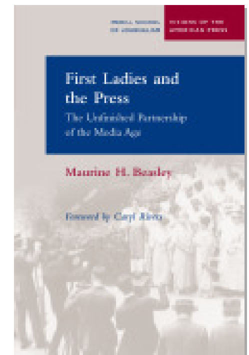
# 7. Hillary Rodham Clinton as Media Polarizer

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attempt to penetrate the private relationship of a president and a spouse. How important is the role of a president's wife in a democratic government? Why should eyebrows go up if she serves as an adviser to her husband? Should her projects and good works, carried out in part with federal tax dollars, be accepted at face value without some tangible effort to measure the effectiveness of their impact? Is she in the White House only as window dressing for her husband? Should she not be expected to wield some kind of power, even though it may be derived from her position as a wife? If she does have a measure of power, should her relationship with her husband be privileged, in the way that a lawyer/client relationship is privileged? But since taxpayers fund her office, should not she be held accountable, at least to some degree, to the public for what she does? Perhaps there are no clear answers, but such questions seem of more importance than a first lady's dress size and the nature of her wardrobe.

If Americans want a president's wife to be a queen, then they naturally crave details of her looks and deportment. If they want an associate president or at least are willing to accept a first lady who wishes to be one, then they need to address the degree to which she can be an autonomous individual. This issue confronted the American public and the news media that strives to represent it in striking terms during the tenure of Barbara Bush's successor, Hillary Rodham Clinton.

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SEVEN

# HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON AS MEDIA POLARIZER

Few individuals in U.S. history, let alone first ladies, have polarized the public as thoroughly as Hillary Rodham Clinton, the wife of President Bill Clinton. Making history by being elected to public office in her own right upon leaving the White House, she deftly deflected criticism of her style and past conduct, standing out as a role model for feminists as well as a target for those who accused her of overstepping her bounds as a wife. Campaigning while still in the White House, she won a U.S. Senate seat from the state of New York in 2000, reaffirming herself as a potent force in the Democratic party and a possible candidate for the presidency in 2008 or 2012.

Her tenure as first lady from 1993 to 2001 was notable in many ways, some emblematic of achievements for women, others fraught with embarrassment. She was the first president's wife to hold an advanced degree and to have been a practicing attorney before moving into the White House from Arkansas, where her husband had been governor. She was the first president's wife to set up an office alongside her

husband's advisers in the West Wing of the White House as well as to have her own office for social affairs in the East Wing, the traditional domain of the first lady's staff. She was the first president's wife to chair an important task force—one entrusted with reforming the nation's fragmented health care system; although the effort failed, it identified her as a key policymaker. She was the first president's wife to insist on the appointment of several women to top administration posts, including Donna Shalala as secretary of health and human services. And she was the first president's wife to serve as a global advocate for women, delivering an acclaimed speech on human rights in 1995 at the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing.

Other Rodham Clinton "firsts" smacked of scandal. She was the first president's wife forced to come to her husband's defense during impeachment proceedings against him, involving charges of lying about his sexual relations during Oval Office trysts with a government intern, Monica Lewinsky. She was the first president's wife to have a close legal associate and friend commit suicide as Vincent Foster did in 1993 while working as a White House deputy counsel, raising questions about what knowledge he might have had of the Clintons' personal and business affairs. Accusations that files were removed from his office fueled speculation, which proved unfounded, that he had been murdered.

She also was the first president's wife to be subpoenaed before a grand jury, being required to testify about her role in a complicated Arkansas land development transaction known as Whitewater. She was the first president's wife accused of making money unethically in cattle futures trading. She was criticized for allegedly having profited as a lawyer

from her relationship to her husband when he was governor of Arkansas. She was called a liar in connection with missing billing records from the Rose Law Firm in Little Rock, where she had been a partner before her husband's election as president. She faced disapproval in connection with the firing of seven White House travel office employees, who supporters said were unjustly dismissed. When she and her husband moved out of the White House, they were accused of taking furniture that critics said had been given to the nation, not to the Clintons personally. In each of these instances, she denied any impropriety or wrongdoing.

In addition, she faced questions about her image, which critics claimed she altered repeatedly for political motives. Her hairstyles and clothing received extensive attention as evidence of her views on femininity. She discarded headbands after being ridiculed for wearing them during the 1992 campaign and experimented with different ways of wearing her hair during her White House years. With her wardrobe varying from business and professional attire to ladylike outfits and glamorous evening gowns, some speculated that she downplayed her feminism as elections approached. When she wore a teal blue pantsuit for a television interview with Barbara Walters, the host who introduced her asked if it was not odd for a first lady to wear pants. Reflecting on the incident, Neel Lattimore, one of her press secretaries, said, "Mrs. Clinton never wore the 'pants' in the family, but she did reinforce the fact there is no such thing as a 'traditional' first lady—every first lady creates her own traditions." In her case, the creation of tradition seemed equated with generating more controversy than any predecessor, with the possible exception of Eleanor Roosevelt.

On all sides, Hillary Rodham Clinton, as she announced her name would be in the White House, drew both acclaim and condemnation. When he took office, President Clinton made no secret of the fact that she was one of his chief advisers and that he valued her contribution to his administration. In doing so, he gave public recognition to the wielding of power by a wife, which led to arguments over the appropriate dimensions of the first lady's role. Many first ladies had exercised power, some more publicly than others, but even in the cases of Roosevelt and Rosalynn Carter, two of the most politically active first ladies, few doubted that the final decisions rested with their husbands. Hillary Rodham Clinton's influence, in contrast, appeared to approach that of a copresident at the start of Bill Clinton's presidency.

By extension, the debate over her role turned into a heated argument on the proper place of women in society as a whole. In her memoir, *Living History,* Hillary Rodham Clinton said, "We were living in an era in which some people still felt deep ambivalence about women in positions of public leadership and power. In this era of changing gender roles, I was America's Exhibit A."

The news media occupied a key position in the battle between her supporters and her detractors, with both sides vying for publicity to support their views. Commentators were divided into two camps. Those for her praised her as an inspiring professional woman; those against her, including conservative talk show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh, labeled her a "femi-Nazi" and intimated she was a lesbian. When her husband appointed her to head the President's Health Care Task Force five days after his inauguration, Betty Winfield, a journalism historian, noted that skeptical columnists argued

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"she risk[ed] being accused of using her marriage as a route to advancement (a variation of the old woman-sleeps-her-way-to-the-top story)." On one hand, reports surfaced of discord at the White House, with stories of the first lady engaging in shouting matches, hurling a lamp, and arguing with her husband. On the other hand, the first lady was given high marks as the concerned mother of a teenage daughter (who had been declared off-limits to the press) and the witty, fun-loving employer of a loyal personal staff of about twenty headed by Margaret Ann "Maggie" Williams. The first African American to hold such a position, Williams was named a special assistant to the president, elevating the Office of the First Lady in the White House bureaucracy and making her Rodham Clinton's emissary at high-level meetings.

As the years went by, with Bill Clinton winning a second term in 1996, supporters said his wife served as a whipping boy (or, in this case, girl) for conservative political opponents. It was these opponents who backed Kenneth Starr, the special prosecutor appointed over Rodham Clinton's objections, to investigate Whitewater and, subsequently, the Lewinsky affair. Detractors, by contrast, claimed the media were biased in the first lady's favor, a contention that she denied, insisting "the reality was that the loudest and most effective voices in the media were anything but liberal."

In the midst of this controversy, members of the White House press corps found themselves sidelined, illustrating a decline in their importance to the field of political communication. Instead of holding periodic press conferences and/or developing close relationships with the reporters at hand, Hillary Rodham Clinton choose to go directly to the

public via television programs and to make use of a new White House Web site set up by the Clinton administration to publicize her activities. She gave some interviews, but these were carefully rationed. To the dismay of Washington reporters, her first major interview was with Marian Burros, a food writer, perhaps, in Betty Caroli's words, "to temper talk of too much clout in a first lady." Run on the front page of the *New York Times* on February 1, 1993, the article featured the first lady's ban on smoking in the White House, the decision to return broccoli to the White House menu (the vegetable had been banished by President Bush, who disliked it), and domestic themes related to entertaining.

According to Rodham Clinton, she had no idea that the story and the picture accompanying it, which showed her in a hostess role wearing an off-the-shoulder black dress, would lead to divisive arguments. While critics surmised "the story was contrived to 'soften' my image," she wrote, "ardent defenders" wondered "if I was really worrying about floral centerpieces and the color of table linens, how could I be substantive enough to head a major policy effort?" She concluded, "It was becoming clear to me that people who wanted me to fit into a certain box, traditionalist or feminist, would never be entirely satisfied with me as me—which is to say, with my many different, and sometimes paradoxical, roles."

Wary of the journalistic sound bite and efforts to simplify rather than to explain complexity, she kept herself apart from most reporters. Her experience under the glare of national publicity during the 1992 campaign had not been a happy one. In *Living History,* she referred to the 1992 election and noted the "tricky, delicate and important relation-

ship" between political candidates and reporters, adding, "I didn't fully understand it."

In the White House, her staff feared that she would be made a scapegoat by the news media. According to Lattimore, "There was a tremendous trust issue between the first lady's staff and the White House press corp. We often said that if a snowstorm hit Washington and the power went out all over town that the press would find some way to blame Mrs. Clinton." Another factor, he said, was the staff's limited knowledge of how journalists operated: "I think as a staff we were terribly inexperienced and none of us really had long-standing relationships with the reporters that were covering Mrs. Clinton." He added, "Also, it is important to remember that reporters and media organizations were not sure how to cover the first lady."

Hillary Rodham Clinton did not fit into the existing patterns of first lady coverage, generally reserved for lifestyle and feature sections. As Lattimore said, "Here was a first lady [who] was photographed and appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* wearing a beautiful sexy gown, hosting the governors to dinner, and the next day she was wearing a pants suit and touring a hospital and talking to doctors about health care reform." Depending on the angle taken, journalists depicted her variously as a saint, a sinner, a career woman, a wife, a mother, a presidential adviser, a political strategist, a feminist, a ruthless power behind the throne, a high-powered lawyer, a global advocate for women and children, a public policy expert, a health care reformer, a hostess, a religious believer, and a sex symbol (after she was photographed in a seductive pose for *Vogue* magazine wearing a clinging, black Donna Karan dress). She refused to be typecast in any partic-

ular role. To a greater extent than even the pathbreaking Eleanor Roosevelt, Hillary Rodham Clinton presented a challenge to reporters attempting to offer an accurate picture of a nontraditional first lady.

Presidents' wives customarily had been portrayed as symbolizing the heart, not the head, of an administration and were not the subject of news articles on governmental policy. Rodham Clinton, however, displayed a perplexing mixture of intellect and emotions and defied placement in any single reportorial category. Were her activities mainly political or social or symbolic? Should the scandals that dogged her be written off as dubious political intrigue or treated as subjects for serious investigative reporting? Should the stories of her husband's infidelities affect her own coverage? What reporters should be assigned to her? Women of her own age group, some of whom acknowledged they identified with her as a role model? Veteran political reporters? Fashion and feature writers? Where should stories about her be placed in newspapers? In main news columns or in lifestyle sections? Her skittishness in dealing with the Washington press corps, which included her decision to hold health care task force deliberations in secret, did not help matters.

She held only one full-scale White House press conference—on April 22, 1994, a day when journalists were expecting the imminent death of former president Richard Nixon. Since she wore a pink sweater set and a black skirt, which could be interpreted as an attempt to soften her image, she noted the event was called the "Pink Press Conference." At the time, both she and her husband were under attack. A month earlier, the story had broken about her commodity

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trading; she also was being criticized on ethical grounds in connection with Whitewater and the travel office firings. And President Clinton had just been accused of sexual harassment by Paula Jones. In the opinion of Ann Blackman, a *Time* correspondent, the first lady did not give a particularly convincing performance. She said, "Hillary does not want to be challenged. I'm not sure she's guilty of anything, but she acts as if she is." With the death of Nixon that night, her news conference got relatively little news play.

Although Rodham Clinton promised to be more open with the press, she did not attempt to court either White House reporters or the Washington elite. Helen Thomas, whose years as a United Press International correspondent made her the dean of the White House press corps, tried for nearly six years before she got an actual interview with the first lady. In her autobiography, Thomas wrote that Rodham Clinton "would talk to the media but her press lunch guests were mainly columnists from outside Washington." Thomas said she was told by an aide that the first lady "was afraid of what Washington reporters will ask."

According to another reporter, Barbara Matusow, Rodham Clinton was engaged behind the scenes in a lot of the activities traditionally carried out by first ladies, "but I think she didn't want to paint herself that way." She said the first lady "did cooperate with me on a piece for *Washingtonian* magazine [a local lifestyle publication] about her style of entertaining, and she posed in front of a doorway with tables set up for guests, looking very lovely." According to Matusow, "There was part of her that wanted to show that she was a regular woman and . . . I actually think she did care about the

color of the napkins but that wasn't the role she relished the best." Matusow said she "saw herself doing important policy work, which meant more to her."

In 1998, when the Helen Thomas interview finally took place, Rodham Clinton told the reporter she had learned that to cope with the pressure of White House life, "you have to fall back on the most basic values that you were raised with." In her case, they were values rooted in the Methodist Church and derived from her upbringing by midwesterners who believed in hard work, education, and determination to overcome obstacles. The brilliant daughter of a businessman and a homemaker, she grew up in Park Ridge, Illinois, a middle-class Chicago suburb.

After graduating from Wellesley College, where she was the first student selected to give a commencement speech, she entered Yale Law School. Concerned with legal issues affecting disadvantaged children, she interned with Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund and worked for her in Boston after graduating in 1973. In addition, she was employed for several months as a staff attorney for the congressional committee considering impeachment proceedings against President Nixon in the wake of Watergate. Theoretical work that she did on children's rights would be used against her in later years.

A chance encounter in the Yale Law Library with Bill Clinton, a classmate from Arkansas with political aspirations, resulted in a romance that took precedence over her career plans in the East. Against the advice of friends, she moved to Arkansas in 1974 to be with Clinton and taught at the University of Arkansas Law School. The couple married in 1975,

but she kept her maiden name and joined the prominent Rose Law Firm in Little Rock. Their only child, Chelsea, was born in 1980.

After Clinton won his first bid to be governor, the couple was shocked when he was defeated for a second term in 1980. When she learned that one of the reasons was perceived voter unhappiness with her bookish appearance and insistence on using her own name, Hillary Rodham quickly took his name and spruced up her wardrobe to present a more feminine image to the public. Bill Clinton went on to win five more elections, even though allegations of philandering were raised against him.

As Hillary Rodham Clinton advanced at the Rose firm, she became the family's chief breadwinner. Taking charge of the family finances, she made a profit of $100,000 from an initial investment of $1,000 in cattle futures trading, with the help of an experienced investor. The Clintons also joined two friends, James and Susan McDougal (who had connections with a failing concern, Madison Guaranty Savings and Loan), in the Whitewater Development Company, set up to invest in land for resale, although the proposed development was not a success. These financial activities led to investigations that plagued the Clintons on their road to the White House.

During her husband's tenure as governor, Hillary Rodham Clinton continued to be a practicing attorney of considerable stature, being named to the list of "100 Most Influential Lawyers in America." She also served on corporate boards, including that of Wal-Mart. At the same time, she was involved in Bill Clinton's gubernatorial campaigns and in

policy matters at the state level. As governor, Clinton appointed her to chair a committee to reform public schools. Her efforts resulted in legislation to raise school standards.

When Bill Clinton decided to seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 1992, conservatives backing President George H. W. Bush, the Republican candidate for reelection, cited their commitment to traditional family values. They aimed their fire at both Clintons. They attacked Bill Clinton on grounds of having extramarital relations and his wife on grounds of holding liberal ideas related to her early legal interests. As news of Bill Clinton's alleged liaison with Gennifer Flowers, a nightclub singer, circulated, his wife saved his candidacy by stepping forward to show forgiveness and support.

She sat beside her husband on January 26, 1992, when he appeared for an interview on CBS's *Sixty Minutes,* in an effort to downplay the harmful effects of a story in the *Star,* a supermarket tabloid. The story alleged Bill Clinton, while governor, had carried on a twelve-year affair with Flowers. Although Clinton did not say whether he had committed adultery, he admitted having caused pain in his marriage. Hillary Clinton suddenly spoke up after the interviewer commented that the couple must have come to a marital "arrangement." She said heatedly, "I'm not sitting here—some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette. I'm sitting here because I love him, and I honor what we've been through together. And, you know, if that's not enough for people, then heck, don't vote for him." Although she was forced to apologize to Wynette, a country-western singer, and her fans for what appeared to be a belittling reference to

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the singer's popular song "Stand by Your Man," Hillary Clinton's loyalty enabled Bill Clinton to stay in the race and win the nomination.

A few weeks later came a more infamous remark, one that was to haunt her for years and provoke hostility from wives who did not work outside the home, particularly after the comment was widely repeated on conservative radio talk shows. Denying a charge from a primary opponent of her husband that the Rose Law Firm had improperly benefited from her marriage to the governor, she told a reporter on March 16: "I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas, but what I decided to do was fulfill my profession, which I entered before my husband was in public life. And I've worked very, very hard to be as careful as possible, and that's all I can tell you." The first part of her statement—"I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas"—was immediately picked up by the news media.

She quickly tried to issue a clarification, stating, "The work that I have done as a professional, a public advocate, has been aimed . . . to assure that women can make the choices . . . whether it's full-time career, full-time motherhood or some combination." But CNN and other news organizations continued to reduce her remark to "I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas." In response, as the Democratic convention approached in July, she was said to "soften" her image. Emphasizing her domestic side, she participated in a good-natured cookie bakeoff contest sponsored by *Family Circle* magazine that pitted her chocolate chip cookie recipe against that of the first lady, Barbara Bush. In May, however, Barbara Bush's staff had demanded that she

apologize (which she did) for alleging in a *Vanity Fair* interview that George Bush had a mistress, a story she contended the press was reluctant to probe.

During the election campaign, Republicans criticized positions Hillary Clinton had taken on family law issues before moving to Arkansas. Richard Bond, chair of the Republican National Committee, castigated reports on legal theory that she had written for the Carnegie Council on Children as radical cant that undermined the family unit. Pouncing on her abstract argument that children should have the same rights in court as their parents, he charged she was a "law-suit mongering feminist who likened marriage to slavery and encouraged children to sue their parents." Another critic was Richard Nixon, the disgraced former president, who declared in the pages of the *New York Times* that Bill Clinton was unlikely to be elected because his wife was too bright. Voters, he said, would not accept a man whose wife was "too strong and too intelligent." Opponents also looked askance at her work on the board of the nonprofit Legal Services Corporation, to which she had been appointed by President Jimmy Carter. The federally funded organization, set up to assist indigents, had provided legal aid for some controversial causes such as sex-change operations and Native American land claims in the state of Maine.

When Clinton was elected president in 1992, Hillary Rodham Clinton, like her husband, was still smarting from the effects of the bitter campaign, which had seen her denigrated in print as well as broadcast media. Conservative magazines caricatured her appearance viciously and attacked her with headlines such as "HILLARY FROM HELL." The *New York Times* commented that between January and September

1992, numerous articles in major publications made some comparison between her and Lady MacBeth.

Not comfortable with reporters, she tried to ignore the Washington press corps, even when she was in the midst of pushing her complicated health care reform proposal, which desperately needed public understanding and backing. She had little awareness of how journalists could be involved in efforts to build consensus, and she insisted on barring the public and press from task force meetings instead of seeking coverage that might have produced constructive feedback. Her preference for secrecy led to litigation that eventually reached a federal appeals court. The court held the first lady was, in effect, a government employee and consequently not bound to abide by laws forbidding advisory groups from meeting behind closed doors. The ruling was the first that established a legal basis for the position of the first lady.

Rodham Clinton's reticence to deal with Washington reporters frustrated Martha Sherrill, who was assigned to cover the first lady for the *Washington Post* in 1993. When Sherrill finally got an interview, she found her "warm and folksy but at the same time sort of preachy. . . . A mix of Bible and ancient wisdom. . . . She wasn't telling us who she was or what sort of first lady she wanted to be." Sherrill said reporters "ended up writing about her clothes and her hair, because that's all we had."

Later, Rodham Clinton saw that her aloofness had been a bad idea, telling Helen Thomas that if she had it to do over again, "I would try to learn more about what the press expected of me, because I really didn't understand that at all. . . . So my lack of experience in that area of public opinion and press coverage is something that I had to learn the hard

way." But at the time, Thomas said, "she gave the impression that she neither needed nor cared for any kind of advice." Perhaps this was because she had been received so warmly on Capitol Hill as the first lady when she went there to testify on health care that she pressed forward blindly with an elaborate plan to give health coverage to all Americans.

Ultimately, she was outmaneuvered by the insurance interests that ran "Harry and Louise" commercials on television, effectively attacking her proposal by portraying average Americans fearing it might cause them to lose existing benefits. The reform effort died on Capitol Hill in 1994. As a result, Thomas said, the first lady was held responsible for votes by "angry white males" in the November 1994 election that "gave Republicans control of both houses of Congress for the first time in forty years."

She never held another policymaking post in her husband's administration, although she continued to be extremely active, speaking and writing on issues of particular concern to women and children in the United States and abroad and promoting breast cancer awareness. On September 5, 1995, she delivered a stirring address on human rights at the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, criticizing China and other countries for human rights violations regarding women. This was the first of many trips that established her as a global women's rights advocate. According to Lattimore, she visited more countries than any other first lady.

Maureen Santini, no longer covering the White House but observing the first lady from afar, saw Hillary Rodham Clinton's reluctance to meet the Washington press corps as reflecting indecision on how to present herself as the presi-

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dent's wife. Santini said, "Hillary Clinton tested a new model of first lady prematurely—before she'd had time to learn the ropes herself at the White House—and it didn't take." Santini continued, "After her first major defeat over health care reform, she retreated a bit and from then on obviously spent a lot of time and energy trying to be herself without incurring the wrath of the public." In Santini's view, "It may have annoyed her when her changing hair styles received attention but in a sense each new hairdo represented a new attempt to figure how to fit into the role and still be herself."

Rodham Clinton appeared uncomfortable with media attention that highlighted her personality or analyzed her attempts at defining herself, preferring, as she said in *Living History,* "to convey my thoughts and opinions directly to the public." Following in the footsteps of Eleanor Roosevelt, the first lady launched her own chatty syndicated newspaper column in the summer of 1995. Her weekly "Talking It Over" column, however, never hit a consistent tone or attained the popularity of her predecessor's "My Day" column. According to Mandy Grunwald, a close adviser, Rodham Clinton gave up on reporters because she "wanted them to focus on substance and they wrote only psychobabble pieces about her." Kati Marton attributed this to her misunderstanding of her times, not realizing that voters in the 1990s cared less about policy and projects than about character and personality.

Rodham Clinton's appearance in different types of attire, as well as different hairdos, led to continual coverage in terms of her image. Was she trying to appear less assertive, more appealing, more glamorous, and younger than before? What kind of statement was she trying to communicate? Lat-

timore said simply, "She changed her hair because she liked to." Her various outfits highlighted diverse aspects of the lives of today's women as wives, mothers, hostesses, and professional women, he noted: "The bottom line is that Mrs. Clinton was not very different than most working women [although] she was terribly aware of the image associated with being the first lady and when traveling overseas always dressed in a fashion that was respectful and stylish."

Unlike the presidential couples who preceded them, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Bill Clinton represented the baby boomers, members of the generation born after World War II. They modeled a new type of political marriage, with the wife being a well-educated professional and her spouse's equal, not his subordinate. Talk even emerged of a copresidency. Their model could have been expected to appeal to a nation of two-income families accustomed to both parents bringing home paychecks. By 1986, when the Clintons' daughter, Chelsea, started grade school, more than 50 percent of mothers with school-age children held a job. In the case of the Clintons, however, the model turned into a symbol of discordant gender relationships.

When Bill Clinton campaigned for president in 1992, he told his supporters, "Buy one, get one free!" Never before had a presidential candidate been so open about the advisory role that he expected his wife to play. Although there was some initial criticism on grounds of nepotism, much of the public responded positively to her appointment as head of the health care task force. Mainstream magazines loved her—she appeared in attractive photographs on the covers of *Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report,* the *New York Times Magazine,* the *Los Angeles Times Magazine, People, Vogue,*

*Mirabella, Parade, TV Guide, Redbook, Family Circle,* and *Good Housekeeping,* with headlines such as "SAINT HILLARY" or "ASCENT OF A WOMAN." The press gave attention to a speech she made at the University of Texas, calling for a new "politics of meaning" with religious overtones. At the end of the first year of the Clinton administration, her poll standings ran well ahead of her husband's, with 62 percent approval for her performance as first lady compared to 48 percent approval of the job the president was doing. Conservative opponents, meanwhile, kept up a barrage of criticism.

Then the tide of mainstream support turned. Allegations of improprieties in the Whitewater affair resurfaced in news coverage after the suicide of Vince Foster, which set off rumors of foul play. In the spring of 1994, Michael Barone, of *U.S. News & World Report,* charged that journalists had tended to go easy on the first lady. He said many journalists were strong believers in feminism, did not want to attack a president's wife, and were not holding her "to the same standard as other people in public life." Health care reform flopped, and Democrats lost in the midterm elections.

In January 1995, a journalistic brouhaha developed when Rodham Clinton invited eleven women journalists, all of whom wrote gossip and advice columns along with traditional articles on first ladies' entertaining and fashions, to lunch at the White House. The *New York Times* carried a front-page story on the event on January 10. Headlined "HILLARY CLINTON SEEKING TO SOFTEN A HARSH IMAGE," the story by Marian Burros began: "Saying that she is eager to present herself in a more likable way, Hillary Rodham Clinton said today she had been 'naïve and dumb' about national politics and was to blame for the failure of the health care

overhaul plan last year." The White House demanded an apology on grounds Burros had reported off-the-record remarks.

Burros claimed she had not violated any rules, but other reporters present agreed she had. Cindy Adams, a *New York Post* gossip columnist, said the story was particularly unfair because the previous week, Connie Chung, a CBS anchor, improperly had broadcast a comment by the mother of Newt Gingrich, the Republican Speaker of the House, that her son called the first lady a "bitch." Adams told the *Washington Post,* "Connie zapped her last week, and the *Times* is sandbagging her this week." The *Post*'s own story on the luncheon quoted the first lady as saying, "Sometimes I read stories or hear things about me and I go, 'Ugh! I wouldn't like her either.'"

Worse news coverage was to come. The surprising discovery at the White House of billing records from the Rose Law Firm conveyed an impression that Rodham Clinton might have been hiding them from the Whitewater grand jury, an allegation she denied. In addition, a memorandum turned up identifying her as responsible for the travel office firings. In January 1996, she was subpoenaed to appear before the grand jury in connection with the work she had done at the Rose firm for Madison Guaranty. William Safire, in his *New York Times* column, called her a "congenital liar." As conservative commentators, particularly on talk radio, tore further into her credibility, she sank lower in the polls. In June 1996, only 29 percent of the public surveyed in the joint CBS/*New York Times* poll expressed a favorable opinion, whereas 38 percent had an unfavorable impression.

At the same time, Bob Woodward, half of the famous

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Woodward-Bernstein reporting team credited with exposing Watergate, revealed that the first lady, hurt by the health care fiasco and long interested in spiritual matters, had met in the White House with a New Age psychic philosopher, Jean Houston. According to Woodward, Houston led "reflective meditation" sessions in the spring of 1995, persuading the first lady to enact conversations with Eleanor Roosevelt and Mahatma Gandhi. Rodham Clinton denied that these sessions were séances, but they made the first lady an even more tempting target for media ridicule.

The White House said that Houston's primary role was to assist the first lady with her book *It Takes a Village and Other Lessons Children Teach Us,* which dealt with child rearing from a family and community viewpoint. In the book, she expressed her reservations about divorce. Published in 1996, the work became a best seller. It may have been a factor in causing her poll ratings to rebound as the 1996 presidential campaign intensified and after Bill Clinton was reelected.

Betty Winfield viewed coverage of Hillary Rodham Clinton as a "conflict story about the strange new species of political wife," which came at a time when the American press was "seeking an up-to-date coverage plan for this kind of postmodern woman." In Winfield's view, the press floundered about, and she said it set a "dangerous (and unfair) national cognitive connection between wrongdoing and the Clintons."

By the end of 1998, the year of the Lewinsky scandal, Hillary Rodham Clinton was popular again. Her ratings stood as high as they had been following the 1993 inauguration, with 67 percent of the public holding a favorable opinion of her. Ironically, Rodham Clinton's approval ratings

went up in response to her conformity to a stereotypical feminine role. They reflected approval of her conduct as an aggrieved wife once again standing by her flawed husband. On January 21, 1998, the news broke that Special Prosecutor Starr was investigating her husband's sexual relationship with an intern, later identified as Monica Lewinsky, to determine whether the president had urged her to lie to cover up the affair. Rodham Clinton appeared on television expressing surprise and shock, but then she counterattacked by claiming the Clintons were victims of a "vast right-wing conspiracy" that included Starr, a "politically motivated" special counsel.

As Barbara Burrell, a public opinion researcher, noted, "Her image as the wronged wife staying in her marriage, however, was quite contrary to the image of the independent, professional achiever role she had adopted as first lady." She won sympathy by surmounting her personal pain and reaffirming values held by many traditionally minded Americans. Lattimore said, "People either thought she should have left the President or admired her for staying with the President. What few people understood was the role Mrs. Clinton's religious faith played in the healing process and how much she loved the President."

Interestingly, her poll ratings began to decline as soon as it became evident she would shatter precedent and seek political office in her own right. Eleven months before Bill Clinton's second term ended, Rodham Clinton announced that she would be a Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate from New York. She said she would continue to serve as first lady too, and so she did, although she spent far more time raising money and campaigning in New York than in the

White House. Critics charged that her decision to run raised ethical concerns, saying it was hard to tell where the role of first lady, financed at taxpayer expense, ended and that of a candidate began. According to Dick Morris, a former White House adviser, Bill Clinton, in gratitude for her remaining with him, fixed his presidential power "on a solitary objective: electing Hillary."

As a candidate, Rodham Clinton was covered by a group of women reporters who found that she stuck to her campaign message without fail and was personally pleasant but still kept the journalists at arm's length. Beth J. Harpaz of the Associated Press attributed this situation to "her first lady trappings and her reserved personality." In the end, Rodham Clinton won a hotly fought contest in November 2000, and she has since announced that she intends to seek reelection in 2006. She is also thought to be considering a bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008. Her successful pursuit of a Senate seat, particularly from a state where she had never lived until she decided to run for office, gives her a strong claim to being the most multifaceted and enigmatic first lady in U.S. history. To many in the media, she has been a flash point for national divisiveness.

The challenges that Hillary Rodham Clinton, a high-profile lawyer, faced in gaining public acceptance as first lady were greater than those confronting her more traditional predecessors. Even though she did not continue her legal career in the White House, her previous professional life opened the door for political attacks. When Kenneth Starr finally presented his report, the Clintons were exonerated in the Whitewater transaction. Impeachment charges were brought against President Clinton in connection with the