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Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell’s *Red, White, and Blue on the Runway* is a lively and detailed account of a little-known fashion show held in 1968. Hosted by Lady Bird Johnson, the “Discover America”–themed event is here set against the backdrop of one of the most turbulent years in American history. The book’s seven chapters detail the conception, context, planning, and execution of the first (and only) White House fashion show.

The central premise of *Red, White, and Blue on the Runway* is that amid the cultural upheavals of the 1960s and changes in American fashion, the show was the “swansong of an industry that, unbeknownst to itself, was already obsolete” (p. 130). While the show lasted just thirty minutes and had no budget, the book reveals its complicated agendas and politics. It begins with a chapter dedicated to Johnson’s relationship with the fashion world, placing the First Lady, an oft-overlooked figure, at the center of this story. Recent scholarship has played in the White House, including as a trusted advisor and political strategist to her husband.[1]

Each subsequent chapter moves through the organization and execution of the event. Chapters 2 through 5 examine the various constituencies involved in the show, beginning with the planning committee, the models (called “mannequins” at the time), the audience, and the designers, respectively. The guest list, as described in chapter 4, constituted a “who’s who of American fashion,” an audience of “political wives, designers, and journalists” (p. 65). Chapter 5 delves into the designers, including household names like Bill Blass (with five outfits in the show) and Oscar de la Renta, a relative newcomer at the time. Chrisman-Campbell includes some biographical and career details about the designers, noting that they were an “eclectic mix of youth and maturity, couture-quality luxury and mass-market affordability, tradition and innovation” (p. 70). “The Runway,” the book’s sixth chapter, describes significant outfits and their reception by the audience. Chrisman-Campbell notes the frequent disconnect between the
“cutting-edge fashions on display and the conservative clothes worn by the political wives” (pp. 121-22). The concluding chapter focuses on the fallout from the show and the politically and culturally loaded choices First Ladies continue to make regarding fashion, touching on the recent tenures of Michelle Obama and Melania Trump.

The book features numerous illustrations, including reproductions of magazine covers, publicity photos, and film stills. Chrisman-Campbell’s research draws on oral histories, the fashion press, and archival collections, most notably at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library. The author relies heavily on Lady Bird’s audio diary, some 850 entries spanning John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 to the Johnson family’s return to private life in 1969. Correspondence from the White House Social Files and interviews the author conducted with key figures like Bess Abell, the Johnson administration’s social secretary, feature prominently. Although no complete and wholly reliable record of the event exists, the book recreates as closely as possible the lineup of the outfits on the runway and designers and fashion insiders in attendance (a last-minute storm stranded many in New York, and to remain on the tight timeline, some outfits seem to have been cut at the last minute).

Patriotic symbolism was not limited to the White House setting but also emphasized in red, white, and blue ensembles, as slides of quintessential American sites like the Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore, and the Capitol Building flashed behind the models. The images tied to the show’s “Discover America” theme were meant to bolster tourism, support the president’s domestic programs, and highlight the First Lady’s highway beautification initiative. Chrisman-Campbell writes that this patriotism was “at war” with glamour on the runway, “reflecting not just the conflicting agendas of the fashion show's organizers but the fractured state of American fashion—and America itself” (p. 69).

Given the book’s focus on fashion within the politics of the 1960s, additional attention to the burgeoning women’s movement would have strengthened the book’s arguments. Johnson had a long-standing interest in advancing the interests of professional women, and the politics of that movement were certainly on her mind; it was after all during her tenure as Second Lady that Kennedy established the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women in 1961. The agenda of radical feminists was about to burst onto the scene at the iconic 1968 Miss America protest, held just a few months after the show (and directly challenging beauty standards and consumerism). Chrisman-Campbell might have contextualized some of the public and press “criticism” of Lady Bird’s clothing and body within this milieu. From Johnson’s perspective, fashion was “froufrou” yet something her position mandated of her (p. 26). The First Lady seemed painfully aware of her responsibility to dress for the public, even while she understood it to be a necessary evil. She referred to marathon dress fittings as “torture,” dreaming about the months of each year when she would be free of those commitments (p. 12).

Moreover, the Vietnam War is another context that could have figured more prominently in the book. War certainly would have been on the minds of all present, as the conflict in Vietnam dragged on. Using the language of the Vietnam War, Lady Bird even referred to her daughter’s 1966 wedding preparations as “Operation Trousseau” (p. 19). Several models recalled discomfort meeting President Johnson, as they were opposed to the war or had loved ones serving. Walter Cronkite’s famous pronouncement of a stalemate in Vietnam had been broadcast just two days prior to the fashion show. Still, Red, White, and Blue on the Runway effectively connects the fashion, politics, and history of the turbulent 1960s, while broadening our understandings of a First Lady too long overshadowed by her husband.

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