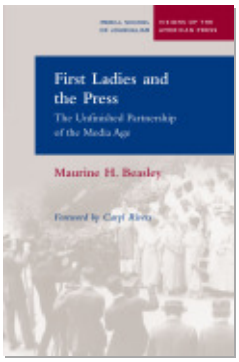
5. First Ladies and Feminism: Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter



FIVE

FIRST LADIES AND FEMINISM: BETTY FORD AND ROSALYNN CARTER

To some degree, all first ladies have been viewed in the light of the political developments of their eras involving women, but this was particularly true in the cases of Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter, the two presidents' wives who presided over the White House following the departure of the Nixons. Both women tried to use their influence to promote feminist causes, particularly passage of the equal rights amendment (ERA). Although they were unsuccessful in that regard, they drew widespread media attention that highlighted the use of their position as a platform to push specific legislation and to promote women's issues. While they had different styles, both women encountered considerable hostility from segments of the public that were not attuned to feminism and thought each first lady was overstepping her bounds.

Yet in terms of their White House performances, both have been ranked higher by scholars than their husbands. Historian Robert Watson found that President Gerald Ford was ranked thirty-second in one poll and twenty-fourth in

another, whereas his wife ranked much higher—fourth and ninth—in a comparison of rankings of presidents and presidential spouses. President Jimmy Carter was ranked twenty-fifth in two polls, but his wife ranked twentieth in one poll and fifth in another. In each case, however, the husband failed in his bid to stay in the White House, a warning, perhaps, that activism by first ladies does not necessarily translate into votes at the polls and may even suggest public rejection of nontraditional presidential couples or partners. Adding to the complexity of the picture, Betty Ford apparently gained more in public esteem for her willingness to speak openly about her breast cancer than for her political stance. Nevertheless, both Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter enhanced the significance of the position of the first lady in terms of the media by attempting to make it a more vital political symbol than it had been since the days of Eleanor Roosevelt.

BETTY FORD

When Betty Ford moved into the White House following the departure of Richard Nixon in 1972, she was an unknown quantity to most Americans. Her husband, Gerald Ford, a well-liked, conservative Republican congressman from Michigan, had become president under unprecedented circumstances on August 9, 1972, following Nixon's resignation in the face of impeachment proceedings. In his inaugural address, Ford pronounced an end to the "long national nightmare" of Watergate and promised to run an open administration, contending "truth is the glue that holds the government together." In sharp contrast to Nixon's failure to acknowledge his wife, Ford declared he was beholden to "no

man and to only one woman, my dear wife, Betty." This statement marked the first time in history that a presidential inaugural speech included a reference to a first lady.

Minority leader of the House of Representatives, Ford had been selected as vice president only eight months before by President Nixon, after Spiro T. Agnew, a former governor, had resigned from the post due to allegations of corruption during his political career in Maryland. A former professional dancer and the mother of four children, Betty Ford stood with a big smile beside her husband when he was sworn in as vice president on December 6, 1973. In her autobiography, she commented, "If I had known what was coming, I think I would have sat right down and cried."

Reporters flocked to the Fords' suburban home in Alexandria, Virginia. Nancy Dickerson, then working for PBS and one of the first journalists to interview Betty Ford, found her determined to maintain "life as always." The unpretentious Ford told Dickerson that when Nixon phoned to offer the vice presidency to her husband, she had been cooking his favorite pot roast.

Although she may have appeared poised and in command of herself, Betty Ford described her initial interview experiences, even with ground rules worked out by her staff, as "terrifying." She agreed to appear on television with Barbara Walters only on the understanding that she did not want to talk about political issues, but when Walters asked for her position on abortion, Ford answered frankly. She said that she agreed with the Supreme Court's ruling in *Roe v. Wade* and "that it was time to bring abortion out of the backwoods and put it in the hospitals where it belonged." She received piles of angry mail, but her reputation for candor was established.

Betty Ford wrote in her autobiography that in the next few months, as the events leading up to Nixon's resignation were fully reported, the possibility of becoming first lady so frightened her that she "was blocking it out." After the inauguration, she created a stir when she said that she and the president were going to take their own bed to the White House and that they would not have separate bedrooms like their predecessors. Playing up interest in the private lives of presidents as a partial response to Watergate disclosures, the press pointed out that the Fords were the first presidential couple who did not have individual bedrooms since the Coolidges. This fact titillated the public, although, as Helen Thomas pointed out, in itself it revealed little about presidents' intimate lives.

Betty Ford's comment on White House sleeping arrangements led to accusations that she "was disgraceful and immoral." She later told Sheila Rabb Weidenfeld, her press secretary, that, to her great surprise, "people have written me objecting to the idea of a President of the United States sleeping with his wife." Subsequently, in an interview with journalist Myra MacPherson, Betty Ford said that she had been asked everything except how often she slept with her husband and joked in response to MacPherson's inquiry that if asked such a question, she would answer "as often as possible." Her spontaneous remarks, which seemed like those of a woman next door, offended some clergy and those of a puritanical stripe. However, journalists and the general public applauded her levity, as well as the genial, low-key manner of her husband, and they found the Ford administration a welcome antidote to the Nixon administration and its attempt to make the presidency imperial.

According to Thomas, Betty Ford "enchanted reporters from the outset with her frankness and strong stands on controversial subjects." She broke taboos, Thomas noted: "She took a drink in public, picked up a cigarette, admitted to having taken tranquilizers for years, and to being a divorcee." She also said that she had undergone psychotherapy when she became depressed while her husband was traveling around the country making political speeches and that she had to raise her children virtually alone.

What was not known at the time was the extent of Betty Ford's use of alcohol and prescription drugs. For years, she had been taking a combination of painkillers to mask the pain of a pinched nerve and arthritis as well as tranquilizers to enable her to deal with her stressful life, washing it all down, as Kati Marton put it, with alcohol. She frequently was late for appointments and canceled appearances, and she spoke haltingly on occasion; according to Ford aide Stuart Spencer, while dining out she "would get bombed," making it "tough on her husband [who] really didn't know what to do." No one, including her staff, physicians, or reporters, apparently looked closely into the situation. Her addiction was not acknowledged publicly until 1978, more than a year after she left the White House, when her condition worsened to the point that the Ford family insisted she enter a rehabilitation facility. Thereafter, she became the guiding force in establishing the Betty Ford Center to help people with alcohol and drug abuse problems.

Although her forthright manner provided a well-publicized change from the bland platitudes of traditional first ladies, it did not suit the president's advisers. One aide, with an eye on forthcoming elections, drafted a memo point-

ing out the need to demarcate a sharp line between the conservative president and the liberal first lady on the issue of abortion. Rivalries broke out between her staff and the president's as each group sought to promote the interests of the person it served.

Drawn in part by curiosity, about 150 reporters, both male and female, attended Betty Ford's initial press conference, held within weeks after she became first lady. Handling questions well in spite of some nervousness, she said that she did not want to commit herself on whether she would encourage her husband to run for president in his own right. She announced her own focus as first lady would be on promoting the arts and programs to help deprived and retarded children as well as passage of the equal rights amendment. But before she could begin her efforts, two events took place that shaped the Ford administration.

Without advance warning, President Ford pardoned Richard Nixon on September 8, 1974. Betty Ford, who had been consulted about the decision, backed his action as a compassionate gesture, but large segments of the press and public were outraged that the former president had not been forced to confess and/or brought to trial. The Gallup Poll showed that Ford's public approval dropped overnight from 70 percent to 50 percent, and press approval, which had been nearly unanimous, plummeted to near zero. In common with some historians, both Betty Ford and her husband have said the pardon may well have cost Ford his bid to be elected president in the 1976 election.

Less than three weeks later, on September 28, Betty Ford was operated on for breast cancer, and her right breast was removed. In the past, little or no public announcement

had been made of first ladies' medical conditions. The Ford White House broke that precedent, releasing complete details of her mastectomy. The operation had been performed only a day after she had carried on with her regular schedule, including a tea for Lady Bird Johnson and her daughters in connection with the dedication of a memorial grove on the Potomac River to Lyndon Johnson.

As a result of Betty Ford's disclosure, the disease of breast cancer, which once had been only whispered about, received widespread media attention that encouraged other women to go to their doctors for examinations. Checkups increased by 300 to 400 percent. Among those seeking mammograms was Happy Rockefeller, the wife of Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, who subsequently lost both breasts to cancer. In a 1994 interview, Betty Ford said her willingness to publicize her cancer, which was detected on a routine examination suggested by Nancy Howe, her personal assistant, had more impact than anything else she had done as first lady.

During her recuperation period, she received more than fifty thousand cards, letters, and messages as well as thousands of dollars, which she donated to the American Cancer Society. As a result of a cruel disease, Betty Ford became a beacon of courage to other women and illustrated the potential of the first lady to serve as a role model. The *New York Times Magazine* declared that if she "achieved nothing else during her husband's administration, the light her trouble has shed on a dark subject would be contribution enough."

Betty Ford's background, which included admiration for Eleanor Roosevelt and a love of performing for an audience, prepared her to be the most outspoken first lady since

Roosevelt's time. Even as a child in Grand Rapids, Michigan, she had admired Roosevelt. She explained, "I really liked the idea that a woman was finally speaking out and expressing herself rather than just expressing the views of her husband." As a loyal political wife, Betty Ford had had little opportunity to speak out until she unexpectedly found herself first lady. She called the position "an opportunity that came at the right time for me . . . it gave me a career that filled in that gap with children having reached the age of independence." At the time the Fords moved into the White House, their three sons were working or attending college, and their youngest child, Susan, was in her last year of high school.

In her youth, Betty Ford had not been shy of the spotlight. In high school, she dreamed of becoming a dancer and put on shows for hospitalized children. She studied dancing for two summers at Bennington College in Vermont, where she met Martha Graham, the leading exponent of modern dance. Not selected for Graham's main troupe, she still made it to Carnegie Hall, performing in Graham's auxiliary group, and she was a fashion model in New York before returning home and teaching modern dance in Grand Rapids. She also worked as a fashion coordinator at a leading department store. A four-year marriage to an insurance salesman ended in divorce when she was twenty-nine years old.

In 1948, she and Gerald R. Ford, a Grand Rapids lawyer, were married in the middle of his first election campaign for Congress, and she soon learned that being married to an ambitious politician meant being without a husband much of the time. Living in a Washington suburb, she did what was expected of a political wife of her era. She cared for her children, took her husband's constituents sightseeing and

helped in his office, taught Sunday school in an Episcopal church, served as a den mother for Cub Scouts, and became active in the Congressional Club, an organization of wives of public officials. In 1964, a pinched nerve in her neck led to permanent pain, exacerbated by arthritis, and resulted in her use of prescription painkillers. Although the Fords had a happy marriage, her physical misery was compounded by emotional stress heightened by her husband's frequent absences to speak on behalf of fellow Republicans. When she came close to a nervous breakdown, Gerald Ford backed her in seeking psychiatric help—a bold step for the wife of a political figure in the 1960s.

Faced with the likelihood that he would never attain his dream of becoming Speaker of the House, since Democrats seemed solidly in control, Ford promised his wife that he would step down from his position in Congress after the election of 1976, and the couple was looking forward to retirement when he was chosen to be vice president. When fate propelled her into the White House, however, Betty Ford, who had become a staunch supporter of the equal rights amendment, believed that she had an obligation to become visible and active. As Carl Anthony put it, "By 1974 the role of women in American society was shifting, and she perfectly mirrored it." In common with other women of the period influenced by the women's liberation movement, she had worked before marriage, devoted years to raising a family, and now sought to be considered a person in her own right rather than an appendage to her husband.

By the time the Fords entered the White House, the demands on the first lady had become so complex that a support staff of about twenty-eight people had been assembled

in the East Wing. Although Betty Ford kept many of the same staff members, she replaced Helen Smith, Pat Nixon's press secretary, with Sheila Weidenfeld, signifying that she sought to make her press operation different from that of her predecessor. Weidenfeld, a television producer and the first broadcaster to serve as a first lady's press secretary, had some familiarity with the White House, since her father had been the secretary of Dwight Eisenhower's cabinet.

Betty Ford decided on the change after Smith had let reporters cluster around her when she nervously flew to Chicago to make her first major speech at a fund-raiser. Smith had promised to keep reporters away until the event was over, but when they appeared, Ford recalled, "I had to talk to them or seem surly." She had no particular directions for Weidenfeld: "When I asked 'what do you want me to do?'" Weidenfeld said, "she laughed and said, 'Well, hold on, I don't know what I'm supposed to do.'"

As she took hold of the job, Weidenfeld decided that it was important to make the first lady feel comfortable with the media because "I always with all my talk shows wanted people to come across well because that's what television is all about." She knew the first lady "couldn't do all those [requested television] interviews." Consequently, she looked for a venue that would be a good fit for Betty Ford's personal style, recognizing that "she's not the type to face the nation. She is the type to chat with it." When Weidenfeld agreed to let her be interviewed by the genial Morley Safer on the CBS show *Sixty Minutes,* she never expected the program, which aired on August 10, 1975, to create the storm of controversy that ensued.

Weidenfeld explained, "Nobody in the White House

except me wanted the first lady to do that program. She didn't want to do it herself. . . . 'Sixty Minutes,' in my opinion, is the only program of its type that shows people as they are. I felt the public should see Mrs. Ford as she is, that she was ready for it, and that's why I pressed her to do the show." The problem, as it turned out, was that a sizable segment of the public was not ready for a first lady to frankly address changing patterns of conduct.

In the interview, Betty Ford repeated her prochoice stand. She also said, as she had before, that she wouldn't be surprised if her children had tried marijuana, adding, "It's the type of thing that the young people have to experience, like your first beer or your first cigarette." Asked if she thought it was immoral for young people to live together without marriage, Betty Ford responded that young people were doing so and that it might even limit the divorce rate.

But Safer's bombshell question was this: "What if Susan Ford came to you and said, 'Mother, I'm having an affair'?" Ford answered, "Well, I wouldn't be surprised. I think she's a perfectly normal human being like all young girls, if she wanted to continue and I would certainly counsel and advise her on the subject, and I'd want to know pretty much about the young man that she was planning to have the affair with; whether it was a worthwhile encounter or whether it was going to be one of those. . . . She's pretty young to start affairs."

Safer then said, "But nevertheless, old enough," and Ford agreed, "Oh, yes, she's a big girl." Newspaper headlines the next day picked up the sensational aspects of the interview. "SUSAN'S A BIG GIRL, AFFAIR WON'T JOLT MRS. FORD," blared the *Los Angeles Times.* The newspapers missed the point that Betty Ford was calling for open communication even if

children's values differed from their parents' own. A public outcry followed. Thousands of letters attacking the first lady as an immoral disgrace were sent to the White House. Betty Ford was terrified that she had become a "real political liability to Jerry."

The Ford administration tried to make light of the situation. President Ford, in a jocular manner, told the press that when he heard what his wife had said, he figured he had just lost ten million votes, but when he read the newspapers, he raised his guess to twenty million. His press secretary, Ron Nesson, with whom Weidenfeld said she had to battle to get the same treatment given male members of the president's press staff, issued a statement that the president had "long ceased to be perturbed by his wife's remarks." According to Nancy Dickerson, Ford's staff honestly thought that Betty Ford was an albatross. Ford himself wrote later, "I was under no illusion as to what the reaction to her remarks would be [but] I had admired her candor from the moment we met and had always encouraged her to speak her mind."

Seeking to control the political damage, the White House sent a letter of explanation from Betty Ford to those who wrote inquiring about her remarks. Given by a recipient to the Associated Press, which published it, the letter spoke of the need for better communication with young people and assured correspondents that the Fords were faithful marriage partners. In the letter, Betty Ford stated, "I do not believe in premarital relations, but I realize that many in today's generation do not share my views."

By October 15, the White House mail was less one-sided in opposition. A total of 10,463 letters had been tallied in favor of Ford's comments, compared to 23,232 against. As

time passed, more favorable opinion appeared in the press. A Harris Poll three months after the episode showed 60 percent of the respondents accepted her answer to the question about her daughter and only 27 percent disapproved, leaving the pollsters to conclude that Betty Ford was a "solid asset" to her husband.

In November 1975, the *Ladies' Home Journal* asked seven well-known mothers of teenage children and two hundred readers in eight cities across the country to give their views regarding Betty Ford's comment on the possibility of her daughter having an affair. The magazine found that less than a third (30 percent) "expressed disapproval of Mrs. Ford's answer." Fifty-three percent approved, and the remaining 17 percent were neutral. Of the seven celebrity mothers, only one was critical. Phyllis Schlafly, leading opponent of the equal rights amendment, said, "It is no justification for Mrs. Ford to say her daughter is a 'big girl' and 'a normal human being.' To approve sin because other people are doing it was the moral sickness of Watergate."

Schlafly tangled repeatedly with the first lady over her enthusiasm for feminist causes. Betty Ford had encouraged her husband to designate 1975 as International Women's Year as a way of pushing for the ERA, which was, at the time, five states short of ratification to become part of the Constitution. She sent letters and called state legislators urging them to support the hotly debated amendment. She also urged her husband to appoint women to high offices and gloried in the appointment of Carla Hills to the cabinet as secretary of housing and urban development and Anne Armstrong as ambassador to England. To make her case to her husband, Betty Ford said she resorted to "pillow talk." In a *McCall's* interview

written by Myra MacPherson, which ran just after the Safer contretemps, she said, "If he doesn't get it in the office during the day, he gets it in the ribs at night."

Her ERA stand, publicized by frequent photographs of the first lady wearing a large "Ratify ERA in 1975" button, enraged some opponents. They accused her of abusing her position and using taxpayers' dollars for long-distance pro-ERA calls. When pickets gathered outside the White House proclaiming "BETTY FORD IS TRYING TO PRESS A SECOND-RATE MANHOOD ON AMERICN WOMEN," she became, according to Carl Anthony, the first president's wife to be picketed for her own political stance.

Less openly, she also became linked to another "first," one with tragic overtones: the first East Wing scandal to rock Washington. Maxine Cheshire, an investigative reporter for the *Washington Post,* discovered in the spring of 1975 that Nancy Howe, Betty Ford's assistant who was often referred to as her best friend, and husband Ed Howe had accepted a free vacation from a controversial Korean lobbyist. As a federal employee, Howe apparently had violated conflict-of-interest laws. Informed that the *Post* planned to print the story, Ed Howe died of what police called "a self-inflicted gunshot wound." Nancy Howe soon left the White House. Betty Ford was accused in print of firing her, but she denied doing so in her autobiography, saying, "When I was told she had to leave, I cried."

In addition to breaking precedents, Betty Ford took part in traditional first lady activities. She publicized the Hospital for Sick Children, a little-known Washington nursing home for chronically ill and abused children. She accompanied the president on a trip to China and, as captured in a

memorable photograph, danced with students, stealing "the diplomatic show from her husband on his otherwise forgettable Chinese journey," the *New York Daily News* reported. To back her husband's campaign against inflation, she cut down on White House expenses and bought relatively inexpensive clothes from American designers. She also brought a more casual note to White House entertaining after the rigid formality of the Nixon years, promoting American arts and crafts and borrowing American artifacts from museums to use as centerpieces.

In short, Betty Ford scored as an outstanding first lady in the eyes of the media. *Time* magazine made her one of its twelve "Women of the Year" in 1976. Her husband, however, was not named "Man of the Year." Beset by fallout from the Nixon pardon, inflation, the fall of Saigon in the Vietnam War, a lackluster record, and a perception of being accident prone after stumbling in public, Gerald Ford found his political star had dimmed. Ronald Reagan emerged as a strong challenger for the 1976 Republican nomination. Ford ended up as the candidate, although, in Troy's view, he was less suited than his wife to the growing emphasis on both personality-based politics and personality-based journalism. Troy saw this trend illustrated by the spectacular success of *People* magazine, "a weekly founded in 1974 to focus on 'individuals rather than issues,' which was already selling more than a million copies an issue."

Campaign buttons urged voters to "ELECT BETTY'S HUSBAND" and "KEEP BETTY IN THE WHITE HOUSE." The first lady herself campaigned vigorously, avoiding more controversial remarks. She won praise for her dignity at a Jewish National Fund dinner in June 1976 when the organization's

head succumbed to a heart attack while introducing her. She took control of the chaotic situation and led the three thousand diners in prayer while efforts were made to revive the stricken rabbi. She later wrote, "An inner strength takes over, and you don't know where it come from, and you can't take credit for it . . . no matter how scared I am, I seem to be able to carry on."

Gerald Ford lost the November election by a close margin to Democrat Jimmy Carter, who promised to bring a fresh perspective to Washington. When he was unable to give his concession speech because his voice had given out, Betty Ford read it for him. It was a remarkable end to a remarkable period in which a woman with a drinking and drug addiction problem had influenced the course of U.S. politics by merging the personal and the political. Was she actually a help or a hindrance to her husband—an asset or a liability? Perhaps there is no right answer. Liberals who liked Betty Ford were unlikely to vote for her conservative husband, while conservatives who disliked her might also have not wanted to vote for the opposing candidate. An example of a polarizing figure who came across as simply herself in the news media, Betty Ford stood out as the most significant feminist first lady between Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Rodham Clinton. As she fought against her own personal demons, she pushed back the boundaries surrounding the position of first lady.

ROSALYNN CARTER

Feminist causes also struck a strong chord with Rosalynn Carter, Betty Ford's successor. The determined wife and business partner of President Jimmy Carter, the little-known

former Georgia governor who won the presidency in a surprisingly successful campaign, Rosalynn Carter considered herself a working woman. She pressed for passage of the equal rights amendment and appeared at the Houston Conference for International Women's Year in 1977 with two of her predecessors, Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford, to show her support for it. When the ERA failed to be ratified during the Carter administration, she expressed great disappointment.

As first lady, Rosalynn Carter gave women's rights high priority. She successfully urged her husband to appoint women to high positions, and a record number of three served in the Carter cabinet. She also pushed for better mental health programs, help for the aged and the retarded, and childhood immunizations, and, like Pat Nixon, she promoted volunteerism, among other concerns.

Of greater significance to the media than her causes, however, was her relationship to her husband as a confidential adviser and political partner. The Carters made little secret of the fact that she knew about and did not hesitate to approve or disapprove almost all the actions of the president, although he did not always follow her advice. He sent her to Central and South America shortly after his inauguration in 1977 to present the administration's approaches to foreign policy. She played a role in setting up the Camp David talks on bringing peace to the Middle East in 1978, taking detailed notes on the conference. She advised her husband prior to his major "crisis of confidence" speech in 1979, which addressed national worry over inflation and energy and led to a cabinet shakeup. That year, she also made a humanitarian trip to Thailand that resulted in more international aid for Cambodian

refugees seeking to escape slaughter by a hostile government in their own country.

Summarizing her activities during the first fourteen months that Jimmy Carter was in office, the *Washington Star* gave the following countdown: visited 18 nations and 27 American cities; held 259 private and 50 public meetings; made 15 major speeches; held 22 press conferences; gave 32 interviews; attended 83 official receptions; and held 25 meetings with special groups in the White House. Clearly, few other presidents' wives had maintained so hectic a pace in an endeavor to counsel their husbands, carry out traditional responsibilities, and accomplish their own personal goals as first ladies. When a reporter exclaimed that Rosalynn Carter was "trying to take on all the problems we have," her press secretary, Mary Finch Hoyt, retorted, "And what's wrong with that?"

Perhaps the answer to that question was that her efforts did not necessarily translate into positive news coverage of the Carters. Journalists did not always view the activities of Rosalynn Carter favorably in an increasingly complex media world in which news of first ladies, like that of other prominent wives, no longer had an assigned place in the genteel columns of women's and society sections. As these sections were being phased out, news of women in the public eye now appeared on the front pages of newspapers or in new feature sections often devoted to opinionated pieces on celebrities and lifestyles. Conflict, controversy, criticism, gossip, use of unnamed sources—all the news elements employed for stories about political intrigue now were being applied to first ladies, too.

Reporters questioned Rosalynn Carter's disciplined

style, her interest in policymaking, and her right to play a substantive role in the Carter administration, although she was neither an elected nor an appointed official. She had been dubbed "the steel magnolia" during the 1976 campaign by reporters who intimated she concealed ambition behind a facade of southern femininity. Subsequently, she declared in her autobiography, the issue of her image became an "annoyance that just wouldn't go away."

She said, "The 'steel magnolia' is in print forever. And by the end of our first year in Washington I found myself described as being 'fuzzy'—which is better than having a bad image, but not as good as a good one." According to Hoyt, the "fuzzy" tag came from Sally Quinn, a writer for the *Washington Post* who initially dismissed Rosalynn Carter's divergent interests and wondered, "Why doesn't she do one thing like Lady Bird Johnson and the environment?" "Fuzzy" soon was cast aside, Rosalynn Carter recalled, because "by virtue of a piece of gossip here or there I had gone from having a 'fuzzy' image to being 'most powerful.'" Wielding power was perceived as suspect for a first lady in the late 1970s because it appeared to undermine her husband's leadership. Hoyt said Rosalynn Carter then faced a situation in which "now I'm supposed to be so powerful I'm being muzzled by the President's men and I'm not doing anything differently!"

Rosalynn Carter's difficulties with the press stemmed, in part, from the Carters' lack of acquaintance with the Washington journalistic scene. In his campaign, Jimmy Carter, described as a "born-again Christian," ran as an outsider who had pledged to restore honesty and moral values to a capital mired in questionable post-Watergate politics and government extravagance. Determined to show himself as a man of

the people, Carter, a Baptist Sunday school teacher, carried his own suitcase and wore cardigan sweaters to highlight heat conservation. Betty Beale, the *Washington Star* society columnist, noted that Carter set out to oppose "a Washington which he did not know, which did not know him, and which I am not sure he really ever understood." It was a Washington that could be unkind to those who violated its political and social mores, as Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter soon learned.

The Carters first showed their determination to alter the Washington scene by making changes in the interest of economy and informality. Rosalynn Carter wore the same dress for the presidential inaugural ball that she had worn for the inaugural ball in Georgia after her husband had been sworn in as governor. The president ordered staff cutbacks and pay reductions at the White House. He directed that thermostats be turned down to save energy as well as lower heating bills. He sold the presidential yacht and eliminated a portion of the fleet of presidential limousines. The Carters stopped holding annual events for ambassadors from other countries, which led to a decline in diplomatic entertaining. They cut down on glitter by initially eliminating dancing as well as hard liquor at White House dinners, substituted English for French menus, and replaced celebrity guests with average Americans.

Social reporters complained that the fun was gone from White House functions. Rather than being seen as decent, hardworking, and God-fearing people, the Carters were considered by some Washingtonians as narrow and penny-pinching, Hoyt noted, "so tasteless" and "so raw." The harshest criticism came when the Carters allowed their

nine-year-old daughter, Amy, to attend a state dinner, sit with the guests of honor, and read a book during most of the meal. Beale said, "Washington was shocked." Such unorthodox behavior did little to get the Carters off to a good start with representatives of the sophisticated Washington press corps.

When the Carters chose not to participate in the private parties that then marked the pinnacle of Washington social life, they offended important hostesses with ties to the media. Jody Powell, Carter's press secretary, told an interviewer after Carter lost the election of 1980 that he himself had made a major mistake in not facilitating contact between the first couple and the "leading female adherents of the Georgetown power elite." Nancy Dickerson agreed: "The Carters never bothered to embrace the mainstays of the Washington establishment. . . . They scorned Washington society. They alienated the press. They created a great deal of resentment." The most significant Georgetown hostess, however, Katharine Graham of the *Washington Post,* bore no grudges. Her newspaper endorsed Carter, not his opponent, Republican Ronald Reagan, although Reagan's wife, Nancy, made Graham her unofficial media adviser.

The Carters, owners of a family peanut business in the hamlet of Plains, Georgia, did not appear comfortable with the White House press corps. Helen Thomas, who covered the Carters on trips back home as well as in Washington, said that in Plains, the Carters were "genial hosts, though we always had the feeling they did not suffer us gladly." When the Carters decided to send their daughter to the public school near the White House, Thomas recalled, Amy looked at the reporters lined up to watch her leave for the first day of class

and asked, "Mom, do we still have to be nice to them?" Eager for Amy to be at home in the White House, the Carters allowed her to roller-skate in the East Room. Thomas said the Carters were very hurt after Jimmy Carter's defeat when a *Time* magazine columnist commented, "Now at last we're going to have some class in the White House."

Veteran Washington reporter Sarah McClendon complained that Rosalynn Carter "depended a great deal upon her public relations advisors." McClendon said, "The first time I saw her she was hesitant to talk to the press. She was always trying to keep her remarks off the record. . . . She turned to her public relations person to ask her if she could speak." McClendon insisted that she wanted to know what the first lady, not her adviser, thought but added, "I didn't have success with that approach because Mrs. Carter remained very, very cautious."

The new first lady displayed what one biographer called a "controlled manner, which allowed for few gaffes and fewer intimate revelations" than the style of her predecessor. Unhappily for Rosalynn Carter, that manner made her seem less open to the press than the popular Betty Ford. It was Jimmy Carter, not his wife, who made one of the most celebrated personal disclosures in U.S. politics. In an effort to appeal to voters who presumably decried his religiosity, Carter gave a preelection interview to *Playboy* magazine in which he confessed that he "had committed adultery in my heart many times."

The resulting furor, which quadrupled the usual circulation for *Playboy,* according to Gil Troy, outdid "Mrs. Ford's '60 Minutes' flap" and made Carter, with his conservative country background, into "a liberal political husband with an

astonishingly political wife." Certainly, Rosalynn Carter, when asked by a television reporter if she had ever committed adultery, gave a politic reply. She answered the reporter firmly, "If I had, I wouldn't tell you!" Referring to the *Playboy* interview, she simply said, "Jimmy talks too much, but at least people know he's honest and doesn't mind answering questions."

After Carter won the 1976 election, journalists pressed to know Rosalynn Carter's views on administration policy because it was widely reported that she was one of her husband's most trusted advisers, if not his chief one. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's genial national security chief, confided to Beale that "Rosalynn is the President's No. 1 adviser." Beale said Rosalynn herself acknowledged her importance when she told one thousand Democratic women, "Jimmy and I need your help." Her predecessors had not equated themselves with their husbands in such a fashion, saying instead, "The President needs your help."

In her autobiography, Rosalynn Carter said criticism of her influence "began to mount, when in the second year of Jimmy's presidency, I started attending Cabinet meetings." She thus was the first president's wife in history to sit in on the meetings. She said she did not participate but used them as a source of information for discussions with her husband.

"I never considered not attending them because of the criticism," she said; "I had already learned from more than a decade of political life that I was going to be criticized no matter what I did, so I might as well be criticized for something I wanted to do." In addition, Rosalynn Carter scheduled a weekly working lunch with her husband, arming herself with papers so she could refer to various subjects. After

figuring prominently in Carter's campaign, she said she continued to present issues for his consideration, often acting as a "sounding board for him."

In Washington, the Carters were viewed as loners without large networks of personal friends, making them dependent on each other for close companionship. Having both grown up in Plains, their lives had been linked for years through the bonds of background, marriage, family, church affiliation, and business and political interests. By the time Carter became president, there was no doubt about their intense relationship, which sparked media debate over the extent of her influence. To Rosalynn Carter, there was nothing mysterious or unusual about it: "In the White House my relationship with Jimmy was the same as it always had been. We discussed business and strategy when we were working together in the warehouse, or campaigning, and when he was serving as governor, the way most husbands and wives do when they take an interest in each other's work."

Some Washington journalists found this relationship difficult to understand. Rosalynn Carter, unlike her four immediate predecessors—Betty Ford, Pat Nixon, Lady Bird Johnson, and Jackie Kennedy—was a complete stranger to the capital. Betty Caroli speculated, "Had she trained at the center of national politics, she might have formed a loyal support system among reporters and other old timers." Without one, she still made a positive impact as first lady, but her media relations were rocky.

An experienced journalist and press secretary who had worked for Eleanor McGovern when her husband, George McGovern, ran for president against Richard Nixon in 1972, Mary Hoyt blamed some reporters for an inability to rise

above "insider" biases when covering the Carter White House. To her, "Mrs. Carter was unfairly criticized because she came in as a Washington outsider." If so, the situation demonstrated the failure of an elite group to recognize the motivation and orientation of a woman whose life had the makings of a Cinderella tale.

The daughter of a seamstress and an auto mechanic who died when she was thirteen years old, Rosalynn Carter, the oldest of four children, worked in a beauty shop to earn money as a teenager. After two years at Georgia Southwestern College, she was married, at the age of eighteen, to Jimmy Carter—the son of the most prominent family in Plains, the brother of her best friend, Ruth Carter, and her first and only sweetheart. Their wedding followed his graduation from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1946 and commission as a naval officer. Happy to be away from the inbred world of Plains, Rosalynn Carter enjoyed her independence as a peripatetic navy wife, giving birth to three sons in five years and taking care of her children while Carter was at sea.

Over her vigorous objections, Jimmy Carter, who believed the husband should be the head of the family, insisted on leaving the navy and going back home in 1953 when his father died to take over the family peanut warehouse. One concern was her relationship with her husband's formidable mother, the tart-tongued "Miss Lillian," with whom the Carters first lived after returning to Plains. Rosalynn Carter's attitude toward residing in Plains improved dramatically when she discovered an outlet for her abilities beyond housekeeping. She became a full-fledged partner in the peanut business, mastering management skills, keeping the books, and running the operation while her husband served in the

Georgia legislature. After giving birth to Amy in 1967, she overcame her fear of public speaking and campaigned on her own for Carter when he ran for governor successfully in 1970.

In the governor's mansion, she gained confidence in her social and administrative abilities, finding the move from Plains to the state capital at Atlanta an even greater transition than the move to the White House later. When Carter won the Democratic nomination for president and scored a narrow victory over Gerald Ford in 1976, she found it hard to believe she was the wife of the president of the United States. After walking hand in hand with her husband along Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol to the White House on Inauguration Day to symbolize that the Carters wanted to "be close to the people," the new first lady reminded herself, "We are first and foremost Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter from Plains, Georgia."

Although the Carters chose to remain a husband-and-wife team working together in a joint enterprise, as was common in the South, making the presidency a mom-and-pop operation did not sit well with segments of the press corps. Rosalynn Carter's journalistic treatment on the national stage raised numerous questions about women, power, and presidential marriages. Journalists were divided over the propriety of the personal closeness of the president and his wife in terms of its effect on governmental policy. When Carter was elected, was she elected, too? If so, to do what? Did her involvement in government make him look inadequate? Did she have the right to speak for her husband?

Arguments regarding the role of the first lady raged on. In the *Washington Post,* Abigail McCarthy presented the issue

as one of attitude toward political wives. McCarthy said she herself fell back on the old analogy of the "'mom and pop' store, the family farm," only to be put down by another woman journalist who said "the difference is that the store and the farm belonged to the family; the White House doesn't." Yet McCarthy concluded that she was not sure this was true: "In a way the American voter does elect the family."

In her actions, Rosalynn Carter took this position when she went on her precedent-breaking trip to Central and South America. She prepared carefully by taking lessons in Spanish, which she had been studying for years, and participating in official briefings. In each of the seven countries she visited, she made a concentrated effort to find out special concerns leaders had about U.S. policy. "I was determined to be taken seriously," she said, even though she encountered "a little discomfort in the State Department and on [Capitol] Hill."

Some members of Congress opposed the trip, leading her to respond that their objections were based on sexist ideas "because I was a woman going into very male territory." The heads of the countries she visited reportedly were confused about the purpose of her trip. A Brazilian newspaper editorialized, "No matter how well informed she may be, Mrs. Carter will lack the indispensable experience to negotiate with GOB [government of Brazil] authorities who have a tradition of negotiators [*sic*] which dates back to imperial times."

Newsweek pointed out that the "mission, in contrast to the usual goodwill-mongering assigned to the wives of presidents, was billed at [President] Carter's own request as substantive—scouting the hemisphere's heads of state for him and interpreting his sometimes gauzy policies to them."

Although, the newsmagazine continued, there were "sniffish remarks" that foreign policy was not properly a first lady's line of work, "this iron-willed first lady put the complaints briskly behind her . . . , remarking undeniably that she is 'the person closest to the President of the United States.'" Still, questions persisted about her right to speak as the president's surrogate, with women journalists among her sharpest critics. Meg Greenfield contended in a *Newsweek* column titled "Mrs. President" that Rosalynn Carter should not engage in diplomacy unless some way was found to hold her accountable for her actions. The *New York Times* said the question should be "not just who she is, but how well-equipped to handle a Presidential errand."

On her return, she reported to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee what she had seen and heard. Betty Beale said no one ever questioned the first lady's mental capabilities: "From the first she came across as a no-nonsense woman." There were those who thought she would have been more successful had she been less serious. "She wanted to be covered the way any member of her husband's administration would be covered," *Washington Post* reporter Donnie Radcliffe told Kati Marton. "She didn't want to be identified with tea parties and fashion stories . . . Rosalynn's lack of a light touch as much as anything may have been one of her weaknesses. She didn't have much humor. If she could have loosened up a bit and shown us her playful side."

Her homecoming was featured positively on CBS's *Evening News,* with a correspondent saying on June 12, 1977: "What started as a rather doubtful mission has apparently ended successfully." The next night, the program showed her husband telling reporters "she has succeeded almost to per-

fection." Lee Thornton, the CBS correspondent who covered Rosalynn Carter, had no patience with those who contended the first lady deserved sympathetic treatment because she was subject to many pressures. Thornton told a journalist that the first lady was a "tough cookie" who "wanted the job, ran for office," and "knew what it was all about," adding that "the women who get into the White House actually want it . . . more than almost anything."

Rosalynn Carter took no more diplomatic trips of the South American type, on which she said she had been sent because the president was too busy to go. She contended later this was because her husband was "able to go himself." Her subsequent trip to Thailand was in keeping with the efforts of previous first ladies to ameliorate distress caused by wars. She focused media attention on the grave situation facing Cambodian refugees as she discussed their plight on NBC's *Today* show and assisted in the organization of relief efforts.

In addition to serving as her husband's adviser, Rosalynn Carter had her own projects. Within a month following the inauguration, she held a press conference to announce the formation of the President's Commission on Mental Health. She had developed a strong interest in mental health issues while her husband had been governor of Georgia, where she had been a member of a commission that overhauled the state's entire mental health system. Although she could not serve as the actual chair of the national commission because of legal problems, she accepted an honorary title and spoke on the subject repeatedly in the United States as well as in Canada and in Europe.

The first lady described herself as "crushed" when the *Washington Post* did not cover the story of the commission's

formation, although the *New York Times* had a "good, substantive article." Instead of writing about the mental health commission, the *Post* focused on the Carters' decision to ban hard liquor at state dinners. The first lady said the decision was based on economy—she had been told "we might save one million dollars by serving only wine and ending our state dinners before midnight so we wouldn't have to pay overtime to the staff."

The press treated the story differently, comparing Rosalynn Carter to nineteenth-century first ladies who had instituted "dry" polices—"Sahara Sarah" Polk and "Lemonade Lucy" Hayes. She indignantly retorted, "They make me sound like a real prude. I'm not a prude." In her autobiography, she said the "wine story created a major flap, much to our chagrin." She complained that journalists did not see the mental health commission as news: "I was told by the press it was not a 'sexy' issue—but 'no booze in the White House' obviously was." She stated she could understand that it is "much more entertaining for people to read about the glamour and excitement of beautiful clothes and celebrities and personal problems and 'no booze' than it is to read about the number of people in the country who need help with mental health problems, but it didn't seem right."

Rosalynn Carter devoted much effort to her mental health campaign, overseeing the issuing of a report in 1978 containing 117 recommendations that she personally presented to the public by appearing on two television news broadcasts, ABC's *Good Morning America* and PBS's *MacNeil/Lehrer Report*. She was distressed when Joseph Califano, the secretary of health and human services, appeared to be dragging his feet on implementing recommendations that were

eventually included in a bill submitted to Congress in May 1979, called the Mental Health Systems Act.

A month earlier, she had testified personally before a subcommittee of the Senate Human Resources Committee in support of the recommendations, making her the first president's wife since Eleanor Roosevelt to testify before Congress. The bill was passed and funded by Congress, signed into law as the Mental Health Systems Act by President Carter in October 1980, but his administration was almost finished at this point. His successor, Ronald Reagan, cut most of the funding needed to implement the act, although expansion of the National Institute of Mental Health was carried out.

As first lady, Rosalynn Carter became the first president's wife to maintain her own working space in the East Wing of the White House, now officially called the Office of the First Lady, rather than in the family quarters. She reorganized and upgraded the functions and pay for her staff, which numbered about eighteen persons, but the effort generated some unfavorable publicity. Mary Hoyt said in her memoir that when it was reported her salary was $47,500 annually, considerably more than that of past press secretaries, the public complained "that we're being paid at all." Hoyt said she realized that "the public and the press had little understanding of the pressures of scope and dimension of the first lady's job."

A firestorm arose in 1979 when Edith J. Dobelle, former chief of protocol at the State Department, was selected for the new position of chief of staff for the first lady and paid $56,000, the same amount as the president's top aides. President Carter himself defended the appointment, designed to make the East Wing operation more efficient and better coordinated with what went on in the West Wing,

saying the first lady needed "someone competent" to supervise her offices. Feminists might have been expected to view the equalization of East Wing and West Wing salaries as a step forward for women, but the press did not picture it this way. Some reporters seized the opportunity to write stories about Rosalynn Carter's total staff costs of $650,000 annually, with headlines such as "THE IMPERIAL FIRST LADY AND HER COSTLY COURT." A *Newsweek* cover story in November 1979 referred to Rosalynn as "The President's Partner," applauded her political sense as being greater than her husband's, and said "the real fear of Rosalynn's power may lie simply in the fact that she is an ambitious woman."

When Carter ran for reelection in 1980, Rosalynn Carter hit the campaign trial, leaving her husband in Washington to deal with the Iranian hostage crisis caused by militants who broke into the U.S. embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979. Some fifty to sixty Americans were taken hostage in protest against Washington's decision to allow the deposed shah of Iran to receive medical treatment in the United States. The inability of the Carter administration to secure the release of the hostages (who remained in custody until Carter's term ended), coupled with an energy shortage that produced long lines for gasoline and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, sealed Carter's defeat by Ronald Reagan.

Rosalynn Carter did everything she could to keep this from happening. In the *Washington Post,* Sally Quinn described her as a "nurse" fighting valiantly against the odds to reach the public on behalf of her husband, "the patient." Comparing the first lady to a nurse "who has come to the waiting room to reassure the concerned relatives," Quinn wrote that "people seem to like her," but "they just don't

know about her husband." When Carter lost the election, Rosalynn Carter said she was "bitter enough for both of us." She returned with her husband to Plains, where she spent the next three years writing her autobiography, which became a best seller. As first lady, she had made a commendable showing, with her approval rating of 59 percent in the fall of 1979 more than doubling her husband's—but not equal to the August 1976 approval rating of Betty Ford, at 71 percent. Rosalynn Carter was respected but perhaps a bit feared and not particularly beloved.