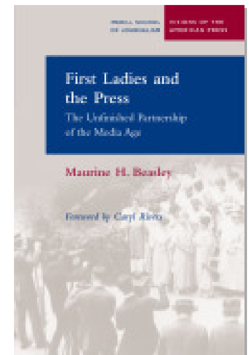
4. First Ladies as Political Helpmates: Lady Bird Johnson and Pat Nixon



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FIRST LADIES AS POLITICAL HELPMATES: LADY BIRD JOHNSON AND PAT NIXON

Jackie Kennedy was followed as first lady by two presidents' wives who personified what Meg Greenfield, the Pulitzer Prize–winning editorial page editor of the *Washington Post,* called the capital's "prevailing wife culture," which "sought to segregate and trivialize them [the wives] as a species." Both Claudia "Lady Bird" Johnson, first lady from 1963 until 1969, and Patricia "Pat" Ryan Nixon, first lady from 1969 to 1974, had played the role expected of political wives long before their husbands were elected president. In the White House, each functioned as a political helpmate, but Lady Bird Johnson ended her stay with lasting recognition for her accomplishments, whereas Pat Nixon departed as a tragic, misunderstood figure. Lady Bird Johnson managed to overcome what Greenfield called the "prevailing inhibitions" against women in Washington to live a life of self-respect and influence. In doing so, she maximized her contacts with the media of her era. Pat Nixon's performance betrayed an inability to pursue the same course. Yet each woman was totally devoted to a difficult, demanding husband and worked hard on proj-

ects that had voter appeal but still seemed safely within the realm of activities deemed suitable for genteel women. Their personal experiences testified to both the opportunities and the limitations that faced the wives of presidents in the late twentieth century and illustrated the growing importance of the media.

LADY BIRD JOHNSON

There was no doubt that Lady Bird Johnson centered her life around her husband, Lyndon B. Johnson, but her interest in environmental causes, politely masked under the feminine name of "beautification," gave her a personal identity during her tenure in the White House. Shocked like the rest of the nation at the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, she told Jackie Kennedy on the plane bringing the president's body back to Washington, "Mrs. Kennedy, you know we never even wanted to be Vice President and now, dear God, it's come to this." She said she felt like a participant in a Greek tragedy, watching "a noble protagonist overtaken by an inevitable doom." Modest and reserved, Lady Bird Johnson saw herself facing a daunting task in the White House, once remarking to a friend, "I feel as if I am suddenly on stage for a part I never rehearsed."

In fact, the role was one for which she was very well prepared. True, she had not been enthusiastic about Johnson running as vice president with Kennedy in 1960, but that was because her husband had hoped to be the presidential candidate himself. Certainly, she had not expected to become the president's wife due to an assassin's bullet, but she had filled in for an absent Jackie Kennedy on so many occa-

sions that she had mastered the ceremonial aspects of the first lady's position. She also had a capable staff in place, with Elizabeth "Liz" Carpenter, an experienced Washington newspaperwoman and former aide to Johnson himself, as her press secretary. Carpenter, who became her chief of staff as well as her press secretary in the White House, employed an assistant, Simone Poulain, the first staff member with a television background to work for a president's wife.

It had not been easy for Lady Bird Johnson, a middle-aged woman who spoke with a southern accent and was not particularly photogenic, to stand in the shadow of the sophisticated Jackie Kennedy. As the vice president's wife, Helen Thomas recalled, "Mrs. Johnson took a back seat and was very retiring. In fact, when Kennedy died and Mrs. Johnson became the first lady . . . I think she said that a big shadow had lifted. I think she always felt that way." In her published diary, Lady Bird Johnson wrote that the "shadow" did not lift until after Jackie Kennedy's marriage to Aristotle Onassis in 1968, revealing that it hovered over her for most of the Johnson presidency.

As Lady Bird Johnson assumed her new role, the press characterized her as being "politically attuned." The *New York Times* pictured her as gracious, hardworking, disciplined, and devoted to her husband: "Married to an emotional, complicated, often flamboyant man, she has never publicly lost her composure, not even when spat upon in a Dallas hotel during the 1960 campaign."

In a profile for the *Saturday Evening Post,* then an influential weekly magazine, Nan Robertson called her a "consummate politician" and said that "some people describe her with adjectives like 'corny,' 'calculating' and 'cold-eyed.'"

The profile pointed out that the camera "is not kind to the first lady as it was to her predecessor. . . . Her warm amber eyes, on television and in photographs, look black and often hard. The charming smile occasionally seems forced, her animation sometimes appears exaggerated. It is a pity." Ending on a laudatory note, the article commended the first lady for being "accessible" to the press and praised her "open heart."

While most coverage was favorable, *Time* magazine treated her somewhat unkindly in a cover story before the 1964 election, when Johnson won the presidency in his own right. Comparing her to Jackie Kennedy, *Time* declared Lady Bird Johnson fit in the "club woman, rather than the Queenly mold" and noted that "she is no glamor girl. Her nose is a bit too long, her mouth a bit too wide, her ankles a bit less than trim, and she is not outstanding at clotheshorsemanship." *Time* also asked "if she is a sort of self-created Galatea, playing the role of a politician's perfect wife, the possessor of a flawless mediocrity that generates warm admiration but no scorching envy."

On the plus side, though it sneered at her "twanging drawl," the magazine praised her as a tireless campaigner for the Kennedy-Johnson ticket in 1960 and quoted Robert Kennedy as saying "chivalrously" that "Lady Bird carried Texas for us." The story pointed out that she had traveled widely since Johnson's unexpected inauguration to boost the administration's War on Poverty program and to promote interest in conservation.

As first lady, Lady Bird Johnson expanded her horizons and developed her own abilities, just as she had been doing for years, but always in the context of putting her husband and two daughters first. In the 1964 race, she became the first

president's wife in history to conduct a whistle-stop campaign on her own. She toured the South by train in an effort to bolster the Democratic party, which was shaken by widespread opposition to her husband's support for civil rights legislation. She covered 1,682 miles in four days, making 47 stops in 8 states and drawing 250 reporters whose news organizations paid for them to go on the campaign train.

When picketers appeared to protest Johnson's push for equal rights, according to Carpenter, Lady Bird Johnson "controlled them" by putting up her hand and saying, "'My friends, this is a country of free speech, and I have a respect for your viewpoint. But this is my time to give mine.' And to our amazement, they were quiet." Carpenter said the chief political value of the trip stemmed from its being shown for four nights on television network newscasts. "You had five minutes every night—time you can't buy or afford to buy in a campaign. And we were on it [television] every night because it was unique that a woman was doing it."

After Johnson's landslide election in 1964, Lady Bird Johnson launched her beautification campaign, a logical outgrowth of her previous trips to the West with Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, a champion of preserving natural resources. The campaign built on references to preserving natural beauty in Johnson's 1965 State of the Union address, which included plans for a White House conference on the subject, and in his subsequent message to Congress devoted to "creative conservation" to promote "the values of beauty." The beautification effort was aimed at enhancing the environment of urban areas and preserving natural beauty throughout the nation, in part by regulating billboards along interstate highways.

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Lady Bird Johnson and her staff thought long and hard before deciding on beautification as her special interest. Bess Abell, her social secretary, said, "She wanted to have a project so that her time wasn't just posing for publicity pictures and shaking hands and giving tea parties. She wanted to have a project, something that she could identify with . . . that would be involved in some way in the President's program."

Beautification supported Lyndon Johnson's effort to build what he called the Great Society, a continuation of Democratic initiatives under Roosevelt's New Deal to expand the federal government to attack social, economic, and environmental problems. By no means was beautification Lady Bird Johnson's sole activity. She also served as honorary chair of the Head Start program to give educational opportunities to disadvantaged preschool children, continued Jackie Kennedy's historical restoration of the White House, and maintained a full schedule of social and ceremonial events along with overseeing the marriages of her two daughters. But beautification was her premier cause.

Lady Bird Johnson did not engage in the same type of outspoken activism as Eleanor Roosevelt, with whom she often was compared. She never gave press conferences, nor did she write a syndicated newspaper column like Roosevelt had, although she kept a diary of her White House years that became a best seller when it was published in 1970. In that diary, she wrote that when she held a tea in January 1964 for women members of the White House press corps, then numbering about sixty-five, she hoped she would never "have to be afraid of them." She tried to make sure she had no reason to be. Under her direction, Carpenter ran a sophisticated, efficient press operation for the East Wing of the White House,

taking care of news related to the president's wife and family, while the president's press secretaries handled news from the Oval Office in the West Wing.

Carpenter explained the difference between Eleanor Roosevelt and Lady Bird Johnson in terms of their concepts of wifehood: "Mrs. Roosevelt was an instigator, an innovator, willing to air a cause even without her husband's endorsement. Mrs. Johnson was an implementer and translator of her husband and his purposes." She might also have added that Lady Bird Johnson was far more dependent on staff support than Eleanor Roosevelt, who had only one assistant, her secretary.

Lady Bird Johnson realized that the word *beautification* carried unfortunate connotations that could easily discredit her efforts. She recognized that "it sounds cosmetic and trivial and it's prissy." Yet no better term could be found, Carpenter said, since "the alternatives were stodgy and they didn't sound like anything new. Conservation. Environmental beauty. Nothing." Besides, Carpenter added, newspapers "condensed it more."

The obvious way to make the term work in a headline was to shorten it to *beauty*. Stories dealing with ladies and beauty logically fit in newspaper women's sections of the day. (For example, the *Washington Evening Star* headlined one typical news story about the campaign "A PLEA FOR U.S. BEAUTY" and placed it on the front page of its society/home section, using the headline "FIRST LADY DISCUSSES BEAUTY" for the continuation of the story on an inside page.) In the 1960s, women's sections, soon to be changed by most newspapers into lifestyle sections, were under attack by feminists on grounds they trivialized women's activities. Placement of

stories on the beautification campaign in these sections tended to lessen the importance of the effort and to discount it in the minds of some feminists.

Lewis Gould, a historian of the beautification effort, concluded, "There was always an undeserved tone of apology and supplication about what Lady Bird Johnson did for the environment; this arose from the label beautification." Contending the campaign showed the constraints on women in public life in the 1960s, he said Lady Bird Johnson had no real choice except to tacitly accept the "attribution of inferiority toward women that the word beautification implied." In reality, the beautification effort went far beyond a garden club approach to planting flowers.

The campaign called for partnerships between the public and private sectors to provide funds needed to improve the environment. According to Carpenter, Udall proposed that the beautification effort initially center on the nation's capital to complement the Johnson administration's plan to clean up the Potomac River. With Lady Bird Johnson working to improve her "hometown" of Washington, the administration hoped that women in other areas would follow her example and organize efforts to beautify their own towns.

Katharine Graham, owner of the *Washington Post,* was an influential member of the First Lady's Committee for a More Beautiful National Capital, the group set up by Lady Bird Johnson to spearhead the campaign. Graham speculated that Carpenter played a major role in developing the program in order to enhance Lady Bird Johnson's role in the administration. Graham said, "Liz Carpenter told me that she was thinking up something to replace Jackie's White House [restoration], and I think it was conceived by Liz as a program

which she [Lady Bird] could do as the first lady that would give her some significance. Now although it was thought up as perhaps an idea of Liz's that would be good for her, I think it meant a great deal to her in the end."

Initially, Graham was skeptical of beautification in light of Washington's pressing needs. She said she feared "people would even resent it and not give money to it because when we are all being asked for money for ghetto problems, education problems, school problems, health problems, you just felt embarrassed going to people and saying, 'Will you give a garden' . . . at moments it got silly." She changed her mind when she found the campaign resulted in new parks, playgrounds, and flower beds paid for by "outside money and outside resources that [otherwise] the city would not have had."

The flower- and tree-planting projects that resulted continue to add to the ambience of the capital today. Plantings included some two million daffodil bulbs, new groves of cherry trees, 83,000 flowering plants, thousands of annuals, and 25,000 trees. To Lady Bird Johnson's credit, the beautification effort attempted to improve the rundown inner city as well as the areas surrounding national monuments. The campaign had a much more lasting impact on the tourist areas of the capital than the cleanup efforts, rat-eradication programs, and other poorly funded endeavors directed at blighted sections. Nevertheless, Lady Bird Johnson tried to raise public awareness of the link between poverty and lack of natural beauty.

Interest in beautification produced a countless array of news stories for the women who covered the first lady's side of the White House. The ebullient Carpenter helped stage event after event and trip after trip to spotlight the first lady's

activities, planning tours of national parks, wilderness refuges, and historical houses that appealed to her press corps. Helen Thomas recalled: "Climbing mountains pursued by gnats, riding Snake River rapids in Wyoming, watching from the beaches as she—not I—snorkeled in the barracuda-filled Caribbean, bobbing in a flotilla of rubber rafts down the Rio Grande . . . no newswoman wanted to be left behind when Lady Bird set out on her adventures."

In total, Lady Bird Johnson made forty trips covering 200,000 miles in promoting beautification and the environment, education including the popular Head Start program for disadvantaged preschool children, antipoverty efforts, historical preservation, and other administration initiatives. She flew in the same chartered plane with representatives of her press corps, which numbered about eighty-five by the end of the Johnson years. In fact, she could not have taken the trips without reporters being present because no public funding went into her travels and the news organizations that were represented were charged for the cost of the planes.

To publicize the need to protect natural resources, Lady Bird Johnson led her press corps on trips that turned into wilderness excursions. Journalists covering her visit to the Grand Tetons in 1965 took a thirty-mile trip in a rubber raft. The *Washington Evening Star* described the experience under the headline "RAIN-PELTED NEWS REPORTERS CHALLENGE SNAKE RIVER" and said it tested the journalists' "frontier mettle." The next year, seventy reporters joined Johnson for a raft trip down the Rio Grande in Texas.

Carpenter considered the trips extremely successful except for the presence of anti–Vietnam War pickets as op-

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position to President Johnson's Vietnam policies grew. She said, "Newspaperwomen want an activist first lady. . . . The fact that she would get out and be a set of eyes and ears for the President thrilled them. It also improved their beat . . . they had a better play on their stories." Women journalists also traveled with the first lady on trips to the family ranch in Texas.

Katie Louchheim, a State Department official and Democratic activist, said that President Johnson "both admired and resented [her] activities." She noted that "many of us had heard him speak caustically of her meetings with talkative conservationists that interfered with his taking a nap; or of her absence when he wanted her: 'She's out planting a tree somewhere.'"

The first lady's most enduring legacy was the passage of the Highway Beautification Act of 1965. This compromise measure to regulate billboards pleased neither the billboard industry nor conservationists and their allies. Lady Bird Johnson took the unprecedented step for a president's wife of involving herself directly in pressing for the legislation. In a six-column headline, the *Washington Star* writers asked in surprise, "DID THE FIRST LADY 'LOBBY' FOR BEAUTIFICATION?" They answered the question by saying, "The White House shies away from any suggestion that Mrs. Johnson was actually lobbying. But there really isn't any other word that accurately describes her activities." Yet the article appeared in the society/home section, a placement that served to undercut its message of a woman taking a substantive political role.

In an attempt to embarrass President Johnson by inferring he was giving in to a woman, opponents attacked the bill

on grounds it was being pushed by his wife. In Montana, a billboard called for Lady Bird to be impeached. In an unusual personal attack, Representative Robert Dole, a Kansas Republican, proposed an amendment to delete references to the "Secretary of Commerce" whenever they appeared in the bill and to substitute the words "Lady Bird."

Lady Bird Johnson's response to finding herself involved in public controversy was, in Gould's word, "guarded." While she did not give up her beautification efforts, she decided to be "more careful and less visible." She long had been familiar with the need for wives to stay behind the scenes in the male-dominated world of politics.

In 1963, while still the wife of the vice president, she had said in a speech: "I would say that the life of any congressional wife revolves around three things: husband, children, and home . . . as wives of busy men whose daily business is the nation's business, our best chance to find the significant is to help our husbands achieve their own legislative aims." Abigail McCarthy, wife of Senator Eugene McCarthy, the Minnesota Democrat who challenged President Johnson over conduct of the Vietnam War, called the comments an excellent description of the "vocation" of "political wives." Lady Bird Johnson's own life presented an example that was hard to emulate. As a political wife, she facilitated Lyndon Johnson's rise from a depressed agricultural hamlet in central Texas to the powerful position of Senate majority leader and then on to the White House. In the process, she developed sharp business skills that made the family extremely wealthy.

She did not have an easy life as the wife of a towering figure who dominated those around him. Crude and cutting at times, Lyndon Johnson mastered the art of politics and

dreamed of building a more just nation, but he was a philandering husband who demanded total devotion from his wife. He received it, regardless of his behavior. Describing the "showy affection" between the two, *Time* noted that Johnson "has been known to swat Lady Bird so hard on the behind that her feet nearly leave the floor."

Her loyalty was not always admired. Jackie Kennedy, who scorned the political wife culture, was said to have observed acidly, "Lady Bird would crawl down Pennsylvania Avenue over splintered glass for Lyndon." Helen Thomas said Lady Bird Johnson tried to protect her husband from the consequences of his actions: "She soothed friends he had rode roughshod over and shielded him when he was boorish."

At least one White House reporter disliked the first lady's style as a political wife. Muriel Dobbins, a correspondent for the *Baltimore Sun,* remarked, "When Mrs. Johnson first came in, I followed her on about three of those beautification trips, and she made those sugar-coated speeches until the *Sun* said they weren't going to spend anymore money having me watch her plant azaleas." Dobbins said the first lady lacked spontaneity in her speeches.

A rare exception came in 1968 when she answered an anti–Vietnam War outburst from singer Eartha Kitt at one of a series of White House luncheons set up to recognize women of achievement. Dobbins commented, "It was the first time I ever heard her say anything she hadn't thought out thoroughly first or that Liz Carpenter hadn't written for her." The first lady told Kitt she prayed for "a just and honorable peace" but that until it occurred, Americans needed to "work on bettering the things in this country that we can better."

Along with holding luncheons for women "doers," Lady Bird Johnson staged the first fashion show ever held at the White House. A committee of fashion writers assisted in planning the 1968 event, which they then covered for their newspapers. Although she carefully watched her expenditures on clothing in spite of her wealth, Lady Bird Johnson long had shown an interest in improving her wardrobe and appearance as her husband rose in Washington. Abigail McCarthy said that, as a senator's wife, she admired Lady Bird Johnson's self-discipline and determination to present herself well. "Through the years," McCarthy said, "I saw her progress from the motherly and slightly plump mother of small children to the chic, slim, and well-dressed woman she was when her husband became vice president."

Lyndon Johnson appreciated his wife's strength of character, sought her advice, liked to buy her clothes, and missed her when she was away, but observers witnessed his failure to respect her on numerous occasions. Katharine Graham became incensed on a visit to the Johnson ranch during the 1964 presidential campaign when Johnson grumbled that he had to attend a barbecue in his honor because "Lady Bird had gotten him into it." Graham recalled in her autobiography, "He was so savage about her that I . . . spontaneously said, 'She also got you where you are today.'" This angered Johnson further, and he continued "blaming her and complaining," Graham wrote, "until I finally heard myself saying, 'Oh, shut up, er . . . Mr. President.'" A brief silence followed, she added, broken by Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's vice presidential running mate, "making some comment that alleviated the tension."

Graham also recalled an instance following a White

House dinner when Johnson, angered by a story in the *Washington Post,* called her into his bedroom. He yelled at her, leaving her "frozen with dismay" and thinking "this can't be me being bawled out by the President of the United States while he is undressing." Finally, she wrote, "he bellowed 'turn around'" while he continued "with his angry monologue until I turned back at his command to find him in his pajamas." Such incidents did not find their way into Graham's newspaper, which at that period differentiated sharply between the public and private lives of presidents and their families. For the most part, private lives were left alone.

Although the Washington press corps ignored rumors of Johnson's amorous pursuits just as it had overlooked similar stories concerning President Kennedy, it had no compunctions about attacking Johnson in general and grew increasingly unfriendly during his administration. In addition to faulting his Vietnam policies, journalists accused him of refusing to tell them the truth, behaving erratically, and showing little consideration for their profession by scheduling trips and press briefings with no advance warning. These criticisms may have been justified, but attacks on Johnson because of his background were not, according to Nancy Dickerson, the first woman CBS television correspondent and later a longtime White House NBC network correspondent. She said that the press unfairly "ridiculed Johnson for his Texas origins, for the cut of his pants, for the way he tweaked his big ears, and for his lack of what they considered 'style.'"

Very little of this animosity spilled over to Lady Bird Johnson, although she perceived that she was looked down on as a southerner. Graham recalled calling Carpenter to compliment her on the first lady's performance on an ABC

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television program on beautification. She was surprised to find out Carpenter was keenly interested in whether Lady Bird Johnson's "Southern accent was noticeable at all."

Born in tiny Karnack, Texas, the daughter of a well-to-do merchant and landowner, the future first lady was cared for by a maiden aunt after the death of her mother when she was five years old. Alone a good deal, she remembered years later, she "grew up listening to the wind in the pine trees of the East Texas woods." A love of nature lay behind her selection of beautification for her special interest. Her nickname, Lady Bird, which took the place of her given name, Claudia, was related to her childhood environment. She said it came from her African American nurse, who compared her to dotted ladybird beetles and said she was as "purty as a ladybird."

She and Lyndon Johnson met in 1934 shortly after her graduation from the University of Texas at Austin, and they soon eloped. It was a precipitous action for a serious young woman who had earned two bachelor's degrees with honors. She had followed her arts degree with one in journalism because she thought that newspaper people, in contrast to others, "went more places and met more interesting people, and had more exciting things happen to them." So shy that she had been delighted when she narrowly missed being the valedictorian of her high school class and consequently did not have to give a commencement speech, she did not immediately seek a job following college. She went home to remodel her father's house.

After the petite Lady Bird was introduced to Johnson, a towering six feet three inches tall with an oversized ego to match, he proposed during their first day together. She declined, but Johnson pressed his suit by letter and phone from

Washington, where he was working as an aide to a congressman. In their correspondence, she told him she would hate for him to seek a career in politics, although she said she loved him. Ten weeks after they had met, he returned to Karnack, determined they would wed, saying, "We either do it now or we never will." She did it and accompanied him back to Washington.

As a novice political wife, she soon discovered her husband, the product of the depressed Texas Hill Country who had worked his way through San Marcos State Teachers College, had lofty ambitions and exacting expectations. Promises to take her to museums and cultural activities faded as Johnson urged her to learn the names of the constituents of his employer. She had to master cooking and the art of entertaining his political associates at a moment's notice on a slim budget. He insisted that she perform his personal chores—bring him coffee in bed, lay out his clothes, fill his cigarette lighter, shine his shoes—and she did. She developed a positive attitude, explaining: "He early announced, 'I'd like to have coffee in bed,' and I thought, 'What!?!? Me?!?!' But I soon realized it's less trouble serving someone that way than by setting the table and all."

When a Texas congressman died in 1937, leaving a vacant seat, she borrowed $10,000 from her father against her inheritance to help finance Johnson's campaign. Her father donated $25,000 more. Johnson won on a platform of supporting Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, the first of his six successful campaigns to win election to the House of Representatives. In 1942, Lady Bird Johnson ran her husband's congressional office for eight months while he served in the armed forces during World War II. Answering con-

stituent mail and making political decisions, she received no pay but got invaluable training in politics and management skills that she would put to good use.

In 1943, Lady Bird Johnson bought a small radio station, KTBC, in Austin for $17,000, using money remaining from her mother's estate of $63,000 plus landholdings. The debt-ridden station became the basis for the Johnson family's multimillion-dollar media empire. Through his political contacts with the Federal Communications Commission, Johnson was instrumental in securing permission for the station to expand into a television operation that monopolized the Austin market. A shrewd businesswoman, Lady Bird Johnson kept a close eye on the station's bottom line and bought interests in other media properties and in real estate. She kept up her business and political interests after the birth of two daughters, Lynda Bird in 1944 and Lucy Baines in 1947. During the time Johnson was president, *Life* magazine estimated her fortune, then in a family trust, at $9 million.

She overcame her shyness sufficiently to campaign for Johnson during his winning race for the U.S. Senate in 1948. After he suffered a major heart attack in 1955, she insisted he follow a healthier lifestyle so he could continue his career. She also took a public-speaking course to prepare herself for more campaigning. By the time she became first lady, she was an effective speaker who used folksy southern sayings and colloquial phrases such as "y'all" to relate to audiences. Reluctant to use the word *I,* in order to emphasize that she and her husband were a political team, she often made comments such as "We went and made a speech."

Over the years, she also learned how to cope with her husband's unfaithfulness, which included overtures to

women journalists. Nancy Dickerson stated, "[Johnson] propositioned me once." On that occasion, she wrote in her autobiography, Lady Bird Johnson dispatched Bill Moyers, her husband's press secretary, to persuade Johnson to leave Dickerson's room. Dickerson explained, "Lady Bird was secure in the knowledge that LBJ's love for her superseded any sexual desire, or even sexual relationship. In her realm she had no peer; she knew it, he knew it, and so did everybody else."

As the holder of a journalism degree, Lady Bird Johnson understood the way the press operated, and she wanted to please reporters as well as her husband. Carpenter said, "She knew the five W's [the journalist's who, what, when, where, and why] and the H [how], and she knew the difference between the A.M. [morning newspaper deadline] and the P.M.[evening deadline]." Describing Lady Bird Johnson as "a saint to work for," Carpenter added, "I could call any time of the day and say, 'Fran [Lewine] and Helen [Thomas]—the AP and UP girls—have this problem and have got this question.'" Even if the question could not be answered, Lady Bird Johnson would give her enough information so she could return the reporters' telephone calls.

Working with Carpenter, reporters received a never-ending supply of news that presented the first lady doing far more than simply pouring tea. The material was made to order for newspaper women's pages as they were being transformed into cultural/lifestyle sections, as well as for women's magazines. Editors featured stories on the first lady's beautification project and her other activities apart from being a hostess. But they also ran traditional stories and pictures on White House social events and employed widely

read society columnists who reported on Washington parties and official entertaining.

Betty Beale, a syndicated columnist who worked for the *Washington Evening Star,* said the Johnsons were unfairly compared to the Kennedys in terms of social style and grace. Consequently, she noted, they "were daily subjected to printed putdowns." Beale wrote about the Johnson era bringing the frug, the watusi, and the jerk, "free-wheeling gyrations to rock music," to White House parties, prompting additional music at social functions and more liveliness than previously. Yet the public remembered the elegance of the Kennedys, with Jackie Kennedy (until her marriage to Onassis in 1968) annually outranking Lady Bird Johnson in the Gallup Poll's "Most Admired Women" survey.

The biggest society stories were the weddings of the Johnson daughters, Lynda Bird and Lucy Baines, both of whom were married while Johnson was president. Lucy, who changed her name to Luci, had a wedding in 1966 at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, attended by seven hundred guests. Her sister was married in a candlelight service at the White House shortly before Christmas in 1967.

Stories on her daughters and their plans did not always please Lady Bird Johnson. When Helen Thomas reported that eighteen-year-old Luci planned to marry Pat Nugent before her father knew it, Lady Bird Johnson, like her husband, was "seething." Similarly, when *Women's Wear Daily* published a description of Luci's wedding gown in advance of the official release date, the first lady and her family were irate. In retaliation, the White House barred all reporters for that publication from the wedding. But these incidents were exceptions to the generally warm relationships between Lady

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Bird Johnson and the media. She invited the newswomen to White House events, thanked them for stories she liked, and gave them lots to write about.

Lyndon Johnson made his bombshell announcement on March 31, 1968, that he would not seek a second term as president due to tensions arising from the Vietnam War. Lady Bird Johnson, who herself had been booed on two campuses because of Vietnam, was relieved. She feared his health would give way if he stayed in office. One of her last acts as first lady was to entertain her press corps at a White House Christmas party. She modestly confided to her diary, "I like this crowd. I've gotten better from them than I deserve, by and large."

Considering the dominating nature of her husband and the stereotypical expectations for women of her era, Lady Bird Johnson raised the role of political wife to a new level. She had a direct impact on legislation and energized the undefined position of the first lady, carrying on the tradition of Eleanor Roosevelt. Helen Thomas said Johnson grew as a person while serving as first lady: "She made up her mind to be a 'doer' herself and to make her own interests a cause. She left the White House more poised, confident and happy." In Texas, she continued her beautification efforts by creating the National Wildflower Research Center.

PAT NIXON

In contrast, her successor, Thelma Ryan Nixon, known as Pat because she was born close to St. Patrick's Day, did not promote any specific project apart from the vague one of volunteerism and rarely expressed herself on public issues, although she backed the equal rights amendment. She also

urged her husband to nominate a woman to the U.S. Supreme Court, but he did not. Her daughter, Julie Nixon Eisenhower, commented that "she kind of lost faith that journalists would interpret things as they really are, and just didn't want to reveal herself at all."

In fact, Pat Nixon was such a private person that her two daughters, Julie and Tricia, did not even know her real name was Thelma until their father, Richard M. Nixon, unsuccessfully ran as the Republican candidate for president in 1960. With the slogan "Pat for First Lady" a part of the campaign and her homemaking abilities widely publicized, Pat Nixon appeared personally humiliated by the outcome, as cameras captured her tear-streaked face when her husband conceded to Kennedy. By the time he won his 1968 presidential bid, she had become privately disillusioned with politics, but along with her daughters, she campaigned as she always had. Television, a medium in which she was never comfortable, showed her loyally standing by his side even when Nixon himself seemed almost oblivious to her presence.

As a consequence, journalists and other observers looked at her pasted-on smile in public appearances, first obvious during the years when Nixon was vice president, and called her "plastic Pat" and "Pat the robot." In private, she presented a different picture. One woman reporter wrote: "The tense guarded campaign wife with the rehearsed smile was in relaxed moments a warm and peppy person." Her personal warmth failed to carry over to public forums, however. Helen Thomas noted, "She had come up through a stoic school for Presidential wives and she may have been the last one to think it necessary to hide her feelings completely."

Her reticence to display emotion in public stemmed from several factors, including: a childhood of hard work, poverty, and caring for ill parents that had taught her to carry on in spite of adversity; a dislike of the personal revelations increasingly expected of candidates in a media-dominated world; a perceived need to conform to the image of women as cheerleaders and supporters for males; and tension between her husband's advisers and her own staff. These factors diminished her ability to carry out the public communication increasingly needed to perform the role of first lady effectively. Underlying them all was the issue of her relationship with her husband, which appeared increasingly distant to the journalists who covered her. As newspapers were forced to provide more human interest material to compete with television, reporters looked more closely than before at the personal styles and interactions of public figures.

In the case of Richard Nixon, what they saw was a disturbing lack of attention to his wife. Not necessarily the stuff of news stories, their observations nevertheless did little to portray the president as a likable individual. Recalled Kandy Stroud, a reporter for *Women's Wear Daily,* "I rode in the limousine with them, the first time I was alone with them together. He did all the talking, she did none. She just sat there . . . like a staff member . . . the entire ride and he didn't refer to her, or defer to her."

A *Washington Post* reporter, Donnie Radcliffe, told author Kati Marton, "Nixon seemed to forget about her in big moments. He didn't want her to upstage or embarrass him." Since there was no evidence that she ever had done so, he apparently had no need to worry, but his staff, headed by H. R. Haldeman, considered her a potential threat. Accord-

ing to Betty Caroli, one of Pat Nixon's aides said, "You wouldn't believe the sexist attitude of some of those guys, and Haldeman was the worst of the lot." Far more than either Kennedy or Johnson, Richard Nixon refused to acknowledge the potential of his wife to take a substantive role in his administration, although he needed her as a visible supporting player. Hugh Sidey, of *Time* magazine, concluded, "She kind of followed along with him, and he used her in campaigns, but once he got in the White House that was the end of it."

From his first unexpectedly successful foray into politics as a candidate for Congress in 1946 to his triumphant election to the presidency in 1968, Nixon had appealed to voters through his wife and family. With campaign literature stressing the team of "Pat and Dick," Nixon, a Navy veteran of World War II, personified a generation of leadership that called on women to play an active but always subordinate role in political image-making. Pictures of the trim, photogenic Pat Nixon and their two blonde little girls helped humanize Nixon when he ran for the Senate in 1950 as a hard-hitting anti-Communist. By calling attention to his family in his famous "Checkers speech" (Checkers was a dog given to his daughters) on television, he got off the hook in 1952 for accepting secret funds for office and travel expenses and stayed on Eisenhower's ticket, winning election as vice president for two terms. Pat Nixon, however, was embarrassed as she gazed intently at her husband while he discussed their personal finances during the broadcast. He stressed that she had no mink coat but only "a respectable Republican cloth coat and I always tell her she looks good in anything." Even in the White House, Nixon celebrated the anniversary of the celebrated speech, but his wife refused to talk about it.

In Nixon's losing bid for the presidency in 1960 against John F. Kennedy, Pat Nixon campaigned much harder than the reluctant Jackie Kennedy. According to Lester David, her biographer, she declined to give overt political speeches, but she became "the most active and visible wife of a presidential candidate in American political history" up to that point. When Nixon decided to run again for the presidency in 1968, after entering the race for governor of California over her objections and losing that election, Pat Nixon again hit the campaign trail like a good soldier obeying orders. Some campaigning, however, was delegated to her daughters, both of whom presented traditional feminine appearances in opposition to those of the long-haired hippies protesting the continuation of the Vietnam War.

It was apparent to journalist Helen Thomas that Pat Nixon "was clearly not gung ho about campaigning," while Nixon's high-powered public relations men, who had little regard for women, "did not seem to care whether she was around or not." By then, the women's liberation movement combined with the social upheavals stemming from the Vietnam War had made Pat Nixon's determined pleasantness and refusal to voice her own opinions seem old-fashioned and suspect to many of the journalists who covered her, a fact of which she was well aware. Like her husband, she resented what she saw as the liberal media that represented an elitist world.

One journalist who managed to break through her reserve was Gloria Steinem, the feminist leader who wrote for *New York* magazine. When Steinem pressed her on what woman she most admired in history, Pat Nixon replied indignantly: "I never had time to think about things like that—

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who I wanted to be or who I admired, or to have ideas . . . I've never had it easy. I'm not like all you . . . all those people who had it easy." Four years later, she expressed relief when Nixon was reelected for a second term, telling her staff, "I'm going to relax in these last four years." She could not foresee what lay ahead.

The only president to resign his position, Nixon was forced out on August 9, 1974, after tapes of conversations in the Oval Office revealed that he was a party to efforts at political sabotage, including the cover-up of a burglary at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate apartments. Pat Nixon had not known of the existence of the tapes; when they materialized, she said they should be burned, but her husband did not seek her advice. In an emotional farewell to the nation, Nixon praised his mother but failed to mention his wife or his daughters loyally standing nearby. It was a commentary on a strained marriage in which the principals did not show affection to each other in public, as well as on a failed presidency. Lester David quoted a friend of Pat Nixon as saying, "She gave so much and got so little of what was really meaningful to a woman—attention, companionship, consideration."

Pat Nixon represented both an American success story and an American tragedy. She was the attractive, bright daughter of a poor miner turned small farmer and worked her way through the University of Southern California. A popular high school teacher, she had married Nixon, an ambitious young lawyer in Whittier, California, and stayed at his side as he overcame political defeats, rebuilt his support in the Republican party, and finally made it to the White House. Yet she was a woman locked up inside herself who resented the

demands that politics made on her marriage and her children, telling a friend shortly before her husband was nominated for president in 1960, "I gave up everything I've ever loved." As first lady, she worked hard but received relatively little credit for her endeavors, which did not make much of an impression on the media.

In actuality, Pat Nixon hosted thousands of people at the White House, opening the grounds and offering tours for the disabled. She made the mansion more accessible to the public by providing more printed information and historical displays for tourists. She carried out an extensive campaign to complete Jackie Kennedy's restoration of the mansion by locating actual antiques instead of reproductions and adding to the collection of portraits of presidents and their wives. She religiously spent four to five hours a day on her mail, responding to requests from those she called "the little guys." Yet in part because she did not spotlight a concrete cause or program of her own, her detractors, whose hostility toward her husband both politically and personally carried over to her, sneered at what they considered her misplaced martyrdom.

Soon after arriving in the White House, Pat Nixon found that media expectations for the first lady had changed since the 1950s when she was the wife of the vice president under Dwight D. Eisenhower. As Julie Nixon Eisenhower put it, "For eight years the newspaper coverage of Mamie Eisenhower [who became Julie's grandmother-in-law after her marriage to Mamie's grandson, David] was no more weighty than what she wore, her menus, and the stir she caused when she decided to receive guests with her right glove off." But, Eisenhower continued, the newswomen

covering her mother "wanted a First Lady 'project' and a newsmaker in her own right." Pat Nixon, unfortunately, did not move confidently in those directions.

Projects appealed to Pat Nixon less than "personal diplomacy," which she told Thomas was her "only claim to fame both at home and abroad." As the wife of the vice president, she had traveled repeatedly across the United States and visited fifty-three nations as well. By the time she left the White House, she had gone to seventy-eight countries, including war-torn Vietnam, and crisscrossed the United States, often encountering antiwar protestors. She had become the most widely traveled first lady in history up to that point.

Observers said her personal warmth was most obvious when she traveled without her husband. In 1970, accompanied by a group of reporters, she delivered nine tons of relief supplies on a hazardous flight deep into the snow-covered Andes Mountains in Peru after a disastrous earthquake there. Fran Lewine of the Associated Press recalled, "It was a wonderful trip because we did something for a change instead of just [fulfilling] this role of a first lady being out there to shop and tour. . . . [There] was a mission to this and therefore it had much more significance than the usual trip of a first lady." In the 1972 election campaign, Pat Nixon, a popular figure with Republican women, took the unusual step of making a campaign tour on her own, as did each of her daughters, with the family assuming surrogate roles for Richard Nixon himself. His political strategy called for him to appear to be busy with nonpartisan activities.

Initially, Nixon did not plan to take his wife on his historic trip to open relations with China in 1972, but he changed his mind after she made a successful solo visit to

Africa and represented the United States at the inauguration of a new president of Liberia. Still, Nixon reportedly said, if she were to go to China, she would go "solely as a prop." And she apparently agreed, telling journalists, "I wouldn't say anything to spoil the good work Dick has done."

A hesitancy to speak her mind for fear of hurting her husband marked Pat Nixon's media relations in general. Just after the presidential election in 1968, Betty Beale of the *Washington Star* published an open letter to the new first lady with pointers on what she should do. Beale called for a continuation of the kind of press operation in place under Liz Carpenter and ended with the hope the White House would be a "vibrant, warm music-filled home." To the detriment of both the first lady and the journalists who covered her, Beale's recommendations were only partially carried out. Pat Nixon turned the lights back on at the White House, after the frugal Lyndon Johnson had ordered them shut off, and made plans for formal entertaining, but her media relations floundered.

In contrast to the effective press operation under Carpenter, reporters assigned to Pat Nixon said they initially dealt with what *Newsweek* termed a "Closed Door Policy" of "choking off information, giving out releases late . . . and favoring certain reporters over others." In an effort to take charge of the situation by making the first lady a public relations arm of the presidency, Nixon's key advisers, H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, expanded the Office of the First Lady in 1969. The reorganization gave the office thirty employees and a budget and combined the positions of staff director and press secretary. The new post went to Constance Stuart, whose husband worked for Ehrlichman, in a

move seen as lessening the role of the first lady in directing her own affairs.

Stuart, a public relations professional, expressed a desire to work out any difficulty between the president's men and the first lady's staff before "it got to the husband and wife level." (Curiously, the division of responsibilities between the president's staff in the West Wing and the first lady's staff in the East Wing led to a series of communications by formal memos between Nixon and his wife. On one occasion, for example, "The President" requested "Mrs. Nixon" to outfit his bedroom with a "bigger table on which he can work at night.")

Stuart set up what Maria Smith of the *Washington Post* called the "largest, most expensive press or public relations staff ever assembled to promote the public image of a President's wife," estimating its cost at $150,000 a year. Some reporters liked Stuart's brisk energy, but others objected to what they saw as her Madison Avenue "snow-job" technique. She held biweekly press briefings and incurred the wrath of society reporters by unsuccessfully trying to ban notebooks at White House parties.

Although Pat Nixon eventually was linked to volunteerism, her efforts were diffused. According to Gil Troy, the first lady "scurried about, helping poor kids here, elderly widows there, dabbling in literacy crusades, urban planning, postal academies for inner city education, and environmentalism." Stuart was forced to decline a $100,000 donation from a Nixon supporter to support the first lady's projects, since they had not "gotten off the ground."

In terms of social news, although White House entertainment was lively and varied, the Nixons themselves left

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dinners early and almost never stayed to dance, affording little opportunity for reporters to glean feature material on them. The biggest society story was the televised White House wedding of Tricia Nixon and Edward Cox on June 12, 1971, a royal-like event at which the Nixons actually danced together, solidifying an image of what the president called "America's first family you can be proud of." Another successful broadcast in 1971 was an hour-long ABC special, *A Visit with the First Lady,* based on Pat Nixon's trip to new national park sites as well as her management of the White House.

Unhappily, preludes to the disaster that lay ahead soon filled news columns. The story on the marriage shared space on the front page of the *New York Times* with the first installment of the Pentagon papers. This publication of a leaked government archive on the history of the Vietnam War set the parameters for political sabotage that ended with Watergate and Nixon's downfall.

By the time of Tricia Nixon's wedding, the president's aides had lost confidence in Stuart and designated one of their own, Alexander Butterfield, to oversee handling of "events and publicity." Stuart left after Nixon was reelected in 1972 and was replaced by Helen Smith, whom Helen Thomas praised because she "never lied." Pat Nixon pared down her staff and served as her own staff director, but her press relations remained a problem to the administration. Richard Nixon himself instructed his press secretary, Ron Ziegler, to improve the situation, complaining that "despite an unprecedented effort on the part of Mrs. Nixon to handle all sorts of visiting delegations, foreign diplomats, etc., over the past four years we have been unable to break

through in terms of getting some kind of coverage in the press." He blamed the situation on antagonism from the women's press corps toward his presidency, but according to Carl Anthony, the reporters did not perceive her activities as substantive copy.

Laudatory news did appear, such as a story in the *New York Times* on February 15, 1973, that the first lady received three thousand letters a week and personally answered every one of them. A *Washington Post* article a week earlier was more critical. On February 8, the newspaper reported on Pat Nixon's resignation as honorary chair of the Day Care Council of America, following the group's criticism of President Nixon's veto of a day care bill. The story quoted a council representative as saying that "after her initial two days of visiting day care centers and being photographed she never did anything else."

At times, reporters found her determined to present a public front that seemed to be a smokescreen for reality. When Beale interviewed her prior to Nixon's reelection as president in 1972, for instance, she spoke of her husband, not herself, saying, "I think being a partner to a great man is about the top experience." In a subsequent interview on "the real Richard Nixon," she praised her husband as "considerate, kind and gentle," dismaying Beale, who hoped that for the sake of credibility, "she would find some fault with him."

Reporters also detected false notes in her public conduct. Pat Nixon claimed she did not smoke or drink, for example, but she actually was a heavy smoker who died of lung cancer. She also drank on occasion, although her family vigorously denied allegations of heavy drinking during the Watergate episode. They were made by Bob Woodward and Carl

Bernstein, the *Washington Post* reporters credited with uncovering the scandal.

Thomas recounted an incident when the first lady reached out for a glass of sherry from a tray, then pulled her hand back when she observed newswomen watching her. Thomas wanted to tell her to go ahead and take it, but she realized that Pat Nixon "had been brought up in the old school that first ladies have NO 'bad habits.'" Her life might have been happier had she not been. In 1958, a British journalist said, "She chatters, answers questions, smiles and smiles, all with a doll's terrifying poise. . . . One grey hair, one hint of fear, one golden tea-cup overturned on the Persian carpet and one could have loved her."

After the former first lady's death in 1993, Bonnie Angelo, who had covered her for *Time* magazine, wrote, "Somehow Pat Nixon never quite captured the fancy of the American public. The cameras that caught the angular planes of her face missed the soft contours of her heart." Angelo believed this "was because Pat Nixon stood by her man [and] her man could not shake the visceral distrust of the public and the media." In 1999, Helen Thomas remembered Pat Nixon as warm and lively and recalled how she had staged a surprise celebration of Thomas's engagement, concluding, "She was probably the most underrated first lady I've covered."