
Most Influential First Ladies Of USA

The Constitution of the United States sets the precedent for all branches of the government. It clearly lays out the powers, roles, and responsibilities of Congress, the Supreme Court, and the President. However, the Constitution does not mention the First Lady of the United States. There are no rules, responsibilities, or expectations clearly set for these women. Therefore, every first lady must decide to define and execute the responsibilities that she feels are necessary to her specific role. Since the establishment of the United States federal government through the Constitution in 1787, each first lady has implemented unique changes to the position. These changes have depended on many factors; such as the first lady's personal, political, and social agenda.

Due to the vague territory under which a first lady operates, it can be difficult to draw a conclusion upon the precise extent to which this position has changed over time. One could argue that the role has expanded to include important political responsibilities. In that sense, it is conceivable that the policy-based agendas that many first ladies have taken on allowed for a further integration of women into politics. However, one could also postulate that the role of the first lady has remained relatively domestic and social, as it was established so. In this sense, it is believed that the role of the first lady has primarily been to represent a social image of an elegant hostess, characterizing a "proper American woman". Each first lady has approached the role differently. For this reason, it is necessary to analyze the actions and priorities of several of the most prominent first ladies in order to identify a chronological pattern of change. This investigation will focus on the following question: To what extent have the roles and responsibilities of the first lady changed in American politics?

Martha Washington was the first woman to be titled "First Lady of the United States". Her husband George Washington was unanimously elected to lead the young country as the first president under its newly established constitution in 1789. As both wife and husband stepped into new roles, they were each tasked with the challenge of setting new examples for their future successors. While the president could rely on the Constitution and other members of the Federal Government to guide him to his jurisdiction, Martha had no such instructions. Although she never resided in the White House (its construction was not completed until 1800), her actions would establish a precedent for the social duties of a first lady, including expected behavior, etiquette, and social conduct. Carl Sferrazza Anthony, a scholar of the political and social power of presidential wives, once stated, "The fifteenth generation of First Ladies...have inherited certain customs indigenous only to their role, stemming back to Martha" (Parry-Giles, Blair 575). As first lady, Washington was in charge of running her household as well as planning and executing formal dinners, parties, and receptions, all tasks that were common among early first ladies (National First Ladies' Library). Washington did execute few roles that had a more "political" focus, such as volunteering by "attending [to] wounded soldiers in camp sites" (Parry-Giles Blair, 573). From her example, the act of volunteering would become a standardized practice among almost every First Lady, as it established the image of each woman as a "first mother" to the country. Throughout her time as First Lady, Washington established social, domestic, and political roles and responsibilities for the position. In its initial stages, the role was made that of a hostess, with few "motherly" political duties.

The following First Lady, and the first to reside in the White House, was Abigail Adams. Her husband, John Adams, was elected in 1797 and would only serve one term. She wrote innumerable letters of correspondence to her husband, many of which have been archived as important pieces of early American history. In her letters, Adams's words set "an example for the republican mother of her day, a woman fit to bear and raise sons worthy of the new United States of America" (Schneider, 12). This idea of Republican Motherhood, which would see a resurgence in society many years later, was established by women of high social status, specifically the first lady. Abigail's social role continued to fulfill Washington's foundation of a domestic first lady. However, Abigail had many responsibilities that affected the political realm as well. She met with members of Congress and once stated that certain members "ought never to be admitted to the table of the president again" (Parry-Giles Blair, 568). Throughout the American Revolution, Abigail advised her husband on many legal and political aspects, and she continued to do so into his presidency. She weighed in on the topic of Thomas Pickering, the secretary of state. Shortly before President Adams dismissed him, Abigail wrote, "He would not remain in office, if the President possesses such kind of resentments as I hear from various quarters, he permits himself to utter" (Schneider, 19). This quote embodies the extent to which Abigail Adams was involved with her husband's political affairs, as he often sought out his wife for advice on policy and his administration. Although she executed the social role established previously, Adams differed from her predecessor politically. As first lady, Abigail held roles and responsibilities that were far more politically extensive than that of Martha Washington.

Dolley Madison became the 4th First Lady of the United States when her husband James Madison was elected in 1808. During her eight years in this position, Dolley became one of the first "well-liked" first ladies. She was very well-known throughout the country, as many citizens looked to her for "fashion trends and social customs" (Whiteman, 6). Madison also executed many domestic roles, as she made many plans for renovating and decorating the Executive Mansion (Dolley Madison: America's First Lady). She held formal gatherings each Wednesday night, which two to three hundred people would attend (Dolley Madison: America's First Lady). Although she placed strong emphasis on the domestic aspect of the role, Madison was the first to be formally associated with a specific public task. She aided the foundation of a Washington D.C. home for young orphan girls (National First Ladies' Library). It is in her time as first lady that we see the development of a shift from a strictly domestic role to one including public political aspects as well. Like her predecessors, Madison maintained mostly social and domestic responsibilities. However, her novel act of publicly associating herself with progressive projects would become a common practice among modern first ladies.

Moving further into American history, first ladies continued to serve a purpose that was much more than a social image. Edith Wilson was the 28th First Lady of the United States. Her husband, President Woodrow Wilson, served from 1913 to 1921. Due to the fact that her tenure occurred during either during a presidential campaign, the first World War, or during her husband's illness, Edith was unable to host entertaining during the social seasons (National First Ladies' Library). However, she did serve many political purposes. She sat in on important presidential meetings and advised her husband on his speeches. When President Wilson suffered a debilitating stroke, Edith continued her husband's administration instead of turning it over to the vice president. She became the sole communicator between her husband and his Cabinet, and insisted that all pressing matters, memos, correspondence, questions, and requests be sent to her (National First Ladies' Library). Although Edith Wilson never actually made any important political decisions while her husband was ill, she influenced them by being the sole person who decided which individuals could see the president (Weaver, 51). Due to the

fact that Wilson was never given the chance to fulfill traditional social elements of the role of first lady, it is hard to assess the social aspect of her time. Whether or not she would have taken on a more involved social role is unknown and cannot be precisely assumed. However, by assisting in her husband's administration, Edith Wilson made her time as first lady more politically involved than that of her predecessors. Her contribution furthered the advancement of the first lady's roles and responsibilities.

Perhaps the most influential first lady of all, Eleanor Roosevelt served the longest "term"-slightly over twelve years (National First Ladies' Library). Her husband served from 1933 to 1945, the only president to serve more than two terms. Eleanor Roosevelt's accomplishments surpassed those of her predecessors in many ways, setting new standards for all of her successors. Many significant historical events such as the Great Depression, World War I and World War II, the Holocaust, the founding of the United Nations, the Cold War, the rise of Communism, the civil rights movement, and the revival of feminism occurred during her lifetime. In the introduction to *Courage in a Dangerous World: The Political Writings of Eleanor Roosevelt*, Allida M. Black embodies the work of Eleanor Roosevelt with the quote, "Her legacy as first lady, delegate to the United Nations, Democratic party leader, humanitarian, and social activist made her an icon to millions, many of whom would agree on nothing but their respect for her". Roosevelt was a prime example of the gradual evolution of the role of first lady. She delivered over fifty speeches each year for over thirty years (Black, 2). Throughout her time in the White House, Roosevelt accomplished many things that would continue to impact the United States for many years to come. For example, she briefly held an official position under her husband's administration. When the United States began to rearm its military after the second World War began in Europe, Roosevelt became the codirector of the Office of Civilian Defense. In addition to this, Eleanor also pursued many other personal and "semiofficial" projects (Wills). Unlike her predecessors, Eleanor actually wished to avoid "purely social gatherings" whenever she could (Wills). Her accomplishments are innumerable. Both politically and personally, Roosevelt was an inspiration for not only her successors but for all women in general. There is a large difference between her time as first lady and that of the previous women. This is due to the fact that she was politically motivated rather than socially motivated. The political achievements of Eleanor Roosevelt greatly advanced the roles and responsibilities of the first lady.

Jacqueline Kennedy (commonly referred to as "Jackie") became the 35th First Lady in 1961, when her husband John F. Kennedy took the presidential oath of office. She strived for excellence in all her endeavors and felt a passionate sense of patriotism and obligation to her country. While this is true, she also felt that her most important roles were that of a wife and mother. She once told a journalist that "if you bungle raising your children, I don't think whatever else you do matters very much" (JFK Library). Many of Jackie Kennedy's roles and responsibilities were social. She focused on restoring the White House and adding amenities that would make it a good home for her family. She also wished to preserve the history of the United States displayed through the White House, establishing a White House Fine Arts Committee, and gathering many pieces of historical American art and furniture from around the country (JFK Library). Kennedy was seen as a fashion icon, receiving international attention for her style. She made more international trips than any previous first lady. She traveled both with the President and alone, forming close personal friendships with many world leaders and helping to advance the political agenda of the President. For instance, she gave speeches in Spanish regarding the "promise of the Administration's Peace Corps" (National First Ladies' Library). Jacqueline Kennedy represented the societal image of women in her time period. She

upheld many important political duties and remained committed to them and to her country. While she declared her utmost priorities to be her family, her increasingly active duties allowed the role to evolve.

Elizabeth Ford (more commonly known as “Betty” Ford) became the 38th First Lady when President Richard Nixon resigned and her husband, Vice President Gerald Ford, was sworn into office. As first lady, Betty Ford immediately dedicated herself to the role, taking on many public issues and using her platform to make a difference among them. She focused her efforts on gathering support for the arts, as well as handicapped children (Witherbee). She was also (according to her successor, Rosalynn Carter) a “champion for women’s rights”, constantly advocating and working for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. While many of her acts as first lady contributed to her legacy among American politics and society, Ford is most known for her ability to bring private issues to public attention. She spoke extensively and openly on her struggles with cancer and substance addiction. Just seven weeks into her time in the White House, Ford was diagnosed with breast cancer. This had been a sensitive subject among society, one that was not a frequent open discussion. However, in the wake of Nixon’s Watergate scandal, the Ford administration was focused on rebuilding the trust of American citizens. Therefore, when Ford was to undergo an emergency mastectomy, she shockingly decided to have the information made public. Her openness on issues made her one of the most popular first ladies, following closely behind Eleanor Roosevelt. Following the news, thousands of American women hurried to get mammograms and the number of early-diagnosed breast cancer cases rose significantly. This rise has since been deemed the “Betty Ford blip” (Witherbee). After her surgery, Ford continued to speak about her experience, both raising awareness and changing the public perception of the illness. Ford also went public with her recovery from alcohol addiction and other substance abuse instances in 1978. Again, her bravery brought a serious issue to national attention, causing an increase in “women-focused research and treatment” (White). Similar to her public agenda, Ford’s social roles were unconventional. Her love and dedication to the arts showed here, as her post-dinner entertainment was “lively and informal” (National First Ladies Library), with dancing always proceeding. It is a well-known fact that Betty Ford was one of the most unorthodox and outspoken of all American first ladies. She took on a more politically-based agenda than most of her predecessors, and while she did preform social tasks, it is her active involvement with important issues that she is remembered for. It is her willingness to stretch beyond the barrier of social norms to give light to subjects she believed needed attention most that allowed her to shape the role of first lady.

The next First Lady of the United States was Rosalynn Carter. Her husband, President Jimmy Carter, was sworn into office in 1977. The Carters remained in the white house until 1980, when President Carter lost reelection. During her “tenure”, Carter focused her efforts on raising awareness for mental health issues, ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, support for the elderly, and many other issues. Carter was one of the most involved First Ladies in American history, due to her deep and involved concern for such matters. In her autobiography, *First Lady from the Plains*, Carter disclosed that she was distinctly proud of her work with the President’s Commission on Mental Health. Like some of her predecessors, Carter sat in on cabinet meetings. She also met privately with her husband each week to confer about political policy. In her first year as first lady, Carter visited “16 nations and 21 domestic cities; worked 250 hours on mental health; held 21 press conferences; supervised 39 receptions, 20 congressional breakfasts and 8 state dinners; was briefed for 71 hours on foreign and domestic affairs and spent 210 hours learning Spanish” (Jensen, 769). Her most prominent roles as first lady were

the parts of “advisor, emissary, social director, activist, and campaigner” (Jensen, 769). Simultaneous to all of her responsibilities, Carter was also raising her young daughter, Amy. Due to this, she was determined to make the White House a home for her family. Rosalynn Carter was extremely active in her role as first lady. She focused on important policy, held many crucial roles, and upheld the social requirements established by her predecessors. Carter differed from previous first ladies in respect to her agenda. She took on many projects, all of which she committed to with great passion, whereas many of the others chose few subjects to adhere to with great detail.