always support her, she can always get their attention, as well

¹⁰⁰ Carter, 5.

¹⁰¹ Jane Whitmore, “‘The Things I Want to Do,’” *Newsweek*, January 24, 1977, 18.

¹⁰² Lewis L. Gould, *Lady Bird Johnson: Our Environmental First Lady* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 96-97.

as the attention of other powerful people. She also has access to the press.”¹⁰³ Just as Eleanor Roosevelt and Betty Ford constantly dealt with the press, so too did Carter have to navigate her way through the media storm surrounding the White House. She publicly acknowledged her influence within the administration, dubbed by both supporters and critics as a “co-presidency.”¹⁰⁴ *The New York Times Magazine* predicted at the outset of the Carter administration that Rosalynn would be a very public and influential First Lady, drawing an immediate comparison to Eleanor Roosevelt: “Just as Mrs....Roosevelt was called ‘the Assistant President,’ Rosalynn Carter could also have an impact on the making of national policy, advising on her husband’s programs as well as her own.”¹⁰⁵ This acknowledgement and acceptance of Rosalynn’s influence reflected the public impression of how this First Lady would follow in the footsteps of her famous predecessor.

In addition to her influence within the administration, Carter’s loyalty to her husband in the public sphere is particularly notable, as she defended Jimmy through her many press conferences in which she consistently voiced the policy of the administration. When Americans questioned the president’s abilities following the Camp David meetings between Israel and Egypt, Carter attempted to assuage their fears by stating: “Jimmy is healthy, happy, confident, and optimistic about the future.”¹⁰⁶ During her diplomatic mission to Central and South America, the First Lady even made “the first public enunciation of a new policy” on economic assistance and trade between those countries she visited and the United States, according to *The*

¹⁰³ Carter, 95.

¹⁰⁴ Troy, 236.

¹⁰⁵ Diane M. Blair and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, “Rosalynn Carter: Crafting a Presidential Partnership Rhetorically,” *Inventing a Voice: The Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Molly Meijer Wertheimer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 346.

¹⁰⁶ “Special Segment (Rosalynn Carter),” reported by John Chancellor and Judy Woodruff, *NBC Evening News*, July 30, 1979.

Washington Post.¹⁰⁷ In a very visible way, Rosalynn Carter demonstrated the power of the First Lady's public role to reinforce and present the goals of her husband's administration to both the American people and the rest of the world.

Despite her masterful handling of the press, Carter constantly struggled with her portrayal in the media. In the *Newsweek* interview, Whitmore described the new First Lady as "serious, ambitious, somewhat steely in her manner," traits also attributed to Jimmy Carter.¹⁰⁸ The "steel magnolia" image would follow her from the campaign trail to the White House. She wrote: "Image...did become an annoyance that just wouldn't go away...I learned that labels are easy to come by and hard to overcome."¹⁰⁹ The American media and public did not know how to handle her polished public image after the candid outspokenness of Betty Ford. Carter did not spark the same kind of controversy with her public statements as her predecessor.

In addition to her image, Rosalynn Carter grew frustrated with the press when they did not portray her husband's accomplishments in a favorable light. During the last six months of the administration, amidst the ongoing Iran hostage crisis, the press, according to Carter, began to favor the Republican presidential nominee, Ronald Reagan. She wrote about her intense displeasure with the media at this juncture in her husband's political career: "Now it seemed that the television networks had declared a moratorium on any reporting that showed legislative achievements, giving the impression that under Jimmy's leadership, the government had ground to a halt."¹¹⁰ Much like Eleanor Roosevelt forty years previously, Rosalynn Carter understood the power of public opinion regarding the popularity of the president and First Lady. She did

¹⁰⁷ Susannah McBee, "Carter's Latin Approach: No Undelivered Promises," *The Washington Post*, June 2, 1977, A23.

¹⁰⁸ Whitmore, 18.

¹⁰⁹ Carter, 174.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 335.

everything in her power to create and maintain a positive image of the Carter administration in the media, demonstrating both her political savvy and loyalty to her husband.

In her public life, Rosalynn Carter shared certain attitudes with Roosevelt and Ford. These First Ladies recognized the importance of their position, especially their status as a woman in a public role. Rosalynn Carter recognized the inherent contradictions embodied in the office of First Lady, contradictions reflected in assessments of the First Ladies' position in American history by contemporary historians. She summarized the difficulty and delicacy of her office: "First Ladies throughout our history have been expected to be adoring wives and perfect mothers, to manage the public and social aspects of the White House..., and to participate in 'appropriate public service.' The role of First Lady is a difficult – and sometimes nearly impossible – one to fill, and each one of us has dealt with this challenge in her own way."¹¹¹ Carter's statement applied to Eleanor Roosevelt and Betty Ford who built upon the precedents set by the presidential wives before them but who also established unique contributions to the East Wing. Betty Ford felt the weight of her responsibilities as First Lady from the moment that her husband was sworn in as president of the United States. She remembered: "I felt as though I were taking the oath with him, promising to dedicate my own life to the service of my country."¹¹² Despite the fact that she was not elected to her position, Ford accepted a portion of the burden of serving in the White House and recognized her unique ability to be a leader in the public sphere for all Americans, particularly women. In a similar way, Eleanor Roosevelt, who established the most impressive set of precedents and list of "firsts" of any other First Lady, emphasized the role of the president's wife to advocate for the empowerment of women.

¹¹¹ Carter, 292.

¹¹² Betty Ford, 4.

All three women grappled with their public role and its intrusion on their private lives. Eleanor Roosevelt initially dreaded becoming First Lady given what she understood about the position from her knowledge of the duties of her aunt, Mrs. Edith Carrow Roosevelt, the wife of former president Theodore Roosevelt.¹¹³ She resisted losing the privacy that came with living in the White House. *Washington Post* reporter Michael Kernan remarked upon the phenomenon of the “social fishbowl” effect facing the first family: “The President's family has always been more or less public property. But since television, and especially since the cult of celebrity flowered in this country, life for anyone residing in the White House has become grotesque.”¹¹⁴ Betty Ford could identify with Kernan’s sentiment when the press seized upon her more controversial statements, such as her comment regarding her children’s potential use of marijuana. Her public opinions negatively influenced her children’s lives, especially since they vehemently denied her statement.¹¹⁵ Rosalynn Carter echoed Roosevelt’s statement when she wrote that during Jimmy’s administration, “we really understood that our private lives no longer belonged to ourselves but to the press.”¹¹⁶ The lack of distinction between where a First Lady’s public persona ended and her private life began was a major challenge to every presidential wife. Despite this challenge, Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter understood that life in the public sphere was a necessary component to their jobs as First Lady. This expectation can be traced back to Eleanor Roosevelt’s expansion of the First Lady’s role through her engagement with the media as a public representative of her husband’s administration.

¹¹³ Roosevelt, 163.

¹¹⁴ Michael Kernan, “Aswim in the Social Fishbowl; Life in the Washington Fishbowl,” *The Washington Post*, August 28, 1977, K1.

¹¹⁵ Betty Ford, 207.

¹¹⁶ Carter, 181.

Beyond Partnership: An Independent First Lady

The American people wondered how Rosalynn Carter would assert herself as First Lady. Myra MacPherson in *The Washington Post* asked this question, drawing on the legacies of Eleanor Roosevelt and Betty Ford to discuss the potential path of Rosalynn Carter: “The question of the day is what kind of First Lady will Rosalynn Carter be – as outspoken as Betty Ford or as cause-minded as Eleanor Roosevelt?”¹¹⁷ While Carter entered the office with certain campaign promises, the public waited to see if she would fulfill her pledge to constituents. She certainly lived her life publicly and developed a mastery for handling the press but much of her public life was also lived separately from that of her husband. Even though her relationship with her husband informed much of what Carter accomplished, this partnership enabled her to act independently in conjunction with the Carter administration.

One of the ways in which Rosalynn Carter expanded the role of the First Lady was through her role as an official United States envoy to Latin and South America. No other president’s wife represented her country in this capacity before the Carter administration. While Eleanor Roosevelt traveled all over the country and the world, she never acted in an independent official capacity but instead fulfilled a role similar to that of a goodwill ambassador or member of a fact-finding mission. In a similar way, Jacqueline “Jackie” Kennedy met with French leaders who admired her manner and intelligence yet she did not act as an official representative of her husband’s administration, unlike Carter. Rosalynn Carter met independently with leaders in every country she visited to discuss foreign and economic policy with these heads of state, like any other presidential appointee.

¹¹⁷ MacPherson, 15.

When presented with this opportunity, Carter leapt at the chance to assume added responsibility. Applying the personal drive and determination that served as a hallmark of all of her endeavors, the First Lady applied herself to becoming familiar with and fluent in the issues facing each of the countries she would visit. After intensive study and briefings from numerous sectors of the government, Carter began her diplomatic tour in Jamaica, ending in Caracas, Venezuela, two weeks and 12,000 miles later. Initially, the First Lady was concerned about her reception by the male leaders of the countries she would visit, especially since she was a woman without an elected position. Members of the American government also resisted sending her into what was previously considered to be the exclusively male domain of foreign relations with one European diplomat saying: “I don’t think any Latin American statesman will take her seriously, even if she is the wife of the President of the United States.”¹¹⁸ Despite the criticisms, Carter wrote that “I was *determined* to be taken seriously,” by her fellow countrymen and the people of Latin America alike.¹¹⁹

Despite initial hesitations from both parties, Rosalynn Carter surprised the leaders of the countries on her tour with her informed and intelligent discussions on substantive issues. Eventually, through the course of her travels, she began “to believe that being a woman in Latin America was more an asset than a liability. I could get away with a lot of things another representative of our government could never do...I could say the unexpected.”¹²⁰ Despite the successes of her interactions with these world leaders, members of the American press continued to question her abilities to represent her country in this fashion. For example, Carter recalled one confrontation with a reporter who asked: “You have neither been elected by the American

¹¹⁸ Carter, 188.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 201.

people nor confirmed by the Senate to discuss foreign policy with foreign heads of state...Do you consider this trip an appropriate exercise of your position?" Faced with the inherent contradiction of the First Ladyship, Carter retorted: "I am the person closest to the President of the United States, and if I can explain his policies and let the people of Latin America know of his great interest and friendship, I intend to do so!"¹²¹ Just as Eleanor Roosevelt utilized her relationship with FDR to act as his eyes and ears on independent assignments, so too did Rosalynn Carter point to her position as the president's wife as crucial to her ability to accept independent missions. She also highlighted her opinion that the First Lady was an appropriate choice to take on this independent role.

Just as Eleanor Roosevelt faced challenges regarding her role as First Lady, Rosalynn Carter also grappled with her place as a woman in the public sphere, a dilemma that continues to face each and every First Lady. Betty Ford demonstrated her support for the new women's movement through her staunch advocacy for the Equal Rights Amendment, which Carter also supported. The press expressed conflicting views regarding Carter's ability to appeal to supporters of traditional roles for women as well as those who argued for an expanded female role. The opinions of the press also reflected their frustrations with Carter's enigmatic public image, which many journalists believed hindered their ability to understand the First Lady and her views. Even though she acted independently throughout the Carter administration, this did not automatically translate into a feminist or traditionalist endorsement of her First Ladyship. For example, Richard Carson in *The Washington Post* reflected this idea by placing Rosalynn in a historical context of public, independent, and influential wives, including Eleanor Roosevelt: "We somehow think [First Ladies] are something more than wives or something different than

¹²¹ Carter, 201-202.

wives -- have it anyway you want. Eleanor Roosevelt was turned into some sort of evil influence over her husband by conservatives who, in their usual fog, imagined the Roosevelts were close. Now we have Rosalynn Carter and it's clear we don't know what to make of her, either. There is consternation that [Jimmy] lunches with her, but worse than that, she gives him advice. This is said not as fact, but as an accusation."¹²² The visibly influential role that women like Eleanor and Rosalynn played in their husbands' administration made some members of the American public uneasy while others argued that they did not do enough.

This contrasting view of Rosalynn Carter's First Ladyship appeared in an article by Sally Quinn, also in *The Washington Post*, but published a year before Cohen's piece. Quinn argued that despite the White House's portrayal of Carter as a second Eleanor Roosevelt, she did not see any concrete evidence of this projected image. Regarding this public image, Quinn wrote: "They portrayed her to the press and the public as the first working first lady, the most powerful and influential adviser to the president, the first woman vice president, as it were, the next Eleanor Roosevelt."¹²³ Yet, according to Quinn, Carter did not live up to the hype surrounding her agenda. In this instance, then, one contemporary attitude distanced this First Lady's independent role from that of Eleanor Roosevelt. This account differed from that of many historians who tend to emphasize the similarities between the two women given their accomplishments while in the White House. Gloria Steinem expressed a similar opinion to that of Sally Quinn in her own assessment of Rosalynn Carter's independent and progressive actions:

¹²² Robert Cohen, "Rosalynn Carter's Role: Resolving the Mystery," *The Washington Post*, July 31, 1979, C1.

¹²³ Sally Quinn, "Have You Heard What They're Not Saying About Rosalynn?; The First Lady, in Search of an Image; Rosalynn Carter, Seeking an Image; Why Aren't They Talking About Her?; If She's Not the New Eleanor Roosevelt, Who Is She?," *The Washington Post*, June 25, 1978, K1.

“I am disappointed in her altogether...I try to be reasonable because of the initial comparison with Eleanor Roosevelt. That made the problem. She has a lot in common with Patricia Nixon. That determination that people are out there trying to get us so we're going to stick together and see it through.”¹²⁴ Steinem, believing that Rosalynn represented the traditional woman, made this statement despite Rosalynn's support for the ERA and other women's rights issues. These examples demonstrated that despite Carter's actions to the contrary, controversy and criticism arose on all sides, even from the people whose causes she attempted to support.

Carter felt very strongly that the ERA would make a great difference in the status of American women, even writing: “My greatest disappointment in all the projects I worked on during the White House years was the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment to be ratified.”¹²⁵ Her autobiography also provides a counterargument to her portrayal in the press. While Rosalynn described herself as “a relatively traditional person” she also emphasized her willingness “to expand my life and to participate outside the home as a partner and businesswoman and in public serve as First Lady.”¹²⁶ Despite the negativity from certain sectors of the press and public opinion, Rosalynn herself embraced her independent role by focusing on her responsibilities outside of a typically feminine sphere, stating that she was “much more political than Jimmy,” a statement corroborated by many who knew the Carters well. Rosalynn Carter urged her husband to be more cautious when initiating potentially controversial projects since she focused on the political ramifications of his decisions. The president, on the other

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Carter, 286.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 289.

hand, preferred to attack the issues on his agenda despite criticisms and the political effects of these initiatives.¹²⁷

Carter attributed her ability to be independent, in large part, to the precedents set by Eleanor Roosevelt and highlighted her belief in a new and progressive set of expectations for women, with the First Lady acting as the example of this change: “Until quite recently, First Ladies were expected to limit themselves to the duties of official hostess and private helpmate, and most of them never varied from this narrowly restricted role. Eleanor Roosevelt was the notable exception...Nowadays, the public expectation is just the opposite...I am thankful for the change.”¹²⁸ In her own words, then, Rosalynn Carter emphasized her independent role and gave Eleanor much of the credit for her ability to tackle substantive issues separately from the traditional roles of a wife and mother. Like Eleanor Roosevelt before her, Rosalynn utilized her public and independent role to present her solutions to issues that would produce a positive social change.

Reforming the Mental Health System and Working for Social Change

Even before Jimmy Carter won the presidential election, Rosalynn began to plan which projects she would focus on as First Lady, with the goal of finding ways to improve American society. Her primary project became an overhaul of the mental health system in the United States: “I wanted to take mental illnesses and emotional disorders out of the closet...If only we could consider mental illnesses as straightforwardly as we do physical illnesses, those affected could seek help and be treated in an open and effective way.”¹²⁹ This cause served as one of the

¹²⁷ Carter, 165.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 292.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 271.

defining characteristics of Rosalynn Carter's First Ladyship through which she carried on the legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt, using the federal government as a method to accomplish the goal of social improvement.

One of Jimmy Carter's first actions as president was the formation of a Mental Health Commission with Rosalynn as its honorary director. In this capacity, Carter built upon Eleanor's legacy as the second First Lady to testify before Congress in support of the Mental Health Systems Act. Carter reflected on this accomplishment, drawing a direct link to Eleanor Roosevelt: "...I went to Capitol Hill myself to testify before the Senate committee... We could find a record of only one other First Lady who had testified before Congress – Eleanor Roosevelt on behalf of the coal miners."¹³⁰ Rosalynn Carter, like Eleanor, believed in the power of the government to enact change, a belief stemming in part from their membership in the Democratic Party. Carter expressed these political views following the passage of the mental health in September 1980. With the election of Ronald Reagan in the same year, a Republican president, Carter voiced her frustration at the fact that the legislation she supported and advocated for "was killed by the philosophy of a new President. It was a bitter loss."¹³¹ The governmental apparatus both supported and hindered Rosalynn's attempts to forge social change for one of her personal causes.

Another area in which Carter focused her energies again emphasized the American health system. She strove to improve conditions for the elderly both in Washington, D.C. as well as all over the country. Through her extensive travels, Rosalynn Carter recognized the need of the elderly population and their caregivers on a micro level and then drew upon these observations to create nation-wide initiatives. One of these projects included the creation of the Rosalynn Carter

¹³⁰ Carter, 278.

¹³¹ Ibid, 279.

Nurse Training Program, focusing on geriatric care, which became a component to nurse training at American veteran hospitals. Through programs such as these, Carter hoped to contribute to a gradual movement towards improving the health system in the United States, an issue that continues to the present day.

In addition to these domestic projects, Rosalynn Carter also undertook international goodwill missions. While these differed in nature from her journey to Central America, she utilized the power of her position to draw international attention to human rights abuses in an attempt to inspire a movement for improved social conditions. The Carter administration sent Rosalynn to Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand, which formed as a result of the genocide under Pol Pot. Just as Eleanor Roosevelt visited devastated towns during the Great Depression and hospitals during World War II, the First Lady was sent to an area of the world to observe and report on the situation on the ground. In November of 1979, Carter arrived in Thailand and despite the fact that she understood the political situation in the country she wrote: “nothing, however, had prepared me for the human suffering I saw in the refugee camps when I arrived.”¹³² The horrific suffering on such a massive scale left a deep impact on Rosalynn who made every effort to alert the American public as well as the international community to the plight of the Cambodian refugees.

Through her meetings with the king of Thailand as well as her highly publicized visits to the camps and her personal appearances both on television and before various government and non-government organizations. Rosalynn’s efforts helped inspire government funding for the United Nations Children’s Fund’s (UNICEF) relief effort as well as the many grass-roots campaigns that rallied around this cause. In this instance, Rosalynn Carter utilized her office to

¹³² Carter, 295.

bring about positive social change for a group of people far removed from everyday Americans but through her efforts she inspired others to follow her example to support this cause.

Through her support of social improvement projects, such as mental health and the Cambodian refugee crisis, Rosalynn Carter took responsibility for substantive issues that would also result in a positive change for Americans as well as other members of the international community. Even after the Carters left office, they both continue to work in support of human rights issues to the present day through Carter Center, founded in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1982 with the goal of “exploring ways to improve human life and to promote peace,” according to Rosalynn.¹³³ The former First Lady continues to pursue the initiatives begun during the Carter administration, such as mental health and women’s issues. Rosalynn’s ability to broaden the scope of the office of First Lady certainly drew upon the initiatives supported by Eleanor Roosevelt while Carter also left her own unique impact on the position of the president’s wife. Her advocacy for the Mental Health Systems Act as well as her other causes utilized the skills and responsibilities from her public and independent role in order to accomplish lasting change with far-reaching benefits.

In addition to the ways in which Eleanor Roosevelt’s First Ladyship influenced Ford and Carter, these two presidential wives also influenced one another, particularly due to the fact that they served in successive administrations. Carter, in particular, recognized the value of Ford’s contributions to the office and the consequences of her innovative approach for Carter’s own tenure in the office. As Ford toured the new First Lady around the White House, providing insight and advice for the next administration, Carter remarked that at that point “there was no way to know how significant Betty Ford’s openness would be. She began to make it possible for

¹³³ Carter, 356.

other spouses not to have to be quite so perfect.”¹³⁴ Rosalynn Carter recognized the importance of Betty Ford’s First Ladyship and in doing so reflected the important fact that no presidential wife could act completely independently of any other. According to Eleanor McGovern upon President Carter’s inauguration, wife of Democrat George McGovern who was defeated by President Richard Nixon in the 1972 election, “...Rosalynn Carter will reap the benefits of Betty Ford’s initiatives.”¹³⁵ Each successive administration represents another link in a prestigious history of First Families who have called the White House home, relying on one another to determine the direction of their term in office. The Fords and Carters were no exception to this rule. Both Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter advocated for similar fields, such as the ERA and health reform, and both women demonstrated the lasting effects of Eleanor Roosevelt’s legacy.

¹³⁴ Carter, 100.

¹³⁵ MacPherson, 15.

Epilogue

The position of the First Lady continues to undergo change depending on the woman who holds the office. Eleanor Roosevelt, Betty Ford, and Rosalynn Carter approached the First Ladyship from different points of view given their life experiences and yet commonalities exist between these three women who shared the role of a presidential wife. While these First Ladies did not grow up with plans to enter political life, they accepted their public and independent role and utilized the power of their position to effect positive social change.

Even after their stay in the White House, Carter and Ford collaborated on various projects, utilizing their ability to garner press attention and public support as former First Ladies. For example, during the Clinton administration, both women journeyed to Washington, D.C. to rally support for the health care reform bill, designed largely by another First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton. Despite the fact that Ford and Carter ascribed to different political parties, the two women united over a common issue. Rosalynn Carter lobbied for support for the inclusion of mental health in the bill whereas Betty Ford advocated for a substance abuse section, thus demonstrating that both women continued to work for causes begun during their White House years. Even after the end of their First Ladyships, both Carter and Ford still recognized the responsibility to continue fighting for their personal causes, much like Eleanor Roosevelt remained active in areas of social concern throughout her life. Ultimately, as Rosalynn Carter remarked, the bill “didn’t have what any of us wanted” but Ford “got together the Republicans, and I got together the Democrats.”¹³⁶ These First Ladies worked on both sides of the aisle to achieve a common goal, demonstrating the interconnectedness between every presidential wife.

¹³⁶ Elisabeth Bumiller, “Public Lives: Two First Ladies, So Alike and So Different,” *The New York Times*, May 12, 1999, 2.

Placing these three women in the context of the First Ladies who served before and after them further demonstrates the notion that all of these women were influenced by one another. After the groundbreaking First Ladyship of Eleanor Roosevelt, the two wives who directly followed her did not accept the same kind of public and independent role. Both Elizabeth “Bess” Truman and Mamie Eisenhower fulfilled the traditional role of wife and mother and were not nearly as publicly active as their predecessor. Jacqueline Kennedy began to take on a more public role through initiatives like her televised presentation of her restoration of the White House. Her popularity skyrocketed overseas when she met with European leaders, particularly in France, where her impeccable French and sophisticated manner often overshadowed her husband, President John F. Kennedy. Yet she did not operate with the same independence or official capacity as Rosalynn Carter did in Central and South America during her First Ladyship.

The woman who succeeded Jackie Kennedy was the first presidential wife after Eleanor Roosevelt who began to reflect some aspects of Roosevelt’s legacy. Claudia “Lady Bird” Johnson launched an independent project to beautify America’s highway system and became heavily invested in the legislative battle that resulted in the passage of the Highway Beautification Act of 1965. Much like Roosevelt’s First Ladyship did not directly carry through to the tenures of either Truman or Eisenhower, Lady Bird’s successor, Pat Nixon, did not embrace the public or independent role of the First Lady. Instead, she emphasized a woman’s traditional duties, partially because her husband, President Richard Nixon, did not support the idea of an independent First Lady. The American public, then, faced a radically different approach to the role of the president’s wife with Ford and Carter who actively lived out the components of Eleanor Roosevelt’s legacy that began to appear in women like Lady Bird

Johnson. It was not until Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter, however, that the impact that Roosevelt made on the office became truly apparent.

Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter served their country during a crucial period of women's history in the United States. In one of her many essays, "Women in Politics," Eleanor wrote: "Women must become more conscious of themselves as women and of their ability to function as a group."¹³⁷ By the time that Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter held Roosevelt's position, women began to recognize their ability to accomplish the goals that Eleanor propagated thirty years earlier. In the same essay, Roosevelt also addressed one of the challenges that consistently face women in a position of power: "There are moments when I think that women's fervor to work continuously does not make them very popular with the gentlemen!"¹³⁸ Ford and Carter could certainly relate to this notion, given the controversy that resulted from their actions and opinions on contentious issues of their time.

Each of these First Ladies navigated the ways in which they could appeal to the traditional woman as well as the idea of the progressive woman that resulted from the women's movement during the tumultuous decade of the 1970s. Thirty years before either of these women dreamed that they would live in the White House, Eleanor Roosevelt reflected upon the central themes that continue to face women in a public role. Roosevelt argued: "Sex is a weapon and one that women have a right to use, because this is a part of life in which men and women live as men and women and complement, but do not compete with each other."¹³⁹ Carter and Ford lived out this notion by accepting an individual role in a male-dominated environment, forcing the American public and the political establishment to take their opinions and programs

¹³⁷ Eleanor Roosevelt, "Women in Politics," *Courage in a Dangerous World*, 66.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 61.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 70.

seriously while still supporting their husbands' administrations. In the same essay, "Women in Politics," Roosevelt asked a poignant question that applies to not only First Ladies but to all women, regardless of their profession: "Where are we going as women? Do we know where we are going? Do we know where we want to go?"¹⁴⁰ The women who followed Ford and Carter also grappled with and continue to be challenged by Eleanor Roosevelt's question.

After the independence and public activism of Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter, Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush did not demonstrate their influence over their husbands in the media spotlight. Instead, they worked behind the scenes to support their husbands and help guide the direction of his administration. After Bush, however, a new presidential wife entered the White House who many consider to be the most influential First Lady after Eleanor Roosevelt. Hillary Rodham Clinton and her husband, President Bill Clinton, expanded upon the close partnership demonstrated by the Carters with Hillary's appointment as director of the president's task force on health care reform. This was a further expansion of Rosalynn Carter's honorary directorship on the Mental Health Commission and with the added responsibility came heated controversy over Clinton's role. Ultimately her health care initiative was unsuccessful; yet Hillary Clinton further expanded the role of the First Lady beyond any of her predecessors. Laura Bush certainly did not attract the same kind of controversy as she, like her mother-in-law Barbara Bush, took a backseat in her husband's administration, focusing on education projects and as a result, she enjoyed more overall popularity than Clinton. The current First Lady, Michelle Obama, has not taken on the same degree of publicity and independence as Hillary Clinton yet she is more visible and active than Laura Bush. While it is difficult to judge how her First Ladyship will be recorded, the first black First Lady, a groundbreaking precedent in its own

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 66.

right, seems to be focusing on relatively uncontroversial causes, such as the fight against child obesity. Some Americans expected her to use her Harvard law degree to be an active member of the administration while others applaud her focus on her two young daughters and unwavering loyalty to her husband, President Barack Obama.

Michelle Obama's approach to the First Ladyship poses a question as to the future of the position. What does the future hold for the president's wife? Will the current trend of "safe" causes and initiatives and avoidance of controversy continue? Will there be a new First Lady who will claim the same kind of attention as an Eleanor Roosevelt or Hillary Rodham Clinton? How will the White House change if, one day, a woman is elected to the highest office in the United States? While it is impossible to answer any of these questions with certainty, it does seem that if the Obamas live in the White House for an additional four years, Michelle will continue to support her personal causes while trying to avoid negative press attention. While she is probably very influential out of the spotlight, it is difficult for the American public to catch a glimpse of this influence in the midst of the current administration. As for a female president, Eleanor Roosevelt reflected on this question in Joseph Lash's biography of her incredible life. She argued that a woman should not be elected president purely based on the female vote but instead she should attain her office "as an individual, because of her capacity and the trust which a majority of the people have in her integrity and ability as a person."¹⁴¹ She did not believe that this day would arrive for a long time and it is still difficult to conceive that a woman could be in the Oval Office. The only serious contender for the position was none other than former First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, who is following in the footsteps of Madeline Albright and Condoleezza Rice as Secretary of State. Eleanor Roosevelt's questions regarding the direction of

¹⁴¹ Lash, 390.

women in the political realm still resonate seventy years later. The development of the office of First Lady will continue to reflect the constantly changing social expectations of the role of the president's wife and her place in her husband's administration.

The First Lady approaches her role in her own unique way while still recognizing and building upon the precedents and actions of the illustrious list of women before her. Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter fulfilled this expectation through their recognition of the special importance of Eleanor Roosevelt who made arguably the greatest and most influential impact on the office of the president's wife. Despite the fact that the First Lady receives her role by nature of her husband's election to the presidency, she must accept and adhere to the expectation that she act publicly and independently, emphasizing the social concerns and needs of the American people as well as the international community. Operating without a constitutional grounding or list of concrete functions, the First Lady utilizes her power and presence to highlight the goals of her husband's administration as well as her own personal causes and initiatives. *Washington Post* journalist Henry Fairlie recognized this delicate balance in his article concerning Carter's role in her husband's administration: "Every four years we have the speculation as to whom the [presidential] candidates will choose as their running mates. Yet they themselves chose their real running mates years ago."¹⁴² In this statement, Fairlie acknowledged the influence of the First Lady as a political player in her husband's career and certainly a force that must be considered in any assessment of a presidential term. Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter, in the tradition of Eleanor Roosevelt, built upon their supportive relationships with their husbands and publicly demonstrated their independence through various initiatives, most notably their work towards societal improvement on behalf of their constituents. Eleanor Roosevelt's innovative and

¹⁴² Henry Fairlie, "First Ladies Should Be Nominated, Not Married," *The Washington Post*, August 10, 1980, C1.

precedent-setting First Ladyship enabled Ford and Carter to take on a more active role than many of the other women who preceded and succeeded them, placing them in the company of remarkable women who have called the White House home.

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