

**The First Ladies' Role in an Always Changing Society**

by

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## What is a First Lady?

Being the First Lady of the United States is a constantly evolving position. Let us begin with Edith Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt and Michelle Obama, three First Ladies who each faced expectations, prejudice, love and hate when their husbands were in office. To be the most effective First Ladies they could be, each woman had strategies, some different and some the same. These three women had to find a way to please the public in their roles, though they were not always able to do so. They had to be able to take the heat and the hate, and that took a lot of strength. Each First Lady faced a different version of this and sometimes the same as well. A first lady's role changes every time a new woman is in office with her husband. As Michelle Obama put it, “a job that’s not officially a job, but that nonetheless has given me a platform like nothing I could have imagined. It challenged me and humbled me, lifted me up and shrank me down, sometimes all at once.”<sup>1</sup> Being the First Lady of the United States is not an easy job and these three women are great examples of those who did their best to either meet the demands made of them or worked to be the best help their husbands needed for their roles as Presidents. As First Ladies, these three women faced their own current societal expectations and sexist world views, fought them in their own ways, and used their “small” positions to make big differences in the world.

How do we understand what it means to be a First Lady? The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum discusses how the role is constantly evolving. From being a domestic role to becoming a politically involved role. Even this changes depending on who is First Lady at the time. The word “lady” was chosen because while many of the First Ladies are wives not all have been so it would not have made sense to call them Misses. if they were not all

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Obama, *Becoming*, (New York, Crown, 2018), Preface.

the wives of the president. The role of First Lady is created by each woman who is put into the position. The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum states that, “Unlike the President, the role of the First Lady is not addressed in the Constitution.”<sup>2</sup> This means that there are no clear guidelines on how exactly a First Lady is meant to act. Is it a job? Is she just meant to be a housewife and mother? Barbara Feinberg, the author of *America's First Ladies: Changing Expectations* says, “Sometimes, First Ladies deliberately took action as homemakers to set an example for the nation. For example, during World War I, Woodrow Wilson’s second wife, Edith, publicized her observance of meatless days to encourage Americans to do without beef and poultry so that more food could be diverted to the armed services, a practice that Eleanor Roosevelt followed as well.”<sup>3</sup> While sometimes the First Ladies did play the role of housewife, as has long been and remains an expectation of many women, it was not the most common or even the most attempted role of these three. In figuring one's role each woman took on different roles and responsibilities, including taking it upon themselves to bring forth important causes in public. For example, Eleanor Roosevelt was important in helping fight for both women’s rights and civil rights, as well as, holding her own press conferences and helping with war relief. We can also look at Michelle Obama who created her own campaigns and projects like the “Let’s Move” campaign and the fruit and vegetable garden she created on the White House grounds. In the introduction to “American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacies,” Lewis L. Gould discusses how writers, historians and journalists have paid close attention to the women attached to the presidents. Lewis explains that the goal of the book is to give us an in depth understanding of First Ladies so we can see them as their own people and understand what upbringings they

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<sup>2</sup> George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, “First Ladies Role,” [www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/first-ladys-role](http://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/first-ladys-role), 5/1/23.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Feinberg, *America's First Ladies: Changing Expectations*, (Connecticut, Franklin Watts, 1998), 50-51.

had and how their minds worked when in office. Gould says, “Americans are ambivalent about presidential wives. The public expects the First Lady to fulfill a multitude of roles flawlessly, and there is criticism at any departure from perceived standards. At the same time the criteria for success as a First Lady constantly changes as the public's view of women evolves and develops.”<sup>4</sup> Evolving expectations on women, sexism, sometimes racism for First Ladies like Michelle Obama, and the time period they are in office all play a huge role on what their jobs become. Each woman I have selected had different backgrounds, were First Ladies during different times throughout history and walked into the role with different mindsets. But with these different identities they all found ways to make lasting impressions on the country and sometimes even possibly be more powerful or well-known than their husbands.

### **Literature Review**

My topic on understanding the role of the First Lady and specific women in the role was first helped by a webpage from the George W. Bush Library and Museum called “First Lady’s Role.” This source discusses what the term First Lady means and what exactly the role of the First Lady is. The source goes on to discuss being known as “First Lady” came from a place of respect. For example, Martha Washington was referred to as “Lady Washington” and eventually the wives of the Presidents became known as the First Ladies. Also discussed is the term Lady being a bit of a problem for many of the women because at the time it was similar to what the Queen of England would be called and the United States was trying to step away from them. New names like “Presidentress” and “Mrs. President” were brought to the table and often used. The problem with these names being that not all First Ladies were wives of the President.

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis L. Gould, *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy*, (New York and London, Garland, 1996), xv.

The source continues to then discuss what the First Ladies roles were. While it was not a job, they were very often the most famous women if not just in the country, but in the world. They were assumed to have a voice with the President so a lot was asked of them because it was believed they could sway his decisions. The source finishes off by saying the First Ladies job can be hard because they have no guidelines, they have no rules. While the webpage was not specifically focused on the three women I discuss in my paper, it allows for me to really understand the history of expectations put on First Ladies.

Choosing who I wanted to write about came after reading Lewis L. Gould's *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy*. This text was first published by Garland Publishing Inc. in 1996 after being edited by Gould. His educational and historical background made him a great candidate for a secondary source I would use. Gould went to Yale University, became a historian and writer and since has written and edited over 20 historical works. He is now the Eugene C. Baker Centennial Professor in American History at the University of Texas at Austin. This text is a number of biographies on thirty-eight First Ladies. Each biography is written by a different person who are either historians or political scientists that did in depth research using personal papers like letters or historical documents. The two biographies I read each had a different author. Edith Bolling Wilson was written by the book's editor, Lewis L. Gould. Eleanor Roosevelt was written by Allida M. Black. She went to George Washington University and Emory University and is the director of the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, a documentary editing project at George Washington University. She is also the assistant professor of History and American studies at Pennsylvania State University. The authors who wrote the two biographies of Edith Wilson and Eleanor Roosevelt write on the before, during and after of the women's experience of First Ladies. Both biographies were well written and gave me a broad

view into the lives of these First Ladies which helped me to decide not just to select these women, but also gave me an idea on how I would write my paper.

While Gould created a novel that was helpful in getting to know First Ladies individually, Barbara Silberdick Feinberg wrote a book that connected the women. The book, *America's First Ladies: Changing Expectations* was extremely helpful in my research because it looks at all First Ladies from Mary Washington to Hilary Clinton. Reading this book allowed me to get a lot of more information on similarities and differences between Edith Wilson and Eleanor Roosevelt. Feinberg observes the good and the bad of all the First Ladies. She also makes each First Ladies story their own while also finding ways to show us how some of their actions may have matched another First Ladies from years before. This was especially necessary for my paper because my goal was to show some ways in which these women's experiences meshed, whether that means they acted the same when in their roles or differently.

After reading up on and selecting two of my First Ladies I had to decide on a third. I felt that Michelle Obama would be best from the help of two sources. The first was Laurel Elder and Brian Frederick's, "Why we Love Michelle: Understanding Public Support for First Lady Michelle Obama." Both authors were political science majors who now specialize in American politics. This article is a public opinion piece that uses data from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research archives and drew upon public opinion from the 2012 American National Election Studies survey on Michelle Obama's popularity. I chose to use this article because it was different from other works I had read. It specifically discusses why Michelle was not only extremely popular after her and Barack left office, but her popularity rating was much higher than his was. It gives us an honest view on not just the good that Michelle did, but also reasons for which she was not liked and it was not just because she was a woman. This article

was a good choice for my senior project because it is a present-day article with opinions from now. Michelle Obama is not yet considered history so my research on her was very different from my research on the other two women due to the fact that there are more present-day articles and books on Michelle Obama.

The second source on Michelle Obama that I felt best helped my paper along was an article called, “5 Milestone Moments for Michelle Obama since Leaving the White House.” by Louisa Ballhaus from the web page *SheKnows*. While the other two First Ladies I had written about are now history, Michelle Obama's life after the White House is still present. Because of this her memoir did not speak very much on what she did after she stopped being First Lady so I had to rely on secondary current news sources and interviews. This one specifically gave me some interesting highlights of her current life after her time as First Lady in the White House.

For Edith Wilson a helpful piece I read on her was James F. Lee’s, “The Western Virginia Town That Raised a Forward-Thinking First Lady: Woodrow Wilson’s Second Wife, Edith Bolling Wilson, Was First Lady from 1915 to 1921.” This Washington Post Newspaper Article was published on January 9th, 2020. The author, James F. Lee is a freelance writer who has written for many papers, not just the Post. When he writes his focus is on traveling and history and he has also written two books. In this article, Lee writes a small biography on the First Lady, Edith Bolling Wilson. He goes to her childhood home in Western Virginia where he uses the real pieces from her life to write his secondary source. Lee discusses the connection between the fact that Edith Wilson knew how to take care of Woodrow Wilson when he got sick because she had taken care of her grandmother, Ann Bolling, after she’d gotten sick when she was younger. Lee's article also brings up this common debate about Edith Wilson, did she or did she not make any decisions on policy during Woodrow Wilson’s presidency when he was sick.

Her statement stands that she did not. This newspaper article was well written, a small piece that added a lot of key details in Edith's life and helped me to be able to see that there was more research that I needed to do on her.

An additional source that helped me to learn about Edith Bowling Wilson was A. Scott Berg's, *Wilson*. The reason this biography helped me was because it gave me a perspective from an author more focused on her husband. A lot of the pieces written about Edith that I had read were solely focused on her. Now I was able to get a more outside perspective, one Berg used from Wilson's eyes. A. Scott Berg is a Princeton graduate who has written many novels and biographies. Because of that and because of the awards he holds, the National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize, I felt his biography would be a good fit for my studies on First Ladies.

The last piece that I felt best helped my paper was Doris Kearns Goodwin's, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II*. Goodwin's book won the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1995. Knowing that about this book and with Goodwin's long background as a Historian/journalist and the time she spent working in the White House, I felt this would be a great source to use to learn more about Eleanor Roosevelt. The book helped me tremendously in understanding certain aspects of Franklin and Eleanor's relationship as well as the ways in which their relationship would still shape Eleanor after he passed away. Goodwin's book was a very important part of why I was able to understand more than just Eleanor's strengths. The book helped me to get a well-rounded understanding of who Eleanor Roosevelt was.

### Their Lives Before Being First Ladies



The public really only ever gets to know these women when they are in the White House, but each First Lady had a life before their positions. While each woman had different experiences as they grew up, they also had similar ones as well. For example, Eleanor and Michael both have great educational backgrounds and Edith and Eleanor were both born before women had the right to vote. Edith Bolling Wilson or Edith Wilson was born October 15th 1872. The time period she was born in was one before women had any rights, specifically any right to vote. She was the seventh of eleven children. Her ancestry ties back to Pocahontas, the Native American, and her grandfather had been a slave owner during the Civil War. She grew up traveling with her father who studied law and was a judge. Before meeting Woodrow Wilson, Edith was married. She had a child who died three days after being born and her first husband passed away five years after that. After he died, she took on being manager of the jewelry business that they had. The money from this business was able to help sustain her without needing to do any extra work and it also allowed for her to travel. Edith did not have much education, but even without it Edith was successful in her business. She made money and was able to travel often. During her travels she was introduced to Woodrow Wilson's cousin Helen who invited her for tea at the White House. The weeks after that they spent lots of time together and he proposed to her in May of 1915. She said no to his proposal and during this time period it was common for women not to accept a first proposal. By that June she did accept his proposal because they had grown so close and he would confide in her super important presidential things that made her feel she was sharing in the work he was doing. While Edith had been a widow for many years Woodrow had been a widow for less than a year, so many of his advisors and friends thought this engagement would be too soon for the public to accept. They tried to use his past romance, one rumored to have happened during his last marriage, to stop him from announcing

his new engagement, but it did not work. In October 1915, Woodrow Wilson announced their engagement. Gould states, “The president simultaneously announced his support of women’s suffrage in his home state of New Jersey– a reform he had earlier opposed. The gesture was designed to lessen political reaction to the second marriage.”<sup>5</sup> In December, they were married. Wilson would be First Lady from 1915-1921. She was Woodrow Wilson's second wife and his second First Lady.

Eleanor Roosevelt was born October 11th, 1884. Just like Edith Wilson, Eleanor was born before women were given the right to vote. Her upbringing was different from that of Edith Wilson’s though. While she was born into wealth she grew up with some bad luck, a sick mother and a father who was an alcoholic. Her parents barely got along and although she tried taking care of her mother while she was unwell, her mother made her very self-conscious by constantly making fun of Eleanor’s appearance. Within the first ten years of her life Eleanor would lose her mother at age eight and then her father at age 10. She ended up spending her young years with her grandmother and then in Allenswood Academy in London where her grandmother sent her away to be educated. Eleanor loved school because of how independent she felt and the confidence it brought her. In 1902, Eleanor came back to New York where she ran into her cousin Franklin D. Roosevelt on the train. From then on, they would see each other every so often and eventually were engaged in November of 1903. Their engagement was drawn out because Franklin's mother did not want them to get married. She believed Franklin was too good for Eleanor. Her efforts did not work though and they were married in March of 1905. Unlike Edith Wilson who married into being First Lady, Franklin was not yet president and they would be married twenty-eight years before they got to that point. For the first ten years of their

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<sup>5</sup> Gould, *Their Legacy*, 360.

marriage Eleanor was basically a stay-at-home mom because she was constantly having babies and had no time for anything else. During this time Franklin was in politics already. After Eleanor had their son Elliott in 1910, Franklin was elected as New York State Senator in 1911. This gave Eleanor an opportunity to leave their home in the city and move to Albany with their children to be around Franklin more. After two years in Albany Franklin left to actually help the Wilson administration. This would finally give Eleanor complete freedom to start her own endeavors. Mrs. Roosevelt was at first just a big help in coordinating Franklin's constant moves, but when World War 1 came she became involved in wartime relief. This became her first time doing real work on her own outside her family. What Gould says in his book is, "Emboldened by these experiences, Mrs. Roosevelt began to respond to requests that she play a more public political role."<sup>6</sup> In 1920 when Franklin was nominated to be vice-president Eleanor took on a big role within his campaign. Although his presidential running mate lost, Franklin stayed in politics and Eleanor became involved in more as well. Throughout this time Eleanor Roosevelt became extremely involved in Women's unions and organizations. In Blanche Wiesen Cook's biography, *Eleanor Roosevelt the Early Years*, she writes that Eleanor was, "Impressed by the women she worked with, she came to believe that women's public activities would determine America's national future. Not a prewar suffragist herself, she fully appreciated the suffragists' century of struggle, and grass-roots strategy that ultimately triumphed."<sup>7</sup> Though some people thought of her political career as a joke, because it was believed women did not have a place in politics, Eleanor stood her ground and took her politics seriously. After discovering that Franklin had an affair in 1918, Eleanor changed their relationship to one of professionalism and alliance in politics. In 1921, Franklin was hit with Polio and Eleanor was the steadfast partner who kept his

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<sup>6</sup> 426.

<sup>7</sup> Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt the Early Years*, (New York, Penguin, 1993), 338.

name in the public and kept campaigning to keep his politics alive while he could not. Though she supported her husband in his politics she did not agree with everything he did and she did have her own political circles she was focused on as well. In fact, when he was nominated to be president, she specifically spoke about not wanting to be the First Lady because it might take away from her own political endeavors. An additional author in Gould's book, Allida M. Black, states that Eleanor said, "I never wanted it even though some people have said that my ambition for myself drove him on.... I never wanted to be a President's wife."<sup>8</sup> Unlike Edith Wilson who married into the role and had no real relationship with politics Eleanor did not want to be a First Lady. Though she agreed with lots of Franklin's politics, she did not agree with everything and that was a part of why she enjoyed having her own political role. If she were to become First Lady, she knew she may lose this. Black says, "The American press, like the American public, was divided over how professionally active a First Lady should be."<sup>9</sup> She had always been ridiculed for being a woman in politics, but now she would face more scrutiny and questioning being the First Lady as well. Unfortunately, she had no say in the matter. In 1933 Franklin D. Roosevelt was chosen to be President of the United States and she would then be First Lady from 1933-1945.

Michelle Obama was born January 17th, 1964 in Chicago, Illinois. Michelle has a memoir she wrote after her time in the White House called, *Becoming*, where she writes of the before, during and some of the after of being First Lady. In her memoir she writes that her father and mother, Fraser and Marian, were lower middle-class parents who did not sugarcoat anything for their children. Michelle Obama writes in her memoir, "As we grew, we spoke more about

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<sup>8</sup> Gould, *Their Legacy*, 433.

<sup>9</sup> 434.

drugs and sex and life choices, about race and inequality and politics. My parents didn't expect us to be saints. My father, I remember, made a point of saying that sex was and should be fun."<sup>10</sup> Her and her brother, Craig, asked a question and it was answered with complete honesty. Chicago was and still is to this day a very divided city. In her memoir, *Becoming*, Michelle Obama explains that she was not hidden from racism at all and learned fast that being black meant a lot of assumptions were put upon her like, she must be less educated. She had parents who wanted her educated, not because they wanted her to be whiter, but because they knew that black people could be just as educated as white people if given the opportunity. Her first experience of racism directed at herself was one day when hanging out with a few girls. She was asked by one of them, "How come you talk like a white girl?"<sup>11</sup> Then again, she was met with racism when her high school counselor did not believe she, a black girl, was capable of getting into Princeton. The fact that it is believed if you sound educated, you sound white, or that being black meant you could not be smart, was what drove Michelle to prove to the world that these racist stereotypes were not true. Michelle stated, "My only thought, in the moment, was I'll show you."<sup>12</sup> She wanted to prove to herself and show others that black people, especially black women, can be educated too.

Michelle's first success outside of doing well in her classes in school was when she got accepted into Princeton University and then after she graduated, she worked for a law firm called Sidley and Austin in Chicago. These were two great successes for her, but what she says she had come to realize, especially once she met her soon to be husband Barack Obama was, "I'd constructed my existence carefully, tucking and folding every loose and disorderly bit of it, as if

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<sup>10</sup> Obama, *Becoming*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> 40.

<sup>12</sup> 67.

building some tight and airless piece of origami.” [...] “I think now it’s why I guarded myself so carefully, why I still wasn’t ready to let him in. He was like a wind that threatened to unsettle everything.”<sup>13</sup> She had met Barack Obama while working at Sidley and Austin. It was her job to show him the ropes of the place and make him feel welcomed and comfortable and they inevitably fell in love. During their time together Michelle would come to understand, because of Obama’s free spirit, she had been working so hard to prove black women could do anything that she wasn’t even sure she wanted to be a lawyer. In October of 1992 Michelle and Barack got married. In *Becoming*, Michelle describes to us the ups and downs of their marriage and the ways in which Barack’s job in politics weighed heavily on them. His job consumed his daily life and while Michelle tried to be understanding and give him the artistic space he needed she also felt alone at times and felt like it took away from her goals, always being so focused on his. During their marriage they had two daughters, Michelle had to learn to juggle both work and the girls, while Barack would be away for days on end working in his political circles. His job was important and Michelle understood that, but they had to learn to find a balance. What Michelle said about this was, “My goals mostly involved maintaining normalcy and stability, but those would never be Barack’s. We had grown better about recognizing this and letting it be. One ying, one yang. I craved routine and order, and he did not.”<sup>14</sup> And what Michelle soon realized she said was, “I had no choice but to adjust to Barack’s absences anyway, because they weren’t slated to end.”<sup>15</sup> Michelle learned how to work with this. She worked many jobs, not because she could not keep a job, but because she always had a want for something new, something more. She was the vice president of a hospital, as well as the director of a non-profit, on top of having

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<sup>13</sup> 105.

<sup>14</sup> 211.

<sup>15</sup> 211.

been a lawyer as well. She even once brought her daughter to an interview with her because Barack was away and she had no one to watch Sasha. And during this interview she even spoke up for herself because she knew she was acting as a single mother at times and would need to be able to bring her daughter with her to work if Barack was away. With confidence Michelle stated, “I walked out of the interview feeling pleased and fairly certain I’d be offered the job. But, no matter how it panned out, I knew I had at least done something good for myself in speaking up about my needs.”<sup>16</sup> Up until Obama was sworn in as president in January of 2009 Michelle would learn how to juggle being a mom and an employee and she realized that she should not have to do one or the other because she could do both.

All three women had lives before they were First Ladies. Whether these lives were ones of education, political influence, prior jobs or having children, they all have a connection in the fact that they had personal lives before becoming a First Lady. As we look at each woman, we can see many similarities and differences as well. Between Eleanor Roosevelt and Michelle Obama's motherhood was a big factor in the past. Both women had to figure out how to be mothers and working mothers while their husbands' political lives often came before the families. Edith Wilson's situation was not the same because she had no children prior and she married into the First Lady role; she did not marry Woodrow Wilson before he was president. Each woman's educational background was different and this can be attributed in part to the times they grew up in. Women had very little rights before 1920 and both Edith Wilson and Eleanor Roosevelt were born before this time. What Eleanor Roosevelt had in her favor was money, she had the means to get an education. Then there is Michelle Obama who, while she was born in a time when women had more rights, she as a black woman was automatically

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<sup>16</sup> 202.

assumed to be less educated so she worked extra hard in school to pave a path for herself to be as educated as she became. The next thing we can look at is their politics before being First Lady. Edith Wilson did not have much to say when it came to politics before becoming First Lady. She was Woodrow Wilson's confidant before they were married though and did know many things about what was going on in politics and the world because of him. Eleanor Roosevelt is probably the most well known for her involvement in politics before becoming First Lady. She helped the Red Cross during World War I by taking care of soldiers and speaking with them. Her stances were pretty clear as well. She was a big advocate and fighter for women's rights and women not being held down by the household. Cook stated that, "ER admired the concerned and politically astute women who dedicated themselves to making their hard-won right to vote meaningful."<sup>17</sup> She had many significant roles at women's conventions as well as calling attention to things she cared about to Franklin when she had certain opinions. Michelle Obama's politics was very much intertwined with the jobs she had. Michelle's jobs spoke for what she stood for. She wanted to help people. One of her jobs was the Chicago Department of Planning and Development. This job worked with young adults, mostly minorities, to get internships and have experience to help give them opportunities for work after school. This personal need to help minorities and other folks of the younger generation would go on into her ideals during her time as First Lady. Outside of her work though Michelle Obama did her best to stay away from the politics that Barack Obama was in because she saw the ways in which it treated him poorly and did not want herself or her daughters to be thrown into any drama.

An additional thing to observe is each woman's different relationships to their husbands. Edith Wilson married a president both of the other two women's husbands became Presidents

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<sup>17</sup> Cook, *Early Years*, 290.



while they were married. Edith Wilson had a strong relationship with Woodrow Wilson prior to the White House. Their romance was a very short one that would lead to marriage within a year of knowing one another. They met, dated and got married by December of 1915 where she was then immediately First Lady. Michelle's relationship to Barack Obama was one of romance, but still arguments, it was very real and just like Eleanor Roosevelt, she supported him through his political aspirations. Michelle and Barack were very different though. She was very well kept and liked things in order and he was free and could just do things on a whim. They were best friends and this never changed, but they did have struggles. Michelle Obama talks about couples therapy they went to, arguments they had and even times when she felt very lonely in her memoir, *Becoming*. She was not a fan of his political life at all and in fact said that she did not want to be involved, which is hard when you have to become First Lady if he is to become President. At the end of the day though Michelle Obama always supported Barack. Lastly, we have Eleanor Roosevelt who, like Michelle Obama, did not want to be First Lady but for different reasons. Hers and Franklin's relationship started out as one of love, friendship and teamwork. The relationship became harder as years went on. One with the constant nagging and butting in of her mother-in-law, Sara Roosevelt. Franklin's mother was not fond of Eleanor in the beginning of their marriage. She believed with her son to be too good for her and so it sometimes seemed as if her life mission was to always be in the way and Franklin never really pushed her away. Then came Franklin's affair, where it was Sara who gave Eleanor moral support. Eleanor and Franklin were apart very often, but this was hard for Eleanor to accept because she had loved Franklin. Inevitably hers and Franklin's relationship became a partnership and one where they were sometimes at odds because while they agreed on some stuff their politics did not always align. Inevitably, to bring us back to my first point, this would lead to her to not want to be First

Lady because one, their relationship was barely husband and wife and two, she worried she would have to set her politics aside in order to be the caretaker to Franklin's ideas and the hostess of the White House, which was not what she wanted and went against a lot of her morals. What Gould says about Eleanor is that, "Although she supported her husband's aims and believed in his leadership ability, she feared that his political agenda—in addition to restricting her movements and curtailing her independence—would force her to minimize the political issues she held nearest and dearest to her heart."<sup>18</sup> Here we can see that each woman had different upbringings, home lives, jobs, and relationships to their respective partners. The society they were brought up in also affected the ways in which they carried themselves or the paths their lives took them on.

### Their Lives as First Ladies

Once they became First Ladies, each woman had a different experience, different expectations set upon them, and different approaches to the job. We will see some similarities as well, but inevitably society's ideas of woman and each woman's own personal selves would shape this next chapter of their lives because First Ladies are expected to set examples of what a woman in America should be and each of these women had their own views on this. Barbara Feinberg's novel reads, "They are in effect unpaid government workers whose duties more or less depend on their individual personalities, interests, and the amount of power they are able to exercise."<sup>19</sup> Becoming First Lady is also a whole new life for most of these women. While Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Barack Obama had constantly been in politics and in the public eye not all of their wives signed up for the same feat. And while Eleanor Roosevelt

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<sup>18</sup> Gould, *Their Legacy*, 434.

<sup>19</sup> Feinberg, *Changing Expectations*, 13.

was the most involved in politics unlike the other two First Ladies, her role in the spotlight would be changed by her new role as First Lady.

Edith Wilson, of these three First Ladies, was not as prepared as Eleanor and Michelle for the role she would come to face as First Lady. Unlike Eleanor Roosevelt and Michelle Obama whose husbands had both been politicians long before their presidencies, and whom they had been married to during that time, Edith married into the presidency. This did not stop her from learning the ways of the job or attempting to be a good wife to Woodrow Wilson. In fact a writer for the Washington Post, James F. Lee states, “I once heard Edith Bolling Wilson referred to as the ‘first female president’ of the United States.”<sup>20</sup> Edith Wilson did not start out her job of First Lady as anything more than an aid and an ear for Woodrow Wilson. She helped him to become better dressed, she was very attentive to his health and she was who he went to with all of his secrets, both personal and of the state. The majority of her time as First Lady was during Woodrow Wilson’s second term which was also when World War I began. Of the three ladies Edith Wilson would face more crises than the other women during her time.

At the start of the war Edith Wilson saved money and raised money for the war effort by having wives wear planer clothing and then by having sheep graze on the White House’s lawn so they would not spend money on the mowing. She then had the wool of the sheep donated. As well as this, Edith set up a Red Cross in the White House. Then came her trip to Europe with Woodrow Wilson. According to Feinberg, “Edith Wilson became the first First Lady to visit Europe on an official trip with her husband.”<sup>21</sup> On this trip the Treaty of Versailles was signed in

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<sup>20</sup> James F. Lee, “The Western Virginia Town That Raised a Forward-Thinking First Lady: Woodrow Wilson’s Second Wife, Edith Bolling Wilson, Was First Lady from 1915 to 1921.” (The Washington Post, 2020), 1.

<sup>21</sup> Feinberg, *Changing Expectations*, 103.

1919. Afterwards when the Wilsons returned to the US, Edith was worried about Woodrow because his health had begun to decline. The worst was yet to come though. Woodrow Wilson, on their return, would go on a campaign tour to get public support for the United States to become full members of the League of Nations. As he traveled his health got worse and Gould says, “Wilson complained of a severe headache. He awoke the next morning with one side of his face fallen and tears in his eyes.”<sup>22</sup> Edith did not share this news with the public, she chose to keep it a secret until doctors had more to say. On October 2nd, 1919, after returning to the White House, he had a stroke. This moment is where Edith Wilson’s role as First Lady is drastically changed. Feinberg says that, “When Edith asked Dr. Dercum whether her husband ought to resign to avoid stress, he replied that ‘if he resigns, the greatest incentive for recovery is gone; and as his mind is clear as crystal, he can still do more even with a maimed body than anyone else.’ By following Dercum’s advice, Edith, in effect, began to govern the nation.”<sup>23</sup> Not only was her husband incredibly ill but she felt, based on his words, the only thing she could do was stick by his side and help him with his work because if he resigned, he would have less of a reason to push to get better.

Edith Wilson’s decision though huge for the role she would inevitably play did not help first ladies for the future because many of the public felt she greatly overstepped the role that a First Lady was meant to have in office or because so much of her role she kept quiet that people also do not even know the things she did to help Woodrow Wilson. During the height of his illness Edith was an intermediary for many of the affairs Woodrow Wilson was meant to attend to. Edith called her role a “stewardship” but as Lee said it was, “a stewardship that lasted until

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<sup>22</sup> Gould, *Their Legacy*, 362.

<sup>23</sup> Feinberg, *Changing Expectations*, 65.

the end of Wilson's term in March 1921 – 17 months!"<sup>24</sup> Her role, as small as she played it off, consisted of reading all the important documents that went to him and she herself decided if they were important. Gould wrote, "Some writers have alleged that she functioned as the first woman president during the period of her husband's illness. In her memoirs, Edith Wilson denied that charge: 'I myself never made a single decision regarding the deposition of public affairs.... The only decision that was mine was what was important and what was not, and the very important decision of when to present matters to my husband.'" <sup>25</sup> She did this in order to make it easier on him because he was sick so she did not want him to have to read too much, but it was a huge decision for a First Lady to make on what was and was not important enough to bring in front of the President of the United States. What she did not seem to accept was although she was not making any presidential decisions, the decision on what government affairs Woodrow Wilson should or should not see/be a part of was huge. Eventually the amount of work she did was not enough because the job got too hard. From taking care of her husband, being his middle man and keeping his illness a secret, it was piling up. What we read in Gould's book is that, "Despite Edith Wilson's best efforts to deal with the flow of the public business that poured into the White House, the machinery of government became as Wilson slowly recovered."<sup>26</sup> After he got sick on October 2nd Edith had to work very hard, taking on as much as possible in secret, but inevitably the word got out. Before it reached the public, people within the White House were slowly told since rumors were spreading. Wilson's doctor, Dr. Grayson worked to help Edith in keeping Woodrow Wilson's illness a secret. Author of the novel "Wilson," A. Scott Berg writes that, "The doctor assured Lansing that the President's mind was 'clear and acute' and that he

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<sup>24</sup> Lee, "Forward-Thinking First Lady," 2.

<sup>25</sup> Gould, *Their Legacy*, 363.

<sup>26</sup> 364.

would not be party to suggesting his incapacity.”<sup>27</sup> This inevitably would work for a while. There was even a point where, while the truth was being spread around the White House a cabinet meeting was held on what to do about the situation. People, like the secretary of state Robert Lansing, wanted Woodrow Wilson out and the Vice President in. Dr. Grayson went to the meeting on behalf of the President to say he was angered by a meeting being called without his knowledge.

Even though Edith and Dr. Grayson worked hard to hold back knowledge on the severity of the President's condition, word did get out to the public who began discussing disabilities. A. Scott Berg writes that Dr. Grayson kept repeating Woodrow Wilson's body was not in shape, but his mind was so that people would not push for him to be taken out of office. Eventually the President began to feel better. While at first, he could do no more than lay in bed and talk a little, by the end of October he was able to sit upright in a chair and have conversations and eventually meetings plus back to his more regular routine! He would get sick again in January of 1920 when an influenza epidemic occurred. Because of his past bad health, it would hit him harder than most and Edith would be thrown back into her job of being his middle man. He would not be able to officially get back up and out of the White House until March 3rd of that year. For the rest of his presidency some of his cabinet members would be on edge and worried about his health and whether or not he was fit to run the country. Edith was always by his side, defending and taking care of him. During her time in office with Woodrow Wilson she took on a great deal of the work that was meant for the president not for a First Lady. Though the work she did for him was short lived she still became his confidant in all aspects of his presidency, he was reliant on her advice. It is not clear if all the information on how far Edith went to help her husband is

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<sup>27</sup> A. Scott. Berg, *Wilson*, (New York, G.P Putnam's Sons, 2013), 645.

true, if it is over exaggerated or even under exaggerated, but what is known is that at this time most of the public considered the presidency only fitting for a man and so Edith Wilson's role was not always looked at with admiration and would cause the role of First Lady to be scrutinized for overstepping in generations to come.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt became President in 1933 Eleanor Roosevelt's political life was altered because she was no longer just Eleanor Roosevelt, the politician, she was now Eleanor Roosevelt, Franklin's First Lady. This differed from Edith who did not have much of a political presence before being First Lady and just wanted to help her husband during his presidency. This would not stop Eleanor from using the voice she had before this new role. Gould says, "Mrs. Roosevelt refused to accept a superficial and sedentary role."<sup>28</sup> Eleanor became a new kind of First Lady. Not only was she already involved in politics before Franklin's presidency, but because Franklin would eventually be the longest running president, Eleanor would be the longest running First Lady which gave her so much time to get her voice out there. Her first plan was to create a weekly press conference, with women reporters only, to discuss her roles as First Lady, but it also turned into political talks which she would often have off the record to not harm her husband's image. She also had Franklin and the administration appoint women to help the New Deal as well as advocating for women's rights in public programs like FERA (Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the CWA (Civil Works Administration). Her position as First Lady, while it may have partially held her back from voicing any opinions of hers that were at odds with her husband, did allow for her to be in his ear. In the bio on Eleanor in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum we read, "Throughout Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency, Eleanor traveled extensively around the nation, visiting

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<sup>28</sup> Gould, *Their Legacy*, 435.

relief projects, surveying working and living conditions, and then reporting her observations to the President. She was called ‘the President's eyes, ears and legs’ and provided objective information to her husband.”<sup>29</sup> Eleanor was known for wanting to move at a faster pace than Franklin could and also faster than he could since he had channels he had to go through. She did not allow for his slow pace to stop her though. She made sure to discuss her many interests to any and all who would listen because she knew the pull she had and knew that people often wanted to hear what she had to say. From radio talks to newspaper reports Eleanor brought attention to many causes. She advocated for artists, for refugees, and for women. Eleanor found a way to have her own voice while not taking away from Franklin, but by either building onto his campaigns or holding him accountable for promises he made. Feinberg writes, “When Franklin Roosevelt set up the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933, putting young people to work on reforestation, irrigation and flood control, Eleanor insisted that young women be included to do lighter tasks, and she encouraged the first female cabinet member, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, to set up a camp for them at Bear Mountain, New York.”<sup>30</sup> As well as this Eleanor advocated for the youth and during hers and Franklin's second term, she became a big voice in the Civil Rights movement.

Eleanor Roosevelt increased her civil rights activism in her second term as First Lady which angered many people. She was open to learning about and helping African Americans and refused to be intimidated by any backlash. Eleanor even resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution when they did not let Marian Anderson, an African American singer, perform. Feinberg says, “In a well-publicized gesture of support, the First Lady arranged for Ms.

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<sup>29</sup> George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, “First Ladies Role,” 5/1/23.

<sup>30</sup> Feinberg, *Changing Expectations*, 86.



Anderson to perform on the steps of the Lincoln memorial before an audience of 75,000. She also asked the soprano to sing before the king and queen of England...”<sup>31</sup> Along with this she pushed for equal pay for blacks and whites and for black people to have jobs in the government just like she had done for women. Eleanor Roosevelt's activism during Franklin's presidency was ahead of her time. Women, especially first ladies, were not supposed to be outspoken or pushy. There were even times where Eleanor wondered what if she stepped back and just helped her husband. He had polio and every once in a while, would get hit with a heavy spell of sickness especially at the start of his fourth term. Author Doris Kearns Goodwin of the novel, “No Ordinary Time,” says that Eleanor wrote, ““Maybe I’d do the most useful job if I became a good wife and waited on FDR,’ she wrote to Esther Lape a week after the election.”<sup>32</sup> Even with these thoughts Eleanor did not sit back. When he was at his best she did not pamper Franklin while he did his work, she pushed along right beside him. She had come to realize that, “she commanded more power and respect than any other woman in the United States.”<sup>33</sup> So, although she would be there for him in his illness her power could still hold on for the both of them. Franklin and Eleanor were the longest standing President and First Lady. Franklin D. Roosevelt served four terms and the only reason he did not finish out the fourth was because he passed away during it on April 12th, 1945. What we can get from Eleanor’s time as First Lady is that she was not one to falter in the face of struggle or adversity. She was First Lady during both World War I and the Great Depression as well as during the Civil Rights Movement and her time only landed a little

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<sup>31</sup> 87.

<sup>32</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II*, (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1994), 554.

<sup>33</sup> 554.

over ten years after women had gained the right to vote. The number of problems both political and personal that she took on is nothing ever seen done by any other First Lady.

When Barack Obama was made the first black President of the United States, the Obama's lives were drastically changed. In her memoir Michelle Obama says, “My mind raced with all that needed to get done. There had been no way to plan for this transition. Doing anything ahead of time would have been viewed as presumptuous. For a planner like me, it had been hard to sit back. So now we went into overdrive. My top priority was looking out for Sasha and Malia.”<sup>34</sup> Michelle Obama was now the first black First Lady of the United States. She had to be a united front with her husband, while trying to still keep her identity her own, while also making sure her daughters were comfortable and safe in this new spotlight. Michelle headed many important campaigns during her time as First Lady. Some of the most remembered or most notable were her “Let's Move!” campaign and her garden project. The “Let’s Move” campaign fought child obesity and advocated for healthy lifestyles. Her garden project was a fruit and vegetable garden she convinced the National Parks Service to make at the White House. She did this project to help support Barack’s push for healthcare because healthy foods meant a healthier lifestyle. Even with the work she attempted to do there was still backlash. In the article, “The Cult of First Ladyhood: Controlling Images of White Womanhood in the Role of the First Lady,” by Megan Handau and Evelyn Simien, we read, “Michelle Obama was criticized by feminists for her Let’s Move! initiative to combat childhood obesity because the standards for feminine beauty correlate with the ability to achieve a body that meets societal approval through a regime of diet and exercise.”<sup>35</sup> This campaigning that Michelle did was of her own choice. Her goal was to

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<sup>34</sup> Obama, *Becoming*, 285.

<sup>35</sup> Megan Handau and Evelyn Simien, “The Cult of First Ladyhood: Controlling Images of White Womanhood in the Role of the First Lady,” (2019) 485.

make sure children had someone who cared about them even if the public had their own opinions on it.

Outside of just her campaigns she was constantly worried about her girls and Barack. She was Barack's relief at the end of the days when the job got really hard because he had to make tough calls and was constantly hated for his decisions. This was who she was, this was not a ploy made by the media, but the media used her nurturing side to their advantage. Authors of "Why We Love Michelle: Understanding Public Support for First Lady Michelle Obama" Laurel Elder and Brian Frederick state that, "While the public does not want the president's spouse to be an official White House adviser, the public does expect the presidential spouse to be visible in carrying out the ceremonial responsibilities of the job, doing good works on behalf of the nation, and helping the president win reelection"<sup>36</sup> The public always had expectations and those needs changed day to day so the media and herself had to find a way to meet these needs. Michelle Obama discusses, in *Becoming*, how she supported her husband because politics was what he wanted, but she did not want it. She did her best as a First Lady, but Michelle was often focused on the family aspect of her job because she wanted to make sure this very public sphere did not tear her family apart. People did not have a problem with her being a family woman, but black Americans felt that because she did not use her black platform for them she was letting them down. Elder and Frederick also say, "Michelle Obama avoided high-profile speeches on issues such as systemic racial injustices in the criminal justice system including police brutality and the deaths of unarmed African Americans at the hands of police. Had she taken a leadership role in addressing these issues her favorability rating among whites and Republicans most likely would

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<sup>36</sup> Laurel Elder and Brian Frederick, "Why We Love Michelle: Understanding Public Support for First Lady Michelle Obama," (2019), 406.

have suffered.”<sup>37</sup> She was not just some hero figure to the black community. People believed she was trying to save face for Obama’s campaign and because of this she was not speaking for her community. Michelle’s truth to this, from what we read in *Becoming*, is that while most of her jobs throughout her life were about helping people she did not want to be as involved in politics because her main concern was her family and for many people, specifically black people, that was a let down because she did not use her new found privilege to help those without it. She did not just face scrutiny though; Michelle Obama was popular and very well liked for many of the choices she made while being the First Lady. Elder and Frederick state, “Michelle Obama was active and visible, garnering high levels of name recognition while first lady, yet she confined her actions to championing nonpartisan and feel-good causes,” [...] “activities the public is nearly unanimous in viewing as highly appropriate for first ladies.”<sup>38</sup> This in fact tells us that Michelle Obama did a good job of meeting what society’s expectations of first ladies were during her time in office.

Michelle Obama faced a mixture of positive and negative feelings from the public while she was First Lady for two terms. In her memoir she talks about how although she was popular and often liked it was hard to look past the backlash and rude or sometimes racist people who talked bad about her. In her memoir Michelle wrote, “I put this on myself as pressure, a driving need not to screw anything up. Though I was thought of as a popular First Lady, I couldn’t help but feel haunted by the ways I’d been criticized, by the people who’d made assumptions about me based on the color of my skin.”<sup>39</sup> What Michelle discusses though is that at the end of the day after all the work she put into her campaigns, all the fight she put up against hate and racism, and

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<sup>37</sup> Elder/Frederick, “Why We Love Michelle,” 423.

<sup>38</sup> 411.

<sup>39</sup> Obama, *Becoming*, 366.

taking care of her girls and Barack, she would still forever be the first black First Lady, they would be the first black first family and that was a huge success all on its own. During their last few months in the White House she wrote, “I hoped that when future parents brought their children to visit, the way I’d brought Malia and Sasha when their father was senator, they’d be able to point out some reminder of our family’s time here.”<sup>40</sup> Michelle, though facing backlash for some of her campaigns and the way she looked, was a model for First Ladies to come. She may not have met every person in America’s standards but she left a lasting impact and still holds one to this day.

### Their Lives After Being First Ladies

At some point the role of First Lady must come to an end because Presidencies come to an end. What these women chose to do afterwards was up to them. When Edith and Woodrow Wilson left the White House together in March of 1921, but still lived in Washington DC. Edith was never fully convinced her husband was completely better, she believed he got back into things too fast and he was putting too much on himself during the last years of his presidency. Edith believed if he did not slow down, he would be extremely sick again. Inevitably, after he finished his Presidency, she was right. The time after his presidency ended was often spent in bed. Berg says, “No President had left the White House feeling so utterly depleted as Woodrow Wilson. By mid-May, he was still lying in bed most days.”<sup>41</sup> Edith did her very best to try and keep Woodrow’s spirits high, but it was hard because like Dr. Grayson had assumed once he was no longer president he stopped trying, stopped caring to fight his illness. The President would eventually begin to get very sick again at the end of January in 1924. Edith called both Dr. Grayson and a second doctor for a second opinion to check on her husband. Woodrow Wilson

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<sup>40</sup> 412.

<sup>41</sup> Berg, *Wilson*, 708.

would sadly pass away in February of 1924. Edith would spend the rest of her life making sure she controlled any narrative about Woodrow Wilson. She made sure that anyone who talked about him either was not allowed to publish any of his personal letters or only allowed to publish what was first run by her. In 1939 she also published her own memoir that focused heavily on her romance with Woodrow Wilson. She was not very involved in much politics after her husband's presidency, but she did publicly support John F. Kennedy and attended his inauguration. Berg also says that, "Edith Wilson had largely withdrawn from the public eye, except for occasions that honored her late husband."<sup>42</sup> She would eventually donate hers and Woodrow Wilson's house in Washington to the National Trust for Historic Preservation and made sure her husband's birthplace was also made important historically. In November of 1961 she unfortunately got sick with a respiratory infection and would pass away a month later in DC. Of the three First Ladies we are discussing, Edith Wilson made her life most about her husband and his well-being. She was always worried about his health throughout his life and did her best to protect him both before and after he passed away. While she was not extremely active in politics, she was a great confidant for Woodrow Wilson with all the responsibilities he held and took on a lot as a First Lady once he was sick. Gould says, "Her performance in the White House has often been depicted as an example of the dangers that might arise whenever First Ladies seek to exercise real power."<sup>43</sup> Edith Wilson was a First Lady who had both good and bad effects on future first ladies and on women in general. The power she held was considered too much to many, while it could also be seen as empowering to women as well.

Eleanor Roosevelt's time as First Lady only ended when it did because of the passing of Franklin D. Roosevelt. It only took her a week after his passing to plan the funeral and get all her

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<sup>42</sup> 742.

<sup>43</sup> Gould, *Their Legacy*, 366.

things in order because she wanted to be out of the White House as fast as possible. She would learn that Franklin's mistress Lucy Rutherford had been with him when he passed away and so on top of no longer wanting to be First Lady she just did not want to be surrounded by his constant memory. Eleanor had very little space when she left the White House. Reporters and photographers wanted to know what her next political mission would be and even close friends and other politicians were asking questions, giving suggestions, and pushing for information. Gould states, "Even the syndicated columnists Joseph and Stewart Alsop belatedly joined the conjecture, satirically suggesting that their cousin become President Truman's new political medium."<sup>44</sup> What Eleanor would come to realize was that she was free. Whatever she chose to do next was up to her. She was no longer a wife and no longer a First Lady, she was free to make her own choice on where her political endeavors would or would not go. Freedom did have a cost though. She had living expenses because she and FDR owned more than one property. And because she decided to stay working, she would not just be living off of the money FDR left her which she would also learn meant she did not have the same money sway in the political circles she once did. In her memoir, *On My Own*, she wrote, "In my new position, however, because of the tax laws I could no longer give my earnings to people or organizations in which I was interested. I had to establish a charity fund into which I put all earnings from lectures, which amounts to about twenty to thirty percent of my income."<sup>45</sup> While she did feel some anxiety that she would not have as much pull now that Franklin was gone, she would learn how to use her voice again without him and how to do so without ruining his reputation. She would not be loved by everyone, just like she had not been when she was First Lady, but that did not matter.

Goodwin wrote, "Unsympathetic observers referred to her as 'Lady Bountiful,' 'The Busybody,'

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<sup>44</sup> 443.

<sup>45</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *On My Own*, (New York, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958), 12.

The Meddler,' and 'The Gab.'"<sup>46</sup> Eleanor would be alive for another seventeen years after she left the White House and, in those years, she would do well in keeping herself in political circles. Eleanor would learn how to become her own political figure without Franklin while also eventually realizing that people had loved and respected her husband and whatever feelings she may have had towards him with his affair he had been a president many people adored. Goodwin says, "writing her daily column, traveling and beginning to answer the hundreds of thousands of letters that were sent to the White House after the president's death—she gradually moved toward reconciliation with her husband's memory."<sup>47</sup> Inevitably though, her political life after her husband's death did not have to be intertwined with his anymore.

President Truman made her a member of the US's faction in the United Nations where she helped in the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While she was not the biggest fan of Truman, she was more supportive of Eisenhower and when he became president, she became more involved. One thing she began even more involved in was the Civil Rights Movement. She was even on the board of directors for the NAACP and CORE as well as fought against segregation. She was so involved in fact that the KKK put a bounty on her. Gould wrote, "Soon the Ku Klux Klan had placed a bounty on her head. The number of death threats she received for her civil rights stance increased."<sup>48</sup> As her political years went on, she became even stronger and vocalized her opinions more and more. She never stopped fighting for women's rights which included the workforce. As well as that, she was the first nationally known liberal to go against Joseph McCarthy as well as stating to the public she did not trust Richard Nixon. At first Eleanor was also against John F. Kennedy, but he swayed her onto his side when showing

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<sup>46</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 628.

<sup>47</sup> 619.

<sup>48</sup> Gould, *Their Legacy*, 445.



his allyship in the Civil Rights movement. JFK knew the political power she held and knew he needed her support so when he was made president, he made her the chair for the President's Commission on the Status of Women. Outside of politics she strengthened her relationships with her children and made sure to keep up traditions that Franklin had made in the family. Goodwin stated, "Eleanor Roosevelt remained an important political figure until her death in 1962, at the age of seventy-seven. She was a leading force behind the United Nations; Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1984, a vigorous advocate for the establishment of a Jewish state in Israel, a prominent actor in New York politics, a supporter of Adlai Stevenson, and a founding member of Americans for Democratic Action. During her last years, she was often called 'the greatest woman in the world.'" <sup>49</sup> In her last years she suffered through pain from aplastic anemia and tuberculosis, but this did not stop her from voicing her opinion and writing one final book that stated racial justice and political and social justice were extremely necessary. Of the three First Ladies we are discussing, Eleanor Roosevelt was the most politically active and vocal. What Gould stated and what we can see is, "In the White House she had revolutionized the role of First Lady by constantly acting in ways that were new to the position." <sup>50</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt was extremely important not just as a First Lady, but as a politician. She did not listen to anyone who said women should not be in politics and she showed that First Ladies did not just have to be stay at home moms or housewives who sat back and watched their husbands. Eleanor was a force to be reckoned with.

Michelle and Barack Obama and their two daughters left the White House on January 20th, 2017. When leaving she said she felt, "tired, proud, distraught, eager." <sup>51</sup> Unlike our other

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<sup>49</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 636.

<sup>50</sup> Gould, *Their Legacy*, 444.

<sup>51</sup> Obama, *Becoming*, 417.

two first ladies, Michelle Obama is still alive and her legacy is not yet considered history because she is still doing things and using her voice. What Michelle did after the White House though, and does to this day has been both intertwined in politics and away from politics. Michelle was not and is not a fan of politics and being First Lady did not change her mind in that. After her time as First Lady she knew the bad side to politics still remains, but still uses her voice because she is aware of the pull she has and the fact that politics does have the ability to bring change. Michelle said, “I continue, too, to keep myself connected to a force that’s larger and more potent than any one election, or leader, or news story—and that’s optimism.”<sup>52</sup> Her goal is to give those less privileged the opportunity to do the things she has been so fortunate to do. Her goal is also to use her own personal voice and story to empower others. Laurel Elder and Brian Frederick who used data from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research archives and individual-level public opinion data state, “After eight years serving as the First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama left the White House beloved in the eyes of most Americans. According to Gallup, her favorability rating was 69%, well above that of her husband.”<sup>53</sup> Unlike Eleanor Roosevelt who continued head first into politics or Edith Wilson who made her main concerns her husband, Michelle Obama let life take her wherever it wanted.

Since Michelle knew where her popularity was, she wanted to retreat from the public eye as much as possible. While she has eventually become more open to the limelight, that being the reason we know so much about her present life, for some time she just soaked up the new found time to just breathe. What Michelle really learned to do was have a strong marriage with Barack again. With both daughters growing up and eventually moving out it became just the two of them. Michelle joked to the Today Show and said, “One of the keys to a successful marriage is

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<sup>52</sup> Obama, *Becoming*, 420.

<sup>53</sup> Elder/Frederick, “Why We Love Michelle,” 403.

separate bathrooms.”<sup>54</sup> After about a year of mostly keeping to herself though she began to start being more public again in 2018. She started an education initiative that is called the Global Girls alliance as well as beginning a tour for her memoir, *Becoming*, which is a big source in this piece here. Michelle Obama’s memoir was incredible. In the article, “5 Milestone Moments For Michelle Obama Since Leaving the White House,” by Louisa Ballhaus she states, “Michelle Obama’s *Becoming* wasn’t just a hit — it was one of the most successful memoirs of all time. Just 15 days after its release, *Becoming* became the best-selling book in the U.S. for 2018, and it sold 10 million copies in its first year on shelves.”<sup>55</sup> Stepping out of her semi-private life she has become a celebrity after being First Lady. She also has deals with Netflix because of her memoir. Her deal with Netflix was a documentary made during her book tour. The last show in the book tour is where we see some of the hold she has on the public world. Louisa Ballhaus of “SheKnows” writes, “in December 2020, Michelle ended her book tour at the Barclays Center with Sarah Jessica Parker, clad in a \$3,900 pair of thigh-high Balenciaga boots that nearly sold out that same night.”<sup>56</sup> The reason this was such a big deal is because while she was First Lady, she had chosen to wear some clothes that some of the public had judged her for and considered not to be something a First Lady should wear. While as First Lady she had still tried to stand up to this and go against the norm of what she was expected to wear, she now is dressing however she feels comfortable because she no longer has a title that holds her to a made-up dress code. Her memoir and book tour were not all she did though. After being First Lady, she also created a podcast and YouTube channel. Her YouTube channel came first and she made it to help new

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<sup>54</sup> Ciara Nugent, “Michelle Obama on What She Enjoys Most About Life After the White House.” [Michelle Obama on Life After the White House | Time](#), 5/1/23.

<sup>55</sup> Louisa Ballhaus, “5 Milestone Moments for Michelle Obama since Leaving the White House,” [Things Michelle Obama Has Done Since Leaving the White House – SheKnows](#), 5/1/23.

<sup>56</sup> Ballhaus, “5 Milestone,” 5/1/23.

college students work their way through their first year of college. Her podcast is much more personal. It is meant to give the public an in on conversations that are not normally public ones. Ballhaus also writes, “Talking with doctors and experts, Michelle sought to de-mystify all that stuff we’re not supposed to talk about — fighting with your partner, being annoyed by your kids, the physical effects of menopause.”<sup>57</sup> After being First Lady, she became extremely personal with the public. Unlike when she was First Lady and had to put up a front, she now works on showing the world real life and letting people know that everyone is human.

With everything Michelle Obama and her husband have done since leaving the White House, one thing they have notably done together is create the Obama Foundation. In a BBC news article, “Michelle Obama: Former US first lady says she is 'moving towards retirement’” we read, “The Obama Foundation's website says it wants to ‘inspire, empower, and connect people’ to change the world.”<sup>58</sup> In an article written by BBC News the foundation is discussed as a part of Michelle’s plan to retire. Michelle says, “We're building the foundation for somebody else to continue the work so we can retire and be with each other - and Barack can golf too much, and I can tease him about golfing too much because he's got nothing else to do.”<sup>59</sup> Michelle knows that there is a lot of political turmoil that needs to be dealt with, but her and Barack have been in the limelight for a while and they are getting ready to retire, but the foundation is meant to pass the torch on so they still contribute in some way!

#### Conclusion: Comparing These Women/Their Times and How They Did as First Ladies

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<sup>57</sup> Ballhaus, “5 Milestone,” 5/1/23.

<sup>58</sup> *BBC News*, “Michelle Obama: Former US First Lady Says She Is 'Moving towards Retirement',” [Michelle Obama: Former US first lady says she is 'moving towards retirement' - BBC News](#), 5/1/23.

<sup>59</sup> *BBC News*, “Moving towards Retirement,” 5/1/23.

Each of these women, of these First Ladies, had experiences very similar to one another as well as, very far from one another. All three women were born during different times where the view on women, and on First Ladies, had new expectations. Edith Bolling Wilson and Eleanor Roosevelt were alive at the same time and born much closer together than Michelle Obama. Edith and Eleanor were also both white women, Edith middle class and Eleanor upper class. Whereas Michelle Obama grew up a black woman who faltered between lower class and lower middle class. When Edith Wilson was born, in 1872, women did not have the right to vote. When Eleanor was born, only twelve years later in 1884 the case was the same for her. Michelle Obama was born in 1964 when women did have the right to vote, but the Civil Rights act had just been passed. Edith's focus was taking care of her husband and his bad health. Eleanor's focus was on the politics of the country, specifically those with less of a voice, minorities. Edith Wilson's decision to keep her role running the White House during her husband's illness a secret—allowing him to maintain the image of a man in charge—different than Eleanor, who seems more willing to challenge gendered notions regarding the proper role of women at the time. Michelle's focus was making sure her daughters were well taken care of while creating projects as First Lady that did not outshine her husband or pull her into the politics of the country. Different upbringings, races, time periods, and circumstances gave these women completely different jobs as First Ladies. What makes them the same is that they were all women trying to navigate a job where no matter what they would not make the public 100% happy, but they had to try and meet the standards of the public they were in office for.

Looking at all three women it is not a simple yes or no answer to whether or not they did a good job as First Ladies. Knowing that there is no job description for their position means that public opinion, changing societal expectations and how they affected First Ladies to come is

what we need to use to answer this question. We can look at it from a few different perspectives. The first is, did the majority of the public at the time like how they acted as first ladies? This can also be worded as; did they meet the expectations society had of women during their time in office? Last, did they help or cause harm to how the public looked at First Ladies who would come after them? Answering these questions helps us to determine how they did in the “job” of the First Lady.

Edith Wilson did not walk into the White House having had much time to prepare to be a First Lady. She walked in as the wife of the man she fell in love with who just so happened to be the President of the United States. Outside of this fact though, it was not just that she married Woodrow Wilson while he was president that made her ill prepared, it was also the fact that he was unwell for a lot of his presidency and so her focus was him and not some of the so-called duties she had. Feinberg says, “Because of World War I and her husband’s stroke, Woodrow Wilson’s second wife, Edith, did not give too many dinners and receptions.”<sup>60</sup> Many of the duties she did uphold or go through with were that of a doting wife for her sick husband, but because not everyone was aware of the severity of his illness this was a good look for her as First Lady. What people did come to know about Edith helping the president and their understanding of the extent that she helped him caused her much controversy and a lot of public distaste towards her. Gould says, “The institutional legacy that Edith Wilson left for future First Ladies was the historical convection in unofficial Washington that she had overreached the proper limits of the role of a presidential wife.”<sup>61</sup> Her actions as First Lady were as caregiver to her husband which would cause her to take on a role many see as unbecoming to a First Lady. Though she saw

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<sup>60</sup> Feinberg, *Changing Expectations*, 24.

<sup>61</sup> Gould, *Their Legacy*, 365.

what she did as no more than giving him a guiding hand, she unfortunately caused harm to the expectations of a First Lady.

Opinions on Eleanor Roosevelt's time as First Lady can be seen in so many perspectives and this is why First Lady being a job that is not actually a job is hard. Eleanor saw herself as an attentive wife, but some did not see it this way. She stayed with a man who was cheating on her and let him handle his presidency how he saw fit, but still used her platform to express her opinions. Feinberg wrote that, "A self effacing Eleanor Roosevelt claimed that she was only trying to help her husband, to serve 'his purposes,' but she admitted, 'I think I sometimes acted as a spur even though the spurring was not always wanted or welcomed.'" <sup>62</sup> She also sometimes neglected his health in some aspects believing he would get through it every time. What people would say about her was that she was very career driven, very focused on her politics, less focused on the White House and wife duties. Many people also liked this though, she used her platform to speak up for minorities and advocated to her husband as well. Many women looked to her for she was a strong female voice when female voices were just finding themselves having only been given the right to vote thirteen years prior to Eleanor coming into the White House. Eleanor opened up possibilities for First Ladies to come. While not all followed or used their platforms to speak up and out, she did show women that they could.

By just stepping into the White House with her husband Michelle Obama had huge spotlights on her. She threatened racism by being the first black First Lady and the color of her skin set a whole new wave of rules for her as First Lady. Stereotypes and racism led Michelle to have to work around things like being an angry black woman and being ghetto. Through Elder and Fredericks polling data they stated, "those holding racist views and negative racial

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<sup>62</sup> Feinberg, *Changing Expectations*, 15.

stereotypes viewed First Lady Michelle Obama less warmly, we show that a key engine behind Michelle Obama's strong approval ratings were distinctly warm feelings from women, African Americans, and African American women, groups that had previously not seen people who look like them occupy prominent roles in the American political system.”<sup>63</sup> In her position as First Lady she made many people happy and many people mad, that was just a part of any job that is the public eye. She used her platform for good, with her Let's Move campaign and her garden on the White House lawn. As well as the good though she had people who weren't a fan of the lack of action she took in politics. She was a doting mother to her daughters, a loving wife to her husband and made sure to have her own campaigns, but none that fought against racism. I believe the difference between her and other First Ladies, like Edith Wilson and Eleanor Roosevelt, was that she walked into the White House and people were actually hoping she had a political agenda. Frederick and Elder state, “While Michelle Obama may have broadened the position of first lady in some ways, most obviously in terms of what a first lady can look like, she did not radically transform the role. Despite her substantial educational and professional credentials, she acted within rather than to challenge traditional expectations of the first lady.”<sup>64</sup> From public opinion, outside of racist people who just did not like her for the color of her skin, Michelle Obama's “bad side” was that she did not use her platform for more than the traditional roles of a First Lady, mother and wife. What we can take from this is, while she excelled as a traditional First Lady, the time period she was First Lady is different than that of Edith Wilson and Eleanor Roosevelt. Women were and are more empowered and outspoken. Women, especially at this time black women, wanted a First Lady who was loud and proud to stand up for those not treated equally. Michelle Obama was a great wife and mother during her time as First

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<sup>63</sup> Elder/Frederick, “Why We Love Michelle,” 408.

<sup>64</sup> 424.



Lady, she never tried to outshine Barack Obama and she never pushed too hard on politics. Now, after her time as First Lady, and before she was First Lady, she is more involved in politics.

What we can say about Michelle Obama is that she did a fine job as a traditional First Lady, but not the best as an outspoken one.

Edith Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Michelle Obama were all very strong women in their own way. Whether people liked how Edith handled Woodrow Wilson's presidency or not she was able to keep his secret, take care of him and help sift through his work and she did that without any form of training, political background, and a very small education. Of the three Eleanor was probably the most outspoken and active in politics. While Edith's time as First Lady may have caused the role to be looked down upon, Eleanor Roosevelt came in just two presidencies later and did not shy away. She was not going to lose all the work she had done before Franklin was president to just become a good wife, cleaner and mother. Goodwin writes, "In part, Franklin tolerated Eleanor because she represented the more generous, idealistic side of his own nature, the humanitarian values he himself held but felt unable to act upon in the context of the Southern dominated Congress."<sup>65</sup> She used her privilege for the people, something she believed in and something her husband could not always do. Now, while Michelle Obama may have not spoken on the politics many wanted her to, she was not a silent First Lady. Michelle Obama talked about children's health and focused on staying active and eating right, as well as, keeping her head held high through racist and sexist stigma on what she wore and how she acted. Michelle states in her memoir, "What I won't allow myself to do, though, is to become cynical. In my most worried moments, I take a deep breath and remind myself of the dignity and decency I've seen in people throughout my life, the many obstacles that have already been overcome."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 164.

<sup>66</sup> Obama, *Becoming*, 419.

She may not have been loud about certain topics or how people treated her and her community, but she did not let it define her while she was First Lady.

To be seen as First Ladies excelling in their positions, all three women had to figure out what the society they lived in liked or disliked, wanted or did not want. They were expected to figure out what the people wanted, choose a cause that would make the public happy and do it for the people or go their own way and hope the public did not eat them alive for it. The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum wrote, “Due to their position and proximity, proponents of causes would implore First Ladies for their aid and assistance, sometimes successful in finding a champion.”<sup>67</sup> While Eleanor helped in women's movements and Civil Rights movements and Michelle worked her focus on the wellbeing of children, their causes did not always please every person in the public. There is no way to. Each one of these women attempted to work a job with no clear guidelines other than being a good wife and mother. All followed those guidelines in their own way, while stepping outside of it some or like Michelle Obama staying pretty close to that guideline because she did not want to be involved in too many political problems. The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum states, “As the personification of American power, the President of the United States and his family face continual scrutiny and criticism. First Ladies have been criticized for doing too much and for not doing enough. Some have been praised for their looks or fashion, and others have been less kindly treated. Each woman has had to make her own rules and define her own role without the guidance or limitations of the Constitution.”<sup>68</sup> It is a forever evolving position. They each learned from the First Ladies before them, while also needing to make the position their own. To say any

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<sup>67</sup> George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, “First Ladies Role,” 5/1/23.

<sup>68</sup> George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, “First Ladies Role,” 5/1/23.

did a good or bad job in the role is an answer that would have to be found in an overall polling. What we can say is Edith Wilson was a loving and doting wife who the public believes to have overstepped her place. Eleanor Roosevelt was a less attentive mother and wife, but pleased a lot of the public by using her platform to help the country have their voices heard. Lastly, Michelle Obama was a caring wife and mother who pushed her causes to the forefront, but disappointed many black and female American's by not using her platform for them. All in all, the job of the First Lady can be seen as hard because the women need to figure out what role the citizens of the United States expect them to play and they need to make the country constantly happy when they are not the ones who signed up for this spotlight.

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