

Abstract

“Hillary and Jackie: Comparing the Role of First Lady in the Clinton and Kennedy Administrations”

My new book, *Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier* (University Press of Kansas 2004), provides a foundation for an intriguing comparison between Mrs. Kennedy and Hillary Clinton. Placing both women in the historical context of the presidency and women's roles in politics, my paper examines the similarities and differences between these two fascinating women and their impact on the position of First Lady. Both were mothers of young children and fought to protect their privacy in a time of increasing media intrusion. Both focused one facet of their public work on White House redecoration and promotion of the arts. Both attracted public interest in their fashions and hairstyles, and they traveled extensively abroad (alone and with their husbands) as good-will ambassadors.

Yet with their White House service separated by three decades, the First Ladyships of Kennedy and Clinton reflected a fundamental difference. Hillary Clinton, both a generation younger than Jacqueline Kennedy and a product of the modern women's movement, broke new ground in the role of presidential spouse. Mrs. Kennedy served as a bridge between traditional First Ladies like Bess Truman and Mamie Eisenhower, who were content to remain on the sidelines of their husbands presidency, and modern First Ladies, starting with Lady Bird Johnson, who advocated a public policy cause (beautifying America, fighting drug use, promoting the Equal Rights Amendment, and spreading literacy). Mrs. Clinton, an attorney with her own career before she came to the White House, chose health care as her public policy concern. But she went far beyond her predecessors in leading a task force that developed draft legislation and presented it to Congress.

My paper analyzes the controversy surrounding Mrs. Clinton's expanded First Lady role in public policy and offers a conclusion on how Americans view the position in the context of presidential power and women's political participation.

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