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The Role of First Lady of the US

The role of the first lady in the American political system is one with a long and evolving history. Through history, the first lady has been seen mostly as the symbolic figure entrusted with welcoming people to the white house. The first lady's first and paramount duty has been to welcome diplomats or guests to the Whitehouse and ensure they are comfortable and well looked after. With time however many first ladies have taken on much more substantial duties that have developed and supplemented the current role of the first lady. This paper will examine the historical evolution of the first lady and what the current role of the first lady is understood as today.

Perhaps the most thorough documentation of the first ladies' evolving duties and roles can be found in the book: Frist Ladies and the Fourth Estate by Lisa Burns (Burns, 2008). The book cites four distinct phases that the author feels the first lady has passed through. The first phase Burns cites is the role of the first lady as a public woman. This era was signified by the increasing presence of the United States on the international stage. Following WWI, the president of the United States at the time Woodrow Wilson, was for the first time in history perceived as a dominant political figure in the world and the first lady was seen with much more prestige than in the past. For the first time the first lady was seen in line with queens and other women of high distinction throughout the world. When Wilson attended events like the treaty of Versailles his wife Edith was by his side (Mark, 1978). Events like this were world renowned

and the first lady was given commensurate respect as the wife of perhaps the most important man in the world. As the United States quickly grew into the most powerful economy in the world, the role of both the president and first lady became more important.

The next major phase that Burns cites is the first lady as a political celebrity. This era was embodied by Jaqueline Kennedy Onassis, who became a celebrity as first lady to John F. Kennedy. Their marriage was viewed with all the awe and wonder of any celebrity marriage. It was also highly scrutinized as rumors of affairs began to circle. The first lady was suddenly looked at as a figure to gossip about. Jaqueline suddenly found herself in a similar part as played by many famous celebrities in American culture. Other first ladies in this period also impressed similar images upon the American public and similarly became conversation topics in day to day life. This began the era where the first lady was no longer just a passive quiet figure but rather a focus of public debate and scrutiny.

The next phase cited by Burns is that of the first lady as a political activist. This was in no doubt somewhat an outgrowth of the era. Following the turmoil of the 1960s it was no longer viewed as acceptable for public figures to not have an opinion with regards to important topics. No one was safe from this scrutiny including the first lady. The person that exemplified this more than anyone else was Betty Ford the wife of President Gerald Ford. Betty was a political activist who spoke out strongly for causes such as women rights and thus really began a new era, one where the first lady didn't just have a symbolic role but also real power. It was even questioned at times that perhaps Betty had more political power than her husband. This perception, though likely not true, was unprecedented in the history of first ladies.

The final phase that Burns points out is the first lady as a political interloper. This was no doubt represented by first lady Hillary Clinton in her marriage to President Bill Clinton. The presidency was mired in intrigue as Bill Clinton was caught having an affair. As the process played out in the public eye, Hillary became involved in many political policy debates. This was similar to Betty Ford but different to the point that Hillary had her own political career. Indeed to this day Hillary is seen as a possible presidential candidate. Thus Hillary as first lady, was largely viewed as someone who was actively involved in the role to further her career. This was the first time that the first lady was not just viewed as the woman who happened to be the wife of the president but as someone who had her own career to look after.

Above is a brief review of some of the most known first ladies and how they changed the role. The major theme to take away is that there isn't one specific role for the first lady but rather a changing set of roles. Initially, the first lady was only seen as a symbolic figure that had no real power and indeed never even talked to the media. This was followed by a period of rising prestige for the first lady. In some ways, this really culminated in the first lady becoming a major public figure that was as well-known as celebrities. The role again changed as the first lady began to take on more duties in politics and as an advocate for certain causes. This can be seen today as the current first lady Michelle Obama has an active outlay of charitable responsibilities and is often asked to give public speeches.

An interesting question that was raised briefly in this paper (see discussion of Hillary Clinton) is when will we see a first man? To date, there has never been a female president but with the first black president many feel it is just a matter of time. As noted Hillary Clinton is considered a candidate for the presidency in 2016. This would no doubt change the role

completely as it is really unclear as to what role the first man would have. It would no doubt change a role that has already been in flux over the century.

In conclusion, the first lady's role is still what it was at the onset that is a symbolic role to welcome guests to the Whitehouse. However, this role has evolved and changed dramatically and the first lady is no longer seen as just the woman that keeps the house and welcomes guests. It is now accepted that the first lady should have duties and support various charities. It is also now accepted that the first lady should speak for herself and have her own opinions aside from those of her husband.

Works Cited

Burns, L. (2008). *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate*. Northern Illinois University Press.

Mark, S. (1978). *The Myths of Reparations, Central European History*. American Historical Association.

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