

A Conference Report

First Ladies

"She deserves the help and loyalty of every woman in the U.S., for life will never be easy for the First Lady of this land."

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

The centennial of Eleanor Roosevelt's birth is soon to be celebrated; Professor Barbara Welter of Hunter's History Department is a specialist on 19th-century First Ladies; Joseph Lash, who is Mrs. Roosevelt's biographer and a member of the Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, sat next to President Shalala one evening at dinner. This happy juxtaposition resulted in an all-day conference on the First Lady, which attracted some 800 people to Hunter's Brookdale Health Science Center on December 4, 1982.

Organized by Professor Welter and Joseph Lash, the First Lady Conference—the first of its kind—brought together three Pulitzer Prize winners, members of the Roosevelt family, and representatives from government, academia, and the arts, to examine the office of First Lady ("a quasi-monarchical usage" that Arthur Schlesinger said offended him).

The Conference was opened by a surprise guest, the President of the New York City Council, Carol Bellamy. She brought greetings from the City of New York and delighted the audience by looking forward to a future when Hunter would hold a similar gathering on "The First Mate."

Judge Justine Wise Polier brought greetings as chairman of the Eleanor Roosevelt Institute which, through its generous support, made the day possible. She explained that one of the many values of the Conference was to bring to those too young to have known the living presence of the Roosevelts an awareness of "the energy, the determination, and the joy" with which President and Mrs. Roosevelt met "the terrible problems of the Thirties" and an understanding of "the light of hope which two human beings who cared were able to bring to America."

The morning session, chaired by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and Schweitzer Professor at the City University, began with a keynote address by Abigail Q. McCarthy, author and, as former wife of Eugene McCarthy, herself once a candidate for the position of First Lady.

Other speakers in the morning session, devoted to "The Office of First Lady as Defined by Eleanor Roosevelt," were the Rev. Pauli Murray, lawyer, Episcopal priest, alumna of Hunter's Class of 1933, and a personal friend of Mrs. Roosevelt; Joseph Lash, Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of Mrs. Roosevelt; and Elizabeth Janeway, the author and feminist.

At the luncheon panel chaired by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., a group of distinguished women—Letitia Baldrige, social secretary to Mrs. Kennedy; Nancy Dickerson, the first women TV correspondent; Ann Cottrell Free, an original member of "the Girls," the women who covered Mrs. Roosevelt when she was in the White House; Isabelle Shelton, who covered the White House from Truman through Ford; and Sheila Weidenfeld, press secretary to Mrs. Ford—reminisced about First Ladies they had known.

In the afternoon, examining the office as defined by history, were historians Beatrice Hofstadter, Barbara Welter of the Hunter and Graduate Center faculties, Blanche W. Cook, an alumna of the Class of 1963 and a professor at John Jay College, Thomas O. Kelly II, from Siena College, who, with his colleague statistician Douglas Lonnstrom, presented the results of a survey on First Ladies, and James MacGregor Burns, Woodrow Wilson Professor at Williams College, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his work on Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Professor Burns welcomed the attention being given to First Ladies, not least because it was a healthy departure from "the class system in history." He was, however, saddened that First Ladies have now become an institutionalized part of "the most difficult selection system in the world...the degrading, demeaning, destroying, presidential primary."

At the end of the afternoon's program, chaired by Michael Riccards, Provost of the College, Elizabeth Janeway, in a delightful second appearance, looked into the future to tell a rapt audience about the first woman president.

Highlights of the conference follow.

First Ladies before Mrs. Roosevelt



by Barbara Welter

The history of early presidential wives tends to be a collection of random anecdotes or attributes. One knows of Martha, her teeth as unseen as the more famous dentures of George, smiling under her mobcap; Abigail Adams, coping with her farm and family, and endlessly writing letters to her "Dear Friend" in which, among other things, she asked him to "Remember the Ladies"; Dolley Madison saving the Portrait of Washington and presumably at a later date sitting down to an ice cream dessert; then there is a long pause while memory gropes among the names of the Presidents themselves, much less their wives. A dedicated student remembers Rachel Jackson, surrounded by faint sniffs of scandal and the lingering smoke of her corn cob pipe; there is Mary Todd Lincoln, more than slightly mad; someone called Lemonade Lucy, for some incomprehensible reason connected with White House social customs—another long wait for the mists to recede; a vague feeling that Teddy and his children probably had someone in the background cheering their wrestling matches; and then, a triumphant conclusion: Mrs. Wilson who either was, or was not, running the country during her husband's illness.

From that motley collage one must try long and hard to fill in the blanks with facts and figures, as well as faces. Even the origin of the term First Lady is disputed: usually said to have originated in 1877 in an article describing the Rutherford B. Hayes Inauguration. . . .

. . . Wives, with the exceptions of Mary Todd Lincoln and possibly Julia Grant, in general escaped criticism. . . . But they were susceptible to criticism by others.

One White House staff member remembered the pain on Eliza Johnson's face as she waited, quietly sewing, for the news about her husband's impeachment. Rachel Jackson, when she finally heard the stories that had circulated about her for so long, cried out in a letter, "The enemies of the General have dipt their arrows in wormwood and gall and sped them at me. . . . Listening to them it seemed as if a veil had been lifted, and I saw myself, whom you have all guarded from outside criticism and surrounded with flattering delusions, as others see me, a poor old woman. . . . I will not go to Washington." It is one thing for the son of Theodore Roosevelt to offer to fight any boy who spoke against his father; it is another to bear in the silence and dignity that the office and the role demanded, the harsh language about someone you loved. . . .

Although generally the influence of wives of presidents, like all women, was seen as beneficial, there were times when women in general and First Ladies in particular, were blamed for national ills. This was particularly true during the Grant Administration when the extravagance of dress of the Grant "court" was held accountable for the scandals surrounding his time in office. . . . The rampant feeling against the "Southern" connections of Mary Todd Lincoln made it necessary for her husband to issue a press release denying that any member of his household gave aid and support to the enemy.

The criticism of First Ladies was more likely to center on style than on substance. . . . The most trenchant criticism of the 19th century came in the anonymous novel *Democracy*, which alienated a number of people both before and after its author was discovered to be the well-connected Henry Adams. In the novel the President and his lady—"Old Granny" and his hatchet-faced wife—are ridiculed for the ridiculous way in which they mimic the forms of Europe, whose culture they know so little of. "Old Granny" was an amalgam of Grant and Hayes, and his wife apparently was based on Julia Grant who, in his own name, Adams once described as reminding him irresistibly of an isosceles triangle.

. . . The history of these First Ladies is a little like the history of popular culture; they reflect very clearly the idiom of their

time, as they were expected to do, and, insofar as our own idiom is at variance with it, we have trouble making positive judgments about their role. The force of the office in replacing individualism with conformity, is clearly seen in the career of Lou Hoover. The woman in the White House sitting in splendid isolation with her husband at formal meals for two, is a far cry from the tomboy Lou Henry who majored in geology at Stanford, an extraordinary thing for a woman to do; who translated *De Re Metallica* from the Latin, bicycled through the Chinese Revolution amidst spraying bullets, and singlehandedly organized a committee to return 10,000 Americans from overseas. Her husband wrote of her, "Except when she felt it imperative, she never volunteered her judgments. However I could tell them from her expression."

This replacement of the individual woman with the faceless head mounted on the Inaugural gown, the appropriate symbol in the Hall of the First Ladies for much of their history, ended with Mrs. Hoover. From the time of Eleanor Roosevelt, the expectations of the American people have been changed—to know that more can be done by a First Lady, and to judge successive First Ladies by a different set of standards, is her legacy to those Presidential wives who preceded her.



Eleanor Roosevelt as First Lady

by Abigail Q. McCarthy

There are persons so great in their effect on others that it is impossible to think of their era without them. Eleanor Roosevelt was certainly one of those persons. And her life was so multi-faceted that it will provide insights and indicators for other women living different lives in different times long into the future.

My own first impressions of Mrs. Roosevelt were not of a First Lady in any way unusual. I was in school when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president, and Mrs. Roosevelt was the first wife of a president of whom I was fully aware. (I had, it is true, a vaguely positive feeling about Mrs. Hoover because she had headed the Girl Scouts when I became one. Other than that I do not think I had given much thought to First Ladies. They were not much thought about or talked about.)

My father was a state committeeman of the Democratic Party. The women in our family were heirs to the first wave of feminism. Eleanor Roosevelt was the wife of the long-awaited first Democratic president since Woodrow Wilson—our president who was bringing hope once again to our depression-ridden state where farmers, workers, and miners had despaired and united. Her interests, her activities seemed the fitting activities for the wife of such a man in those times and fitting, too, for a prominent woman of the 20th century.

"No other First Lady in history has had her influence, no other has been so much the center of controversy and no other has so affected the lives of the women who followed her."

As the Roosevelt years wore on, however, as I went to college and, later, as I cast my first vote in a presidential election for FDR, what began to impress me was the cost of what Mrs. Roosevelt was doing. From the beginning I had felt deeply and resented criticism of Mrs. Roosevelt in a very personal and partisan way. She was, after all, the wife of *my* president and I identified with her. But as I grew more reflective with the years, I began to understand that Mrs. Roosevelt was the center of storms because she broke ground; she ventured where other women had not ventured before her.

Honesty compels me to say that the cost in ridicule, in the enmity of the petty and the vindictive, and the censure of the con-



vention-bound, seemed very high to me. It was borne in on me at that early stage that any woman—no matter how highly placed—any woman who varied from the norm, from the accepted conventions—any woman who rose head and shoulders above the crowd did so at a great price. . . .

© Abigail Q. McCarthy, 1982

Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., said of his mother, "She never took a public position contrary to that of the Administration," but privately, "memorandums used to fly. She was always asking, 'What is the policy of your government?' She chose to ignore the fact that quite often my father didn't want to hold a position."

Justine Wise Polier said that Mrs. Roosevelt was a woman with a mischievous sense of humor and "an inner core that was untouchable, indestructible. . . . Her life became part of history."

Blanche W. Cook ('62) put Mrs. Roosevelt into a feminist context, demonstrating that Mrs. R. was not only "concerned directly with the world and

how it is ruled" but that she also "influenced policy from positions of power." Notably she reached out even to foreign policy. "A measure of the remarkable partnership between the Roosevelts was that Eleanor Roosevelt chartered her own course on foreign policy before, during, and after her twelve years as 'first wife.'" She helped to found the American Federation to Promote U.S. entry into the World Court, opposed isolationism, and supported the Spanish Republicans at a time when it simply was not done in polite circles. She addressed the Council on Foreign Relations almost 30 years before it admitted women to membership; she debated the Middle East crisis of 1956 with Senator Margaret Chase Smith on TV.

Despite having held the anti-Semitic attitudes typical of her class and culture, she became a passionate Zionist. She signed the SANE nuclear test-ban petition, advocated arms control, and was the leading advocate of human rights both at home and internationally. "Committed to improving the quality of life, she made the noblest values seem globally achievable."

The press panel described her as a fantastic mixture of pragmatism and idealism. Her relations with the press were symbiotic. They needed each other. Because she restricted her press conferences to women and dispensed hard news, newspapers and syndicates *had* to add women to their staffs.

First Ladies Who Followed Mrs. R.



(left to right) Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., Letitia Baldrige, Isabelle Shelton, Nancy Dickerson, Sheila Weidenfeld, and Ann Cottrell Free.

The following remarks by members of the luncheon panel were gathered from what Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., called a "free-wheeling discussion."

On Bess Truman When she came to the White House, she scheduled a press conference, cancelled it, and never scheduled one again. Asked what qualities were necessary for a First Lady, she said, "Good health and a sense of humor."

On Jackie Kennedy Both a movie star and a very, very private person. One wonders now how she got away with so much.

On Lady Bird Johnson Her beautification program had real substance; she can justly be thought of as one of the originators of the environmental movement.

On Pat Nixon She was not comfortable in a public role. She was best at being a

hostess. She remembered everyone's name and found more things to say about how lovely a woman's hat was than anyone would have thought possible.

On Betty Ford A breath of fresh air. She did women a great service, not only because of her support of ERA but because of her willingness to discuss her operation for breast cancer.

Rosalynn Carter Important behind the scenes. Like Mrs. Roosevelt and Lady Bird Johnson before her, she acted as an ombudsman. To bring things to the president's attention people wrote to the First Lady, who would pass letters on.

Nancy Reagan Maybe she's been forced into a public role she didn't want to perform. She has been unjustly criticized for what she has always done: setting a beautiful table and dressing well.

Survey on First Ladies

In 1982, Professors Lonnstrom and Kelly asked historians to rate First Ladies on ten items: background, value to country, integrity, leadership, intelligence, "own woman," accomplishments, courage, public image, and value to the president.

At the top of the poll came Eleanor Roosevelt, with a rating of 93 out of 100 possible points (she was judged weak only in "value to the president").

Thirteen other First Ladies garnered

statistically significant "positive" responses: Abigail Adams—at 84%, ahead by a considerable margin of Lady Bird Johnson (77%), followed by Dolley Madison, Rosalyn Carter, Betty Ford, Edith Wilson, Jackie Kennedy, Martha Washington, Edith Roosevelt, Lou Hoover, Lucy Cleveland, and Louisa Adams (at an above-average 63%).

Low women on the totem pole were Pat Nixon (58%), Jane Pierce, Nancy

Reagan, Ida McKinley, Florence Harding, and—at 52%—Mary Lincoln. (If a First Lady is unlisted here she was clustered among the statistically average.)

According to the surveyors, the ratings seem to be biased toward "presentism," Democrats, and activist women. (James MacGregor Burns, in commenting on the survey, added "the ignorance factor," saying that the survey told less about the quality of First Ladies than about contemporary perceptions.)

The First Woman President

by Elizabeth Janeway

Leaving aside the horrid possibility that the sky may fall on our heads prior to the inauguration of a woman president, it seems all but inevitable that we shall have a female head of government at some time during the next generation. Who and what will she be?

Here are some guesses. They do not represent my best hopes, but rather what I, as an old observer of the political process, think is the probable provenance of a Number One Woman.

First, let me point out that I spoke of her *inauguration* as president, not her *election*. That's because nominating a woman for vice-president will be much easier for a party convention to consider than would be naming a woman to the top of the ticket. Anomalous vice-presidents have been nominated before. If Franklin Roosevelt had died during his first two terms, we would have had a President from Texas long before Lyndon Johnson succeeded to the Oval Office. Putting a woman in the second slot gives Fate a hand in any possible elevation to Chief Executive, and Fate, in Western mythology, has always been female. . . .

Politically, I think it's highly likely that the first woman president will be a Republican rather than a Democrat, and that's not simply because the British example of Margaret Thatcher points this way. Any time that people are asked to vote for someone or something unexpected, they will want to vote for as little unexpectedness as possible—for a figure who departs from the norm by a minimal degree. A woman candidate will have to be

nominated by a still male-dominated party convention. A conservative woman—not a reactionary: Phyllis Schlafley would call out a negative vote that would make the reaction to Teddy Kennedy seem pale—represents the lesser range of unexpectedness. Here we can turn to the example of Sandra O'Connor as well as that of Margaret Thatcher. The ideology and policies of such a woman promise continuity with the way things are. She does not threaten innovation except by her presence. . . .

The first woman president will almost certainly be married. It's possible that she might be a widow, but unlikely. The convention would like to see a happy, healthy, non-henpecked husband beaming at the side of his wife. . . . Her husband will have to be portable; that is, he must be ready to move to Washington and to do so without arousing sympathy over giving up a prestigious executive position. On the other hand, he must certainly be successful enough in his profession so that he's not seen as having suffered from his wife's ambitious activities. Let him be neither a wimp nor a hanger-on. I think it probable that he will be a lawyer; they are always portable to Washington. . . .

The first woman president will have been active in politics for a good long time. She will know the ropes. She will have been tested by doubtful male peers and will have stood up to the testing. She will have stamina, she will have demonstrated that she can be persistent in her views to the point of stubbornness: witness Margaret Thatcher once more. She will, that is, have had to break female

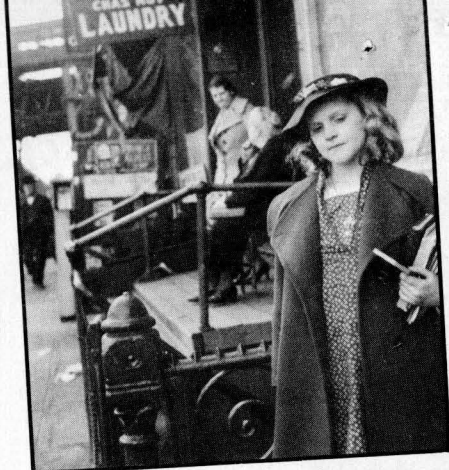


stereotypes about pliability and the desire to please, and will have done so; as Thatcher reminded Parliament, "The lady's not for turning." . . .

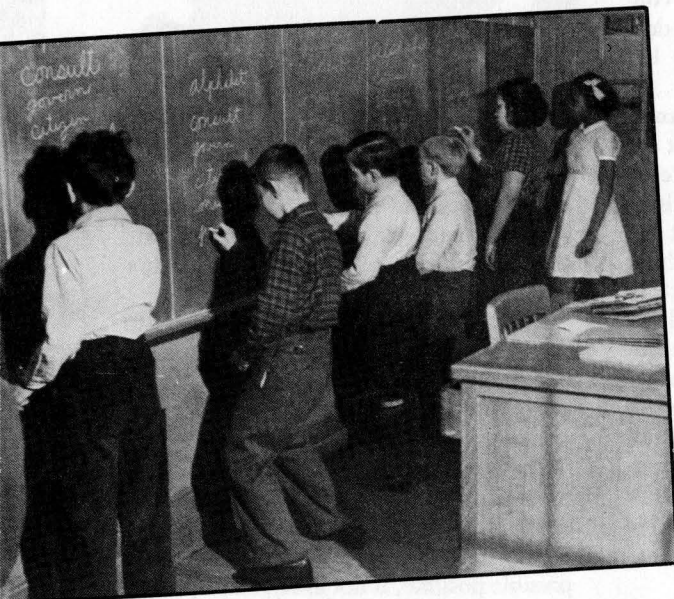
Will I, a liberal-to-radical feminist, welcome the advent of a conservative non-feminist woman as president? Yes. I won't vote for her, but I will welcome her presence, in perfect counter-balance to the convention which will not welcome her presence but will vote for her. A woman in an office that no woman has held before breaks down barriers and makes the impossible possible, if not likely. Her appearance will be a step toward normalizing women presidents. Those who come after could be nominated more easily even if their attitudes and circumstances varied more widely from normal male attributes. The presence of Margaret Thatcher at 10 Downing Street makes the possibility of Shirley Williams as a future resident more likely. And so it will be here.

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YORKVILLE REVISITED



by Fotine Nicholas '42

The 1970s—trendy shops, a new restaurant row, young, with-it strollers, new high-rises, light, and openness. . . .

A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Hunter and its high school, Fotine Nicholas ('42) went on to study American literature at the graduate division of Columbia College. The recipient of a Fulbright grant to Greece, she taught English there at a boys' gymnasium from 1952 to 1954 and lectured on the American woman under the aegis of the American Embassy in Athens. A high school English teacher who speaks six languages, Ms. Nicholas retired in 1981 and has since resumed writing. Her work has appeared in Athene, Common Ground, Greek Accent, Hamptons Exchange, and the Sunday News Magazine. Her translations of modern Greek literature have appeared in The Charioteer. Ms. Nicholas is married and the mother of a son and a daughter.

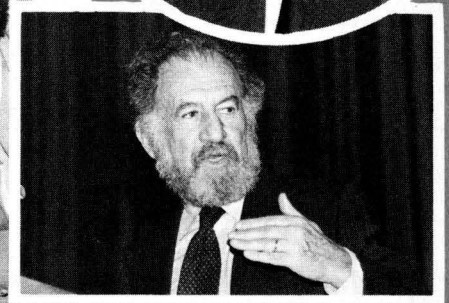
The 1930's—the creaky, noisy Third Avenue El, a trolley line to Washington Heights, four- and five-story tenements, working-class Europeans and their American children.

. . . This was the Yorkville whose geographical boundaries were 59th and 96th Streets from the East River to Fifth Avenue but whose true ambience lay east of Third from the middle sixties to the German eighties. It ended at the river where barges moored to rickety piers and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive had not yet been built.

In those days most Yorkvillites were of Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Irish, German, and Italian origin. There was a small Greek colony on 70th Street and an occasional synagogue was housed in a brownstone. The

main religion was Roman Catholic. The various ethnic groups came together in the public schools of which P.S. 82 on 70th and First was an outstanding example. Its principal was a native of Yorkville, a former student and teacher at 82. Abraham Cohen was small, compact, handsome, immaculate, and a smart dresser.

We students loved 82—its dress code, its formality, the school song, the orchestra, the teams, and most of our teachers. Mr. Cohen believed in motivation. The weekly honor roll rewarded students for improvement in conduct as well as good scholarship. The best students had the dubious (by today's standards) honor of using the teachers' entrance and dusting the principal's office every morning. Our patriotic uniform, white middies, red



(clockwise from top left): Abigail McCarthy, whose keynote address is excerpted on page 11. Justine Wise Polier, chairman of the Eleanor Roosevelt Institute; to her left, Eleanor Roosevelt Seagraves, first of the Roosevelt granddaughters. Waiting to take the platform: Mrs. McCarthy, Professor Schlesinger, the Rev. Pauli Murray ('33), Joseph Lash, and Elizabeth Janeway. (The full text of Dr. Murray's speech will appear in the next

issue of THM.) James MacGregor Burns commenting on the afternoon papers. Joseph Lash, Mrs. Roosevelt's biographer. A few of those registering for the Conference at Hunter's Health Science Center. Looking remarkably like his father, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., introduces the panel, "The Office as Defined by the Press." (Photographs by Janet Charles)