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## Foreword

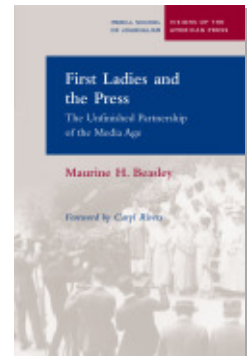
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## FOREWORD



*Caryl Rivers*

Each election season, a Niagara of print is devoted to whether or not a prospective first lady is a replay of the original Eve, proffering poisoned fruit to an unsuspecting mate. Is she too mouthy and not attentive enough to her husband, as Teresa Heinz Kerry was said to be? (*New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd wrote on July 8, 2004, that running mate John Edwards's adoring gaze at John Kerry was taking the place of the one Kerry *wasn't* getting from his wife. "Heaven knows Teresa was never going to do it," Dowd decreed. "Her attention rarely seems to light on her husband when she's at a microphone with him . . . she doesn't gaze like Nancy or glare like Lee Hart or look appraisingly at her husband like Elizabeth Edwards. She doesn't always seem to notice he's there. When Mr. Kerry moves in for a nuzzle or a kiss, she sometimes makes a little face. . . . She siphons attention from a husband who has a hard enough time getting it.")

Is a prospective first lady too powerful, as Hillary Clinton was proclaimed to be? Too intrusive, like Nancy Reagan, trying to get her astrologer's ideas into the Oval Office? The best sort of first lady, one would assume after reading the press, would be like Mr. Rochester's first wife in *Jane Eyre*—locked in the attic and neither seen nor heard, except for an occasional muffled shriek.

Why is there so much angst in the press over whether

a president will be influenced by his wife? Why is he in danger of being called a wimp if he barely nods in her direction? It seems odd that we don't worry half as much about the men to whom a president listens. Why don't we see cascades of print about a candidate's male political allies? Oh, there are the occasional "newsmaker" profiles now and then, but rarely do these view a male friend or ally with alarm.

In truth, it has been the President's Men, not his Lady, that have led him astray, from Teapot Dome to Watergate. Remember Ollie North slipping Iranian money to the contras? Remember the Happy Warriors—Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Hunt, Liddy, Mitchell, et al.—who almost managed to get Nixon impeached? LBJ had Bobby Baker, and Ike had Sherman Adams, both accused of having a blind spot where ethics were concerned. Harry Truman weathered the scandal of the "five-percenters."

By contrast, what influences have first ladies had on affairs of state? Eleanor Roosevelt made things better for blacks, coal miners, and poor people. Rosalynn Carter used her influence with her husband to help the mentally ill. Lady Bird Johnson pushed for environmental laws, Betty Ford tried to help alcoholics, and Hillary Clinton worked for universal health care. Perhaps it was only Edith Wilson whose actions could be called a potential threat. She concealed the grave illness of Woodrow Wilson for many months, becoming the de facto president while her husband was unable to perform his duties.

What is at play in the media's treatment of modern first ladies, I believe, is the Myth of Female Strength. In *Labeling Women Deviant*, Edwin Schur wrote that men have a tendency "to experience the very condition of femaleness as

threatening . . . if femaleness itself possesses some kind of threat, then it becomes all the more important to keep it under control.” In a report for Harvard’s Shorenstein Center for Press, Politics, and Public Policy in May 1989, former *Newsweek* Boston bureau chief Bernice Buresh noted several themes that emerge in the press’s attitudes toward women and political power:

Women’s demands are always excessive. No matter what they are.

Women’s anger is terrifying.

Once loosed, that power cannot be contained.

A woman close—as close as it is possible to get, in fact—to the holder of great power seems to start all sorts of media alarm bells to ring. Unless a first lady stays in the attic, she cannot win. Eleanor Roosevelt was cruelly mocked for her activities in behalf of minorities and women. Hillary Clinton was probably the most maligned female since Lady Macbeth. In fact, the *New York Times* reported on September 23, 1992, that “at least 20 articles in major publications this year involved some comparison between Mrs. Clinton and a grim role model for political wives: Lady Macbeth.” That was just the beginning. Hillary was the “Yuppie wife from hell,” said *US News & World Report* (April 27, 1992). *Spy* magazine put Hillary on its cover in a black-studs-and-leather dominatrix outfit, holding a riding crop, with the headline: WHAT HILLARY PROBLEM? (February 1993). The Canadian news-magazine *MacLean’s* declared flatly that “the First Lady has emasculated America” (April 1994). One syndicated cartoon showed Hillary, an evil grin on her face, sitting up in bed and thinking “Hillary Rodham . . . Bobbitt.” (Lorena Bobbitt was

the woman who made headlines around the world in the early 1990s by slicing off her husband's private parts.)

Castration, sadomasochism, witches, harridans, Lady Macbeth. It is the language of fear, dread, and loathing. Few males get this sort of terminology applied to them. How many male political candidates are called warlocks, devils, fiends, or sexual mutilators, no matter what their transgressions? "Three centuries after Salem, what's going on?" asked Patricia J. Williams in the *Village Voice*. "Why are we still burning witches, or even just simmering them to death? Why are these images so powerful?" (January 24, 1993).

While Hillary got the worst of it, Nancy Reagan, a traditional political wife who believed that her husband's career was her major career too, also came in for massive doses of critical coverage. Nancy, it seems, may have urged her husband to consider his place in history and take a step toward world peace. The vixen! And she was not kind to presidential aides whose egos and political ambitions were making her husband look bad. For this she should be stoned? Kitty Dukakis, wife of presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, was called a "Dragon Lady," while Rosalynn Carter was dubbed "The Steel Magnolia." Kitty's interests were in the welfare of refugees and in funding the arts. If Kitty got her hands on some dough, she would have given it to the National Symphony. Rosalynn Carter worked tirelessly for people who were mentally ill. Should the Republic have trembled?

The fear of an all-powerful female dominating a president seems unwarranted, given the sort of men who get to that office. They are almost always men with towering egos and rock-solid constitutions, with a strong belief in their own ideas. Few shrinking violets suddenly wake one morning and

say, “By golly, I’d like to be president.” So why, each political season, does the Dragon Lady specter arise? The very idea of a female with power has wellsprings deep in history and myth. Eve, after all, got blamed for losing Paradise. Even John Adams, who adored his Abigail, was not about to cede power to any other women when Abigail asked him to “remember the ladies” in his revolution (letter dated March 31, 1776). He replied, “We know better than to repeal our masculine systems. Although they are in full force, you know they are little more than theory. . . . In practice, you know we have only the name of master, and rather than give this up, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat, General Washington and all of our heroes would fight” (letter dated April 14, 1776). And this was when women could not vote or own property.

With such a long and venerable history, the press’s fear of Dragon Ladies and Petticoat Despots will not fade overnight. The story that Maurine Beasley tells makes that clear. Perhaps, though, the media will call a moratorium on some clichés in the future: for example, iron fists in velvet gloves, flowers made of steel, and all manner of reptile life attached to a word indicating the female gender. Some traditions—even if they date back to Adam and Eve—are not worth keeping around.