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Lady Bird Johnson, Betty Ford, and Second Wave Feminism

Lauren A. Stealey
University of Southern Mississippi

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Lady Bird Johnson, Betty Ford, and Second Wave Feminism

by

Lauren Stealey

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Approved by

Pamela Tyler, Ph.D., Thesis Adviser
Professor of History

Kyle Zelner, Ph.D., Chair
Department of History

David R. Davies, Dean
Honors College

Abstract

The First Ladyship is an ambiguous, constitutionally undefined role. The women who have inhabited this role since Martha Washington have had to interpret this role in their own ways and encounter the scrutiny or approval of their country along the way. On this national stage, these women have influenced and been influenced by contemporary conceptions of American womanhood. National discussion shifted to focus prominently on the role of women particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, in the resurgence of an organized women's rights movement known as Second Wave Feminism.

In this qualitative study, I focused on two First Ladies during this time, Democrat Lady Bird Johnson and Republican Betty Ford, concentrating on their portrayals in the *New York Times* and the words of the women themselves. Because of personal factors in their own lives and in their relationships with their Presidential husbands, and because of the shifting historical context that propelled feminist discussions to the forefront over time, Johnson and Ford interacted with feminism in different ways. What I discovered was that while Lady Bird Johnson deftly and cautiously navigated a balancing act in her self-presentation between tradition and real influence, Betty Ford was able to build upon this balance and act as a boldly vocal feminist figure while in the White House. This study contributes to the historiography of First Ladies by providing insight into how Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford, as women, acted within the context of the changing roles of women.

Key words: Lady Bird Johnson, Betty Ford, Second Wave Feminism, First Lady, President, women

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Part I: Prospectus/Introduction

Following the American Revolution, the Founding Fathers undertook the unique task of structuring a radically new government. At the heart of this new government lay the American Constitution, outlining the roles and responsibilities of three distinct branches of government. One aspect of the new government that these men left completely undefined was the role of the spouse of the executive, the First Lady. From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama, these women have defined and fulfilled this role in vastly different ways. One inescapable commonality among all these women is that they were all products of their own times. All of the First Ladies, both individually and as a group, have reflected the evolving and expanding roles of American women over the last two and a quarter centuries, and each has faced the scrutiny and judgment of her nation.

Not only did the Founding Fathers fail to define this role in establishing their new government, but they also failed to ensure equality on the basis of gender. Women have instead been forced to actively assert their legal, political, and social equality, beginning with the first politically organized women's rights movement in Seneca Falls, and continuing with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. This feminist cause entered its second wave in the 1960s with an increased attention on social equality. Two of the First Ladies during these tumultuous decades interacted with and were influenced by this movement in differing and complex ways.

Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford assumed the unelected role of First Lady in 1963 and 1974 respectively, and each faced the challenges of fulfilling her new and powerful role in her own way. Likewise, each woman faced the unavoidable criticism and support attached to her prominent position. The goal of this comparative study is to examine from a feminist

perspective how and why Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford differed in fulfilling the role of First Lady and to illustrate how their interactions with second wave feminism reflected the changing roles of American women as a whole. Throughout this study, one overall theme emerged. Lady Bird Johnson's actions were a constant cautious balancing act, while Betty Ford was able to be more vocal and controversial, frequently tilting boldly towards feminist positions.

Literature Review/ Historical Context

From its very beginning, American society relegated women to a subordinate position, but women pushed back to expand the limited and rigidly defined constraints of their roles as wives and mothers. Before the concept of feminism even existed, women strove to expand their role and to achieve some degree of legal, social, and political equality. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, individual women propelled this quest for equality into a nationally organized women's rights movement. More successful at some points than others, this movement peaked with women's enfranchisement in 1920 and surged again into prominence in the 1960s and 1970s in its second wave.

Throughout its history, the women's rights movement has never been a unified or homogenous struggle. Likewise, not all women have been or considered themselves to be feminists. Nancy F. Cott defines a feminist as one who believes in "sex equality," that "women's condition is socially constructed," and who identifies with other women "as a social grouping."¹ The complexities of the women's movement, propelled by feminists, have impelled women to interpret and interact with feminism in diverse ways. Like many other women, Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford viewed feminism through the lenses of their own

¹ Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 4-5.

lives. Unlike other women, however, these two wielded incomparable influence in their ambiguous yet powerful role during their terms as First Ladies.

The legal, social, and political spheres of early American society placed women in a distinctly disadvantaged and subordinate position to men. Perhaps the greatest tool of women's oppression was the legal system of coverture. Adopted from English Common Law, this concept held, "Husband and wife are one person in law, that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of her husband; under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing."² Essentially, a woman's civic identity ceased to exist upon her marriage. The implications of this legal practice entailed that women could not own property or make legal contracts. A husband was free to do with his wife's property what he pleased. She, in turn, did not regain any control over this property and could not make any type of legal will until his death. Coverture meant that fathers, not mothers, retained custody of their children. This played out primarily in cases of divorce and apprenticeship, in which the mother had no control over the placement of her children.³ A married woman was legally powerless under the system of coverture.

Compounded upon this legal powerlessness for women was their subordination within the social sphere. It was widely believed that women's primary social role was in the home, caring for their families and fulfilling domestic obligations. Even when women

² "The Law of Domestic Relations: Marriage, Divorce, Dower" in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, ed. Linda K. Kerber, Jane Sherron De Hart, and Cornelia Hughes Dayton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 57.

³ Linda K. Kerber, Jane Sherron De Hart, and Cornelia Hughes Dayton, "Introduction: Gender and the New Women's History," in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, ed. Linda K. Kerber, Jane Sherron De Hart, and Cornelia Hughes Dayton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.

stepped outside this limited role, it was often under the guise of merely expanding, rather than revolutionizing, their domestic responsibilities. In the workplace, this meant that women served in the feminized roles of teachers, nurses, librarians, and secretaries. As these roles became increasingly acceptable for a woman to inhabit, they correspondingly decreased in pay and prestige, a trend consistent with the general devaluation of women's work.⁴

Women were also disadvantaged within the political sphere. Along with coverture, American society inherited from the English the contingency of political participation upon property ownership. Because women were legally unable to meet this requirement, they faced exclusion from the American political arena from its very beginning. Instead, women discovered that often their only tool of political participation was their influence, which they could exert upon the men in the lives, who were the only legitimate political participants.⁵ This trend largely continued until the dawn of feminism's First Wave and its organized beginning in Seneca Falls, New York.

The Seneca Falls convention, organized largely by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, was held on July 19, 1848.⁶ Modeled explicitly on America's Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Sentiments adopted at this convention asserted women's equality and called for the end of women's oppression in the lines, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal," and "The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in

⁴ Kerber et al., 12-13.

⁵ Kerber et al., 13-14.

⁶ Gerda Lerner, *The Woman in American History* (Menlo Park, California: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1971), 83.

direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.”⁷ Further, one specific demand these women made was that they should be enfranchised.⁸

This quest for suffrage was propelled by Stanton and her close friend Susan B. Anthony. Other reformers included Lucy Stone (who elected to keep her maiden name in marriage), Lucretia Mott, and Sarah and Angelina Grimké.⁹ These women also commonly devoted their energies to the abolitionist cause. With the outbreak of the Civil War, they allowed this cause to overshadow their own feminist cause, with the hope that abolitionist leaders would lend their support to the women’s movement at the end of the war. This did not turn out to be the case, and it resulted in a split in the women’s movement.¹⁰

Anthony and Stanton formed the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869, which was wholly devoted to a constitutional amendment guaranteeing women’s suffrage. Henry Blackwell, Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe, and Mary Livermore formed a similar organization that instead advocated reform through state, rather than national, legislative changes.¹¹ This split continued until 1890, when the two separate organizations joined to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Under the presidencies of Stanton, Anthony, Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, and Carrie Chapman Catt, NAWSA advocated legislative reforms and, at first, attempted state-by-state change. After this tactic stalled, the organization was radicalized somewhat by Alice Paul, who was influenced by British suffragists. Paul organized suffrage parades, including one the day

⁷ Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Women’s Rights, Feminism, and Politics in the United States* (Washington, D. C.: American Political Science Association, 1988), 2-3.

⁸ Shanley, 3.

⁹ Lerner, 81.

¹⁰ Lerner, 108.

¹¹ Lerner, 108-110.

before President Wilson's inauguration.¹² After splitting from NAWSA to form the National Woman's Party, Paul became increasingly radicalized, holding protests outside the White House and staging hunger strikes after being jailed, effectively drawing national attention to her cause. These innovative and extreme tactics, coupled with the legislative reform efforts of NAWSA, eventually culminated with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.¹³

Reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had argued that women needed the vote to legally rectify their social position. Once they received the vote, however, many women believed they had accomplished equality and failed to remain politically active.¹⁴ During World War II, just as in the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, women witnessed a slight expansion of their roles on the home front as men left to fight. This time, however, instead of new opportunities for education and activism, the conservative backlash of the 1950s followed. Historian Gerda Lerner wrote, "Rosie the Riveter was told to go home where she belonged and to produce babies, not ships. She did just that, as can be seen from the post-war baby boom."¹⁵ Although individual women made cultural gains, as a whole, the movement largely stalled until its second wave in the 1960s.

The 1960s witnessed a decade of civil rights activism in the United States. Events like the Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, which proclaimed that separate but equal educational facilities were unconstitutional, the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955, the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1960 and 1962, illustrated the level of social

¹² Lerner, 159-165.

¹³ Lerner, 167-171.

¹⁴ Lerner, 172.

¹⁵ Lerner, 177.

change prevalent at the dawn of the 1960s.¹⁶ At the beginning of the decade, much of the focus centered upon racial equality.

Women worked alongside men in organizations like SNCC and events like the Freedom Summer of 1964, when activists traveled to the southern United States to register previously disenfranchised voters. Increasingly conscious of their subordinate position within this movement, women began to vocalize their demands for gender, in addition to racial, equality. With this goal, Mary King and Casey Hayden issued “SNCC Position Paper, Nov. 1964,” which outlined primarily how men monopolized the authority positions of the movement. Men assumed dominant positions, and they expected the women to fulfill clerical and secretarial functions.¹⁷ Men’s reaction to this paper was generally unfavorable. Perhaps the most infamous response came from Stokely Carmichael, who remarked, “The only position for women in SNCC is prone,” underlining the degree of sexism within a movement otherwise dedicated to social equality.¹⁸

Largely unattached to such civil rights work, Betty Friedan publicized the cultural subordination of women in her 1963 work *The Feminine Mystique*. Based on interviews with her fellow middle-class, suburban, college-graduate women, Friedan chronicled their feelings of discontent and isolation. She dubbed their unhappiness with their socially acceptable but confining roles as homemakers “the problem that has no name.”¹⁹

Along with her growing prominence came a sense of political dissatisfaction for Friedan, just as it had for Hayden and King. Frustrated by the failure of the Equal

¹⁶ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), xvii-xviii.

¹⁷ Rosen, 103-107.

¹⁸ Rosen, 108.

¹⁹ Rosen, 4.

Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to enforce sex-based discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Friedan and other women at the Third National Conference of State Commissions on the status of women formed the National Organization for Women (NOW). Although Title VII had initially appeared to be a victory for feminists, in that it provided a legal safeguard against sexual and racial discrimination in the workplace, the director of the EEOC, which had been created to enforce Title VII, did not take sexual harassment seriously. NOW and other similar organizations sought, through nongovernmental channels, to rectify this situation, and in doing so, they acknowledged the shortcomings of traditional liberalism and radicalized the feminist agenda.²⁰

This feminist agenda included topics such as women's reproductive health, rape, and abortion. In 1973, the Boston Women's Health Collective published *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. This educational work provided women not only with information about their bodies and reproductive systems, but also a sense of agency through a rejection of the paternalism of the medical field. Health activists questioned why women were subjected solely to the decisions of their physicians and initiated many public discussions on the merits of breast-feeding and self-examinations. They formed support groups for breast cancer patients, a disease that previously was considered taboo. By the 1990s, women's health activists even successfully lobbied Congress to increase breast cancer research funding.²¹

Another taboo issue that feminists addressed was rape, both in and out of marriage. Prior to the 1970s, rape was a highly unreported and highly unprosecuted crime. Police officers and hospital workers often treated the victims as criminals, and many state laws necessitated corroboration in rape trials, thus rejecting a victim's personal credibility.

²⁰ Rosen, 72-75.

²¹ Rosen, 176-181.

Feminists publicized rape reform through outlining its universality and its primary function as an exercise of power, usually of men over women. They also worked to establish marital rape, date rape, and domestic abuse as legitimate crimes.²²

One of the greatest victories for these feminist activists came with the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*, which stated, “We recognize the right of the individual, married or single, to be free from unwanted government intrusion into matters so fundamentally affecting a person as the right of a woman to decide whether or not to terminate her pregnancy.”²³ This legal precedent helped overturn restrictions on abortions, which had previously been practiced illegally and often dangerously. While *Roe v. Wade* did create new outlets for legalized abortions, it lacked Congressional backing and served as a catalyst for social and political polarization.²⁴ It also triggered a massive conservative backlash. Conservative religious groups such as the Catholic Church and evangelical Christians worked to overturn the court’s decision. Further, in 1977, Congress passed the Hyde Amendment, providing a barrier to legalized abortions by forbidding federal funds to be used towards the procedure for women in poverty.²⁵

Feminists faced conservative backlash in other reform areas as well, particularly in efforts against the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Composed initially in 1923 by Alice Paul, the leader of the National Woman’s Party, the ERA stated, “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.”²⁶ Although it was introduced to Congress in every successive term after its

²² Rosen, 181-186.

²³ Quoted in Rosen, 158.

²⁴ Rosen, 157-159.

²⁵ Rosen, 331.

²⁶ Quoted in Rosen, 66.

inception, the ERA was largely avoided until the 1970s. Even the President's Commission on the Status of Women, which generated unprecedented levels of research on the conditions of American women, failed to support the ERA.²⁷ It was not until 1972 that both houses of Congress passed the ERA, after which it was sent to the states for ratification. After thirty states initially supported it, it failed to receive the necessary thirty-eight within its allotted deadline, in part due to the efforts of antifeminists and the conservative right, including Phyllis Schlafly.²⁸ Schlafly founded Stop ERA and held that feminists, "hate men, marriage, and children. They are out to destroy morality and the family."²⁹

The Role of the First Lady

The role of the First Lady is an ambiguous one that exists without a Constitutional definition. This is not to say that the role lacks significance. Many First Ladies wielded not only influence, but also real power, over both their husbands and American society. Two seminal works on the First Ladyship are *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy*, edited by Lewis Gould, and Carl Sferrazza Anthony's two-volume *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power*.

In his significant study, Carl Sferrazza Anthony explores this question of power and how the role of First Lady has evolved. Anthony establishes the central paradox of this position, asking, "How could a person of a gender once deemed 'inferior,' in a role that tended to repress, in a position that was not official, in a situation always scrutinized, usually criticized, and perpetually debated, exert influence on everyone from the presidents of the United States, Cabinet members, senators, congressmen, Supreme Court justices, and

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Rosen, 332.

²⁹ Quoted in Rosen, 39.

governors to the czar of Russia, Pope John Paul II, and Mae West?”³⁰ Essentially, the American public has largely expected its First Ladies to conform to the traditional roles of women, which relegates them to a private role, while at the same time also expecting them to fulfill a very public role imbued with a great deal of influence.

One of the best examples of an early First Lady wielding a measurable degree of influence is Abigail Adams, whom Anthony refers to as “a political partner to her husband.”³¹ Before her term as First Lady, Adams beseeched her husband and colleagues to “Remember the Ladies and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors,” and reminded him, “That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical.”³² Commenting on her power concerning the president, Adams’s grandson remarked that “even upon public affairs, [she] had at all times great weight with her husband.”³³

Her successor Dolley Madison, as hostess for both her husband James and his widowed predecessor Thomas Jefferson, set many precedents as First Lady in her manner of interacting with the press and her championing of a special project. Further, the title First Lady was applied for the first time to Madison. Other First Ladies have likewise left their mark on this role. Sarah Polk, like Abigail Adams, served as a political advisor to her husband. Frances Cleveland, the twenty-one-year-old who married Grover Cleveland during his first term as president, was the first of the First Ladies to face intense scrutiny from the

³⁰ Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents’ Wives and Their Power: Volume I, 1789-1961* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 18.

³¹ Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents’ Wives and Their Power: Volume II, 1961-1990* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 17.

³² Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776, in “Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive,” from the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17760331aa>.

³³ Anthony, *First Ladies: Volume I*, 63.

press. Nellie Taft was the first to publically support women's suffrage, and Edith Wilson tightly controlled her husband's schedule following his stroke.³⁴

Eleanor Roosevelt, perhaps more than any of her predecessors, stepped unapologetically into the public spotlight. Two days after her husband's inauguration, Roosevelt held her own press conference with women reporters, a practice which she continued throughout her twelve-year term. She also published a newspaper column, *My Day*, six times a week from 1936 to 1962. She pressured her husband to include women in prominent positions in New Deal programs, and she defied her husband's wishes by joining Washington D.C.'s National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and taking a public stand against lynching. Her political activism continued even after her husband's death, and she served as an ambassador to the United Nations for seven years.³⁵

Many of Roosevelt's successors retreated from her level of public activism. Complexities abound, however, in attempting to compare any First Lady to others who have held the title. Just as the position has evolved over time, so too have the general roles of women in American society. Each First Lady has thus reflected both these greater changing roles and the perceptions she brings to her position from the perspective of her own life. Analyzing any account of Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford must therefore take the foundations of their personal lives into account.

Lady Bird Johnson, born Claudia Alta Taylor on December 22, 1912, in Karnack Texas, acquired her nickname from her family's cook. As a child, Johnson developed a lifelong love of nature. She graduated from high school at age fifteen and went on to earn

³⁴ Anthony, *First Ladies: Volume II*, 17-18.

³⁵ Allida M. Black, "(Anna) Eleanor Roosevelt," in *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy*, ed. Lewis L. Gould (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 435-445.

two bachelor's degrees, a Bachelor's of the Arts, and a journalism degree, from the University of Texas in Austin. In her early twenties, she was introduced to Lyndon B. Johnson, then an aide to a Texas Congressman. He proposed on their first date. She initially refused, but they carried on a long distance relationship that culminated with their marriage on November 17, 1934.³⁶

Johnson soon developed a skill for moderating her husband's temper and mood swings. She also tolerated his criticism of her and his marital unfaithfulness. When her husband, a Democrat, ran for Congress for the first time in 1937, Johnson donated \$10,000 from her mother's estate, and her father donated an additional \$25,000. This financial support, coupled with her public and emotional support, helped Johnson win his election. Johnson again contributed financially to her husband's career by purchasing a radio station in Austin, Texas, called Station KTBC. With the deed in her name, her husband's connections with the Federal Communications Commission, and her own business acumen, KTBC grew into a multimillion-dollar business.³⁷

In 1948, Johnson furthered his political career by winning a Senate seat, again with the public support of his wife. This eventually blossomed into his nomination for the Vice Presidency in the 1960 campaign. To prepare for this campaign, Lady Bird Johnson took public speaking classes, and she served as a key adviser to her husband. After Lady Bird Johnson was spat upon at a Dallas airport by fervent Nixon supporters, the Democrats won Texas, and Robert Kennedy credited Johnson herself for this key victory.³⁸

³⁶ Lewis L. Gould, "Lady Bird (Claudia Alta Taylor) Johnson," in *American First Ladies*, ed. Lewis L. Gould (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 497-498.

³⁷ Gould, 498-501.

³⁸ Gould, 501-502.

As Second Lady, Johnson often stepped in to fulfill official obligations when Jacqueline Kennedy was not available. She assembled her own personal staff, including Elizabeth Carpenter as her press secretary, and she traveled on official business with her husband. She and her husband were in Dallas when President Kennedy was assassinated, and as her husband took the oath of office on Air Force One next to Jacqueline Kennedy in her bloodstained suit, Lady Bird Johnson assumed the First Ladyship, which she occupied from that day in 1963 through 1969.³⁹

Betty Ford assumed the First Ladyship upon similarly unexpected terms, after Nixon's resignation. Born Elizabeth Ann Bloomer on April 8, 1918 in Chicago, Ford developed lifelong passions for reading and dancing. After finishing high school in 1936, she even studied under the renowned choreographer Martha Graham. Against her mother's advice, she traveled to New York to study with Graham, and she worked as a model to support herself. She returned home to Grand Rapids, Michigan, after six months, where she then married Bill Warren at the age of twenty-four.⁴⁰

For Ford, this marriage was largely an unhappy one, and after nursing Warren back to health after a severe illness, she initiated a divorce, which ended her marriage in 1947. She met Gerald R. Ford before her divorce was final, and they dated regularly after the official end of her first marriage. Their relatively short courtship culminated with their marriage on October 15, 1948. Gerald Ford was late to his rehearsal dinner and wedding because he was busy campaigning for a seat in Congress. The couple continued to campaign on their

³⁹ Gould, 503.

⁴⁰ John Pope, "Betty (Elizabeth Ann Bloomer) Ford," in *American First Ladies*, ed. Lewis L. Gould (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 536-539.

honeymoon, and Gerald Ford won his election and continued to win reelections as a Republican Congressman.⁴¹

The Fords moved to Washington, D.C., in 1954, and Betty Ford gave birth to four children—Michael, John (also known as Jack), Steven, and Susan. She also fulfilled all of the social and charitable functions expected of her as a congressional wife, cared full-time for her children, and taught Sunday School. She undertook this childrearing largely in her husband's absence, as he was away for as many as 280 days a year. After suffering from a pinched nerve in her neck, Ford began regularly consuming alcohol and started seeing a psychiatrist to combat her mental and emotional pain.⁴²

After achieving the status of House Minority Leader in 1965, Gerald Ford promised his wife he would retire in 1977. Instead, on October 12, 1973, Nixon named Gerald Ford his new Vice President after Spiro T. Agnew resigned. Then, following Nixon's own resignation in the face of the Watergate scandal, Gerald Ford assumed the presidency on August 8, 1974, and Betty Ford assumed her role as First Lady, a position she would fill for only the next two and a half years.⁴³ Leading somewhat similar lives before their husbands' inaugurations, Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford undertook the First Ladyship in some ways that were very similar and in others, very different.

Research Questions and Methodology

The general goal of my thesis is to compare and contrast how Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford performed the role of First Lady within the context of second wave feminism, the resurgence of an organized women's rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In this

⁴¹ Pope, 539-542.

⁴² Pope, 542-543.

⁴³ Pope, 544-545.

qualitative study, I analyzed the similarities and dissimilarities of their words and actions. Further, I examined how the circumstances of their different historical and political contexts and their personal lives contributed to these similarities and differences. As the First Lady of a Democratic President from 1963 through 1969, Lady Bird Johnson encountered a historical and political situation markedly different from that of Betty Ford, the First Lady of a Republican President from 1974 through 1977.

General questions that I explored include: how did their words and actions differ? How were they similar? What factors in their personal lives influenced these similarities and differences? How were the historical contexts different during each First Lady's term? How did they portray themselves differently in their autobiographies? How did media sources portray the words and actions of each First Lady?

To conduct this comparative analysis, I examined the words and actions of Johnson and Ford themselves. Both women vocally championed different causes from the platform of the First Ladyship, and both published books reflecting on their times in office. Moreover, I compared how the two women were portrayed differently in mass media outlets. Beyond these sources, I examined what other historians have written. I hope to have enhanced this existing literature by evaluating Johnson and Ford's roles as First Ladies with particular emphasis on how they, as women, interacted with the resurgence of an organized women's rights movement.

Part II: A Quiet Crusade: Lady Bird Johnson's Combination of Tradition and Political Influence as First Lady

Introduction

Lady Bird Johnson served as First Lady during the very dawning of Second Wave Feminism. The 1960s witnessed the resurgence of an organized women's rights movement that eventually caused drastic changes in women's roles in American society. As the wife of the president during the early days of this movement, Johnson occupied a unique position from which to interact with these changes. With caution and political astuteness, she was able to navigate between the traditional role of the First Lady and a more influential political role. She was able to construct her image as First Lady in a way that made her a political asset, rather than a liability, for her husband's administration. By embracing the traditional role of hostess and partner and often combining it with public acts of political advocacy, Johnson was able to balance the old and new aspects of women's roles in American politics and create new opportunities from which her successors would benefit.

The dilemmas that Johnson faced in balancing the traditional and progressive aspects of a woman in a prominent social and political position were not new or specific to her in the 1960s

It was under conditions of growing activism against women's oppression that Lady Bird Johnson entered the office of the First Ladyship on November 22, 1963.

Transition to a New Administration

In her *White House Diary*, a record of her thoughts and activities that Johnson maintained during her time in the White House and then edited and published in 1970,

Johnson recorded her first words to the newly-widowed Jacqueline Kennedy aboard Air Force One. “Oh, Mrs. Kennedy,” she wrote, “you know we never even wanted to be Vice President and now, dear God, it’s come to this.”⁴⁴ This line is significant in two regards. First, it illustrated the marital and political partnership the Johnsons shared in her use of the first person, plural “we.” Secondly, this is not simply a condolence for a grieving woman. It also illustrated the enormity of the responsibilities that the Johnsons now faced and Lady Bird Johnson’s trepidation at the thought of so suddenly entering this office.

These personal recollections, in Johnson’s own voice, formed only one side of this event, which differed from its representation in the mass media. The front page of the *New York Times* from the day of Kennedy’s assassination carried the famous picture of Lyndon Baines Johnson taking the oath of office, flanked by Jacqueline Kennedy and his wife, the new First Lady.⁴⁵ This symbolic role of simply appearing in pictures beside her husband was a role that Johnson fulfilled frequently during the early months of her husband’s administration. She appeared beside him not only on the plane in Dallas and outside the plane’s landing back in Washington, D. C., but also in the background of the pictures from Kennedy’s funeral, attending church with the new President, hostessing a reception for Queen Frederika of Greece, behind the President following his first address to the United Nations, and in the family’s official Christmas picture, all within just over the first month of the Johnsons’ administration.⁴⁶

On one hand, the country was reeling from its first presidential assassination in over 60 years. From Johnson’s mostly visual representation, it seems as though she recognized

⁴⁴ Lady Bird Johnson, *A White House Diary* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 6.

⁴⁵ *New York Times*, November 23, 1963.

⁴⁶ *New York Times*, November 23, 25, 26 and December 18, 26, 1963.

the need to transition slowly into her new position in order to avoid overshadowing the former First Lady or the new President. On the other hand, Johnson herself had come into this unelected role of First Lady at the same time that her husband entered the Presidency similarly unelected. In that sense, she was doubly unelected and felt personally unprepared. During these early days, she wrote in her *White House Diary*, “I feel like I am suddenly onstage for a part I never rehearsed.”⁴⁷

At the same time that Johnson appeared frequently in its pictures, the *New York Times* also sought to describe how she would or should act in her new role. The day after Kennedy’s assassination, the paper offered its readers a brief biography of Johnson, so they could acquaint themselves with their new First Lady. Relying on quotes generated only before she unexpectedly assumed her new position, this article painted a picture of an extremely active woman. Its very first line, in fact, directly compared her to her most active predecessor in saying, “Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson is the most politically minded woman to enter the White House as First Lady since Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt.”⁴⁸ This comparison is significant in light of all of Eleanor Roosevelt’s groundbreaking activities and achievements. The *New York Times* set high expectations for Lady Bird Johnson.

In summarizing the roles she had fulfilled as Second Lady, including touring impoverished areas and traveling with the President, this article projected the assumption that Johnson would continue to remain active. Interestingly, it also highlighted her personal business savvy, quantifying this value judgment in explicitly recounting how she transformed her \$67,000 inheritance into a million-dollar net worth through land investments and

⁴⁷ Johnson, *White House Diary*, 16.

⁴⁸ *New York Times*, November 23, 1963.

business ventures, all “without the help of her husband.”⁴⁹ This sentiment alone placed Johnson squarely within the public sphere, in the masculine world of business.

Throughout her term, aspects of Johnson’s life like her successful business had to be counterbalanced by more domestic activities in order to refrain from overstepping the boundaries of what was then expected of traditional womanhood. Towards this end, the very next paragraph of this article shifted in tone to discuss Johnson in terms of her being a homemaker whose focus was on creating a comfortable environment for her husband.⁵⁰

Regardless of this delicate balance, one thing that both Johnson and the *New York Times* agreed upon was that her new role was undoubtedly a job and could openly and explicitly be described as such. After a brief holiday vacation, Johnson wrote on January 6, 1964, with excitement of her return to work, “My first big day back on the job!”⁵¹ On this particular day, her duties included a logistical meeting with members of her staff, Liz Carpenter, Bess Abell, and Ashton Gonella, her secretary, and hostessing a reception for the members of the White House Staff.⁵²

Several weeks earlier, the *New York Times* similarly described her role as a job, specifically as a “public servant without pay.”⁵³ This article outlined the demands of the role and related that Johnson “brings perhaps more experience than any other First Lady. She is certainly more politically attuned to her husband’s Administration than most.”⁵⁴ Further, the article quoted Johnson describing her role in her own words, “I will try to be balm, sustainer and sometimes critic for my husband...For my own self, my role must emerge in deeds, not

⁴⁹ New York Times, November 23, 1963.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Johnson, *White House Diary*, 31.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *New York Times*, December 15, 1963.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

words.”⁵⁵ In both of these descriptions, the emphasis was split between Johnson’s own capabilities in her potential for political activism and her role in helping her husband, the President. This split in focus may at first seem like a detriment to Johnson’s ability to expand her role. In reality, however, serving in the capacity as her husband’s helper actually allowed Johnson to push boundaries, accumulate political experience and influence, and eventually create a political space of her own.

On Behalf of Her Husband

Even before her husband was Vice President, Lady Bird Johnson played an active role in his political ambitions. One of her most enduring contributions was in helping the Kennedy-Johnson ballot with their campaigning efforts. Initially terrified of public speaking, she worked hard to overcome this fear while campaigning in eleven states in the south, usually without her husband. Additionally, while accompanying her husband on a whistle-stop campaigning tour in 1960, she made as many as sixteen speeches a day. Of her transformation in the face of public speaking, the *New York Times* quoted her as saying, “Lyndon expects a lot of me, and so I’ve learned not to be afraid any more.”⁵⁶ This line in particular framed her efforts as both propelled by and on behalf of her husband. Her efforts contributed so much to this campaign that Robert Kennedy credited her with the ticket’s victory in Texas that year.⁵⁷

Her role in her husband’s campaigning only intensified when it became his name in the presidential spot on the ballot in 1964. Before he accepted his party’s nomination for that year, however, he consulted his wife extensively on her insight as to whether or not he should

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ *New York Times*, December 15, 1963.

⁵⁷ Gould, *American First Ladies*, 502.

run for a full term. Both Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson commented on this issue in their autobiographies. In fact, in his autobiography, Lyndon Johnson included the text of the entire note that he asked her to write on this matter. In this note, she weighed the potential consequences of not running against those of running in 1964. After including this text, Lyndon Johnson wrote, “Through our years together I have come to value Lady Bird’s opinion of me, my virtues and flaws. I have found her judgment generally excellent.”⁵⁸ This evidence of their strong political partnership aside, he was, however, “not convinced” by her assessment at this time, but his campaign later that year says otherwise.⁵⁹ Johnson wanted her husband to run again; it was he who was unsure. Although it is impossible to know the extent to which her wishes and political strategies influenced him, in the end, he ran and won.

In her *White House Diary*, Johnson discussed her role in this decision more extensively than did her husband, but rather than portray it as political advice as he did, she constructed the story more in terms of caring for his health and personal well-being. His 1955 heart attack weighed heavily on her mind, and she worried about his health constantly throughout her diary. According to Johnson, if her husband decided not to run, she thought it should be for health reasons and explained to the general public as such. She also went so far as to draft a statement for Johnson if he decided not to run. Although she included the full text of this short statement in her diary, it was followed by examples of her self-consciousness and second-guessing herself on this matter. This is evident in her writing that his assistants would need to “polish” the statement, doctors would need to add “any medical

⁵⁸ Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 93-95.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 95.

terms,” and most significantly, “I hope he won’t use it—that’s that!”⁶⁰ In this public portrayal of her influence, Johnson was explicit that she wanted her husband to run again. However, by phrasing her argument also in terms of his health, she re-established and reinforced her role as a caretaking wife.

Once Lyndon Johnson decided to run, Lady Bird Johnson endeavored to campaign extensively on his behalf. Aboard the train the Lady Bird Special, she embarked upon what historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony called “the most active public campaigning assumed by a First Lady.”⁶¹ Traversing 1,682 miles, Johnson made the most of her southern roots to garner support for her pro-Civil Rights, Democratic husband in an increasingly hostile South.⁶² Her willingness to enter this antagonistic region, rife with the possibility of real danger, illustrated both her personal courage and her unwavering devotion to her husband’s career. Johnson’s role in planning for this extensive tour began over a month ahead of time, in September 1964. Towards this end, Johnson met with members of her own staff and political planners like Dewey Long, who organized President Truman’s Whistlestop tour in 1948.⁶³

Johnson herself also used her considerable influence to call on the governors and senators of the states she visited. Through this act alone, Johnson demonstrated her ability to step ably into the public political sphere. Some of these politicians, like North Carolina’s Governor Terry Sanford and his wife, were entirely receptive to her political advances and “delighted” to participate in her campaign efforts.⁶⁴ Other aspects of this behind-the-scenes politicking were less enjoyable for her. Describing Alabama, Johnson wrote in her diary that

⁶⁰ Johnson, *White House Diary*, 138.

⁶¹ Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents’ Wives and Their Power: Volume II, 1961-1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 124.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Johnson, *White House Diary*, 194.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

it was “the state most adamantly against us and the state with which I have the most personal bonds. There was no use in calling Governor George Wallace.”⁶⁵ In this sentiment, Johnson emphasized her personal connection to the South, in conjunction with the political motive of her campaigning; for her, this trip was both personal and political. For Governor Wallace, her actions and their implications were purely political. Because of her association with her husband’s support of Civil Rights, Wallace could not accept her outreach under any circumstances, even under the guise of a southern gentleman welcoming a southern lady to a state with which she had familial connections.

After these whirlwind and very public campaigning efforts proved successful, Johnson retreated temporarily to a more private, domestic role. On New Year’s Day of 1965, she wrote in her diary, “I spent the morning in that long-needed, female chore of cleaning closets...and [a] determination” to get the LBJ Ranch organized. Highlighting these domestic chores, she nevertheless played a significant role in the year that followed this entry in her *White House Diary*.

At President Johnson’s second inauguration, Lady Bird Johnson became the first First Lady to hold the Bible for her husband while he took the oath of office. Symbolically, this gesture seemingly demonstrated an increased visibility for the role of the First Lady, a partnership between husband and wife, and the potential for breaking tradition. Both Johnson and the *New York Times*, however, complicated this picture slightly in their portrayals of this event. Johnson wrote in her diary, “I was touched that Lyndon wanted me to hold the Bible for his swearing-in.”⁶⁶ Mentioning the event only briefly, she framed it entirely as fulfilling the wishes of her husband. It was not a symbolic gesture that she

⁶⁵ Ibid, 197.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 226.

masterminded for political gain, but rather an honor bestowed upon her by a true political leader and the head of their marriage.

The New York Times took a slightly more dramatic approach. In this article's opinion, Johnson holding the Bible for her husband was "the high point of a triumphant day."⁶⁷ Further, this break in tradition "astonished" the aide who handed Johnson the Bible "at the last moment."⁶⁸ Although these sentiments seemed to initially underline the significance of this event, this article then discussed much more thoroughly the First Lady's clothes, which "gave her a little girl air," and her tears of pride shed over her husband's speech.⁶⁹ Apparently, Johnson shed these tears even though "as usual with Mr. Johnson's important speeches, [she] went over the text with the President in its early and last stages."⁷⁰ The irony of this complicated image, that of a woman crying over a speech she admittedly contributed to, mirrors the overall cloudy implications of the entire inaugural experience and Johnson's expansion of her role in general. In this case, holding a Bible broke a precedent and established a new symbolic role for First Ladies, but it did so in a way that portrayed Johnson as a grateful wife and emotional partner.

Johnson broke ground for the role of the First Lady in other structural ways. She was the first First Lady to appoint her own Chief of Staff. Historian Lewis L. Gould writes that this act "laid the foundation for subsequent expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus that served the wife of the President."⁷¹ This position underlined the seriousness with which Johnson regarded her role. Her Chief of Staff, Liz Carpenter, as a former journalist, also

⁶⁷ *New York Times*, January 21, 1965.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Gould, *American First Ladies*, 515.

acted as Johnson's press secretary. In this capacity, she interacted with eighty-five women reporters who covered the domestic side of life in the White House, a job made significantly easier by the press's respect for Johnson.⁷² In her autobiography, Carpenter wrote, "I was blessed with the knowledge that most newspaper reporters, male and female, admired and liked the First Lady. This wasn't hard to do. She was considerate. She was doing something. And she treated reporters with warmth and respect."⁷³ Carpenter's skills in interacting with the press, and Johnson's kindness towards individual reporters, helped Johnson construct a positive image of herself in the press.

With the aid of this staff, Johnson was able to take on significant responsibilities that supported her husband's Great Society program. In the first months of her new term, Johnson identified particularly with the Head Start program, accepting an honorary chairmanship of Project Head Start.⁷⁴ In her diary, however, her ambition for this project shone through in the lines, "I don't like being just 'honorary' anything. If I take it on, I want to work at it," and work at it she did.⁷⁵

One example of her Head Start advocacy was an August 12, 1965, trip to New Jersey to see this program in action. On her trip, she spoke with teachers and children and held a press conference. By bringing with her a plane full of reporters, who followed her around for the day, she was able to effectively use her platform to shine a bright light on a cause she supported, a cause that she chose because it fell under the goals of her husband's

⁷² Liz Carpenter, *Ruffles & Flourishes* (College Station, Texas: Texas A & M University Press, 1993), 112.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 117.

⁷⁴ *New York Times*, February 5, 1965.

⁷⁵ Johnson, *White House Diary*, 235.

administration.⁷⁶ Similarly, this cause also emphasized the traditional side of her balancing act. Working on behalf of children fell under the traditionally acceptable role of women as caretakers and nurturers.

This trip contrasted with a prior ambassadorial trip Johnson made for her husband earlier in his Presidency. In March of 1964, upon the death of King Paul of Greece, President Johnson named former President Harry S. Truman and Lady Bird Johnson as the American representatives for the king's funeral in Greece. The *New York Times* announced this appointment with the headline, "Truman Will Go to Rites for Paul," and underneath in much smaller font, "Mrs. Johnson Also to Attend Athens Funeral Thursday."⁷⁷ Beyond mentioning her presence and depicting her in several photographs of this occasion, the newspaper did not portray her as a very active participant in this diplomatic endeavor. The largely symbolic nature of this visit contrasted directly with the active role she played in her Head Start visits a year later. In that short amount of time, Johnson had gained undeniable traction and confidence in her role. Shortly following her work for Head Start, she was ready to embark upon the advocacy that would become her legacy.

Beautification

Lady Bird Johnson explained her initial interest in beautification as the result of a lifelong passion. She stated, "All my life, nature, scenery, the beauties of this country had been my joy, what fueled my spirit, made me happy."⁷⁸ This almost instinctual interest in beautification is evident throughout her *White House Diary*. Often her entries begin with descriptions of her natural surroundings, with particular attention to flowers and trees. These

⁷⁶ Ibid, 308-309.

⁷⁷ *New York Times*, March 8, 1964.

⁷⁸ Michael L. Gillette, *Lady Bird Johnson: An Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 356.

descriptions also frequently served more than simply aesthetic purposes. When visiting the home of former First Lady Abigail Adams, her favorite part of the house were the “huge lilacs—almost trees now, bending with fragrant purple blooms, that Abigail Adams herself had planted. They go on blossoming, a living link with the second First Lady.”⁷⁹ In this instance, the natural surroundings served as a link to history and as a tangible connection to one of her most admired predecessors.

Further, the term beautification itself encompassed more than just natural beauty. Although she said the term “never really suited any of us,” she still used it to define her intentions.⁸⁰ Johnson defined this intended meaning of the term beautification as “just part of the whole broad tapestry of environment—clean air, clean water, free rivers, the preservation of scenic areas.”⁸¹

Her interests in beautification were not just a personal fascination. Writing in her diary in 1966, Johnson described the significance she invested in this issue: “Conservation, beautification, call it what you will, is more than just one tree, or one historic building, or one scenic highway. It is a frame of reference, a way of life.”⁸² With this mindset, Johnson worked to use the power of her platform to cultivate national support and interest in the cause she advocated. She explained her intent to “put it on the national agenda,” and expand interest in and legitimize the concept: “Yes, beautification, prissy word though it may be, became the business of the politician, the businessman, the newspaper editor, and not just the ladies over a cup of tea.”⁸³ In this line, she showed how something considered to exist within

⁷⁹ Johnson, *White House Diary*, 523.

⁸⁰ Gillette, 357.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Johnson, *White House Diary*, 424.

⁸³ Gillette, 357-358.

the feminine sphere could cross over into the masculine political sphere, and she seemed to take a degree of credit in this transition.

One way in which she propelled this change was in taking political action herself, particularly with regards to the Highway Beautification Act of 1965, intended to limit billboards along the nation's highways. Although President Lyndon Johnson also worked on behalf the passage of this bill, historian Lewis L. Gould claims that his intentions were "to get the bill that his wife wanted enacted into law."⁸⁴ Apparently it was no secret that Lady Bird Johnson was the driving force behind this act. Additionally, the bill even took on the nickname, "Lady Bird's Bill," further demonstrating her association with this legislation.⁸⁵ Writing that she was "a central catalyst" in this regard, Gould outlines the political backchannels she utilized, including providing the "initial impetus," building public support as momentum for the cause, supplying "overall direction to the lobbying campaign," and personally calling four Congressmen, including John C. Kluczynski, the "chair of the crucial subcommittee."⁸⁶

These actions did not go unnoticed or un-criticized. Two Republican congressmen in particular channeled their opposition towards the bill at the First Lady herself. Melvin R. Laird sarcastically held, "We must pass this bill tonight so that it can be delivered to the lovely First Lady as a present or package at the White House party."⁸⁷ Another, Robert Dole, proposed substituting Lady Bird Johnson's name for the phrase Secretary of Commerce

⁸⁴ Lewis L. Gould, *Lady Bird Johnson: Our Environmental First Lady* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1999), 93.

⁸⁵ Anthony, 136.

⁸⁶ Gould, *Environmental First Lady*, 97, 103.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 99.

where it appeared in the bill.⁸⁸ Robert Dole defended himself against the criticism he received for these actions against Johnson in claiming that Johnson's "active interest" in the legislation warranted his attacks. He explained, "When one chooses to step down from the pedestal of the dutiful, preoccupied wife of the president, or other public official, and to wade into the turbulent stream of public controversy, one must expect to, at least, get her feet wet."⁸⁹

Despite this criticism, President Johnson also used his wife's wishes as a political tool in securing passage of the Highway Beautification Act. According to Gould, the bill itself did not enjoy widespread, overwhelming support, but at the same time, legislators did not want to stand in opposition to the First Lady. As Democratic Texas Congressman George H. Mahon upheld, "no one wants to vote against Lady Bird."⁹⁰ Because of all these factors, the bill passed in the House with two hundred forty-five yeas to one hundred thirty-eight nays with forty-nine Representatives not voting⁹¹. In the Senate, the yeas included sixty-three votes to fourteen nays with twenty-three Senators not voting.⁹² At the ceremony in which President Johnson signed the bill into law on October 22, 1965, Johnson did not make a formal speech, but she did accept one of the pens used to sign the bill into law.⁹³ By not speaking, she seemed to reduce her level of public activity, and at the same time, through her presence and acceptance of a pen, she affirmed her ownership of this issue.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 101.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 98.

⁹¹ U. S. House, 89th Congress, 1st Session, H. R. 599, *A Bill to Provide for Scenic Development and Road Beautification of the Federal-Aid Highway System*, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1965.

⁹² U. S. Senate, 89th Congress, 1st Session, S. 2084, *A Bill to Provide for Scenic Development and Road Beautification of the Federal-Aid Highway System*, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1965.

⁹³ Gould, *Environmental First Lady*, 99.

Analyzing her influence on this legislation, Lewis L. Gould writes, “Lady Bird Johnson had moved beyond the precedents of Ellen Wilson and her alley legislation in 1914, Eleanor Roosevelt’s public role in the 1940s, and Jacqueline Kennedy’s advocacy of White House restoration to immerse herself in the details of environmental legislation.”⁹⁴ In this way, Johnson’s foray into real, hands-on legislative action definitively broke new ground for herself and for future First Ladies.

Johnson’s legislative action, however, is largely absent from her *White House Diary*. Whereas she does not shy away from describing her role as a caretaker or consultant to her husband, she downplays the true extent of her more political actions. In her entry for October 21, 1965, the day before her husband signed the bill for which she had fought, she mentions only the failure of the Rent Subsidy Bill due to “some legislative maneuver I did not understand” and her meeting with wounded Marines.⁹⁵ In this brief entry alone, she explicitly placed legislation as beyond her understanding and highlighted her highly traditional caretaking, motherly role. Her feelings about the Highway Beautification Act in the immediate aftermath of its passage are absent entirely from this period of her diary; there is no entry for October 22. Recorded during her time in office and published in 1970, this edited version of her diary portrayed Johnson as she wished the public to know her in the immediate aftermath of her husband’s administration. Even by 1970, she worked to construct a public identity that downplayed any aggressive legislating she had undertaken.

On the continuum between hardcore, legislative action and a strictly traditional presentation, most of Johnson’s activities on behalf of beautification, and in general, existed somewhere in the middle. In selecting causes to champion, Johnson cautiously and astutely

⁹⁴ Ibid, 100.

⁹⁵ Johnson, *White House Diary*, 329.

chose traditionally womanly activist outlets. Both beautifying her surroundings and caring for the children of Head Start fell under the guise of woman as caretaker for her surroundings and for the children of her community. As First Lady, she was able to take these causes a step further, by working on a national scale, pushing for legislative action, and drawing cultural and political attention to them.

Like her visits to promote Head Start, Johnson often traveled to draw attention to scenic landmarks. During her term, she undertook about forty visits, traveling more than one hundred thousand miles.⁹⁶ One such trip, in April of 1966, made the front page of the *New York Times*. Pictured with Stewart L. Udall, the Secretary of the Interior, Johnson appeared in a cowboy hat and casual hiking outfit in a large picture. Accompanying this picture is a brief article, highlighting the sights she, park rangers, and reporters observed along the Rio Grande during a five-hour rafting trip.⁹⁷ Beyond shining a spotlight on the nation's beauty, she also fulfilled one of the ceremonial duties of her role in dedicating Fort Davis as a historic site.⁹⁸

Another way by which Johnson promoted beautification was through an American Broadcasting Company television special titled "A Visit to Washington with Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson on Behalf of a More Beautiful America." Filmed in the spring and aired on November 25, 1965, this special highlighted Johnson's beautification efforts in Washington, D. C. Her initial beautification efforts focused on this capital city, both in planting flowers and trees to make tourist areas more attractive and also in removing trash and cleaning up

⁹⁶ Anthony, 134.

⁹⁷ *New York Times*, April 4, 1966.

⁹⁸ *New York Times*, April 5, 1966.

largely minority-dominated areas of the inner city.⁹⁹ Through her special, she hoped to show how the smaller-scale model there could be expanded to a national scale and enacted in other cities around the country.

After its debut, the *New York Times* hailed it as “an enchanting interlude of serenity that healed and refreshed the spirit” in a “world dark with ominous headlines and ugliness.”¹⁰⁰ Beyond this positive message it extrapolated from the special, the paper also held that this exposure “may well give the cause of national beautification its most important advance.”¹⁰¹ These lines illustrated the real impact Johnson’s traditional role could have. In publicizing her cause through hosting this special, she expanded the exposure of beautification and did so effectively through a traditional mode, broadcast through a very public medium, as an example of her combination of hostessing and public advocacy.

Johnson’s success in lobbying for the Highway Beautification Act served as a climax for her influential political role during her term. This occurred in part because of the timing of her nineteen-year-old daughter Luci’s wedding on August 6, 1966. A *New York Times* article in February of 1966 declared these intentions explicitly with the headline, “Mrs. Johnson to Curb Activities to Arrange for Luci’s Wedding.”¹⁰² This wedding served as the perfect opportunity for Johnson to especially emphasize her traditional role and avoid any potential criticism for crossing any kind of legislative line. Although this wedding served in no way to end her influential role in general, it, along with the passage of the Highway Beautification Act, helped mark Johnson’s turn away from an explicitly political role.

⁹⁹ Gould, *American First Ladies*, 503-504.

¹⁰⁰ *New York Times*, November 26, 1965.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *New York Times*, February 25, 1966.

There is no doubt that Johnson's work on behalf of beautifying her surroundings was the result of a real, personal significance she attributed to this cause. It illustrates perfectly how she combined traditional elements of her role with a more influential political role. While historians have documented the legislative processes she initiated and influenced, Johnson herself downplayed this side of her role and portrayed herself significantly more traditionally. As a result, Johnson avoided overstepping the boundaries of her ambiguous position. Even within the larger context of the changing roles of women, Johnson seemed to realize that her prominent position restricted how far she could push the boundaries of women's roles in the public sphere. By refraining from aggressive legislative action and downplaying the legislative action that she did undertake, she was able to preserve the respectability of the office of the First Lady. Even long after her term, she described her decision to work on this issue as simply a piece "of Lyndon's program that made my heart sing, that came naturally, that belonged to me."¹⁰³ In this light, her beautification advocacy was another way she worked to help her husband, but at the same time, it was where she created space and a legacy for herself.

Conclusion

Everything that Lady Bird Johnson was able to accomplish on behalf of beautification and in expanding the role of the First Lady occurred within a larger context of changing roles for women and in an administration that generally valued women. Cultural developments like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, the formation of the National Organization for Women, and the issue of the Equal Rights Amendment spurred national discussions that

¹⁰³ Gillette, 356.

contributed to an increase in the scope of acceptable public activities for women.¹⁰⁴

Likewise, the Johnsons' daughter Lynda said, "Father was well aware that we were not allowing people to live up to what God had given them...On women, when he learned that the government would permit them only to reach a certain G-S level, he had a meeting about it, and it was raised overnight. He felt there was a great amount of potential we were losing."¹⁰⁵ Further, Lynda attributed some of this increase in the status of women in the federal government to Lady Bird Johnson herself. Carl Anthony summarizes Lynda's claims in writing, "her mother's influence may indirectly have affected the careers of perhaps thousands of women working in government."¹⁰⁶ In this way, Johnson both benefitted from and influenced the expanding roles of women.

She also explicitly commented on what these changing roles entailed and how women should function in American society. In a 1964 speech to the graduating class at Radcliffe College, Johnson illustrated notions of both the tradition and progress that intertwined frequently during her term. She advised the young women, "If you can achieve the precious balance between woman's domestic and civic life, you can do more for zest and sanity in our society than by any other achievement."¹⁰⁷ She further advocated rejecting "a number of overtones of the emancipation movement as clearly unworkable," and encouraged women to strive not to be "a superwoman, but as a total woman, a natural woman, a happy woman...in your job or studies, in your home, in your husband's work and in your community."¹⁰⁸ Here, although the emphasis was less on public activism than on private and community work, she

¹⁰⁴ Anthony, 118.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ *New York Times*, June 10, 1964.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

advocated very clearly for the balancing act she enacted throughout her public portrayal of herself. For Johnson, it was important to take on civic responsibilities, but it was equally important to embrace elements of traditional womanhood, especially marriage.

While this Radcliffe graduation speech harkened towards more old-fashioned notions of traditional roles for women, another commencement speech, at a high school around the same time, projected a much more active picture of the contemporary American woman. In this speech, she explained “I believe the educated woman today has a role to play of courage and conviction unparalleled since frontier days,” and that “in a world of change and challenge...women can no longer afford to concern themselves only with the hearth any more than man can afford to concern themselves only with their job.”¹⁰⁹ Even in these early speeches to groups of women, Johnson was hesitant to advocate for too much change on their behalf.

However, she did not hesitate to throw her influence behind capable women, and she supported their work through a series of sixteen “Women Do-er Luncheons” beginning in 1964.¹¹⁰ Designed with Eleanor Roosevelt’s all-women press conferences in mind, these luncheons featured women speakers who were experts in their fields and gave them a platform from which to speak about their interests and demonstrate their achievements.¹¹¹ Often her interest in promoting prominent women and in promoting beautification overlapped, as when she wrote in her *White House Diary* to describe the Women Do-er’s

¹⁰⁹ *New York Times*, June 4, 1964.

¹¹⁰ Anthony, 119.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

Luncheon on February 5, 1965, as “the kick-off of the beautification program,” headlined by Mary Lasker.¹¹²

Lady Bird Johnson’s term occurred not only within this context of these changing roles of women, but also within the context of the controversy of the Vietnam War. She was not immune to the critics who opposed her husband’s policy on Vietnam. During one incident in particular, when she traveled to Yale University in 1967 to make a speech stressing the importance of beautification, an estimated 1,600 picketers responded to her presence by holding a silent vigil before breaking into chanting. These chants included the standards, “peace now,” and “Hell no, we won’t go,” and were obviously about Vietnam, not her message of beautification.¹¹³ The highly controversial foreign policies of her husband’s administration helped shift national focus away from the domestic issues she championed and served as one of the factors that allowed her to take on a legislative role on behalf of the Highway Beautification Act in 1965.

Foreign policy contributed the most significantly to President Lyndon B. Johnson’s declining level of popularity throughout his time in office. In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy of Kennedy’s assassination, only three percent of respondents in a Gallup poll disapproved of the way President Johnson was handling his new role.¹¹⁴ A year later, that number increased to eighteen percent and the following year, to a twenty-two percent disapproval rate.¹¹⁵ Concurrently, these growing disapproval ratings matched similarly declining approval ratings of the Vietnam War, from a fifty-six percent approval in January

¹¹² Johnson, *White House Diary*, 237.

¹¹³ Johnson, *White House Diary*, 580.

¹¹⁴ George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971, Volume Three: 1959-1971* (New York: Random House, 1972), 1855.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 1911, 1977.

of 1965 to a forty-six percent approval in June of 1966.¹¹⁶ By the final day of Lyndon Johnson's presidency, his disapproval rating rested at thirty-seven percent, while approval of the Vietnam War the previous November was at only twenty-one percent.¹¹⁷ Throughout his term, his disapproval ratings rose, and approval of the Vietnam War declined. This relationship is explained in part by the fact that fifty percent of Americans in a Gallup poll of November 1967 held Vietnam as "the most important problem facing the nation."¹¹⁸

Meanwhile, Lady Bird Johnson appeared in Gallup Polls solely under the category of "Most Admired Woman."¹¹⁹ This speaks both to the non-political nature typically associated with the office of the First Lady and also the overall approval and respect with which the American people regarded Johnson herself.

Further proof that Johnson was a political asset to her husband's administration lies in his own evaluations of her endeavors. In his autobiography, he wrote, "I believe that Lady Bird Johnson touched a fundamental chord in the American people with her quiet crusade to beautify our country. She enriched the lives of all Americans."¹²⁰ President Johnson supported his wife's efforts and fully realized the significant role she played as his First Lady. In his adept description of her work as a "quiet crusade," he underlined just how astutely Johnson navigated the balance between tradition and real progress.

During her time in office, Lady Bird Johnson constructed and then utilized her positive reputation on behalf of social and political programs, particularly expanding her role by working legislatively for the passage of the Highway Beautification Act in 1965. In all

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 1982, 2011.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 2179, 2224.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 2090.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 2365.

¹²⁰ Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 337.

that she did, she actively presented herself in ways that balanced an influential political role with more traditional elements of her ambiguous position. What is especially impressive is that Johnson was so successful in navigating this delicate balance in the turbulent context of Second Wave feminism. A testament to her success in this endeavor is evident in her placement on the Siena Research Institute's "Ranking America's First Ladies." In all four years of the study, prominent historians have placed Lady Bird Johnson within the top seven spots, ranking as high as the third in "best exemplifying the ten characteristics of a First Lady."¹²¹ A final testament to her success as First Lady is the genuine happiness she seems to have taken in her work and the opportunities her position provided her. To this end, she closed her *White House Diary* with the line, "I have loved almost every day of these five years."¹²²

¹²¹ Siena College, "Ranking America's First Ladies," *Siena Research Institute*, December 18, 2008, accessed October 4, 2013, URL: http://www.siena.edu/uploadedFiles/Home/Parents_and_Community/Community_Page/sRi/independent_Research/FL_2008Release.pdf.

¹²² Johnson, *White House Diary*, 783.

Part III: Betty Ford: A Feminist Voice in the White House

Introduction

On August 9, 1974, Richard Milhous Nixon became the first man to ever resign the office of the Presidency. New First Lady Betty Ford described the day in her autobiography as “the saddest day of my life.”¹²³ As the Fords walked their friends and predecessors to their helicopter, Pat Nixon set an ominous tone in cautioning her successor, “Well, Betty, you’ll see so many of these red carpets, and you’ll get so you hate ‘em.”¹²⁴ Then, as her husband took the oath of office, Ford described her own terror, “The words cut through me, pinned me to the floor. I felt as though I were taking the oath with him, promising to dedicate my own life to the service of my country.”¹²⁵

On that day, the Fords found themselves in a position neither had ever expected to achieve. A career congressman, Gerald Ford had realized he would never achieve his lifelong goal of Speaker of the House and promised his wife he would retire following the 1974 elections to focus on his family.¹²⁶ Instead, on August 9, he became the nation’s thirty-eighth president, “a job to which [he’d] never aspired,” and did so in the remarkably tumultuous context of Watergate, the Vietnam War, and cultural movements and revolutions on behalf of minorities, women, and sexual freedoms.¹²⁷ Immediately after assuming the powers of the presidency, Gerald Ford kissed his wife, told her he loved her, and for the first time in presidential history, a President acknowledged his First Lady in his inaugural address:

¹²³ Betty Ford with Chris Chase, *The Times of My Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979),

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¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

¹²⁶ Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers and The Reader’s Digest Association, Inc., 1979), 99.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

“I am indebted to no man and only to one woman, my dear wife, as I begin this very difficult job.”¹²⁸

Although both Fords wrote of their trepidation in facing their new offices of President and First Lady, Gerald Ford’s public display of respect for Betty Ford set the tone for the positive and influential role she carried out over their short term during the next twenty-one months. A prominent presence in his administration from the very beginning, Betty Ford used the power of her position to promote the issues, even controversial ones, that she genuinely cared for. Through her public battle with breast cancer, her controversial interview on “60 Minutes,” her political support for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and the influence she openly exerted on her husband, Betty Ford’s position as First Lady blurred the line between private and public aspects of her life. Unlike Lady Bird Johnson’s careful balancing act, Betty Ford’s natural tendencies towards candor, these publicly private circumstances, and her ability and willingness to be boldly outspoken on controversial issues made her a vocal and openly feminist presence in the White House and on the national stage during the context of second wave feminism.

Before the First Ladyship

Born on April 8, 1918, Elizabeth Ann Bloomer dreamed of a career as a professional dancer from an early age, writing in her autobiography, “Dance was my happiness.”¹²⁹ She worked towards this career goal by teaching dance lessons and working as a model at Herpolsheimer’s Department Store during the Depression. Her desire for a career in dance even took her to New York City to study under renowned choreographer Martha Graham, but

¹²⁸ Ibid, 41.

¹²⁹ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 18.

she returned home to Michigan in a compromise with her mother and never returned to the city. This relocation did not quash her passion for dance, and she continued to teach dance in her home state, including working with hospitalized children and one night a week in an all-black part of town, eventually becoming known as “the Martha Graham of Grand Rapids.”¹³⁰ Her passion for dance, the steps she took to achieve a career, and her work with handicapped and minority children illustrated not only her natural independence and ambition, but also her innate awareness of social injustice.

In a chapter in her autobiography titled “The Five-Year Misunderstanding,” Ford described her unhappiness during her first marriage to Bill Warren.¹³¹ As he moved them around the country, she took on odd jobs, including continuing to teach dance and working at a department store in Ohio and on a production line in a New York frozen-food factory. Feeling neglected by her peripatetic and fun-loving, bar-hopping husband, she decided to initiate divorce proceedings, but was halted by her husband’s sudden diabetic coma. After nursing him back to health for two years, she obtained a divorce, which was finalized in 1947.¹³² Although she recognized the social pressures against her divorce, she wrote in her autobiography that “frankly, by then I didn’t give a hoot.”¹³³ Her willingness to remove herself from this unhappy situation, her financial ability to do so, and her constant openness about her divorce illustrated some of the foundation for Betty Ford’s feminist philosophies.

Although her divorce left her uninterested in remarriage, the young divorcee agreed to go on an impromptu date with former football hero and, as she later described him,

¹³⁰ Lewis L. Gould, ed., *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 536-539.

¹³¹ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 41.

¹³² Gould, 540-541.

¹³³ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 45.

“probably the most eligible bachelor in Grand Rapids,” Gerald R. Ford, Jr.¹³⁴ As the head fashion coordinator at Herpolsheimer’s Department Store, she was busy preparing a fashion show for the next day, but Gerald’s persistence wore her down. Although her divorce was not yet fully finalized, the two drove to a bar, limited by the twenty-minute time span Betty set for their date. She later wrote, “The next time I looked at my watch, an hour had passed. That’s how it began.”¹³⁵

As a thirty-five year old bachelor, Gerald Ford was also disinclined to pursue marriage, but through spending time with Betty, he realized that he “needed her very much.”¹³⁶ From the beginning, the two were mature partners in their relationship. Betty wrote, “He wanted a companion, and I filled the bill.”¹³⁷ Likewise, Gerald wrote, “Betty and I talked often about our values and goals. They were almost identical and I felt good about that.”¹³⁸ In his autobiography, Ford included a picture of his wedding day, captioned, “The luckiest day of my life.”¹³⁹

On their wedding day, Gerald Ford arrived late and in muddy shoes because he was busy campaigning in his first election for the United States Congress.¹⁴⁰ He had kept his candidacy a secret, even from Betty, until after their engagement and only a few months before their wedding and the primary shortly thereafter. Upon learning of his political ambitions, Betty wrote, “When he first told me he was going to run for Congress, I didn’t know what running for Congress meant. I was very unprepared to be a political wife, but I

¹³⁴ Ibid, 47.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 49.

¹³⁶ Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 65.

¹³⁷ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 51.

¹³⁸ Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 65.

¹³⁹ Ibid, photo insert following page 150.

¹⁴⁰ Gould, 541.

didn't worry because I didn't think he was going to win."¹⁴¹ Despite her unpreparedness, Betty campaigned extensively on his behalf and eventually settled into her life as the wife of a busy and highly committed politician. In the early days of their marriage, this meant Betty behaved as a self-described "typical Congressional wife," watching the Supreme Court, monitoring legislation, becoming active in the Congressional Club (a bipartisan organization composed of the wives of the members of congress, cabinet, and Supreme Court), volunteering for the Red Cross, and, like Lady Bird Johnson, taking public speaking classes.¹⁴² Betty Ford's lifelong independence carried into her married life as she worked to better not only her husband's political career but also herself.

In the roughly ten years after her marriage, Betty Ford gave birth to four children. She took great pride and joy in her motherhood, writing, "Because my husband seemed to me so wonderful, I thought there was nothing better than having produced two boys for him. I was bursting with pride."¹⁴³ Not everything was perfect, though, as she candidly revealed, "I don't think there's anything worse than having to clean up after a little kid."¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, she full-heartedly embraced motherhood, writing, "Especially in the later years, when Jerry was so busy traveling, the children were my whole life."¹⁴⁵

As a wife and mother, she acknowledged the responsibilities she took on both inside and outside the home. She described her roles as a den mother, Sunday school teacher, "an interior decorator and a peacemaker and a zoo keeper."¹⁴⁶ Although Ford had been unhappy with her first husband's frequent absences, Gerald Ford also developed patterns of long

¹⁴¹ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 58.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 69-70.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 81.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 78.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 99.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 100.

absences from his wife and four children. As he garnered increasing Congressional seniority and better committee appointments, he traveled extensively. Gerald Ford estimated that he made around two hundred speeches a year as Minority Leader.¹⁴⁷ Numbering his absences at 258 days a year, Betty Ford wrote, “The Congress got a new Minority Leader, and I lost a husband.”¹⁴⁸ At that point in her life and her husband’s career, Betty Ford became “a virtual political widow” and suffered from feeling isolated.¹⁴⁹

This isolation and the pressures of motherhood drove Ford to what she called “the collapse.”¹⁵⁰ Openly detailing this private event, she wrote, “I’d felt as though I were doing everything for everyone else, and I was not getting any attention at all...I’ve often said I’d lost my feeling of self-worth, and that’s what sent me for help. I think a lot of women go through this. Their husbands have fascinating jobs, their children start to turn into independent people, and the women begin to feel useless, empty.”¹⁵¹ After harboring feelings of resentment and neglect, her emotions overflowed one day as she began to cry, prompting her to begin visiting a psychiatrist twice a week. During these appointments, she became even more vocal about the pressures of her life. Foreshadowing her outspokenness as First Lady, she wrote that this period in her life led her “to 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.”¹⁵²

As a Congressional wife, Betty Ford pursued traditional roles as a wife and mother. By later publicizing the honest discontent she experienced during moments of this portion of

¹⁴⁷ Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 83.

¹⁴⁸ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 132.

¹⁴⁹ Gould, 542.

¹⁵⁰ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 136.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

her life, she helped lessen the culturally embedded idea that women could and should find happiness solely within these narrowly defined traditional roles. Ford's revelations mirrored those of leading feminist figure Betty Friedan, who, a decade earlier, had chronicled similar feelings of discontent and isolation among traditional homemakers. Particularly by speaking out about the helpfulness of her psychiatric treatment, Betty Ford used her early life to break cultural taboos and establish the foundation for her unending candor as First Lady.

Breast Cancer

After unexpectedly and apprehensively assuming the First Ladyship, one of the first opportunities Betty Ford had in this position to demonstrate her remarkable candor came when doctors found a lump in her right breast during a routine gynecological checkup on September 26, 1974.¹⁵³ The Presidential couple carried out their regular schedule on September 27, and then Betty checked in to the Bethesda Naval Hospital that night at 5:55 p.m., just in time for the six o'clock news to announce her procedure.¹⁵⁴ The *New York Times* reported on her hospital stay, briefly mentioning it on September 28 and carrying news of her surgery on the front page of its September 29 edition.¹⁵⁵ This article described Ford's procedure in technical phrases including "open standard mastectomy" and "pathological tests of the malignant tissue."¹⁵⁶ It also stressed the importance of early detection in order to prevent breast cancer from spreading. The article closed with descriptions of Ford's

¹⁵³ Gould, 545.

¹⁵⁴ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 200.

¹⁵⁵ *New York Times*, September 28 and 29, 1974.

¹⁵⁶ September 29, 1974.

“confidence” and “inner strength that sustained the first family, her close staff and...her doctors.”¹⁵⁷

More than just raising awareness, these news stories also portrayed the intimacy of the Fords’ relationship. Gerald Ford accompanied his wife to the hospital and ate dinner with her, but he planned to maintain his work schedule the following day.¹⁵⁸ Upon seeing his wife after her operation, where the cancer was discovered to be malignant, the *New York Times* described Gerald Ford as looking “grim and pale” but smiling on behalf of his wife’s “excellent spirits.”¹⁵⁹ In a more intimate portrayal of the events in his autobiography, Gerald Ford described kissing and holding his wife upon learning of the lump in her breast, and he called the night he spent away from Betty before her surgery “the loneliest of my life” and described his “brief flood of tears” in his office upon learning of the lump’s malignancy.¹⁶⁰ Not only did this illustrate the closeness of their relationship, but it also showed that Gerald Ford himself could be emotionally honest and forthcoming.

Appearing prominently on the front page of a significant national newspaper, news of Betty Ford’s operation helped dissipate the then-rigid taboo on public discussions of breast cancer. Her disclosing the news of her operation sparked further national discussions. While the *New York Times* reported on the First Lady’s recovery, the paper also included significant statistics, including breast cancer’s role as “the leading cancer killer of women,” outlining the 90,000 women expected to be affected that year by the disease and the 33,000 lives it would take.¹⁶¹ Significantly, the paper also provided information on testing centers and self-exams,

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ *New York Times*, September 28, 1974.

¹⁵⁹ *New York Times*, September 29, 1974.

¹⁶⁰ Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 191.

¹⁶¹ *New York Times*, October 6, 1974.

going so far as to include an anatomically correct guide for self-examination in its October 19, 1974 edition.¹⁶²

Other second wave feminists during this time worked to disseminate information on preventative care and treatment options to shatter what historian Ruth Rosen described as a previously “shameful taboo.”¹⁶³ Betty Ford’s publicity on this private matter contributed to this effect, and she herself described lying in bed in the hospital, watching “lines of women queued up to go in for breast examinations because of what had happened to me.”¹⁶⁴

Most significantly for the future of her role, this event, and the widespread social impact it created, showed Ford the true power of her position. She realized, “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.”¹⁶⁵ At the same time, however, she recognized her own agency in this situation: “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.”¹⁶⁶ Another article in the *New York Times* proclaimed, “If she achieved nothing else during her husband’s Administration, the light her trouble has shed on a dark subject would be contribution enough.”¹⁶⁷ For Ford, however, realizing the power of her position was only the beginning of the impact she would have on her very public role.

¹⁶² *New York Times*, October 19, 1974.

¹⁶³ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 181.

¹⁶⁴ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 203.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁶⁷ *New York Times*, December 8, 1974.

“60 Minutes” Interview

Another episode that greatly influenced Betty Ford’s tenure as First Lady was an interview she conducted with Morley Safer on the television program “60 Minutes.” Airing on August 10, 1975, this special generated 13,787 mailed responses in the twelve weeks following its debut.¹⁶⁸ Its controversy stemmed from the nature of the questions that Ford openly and willingly responded to. Although she later wrote that they “caught me off balance,”¹⁶⁹ she attempted to answer honestly and emphasized that her answers were her own, not necessarily reflective of the Ford Administration.¹⁷⁰

Topics of this interview spanned the controversies of the mid-1970s. On abortion, Ford expounded that *Roe v. Wade* was “the best thing in the world... a great, great decision,” that was helping “to take abortion out of the backwoods and put it in the hospitals where it belongs.”¹⁷¹ On marijuana, she believed that it had become as casual as her generation’s “first beer.”¹⁷² Perhaps most shocking was her response to her eighteen-year-old daughter’s having a hypothetical affair. Ford responded, “Well, I wouldn’t be surprised... she’s a perfectly normal human being... if she wanted to continue... I would certainly counsel and advise her on the subject.”¹⁷³ She also even suggested that the divorce rate might decline in light of increased premarital sex.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁸ Maryanne Borrelli, “Competing Conceptions of the First Ladyship: Public Responses to Betty Ford’s ‘60 Minutes’ Interview,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Sep., 2001): 402.

¹⁶⁹ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 224.

¹⁷⁰ Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents’ Wives and Their Power: Volume II, 1961-1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 249.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Gould, 547.

Carl Sferrazza Anthony wrote that most Americans did not watch the interview upon its initial airing and instead learned about it through newspapers whose headlines carried “sensational implications.”¹⁷⁵ The *New York Times* was far from silent on the matter, disseminating both positive and negative reactions to the CBS interview. Immediately following the interview, the paper published the negative reactions of several religious leaders. One man wrote, “We deplore the deterioration of morality around the world.”¹⁷⁶ Another was “really shocked” at Ford’s remarks and felt “very strongly that this type of philosophy should not be espoused by someone who has such a prestigious position in the country.”¹⁷⁷ One Baptist church went so far as to publish and sell an anti-Betty Ford sermon titled, “Betty Ford vs. the Bible.”¹⁷⁸

Not all responses published in the *New York Times* were negative. One humorous response came from future President Jimmy Carter, who was, as Ford wrote, “bombarded” by reporters “drunk with the controversy.”¹⁷⁹ The ex-governor of Georgia answered the same affair question as Ford, but said instead that he would be shocked if his daughter was having an affair because she was only seven years old.¹⁸⁰ Other reactions were outright positive. The paper quoted a telegram that read, “You come across as the very best kind of liberated woman,” thanking her for “a boost for millions of mothers and daughters.”¹⁸¹ It came from Betty Friedan.

¹⁷⁵ Anthony, 250.

¹⁷⁶ *New York Times*, August 12, 1975.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ *New York Times*, August 23, 1975.

¹⁷⁹ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 224.

¹⁸⁰ *New York Times*, August 16, 1975.

¹⁸¹ *New York Times*, August 14, 1975.

In its August 21 “Letters to the Editor” section, the *New York Times* published two letters that respectively represented the overtly hostile and positive reactions to Ford’s candor. The first castigated the First Lady’s “immoral comments” and complained she was “ashamed for my country,” and “our society is ill and troubled for just this reason.”¹⁸² The writer was both dissatisfied with Ford’s performance as First Lady and the general liberalization of society in general, writing, “I for one object to her using the public platform available to the wife of the President to noise her views” and “We are surfeited and weary of vociferous liberated women. Have we not the right to expect a more genteel, lofty moral code in the woman who, willingly or not, represents American womanhood?”¹⁸³ For this negative responder, Ford was a terrible role model, and her husband should be reprimanded electorally for not controlling his wife.¹⁸⁴

Published alongside this was an equally positive letter that claimed Betty Ford was a strong asset to her husband’s administration and propelled all women voters, not just Republicans, to support her husband’s Republican party. The letter claimed, “I’ll take Gerald Ford, too, in order to keep Betty Ford.”¹⁸⁵ The writer believed that the First Couple provided an excellent example of a relationship whose partners “understand equality, who are not threatened by each other’s independence and personhood and who are able to show to the public that they have respect for each other.”¹⁸⁶ These responses published in the *New York Times* illustrated the spectrum of responses to Ford’s candor. Some Americans detested her impropriety, others appreciated her candor without necessarily agreeing with her views, and

¹⁸² *New York Times*, August 21, 1975.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

still others believed her to be an entirely positive force in both her husband's political career and the future of women in American society.

In analyzing the 13,787 pieces of mail that were sent to the White House directly in regard to this interview, Maryanne Borrelli discovered 66.9% to be critical and the remaining 33.1% positive.¹⁸⁷ She found that, of the critical letters, most faulted Ford for failing her "primary duty of wives and mothers as moral guardians."¹⁸⁸ One letter-writer accused her of "endors[ing] immorality," and another lambasted her answers as "indecent & immoral."¹⁸⁹ In supportive letters, Borrelli found praise of Ford's "honesty, lack of hypocrisy, openness," as an "intelligent, thoughtful woman."¹⁹⁰ Another wrote, "While neither a 'Libber' nor a feminist, I believe firmly that women and girls be allowed to speak and act in the manner they feel morally right for themselves without being condemned for their honesty."¹⁹¹ Even if they did not agree with her political stances, many people could admire her openness.

Gerald Ford exhibited a somewhat mixed response. An early statement to the press claimed, "The President has long since ceased to be perturbed or surprised by his wife's remarks."¹⁹² It seemed at first as if Gerald Ford wanted to dismiss the entire situation. A second response in this paper took a drastically more positive approach: "The President's position, according to a spokesman, was that he has always told his wife to 'speak her mind.'"¹⁹³ His third response addressed potential consequences. "When I first heard it, I

¹⁸⁷ Borrelli, 402.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 405.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 407.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 408.

¹⁹² *New York Times*, August 11, 1975.

¹⁹³ *New York Times*, August 12, 1975.

thought I'd lost 10 million votes... When I read it in the paper the next morning, I raised it to 20 million.”¹⁹⁴

Although his last response seemed partially in jest, in his autobiography, Gerald Ford blamed Betty's interview as one of four factors that jeopardized his nomination in 1976 and made “a Reagan challenge inevitable” for him.¹⁹⁵ In retrospect, he wrote “I had admired her candor from the moment we met and had always encouraged her to speak her mind—and we had few disagreements, but when we differed, we respected the other's opinion.” However, her comments made “conservatives grumble,” and “their grumbles swelled to a roar.”¹⁹⁶ In this case, he believed his wife's differing political philosophy hindered him as a real political liability.

In reality, although two-thirds of the mailed responses were negative, and she had breached topics no other First Lady had ever dared to before, opinion polls demonstrated the First Lady's rising popularity. Her Harris poll approval rating rose from fifty to seventy-five percent in the months following her interview on “60 Minutes.”¹⁹⁷ She also achieved the top spot in *Good Housekeeping's* “10 Most Admired Women Poll.”¹⁹⁸ Although Ford acknowledged, “It is difficult to adequately express one's personal convictions in a 15-minute interview,” she also utilized this platform to disseminate her personal beliefs and spark a larger national discussion. Reporter Nancy Dickerson wrote at the time, “Betty Ford single-handedly triggered a national dialogue on the changing morals of the emerging

¹⁹⁴ *New York Times*, August 20, 1975.

¹⁹⁵ Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 295.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 307.

¹⁹⁷ Anthony, 251.

¹⁹⁸ *New York Times*, December 17, 1975.

generation.”¹⁹⁹ By presenting her private beliefs in a public platform, one exposed on national television and then dissected in national newspapers, Betty Ford’s interview on “60 Minutes” perfectly illustrated the power of her voice as First Lady.

Ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and Influencing Her Husband

Betty Ford’s handling of the publicity of her breast cancer treatment and “60 Minutes” interview allowed her feminist candor to shine through. It was through her long-term goals to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and the influence she exerted over her husband, however, that her feminism burned most brightly. Although she entered her new office abruptly, Ford quickly took control of her position and staged a “full-fledged White House news conference,” described in a September 5, 1974 issue of the *New York Times* as an event that no other First Lady in recent memory had undertaken.²⁰⁰ While outlining her intentions to work with children and the arts, she was also forthright about her goal to ratify the ERA, and she did not shy away from controversial subjects like her support for legalized abortion and her belief that women should be involved in politics. Also at this press conference, Ford spoke openly about the influence she exerted over her husband on this legislation. The paper detailed how Gerald Ford “had once joked with her about ‘equal rights’ for women but was now an advocate of the proposed, constitutional amendment.”²⁰¹ From the very beginning of her First Ladyship, Betty Ford’s feminism was a prominent part

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 251.

²⁰⁰ *New York Times*, September 5, 1974.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

of her position, and neither she nor her husband attempted to minimize her level of influence on these domestic gender issues.

For Betty Ford, work on behalf of the ERA occurred both inside and outside of the White House. She combated what her press secretary Sheila Weidenfeld described as a male chauvinistic atmosphere of the West Wing by creating a slide presentation about the ERA that she presented to members of both East and West Wing staffs.²⁰² In her autobiography, Ford described how her husband's staff needed to be educated, how she jokingly bought one of her Secret Service agents a "male chauvinist pig necktie," and how she acquired an ERA banner to fly from her car as the result of her bantering with male staff members.²⁰³

Historians have also documented the real, legislative action that Ford undertook and the measurable impact this had, both positively and negatively, towards her cause. By 1976, only thirty-four of the required thirty-eight states had ratified the ERA. Ford attempted to combat this deficit by contacting individual state legislators to explain her position and attempt to sway their votes.²⁰⁴ She wrote North Dakota state legislator William Kretschmar, whom Carl Anthony described as "a leading foe of ERA ratification" and telephoned Illinois senator William Harris, remaining respectful of his anti-ERA views but nonetheless asking him to consider voting it out of committee so that the entire senate could have a say on the matter.²⁰⁵ After protesters targeted the Missouri legislature, she again picked up the telephone and attempted to reason with at least two state legislators: "I realize you're under a lot of pressure...I am not a wild-eyed Liberal on this...Women should have opportunities."²⁰⁶ For

²⁰² Anthony, 257, 238.

²⁰³ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 221.

²⁰⁴ Anthony, 256.

²⁰⁵ Anthony, 238.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

her efforts, Ford saw measurable results. The Illinois legislature voted the ERA out of committee, and the two Missouri representatives supported ratification of the ERA, which ended up passing in that state.

Ford also recognized the need to approach different lobbying targets with different tactics. To men, she expressed her belief that the ERA would “free” them as well, in their case from alimony payments to wives capable of earning their own incomes.²⁰⁷ She appealed to conservatives on behalf of their daughters’ education and equal job and payment opportunities. And finally, to her own Republican party, she addressed the need to lead on behalf of “the cause of basic human rights.”²⁰⁸

Not all of the results of her legislating were positive. Leading anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly’s crusade to “Stop ERA” led her to attack the First Lady. She sent a telegram to Ford demanding “an accounting of how much federal money has been spent by you and other White House personnel in making long distance calls to legislators” on behalf of the ERA.²⁰⁹ For Schlafly, Ford violated her duties as a mother and abused her position as the representative of American womanhood.

Betty Ford challenged Schlafly’s accusations directly in her autobiography. She refused to meet the anti-feminist for a debate on the basis of Schlafly’s hypocrisy. She wrote, “She contends that women’s place is in the home, yet she’s out touring all over the United States in order to bring women that message.”²¹⁰ Playfully and pointedly, she added, “I wonder how often she’s home to greet *her* husband when he comes in for dinner.”²¹¹

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 239.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 239-241.

²¹⁰ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 221.

²¹¹ Ibid.

Ford's response to Schlafly illustrated Ford's deep concern over the ERA and what it meant for American women. Ford herself was not a lifelong politician, and unlike Schlafly, she entered the political sphere because of her husband's speedy career ascent. Although she had had several jobs and a career as a department store fashion coordinator before her marriage, Ford's life took a traditional turn towards wifedom and motherhood for her entire married life. From this perspective, she was able to advocate, to the entire country, her deep-rooted and personal belief in women's equality. Because of this, her concise and perceptive response to Schlafly's attacks became even more effective: "Well, I was a mother. I thought motherhood was swell. But I wasn't so sure mothers shouldn't have *rights*."²¹²

Further illustrating the depth of her convictions and the astuteness of her political strategy to merge the traditional with the progressive, Ford wrote, "My views on women's rights don't extend to believing that all women need to work outside the home... In fact, being a good housewife seems to me a much tougher job than going to the office and getting paid for it... *Because* of this I feel women ought to have equal rights."²¹³ This is not to say that this strategy of emphasizing motherhood did not cause problems for Ford or that she was completely and outright progressive. She wrote of the paradox of emphasizing motherhood and women's public life, "A President's wife, who has to serve as a symbol for *all* citizens, sometimes finds herself talking out of both sides of her mouth."²¹⁴ In this particular case, she was referring to two receptions within two days of each other. One was with women stockbrokers, whom she congratulated "for having got out of their kitchens and into the stock market" and another with group of homemakers, whom she congratulated for "having stayed

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid, 220.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 240.

in their kitchens.”²¹⁵ Although this approach created contradictions like these, she found them to be more “funny” than problematic, and it nevertheless provided Ford with a widely respectable angle to approach this issue.²¹⁶

Further, although she was extremely outspoken, she did not completely embrace all progressive causes. She defended her support of the ERA against one of the most frequent complaints, that she was “promoting a bunch of lesbians.”²¹⁷ While she found Anita Bryant’s anti-gay crusade “ill considered,” she also was ambivalent about her own children interacting with gay schoolteachers and professed that it was time for sex, “of any and all kinds” to “get back in the closet.”²¹⁸ These sentiments illustrated that the conservative and more mainstream components of her message were not merely empty political babble, but that her beliefs were authentically her own.

Ford’s sentiments and work on behalf of the ERA did not come out only after the Fords left office in early 1977. Rather, an entire chapter of her autobiography discusses her feminist activism, and the *New York Times* documented much of Ford’s activities and both the positive and negative feedback she received throughout her time in office. Beginning with Ford’s first press conference in September of 1974, this newspaper constantly reminded its readers of Ford’s quest for legal equality. In a lengthy profile of Betty Ford published on December 8, 1974, the paper even found a way to connect her recent cancer surgery to her work on behalf of the ERA. Underscoring her connection to the feminist movement, the paper published remarks from leading feminist Betty Friedan to the First Lady: “She’s done so much good for the movement, speaking out as she has for things like the Equal Rights

²¹⁵ Ibid, 241.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid, 223.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 223.

Amendment, I hope [that] some of our strength can flow back to her.”²¹⁹ Shortly thereafter, the paper outlined even the radical implications of Ford’s support, in that she was not opposed to women being drafted in the military, a Schlafly complaint and nightmare outcome of the controversial legislation.

Coverage of Ford’s support for the ERA only increased in 1975 as coverage of her breast cancer gradually subsided, although it never entirely disappeared. She vowed to “stick to my guns” in support of the Amendment in February of 1975, illustrating her unwavering devotion to the subject.²²⁰ In May of that year, the paper published an excerpt of a letter she wrote to state legislators facing ratification of the ERA. In this letter, Ford called the legislation “the single most important step that our nation can take to extend equal opportunity to all Americans.”²²¹ Not only did this letter show the depth of her support, but it also openly revealed the level of her lobbying efforts.

The newspaper also recorded feedback from its readership. On February 20, 1975, the *New York Times* included only one letter to the editor regarding Ford, a negative one that attacked her “arm-twisting” lobbying efforts.²²² This reader found her work “unseemly at best” and a “distasteful” abuse of power.²²³ Another article from the following day included both positive and negative responses. The first championed Ford as a “wonderful” First Lady “concerned about people and not just about clothing or decorating or trees.”²²⁴ The second response interrogated Ford, “What right do you have as a representative of all women

²¹⁹ *New York Times*, December 8, 1974.

²²⁰ *New York Times*, February 15, 1975.

²²¹ *New York Times*, May 6, 1975.

²²² *New York Times*, February 20, 1975.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ *New York Times*, February 21, 1975.

to contact the legislators and put pressure on them to pass the hated E.R.A.”²²⁵ As her interview had done, her lobbying efforts here sparked national discussion that the *New York Times* preserved for the historical record as a measurement of America’s general attitude during second wave feminism.

On two separate occasions documented in the *New York Times* in 1976, Betty Ford utilized appearances she made as First Lady to talk about her support of the ERA. At the first, in March, she received the Woman of the Year Award from the Women’s National Republican Club. She stressed not only party unity, but also the right to freedom of expression, which benefitted not only her support of the ERA, but also the position of the three hundred picketers who protested that support on that particular day while she received her award.²²⁶ In June, Betty Ford attended a museum exhibit, titled “Remember the Ladies” after Abigail Adams’s pro-woman letter to her husband. When making her formal remarks on the exhibit, she connected it adeptly to her cause: “This exhibit about neglected Americans should give us strength and courage to seek equal rights for women today.”²²⁷ In doing so, she had to speak over “mild boos” from roughly one thousand people who protested her feminist philosophies with signs like “Stop ERA” and “Equal Rights Amendment Stamps Out the Family,” and chanted “Go away, ERA.”²²⁸

These events illustrated one way that Ford was able to speak publically in support of her cause, by connecting it to different events that fell under the traditionally acceptable roles of First Lady. Further, although she faced hecklers, they did not prevent her from speaking

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ March 21, 1976.

²²⁷ *New York Times*, June 30, 1976.

²²⁸ Ibid.

her mind. Historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony documented that Betty Ford “was proud to be the first First Lady to be picketed for her own political stance.”²²⁹

Although Betty Ford’s support for the ERA definitely stemmed from her own convictions, her husband’s support of women’s issues meant that she was not completely alone in her political views. From even their earliest days as an unmarried couple, both Gerald and Betty lived independent lives, and both recognized Betty Ford’s status as a partner in their relationship. Throughout Ford’s breast cancer treatment, her husband’s private affection shone through as he visited his wife and reported on her progress with tears in his eyes at an economic speech on the day of her surgery.²³⁰ Following the public backlash after Betty’s “60 Minutes” interview, Gerald Ford stood by his wife’s right to express her own opinions and reinforced the notion of their relationship as a partnership by admiring her candor.²³¹ Through these public moments of their lives, they revealed the private intimacy of their relationship to the American public.

Further, because of their intimate relationship, Betty Ford was in a unique position to influence her husband on his policies, and both acknowledged that fact. The Fords set a precedent for a Presidential couple openly sharing the same bed in the same bedroom.²³² This provided Betty with the ideal setting for what she called “pillow talk.”²³³ Describing this practice, she wrote, “I kept pushing, trying to influence him. I used everything, including pillow talk at the end of the day, when I figured he was most tired and

²²⁹ Anthony, 239.

²³⁰ *New York Times*, September 29, 1974.

²³¹ Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 307.

²³² Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *America’s First Families: An Inside View of 200 Years of Private Life in the White House* (New York: A Lisa Drew Book/ A Touchstone Book, Published by Simon & Schuster, 2000), 40.

²³³ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 219.

vulnerable.”²³⁴ In this twist on providing domestic bliss for her busy husband, Betty Ford as First Lady openly manipulated the couple’s down time to promote worthy causes.

In addition to securing his open support on the Equal Rights Amendment, Betty Ford also utilized this tactic to promote women to high governmental positions within her husband’s administration. Beyond simply talking to him, she also exposed him to qualified women through tactics like using round, rather than the traditional E-shaped, tables in order to place more women in the President’s line of conversation at formal dinners.²³⁵ Although she was disappointed by her failure to influence the potential appointment of the first woman Supreme Court Justice, two measurable indicators of her success include the appointments of Carla Hills as Gerald Ford’s HUD Secretary on his Cabinet, and Anne Armstrong as the first female Ambassador to Great Britain.²³⁶ What is most remarkable about these two cases is that Gerald Ford also acknowledged the influence his wife had on these appointments. He wrote, “From the first day of my Administration, Betty had been pressing me to pick a woman for a top job, so when I saw the name of Carla A. Hills on the list of potential candidates...I decided to review her credentials carefully.”²³⁷ Betty’s persistence provided other women with increased opportunities within the public sphere.

Another way that Betty Ford achieved a successful level of influence was in Gerald Ford’s January 1975 executive order that established a National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year. Although Betty recognized that the order did not carry any legal force, she grasped its moral importance, which signaled that “a President

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Gould, 548-549.

²³⁶ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 219.

²³⁷ Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 240.

of the United States was standing up for women and the ERA.²³⁸ At the signing of this order, at which many leading feminists were present, Ford jokingly told her husband, “I am glad to see that you have come a long, long way.”²³⁹ This moment shone a bright spotlight on women’s issues. As Carl Sferrazza Anthony described, “In the International year of the Woman, Betty Ford would prove to be Woman of the Year.”²⁴⁰

Conclusion

As First Lady, Betty Ford never shied away from controversy and never failed to use her voice as a potent feminist asset. Her candor, intimate relationship with her husband, and open relationship with the press contrasted greatly with the more reserved nature of her predecessors and the secrecy of the Watergate Era in general. Her husband supported her right to express herself, and she did so in a way that touched both feminist leaders like Betty Friedan and the thousands of everyday citizens who wrote letters supporting her openness in every aspect of her life. Even those who disagreed with her beliefs contributed to the national discussions she sparked by voicing their discontent.

In a testament to the positive effectiveness of her efforts as First Lady, Betty Ford received many honors during her term, from groups ranging from her own Republican Party to feminist groups to the general public. She was the first recipient of the National Women’s Party’s Alice Paul Award on behalf of her work for the ERA.²⁴¹ Furthermore, in 1975, Ford was the first First Lady to be one of *Time* magazine’s Women of the Year. Remarkably, her popularity earned her this award at the same time Gerald Ford became the first President

²³⁸ Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life*, 220.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ Anthony, 236.

²⁴¹ Anthony, 238.

since Herbert Hoover to not be named *Time*'s corresponding Man of the Year.²⁴² Betty Ford's only appearance in Gallup Polls was under the category of "Most Admired Woman," a list she appeared on three times and topped in 1977.²⁴³ In the long term, her efforts earned her a spot solidly within the top ten of all four of Siena Research Institute's prominent rankings of First Ladies, reaching as high as sixth place and never sinking below ninth.²⁴⁴

Although her term was short, her legacy on behalf of women was able to succeed in measurable ways with long-term effects. By opening discussions on the previously taboo topic of breast cancer, setting precedents for candor in her "60 Minutes" interview, actively lobbying and speaking on behalf of the Equal Rights Amendment, and openly influencing her husband on feminist policies, Betty Ford's voice, in conjunction with the platform provided her by her prominent position, made her a feminist icon among First Ladies. Even if some Americans disagreed with her or thought her actions inappropriate, Betty Ford remained consistently vocally feminist throughout her term and beyond. She exposed the private moments of her life to the American public, and she never failed to speak about them in a way that conveyed her genuinely feminist beliefs. As she said in a speech during the International Women's Year, "I do not believe that being First Lady should prevent me from expressing my views...Being ladylike does not require silence."²⁴⁵ During her time as First Lady, Betty Ford became one of the greatest feminist spokeswomen to inhabit the White House, and she never stayed silent on behalf of women's equality.

²⁴² Gould, 547.

²⁴³ George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972-1977* (New York: Random House, 1978), 402, 1271.

²⁴⁴ Siena College, "Ranking America's First Ladies," *Siena Research Institute*, December 18, 2008, accessed January 11, 2014, URL: http://www.siena.edu/uploadedFiles/Home/Parents_and_Community/Community_Page/sRi/independent_Research/FL_2008Release.pdf.

²⁴⁵ Anthony, *First Ladies*, 237.

Part IV: Overall Conclusion

As evidenced by their status as Gallup Poll's "Most Admired Women" and their high placements on Siena College's rankings of First Ladies, both Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford were and are considered to be successful First Ladies. Neither woman reached too far or did too little within an era that sought to redefine what the limits on American womanhood should be. Each woman used the power of her position to disseminate information and influence on issues that were both politically and personally close to her heart. As the world changed around them, these two women changed with it and used the unique perspectives of their own lives to expand what it meant to be the First Lady of the United States of America.

Both women entered their terms upon unusual and unexpected circumstances. Johnson faced the tragedy of a Presidential assassination and thus had to ease into her new role. Ford, on the other hand, arrived into both the Second and First Ladyship in the face of scandal and was able to take an aggressive, rather than passive, approach to set the tone for her increased activism within these positions.

Further, while neither felt fully prepared for the role, both brought with them their valuable experience as career politicians' wives. Each woman understood the constraints of this role, and each had actively undertaken efforts to improve her husband's and her own standing within these political circles through networking with other wives, completing charitable work, donating time and money to campaign efforts, and taking public speaking classes to improve their own skills as campaign assets.

Both Johnson and Ford had lived independent lives before marrying their husbands. Johnson's two bachelors degrees and Ford's professional ambitions as a dancer and fashion coordinator illustrate their innate tendencies towards self-reliance and public-sphere activity.

Although both valued and emphasized their roles as wives and mothers, neither sought complete fulfillment through these channels but instead stepped into the public world, well before coming to national prominence.

Leading generally similar lives before their First Ladyships, Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford also shared the great challenge of balancing different aspects of their lives within the ambiguity of their position. Just as Johnson walked the fine line between tradition and real influence throughout her term, Ford balanced her progressive legislative action with more conservative caveats, like her strong emphasis of the value of women as both stockbrokers and homemakers. However, Johnson's balancing act permeated her entire tenure, as illustrated through both her own words and her portrayal in the *New York Times*. Nearly every *White House Diary* entry or *New York Times* article emphasized her role as mother, wife, and/or helpful partner, and mentioned far less frequently her legislative action, which is absent entirely from her published diary.

On the other hand, Betty Ford's balancing act placed a heavier emphasis on the side of progress than tradition. She pushed boldly and directly for women's social and legal equality and tempered this only with her perspective as a wife and mother. For Ford, the balancing act appeared to be less of a conscious effort to moderate her image than the genuine perspective she brought to the national table.

One of the reasons for this difference within these balancing acts stems from the personal convictions and experiences of each woman. Johnson benefitted from a much more gradual ascendancy to the national spotlight and could adjust her image accordingly, while still maintaining her own personality and love for nature. Ford, on the other hand, went from

Congressional wife to Second Lady to First Lady much more quickly, and she then had to learn to adjust her image accordingly.

Likewise, the different relationship each woman shared with her husband influenced the role she was able to play in his administration. Lyndon Johnson was much more of a strictly traditional husband, and Lady Bird Johnson had to learn to cope with his domineering personality and to support his career ambitions. Gerald Ford, on the other hand, openly supported his wife's independence and encouraged her in her capacity as his partner, capable of holding and publically voicing her own beliefs.

Another factor that helps explain these differences is the different contexts in which Johnson and Ford assumed their positions. In 1963, activists were just beginning to realize women's subordination, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* marked only the beginning of Friedan's career as a feminist spokeswoman. A little over a decade later when Ford took office, feminist activists had already generated victories like partial ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment and the pro-choice Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade*. For her public part in these efforts, Ford herself even received public congratulations from Friedan multiple times. Feminist activists who had risen to prominence in the years between Johnson and Ford's terms knew they had an ally in Betty Ford. Further, although the end of Lady Bird Johnson's term and the beginning of Betty Ford's were separated by only five years, this larger change in context showed how much more willing the American public had become to accept elements of change.

Whereas Johnson downplayed her legislative actions and was silent about them in her *White House Diary*, Ford's activism's greatest asset was her refusal to be silent. She publically lobbied on both national and local levels and faced the ensuing backlash and

support proudly. Her coverage in the *New York Times* centered on her ability to make private aspects of her life—like her breast cancer operation and personal beliefs—public platforms for national discussion. In great contrast, Johnson’s coverage in the same paper a decade earlier heavily emphasized her traditional appearances and actions. Also, both Johnson and Ford undertook highly publicized television specials. Johnson’s Washington, D. C. beautification tour was far more traditional and portrayed her entirely as a hostess. Ford’s “60 Minutes” interview triggered a mostly negative response, but nonetheless helped raise her popularity ratings and illustrate the power her voice encompassed.

Both women were catalysts for change, both for the institution of the First Ladyship and for larger conceptions of American womanhood. Lady Bird Johnson took a sometimes bold, but more often tentative, step forward. Her successor Betty Ford took built upon Johnson’s achievements and advancements and pushed them significantly farther. Each woman exhibited feminist tendencies of lifelong independence, agency, and public sphere activity, but Ford’s feminism was more overt and vocal than was Johnson’s. Through their actions, speeches, legislative reforms, and representations of themselves, both First Ladies undoubtedly benefitted from and influenced the changing roles of women in American society within the context of Second Wave Feminism.

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