

AP U.S. Government and Politics

Name:

The First Lady

Section:

Leveled Assessment: ____/4

Score: ____/5

Directions:



The Term “First Lady”

Unlike the President, the role of the First Lady is not addressed in the Constitution. Both the role of the Presidential spouse and the title have shifted and formalized over the history of the United States. The spouse of the President is not elected to serve and yet, because the White House is both the residence and the office of the President, public service is inherent to the role. Traditionally, the wife of the Presidents served as the hostess and was in charge of all things domestic; but that role has grown. Beyond defining the role of First Lady, even counting them is difficult as more women than just the spouses of the Presidents filled the role of White House Hostess, particularly in the 19th century. Widowers and bachelors and others would call upon surrogates to fill the role when a spouse was unavailable -- a role that itself is a social surrogate for many of the ceremonial functions of the Presidency.



When Theodore and Edith Roosevelt moved into the White House in 1901, they brought six children with them. The crowded living and office space in the White House led President Roosevelt to construct a new office building in 1902. Today that building is called the West Wing.
Courtesy The Library of Congress

When President George Washington was elected, the public, still steeped in the British culture surrounding royalty and aristocracy, referred to his wife Martha as “Lady Washington” as a sign of respect. This tradition stuck and both Abigail Adams and Dolley Madison were referred to as “Lady Adams” and “Lady Madison” respectively. Since Thomas Jefferson was a widower by the time he was elected, and James Madison was his Secretary of State, Dolley Madison took on the role of White House Hostess when Jefferson’s daughter was out of town and unable to perform the task. When her husband became President, she was able to seamlessly transition into the role of First Lady, as she had already been performing the duties. Dolley was renowned for her excellent dinners and ability to bring opposing political players together. Because of this she is often pointed to as a model spouse who was both able to handle the domestic and ceremonial roles of the Presidency while also influencing policy and politics -- all while not overstepping the boundaries. At her funeral in 1848, President Zachary Taylor eulogized her as the “first lady of our land,” bringing us a step closer to the current term for the Presidential spouse.

Even at this time the term “lady” was problematic as it connoted the royal stratification of England that this fledgling democracy had rebelled against. The First Ladies themselves often did not like being called “lady,” even into the 20th and 21st centuries. Jackie Kennedy famously quipped that it sounded like the name of a prized race horse. Other terms, such as “Presidentess” and “Mrs. President” were used early on. Both terms worked when the woman filling the role of White House Hostess was the spouse of the President, but came short to describe bachelor James Buchanan’s niece Harriet Lane. To remedy the problem, Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper used the term “First Lady of the White House” to describe her, the first time the term First Lady was seen in print. The term has stuck ever since.

Her Role

First Ladies were often the most famous women in America, and were able to influence, or at least were perceived to be able to influence, the President. Due to their position and proximity, proponents of causes would implore First Ladies for their aid and assistance, and sometimes were successful at finding a champion. Harriet Lane took an interest in the needs of Native Americans. Mary Todd Lincoln advocated education, employment, and housing opportunities for freed slaves. Helen Taft inspected unsafe working conditions and used her influence to get health and safety laws passed.

As the role of the First Lady as both an advocate and a ceremonial replacement for the President continued to grow, Edith Roosevelt became the first to have a federally-hired social secretary. Lou Hoover then hired additional secretaries from her own funds, growing the staff of the First Lady. Eleanor Roosevelt was the first to have a personal secretary in addition to social and administrative secretaries, and Jackie Kennedy hired the first press secretary. Soon appointments secretaries, speech writers, and, with Rosalyn Carter, a Chief of Staff came on board, filling out a full staff to support the First Ladies' projects and initiatives, as well as duties she performed on behalf of the President. Like their 19th century counterparts, 20th century First Ladies sponsored national and international causes, such as environmentalism, volunteerism, women's rights, literacy, and treatment for drug dependency. Laura Bush worked to further libraries, education, and the National Parks, and Michelle Obama is currently working to counter childhood obesity through healthy eating and exercise. Often these causes will be interwoven into the ceremonial functions of the White House, such as themed Christmas decorations under Mrs. Bush, or a 'Let's Go, Let's Play, Let's Move' Easter Egg Roll under Mrs. Obama.

The American public has also been fascinated with the First Ladies as trendsetters in style, fashion, entertaining, and home design. After Frances Folsom Cleveland married President Cleveland in June 1886, women imitated her hairstyle and advertisers used her image to sell products. Mamie Eisenhower was named by the Dress Institute as one of the 12 Best Dressed Women in America in 1952 and was lauded for her use of color coordination and matching accessories, which then began to be imitated across the country. Jackie Kennedy worked to historically preserve the White House and her special tours of the House were televised. She was also considered extremely fashionable and her style is still imitated today. Nancy Reagan was known for her signature color red, which appeared in the White House China service and in her wardrobe.

Inaugural gowns have been a popular fascination spanning the centuries and many are held preserved in the Smithsonian. What a First Lady wore to inauguration often set the tone for that social season in Washington even going back to the 19th century. Over time, the interest in First Ladies has gone beyond the traditionally feminine roles of fashion and home, to include their educational background and what they are reading. The three most recent First Ladies have all had masters' degrees, and their reading lists, whether officially released on the White House website or gathered by avid fans, are extremely popular, as are their biographies, whether they be autobiographies, official, or unofficial.

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



Mrs. Laura Bush and Mrs. Nancy Reagan appear at the opening, May 12, 2005, of The Heart Truth's First Ladies Red Dress Collection exhibit at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C. Courtesy George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum (P44867-138)



First Lady Laura Bush stands with a group of Afghan girls on hand to greet her, March 30, 2005, upon her arrival in Kabul. Courtesy George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum (P44656-322)

her own rules and define her own role without both the guidance and limitations of the Constitution. As it has in the past, this role will continue to change and adapt -- someday there may even be a "First Gentleman."

"The First Lady." The First Lady & Her Role. George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, n.d. Web. 05 Oct. 2016.

Bibliography

Caroli, Betty Boyd. First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010)

National First Ladies' Library, The Role of First Lady and Origin of the Title "First Lady"

Thought Questions:

1. How did the position of "First Lady" come about and what roles for the First Lady are laid out in the Constitution.
2. What is the role of the First Lady as Hostess?
3. How has the role of the First Lady developed and what types of things have different First Ladies done to expand the role of the First Lady? Use specific examples of First Ladies and their contributions?
4. Using your own ideas and information from the article above create a job description for the First Lady/First Gentleman of the United States. Create a list of the 4 qualifications and an explanation of 4 duties of the spouse of the President.