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First Ladies and the Press

From the pages of women’s magazines to the covers of drugstore magazines and features on television news and entertainment programs, the media treats coverage of the first lady as separate from the doings within the White House’s corridors of power. Why does the news media fail to take the coverage of the first lady seriously and how do the media portrayals of the first lady as “the single most visible symbol of American womanhood” (p. xix) relate to broader questions concerning gender roles and the expectations of women in American society? These issues form the basis of *First Ladies and the Press: The Unfinished Partnership of the Media Age*, written by Maureen Beasley for Northwestern University’s Visions of the American Press series. Beasley has written several pioneering works assessing women and the media and she is uniquely qualified to tackle this ambitious work, that investigates the interactions between individual first ladies and the press from Martha Washington to Laura Bush.

Beasley opens her book with a brief discussion of Eleanor Roosevelt, and the first chapter is devoted to Roosevelt’s groundbreaking relationship with the press. For Beasley, this is familiar territory as Eleanor Roosevelt has been the subject of some of her other works, most notably *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media* (1987). Roosevelt is a fitting first lady to begin with because she established an active relationship with the press through the innovative introduction of all-women press conferences, her widely syndicated column “My Day,” and a variety of other media activities. While the topics of her press conferences and newspaper column generally “reflected news deemed suitable for women’s and society pages” (p.11), Roosevelt challenged traditional ideas of the role of first ladies and women in general through her public pronouncements concerning issues like her support for the right of married women to work. Roosevelt elevated the stature of the first lady to that of a worthy public figure and source of news. Indeed, Beasley argues that placing Roosevelt at the beginning of the book is justified because she defines the discussion of the first ladies who preceded her and changed the expectations of the first ladies who followed her.

The other chapters proceed chronologically from Martha Washington to Laura Bush. Beasley says Washington was “expected to fulfill the ceremonial role performed by royalty in European courts yet personify the simply dignity appropriate for a republican form of government” (p. 27). Beasley’s discussions of the early first ladies—from Martha Washington to Lou Henry Hoover—in the second chapter, offers only brief glimpses of media relations. Yet it is evident how first ladies who cultivated a relationship with the press—Julia Tyler, Florence Harding, and Grace Coolidge, in particular—were generally rewarded with positive receptions in the press. She also shows how first ladies like Abigail Adams and Edith Wilson, who appeared to overstep their supportive role of wife, were attacked in the press for intruding into the realm of power and politics, and for exercising influence.
over their husbands (p. 31). The third chapter begins with brief discussions of Bess Truman and Mamie Eisenhower, who, according to Beasley, “offered no challenge to journalistic conventions that confined women to stereotypical activities” (p. 61), like those of traditional wives and mothers. Beasley situates these women firmly in the context of mid-century American society, as representations of “Middle America,” and as prototypes of the suburban housewife.

Jackie Kennedy’s move into the White House coincided with the rise of color television specials, and that new medium suited the stylish and elegant first lady. In Beasley words: “Television projected style, if not substance, and the Kennedys excelled in style” (p. 76). Lady Bird Johnson and Pat Nixon are the subjects of the fourth chapter. According to Beasley, both Johnson and Nixon had long experienced the expectations of political wives and fulfilled those as first ladies by remaining “safely within the realm of activities deemed suitable for genteel women” (p. 90). Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter served as first ladies when the issue of equal rights for women came to national prominence, and both, in their roles as first ladies, used their media influence as a platform to promote equal rights legislation and other feminist causes. Ford’s activities garnered her praise from the media. Beasley argues that Ford, who admired Eleanor Roosevelt, “stood out as the most significant feminist first lady between Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Rodham Clinton” (p. 138). In contrast, Carter’s close relationship to her husband, generally described in the media as a confidential adviser and political partner, prompted mixed reviews and even accusations that she overstepped her bounds as first lady. Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush are discussed in the sixth chapter in the context of image-making and the media.

Beasley devotes an entire chapter to Hillary Rodham Clinton, who served both as “a role model for feminists as well as a target for those who accused her of overstepping her bounds as a wife” (p. 201). The chapter on Laura Bush presents a sharp contrast to Clinton. Beasley presents Bush as the ultimate nurturing, motherly figure. In the final chapter, Beasley evaluates the ways in which the news media have created superficial and stereotypical images of first ladies and calls on the media to take a critical look at its treatment of women in politics and power.

Beasley’s scope is ambitious. In several areas, especially the second chapter, Beasley’s treatment of individual first ladies and the press is brief and simplistic. However, surveys require concision, and Beasley’s briefer discussions are still useful starting points for more in-depth investigations by journalism and media historians. First Ladies and the Press also compares first ladies and their relationships to the press and shows how the news media focus on the individual’s personality in their portrayal of first ladies. Beasley’s ambitious scope and her ability to clearly situate each woman within the wider historical context illustrate how depictions of first ladies by the news media reflect the “shifting expectations for women” in American society (p. xix).

Beasley raises a number of significant questions concerning the institution of the first lady in American politics and its ties to gender and power relations. While the first lady derives her importance as a public figure through her proximity to presidential power, Beasley argues there is a subtle “hidden power” in the position of first lady because the first lady “reinforces, reinterprets, strengthens, or weakens his position through her own performance” (p. 242). In her discussions of Carter and Clinton, Beasley also demonstrates how first ladies who achieved more direct political influence were frequently criticized by the news media. Arguing that there is a troubling bias against independent women, especially married women in public office, Beasley challenges the news media to critically evaluate their own role in shaping and reinforcing stereotypical gender roles and expectations. For Beasley, the image of the first lady presented by the news media upholds “outmoded,” even Victorian, ideas about gender.

In her conclusion Beasley opines on the possibility of a female president and a male presidential spouse as the most direct future challenges to these outmoded ideas about gender. What will be the role of a male presidential spouse compared to the public expectations of the office of the first lady? How will the media treat the public activities of the “first man” in the White House? One wonders if the husband of the president will be able to maintain a career outside of the White House, or will he be expected to stay at home and bake cookies? While I was writing this review in late January, Senator Clinton was pursuing her presidential campaign for 2008. The ensuing treatment of her presidential campaign in the news media should be watched closely.

First Ladies and the Press demonstrates Beasley’s deserved reputation as a journalism history pioneer and a contemporary expert in the study of women and gender in the news media. Her book offers valuable insights into the history of the office of first lady and the role of the
media in shaping and reinforcing public expectations for first ladies. Beasley’s work presents several areas for further study. For example, a study comparing the media treatment of first ladies and the equivalent media coverage of other wives of heads of state could be an interesting outgrowth of this work. In Canada, the prime ministers’s wives are rarely covered by the Canadian media and generally do not represent significant public figures.

Why is the institution of the first lady “an important part of the U.S. political system” (p. 258), and what does the fact that the first lady “has become a significant player in the national political game” (p. 243) say about American views of gender roles and political success? The potent relationship between gender, politics, and power infuses Beasley’s book with contemporary significance beyond its narrative focus.

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