

First Ladies as Modern Celebrities:
Politics and the Press in Progressive Era

by

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ABSTRACT

Historians often characterize first ladies in the Progressive Era as representatives of the last vestiges of Victorian womanhood in an increasingly modern society. This dissertation argues that first ladies negotiated an image of themselves that fulfilled both traditional and modern notions of womanhood. In crafting these images, first ladies constructed images of their celebrity selves that were uniquely modern. Thus, images of first ladies in the Progressive Era show them as modest and feminine but also autonomous, intelligent, and capable.

Using the historian Charles Ponce de Leon's research on modern human-interest journalism, I contend that first ladies in the Progressive Era worked with the modern press in a symbiotic relationship. This relationship allowed the press exclusive access to what was, ostensibly, the first lady's private, and therefore authentic, self. By purporting to reveal parts of their private lives in the press, first ladies showed themselves as down-to-earth despite their success and fulfilled by their domestic pursuits despite their compelling public lives. By offering the press exclusive access to their lives, first ladies secured the opportunity to shape specific images of themselves to appeal, as broadly as possible, to their husbands and parties' constituents and the American public. First ladies in the Progressive Era thus acted as political figures by using both public and private, or what historian Catherine Allgor terms, "unofficial spaces" to support and reflect their husbands and parties' political agendas.

In examining representations of first ladies in popular magazines and newspapers from 1901 to 1921 in tandem with letters, memoirs, and other

personal papers from these women, a clear pattern emerges. Despite personal differences, first ladies in the Progressive Era represented themselves according to a specific formula in the modern press. The images, constructed by first ladies in this time period, reflect shifts in economic, social, and political life in Progressive Era America, which called for women to be independent and intelligent yet still maintain their femininity and domesticity.

For my grandfather, Gilbert Horohoe, who taught me the value of history.

And for my grandmother, Helen Church, who taught me the value of speaking
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 EDITH ROOSEVELT	48
3 HELEN TAFT	98
4 ELLEN WILSON.....	148
5 EDITH WILSON	197
6 CONCLUSION	253
BIBLIOGRAPHY	260
APPENDIX	
A POLITICAL AFFILIATIONS OF NEWSPAPERS	271

CHAPTER ONE

Before the 2009 Presidential inauguration ceremonies, a litany of articles emerged speculating not only on the agenda of the newly minted president but also the first lady. A *New York Times* article preceding the inauguration reflected on the possibility of Michelle Obama's potential legacy in the White House:

On Inauguration Day, Michelle Obama will become the first African-American to assume the role of first lady, a woman with the power to influence the nation's sense of identity, its fashion trends, its charitable causes and its perceptions of black women and their families. Already, the outlines of her style and public agenda have begun to emerge.¹

What followed was an assessment of the interior decorating plans, fashion sense, and charitable causes of the soon-to-be first lady. A Harvard educated lawyer, Michelle Obama's plans included "a vision of a White House brimming with children and ordinary Americans while suggesting she may delegate some traditional first lady duties to her staff: food tastings, china selection and the like."² Subsequent articles chronicling Obama's plans for the first lady discuss her gown choices for the inauguration, which reference her noted sense of thrift when it comes to fashion, as well as her informal and "warm" tone, signing all correspondence with only her first name.

Michelle Obama's fashion choices became a point of considerable scrutiny. While critics dissected every outfit worn on the campaign trail and inaugural events, Obama touted her ability to dress economically from various shops that most American women found accessible. Contrasting herself with the

¹ "Hints of agenda and tone for new first lady," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2009.

² Ibid.

Republican candidate John McCain's wife, Cindy, whose lavish Oscar de la Renta ensemble she wore to the Republican National Convention totaled an estimated \$300,000, Michelle Obama elected to showcase fashions from brands such as J. Crew, the Gap, and other popular stores found in malls that thousands of American men and women frequent on a regular basis.³

Over one hundred years earlier, popular newspaper articles regarding the new first lady, Edith Roosevelt, wife of President Theodore Roosevelt, reveal strikingly similar theme. Also a first lady with a family, following years of an "empty White House," reporters speculated not only on the addition of a bustling family to the executive mansion but also carefully considered Roosevelt's sense of fashion, interior decorating choices and ability to manage the household affairs.

Like Michelle Obama and most other first ladies, Roosevelt's appearance was the focus of a great deal of attention. Described as a plain but youthful looking woman, her appearance was modest and unpretentious at all times. Unlike former first ladies and many women of "new money" that surrounded themselves with the latest and most expensive fashions from Paris, Roosevelt had no use for such lavish garments. Never seen adorned in a feather hat or silken gowns, she was criticized by socialites for wearing the same gown more than once and for not keeping up to date with the styles as most ladies of her means allegedly did. Edith made light of such criticism and when asked what her dress would look like for each evening's events, she and her step-daughter, Alice

³ For a description and estimated cost of Cindy McCain's Republican National Convention outfit, see "Cindy McCain's \$300,000 Outfit," *Vanity Fair*, September 2004.

Roosevelt, took great pleasure in seeing how many different ways they could describe the very same dress.⁴ While looked down upon by some wealthy Washington elite, the public and press embraced Edith for her “lack” of fashion sense and many Americans related to her sense of practicality.⁵ Like Obama, Roosevelt often touted her sense of practicality and thrift to which most Americans could relate and also contrasted herself from other wives of politicians, like Cindy McCain.

President Harry Truman wrote: “I hope some day someone will take the time to evaluate the true role of the wife of a President, and to assess the many burdens she has to bear and the contributions she makes.” But Truman’s desire to have the complex role of the first lady analyzed within a broader context of history, both socially and politically, has yet to be realized. While many volumes exist which lump the first ladies together and discuss their style of dress and their various personal touches on White House décor, few historians have sought to look deeper in analyzing the role of the first lady as a politician, advisor, and modern celebrity. Though it can be easy to discard assessments of the way first ladies dress or decorate as irrelevant, a deeper assessment of the role of first lady reveals that this is not the case.

⁴ *The New York Times* (1902-1908) contains a plethora of articles only a few lines in length describing the first lady’s evening wear selections. Many articles were clearly describing the same gown.

⁵ Mabel Potter Daggett, “Mrs. Roosevelt, The Woman in the Background,” *The Delineator*, March 1909, 416. Also Helena McCarthy, “Why Mrs. Roosevelt Has Not Broken Down,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, October 1908, 25.

While the focus on the fashions of the first ladies sometimes trivializes first ladies, it can also reveal how first ladies over one hundred years have purposefully used fashion, for example, to promote their party's political agenda. Edith Roosevelt assumed the role of first lady as the Gilded Age came to a close, when Americans grew increasingly weary of the era's spectacular displays of power and materialism. Roosevelt used her fashion sense to create a compelling image of herself that was meant to appeal to the common American. In a time of monopolies, robber barons, and corporations, many Americans favored a simpler time, less focused on wealth and greed, harkening back to the days of the Jeffersonian Republic rather than the consumerist society America had become. In addition, many segments of society did not yet embrace modern society and the role of the new woman and yearned for more traditional times. Because of these attitudes, the American public embraced Edith Roosevelt due to her large family, seemingly simple approach to life, her apparent embodiment of traditional female roles, and well-documented sense of thrift.

Likewise, over one hundred years later, in a time in America characterized by difficult economic times, Michelle Obama created an image of herself not as a career-driven Harvard educated lawyer but as a mother and a wife. She shops at the same stores as middle class Americans but also faces similar problems in everyday life. Like Roosevelt, Obama's rise to first lady also came at a time in American history where many grew tired of decadence and excess characterized by corporate scandals and incredible displays of greed. Contrasting herself with these images, Michelle Obama used her practical approach to fashion, family life,

and easy going attitude to offer Americans an alternative to the “past eight years” that produced an economic crisis being felt by voters across the country.

The first lady has always played an organic yet ill defined role in American politics and society. Though not elected by any formal body, the first lady has been charged with duties ranging from hosting social functions, to serving as a representative of the president at events, to fulfilling diplomatic roles to, at times, acting as the most trusted advisor to the president. The first lady, since Edith Roosevelt’s tenure beginning in 1901, has an office, a staff and a budget funded by American tax payers but no official role defined by the United States Constitution or other governing body or document. This lack of a rigid definition has produced a complex role for first ladies where the public and private, the political and domestic spheres, come together in a single space.

Described by Gary Wekkin as an American “institution,” not office, the first lady not only fulfills the aforementioned more “official” capacities, the first lady has almost always been a gendered celebrity of sorts, serving as a role model for women in matters of dress, décor, and womanhood.⁶ In addition to being a trendsetter, the first lady has also been charged with appealing to, speaking with, and representing women in America, even before they had the right to vote.

In this study, I argue that the image of the first lady in the press, between 1901 and 1921, despite appearing to conform to traditional Victorian ideals, was carefully negotiated by the first lady and the press that reflected important shifts in media and society. I argue that first ladies constructed a celebrity self that was

⁶ Gary D. Wekkin, “Role Constraints and the First Lady,” *Social Science Journal* 37, (2000): 601.

modern. I assert first ladies negotiated decidedly modern images by purporting to reveal parts of their private lives in the press that showed them as down-to-earth despite their success and fulfilled by their domestic pursuits despite their compelling public lives. I use popular publications from the time period such as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *The Current*, and various newspapers to discuss how the first lady became a modern celebrity in the twentieth century and argue that her image was shaped by what Charles Ponce de Leon terms the “master plot” of human-interest journalism made popular in the 1890s with the boom of large presses and mass readerships.

I will focus on the period between 1901 and 1921 as a particularly significant time when the emergence of the modern modes of human-interest journalism coincided with the growth of the modern city. Industrialism, capitalism, urbanism, and revolutions in transportation and communication all contributed to producing a population of city dwellers that looked at public images of famous people with increased suspicion. This suspicion was a result of opportunities to shape and re-shape one’s identity available in the modern city. Suspicion created a desire for authenticity and authentic experiences that the press capitalized on with an increase in investigative human-interest journalism that sought to reveal celebrities’ private, and ostensibly true, selves. Historian T.J. Jackson Lears describes modern city dwellers search for authenticity when he asserts “For the educated bourgeoisie, authentic experience of any sort seemed

ever more elusive; life seemed increasingly confined to the airless parlor of material comfort and moral complacency.”⁷

Modernity also played a large role in shaping the image of their “true selves” celebrities created. Instead of negotiating images based on Victorian models of self restraint and will power, celebrities sought to show themselves as flawed human beings that were shaped by their experiences, which they had little control over.⁸ Lears suggests that modernity and the modern self was a rejection of material progress, rationality, and “autonomous achievement,” all hallmarks of Victorian society. Instead, the modern self was not only shaped by experiences but also found fulfillment in them. There was also an advantage for the modern celebrity in allowing journalists access to their “true” selves. Modern celebrities were eager for the opportunity to show their “true” selves because of the public’s increased desire for authenticity, especially in the modern city. The exclusive access given to the modern journalists by the celebrity was in exchange for showing the celebrity in the best possible light. For first ladies, and other modern celebrities in the early twentieth century, this meant negotiating an image of true success based on modern values.

Historian Christine Stansell describes this new model of modern womanhood, which called for an independent, creative and intelligent woman.

⁷ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture: 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 5.

⁸ Charles Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America* (North Carolina: University of the North Carolina Press, 2002), 34.

While Stansell argues that some radical moderns looked for an “adequate companion” for the modern woman, who would embrace her independence and intelligence, and eventually lead to the fall of the patriarchal society, the first ladies did not go that far.⁹ They did, however, promote their celebrities selves by exhibiting qualities associated with modernity, including autonomy and intelligence, which made them seem more accessible to common Americans. Using Ponce de Leon’s definition of “true success;” success that comes not from status or wealth but personal fulfillment, happiness, and modesty despite these things, I will argue that the first lady, as a modern celebrity, was reflective of larger changes in ideas about ideal womanhood in society. Society no longer called for women to display only the virtues of true womanhood: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, but called on them to maintain all of these things while demonstrating themselves to be a capable partner, adviser, and helpmate to their famous spouses.

Once I have established the first lady as a modern celebrity, whose image was crafted by new modes of modern human-interest journalism for the benefit of both the first lady and the media, I will attempt to gain a sense of how the first ladies worked to construct themselves as modern celebrities and politicians through private accounts and non-media related documents left behind by the first lady. While private documents are limited in scope compared to the plethora of newspaper or magazine items for most first ladies, particularly for Edith Roosevelt and Ellen Wilson, I argue that the first ladies in the early twentieth

⁹ Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2001), 34.

century were more modern in private than their publicly crafted images indicate. In keeping with the prescriptive nature of the journalism associated with the life of the first lady, I will argue that those attributes that were out of line with notions of ideal womanhood in modern society were either made light of or largely dismissed.

Finally, I will argue that first ladies in the early part of the twentieth century were not only celebrities but also important political figures, all of whom directly or indirectly influenced legislation or political appointments during their husband's tenure in office. I will argue first ladies in the Progressive Era promoted their husband's agenda through traditionally acceptable means, such as dress, demonstrated by Edith Roosevelt modest and simple fashions, and through more modern channels, such as Ellen Wilson's alley bill, part of the City Beautiful movement, which sought to turn dilapidated areas within modern cities into green spaces.

The first ladies of the Progressive Era were charged with navigating a multifaceted period in American political, social, and cultural history, while appealing as broadly as possible to their party's constituents. There were many varieties of progressive reformers, each with his or her own agenda, but most agreed that American society needed to be fixed, but not fundamentally restructured. Significantly, progressives also believed in their own ability to facilitate this mending process. Led by the educated white middle class, progressives focused on issues such as environmentalism, efficiency, and democracy, heavily influenced by a spirit of nationalism. While the white middle

class reaped the benefits of a time period characterized by unprecedented industrial and urban growth, others were not as fortunate. The influx on immigrants from Europe caused new problems within crowded cities while industrialism led to the exploitation of the working class. Economic panics resulted in restrictions on immigration and labor unrest sometimes ended in violence.

Historian Daniel T. Rodgers acknowledges the difficulties scholars have had defining the Progressive Era. He argues that present in most progressives' rhetoric, including Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, and Woodrow Wilson, was the language of efficiency, the social nature of human beings, and anti-monopoly rhetoric.¹⁰ Under this framework, regardless of partisanship, each of the first ladies of the Progressive Era, in promoting their husband's agenda, participated in the proliferation of these three elements. First ladies of the Progressive Era helped their husbands and their parties appeal to progressive voters, who Robert Wiebe, in his seminal work, *The Search for Order: 1877-1920*, argues is the "new middle class." The middle class, who felt uniquely suited to navigate an industrialized society, advocated for order and efficiency in society that they also hoped to see reflected in government.¹¹ First ladies in the Progressive Era, regardless of partisanship, appealed to these constituents by reflecting themes of democracy and practicality in official spaces, in the case of Ellen Wilson's ally

¹⁰ Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," *Reviews in American History* 10 (December 1982): 125-127

¹¹ Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order: 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), 132.

bill, and unofficial spaces, as illustrated by Edith Roosevelt's well publicized sense of thrift and ability to efficiently manager her household.

I argue first ladies' political influence was largely couched as personal advisement that was considered appropriate between husband and wife. First ladies also used what Catherine Allgor, in her book *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*, terms "unofficial spaces." These unofficial spaces, or private spaces or social events that held important political meaning, were first ladies' chief vehicle for participating in the political sphere.¹² First ladies were the most visible female representative of their political parties and as such, using fashion, decorating, and entertainment, played an important role in their husbands' administrations.

In their article on the difficulties assessing the political impact of first ladies, Karen O'Connor, Bernadette Nye, and Laura Van Assnedelft argue it is difficult to measure the political influence of first ladies, particularly given societal norms for women during this time period. I will use not only the first lady's proximity and documented advice to the president as evidence of political influence but also less traditional means, such as attendance at specific social, and in some cases, political functions or events, to argue that despite the slow introduction of women into the political sphere during this time period and their traditional image, first ladies between 1901 and 1921 exerted considerable

¹² Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2000).

influence over their husbands and, at times, acted themselves, as political figures.¹³

First ladies, their relationship to the press, and their public images are the focus of two excellent studies, journalism scholars Maurine Beasley's *First Ladies and the Press: The Unfinished Partnership of the Media Age* and Lisa Burns dissertation "First ladies as political women: Press framing of presidential wives, 1900-2000." These studies provide a useful starting point in discussing the ways first ladies during the Progressive Era were modern celebrities and political figures. Using the comparison between media coverage of Michelle Obama and Edith Roosevelt as an example, it is striking how little has changed with respect to the portrayal of the first lady in the media over the course of a century given women's roles in society have been altered significantly over this time period. It appears that the first lady is little more than a representation of the most traditional vestiges of American womanhood. However, the image of the first lady in the media is one that is crafted by not only the first lady, but also by the press, whose objective is to sell publications to readers looking for interesting, exceptional stories but also ones that resonate with the American people.

In her examination of the relationship between the first lady and the press that spans over two hundred years, Maurine H. Beasley's book *First Ladies and the Press: The Unfinished Partnership of the Media Age* calls for a reexamination of the first lady's relationship to the press. She argues that first ladies before

¹³ See Karen O'Connor, Bernadette Nye, Laura Van Assendelft, "Wives in the White House: The Political Influence of First Ladies," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, (Summer 1996): 836.

Eleanor Roosevelt confined themselves mostly to the domestic sphere and therefore had a limited relationship with the press. She characterizes women such as Edith Roosevelt, Helen Taft and Wilson's wives as women who found themselves in the public sphere, because of their husbands, despite attempts to elude it. She further argues, "By the end of the nineteenth century, the president's wife had become a national public figure... Yet she was not necessarily expected to demonstrate personal capability."¹⁴ Beasley does acknowledge a shift in expectations for first ladies during the twentieth century, but spends most of her time in her study looking at Eleanor Roosevelt and subsequent first ladies of the latter part of the twentieth century. Thus her analysis of the relationship between the press and first lady at the pivotal time when modern journalism and celebrity emerged is very limited. For example, of Helen Taft's stroke she asserts, "Reporters were not told about the stroke and did not raise questions, operating under an unspoken agreement, in effect for at least the first decades of the twentieth century, to separate a lady's public role and private life." However she does not mention that Helen Taft fled Washington D.C. after her stroke in an attempt to elude the press, only to be followed to her sick bed in the country, where secret service agents had to maintain her privacy.¹⁵ In addition to the changes in journalism and subsequent celebrity that marked the turn of the twentieth century, Beasley makes no mention of the impact of

¹⁴ Maurine Beasley, *First Ladies and the Press: The Unfinished Partnership of the Media Age* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2005), 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

changing gender roles during the Progressive Era on the way first ladies were portrayed in the press.

In a similar study of first ladies between 1900 and 2001, communications scholar Lisa Burns argues in her dissertation “First Ladies as Political Woman: Press Framing of Presidential Wives, 1900-2001” that because first ladies are already positioned as symbols of ideal womanhood, journalists expected them to fulfill traditional gender roles during periods of change, such as the Progressive Era. As such, Burns contends, the period between 1900 and 1929 was a time of heightened publicity for the first lady because of contested gender roles in the time period. She claims, like Beasley, that early twentieth century first ladies personified the cult of true womanhood in the face of progressive change for women.¹⁶ Because of the scope of both Beasley and Burns study, they tend to focus more sharply on the easier defined first ladies of the 1930s forward, confining a discussion of the pivotal time between 1901 and 1921 to relative small portion of their study.

Molly Wertheimer edits a volume titled *Inventing a Voice: The Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century* which looks at first ladies from Ida Saxon McKinley to Laura Bush in a series of essays, discussing their spoken, written, and visual representations in the media. The book, unlike others that cover such a broad expanse of time and collection of first ladies, is tied together by a rhetorical framework that explores the ways first ladies shaped the media portrayals of themselves and the way the public responded to and received them

¹⁶ Lisa M. Burns, “First ladies as political women: Press framing of presidential wives, 1900-2000” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Maryland, 2004), 23.

at various points in history. The overarching argument that first ladies, through their rhetoric, understood how to use “unofficial space” such as social events to promote their husbands’ political agenda is a useful way to examine first ladies in the context of the media.¹⁷ Since the volume is a collection of essays, Wertheimer does acknowledge that there are inherent limitations to this approach and while the scholarly work in the book is cohesive, it is meant to provide a starting point or framework for future, more focused research and analysis of the roles of the first ladies and the way they have used and have been used to promote themselves and their parties.¹⁸ The book does not include much context about the changes in journalism during the time period and therefore neglects a crucial part of understanding the changing and unchanging rhetoric of first ladies across the twentieth century.

My study of first ladies in the press will look not just at changes in American society but also changes in the press to better understand the image of the first lady that appears in popular newspapers and magazines. Charles L. Ponce De Leon’s work *Self-Exposure: Human Interest Journalism and the Emergence of American Celebrity* provides an excellent framework to use in approaching this discussion of first ladies as celebrities created by the modern media. Ponce De Leon credits the appearance of mass circulation magazines and newspapers after the 1890s for creating the modern celebrity system. He argues

¹⁷ Molly Wertheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice: The Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2004), 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

that, at the turn of the century, American society was turning away from Victorian culture with its emphasis of self control and character and entered into the modern American era that focused on self-expression and growth. This, he asserts, launched an era of journalism where journalists sought to find the celebrity's "true self" to see if their public success matched their private life. "Beginning in the 1890s, it became what might be called the master plot of celebrity journalism...the struggle of celebrities to achieve 'true success.'"

True success, according the master plot that emerged in the 1890s hinged on the idea that true success and happiness and "self-fulfillment had little to do with material goods or social status – a comforting thought for people to embrace in a society increasingly characterized by stark inequalities of wealth and power."¹⁹ Much of the coverage of first ladies, I will argue, reflects this "master plot" and although appears very traditional in nature, effectively demonstrates a decidedly modern turn in American society, politics, and gender. Modern female celebrities, like first ladies, were no longer described in strict Victorian terms, which celebrated women's presence in the domestic sphere and frowned upon them in the public sphere. Instead, traits such as independence and business sense became increasingly desirable for female celebrities. The very best women were the ones who exhibited modern traits such as independence but found true fulfillment and happiness in their private lives.²⁰ Christine Stansell argues modern female celebrities offered a model beyond the traditional Victorian

¹⁹ Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure*, 107.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 67-68.

dichotomy that characterized private women as good and public women as bad.²¹ Instead, by the early twentieth century, the modern woman was idealized in the press as a figure with public pursuits but one that found true fulfillment in their private, domestic lives.

The modern celebrities' success was a result of their ability to control their inherent potential. Ponce de Leon asserts "But the program that celebrities followed to harness these powers, reporters noted, was not the classic bourgeois regimen of self-mastery, which built "character" and allowed individuals to achieve a higher level of moral development."²² Modern celebrities sought to shed their sanitized image and Victorian self. Instead, in what becomes a formulaic plot in emerging modes of modern journalism, the celebrity, through hard work, is rewarded with what Ponce de Leon' terms "psychological" gains, such as personal growth. Under this framework, articles about first ladies reflect their effort to negotiate an image of their celebrity self that was modern, despite traditional appearances on the surface.

Charles Ponce de Leon's insights on the development of modern modes of journalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are based on his reading of newspapers and mass circulation magazines. After examining an exhaustive number of articles, Ponce de Leon saw a pattern begin to emerge. He read high brow and low brow publications, from the *New York Times* to newspapers geared towards working class readers, and found them "remarkably

²¹ Stansell, *American Moderns*, 29.

²² Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure*, 113.

uniform in form and in content, a trend encouraged by new conventions in the business of newsgathering and feature writing...and the growing emphasis on human-interest features.”²³ The patterns Ponce de Leon saw were, in many ways, reflected in my reading of a comprehensive sampling of articles on a far more specific subject, first ladies. While my archival findings on the first ladies were very limited compared to the articles, private letters, diaries, interviews, and memoirs gave me a good sense of who these women were in their personal lives. Yet, despite their obvious personal differences, the images that materialized in the modern press for each of the first ladies were strikingly similar, as if they were written according to a specific formula. Ponce de Leon suggests, in his extensive research, this was the case, as they negotiated an image of themselves as modern celebrities.

Joshua Gamson’s work *Claims to Fame* supports Ponce De Leon’s framework by looking at how the qualities associated with being a celebrity changed over time by discussing three stages of the development of modern celebrity. The first was based on meritocracy, the notion that celebrities had something exceptional about them, whether it be sex appeal or athletic ability, that garnered them media attention. The second stage of celebrity, that emerged in the 1890s and is carried through the early part of the twentieth century, involved the rise of modern media and publications that sought to reveal the true or “authentic life” of the celebrities, making it necessary for celebrities to provide a controlled image of their “private self.” The final and most modern stage of celebrity is the

²³ Ibid., 7-8.

acknowledgement by the consumer that every aspect of the celebrity's life is crafted and there is no way to differentiate between the authentic or crafted image.²⁴

Symbols of ideal American womanhood, popular portrayals of the first lady were studies in how to be successful wives, mothers, hostesses, and people. Ponce De Leon argues, "More than any type of journalism, celebrity profiles resembled advice and inspirational literature...they were direct descendents of older, hagiographic biographies that were staples of nineteenth century pop culture."²⁵ I will argue that articles on first ladies were at the center of this type of human-interest journalism and their lives were portrayed in such a way that suggested others might follow their prescription for a happy marriage and fulfilled life.

Since celebrity during this time was also linked to private successes, such as parenting, the first lady was also often portrayed as a capable and innovative parent. As Ponce de Leon writes "Edith and Theodore Roosevelt occupy a place in early nineteenth century journalism that focuses on modern attitudes towards child rearing that focused on individualism and arming children with the ability to make good choices as opposed to the patriarchal model favored by Victorians."²⁶ Ponce de Leon uses the example of Theodore and Edith Roosevelt's

²⁴ See Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

²⁵ Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure*, 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

encouragement of physical vigor in their daughters to show shifts in American womanhood from Victorian standards, which favored the “belles,” to more capable women, who were traditionally associated with a lower socioeconomic class.

Human-interest stories on the first ladies also reflect trends seen in journalism on celebrity wives. Ponce De Leon contends by the early twentieth century:

The wives of celebrities had assumed additional duties. Besides managing the home and relieving their husbands from having to worry about the children, they also respected their husbands’ ‘idiosyncrasies’ and allowed to them grow in their own way. A support wife, journalists argued, was one who loved and accepted her husband for who he was - and not one who view him as some kind of “project” whom she could refine or change.²⁷

Time and time again in the press, first ladies were expected to and celebrated for adjusting to their husbands’ demanding schedules as presidents, sometimes at their own personal expense, as was the case with Ellen Wilson.²⁸ But even as wives that accepted and endured their husband’s peculiarities, first ladies still occupied a decidedly prominent place due to their husband’s position that demanded they be more than the traditional source of support because of their exception circumstances. Ponce De Leon points out, “For every wife who supported her famous husband in the more or less traditional fashion, there was another who adopted a more assertive role...The women most likely to take the

²⁷ Ibid., 123.

²⁸ For a full discussion of this see Francis Wright Saunders, *Ellen Wilson: First Lady Between Two Worlds* (North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

assertive course and have their activities acknowledged by the press were the wives of politicians.”²⁹ However, these women never abandoned their domestic duties, at least in the press, in favor of politics but provided models of the modern or companionate marriage, where the wife was more than a life mate than just a domestic one, reflecting the shift from a Victorian to a modern model of marital relationships.

Popular portrayals of first ladies during the Progressive Era reflect the master plot of true success. These women lived in extraordinary circumstances and used talent and skill to achieve happiness and celebrity. But what made them truly exceptional, in keeping with the master plot, was the revelation that they were not much different than anyone else. Status and fame did not spoil them. Ponce de Leon’s study asserts, “Modest, down-to-earth, and optimistic, they were living proof that it was possible to achieve tremendous success and public recognition and not be corrupted by them – not develop values that separated the successful from the rest of society and encouraged them to think they were better than everyone else.”³⁰ Exhaustive descriptions of Edith Roosevelt’s sense of thrift, for example, despite having the means to spend much more, gave the women that read publications like *Ladies Home Journal*, the sense that like her, the first lady was budget conscious and looking for ways to improve the family economy and, most importantly, had not been spoiled by her celebrity. Crusted in diamond jewelry, which can hardly be seen as modest or down-to-earth, Edith

²⁹ Ponce De Leon, *Self-Exposure*, 124.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

Wilson's attendance at the thirty cent lunch in Maryland was presented as a demonstration of the ways she was, in many ways, just like any American woman, despite her status as first lady. Ponce de Leon argues, "Promoted by a wide range of institutions, true success became the modern, therapeutic alternative to Victorian respectability."³¹ Although first ladies during the Progressive Era appeared to associate closely with traditional modes of Victorian respectability, the presence of their personal lives on the pages of popular publications in a way that was crafted for the benefit of themselves, the president, and his party as well as the journalist that wrote about them belied this association with Victorian womanhood. Instead, their public images show the first ladies as representations of modern celebrities, not the last vestiges of traditional womanhood.

First ladies have not been at the center of many analytical studies of history, politics, or journalism. Robert P. Watson argues that "Historically, the first lady has been largely omitted from consideration by presidential scholars," and as such, historians have failed to take seriously the role and influence of first ladies with respect to their husbands, American society and politics, and the White House.³² He discussed the challenges associated with meaningful study of the first lady, focusing on the small sample size, lack of material in the archive compared to their husbands, and the absence of a meaningful methodology under which to study the first lady. Rebecca Edwards, in her book *Angels in the Machinery*, attempts to remedy this to a certain extent by discussing the ways in

³¹ Ibid., 140.

³² Robert P. Watson, "Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, (June 2003): 423.

which women have been active participants in the Republican, Democratic, and Populist parties between the Civil War and Progressive Era. Edwards briefly touches on the political role of several first ladies, including Francis Folsom Cleveland, but spends much of her energy in her finely written book on political parties as opposed to individual characters.³³ Using Edwards' assertion that women, and their traditional spheres of influence, occupied a powerful place in party politics, I will argue that the first ladies used their place to assert their husband's and party's agenda by using traditionally female elements such as fashion, entertainment, being a good wife and mother, as demonstrative political acts, effectively making the personal become the political for first ladies during this time period.

Melanie Gustafson's book *Women and the Republican Party: 1854-1924* promises to examine women's history of participating in public politics. Her study does an excellent job of discussing roles of women such as Jane Addams, Frances Perkins, and other politically prominent women; however, Gustafson makes no mention of perhaps the most visible women associated with the Republican party, its first ladies.³⁴ Gustafson's commendable work neglects to examine unofficial spaces when discussing women's roles in partisan politics. I will argue that, particularly during the Progressive Era, Republican first ladies

³³ Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery* (United States: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³⁴ Melanie S. Gustafson, *Women and the Republican Party: 1854-1924* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

Edith Roosevelt and Helen Taft played an important political role in their party, despite their publicly domestic personas.

Despite Edwards' and Gustafson's excellent studies, Robert Watson's concerns are validated in evaluating the wealth of presidential biographies that exist and their treatment of first ladies. For this study, presidents Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson's biographies reveal much about the presidencies and lives of these men but very little about their relationship with their wife or her role as first lady. Lewis L. Gould argues "writing about the presidents as if the first lady did not exist perpetuates the stereotype of a male-centered political world and makes the presidency a less real institution," but this is exactly what happens in many political or presidential biographies.³⁵

Perhaps the widest body of literature exists on the popular president, Theodore Roosevelt, but only a relatively small portion of it includes any discussion of Edith Roosevelt's influence on Theodore or her role as first lady. The most extensive treatment of Edith Roosevelt in a biography on her husband is *The Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt* by Lewis L. Gould, who frames Edith Roosevelt as a woman who made innovations to White House decorum in order to ensure she and her husband, the president, were the "recognized leaders of Washington Official Society."³⁶ He argues that the president's wife was

³⁵ Lewis L. Gould, "Modern First Ladies and the Presidency," *The Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20, (Summer 1990): 652.

³⁶ Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1991).

traditionally not an important visible part of the Presidency before 1900 but as first lady, Edith Roosevelt pursued “an ambitious cultural agenda” while being careful to appear as non-political as possible in the press. Her large family and motherly roles helped her accomplish this while her service as a diplomat for the United States through her close relationship with political figures such as Cecil Spring-Rice, an English diplomat who later served as the British diplomat to the United States, belied this image. Although her communications with Spring-Rice were unofficial, they were often concerned with state matters, which were not necessarily open to women’s input at the time.

In Kathleen Dalton’s book, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life*, she attempts to deconstruct what she argues is a mythologized version of Theodore Roosevelt that he, in part, crafted for himself and historians such as Edmund Morris have bolstered.³⁷ She argues that under the surface of this so-called Rough Rider was a man who never achieved true maturity, never asked for advice, and had little self awareness. Oft criticized for being too hard on Roosevelt, after all he was an incredibly accomplished person no matter what kind of person he was, the book has been rejected in many circles as vindictive. As critical as Dalton is of Roosevelt, she portrays Edith Roosevelt as Theodore Roosevelt’s closest political adviser. She describes how not only did Edith Roosevelt monitor carefully what the press was saying, she also counseled Theodore more directly, for example, when she urged him to appoint James R.

³⁷ See Edmund Morris, *The Rise of the Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Random House, 1979).

Garfield to his administration, who became one of his closest friends and advisers. She writes, “One admirer of the working relationship between Edith and Theodore recalled ‘As a team they produced a judgment that was not infallible, of course, but dangerously near it, humanly and politically.’”³⁸

However, these biographies are the exception, not the rule, when it comes to a meaningful discussion of Edith Roosevelt in the context of her husband’s life. More recent publications such as *Theodore Roosevelt: Preacher of Righteousness* by Joshua David Hawley almost completely ignores Edith Roosevelt. Hawley suggests that Theodore Roosevelt’s thinking, guided by notions of right and wrong, what is moral and righteous, shaped his policy making during his presidency. Attributing his thinking to his upbringing and “muscular Christianity,” he contends that Roosevelt’s approach was critical to the character of the Progressive Era. In the midst of this history, which is mostly a synthesis of other works, Edith Roosevelt gets little coverage. Hawley’s only anecdote from Roosevelt’s life that includes Edith was his decision to join the army to intervene in Cuba during the Spanish American War, despite the fact she was very ill and had five children to tend to. In this way, the author describes how Theodore Roosevelt’s sense of obligation and belief in “warrior virtues” was so strong that it overrode his obligation to his wife and children. Edith Roosevelt is nothing more than a dutiful mother and wife.³⁹

³⁸ Kathleen Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 2005), 220.

³⁹ Joshua David Hawley, *Theodore Roosevelt: Preacher of Righteousness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

The most recent scholarship on Theodore Roosevelt's presidency does not even mention Edith Roosevelt by name, as is the case for *Theodore Roosevelt, the Progressive Party, and the Transformation of American Democracy* by Sidney Milkis. In this book on American political thought, Milkis argues that Theodore Roosevelt's platform during the 1912 election laid the roots of political discourse in the twentieth century, particularly the increased role of government in the age of industrialism. He contends that Roosevelt believed only the federal government could match the power of the industrial powers and control them while acting in the best interests of the American public. While touting the merits of American democracy, Roosevelt neglects to take into consideration that the Progressive movement was largely white and upper middle class and the people who were being most oppressed, the working class and minorities had little to no voice. Although Edith Roosevelt is not mentioned in this work or in the context of the 1912 election that could have resulted in her third tenure as first lady, her ideals about the proper place of the White House in the cultural context of American society spoke to the notion that even the most successful of industrialists were not to outshine the office of the President, whether it be socially or politically, are present but not attributed to her.⁴⁰

Even in biographies on Theodore Roosevelt that appear more geared towards his personal life and family relationships, like Edward Renehan's *The Lion's Pride: Theodore Roosevelt and his Family in Peace and War*, gloss over

⁴⁰ Sidney M. Milkis, *Theodore Roosevelt, the Progressive Party, and the Transformation of American Democracy* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2009).

Edith Roosevelt's role in Theodore's life, presidency, and, in this case, that of her children. Renehan argues that Theodore Roosevelt's admiration and obsession with war and patriotism was passed on to his children through various life experiences. Renehan asserts that Roosevelt's own father eluded Civil War service by hiring a substitute so he had a special interest in proving his own military worth, as did his own sons, who all joined the military. Stories of Roosevelt as a doting father are tempered with images of him as a war monger. Roosevelt's stint as a Rough Rider in the Battle of San Juan Hill are the centerpiece of this book while his relationship with Edith Roosevelt is boiled down to that of dutiful companion who watched her husband and sons go off to war, as comfortable as a mother could be with the perils of war for the sake of democracy.⁴¹

The scholarship and political biographies on William Howard Taft are considerably more limited than his predecessor's and although Helen Taft played a major part in William's decision to seek the presidency in the first place, her role in political biographies is often relegated to that of invalid wife, since she suffered a stroke shortly after William Taft took office. This, however, is a disingenuous way to look at the first lady. Helen Taft was a smart, articulate and influential woman, who exerted an incredible amount of power over her husband – so much that many biographers of William Taft have characterized her as overbearing and bossy. One of the most even handed and thorough treatments of

⁴¹ Edward J. Renehan, *The Lion's Pride: Theodore Roosevelt and His Family in Peace and War* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1998).

Helen Taft is *William Howard Taft and the first Motoring Presidency* by Michael L. Bromley. In this book, Bromley looks at the political career of William Howard Taft through the lens of the culture of the automobile. The first president who enjoyed the use of a car in the White House, as did the first lady, Bromley places the Tafts at the center of the rise of the automobile culture in America. The book treats Helen Taft as a close companion to the president and also a great lover of automobiles. The author not only reveals much about Helen Taft's love of cars and their significance as status symbols but also criticizes other authors who have characterized her as "nervous" or "bossy," arguing that "Helen Taft was a strong and smart woman who was very involved in her husband's career, revealing a fine example of what lied behind a great man."⁴² His defense of Helen Taft is often very passionate, discussing her success as a first lady, mother, and wife.

Conversely, *William Howard Taft: An Intimate History* by Judith Anderson is an indictment of Helen Taft's role in William's life. In this controversial biography of Taft, Anderson attempts to take a psychoanalytical view of his political life and decisions by arguing that his tendency to shy away from the political spotlight was linked directly to his struggles with weight.⁴³ Anderson paints Helen Taft as a true villain in the life of her husband, marrying him only to satisfy her own ambitions and eluding intimacy with him by taking

⁴² Michael Bromley, *William Howard Taft and the First Motoring Presidency* (North Carolina, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 38.

⁴³ Judith Icke Anderson, *William Howard Taft: An Intimate History* (New York, W.W. Norton & Co, 1981), 103.

extended vacations by herself, because she was horrified by his obesity.

Anderson characterizes Helen Taft as cold, calculating, and bossy and asserts her marriage to William Taft was more of a mother-child relationship than a true companionship.

In the more thorough political biography on William Taft, *The Life and Times of William Howard Taft* by Henry Pringle, the author exhausts nearly every source on William Taft to provide a comprehensive, two volume look at the former president's life, both personal and political. He looks especially carefully at Taft's famous conflict with Roosevelt that led to both of them running for president in 1912 and comes down on the side of Taft, who he argues is more progressive than Roosevelt, a man synonymous with progressivism. Helen Taft also occupies a prominent place in this lengthy biography, the author noting that William seldom made a decision without consulting her first. "His public career was dictated largely by Mrs. Taft's ambition and desires," argues Pringle, citing numerous letters between the two in which William Taft praises his wife for being his "best critic."⁴⁴ Pringle frames Helen Taft as someone who drove her husband politically but also devoted considerable time and effort to his work and provided sound advice to him on a variety of subjects.

Still other biographies, such as *The Presidency of William Howard Taft* by Paolo E. Coletta and *William Howard Taft: Confident Peacemaker* by David H. Burton, give Helen Taft more limited coverage. In this political assessment of

⁴⁴ Henry Pringle, *The Life and Times of William Howard Taft*, (New York, Ferrar and Rinehart, 1939), 149.

Taft's tenure in office, Coletta argues that Taft was a good president over all, describing him as "high minded" and generally a good person but contends that Taft was also lazy and not well motivated and would have been better at being a judge instead of president. Coletta looks closely at Taft's political and military affairs in office and judges them as successes, failures or something in between. Coletta discusses Helen Taft relatively little but frames her as confined solely to the private matters of the president's life and characterizes her relationship with him as loving, highlighting how hard he took it when she fell ill right after entering the White House.⁴⁵ In Burton's short book, which is a study of Taft's foreign policy, covering the time period from his appointment as diplomat to the Philippines through his tenure as president to his subsequent appointment as Chief Justice of the United States, he argues that Taft occupied a happy medium between the realism of Roosevelt and idealism of Wilson when it came to internationalism. Taft was committed to peace by establishing a new world order and even asserted that he conceived of a United Nations-like organization. Helen Taft receives limited coverage save for a mention of her keen support of Taft's appointment as civil governor of the Philippines.

The literature on Woodrow Wilson's tenure in office treats both of his wives, Ellen Wilson, then after her death, Edith Wilson, with similar vagueness. Neither woman plays a particularly central role in many of the traditional political biographies on Woodrow Wilson, despite Edith Wilson's well-documented role in administrative duties following Woodrow Wilson's stroke in 1919. *Woodrow*

⁴⁵ Paolo E. Coletta, *The Presidency of William Howard Taft* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1973), 48.

Wilson and the Progressive Era by Arthur S. Link, the preeminent Wilson scholar, looks at the time period of 1900-1917, discussing Wilson's policy during this time period. Characterizing Wilson as a capable president who was as skillful at articulating his point of view to the public as he was in navigating complicated ideological issues, he takes issue specifically with Wilson's reasons for entry into World War I. He argues that Wilson finally decided to go to war not because of national interest or moral obligation, despite his desire to "keep the world safe for democracy," but because of German aggression, including U boat attacks. Link discusses the League of Nations at some length but never addresses Edith Wilson's role, if any, in its failure.⁴⁶ Similarly, in *Woodrow Wilson* by John A. Thompson, the author dissects Wilson as president, looking at how he used his experience in academia coupled with his responsiveness to popular opinion, to shape his policies. Thompson argues that Wilson was a high minded politician that is unjustly known for his failure to convince Americans to join the League of Nations. Thompson's treatment of Ellen Wilson and Edith Boling Galt Wilson are brief, as is the book. His relationship with Ellen is described as passionate based on letters he exchanged with her, which is particularly entertaining when juxtaposed with Wilson's often stern persona. But Edith Wilson's large role in his administration and the possible part she played in the failure of the League of Nations is not mentioned.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917* (New York: Colter Books, 1963).

⁴⁷ John A. Thompson, *Woodrow Wilson* (London: Pearson Education, 2002), 233-234.

Ellen Wilson, despite her short time as first lady, receives some attention in *Woodrow Wilson and the Press: Prelude to Presidency* by James D. Startt. In this work, James Startt discusses Woodrow Wilson's relationship with the press, prior to his presidency. He argues that in a time period when the president went from isolating himself to attempting to relate to a broader audience through the ever present and increasing power of the press, Wilson was able to navigate through this time period understanding that "'The public man that fights the press won't be a public man very long!'"⁴⁸ Startt contends that Wilson built a relationship with individual reporters and publications that served as a model for the modern presidency. His discussion is limited to Woodrow Wilson's first wife, Ellen, but he does mention her influence on Wilson and his relationship to the press in terms of an ability to "pacify differences" between them and her husband that is never fully explained to the reader.⁴⁹

In perhaps the most thorough treatment of Edith Wilson in the context of political biography, *Woodrow Wilson: A Life for World Peace* by Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, a German scholar, looks at Woodrow Wilson's administration from the modern European perspective, arguing the Wilson's idealism and "moral logic" were seen as offensive to many Europeans, who were not sure of their basis in reality. He argues that Europeans found Wilson's ideas impractical given the political climate of the world during wartime. Nordholt includes a limited amount of necessary information on Wilson's wives but does not present any new

⁴⁸ James Startt, *Woodrow Wilson and the Press: Prelude to Presidency* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), xii.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

material, discussing briefly Edith Wilson's role in government during President Wilson's illness, concluding that "Edith Wilson therefore governed the country" but declines to place this conclusion in the broader context of the historical period.⁵⁰

While the relationship between Woodrow and Ellen Wilson is limited to a single volume of their love letters,⁵¹ the relationship between Edith and Woodrow Wilson is unique because it has a small body of literature that is devoted solely to it. Most of the books focus sharply on the piles of love notes left behind from Edith and Woodrow's courtship in 1915. *Edith & Woodrow: A Presidential Romance* by Tom Shachtman goes through the familiar love letters of Woodrow Wilson and Edith Bolling Galt Wilson to shed light on their courtship, marriage, life in the White House and after the presidency. Starting with his marriage to his first wife Ellen, Shachtman describes Wilson's grief after her death and the start of his new romance with Edith Galt in the context of the political events of the time period. Edith Wilson is portrayed as Wilson's devoted wife and, at times, nursemaid, making relatively little of her political role as first lady. The love story is the centerpiece of the story and while it provides insight into the private relationship between Woodrow and Edith Wilson, it does not offer a probing analysis into the roles of celebrity, politician or symbol of womanhood occupied by a very public first lady. *A President in Love: The Courtship Letters of*

⁵⁰ Jan Wilhelm Schulte Nordholt, *Woodrow Wilson: A Life for World Peace* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 398.

⁵¹ See Eleanor Wilson McAdoo, ed., *The Priceless Gift: The Love Letters of Woodrow Wilson and Ellen Axson Wilson* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962).

Woodrow Wilson and Edith Bolling Galt edited by Edwin Tribble presents a selection of letters from the courtship of Edith Bolling Galt and Woodrow Wilson, revealing a vulnerable, amorous side of a president often considered by critics to be austere and cold. Only six months after his first wife's death, Woodrow Wilson ogled a curvaceous woman he would wed a bit over a year later, despite warnings from his closest advisors about what that would look like on the eve of his bid for reelection. Edith Wilson is depicted as savvy and strong and the letters show not only an intense romantic but also intellectual relationship. Although the book focuses on the intriguing love letters between the two, Tribble also notes that Woodrow Wilson confided in Edith on matters of foreign and domestic policy, particularly on the eve of World War I, reaffirming Edith Wilson's role not only as wife and companion to the president, but also a political adviser that often strayed outside the boundaries of traditional marital relationships in terms of the weight the president placed on the opinions of the first lady.

In a less flattering study of the relationship between Woodrow and Edith Wilson, *Edith and Woodrow: The Wilson White House* by Phyllis Lee Levin analyzes the relationship, both personal and political, between Edith and Woodrow Wilson during the White House years. Levin characterizes Edith Wilson as a power hungry, schemer and emphasizes the time period between 1919 and 1920 when, after Woodrow Wilson was incapacitated to a degree only known to his wife and personal physician, Edith Wilson effectively supplanted her husband as president. Edith Wilson, she argues, sought to not only protect but

shape her husband's legacy by writing her own version of his presidency in the form of her personal memoir, which is riddled with inaccuracies, in order to idealize and sanitize the story of her husband's tenure in office.⁵²

Outside of political biographies on their husbands, several first ladies, including Helen Taft and Edith Wilson, wrote their own autobiographies, which not surprisingly, cast their husbands' administrations and themselves in the best possible light. Helen Taft's autobiography, *Recollections of Full Years*, was the first memoir to be published by a first lady. Appearing in 1914, almost immediately after she left the White House, the book was a best seller and accepted as reliable and truthful source on the comings and goings on life in the White House during William Taft's presidency, offering insight into the woman who was first lady. Edith Wilson's autobiography, *My Memoir*, as Levin points out, has many historical inaccuracies that attempt to re-write some of the controversial chapters of the Wilson administration. Written after Woodrow Wilson's death, the memoir is considered by serious scholars to be on the cusp of a work of fiction, particularly in Edith Wilson's assertion that she occupied no political role and had no political influence in the wake of her husband's stroke in office, despite being the only person that had access to him for months.

In addition, first ladies Edith Roosevelt, Helen Taft, Ellen Wilson, and Edith Wilson are all subjects of their own biographies, though most are not scholarly in nature. Sylvia Jukes Morris, wife of prolific Theodore Roosevelt historian Edmund Morris, wrote *Edith Roosevelt: Portrait of a First Lady* that

⁵² Phyllis Levin, *Edith and Woodrow: The Wilson White House* (New York: Scribners, 2001), 11.

offers an incomparable look at Edith Roosevelt's life from birth to death, with special focus on her years in the White House. With access to interviews and documents not available to the public, Morris crafts a thorough and even biography but the work stops short of placing Edith Roosevelt in the broader context of the time period in which she lived or the place she occupied in American politics and society. In much the same way, noted first lady historian Carl Anthony frames his book *Nellie Taft: The Unconventional First Lady of the Ragtime Era* as an effort to give voice to a first lady that has been long overlooked. While it is meticulously researched and sheds considerable light on, as *Publishers Weekly* terms it, "one of the least compelling first ladies," it lacks analysis of her efforts to put William Taft in office and the impact of her stroke on the first ladyship to be considered more than interesting look at a notable person. The singular biography on Ellen Wilson, Frances Wright Saunders' *Ellen Wilson: First Lady Between Two Words* provides a solid, full length overview of the life and short tenure of Ellen Wilson as first lady, covering her efforts to reform slums in Washington D.C. and other requisite accomplishments while highlighting her efforts to keep Woodrow Wilson even and happy but offers scholars seeking to understand the role of first lady in a way that transcends individual undertakings and inner turmoil little in the way of new analysis.⁵³

⁵³ For biographies on individual first ladies, see Sylvia Jukes Morris, *Edith Roosevelt: Portrait of a First Lady* (New York, Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1980), Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *Nellie Taft: The Unconventional First Lady of the Ragtime Era* (New York, William Morrow, 2005), and Francis Wright Saunders, *Ellen Wilson: First Lady Between Two Words* (North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

Edith Wilson's biographies, like her memoir, tend to be skewed because she lived long enough to oversee the writing of at least one of the accounts of her life. *Edith Bolling Wilson: First Lady Extraordinary* by Alden Hatch is a glowing biography of Edith Wilson. Hatch worked closely with Wilson herself, shortly before her death, to produce a work that reads suspiciously close to her memoir. Woodrow Wilson is portrayed as a heroic figure while Edith Wilson is his steadfast companion, giving her agency but stopping well short of the characterizing her as the power hungry, controlling wife others have criticized. The book is proofed and edited by Wilson herself, which gives the reader a good idea of what to expect and what not to from this publication, completed in the twilight of her life. *Power with Grace: The Life Story of Mrs. Woodrow Wilson* by popular journalist Ishabel Ross, similar to Alden Hatch's work on Edith Wilson, draws on the Woodrow Wilson papers, Edith Wilson papers and other sources at the Library of Congress, Edith Wilson's memoir, and interviews with Edith Wilson's family members to craft a complimentary look at the former first lady but contains no footnotes to assist the reader in locating the documents she used to craft her work.

There also exists a fairly wide body of literature that examines all first ladies or several successive first ladies in a short, biographic format. The most extensive of these works is Carl Sferrazza Anthony's excellent two volume work *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and their Power, 1789-1990*, which examines each first lady from Martha Washington to Barbara Bush, using primary source materials, and offers a general overview of the character and short

biographical account of each first lady. Other similar volumes exist, which mainly lump all first ladies together or attempt to categorize them loosely based on different factors from family size to style of dress but do not offer scholarly analysis.⁵⁴ *Heart and Soul of the Nation: How the Spirituality of the First Ladies Changed America* by Cheryl Heckler-Feltz uses the Beatitudes as a framework for discussing the spirituality of first ladies and their roles as moral beacons as well as social reformers but is ultimately a non-scholarly treatment of first ladies on the way their faith has shaped American society.

The thrust of my source material will come from newspaper and magazine articles from the time period included in the scope of my study. I will look specifically at publications geared toward a female audience, such as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Harper's Weekly* as well as widely read newspapers such as *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. By looking at the articles included in these publications on the first ladies, under the lens of Gamson and Ponce de Leon's work on the emergence of modern journalism, I will document the ways the articles reveal the first lady as a modern celebrity and how her story subscribed to the master plot formula in order to show "true success," which also represents a shift from Victorian to modern ideas about the place of

⁵⁴ See Paul F. Boller, *Presidential Wives: An Anecdotal History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), Lewis L. Gould, *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Legacy* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), Marianne Means, *The Woman in the White House: The Lives, Times and Influence of Twelve Notable First Ladies* (New York: Random House, 1963) and Margaret Truman, *First Ladies* (New York: Random House, 1995).

women in American society, life and politics. I will use these articles to discuss the ways first ladies used preferences in fashion, housekeeping, entertainment and other traditionally female spheres to discuss the ways they promoted their husband's political agenda. I will use newspaper and magazine articles to discuss how, despite domestic appearances, first ladies were political women and played an important part in their husbands' and parties' political agenda. Finally, in order to reconcile the media's portrayal of the first lady's "true self" with who the first lady was in private, I will look at presidential papers, correspondence, memoirs, letters, books and interviews to better understand how the first lady crafted her public image through modern journalism and how that image corresponded to who she was in private to understand her personality and political influence.

The first chapter of this work outlines my argument and reviews the literature pertaining to my topic. While other historians, such as Maurine Beasley, have argued that the media's relationship with the first lady respected her privacy as a woman, thus adhering to Victorian modes of restraint and modesty, I will argue that the first lady's relationship to the media during the Progressive Era is not only reflective of changes in journalism but also changes in ideal American womanhood. The emergence of modern journalism at the turn of the century, which includes the use of the "master plot" in articles that sought to reveal the "true success" of celebrities, treated first ladies as modern celebrities, not Victorian women. Furthermore, I will argue that not only did writers use these modern modes of journalism for their own benefit to sell newspapers and

magazines, but it also enabled first ladies to carefully craft an image that promoted herself, her husband, and their political party. Pivotal to my argument and included in my first chapter is a discussion of literature pertaining to changes in journalism at the turn of the century as well as a discussion of the literature relevant to first ladies and their husbands.

The second chapter of my dissertation will discuss first lady Edith Roosevelt, wife of Theodore Roosevelt. In this chapter, I will highlight the ways Edith Roosevelt appeared to occupy and adhere to a strict code of traditional Victorian womanhood with her large family and sense of simplicity, which according to Rebecca Edwards, was key to the Republican campaign at the turn of the nineteenth century. I will argue that despite this image, Edith Roosevelt was, in fact, one of the most skillful first ladies in using modern journalism to craft her image and promote the agenda of the Republican Party. The articles discussing Edith Roosevelt's life, like first ladies after her, were largely prescriptive in nature, describing aspects of her private life, such as marriage, child-rearing, and home-making, to offer American women a model for their own lives.

At the same time, Edith Roosevelt carefully controlled the information and photographs released of both her and her family in order to craft an image of herself, in keeping with the master plot, of a woman who has not been spoiled by her wealth and position and has much in common with American women but is differentiated by her talent and fortitude to serve as symbol for womanhood. For example, Edith Roosevelt, working through Secretary to the President, George Cortelyou, allowed only one photograph of her and her family, of her choice, to

be released to the press. In this way, Roosevelt was able to ensure what images of her, and later her family, were being released to the press while also maintaining an air of dignity and modesty in the scarcity of these precious releases, as befitting the president and the first family of the United States.

In addition, Edith Roosevelt also used unofficial spaces to promote her husband's agenda of progress and a return to simplicity through entertainment, dress, and, ironically, adherence to Victorian ideals of modesty, piety, purity, domesticity and obedience. I will reconcile this crafted image of the first lady's "true self" with who the first lady was in private by examining documents not related to the media, including private letters, papers, and accounts of her life, highlighting how personality traits or incidents that did not show the first lady as an ideal woman but as one that stepped out of her boundaries of her gender were often ignored, purposefully overlooked, or justified by the press. For Edith Roosevelt, this includes letters, diaries, and interviews left behind by her relatives, since she burned most of her personal papers, that reveals an intelligent, influential and hands-on first lady that wielded a significant amount of power.

My third chapter will discuss first lady Helen Herron Taft, wife of President William Howard Taft. Although she had the same party affiliation as Edith Roosevelt, Helen Taft was a very different woman and, as such, used modes of modern journalism in a different way to temper her politically ambitious personality. Helen Taft easily fulfilled the more modern roles for wives of political figures during the Progressive Era and was a well documented source of personal counsel to her husband that was largely considered an accepted part the

partnership between the president and his appropriately high minded and intellectually stimulating wife.

Helen Taft, however, struggled to fulfill more traditional gender roles for women, even superficially, and therefore used modes of modern journalism to craft an image of herself as a perfect mate for a political partner such as the president, the best combination of breeding, intellect, and domesticity. For instance, when commenting on her well known stance that women, including her daughter, should be afforded the opportunity for higher education, Taft stated, “I believe in the best and most thorough education for everyone, men and women, and it is my proudest boast that all my children are students.”⁵⁵ *The Washington Post* was then quick to note, “Informally in her home, Mrs. Taft is seen at her best advantage. She is an excellent illustration of her own text about higher education and intellectual pursuits not unfitting a woman for domestic duties,” lest she not appear as the ideal housekeeper for the nation’s most popular home – the White House.⁵⁶ Other articles on Taft focused sharply on her domestic prowess while also addressing some of her critics’ charges that she was a woman who did not know her place by couching her domineering and politically driven personality as one tempered by a love of baking and gardening. Like Edith Roosevelt, Helen Taft also used unofficial spaces to promote a political agenda. The press focused on Taft’s commitment to simplicity and informality in the home yet this did not correspond to the pains she took to dress in the latest Parisian fashions that the

⁵⁵ “Mrs. William Howard Taft,” *The Washington Post*, May 5, 1907.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

press conveniently dismissed as important for a woman representing the United States. Helen Taft's memoirs and her copious correspondence with her husband are a testament to her keen intellect, political acumen, and weight of her opinion in William Howard Taft's political affairs.

Ellen Axson Wilson, the first wife of Woodrow Wilson, is the subject of chapter four. Ellen Wilson represents an interesting shift in politics in the White House being the first Democrat first lady after sixteen years of Republican rule. Unlike Helen Taft, who appeared to have groomed herself for the White House since childhood, Ellen Wilson's representation of herself in the press was that of a woman who never considered the idea of being more than a wife, mother, and home keeper. In only seventeen months as first lady, she was the subject of numerous articles that, like Republican first ladies, attested to her simplicity, frugality, and adherence to Victorian ideals despite the fact Ellen Wilson was decidedly un-Victorian in publicly answering charges that she advocated smoking for women or spent an exorbitant amount of money on last season's wardrobe. For example, *Good Housekeeping* reported, "it was with disturbing consternation that she opened the morning paper one day last fall during the political campaign to read that the wife of the Democratic Presidential candidate on a shopping tour to Philadelphia had just purchased some seven gowns at from \$200 to \$300 a piece."⁵⁷ Since this was untrue, Ellen Wilson elected to violate her Victorian principles concerning having her name in print in order to defend herself against these charges. Wilson, "to deny this extravagance, promptly sent to the

⁵⁷ Mabel Potter Daggett, "Woodrow Wilson's Wife," *Good Housekeeping*, March 1913.

newspapers an exact list of that day's shopping, which covered her purchases for one season."⁵⁸ Once again, Ellen Wilson knew that for the sake of the campaign, she needed to maintain a certain image that agreed with the Democratic Party agenda, sending the message to voters that the time of excess was over and a shift in focus on more social issues is at hand. In both public and private, Ellen Wilson worked to influence political legislation, the most notable of which was having her name attached to her slum clearing bill, which she worked hard to craft and support, the initial first lady to do so.

Despite political differences, press coverage on Ellen Wilson did not deviate from the master plot of modern journalism. That is to say, she was portrayed as a woman who was not much different than the common American mother and wife but found herself in special circumstances that allowed her to show that she was, at once, up to the challenge of being first lady of the United States but also level headed enough to maintain her modesty and composure.

Woodrow Wilson's second wife, Edith Bolling Galt Wilson will be discussed in the fifth chapter of my work. A striking departure from the demeanor and character of Ellen Wilson, Edith Wilson faced similar challenges in the press as Helen Taft. Edith Wilson was a formidably wealthy widow, with known business acumen, and a penchant for expensive jewelry and the latest fashions. Yet she maintained one of the most traditional images in the press of all first ladies in a time period when America was on the cusp of world war and American women found themselves closer than ever to achieving suffrage. I will

⁵⁸ Ibid.

argue because she was one of the most modern first ladies, Edith Wilson carefully used the press to invoke an image of herself as a devoted wife who, ironically, never spoke to the press in an effort to maintain as apolitical an image as possible.

However because she maintained such a traditional image, she was able to effectively use her roles as wife and confidant to her ailing husband to exert perhaps the greatest control over the office of the President of the United States that a woman ever has, carving for herself one of the most unique tenures as first lady in modern history. As an example, Edith Wilson used her position as the president's wife and helpmate to accompany him overseas on a European tour following World War I, at times being the only woman in official meetings regarding hotly debated issues such as the League of Nations. Although it was a distinctly political move, the press couched the inclusion of Edith Wilson as a diplomatic envoy to Europe in the most traditional of terms. The *New York Herald* reported "When a President's wife decides to go to Europe with a peace delegation, the question of clothes becomes, to many persons almost as important as the terms of the peace treaty."⁵⁹ Instead of discussing what role the first lady might occupy on such an important voyage, newspaper articles focused on what she would wear and what impression these selections might make to European dignitaries and the people, reinforcing the idea that Edith Wilson was an ordinary woman in the midst of extraordinary circumstances that had not lost her traditional sense of womanhood.

⁵⁹ "Mrs. Wilson Has Complete New Wardrobe for Journey Abroad," *New York Herald*, November 2, 1918.

The only first lady to have her own collection of papers at the Library of Congress, Edith Wilson's correspondence reveals a first lady intent on controlling her husband's affairs during his illness the same as if he were any American worker instead of the President of the United States. As first lady, following Woodrow Wilson's stroke, Edith Wilson became the only link between the president and the outside world, effectively making decisions for and with him as a world leader all the while framing her service as the duty of any good wife.

In my final chapter, I will show the position of the first lady in the Progressive Era as one that, regardless of its occupant, is an intersection of modern celebrity, ideal womanhood, and politician that shaped her image as much as had her image shaped by the modern media. I will argue that the intersectional nature of the position of first lady shaped the role of modern first lady and is a model that persists still today. Finally, I will assert that examining the first lady in the context of emerging modes of human-interest journalism in the Progressive Era provides a useful way to examine the expectations of subsequent first ladies as political figures, modern celebrities, and symbols of American womanhood.

CHAPTER TWO

Although many historians today view Theodore Roosevelt as the first modern president, many scholars argue Edith Roosevelt was one of the most traditional first ladies, the last Victorian woman to fill that position. Ironically, this image is a characterization that Edith Roosevelt, herself, and the press, worked tirelessly to promote. While it is true that Edith Roosevelt argued that a woman's name should only appear in public three times during her life: birth, marriage, and death; this was not her fate. Instead, the relationship Edith Roosevelt developed with the press represents an important shift in the way she, and first ladies after her, negotiated their images within emerging modes of modern journalism. As first lady, Edith Roosevelt crafted an image of her celebrity self that was modern. The image she promoted fulfilled the most traditional roles of womanhood but, at the same time, revealed her as a modern, up-to-date woman, an exceptional partner, household manager, and asset to her party.

As first lady, Edith Roosevelt carefully controlled her and her family's relationship with the press in ways that no first ladies did before her. The control exhibited by Roosevelt was as much a response to emerging modes of modern journalism as a concerted effort to maintain her privacy and manipulate her image in the press. By only releasing certain photographs and information about her family, always through official channels in the White House, Edith Roosevelt crafted a specific image of herself and her family in the press which often promoted a specific political agenda, while fulfilling the master plot of true

success. The scarcity of information Roosevelt released also created a demand for new stories and added to the Roosevelt family's popularity and Edith Roosevelt's celebrity. Additionally, the Roosevelts hired noted journalist and muckraker Jacob Riis to write about both the president and first lady and their family. In exchange for access to Edith Roosevelt's private life, Riis' articles promoted an image of the first lady that was democratic and intelligent as well as an excellent wife and mother, an image of the first lady's celebrity self that was modern.

Although Edith Roosevelt did not campaign with her husband, give speeches or openly support legislation, she was an important political figure for the increasingly progressive Republican Party during the early twentieth century. Edith Roosevelt used unofficial spaces, such as her choices in fashion, to reflect her husband's progressive rhetoric which promised Americans, weary of the wealth and excesses of the Gilded Age, a "Square Deal." Under this program, also referred to as "New Nationalism," Theodore Roosevelt proposed a series of legislative reforms to regulate corporations, protect consumers, and conserve resources. At the same time, Roosevelt made it clear that he was not against big business. He would not take away businessmen's ability to accumulate massive private wealth but he would form government agencies, such as the Department of Commerce and Labor, to regulate them so they could not exploit labor or consumers.⁶⁰ Theodore Roosevelt's Square Deal proposed a more equitable society for all Americans. Edith Roosevelt reflected Theodore Roosevelt's

⁶⁰ H.W. Brands, *TR: The Last Romantic*, 441-451.

agenda by promoting an egalitarian image of herself and her personal habits in the White House. At the same time, she made several aristocratic changes to the White House that belied the democracy and practicality she promoted in the press. These changes and their absence from the pages of the press shed light on just how effectively she, with the modern press, manipulated her image.

Edith Roosevelt also promoted her role as mother in the press more vigorously than all other roles she occupied in her tenure as first lady. Her purpose was twofold. First, she hoped to negotiate her image, in keeping with Ponce de Leon's master plot of true success, as a woman who found fulfillment and happiness in her private role as mother. Second, Edith Roosevelt's role, as a mother of six, was reflective of Theodore Roosevelt's deep concerns about race suicide in America. By showing herself in the modern press as first lady, reveling and excelling in her duties as a mother to a large family, Edith Roosevelt effectively promoted her husband's idea that "old stock" Americans should raise large families to keep from being outnumbered by "lesser" immigrant groups.

Perhaps Theodore Roosevelt put it best when he described his wife and first lady, Edith Roosevelt, in writing, "I do not think my eyes are blinded by affection when I say that she has combined to a degree I have never seen in any other woman the power of being the best of wives and mothers, the wisest manager of the household, and at the same time the ideal great lady and mistress of the White House."⁶¹ The image of the first lady Theodore Roosevelt describes

⁶¹ Archibald Butt, *The Letters of Archibald Butt* (New York: Double Day, Page & Co, 1925), 181.

reflects the image Edith Roosevelt negotiated in the modern press as that of a woman who flawlessly bridged the roles of first lady, mother, and wife but found true happiness and success in her private affairs, despite the glamour of her public life.

Born in 1861 to Gertrude Tyler and Charles Carow, Edith Kermit Carow was the first of two daughters. Charles Carow worked in the family's shipping business but was not as successful as he might have been due to a serious drinking problem. By the time his daughters Emily and Edith were born, Charles Carow had lost most of the family fortune. Instead of salvaging what little he had left, Carow turned to drinking to help him forget his lost fortune. Despite this, Charles Carow had a passion for good books and learning, both of which he passed on to Edith. While the Carows lived comfortably for a time, their "diminished circumstances" became noticeable to Edith early in her childhood. Despite the family's depleted financial resources, the Carows were still considered amongst the elite of New York, working feverishly to hide their compromising circumstances. The Carows relied heavily on the generosity of relatives during the next years and Edith stayed at the home of her mother's relatives, a spacious mansion close to the Roosevelt mansion located on Fourteenth and Broadway in New York City.⁶² During this time, Edith started spending time with the Roosevelt children.

Theodore Roosevelt was born in 1858 to Theodore and Martha Roosevelt, the second of four children born to the Roosevelt family, who were one of the

⁶² Caroli, *The Roosevelt Women*, 188.

wealthier families in the exclusive New York City neighborhood where they lived. A small and sickly child, Theodore Roosevelt suffered from a multitude of ailments, including debilitating asthma that confined to him to his home, and sometimes his bed, for a large portion of his childhood. Describing himself as a “timid boy” who “did not excel in sports in any form,” Theodore Roosevelt found himself drawn to the study of natural history and reading. However, with his father’s encouragement, Roosevelt began to challenge himself to pursue a more “vigorous” life, taking up violent sports like boxing to increase his stamina. Fearing his Victorian upbringing “over-civilized” him, Roosevelt began his journey to reclaim his manhood by participating in sports, hunting, and other “masculine” endeavors. He began participating in these activities after reading the *Potiphor Papers*, which satirized rich families for “disgracing their manhood” and writers, such as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who suggested that over-civilization of men was depleting men’s bodies and “animal spirits,” which would eventually lead to race suicide.⁶³ These ideas would later shape his policies towards the United States and himself, as president, as he feared older stock Anglo-Saxon Americans would soon be outnumbered by inferior races.

Edith Carow and Theodore Roosevelt spent a lot of time together as children before Theodore left for Harvard in 1876 and became busy with college life in Massachusetts. Soon after his arrival in Harvard, Theodore met another woman, Alice Lee. He took to her immediately and the two became engaged. Alice Lee and Theodore Roosevelt’s wedding on October 27, 1880 occurred in

⁶³ Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 39.

the Unitarian Church in Brookline, Massachusetts. A brokenhearted Edith Carow appeared as composed and graceful as possible as her childhood sweetheart wed another. Fanny Smith, who accompanied Edith to the wedding reception, noted that Edith, in an act of defiance, “danced the soles off her shoes.”⁶⁴ Despite the hopelessness Edith felt, having her true love marry another, she resigned that it simply was not in her character to marry for money and would accept a life of spinsterhood before being untrue to herself, despite her precarious financial situation. To demonstrate just how confident and sure of herself she was, Edith later recollected with her granddaughter, “that she had no doubt that ‘someday, somehow, she would marry Theodore Roosevelt.’”⁶⁵

In 1881, now a member of the Republican Party, Theodore Roosevelt was nominated, at only twenty-three years old, to the New York State Assembly, winning by a significant margin. He promised to put the “‘best men’” forward “to oust working class and ethnic professional party politicians from power.”⁶⁶ Although he won the election, Theodore Roosevelt was sharply criticized in the race. Historian Gail Bederman contends, “Daily newspapers lampooned him as the quintessence of effeminacy...They ridiculed his high voice, tight pants, and fancy clothing.”⁶⁷ Roosevelt was mocked for the very kind of over-civilization he

⁶⁴ Morris, *Edith Kermit Roosevelt*, 50.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶⁶ Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 81.

⁶⁷ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 170.

railed against as a teenager by taking up boxing and hunting. At this moment, Theodore Roosevelt understood he must craft a more masculine image for himself without sacrificing civility. Roosevelt found this balance difficult to achieve. For example, when his virility was questioned in person, he confronted the man, shouting expletives, threatening to “kick him in the balls!”⁶⁸ Roosevelt worked tirelessly to shed his effeminate image by extolling his masculine virtues and was so successful, he was characterized just five years later in his run for New York State governor as a “cowboy,” and a “man’s man.”

Not long after Theodore Roosevelt won the assemblyman seat, in a sad turn of events, Edith’s notion that she would “someday, somehow,” marry Theodore Roosevelt came true. On February 11, 1884, Theodore Roosevelt’s wife, Alice Lee Roosevelt, went into labor with her and Theodore’s first child, a girl, Alice. Less encouraging news soon followed, as Theodore received word that Alice, stricken with Bright’s disease, was dying at the same time his mother was suffering from typhoid fever. On Valentine’s Day of 1884, Theodore Roosevelt lost both his mother and Alice Lee Roosevelt. His mother was only forty-nine and Alice was just twenty-three.

Theodore Roosevelt carried on as best as he could in the months that followed the death of his wife and mother. Edith Carow did not see Theodore for nineteen months following the death of Alice Lee. She went out of her way to avoid him upon his return to New York City from the Dakota Bad Lands, where he spent the majority of the two years following Alice Roosevelt’s death. While

⁶⁸ Ibid., 70.

there, Roosevelt continued his transformation into the vigorous, strong, masculine symbol of male civility that would become one of the hallmarks of his presidency.⁶⁹ After nearly two years without speaking, Theodore called on Edith at her home. The relationship remained private for months but on Theodore's twenty-seventh birthday, the two attended the Meadowbrook Hunt Ball at his home, now named Sagamore Hill, and made their romance public.⁷⁰ Less than two years after Alice's death, Theodore Roosevelt proposed to Edith. On December 2, 1886, surrounded by friends and family, Edith Kermit Carow became Edith Kermit Roosevelt.

During the years from 1886 and 1901, Edith and Theodore Roosevelt changed residences frequently as Theodore accepted positions as the Civil Service Commissioner in 1889 and Police Commissioner in 1895, which forced him to move from Sagamore Hill to Madison Avenue in New York City. During this time, Theodore worked rigorously and spent little time with Edith or the children. By this time Edith, in keeping with Theodore Roosevelt's fear of race suicide and belief it was the duty of American women to birth and raise large families to prevent white Americans from being outnumbered by "inferior" races, was taking care of five children, including Alice, Theodore Jr., Kermit, Ethel, and Archibald. The couple's youngest son Quentin was born during Theodore's reign as Secretary of the Navy, a position he accepted in April 1897.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Brands, *TR: The Last Romantic*, 194.

⁷⁰ Morris, *Edith Kermit Roosevelt*, 81.

A pregnant Edith Roosevelt made plans to pack her family up and move to Washington so they could be with Theodore during his reign as Secretary of the Navy in Washington, D.C. and Quentin was born about two weeks later on November 9, 1897. Edith continued to recover from a normal pregnancy when she fell ill shortly after Christmas. For weeks, Edith was in and out of consciousness and Theodore cancelled all of his business trips in order to stay by her side. His sentiment changed after the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. Even though Theodore Jr. and Edith were both terribly ill, Theodore decided to leave his ailing family to serve his country in the war, another opportunity to showcase his masculinity. He wrote to a friend later in his life:

When the chance came for me to go to Cuba with the Rough Riders Mrs. Roosevelt was very ill and so was Teddy... You know what my wife and children mean to me; and yet I made up my mind that I would not allow even a death to stand in my way; that it was my one chance to do something for my country and for my family... I know now that I would have turned from my wife's deathbed to have answered that call.⁷²

Edith and Theodore Jr. both recovered and Edith was well enough to travel to Cuba to meet the Rough Riders following Theodore's heroic charge up San Juan Hill, though she privately yearned for her husband's return home.

Theodore Roosevelt returned to the United States a war hero. His name and tales of his bravery spread quickly, winning him the admiration of both American citizens and the attention of several prominent politicians who wanted to help Theodore capitalize on his new found popularity. Edith hoped Theodore

⁷¹ Joan Paterson Kerr, *A Bully Father: Theodore Roosevelt's Letters to His Children* (New York: Random House, 1995), 250.

⁷² Roosevelt, *Letters*, 293.

would settle down to a quite literary life but this hope was put to rest when a committee arrived at the Roosevelt's Sagamore Hill residence to notify him of his nomination for Governor of New York State in 1898.

At the same time, Theodore financially benefitted from his popularity after the war by writing a series of articles and a book describing his war experiences that would spread his story across the nation and raise enough money to please Edith and put her account book "back in the black." Edith, who handled all the family finances, was also pleased with her husband's nomination for governor as the salary was a generous \$10,000 per year.⁷³ Although the Roosevelt's were never destitute, raising a large family and participating in politics cost a considerable amount of money. A family of means, most of which was inherited, the Roosevelts thought of themselves as practical but Edith always made sure that all of her clothes and surroundings were in good taste. Edith Roosevelt believed her elegant tastes were a reflection of her family's status in society. She felt it was necessary to be as simple and understated as possible and never to flaunt her family's wealth or standing because to do so would be indicative of the "New Money."

New Money families, who emerged during the Gilded Age and continued to flourish well into the twentieth century, were at odds with "Old Money" families, like the Roosevelts, whose fortunes could not match that of big businessmen like the Vanderbilts. Like most Old Money families, the Roosevelts' wealth came from trust funds and inheritance whereas New Money

⁷³ Morris, *Edith Kermit Roosevelt*, 293.

families, like the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers, were considered self-made men whose fortune included not just cash but also capital, which allowed them to not only maintain but build their fortunes.⁷⁴

In an effort to maintain status and power, Old Money families placed increased value on education, conscience, morality, and manners, all elements they believed New Money families were unable to acquire by using their massive fortunes. America's wealthiest New Money families continued to build lavish mansions and throw grandiose parties, even in the midst of the economic depression of the 1890s. Historian Sven Beckert argues, Old Money families "steeped in the country's republican heritage and the moral imperatives of frugality and thrift, looked with disdain upon the ostentatious displays of wealth and conspicuous consumption that flourished at the century's end."⁷⁵ They coupled their criticism of the New Money lifestyle with an alternative model, highly reflective of the master plot of true success, which showed Old Money families as moral, unspoiled, and practical, despite their considerable wealth.

Edith Roosevelt prided herself in presenting her family with a certain pedigree indicative of the Old Money in New York. Distancing her family from the opulence of the New Money lifestyle, Edith felt that understated and elegant taste was crucial for her husband's career and her family's standing in society.

⁷⁴ Nelson Aldrich, *Old Money: The Mythology of Wealth in America* (Allworth Press, New York, 1997), 59.

⁷⁵ Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001), 2.

For the Roosevelts, and many other families that felt threatened by the development of a new crop of millionaires, the adage “less is more” began to take on very serious connotations. Traveling to Europe was one of the chief ways that Old Money felt a reconnection with long traditions of class and refinement, since Europe was seen as the birthplace of the utmost in good taste and elegance. As children, both Edith and Theodore traveled to Europe for this reason, as did their children. In Europe, they studied and learned everything from proper table manners to literature so they might suitably represent their pedigree in the United States and differentiate themselves from the “nouveau riche.”⁷⁶

Following a vigorous campaign, Theodore Roosevelt won the race for governor in 1898 against Augustus Van Wyck by nearly 18,000 votes. Edith Roosevelt enjoyed her role as first lady of New York and hoped Theodore would seek another term. But when time came for his reelection as governor, rumors surfaced he would be the Vice Presidential candidate with Republican nominee, William McKinley. Edith Roosevelt staunchly protested this nomination because she thought Theodore would better serve his country in the position of governor, moreover she and the children were quite content where they were. Despite Edith’s vehement protests, Theodore accepted the nomination as the Vice President amidst much grandeur and Edith was, once again, forced to pack herself, her belongings, and her children in order to be with Theodore, as he became the Vice President of the United States of America and following McKinley assassination, president.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 22.

The circumstances surrounding Edith Roosevelt's transition into the role of first lady made her relationship with the press vitally important. Her transition was not an easy one. She replaced a woman, Ida Saxon McKinley, who was a virtual invalid and had just lost her husband to the bullet of an assassin. In her first act as the first lady, Roosevelt attended the services of the late President William McKinley. Roosevelt next made a private call on McKinley's grieving widow, an act of compassion outside of political decorum that Edith Roosevelt made sure did not go unnoticed by the newspapers.⁷⁷ In her first act on the national stage as first lady, Edith Roosevelt fulfilled her new political duties and her duties as a woman and human being by comforting another in her time of need. In the modern age when the public openly questioned celebrity's public personas, the private visit revealed much about who the new first lady was. A private event, the meeting was disclosed by the first lady to the press to show Edith Roosevelt in the best possible light, as a first lady of compassion and integrity, in and out of the public spotlight.

Edith Roosevelt exhibited a great deal of sensitivity in the days that followed President McKinley's death, allowing proper time for the nation to grieve. As the first lady, she understood that she had certain social obligations to fulfill and these included proper mourning rituals. In an effort to appear neither too anxious nor indifferent, Edith Roosevelt released, to the staff and to the press, instructions on how social calls and other business of the first lady was to be dealt with during her first days in the role. The *New York World* informed readers that

⁷⁷ "The New President," *The Boston Herald*, September 17, 1901.

“Mrs. Roosevelt has instructed Secretary Cortelyou to inform the ladies in social and official circles here that no calls of a formal or informal nature will be expected until after October 15. This period is required to show proper deference to the memory of the late President.”⁷⁸ Papers noted Edith Roosevelt did have a large family to move into the Executive Mansion, a private matter, which was her first and most pressing priority.

Before long, however, the press along with Washington’s political elite, grew to understand the influence this so-called traditional first lady would have not only socially but also politically. As early as November, 1901, newspapers such as the *New York Herald* reported, “Mrs. Roosevelt has swept everything before her at the White House. Matters formerly left to the decision of the secretary to the President or the superintendent of the public buildings and ground, which office has become rather of a social stewardship, have been taken in hand by the President’s wife...who will form a new code of White House etiquette.”⁷⁹ Clearly the decisions Roosevelt made would have a major impact on the lives of members of the president’s cabinet as well as their wives, who were also in Washington to serve the nation in a social capacity.

Edith Roosevelt was at the top of the social order and in a position of power, not only socially, but also politically, in setting a standard of decorum to be observed by the elite in the nation’s capital. As one journalist commented, “In social circles at the capital of the nation, the wife of the president is as preeminent

⁷⁸“New Mistress enters the White House,” *New York World*, September 23, 1901.

⁷⁹ “White House Sees Revolution,” *The New York Herald*, November 16, 1901.

as is her husband in the political realm...her preferences in the matter of social usage are universally respected.”⁸⁰ Roosevelt took this prestige very seriously and believed she should secure the position of the president and his family at the center of the nation’s political and social order.

Not long after her arrival, Roosevelt began to hold weekly meetings with the wives of cabinet members to set “social rules” and make sure that her husband’s cabinet was free from scandal. She made it clear that any adulterous behavior or any other impropriety resulting in corruption would not be tolerated. More political and social ritual than legitimate concern, Roosevelt then moved to the important business of establishing the proper social order amongst the political elite in Washington, D.C. The meetings discussed issues such as entertaining guests and she carefully warned that although these were women of means, they should not attempt to “outshine” the president and the first lady in the parties they might hold. Roosevelt quickly established ground rules among the women and their families so that the Roosevelts, the presidential family, would always maintain superiority.⁸¹ These meetings, although significant, were not made public. These images of Edith Roosevelt purposefully kept out of the public eye.

Because Edith Roosevelt kept her meetings with cabinet ladies out of the press, there was a striking duality in the way Edith Roosevelt was viewed by her

⁸⁰ Waldon Fawcett, “The Cabinet as a Social Factor,” *The Delineator*, March, 1902.

⁸¹ Truman, *First Ladies*, 309 and Morris, *Edith Kermit Roosevelt*, 227.

peers and the way she was viewed by the public. In the modern press, she negotiated an image of herself as a private, modest, and selfless mother and wife. Margaret Truman wrote, “Maternity was Edith’s stock in trade. She not only liked it, she made it the symbol of the Roosevelt White House, with spectacularly popular results.”⁸² She was the subject of many flattering magazine articles and released photographs of her and her family in order to relate better to the common American citizen, a representative of ideal womanhood, which was a goal of both the first lady and the modern press.

These articles did not show her less flattering side revealed to some cabinet members’ wives. Several of the cabinet members’ wives as well as members of Theodore Roosevelt’s extended family found Edith’s “take charge” style and confidence to be domineering. One of Theodore Roosevelt’s cousins disclosed, “When someone dare muster the temerity to comment on Edith’s sharp tongue however, she would state that she would do as she pleased and if necessary ask ‘for the privilege of losing my temper as a Christmas gift.’”⁸³ This side of the first lady never surfaced in the modern press as she carefully controlled what parts of her private life she released to the press and the press dared not damage its exclusive access with the first lady by portraying her in an unflattering light.

⁸² Truman, *First Ladies*, 310 and Catherine M. Hastings, “Edith Kermit Roosevelt: First Lady, First Mommy,” in Wertheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice*, 45.

⁸³ As quoted in an interview with Roosevelt’s unnamed niece in Caroli, *The Roosevelt Women*, 196.

One of the most pervasive and important roles Edith Roosevelt fulfilled as first lady, according to her image in the modern press, were her private roles as wife, mother and household manager. Like other modern female celebrities, in keeping with the master plot of true success, Edith Roosevelt appeared to find true happiness in her private life, the true self the press purported to know through exclusive interviews. These interviews, and the articles they produced, offered woman a new model to follow that represented a departure from Victorian sensibilities and a turn toward modern notions of womanhood. Her skill as a wife, mother, woman, and household manager were noted and celebrated in nearly every printed article during her tenure as first lady which facilitated the popularity she enjoyed upon Theodore's assumption of the presidency. Articles also included a discussion of Edith Roosevelt as independent, capable, and intelligent, traits which were also a part of her image as a modern celebrity. These well publicized roles projected an image of the first lady that was traditional and accessible yet competent. Edith Roosevelt was a success not just in her public life but also her private life, in which she provided a thriving environment for her children and husband, despite the pressure of her position.

As a modern celebrity, Edith Roosevelt's life in the White House strictly followed the master plot of true success. The earliest evidence of this focus on the private life and true success came with the special fervor that surrounded Edith Roosevelt because of the size of her family. A family of eight, the Roosevelts were not typical of their time period, particularly for families in urban areas. As sex became further disassociated with reproduction in the early

twentieth century, the size of middle class American families shrunk.⁸⁴ The shrinking size of American families was a great concern for Theodore Roosevelt, personally and politically, as he encouraged certain groups to increase their rate of reproduction. Theodore Roosevelt cautioned “old stock” Americans they must continue to reproduce or be faced with being outnumbered by “lesser” ethnic minorities. In 1905, Theodore Roosevelt gave a speech before the National Congress of Mothers, extolling the virtues of motherhood, warning “In our modern industrial civilization there are many and grave dangers to counterbalance the splendors and the triumphs.” He reminded women of their duty to raise large families and the virtues and rewards that come with being good mothers. Roosevelt stated “The woman who is a good wife, a good mother, is entitled to our respect as is no one else; but she is entitled to it only because, and so long as, she is worthy of it.”⁸⁵ Theodore Roosevelt did not just speak about the duty of old stock whites in America to raise larger families; he served at the helm of one, himself.

As the number of immigrants in American cities continued to climb in the early twentieth century, historian Gail Bederman noted that Roosevelt’s deep fears that old stock Americans were slowly being overtaken or intermarried with less desirable immigrant classes, also grew. These fears shaped not only his political policies, but also his personal life. As he did after his run for New York

⁸⁴ John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman. *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 266.

⁸⁵ “On Motherhood” Speech, March 13, 1905, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

State assemblyman, Roosevelt encouraged white men to tap into their inherent masculinity that was tempered during the Victorian era and use their virility to raise larger families as part of their manly roles in the home. Roosevelt argued “the willfully [sexually] idle man was as bad as the willfully barren woman.”⁸⁶

Roosevelt’s family, including first lady Edith Roosevelt, carried an important political message. Roosevelt saw a great need for Anglo-Saxon Americans to raise large families. Although Roosevelt acknowledged the need for women as mothers to encourage the growth of the old stock American families, he appealed mostly to men. He called on men to awaken their vigorous masculinity to raise these large families, leaving women “outside the conversation.”⁸⁷ Roosevelt’s nativist sentiments were reflected in the size of his family and his wife’s fulfillment of her motherly duties. This way, Edith Roosevelt’s role as a mother was celebrated in the press not only as part of the master plot of true success but also part of a political agenda.

The first meaningful popular article that appeared after Edith Roosevelt became first lady focused on her role as a mother.⁸⁸ This served a dual purpose. First, it allowed Edith Roosevelt to embody the most traditional notions of womanhood while skillfully managing her image with the modern press, eager to

⁸⁶ Theodore Roosevelt, “National Duties” in *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses* (Michigan: Scholarly Press, 1970), 280 as quoted in Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 188.

⁸⁷ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 205.

⁸⁸ See Jacob Riis, “Mrs. Roosevelt and Her Children,” *Ladies Home Journal*, August 1902, 5-7.

tell the story of the first lady's private life and fulfillment she found in her roles as wife, mother, and household manager, despite her lofty position. It also effectively promoted, by example, her husband's political agenda, encouraging the white men to embrace their virility to raise larger families.

Americans were captivated by Edith Roosevelt's well documented ability to manage social affairs as well as care for her children in such a careful manner. According to the modern press, she made certain each of her five youngsters completed their homework and walked little Ethel to school each day in order to get her exercise. In this way, Roosevelt was set apart from other first ladies and also embodied emerging notions of modern womanhood that called for women to have both public and private pursuits. *Harper's Bazaar* reported "More than any recent occupant of the exalted and nerve-racking position which she holds, Mrs. Roosevelt is a busy woman." Ida McKinley was an invalid, Caroline Harrison's children were grown, and Francis Cleveland's children were so young, they made it impossible for her to fully serve as both first lady and mother.⁸⁹ Edith Roosevelt was called on to be both full time first lady and mother to her six children.

As the press reported, Edith Roosevelt was under more pressure than any other first lady in recent history because the age of her children required a great deal of supervision, yet she did not use these obligations to shirk her social responsibilities as first lady. Significantly, many mothers from the same upper class background as the Roosevelts, particularly ones with large families, sought

⁸⁹ Anne O'Hagan, "Women of the Hour," *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1905, 412.

the help of nannies and nursemaids. While the nurse who cared for Edith Roosevelt as a child remained with the family until her death in 1906, the press reported no childcare expenses were ever incurred by the Roosevelts – a personal expense undoubtedly revealed by Edith Roosevelt as she maintained an image for herself as a capable and loving mother without outside assistance. While it remains unclear who was paying the Roosevelt's nursemaid, Edith Roosevelt's promotion of her ability to take care of her children on her own was an effort to appear at once as a dedicated mother and democratic woman.

While the revelation of a governess did not support Edith Roosevelt's assertion that the family did not spend money on childcare, it did, as she meant it to, show her as a modern woman who balanced her public and private duties with grace and skill, offering American women a model for their own lives. This is where, the press revealed, she excelled and found true success. The *New York Herald* reported, "Whether Mrs. Roosevelt is entertaining a house party of guests, presiding at public entertainment or public function, or alone with her children and their governess, she is absolutely the same."⁹⁰

Edith Roosevelt's ability to balance her roles as wife, mother and first lady, reflective of shifting notions of womanhood, were discussed by Jacob Riis in his articles "Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt: A Personal Sketch," and "Mrs. Roosevelt and Her Children." Both articles were published in the *Ladies Home Journal*, a magazine that targeted middle class women and was often friendly to first lady Edith Roosevelt. Riis, a noted journalist, muckraker and long time

⁹⁰ "The New Mistress of the White House," *The New York Herald*, September 22, 1901.

friend of Theodore Roosevelt, was retained by the Roosevelts and offered exclusive access to the president, the first lady and their family, offering readers a description of the private life and true self of Edith Roosevelt. In describing her capacity to navigate roles of wife, mother, and public figure, Riis reported, “Wife and mother first, Mrs. Roosevelt finds room in her well-ordered life for a beneficent practice of the social amenities that make part of the life of a public man’s wife.”⁹¹ Furthermore, Riis’ articles, the best examples of the access modern journalists were allowed and the popularity they gained from writing articles that followed Ponce de Leon’s master plot, demonstrated that Edith Roosevelt was down-to-earth despite her position and wealth, finding true happiness in her private roles.

American women, who likely never had much interest in politics, could probably relate to Edith Roosevelt as a mother. To highlight her role as a mother, Riis revealed very private moments. For example, when the president and first lady’s son Theodore Jr. fell gravely ill while away at school, Riis reported that other mothers worried along side of Roosevelt, many having been there themselves.⁹² The first lady’s approach to motherhood appeared to mimic other mother’s across the country and was referred to as “old fashioned,” in the best sense of the word. Riis revealed, following Edith Roosevelt’s attendance at a public event where she met other American mothers, “There was no time for extended interviews, else the mothers might have learned the mistress of the

⁹¹ Jacob Riis, “Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt: A Personal Sketch,” *Ladies Home Journal*, March 2, 1901.

⁹² Jacob Riis, “Mrs. Roosevelt and Her Children,” August 1902, 5-6.

White House is in the truest and best sense one of them, with ideas of home-making and child training which, if they are sometimes called old-fashioned, one may be permitted to fervently hope, for the sake of our country, will never go out of fashion.”⁹³ Riis made a point to show Roosevelt as a mother, just like any other, despite her role as first lady.

Riis also noted that her time as a mother took precedence over her political and social duties on nearly every occasion. He assured readers that Roosevelt viewed most matters from a maternal capacity, leading a very “normal” life. Riis argued “I have traced the routine in the day of the White House, believe that every mother who has her own home duties to attend to, would get a sympathetic glimpse of its mistress.”⁹⁴ Riis’ article reflects the way Edith Roosevelt skillfully negotiated an image of her private and true self as accessible and down-to-earth, which was in opposition to the ways she attempted to create a more aristocratic White House, a side of Edith Roosevelt she and the press never revealed.

Motherhood was not the only role in her private life that Edith Roosevelt highlighted in the modern press. Adding to the image she negotiated in the modern press Roosevelt, the press reported, was committed to being outdoors at least a few hours per day. Whether it was walking with her children or riding on horseback with her husband, the first lady cited spending time outdoors as one of her secrets to staying healthy and strong throughout her husband’s presidency. The press tirelessly publicized this attribute of Roosevelt, mentioning it in nearly

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

every article written about Roosevelt's private self. In keeping with Theodore Roosevelt's adherence to a strenuous life, she was the first of the first ladies of the time that was referred to endearingly as "outdoorsy," in a complimentary way, and was the subject of a number of articles that discussed healthy living, exercise and nutrition.⁹⁵

Riis also reported Edith Roosevelt had no place for "rich foods or fancy dishes" on her dinner table. She was not interested in such things; rather, she was concerned with the nutritional content of the food and whether or not it will "add strength" to her growing boys. Additionally, her sense of moderation in terms of dress and social life were also attributed to her staying so healthy and youthful during her tenure in the White House. For Roosevelt, moderation as opposed to extremes in living was crucial.⁹⁶ In stark contrast to many Victorian women who made frequent use of a fainting couch, Roosevelt publicly prided herself on being a healthy and robust woman, offering American women a new and modern model of American womanhood that couple strength and capability with grace and taste, that could also match her husband's oft-promoted masculinity.⁹⁷

In matters of the family economy, Edith Roosevelt promoted an image of herself as frugal. Although she used all of the finery at the White House in order

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Helena McCarthy, "Why Mrs. Roosevelt Has Not Broken Down," *Ladies' Home Journal*, October 1908, 25. See also Joseph Bucklin Bishop ed., *Theodore Roosevelt's Letters to his Children* (New York, Scribners: 1928), 51.

⁹⁷ For a discussion on the commonly weak constitution of Victorian women see Lois Banner's *American Beauty* (Knopf Publishing: New York, 1983).

to entertain guests and command respect for her husband and country, she publicized a more moderate approach to her budget decisions in her life in the White House. In opposition to the vulgar indulgences exhibited by families like the Vanderbilts, whose wealth was built by the big businesses Theodore Roosevelt sought to limit, Edith Roosevelt, the press reported, let nothing go to waste. As first lady, she cut corners where she was able and was always in charge of the finances. Riis reported that “Mrs. Roosevelt does not believe in waste of anything.”⁹⁸ For example, in the renovations of the Executive Mansion, she used some “perfectly decent” curtains to reupholster several chairs and sought the services of a caterer for White House events because it would, in the end, improve the standing of her meticulously kept account book.⁹⁹ Americans could relate to and appreciate her purported sense of thrift and practicality in her handling of the finances as they worked to find ways to stretch their family dollar in ways the first lady probably never considered.

Edith Roosevelt’s promotion of her practicality in the press was not only important in to appealing to common Americans but a reflection of her husband and party’s political agenda. In an era characterized by a spirit of reform, which Theodore Roosevelt embodied in his rhetoric and legislation, Edith Roosevelt’s purported sense of thrift was an attempt to reflect the egalitarian message implied in Roosevelt’s promise of a “square deal” for all Americans. As part of Theodore Roosevelt’s Square Deal program, he promoted an image of himself as a trust

⁹⁸ Riis, “Mrs. Roosevelt and her Children,” 5.

⁹⁹ “White House as a Social Centre,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, February 1908, 162.

buster, though he believed that regulating trusts was a better course of action. However, his image as a trust buster was more appealing to progressive Republicans and common Americans, many of whom endured economic hardships while big businesses flourished. In the same way, Edith Roosevelt promoted her image as economical and sensible, despite making some decidedly aristocratic changes to the White House.

Reflective of shifting notion of modernity and womanhood, which called for women to be not just wives and mothers but high minded and intellectual companions, Edith Roosevelt publicized her traits that highlighted this shift. This change started taking place in the 1880s but never reached fruition until well into the 1920s when Benjamin Lindsey coined the term “companionate marriage” in 1927 to describe a new ideal for marriages based on equity and friendship.¹⁰⁰ Several publications, including the *Delineator* and the *New York Post*, reported that Edith Roosevelt took upon herself to keep Theodore in touch with public opinion. She often forced Theodore to take time out of his busy schedule to review abstracts from magazines. She read at least five newspapers each week herself to assess public opinion of the president. She would clip articles from the paper that she felt were of interest and go over them in detail with Theodore. She also shared her invaluable insight with him and during these times. He often asked her opinion of several political leaders.

The press reported that Theodore Roosevelt thought his wife was an excellent judge of character. Mark Sullivan, journalist and friend of the

¹⁰⁰ D’Emilio, *Intimate Matters*, 266.

Roosevelts who studied with Theodore at Harvard, commented to the *Washington Star*, “Never, when he [Theodore] had his wife’s judgment, did he go wrong or suffer disappointment.”¹⁰¹ It appeared Theodore Roosevelt depended heavily on his wife for public matters and trusted in her unwavering judgment.¹⁰² Edith Roosevelt never voiced her opinions outwardly in public, lest she wander too far outside traditional gender roles. On the surface, the advice she offered the president was in publicized “private moments” from a wife to her husband, consistent with emerging ideals for marriages. This way, by negotiating her public image with the press, Edith Roosevelt seemed to embody the most ideal traits of modern and traditional womanhood while the press enjoyed exclusive access to these private moments between the first lady and president in order to illuminate their true selves for devoted readers.

In addition to this, Edith Roosevelt, as first lady, was celebrated for her independence as a woman, a sign of capability and modernity. The press praised “Mrs. Roosevelt,” as she was always referred to, for her practicality and autonomy. On her way to meet Theodore Roosevelt in Washington once he became president, Edith traveled by train unaccompanied by anyone, not even a maid. A Washington reporter saw this as an example of the “simple habits and democratic tastes” of the soon-to-be first lady.¹⁰³ This portrayed Edith Roosevelt

¹⁰¹ Hermann Hagedorn, *The Roosevelt Family of Sagamore Hill* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954), 194.

¹⁰² See Daggett, “The Woman in the Background,” 393-396.

¹⁰³ *New York World*, September 17, 1901 as quoted in Morris, *Edith Kermit Roosevelt*, 219.

as she wished to be seen and as the party wished her to be seen, as competent but not frivolous.

Edith Roosevelt also promoted an image of herself as a woman of robust health and a loving partner to the president. Journalists, like Jacob Riis, reflected on Roosevelt's ability to please her husband with her femininity but also her capacity to match Theodore Roosevelt in his quest for the "strenuous life." Riis reported, "Mrs. Roosevelt is a superb horsewoman and enjoys the outing as much does the President. It is their confidential hour, the two, who, with six children at their board, have never ceased to be lovers."¹⁰⁴ A vigorous love life was important to Theodore Roosevelt's vision of a modern society with the white race securely in control of American society.

In addition to being a devoted lover and companion, in order to be a good wife to her husband, Edith Roosevelt also had to express interest in her husband's work as well as her own, as mistress of the White House. In this role, Riis argued, "Mrs. Roosevelt has won the hearts of everybody, and the secret of it, I am persuaded, is as much in her love for her husband...as in her own genuine interest in the duties of devolving upon the President's wife." She was not a quiet observer to her husband's presidency and when faced with discussing, as many wives do, matters pertaining to their husband's work, the first lady was an active and important participant in such conversations. Riis relates "For hers is no passive reflection of his robust intellect."¹⁰⁵ Edith Roosevelt was an ideal wife,

¹⁰⁴ Riis, "Mrs. Roosevelt and her Children," 6.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

mother, and household manager, while simultaneously fulfilling the political duties of first lady and the popular role of modern celebrity. Her image in the press reflects the shedding of traditional Victorian ideals for women, in favor of a more modern and capable notion of womanhood.

Like most modern female celebrities, the first lady's physical appearance was also the subject of numerous articles. Edith Roosevelt's appearance was as much a part of her modern celebrity as it was in forwarding her agenda of the down-to-earth and simple nature she hoped to portray as her true self in the press. Therefore, Roosevelt could not be described as a stunning beauty or a homely matron but, instead, occupied a middle ground. Edith Roosevelt negotiated an image of herself as a woman of simple but appealing looks and charm. The *New York Herald* reported, "Not a beauty at first glance, Roosevelt is nevertheless an unusually pretty woman, rather above middle height, with a slight girlish figure."¹⁰⁶

Edith Roosevelt's clothing choices were not only scrutinized but also influential, for their simplicity rather than opulence. As with most prominent ladies of the day, nearly every article that mentioned Edith Roosevelt included a description of her dress. However, in modern cities where the most current high society fashions came from Paris and London, not everyone celebrated Roosevelt's modest dress and the absence of a fashionably large hat.¹⁰⁷ Unlike former first ladies and New Money women, who surrounded themselves with the

¹⁰⁶ "The New Mistress of the White House," *The New York Herald*, September 22, 1901.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

latest and most expensive fashions from Paris, the press asserted Edith Roosevelt had no use for such garments. Roosevelt effectively promoted her practicality in dress in the press by highlighting the fact she wore certain dresses twice in a season and that she would only purchase American fashions.

Roosevelt's fashions were so important in the press that mention of them often appeared alongside significant political events in the White House. After the particularly important visit of African American leader Booker T. Washington to the White House, an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* took issue with the revelation of the first lady's modest yearly clothing budget, which was also seen as newsworthy. In fact, the two items appeared in the same newspaper article, signifying the apparent importance of the first lady's clothing expenses. The press reported, "Not content with trying to raise a sensation over the right of a President to invite whomsoever he pleases to his table, some newspapers are trying to create a sensation over the allegation that Mrs. Roosevelt spends only \$300 a year on her wardrobe."¹⁰⁸ The article begged the question: how much is too much to spend on one's wardrobe, even for a woman of means? And is Edith Roosevelt's example one that other ladies of standing should adopt in order to demonstrate their inherent sense of thrift as women? The attention this issue received was not unique to Edith Roosevelt as first lady. The modest budget the first lady adopted was well publicized by the modern press in keeping with the master plot of true success. The media showed Edith Roosevelt was wealthy yet thrifty, fortunate yet unspoiled, and, since the personal was the political for the

¹⁰⁸ "A Woman's Clothes," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 25, 1901.

first lady, it showed a rejection of the garish displays of wealth by society women made possible in the industrial age.

The modern press embraced Edith for her “lack” of fashion sense and many Americans related to her sense of practicality.¹⁰⁹ Edith Roosevelt’s well publicized refusal to buy fashions not made in America and propensity to wear gowns more than once was considered a major story in Washington as well as the rest of America. She was described by *Harper’s Bazaar* as “graceful and dignified, unmistakably aristocratic” in her style.¹¹⁰ This image of a woman of simple tastes, rejecting the opulence that became the hallmarks of big business and the Gilded Age, worked in tandem with Theodore Roosevelt’s political agenda, which promised reforms to make modern American society more equitable. The image Edith Roosevelt negotiated of herself as accessible and unspoiled by her wealth and position was also not to be confused with New Money families like the Vanderbilts or Rockefellers, who surrounded themselves with luxuries.

Because the personal was often political for the first lady, in matters of fashion, Edith Roosevelt controlled the press releases about her clothing as carefully as she did any story that included her name. In one particularly significant episode, a seamstress to the first lady released a description of a dress she sewed for Roosevelt to wear at an upcoming event. The description, which

¹⁰⁹ O’Hagan, “Women of the Hour”, 416 and McCarthy, “Why Roosevelt Has Not Broken Down,” 25.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 414.

appeared in the *New York Sun*, was met with a sharp rebuke from the secretary to the president, undoubtedly dispatched by the first lady, which warned, “Am surprised to see description of Mrs. Roosevelt’s inaugural gown in the Sun this morning given out by you. Suggest you take steps to prevent its appearance in any other papers.”¹¹¹

The message was followed almost immediately afterward with a telegram from the first lady herself which informed the unfortunate seamstress that her services at the White House would no longer be needed since she violated certain rules pertaining to those who serve the president and his family. Roosevelt’s response to a description of her gown being revealed in the newspaper was a sharp contrast to the democratic image she promoted in the modern press. Edith Roosevelt held little emotion back when she wrote, “Greatly annoyed by your advertisement of my gown in the New York Sun. No such thing is done by tailor here or by any tradespeople [*sic*] serving the White House. For this makes it impossible for me to employ you again.”¹¹² Roosevelt took such an affront to this because it was, to her, a complete violation of privacy and trust to report on anything to do with the first lady, particularly her fashions, without her approval. Edith Roosevelt did not wear the dress and the episode was never publicized yet it reveals Roosevelt’s commitment to restricting access to her private decisions and information as well as the aristocratic air she hoped to establish around the White

¹¹¹ Official Correspondence from Secretary to the President William Loeb, 1905, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Series 2, Reel 363.

¹¹² Edith K. Roosevelt, 1905, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Series 15, Reel 458.

House and first family. Oftentimes, when one of the first lady's dresses was photographed or the style was released, it was copied for sale in short order by many an enterprising seamstress. Like many modern celebrities, the first lady's fashions were often duplicated for the masses to wear, much to the chagrin of Edith Roosevelt, who privately believed the first lady, like other modern female celebrities, should occupy a position in American society, untouched by others.

When Edith Roosevelt held an event, wore a dress, or made a social change that could not be considered democratic, the modern press typically did not to criticize her and sometimes defended her. For a woman who was reportedly of simple and democratic tastes, Edith Roosevelt threw legendary parties that fascinated the public. Her popularity and celebrity were evident in the modern press's coverage of White House social events, such as Alice Roosevelt's debutant ball. The *New York Herald* reveled in the brilliant gathering in a story that was complete with pictures of both Edith Roosevelt as well as her daughters that were carefully posed and released to the press.¹¹³ Alice Roosevelt, daughter of Theodore and his late wife Alice Lee, also enjoyed a remarkable degree of celebrity as well, not only for her beauty but also her well-known and sharp wit. Later, her wedding would become another heavily covered event in Roosevelt's tenure as first lady as a celebration of the most epic proportions, which the press did not question despite its promotion of Edith Roosevelt's adherence to the virtues of simplicity and modesty.

¹¹³ "White House Ball," *The New York Herald*, January 4, 1902.

In 1902, the Roosevelts traveled to France and Edith Roosevelt became embroiled in a scandal. During the stay, famous French artist Theobald Chartran was to paint Theodore Roosevelt. Chartran, one of France's most celebrated artists of the time period, who also painted the likes of Pope Leo XIII, Umberto I of Italy, and other dignitaries, also offered to paint a portrait of Edith Roosevelt. Flattered but ever the model of modesty, the *World New York* reported the first lady worried she was neither beautiful nor young enough to warrant such a painting and asked that the artist consider painting Alice instead.¹¹⁴ Edith Roosevelt eventually agreed to be painted and unlike her husband's portrait, which hung in the darkest corner of the White House and was later destroyed because he disliked it so much, Chartran's rendering of Edith would be the portrait she selected to hang in the newly minted first lady portrait gallery, organized under her direction.

While only the portrait of Theodore Roosevelt was commissioned by the American government, the French government sought to make the portraits of Alice and Edith gifts. The French people criticized this, resulting in the Roosevelts' names and portraits being splashed across the headlines in France and the United States. Some French citizens, who already felt overtaxed, did not want responsibility for the bill and wanted President Émile Loubet to pay for the painting out of his personal coffer. The United States press did not ignore these issues but instead crafted an image of the first lady and her daughter being the

¹¹⁴ "First Lady made a modest demur impression" *World New York*, May 11, 1902.

target of trouble makers. *World New York* summed up the criticisms as a “rumpus caused by the Socialists” in France and further reinforced the modest impression made by the first lady overseas instead of dwelling on the possible legitimate issue the French people took with paying the bill on the paintings.¹¹⁵ The American press defended the first lady against so-called “trouble makers” while highlighting her sense of modesty through the entire situation.

Edith Roosevelt’s role in remodeling the White House and effectively reaffirming its place at the center of American social and political life was also carefully negotiated in the press. In a time when the matters of household were still firmly in the grasp of women, Roosevelt set to work in remodeling the White House. While the press addressed this as evidence of her traditional Victorian upbringing and skill as a housekeeper, as most first ladies set to work in making their mark on the décor of the White House, Roosevelt’s control and interest in this remodel proved far more than simply choosing new curtains or upholstery. She was not attempting to leave her mark on the White House for the duration of her husband’s tenure; rather, she wanted to secure a spot for the Executive Mansion as architectural centerpiece for the American capital as a whole.

Shortly after he became president in 1901, Theodore Roosevelt wrote, “You tell the newspapermen that Mrs. Roosevelt and I are firmly of the opinion that the President should live nowhere else than in the White House.”¹¹⁶ During

¹¹⁵ “Portraits of President’s Wife and Daughter cause controversy.” *World New York*, May 30, 1902.

¹¹⁶ William Seale ed., *The White House: Actors and Observers* (Chicago: Northeastern University Press, 2006) 171.

this time, the Roosevelts were still uncertain as to whether the Executive Mansion, as it was called prior to the 1902 renovations, would remain the official residence of the President of the United States or would be relegated to service as an office building while the president moved to a more central location, near the Capitol Building.

The public was keenly interested in the remodeling of the Executive Mansion and the press covered the renovations thoroughly. Edith Roosevelt is perhaps best known by scholars for her role in remodeling the executive mansion but her role remained largely unseen in the modern press. The large Roosevelt family was in dire need of more space. Plans for remodeling the White House were made in previous years under President Grant but were put off because of fears that remodeling might cause irreparable damage to the historic residence. The mansion was outdated in décor and as the Roosevelts' friend Henry Adams, descendent of John Quincy Adams, related to an acquaintance after visiting the Executive Mansion, "the house to me is ghastly...and holds dreary association way back to my great-grandmother."¹¹⁷ The Roosevelts' large family, coupled with their growing popularity, caused plans to resurface once again. At President Roosevelt's request, Congress appropriated funds for the renovation and work began.

Under the direction of Charles McKim, family friend and high society architect, and Edith Roosevelt, the extensive remodeling began in 1902. After reviewing the blueprints, Congress appropriated nearly \$500,000 to renovate the

¹¹⁷ Morris, *Edith Kermit Roosevelt*, 231.

house and an additional \$65,000 to be spent at the discretion of the president. As Theodore was much more involved with matters of national importance, Edith was left to decide how to use these funds.¹¹⁸

Edith Roosevelt was involved in the renovation of the Executive Mansion on a daily basis. She corresponded with McKim every day as the family was forced to move from the White House during renovations. She freely criticized the blueprints that McKim sent, stating in one note, “I do not like any of the drawings on my desk at all.”¹¹⁹ Often, Roosevelt gave McKim twenty-four hours to change the drawings to resemble something more to her liking. McKim would attempt to choose furniture and wall coverings for the White House but, in the end, the first lady had the last word on those choices.

Roosevelt’s role in the reconstruction of the White House was a conscious and concerted effort on behalf of the first lady to shape the political and social landscape in the American capital. On one hand, Roosevelt exercised the kind of influence she had over the renovation because it was, after all, a matter of domesticity. On the other hand, the home of the first family is an exceptional public space that can be read numerous ways, from symbolic space that represents the nation, to a place of narrow partisan politics. By transforming the White House to a place where practicality and luxury met, with an unmistakable aristocratic air, Roosevelt created a regal space for Americans. She designed a space suitable for the most powerful person in America, the president, to host,

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 239.

¹¹⁹ Letter from Roosevelt to McKim as quoted in Caroli, *The Roosevelt Women*, 199.

entertain, and conduct business with dignitaries from the national and international stage. The White House, after Roosevelt's renovations, was firmly at the center, literally and figuratively, of American politics.

Edith Roosevelt's deep involvement in reshaping the White House into the aristocratic symbol of American politics it is today was largely overlooked in the modern press. Journalists published articles that focused on the changes being made to the mansion; however, the first lady's hand in these changes was unseen. If Edith Roosevelt was mentioned, the press did so in a way that revealed her impeccable taste in selecting curtains and china, not her stern dealings with architects. The press did not have access to these kinds of moments in Edith Roosevelt's tenure as first lady as she crafted a public image of her private self as a woman who was satisfied with fulfilling traditional notions of womanhood.¹²⁰

Edith Roosevelt made several other important contributions to the remodeling of the White House. She chose to collect and preserve the White House china. While the china collection appeared to be a matter of pure domesticity, Roosevelt was of the mindset that the most powerful office in American government should be preserving its heritage and legacy with more purpose. With little attention given to such a matter, as first lady, Edith Roosevelt decided to rectify the sad state of affairs that was the White House china collection. The establishment of the china collection, while appearing purely domestic in nature, symbolically established the United States and the office of

¹²⁰ For popular response to the renovation of the White House, see Charles Moore, "The Restoration of the White House," *Century Illustrated Monthly* 65, (Nov. 1902): 807.

the presidency as a powerful place in the context of global politics, since this tradition was modeled after European aristocracy. Although, much of it was mismatched, chipped, or sold at auctions, Roosevelt recognized the historical importance of obtaining and maintaining the china collection for display for future generations. She immediately set to work having old pieces destroyed rather than sold and cast them into the Potomac River. She wanted to protect the pieces from ever ending up at auction or on the dinner table of anyone but a United States president.¹²¹

With the remaining pieces and what she could find at auctions, Edith put together each set of china as best she could and created a separate room in order to display the rare and unique pieces. Thus the White House China Collection, which remains on display, was begun. Like the kings and queens of European monarchies, the President of the United States also had his own dinnerware. While not a king, the President of the United States position was surely more than a collection of mismatched china haggled over at auction. The china collection would preserve a proud nation's history of leadership.

Edith Roosevelt's efforts to establish and preserve the legacy of the White House and its occupants continued in her domestic work with the establishment of the First Ladies Portrait Gallery. The press overlooked the gallery as a political or historical issue but framed the collection as part of the renovation and redecoration of the White House. Edith Roosevelt specifically set aside space in the White House for a gallery of portraits of all of the first ladies, thus further

¹²¹ Butt, *The Letters of Archie Butt*, 237.

solidifying the first lady's place as an American institution. The gallery was first viewed on January 8, 1903 when guests passed through the south entrance of the White House and encountered the paintings. The gallery was dominated by a large rendering of Roosevelt by Theobald Chartran, presented to her as a gift from the French people. Public reaction to the portrait gallery was favorable and many of the women who entered the White House were pleased to see that the first ladies were finally getting recognized for their role in American history.¹²²

Another innovation Edith Roosevelt made in an effort to institutionalize and dignify the first lady in America was the appointment of her own secretary, shortly after she assumed the role in 1901. The *New York Times* reported, "Mrs. Roosevelt today selected Miss Isabella Hagner as her social secretary, following the example of Mrs. Levi Morton, who was the first official hostess to employ a secretary."¹²³ Mrs. Morton, wife of Vice President Levi Morton, became acting first lady under President Benjamin Harrison after his wife passed away and appointed a secretary to assist her in organizing social affairs. Although the appointment only lasted a few months, Edith Roosevelt carefully framed the appointment of her social secretary as following precedent. Roosevelt specifically chose Isabella Hagner to accompany her into the Executive Mansion to help handle the daily scheduling of visitors, duties associated with entertaining, and, of course, the children.

¹²² Morris, *Edith Kermit Roosevelt*, 225.

¹²³ "Mrs. Roosevelt's Secretary," *New York Times*, October 3, 1901.

The important role Hagner played can not be underestimated. White House military aide and close personal friend of the Roosevelts, Archibald Butt, related to his mother; “I am simply astonished by her [Hanger] executive ability. She really is the chief factor at the White House, and the fact that everything has gone smoothly as it has is due to her.”¹²⁴ Together, Roosevelt and Hagner arranged it so nearly everyone who entered the doors of the White House was required to have an official invitation or appointment, including some family members. In this way, Edith Roosevelt set the president apart from the rest of Washington D.C. and other political figures, including the president’s cabinet.

The cabinet ladies, who were accustomed to considering themselves social equals to the first lady, were the most critical of Edith Roosevelt’s appointment of her own secretary. An article that appeared in *New York World* reflects the discontent amongst the cabinet ladies that the first lady’s secretary was being paid by the War Department at a rate of \$840 per year. The ladies were not so much opposed to the first lady having a secretary but were astonished to learn Roosevelt’s secretary was being paid for by the government.¹²⁵ While there was no official response to these criticisms, subsequent private meetings between the first lady and the cabinet ladies would solidify Roosevelt’s place, as the first lady, at the top of the social order in Washington as well as her entitlement to certain

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹²⁵ “Miss Hagner on War Dept. Payroll,” *World New York*, March 26, 1902.

privileges that came with her superior position, including that of a government-financed social secretary.¹²⁶

As significant as these changes were, effectively setting new precedents for the American presidency, the press did not cover them as such because these were not the kinds of activities that Edith Roosevelt sought to highlight in the popular press. Roosevelt's influence in establishing the White House China Collection, the First Lady's Portrait Gallery, and attempts to keep relics from the White House out of public auction were all reported as part of the renovation process, in which the first lady appeared to have a marginal role. As first lady, Edith Roosevelt silently solidified her position and the president's place in American society while promoting herself, first and foremost, as a devoted wife and mother, not as a political or public woman motivated by power and wealth.

While active in the "domestic" sphere of the White House, as first lady Edith Roosevelt found it important to appear to remain as uninvolved as possible in public and political matters to the extent that what remains of Roosevelt's correspondence from her tenure as first lady is limited. She destroyed much of what she wrote for fear it would fall into the wrong hands after her death. What does survive reflects Roosevelt's desire for privacy and her intense modesty, which she highlighted to the press and public.

Edith Roosevelt's correspondence changed markedly from her time as the wife of the governor of New York to her time as first lady. For example, in 1898, after the publication of her book *Eighty Years & More: Reminiscences 1815-*

¹²⁶ Morris, *Edith Roosevelt: Portrait of a First Lady*, 229.

1897, women's suffrage leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton sent a copy to then first lady of New York, Edith Roosevelt. Roosevelt acknowledged the receipt of the book with a letter and responded to its arguments by stating: "Personally, I feel to take a deep interest in the criminal population is beginning at the wrong end." Roosevelt then suggested that instead of trying to rehabilitate criminals, "all of our energies should be given to the schools."¹²⁷ Roosevelt was willing to give her personal opinion on a social problem in writing as the governor's wife, going on further, in subsequent correspondence to reflect on the very controversial topic of women's suffrage in a letter to Stanton, shortly before she passed away in 1899. Roosevelt was gracious yet did not hesitate to express her point of view, "It was very kind of you or your publishers to send me your book...and tell you how very interested [sic] I found it." Edith Roosevelt went on to explain her position against women's suffrage though she admired Stanton's commitment to the cause.¹²⁸

Yet these are correspondences that survive in Stanton's collection, not Roosevelt's. Instead, what was preserved by the first lady is comprised largely of the most mundane of official correspondence. As first lady of the United States, Roosevelt received many more letters and requests than she did as first lady of New York. However the tone and style of her responses changed from personal and opinionated to impersonal, often being composed by the president's or her own secretary, never containing a hint of personal judgment on any subject, no

¹²⁷ Edith K. Roosevelt to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, n.d., Elizabeth Cady Stanton papers, Box 1, 1886-1899, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

matter how trivial. While her responses were not uncommon, since the first lady could not answer all of her correspondence, the tone of Edith Roosevelt's responses were unique in highlighting her position to not have a position on any political or public issue.

Letter after letter, begging the first lady to intercede to her husband on behalf of any interest group, person, or entity was met with the general and oft-repeated response, "For reasons which will readily come to you, Mrs. Roosevelt has felt obliged to adopt a rule not to concern herself in government affairs."¹²⁹ But more than this, Roosevelt felt it necessary to decline invitations or requests for portraits, donations, and most other public displays of support, in order to keep her proper place as a woman but also to stay out of the public eye, which not only promoted her desired image of modesty but also gave her strict control over what the press, and therefore the public, had access to pertaining to her and her family.

Like any other public dignitary, the first lady's name or likeness was not used without her express permission and obtaining that permission appeared nearly impossible. Requests for a picture of the first lady were met with the stock response, "Referring to your letter of recent date, I regret to say that just now there are no pictures of Mrs. Roosevelt for general distribution."¹³⁰ However once the demand of pictures of the first lady and her family became a matter of security and possible intrusion on her privacy, Roosevelt determined the best

¹²⁹ Official Correspondence from Secretary to the President William Loeb, 1901, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Series 2, Reel 360.

¹³⁰ William Loeb to Elinor Bixler, August 10, 1904, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Series 2, Reel 362.

course of action was to choose photographs that were to be released in order to appease the press and the public and also control her image. In a note from the secretary of the president, George Cortelyou tells Roosevelt's photographer, "Mrs. Roosevelt has selected ... photograph number five as suitable one to be given to representatives of press who desire her photograph; no others to be given out."¹³¹ In this way, Roosevelt was able to ensure she knew what images of her, and later her family, were being released to the press and controlling the image she portrayed while also maintaining an air of dignity and modesty in the scarcity of these precious releases, as befitting that of the president and the first family of the United States.

As first lady, Edith Roosevelt was no less careful in the places she allowed her name to be used or the places she would dignify with her presence. Because the social demands on the president and his wife were rigorous, Roosevelt chose carefully the events she would attend socially and those opportunities she would decline. When faced with numerous invitations to dine at the homes of various Washington dignitaries, Roosevelt consistently replied, "...we have been obliged to decline all invitations, except to the house of Cabinet officers."¹³² Roosevelt made it clear that not everyone had access to the president's company and this was a privilege reserved for his Cabinet members, and the first lady would also host their wives. In the same way, as first lady, Edith Roosevelt only attended specific events in an official capacity.

¹³¹ Official Correspondence from Secretary of the President George Cortelyou, 1902, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Series 2, Reel 360.

¹³² Edith K. Roosevelt, 1901, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Series 2, Reel 360.

Edith Roosevelt rarely associated herself with any cause or organization in writing, so when she approved her renewal to the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), it was not only as a simple act of charity but also a calculated affiliation on the part of the first lady. When William Loeb, presidential secretary, wrote on behalf of the first lady, "Mrs. Roosevelt takes pleasure in renewing her subscription to the Young Men's Christian Associations, and sends herewith the enclosed check for \$5 for that purpose," it was as much an endorsement of the organization as a donation to its cause.¹³³ The YMCA, in a time when urban growth and the problems associated with it were at an all time high, was a popular and suitable organization for the first lady of a largely Christian nation to support because of its goals which included promoting white, middle class ideals to working class immigrants.

Edith Roosevelt did not officially endorse any article written about her that was not specifically released by her office. Even when she was the subject of flattering articles in reputable publications, Roosevelt's approval was impossible to gain if she had not specifically granted access the interview or release. In response to unauthorized articles about her, she released a generic but telling statement, "Of course Mrs. Roosevelt could not even by implication seem to authorize the publication of any article about herself."¹³⁴ Not only did Edith Roosevelt control what was released about her and her family but she also

¹³³ Official Correspondence from Secretary to the President William Loeb, 1904, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Series 2, Reel 363.

¹³⁴ William Loeb to Abby G. Baker, 1904, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Series 2, Reel 363.

endorsed, and therefore lent authenticity, to certain journalists in the modern press. This added authenticity appealed to the reader in the modern urban landscape who wanted to know more about public figure's true selves.

The way the press portrayed the first lady in articles she did not authorize was often aristocratic. For example, the press reported, "Mrs. Roosevelt will receive the Diplomatic Corps on Friday next, December 18, at five o'clock. Owing to the period of mourning, which has been observed at the White House, the recently accredited diplomats have not before had the opportunity to be presented to Mrs. Roosevelt."¹³⁵ The language of the release suggests not only the privilege of meeting the first lady of the United States but being "presented" to the first lady indicates an aristocratic air, establishing the first lady in a position above even the most distinguished of diplomats. Previous first ladies in the late nineteenth century did not make a point of releasing information about these meetings to the press. Edith Roosevelt negotiated her image with the modern press eager to know about the private, though political, moments in the life of the first lady, as a woman of dignity, commanding great respect.

Non-official functions given by the first lady were also the subject of press releases and subsequent news articles and were carefully negotiated by Edith Roosevelt to portray herself in the best possible light. Press releases of Roosevelt's gatherings at the White House, in a non-official capacity, reflected her desire to craft an image for herself as not only a private and modest woman

¹³⁵ Unidentified newspaper clipping, December 12, 1903, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Series 6, Reel 427.

but also a learned woman with a superior pedigree. A 1905 White House press release reveals a small window into the social life of the first lady outside of political functions, “Mrs. Roosevelt entertained a small company of guests at the White House this evening. M. Funck-Brentano delivered an interested lecture in French on the Life of Country Gentleman in Old France.”¹³⁶ Similar to upper class “women’s clubs,” the promotion of the event revealed Edith possessed a small group of trusted friends and was fluent in French and interested in matters of European society, which was indicative of the old money and breeding of the Roosevelts. In addition, the image Roosevelt crafted for herself in the press release is of a modern celebrity self. She was not only a mother and wife but also a woman with breeding, intellect, and education.

Edith Roosevelt’s status as a modern celebrity made innocuous displays of charity or consumption political statements as well in the modern press. For the first lady, even shopping trips took on political importance when properly publicized, as was the case with Edith Roosevelt’s cloth purchase in New York City. Shortly after she became first lady, the *Boston Herald* reported, “Mrs. Roosevelt has evolved a practical scheme in political economics. While on her shopping trip to New York recently she was shown some of the drawn linen work of the Porto Ricans. She immediately placed a large order with the society formed to promote this industry.”¹³⁷ Edith Roosevelt’s acquisition of linen was

¹³⁶ White House press release, January 14, 1905, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Series 6, Reel 428.

¹³⁷ “Mrs. Roosevelt Orders Porto Rican Linen,” *The Boston Herald*, December 12, 1901.

not seen as a woman making a purchase on a shopping trip but the wife of the president making an investment in a United States protectorate.

Women donating time and money to charitable organizations such as churches were common in the early twentieth century. But when the first lady made a donation, the contribution was also considered a political statement. The *New York Herald* reported “Mrs. Roosevelt sent a valuable handkerchief of delicate lace to help pay off the church’s debt of \$17,000.” The gift was sent to St. Paul’s Baptist Church, a church with a largely African American congregation. The pastor proclaimed that the president and his wife were the leaders of all men, not just whites.¹³⁸ Roosevelt’s donation and the press it received was a statement on race relations rather than a simple donation made in the spirit of charity, revealing clear places of confluence in the first lady’s role as both a celebrity and a politician. As the first lady, for Edith Roosevelt, the personal was the political and her donation was part of the larger Republican Party agenda that, as the party of Abraham Lincoln, still sought African American votes in the north.

An analysis of the specific changes made by Edith Roosevelt during her tenure as first lady reveal important trends in American society and the way she was able to effectively manipulate her image while making these changes. The changes illuminate rising tensions between Old and New Money during and after the Gilded Age. Edith Roosevelt established precedents that made the presidency even more aristocratic than ever before, firmly placing her family and other Old Money families in a decidedly superior position over the New Money families.

¹³⁸ “Mrs. Roosevelt’s Gift,” *The New York Herald*, September 25, 1901.

By setting social rules for cabinet members, establishing the White House as the social center of Washington, D.C., and controlling what was released to the press about herself and her family, Edith Roosevelt created an aristocratic air around the White House while maintaining her accessibility and popularity. Focusing on manners, rules, and good taste, Edith Roosevelt made a statement reaffirming the responsibility, breeding, and sense of stewardship of Old Money families and at the same time denouncing the ostentatious style of the “nouveau riche” by wearing simple fashions and maintaining and publicizing her practical sensibilities and thrift.

By negotiating her image in the modern press that highlighted her common sense and frugality, Roosevelt appeared to be down-to-earth and appealing, and in keeping with the master plot of true success, revealed her private self as one fulfilled by her roles as mother, wife, and household manager. With the skill of the savviest politician, Edith Roosevelt endeared herself to the American public while creating aristocratic traditions that would become part of American presidential history.

CHAPTER THREE

First lady Helen Taft presented a challenge to the modern press. During her husband's William Taft's 1908 presidential campaign, Helen Taft exhibited such a degree of overt ambition that journalists struggled to promote an image of the prospective first lady that reflected the master plot of true success. Helen Taft's determination often appeared unladylike, pushy, and, frequently, poorly concealed. She was the driving force behind her easy going husband's successful political career and was thrust into the public spotlight by her own design. As such, Helen Taft negotiated her image in the press as a woman whose political goals and acumen were uniquely suited to a powerful political husband. Her ambition was carefully presented as ambition for her husband, which helped bring out William Taft's "best self." The press argued Helen Taft's ability to channel her husband's potential was key for the wife of a political figure.¹³⁹ Helen Taft's personal ambitions, which she later revealed in her 1914 memoir, were largely concealed or made light of in the media, which chose to present Taft in the best possible light.

While Helen Taft easily fulfilled modern notions of womanhood in her outward interest in politics, she struggled to satisfy more traditional roles that were essential to fulfilling the master plot of true success. Strikingly different than her predecessor, the popular and maternal Edith Roosevelt, Helen Taft appeared to relish her public life more than her private life. Because of this, Helen Taft found it more difficult to negotiate an image of herself in the modern

¹³⁹ Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure*, 122-23.

press as a woman whose ambitions did not interfere with her activities in the domestic sphere. But she succeeded. The press vigorously promoted Helen Taft's domestic attributes as well as the advantages her world travels and experience provided to her ability to fulfill traditionally feminine roles. In keeping with the master plot of true success, Helen Taft crafted an image of herself as a woman who found true happiness and fulfillment in her private roles as a mother, wife, and home keeper, despite her prominent public position.

In addition, many of Helen Taft's personal tastes did not reflect popular notions of progressivism that were at the forefront of political agenda for both Democrats and Republicans in the early twentieth century. During an era characterized by economic, political, and social reform, most politicians agreed that limiting the power of big business and squashing political corruption were crucial in constructing a successful industrialized nation.¹⁴⁰ William Taft, Theodore Roosevelt's chosen successor to the presidency, considered himself part of the progressive movement that swept the nation and ran for president on the promise to carry on Roosevelt's spirit of reform. As first lady, Helen Taft's glittering parties and propensity to wear the latest European fashions did not agree with goals of progressivism and appeared elitist to critics. Despite this, the modern press often ignored Taft's expensive tastes and, characterized her preferences, like Edith Roosevelt's, as simple and democratic.

Like her predecessor, Helen Taft also used unofficial spaces, and her ability to reveal these spaces to the press, to promote her husband's and party's

¹⁴⁰ Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," 127.

political agenda. Unlike Edith Roosevelt, Helen Taft also used official spaces, such as the courtroom and the 1912 Democratic National Convention, to ambitiously promote the Republican agenda and her husband's political career. Because William Taft's political agenda was highly complicated, partly due to his desire to please both developing factions of the Republican Party, Helen Taft used her political expertise to promote either a more conservative or progressive message as needed.¹⁴¹

Helen Taft's ambition, political acumen, and influence over her husband's political career figures prominently in the election of 1908, 1912, and her tenure as first lady. Although much of Taft's energy was focused on forwarding William Taft's public and political pursuits, she was able to negotiate her image in the modern press in order to appeal to the American public. Helen Taft and the modern press skillfully crafted her image according to the master plot of true success. Taft embraced her ambition and powerful role as first lady yet still appeared unspoiled and down-to-earth by highlighting the true happiness she found in her roles as wife and mother. Her political intellect, shrewdness, and

¹⁴¹ The Republican Party's fracture between conservative or "traditional" Republicans and progressive Republicans deepened during William Taft's tenure in office. Conservative Republicans, who were located mostly in the northeast, generally supported big businesses and financial institutions. They referred to themselves as the "old guard" since they dominated the party's agenda since the 1890s. Progressive Republicans, referred to as "insurgents," were located in the west and midwest United States. Led by Republican Governor of Wisconsin, Robert La Follette and then Theodore Roosevelt, the insurgents or "Progressives" as they were referred to after 1910, supported a vigorous agenda focused on limiting big business through anti-trust legislation, labor reform, direct elections, and other reforms that became hallmarks of the Progressive Party agenda. Brett Flehinger, *The Election of 1912 and the Power of Progressivism* (New York: Bedford-St. Martins, 2003), 6.

determination created one of the most powerful, yet historically overlooked, tenure's as first lady during a particularly contentious time, both politically and socially, in American history.

William Howard Taft never wanted to be president. Like his father, Taft aspired to serve as a judge but William Taft's wife, Helen Herron Taft, had other aspirations for her husband. William Howard Taft was born into the prestigious Taft family of Ohio in 1857. William Taft's father, Alphonso, was a judge, who also served as Secretary of War and Attorney General under President Ulysses S. Grant. Taft's mother, Louisa Torrey Taft, Alphonso Taft's second wife, was a graduate of Mount Holyoke College. William Taft attended Yale University, graduating in 1878 and came back to Ohio to attend Cincinnati Law School, graduating in 1880. Taft then settled into a position as the Assistant Prosecutor of Hamilton County, Ohio and, in 1886, married his long time sweetheart, Helen Louise "Nellie" Herron.¹⁴²

Helen Herron was born on June 2, 1861 in Cincinnati, Ohio. The fifth of ten children born to John and Harriet Herron, "Nellie," as Helen was always referred to, grew up in a privileged home. John Herron was a prominent lawyer, who practiced with President Rutherford B. Hayes, which afforded his children, including Helen, access to education. Helen Herron attended primary school in Cincinnati and took classes at the University of Cincinnati in 1881 before taking a position at Madame Fredin's School in spring, 1882, teaching French part time. She then moved on to teach at Whyte-Sykes School for Boys for a year before

¹⁴² Coletta, *The Presidency of William Howard Taft*, 1-3.

working on what, at the time, was more pressing endeavor – finding a suitable husband. Helen Herron considered this a most difficult undertaking. “‘I am very exacting,’ she penned, ‘so what wonder I am not always satisfied.’”¹⁴³

In 1881, she met William Taft, who asked her to a dance as a favor to her brother Charles Herron, who attended Yale with William. Although Taft found his date “pretty,” he did not pursue Helen Herron after the dance. He confessed he found her “empty headed.”¹⁴⁴ The anecdote is ironic given Helen would be the driving force behind her husband’s political career and one of his closest advisers on a variety of political matters. Eventually Helen Herron was able to reveal her intellect and substance to William Taft and the two dated for three years before he proposed marriage to her in 1885 and they married on June 9, 1886. This was, of course, after Helen Herron turned Taft’s proposal down several times because, she feared, he did not listen to her or value her opinions.

Despite the fact William Taft was content to live a life devoted to the practice of law, Helen Taft encouraged her husband to pursue political opportunities. William Taft left his position as an Ohio Superior Court judge in 1890 to accept an appointment by President Benjamin Harrison as Solicitor General of the United States after touring Europe with Helen in 1888. Helen gave birth to the couple’s children Robert in 1889, Helen in 1891, and Charles in 1897. William Taft was appointed as a judge in U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in 1892, much to his delight, but his constant travel and her confinement to Cincinnati led

¹⁴³ Anthony, *Nellie Taft*, 42.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

Helen Taft to encourage her husband, through a series of personal correspondence, to find a more suitable position that offered them more time together, but more importantly, led them out of Ohio. Helen Taft understood that the elite who lived in eastern cities such as New York and Philadelphia considered Ohio a virtual outback. Taft longed to mingle amongst the upper crust of more cosmopolitan, urban areas.¹⁴⁵

During this time period, in the late nineteenth century, William Taft was noticed by conservative Republican leaders when he ruled multiple times against organized labor and expressed outrage at conflicts between labor and management, often siding with businessmen. In one particularly significant correspondence between William Taft and his wife, he reveals his opinion on the 1894 Pullman Strike, which turned violent. He wrote, ““it will be necessary for the military to kill some of the mob. ... They have only killed six ... as yet. This is hardly enough to make an impression.”¹⁴⁶ William Taft believed business owners had a right to protect themselves and their property and his conservative position on labor and business caught the attention of leaders in the Republican Party.

In 1900, opportunity called when President William McKinley requested on William Taft to be the governor, or “chief civil administrator,” of the Philippines. With little regard for the volatile situation in that country, Helen Taft

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 5-6.

¹⁴⁶ Kermit L. Hall, ed., et al. *The Oxford Companion to the US Supreme Court* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 301.

encouraged William to take the position. William Taft was unsure about the appointment but Helen's encouragement and unbridled desire to leave Cincinnati led him to accept McKinley's offer and the family set out for the Philippines. Helen Taft and her three children arrived in Manila in 1901, just a few weeks after William, following the family's tour of China. Helen Taft quickly settled into life as "first lady of the Philippines" and enjoyed her time in that role immensely. Her memoirs reflect on her time there as a period of fulfillment and joy in her life as she presided over a household and staff at the political center of the country, much like the White House in the United States. Helen Taft was, for a time, the social leader of U.S. imperialist policy in Southeast Asia, living in a palace, entertaining, and taking up social causes in much the same way the first lady acted in the United States.

William Taft served in the Philippines between 1900 and 1904 when President Theodore Roosevelt offered him the position of Secretary of War. Again, Taft was hesitant to abandon his current position but Helen saw this as an opportunity to return to Washington, D.C. and back into the inner circle of the president, which she hoped would ultimately lead to the presidency for William. Taft was not as sure. He confided "Politics make me sick," and he longed to return to his career in law, ideally as a Supreme Court Judge. But Taft understood that returning to Washington would forward his goal of being appointed to the Supreme Court, so he accepted Roosevelt's offer and the couple and their children moved into a house on K Street in Washington, D.C. in October 1904.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Anthony, *Nellie Taft*, 178.

Helen Taft's influence over her husband's decisions was not a secret to most people who knew them. William, the easy going, jovial character of the pair was driven by Helen's determination and attention to detail, even when she offered advice that he did not agree with. For example, when Theodore Roosevelt announced in 1904 that he would not seek another term as president, he called on William Taft to be his chosen successor as the Republican presidential nominee in 1908. William Taft confided in friends, as early as 1903, "'Don't sit up nights thinking about making me President. I have no ambition in that direction. Any party which would nominate me would make a great mistake.'"¹⁴⁸ Unlike her husband, who was content with his post as Secretary of War and prospective appointment as a Supreme Court Justice, Helen Taft openly sought the presidency for her husband. In 1906, when William Taft was offered a seat on the Supreme Court for the second time, his son Charlie replied to reporters who asked if his dad was going to accept, "Nope. Ma wants him to wait and become the president."¹⁴⁹ As for her husband, William Taft disclosed later in life that he hated being president and was even relieved after he lost the 1912 election after splitting Republican votes with his one time ally and friend, Theodore Roosevelt.

Helen Taft possessed incredible ambition; enough, she surmised, for both her and William Taft to make it to the White House. Washington insiders, including the president, were aware of the influence Helen Taft had over her

¹⁴⁸ Truman, *First Ladies*, 104.

¹⁴⁹ William Howard Taft, <http://www.williamtaft.org/>, (Accessed February 18, 2011).

husband. Therefore, Roosevelt held private meetings with her in 1906 in the hopes of harnessing the potential soon-to-be first lady's ambition for his own purposes. In May, 1906, in an unparalleled moment in presidential history, the sitting president, Theodore Roosevelt, requested a conference with a Cabinet member's wife, Helen Taft, to assess William Taft's viability as a presidential candidate. Another motive for the meeting may well have been to get Helen Taft on his side since Roosevelt wanted to usurp the large role she currently occupied as William's political adviser. A formal record of what transpired in the meeting does not exist however, correspondence between William Taft and Roosevelt indicates Roosevelt was attempting to gauge Taft's feelings on holding a position on the Supreme Court Justice as opposed to running for the presidency.

Historians, such as Carl Anthony, have speculated that Roosevelt hoped to find an ally in Helen Taft and, with her support, ensure that William Taft would carry on the policies of the Roosevelt administration in the White House after 1908.¹⁵⁰

President Roosevelt met with Helen Taft again in October, 1906 after summoning her to a lunch with other Washington dignitaries while Edith Roosevelt was out for an afternoon cruise on the presidential yacht. After lunch, Roosevelt met with Helen Taft privately. The visit was never revealed to the press or appears in official papers, but Helen Taft's correspondence with William Taft provides documentation of this conference. She wrote to her husband, "He [Roosevelt] seems to think that I am consumed with an inordinate ambition to be

¹⁵⁰ Anthony, *Nellie Taft*, 189.

President and he must constantly warn me you may never get there.”¹⁵¹ Helen Taft’s letter to her husband went on express irritation at the president’s insinuation about her ambition but, more than that, reveals her understanding of the gamesmanship she was engaging in with the President of the United States.

Roosevelt knew Helen Taft wanted the presidency for her husband more than William Taft wanted it. By insinuating he might be inclined to support a different candidate if he could not be sure Taft would carry on Roosevelt’s progressive policies in the White House, Roosevelt sent a message to Helen Taft that her husband’s candidacy depended on his promise to uphold Roosevelt’s policies. William Taft dismissed the meeting as Roosevelt trying “to stir you up to stir me up.” Helen Taft understood President Roosevelt’s underlying desire to remain in power by relinquishing the presidency to someone whose policies he could shape as if they were his own.¹⁵²

When William Howard Taft agreed to run as the Republican candidate for President of the United States as Theodore Roosevelt’s chosen successor in 1908, Helen was overjoyed. After her husband secured the Republic Party nomination, a story in the *Ladies Home Journal* on the prospective first lady and her family reported:

As a girl Mrs. Taft spent several months visiting at the White House as the guest of President and Mrs. Hayes. She was only 16 years of age at the time, but so enjoyable was her visit that when she returned home and

¹⁵¹ Helen Herron Taft to William Howard Taft, October 27, 1906, William Howard Taft Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵² WHT to HHT, October 29, 1906, William Howard Taft Papers.

confided to some of her girlfriends that it was her purpose to marry only “a man destined to be President of the United States.”¹⁵³

Helen Taft immediately began negotiating her image in the modern press as a woman who was ambitious and bred to be first lady. At the same time, *Ladies Home Journal* argued, Taft was unspoiled by her success and ascending to her position through hard work and her inherent potential.

Both William Taft, as president, and Helen Taft, as first lady, struggled to fill the roles occupied by the former president and first lady. Most of William Taft’s appeal to voters was that he would carry on the work of the popular President Roosevelt. Roosevelt’s endorsement of Taft as the Republican candidate meant that Taft’s policies, platforms, and ideas closely mirrored his predecessor’s. Like Roosevelt, Taft’s agenda included limiting the influence of big business, reducing tariffs, labor reform, and conservation. However just as Roosevelt’s knack for delivering a compelling speech and his skill as a politician stood in stark contrast to Taft’s poor oratory skills and penchant towards judicial matters, their wives were equally opposite. Whereas Edith Roosevelt, the press reported, was happy to be the “woman in the background” as noted in the title of an article on her lifestyle in the *Delineator*, Helen Taft played a large and public role in her husband’s political career, urging him, publicly, on many occasions to seek the office of the president. Helen Taft promoted these moments in the modern press. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1908 that “She [Helen Taft] persuaded him [William Taft] to remain in politics,” describing her efforts as

¹⁵³ “The Wife of the New President,” *Ladies Home Journal*, May 1908.

uniquely patriotic.¹⁵⁴ The *Ladies Home Journal* reported, “Had it not been for his wife, Mr. Taft would never have entered the Presidential race and would have contented himself with a seat on the Supreme Court Bench.”¹⁵⁵

Before she became first lady, the press was eager to explore the kind of woman that would be assuming the role after the very popular Edith Roosevelt. Helen Taft set to work during the election of 1908 to begin negotiating her image in the modern press as a woman who prepared her entire life to be first lady. As the wife of a public figure, Helen Taft had significant experience in politics and in the public eye but as much as she thought she was prepared, Taft later confessed that, “Accustomed as I had been for years of publicity, yet it came as a sort of shock to me that nearly everything I did, and especially my slightest innovation, had what reporters call ‘news value.’”¹⁵⁶ Quickly, Helen Taft became the subject of numerous popular newspaper and magazine articles that looked into her public and personal life with an incredible amount of scrutiny, including her penchant for card games, beer, and smoking, all of which were not considered appropriate activities for a prospective first lady.

When a newspaper article emerged that questioned the legality of her recreational activities at the bridge table, the publication insinuated that Taft may be a part of some unsavory activities or keeping poor company. Of a card party in

¹⁵⁴ “Is Politician of the Family,” *The Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 1908.

¹⁵⁵ George Griswold Hill, “The Wife of the New President,” *Ladies Home Journal*, March 1909, 71.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 347.

the Philippines, the *New York Times*, who endorsed Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan in the 1908 election, wrote, “While Mrs. Taft was at a bridge party this morning, a message of warning was delivered to her hostess by a policeman.”¹⁵⁷ The policeman delivered a message, letting Taft’s unnamed hostess know that gambling for money was illegal in Manila and she and her guests must respect this law. The event seemed so staged that it appeared possible someone, possibly a political opponent of William Taft, notified the authorities to catch Helen Taft in an unflattering moment. Gambling was not the kind of activity any prospective first lady would want to associate herself with in public or private, overseas or on the mainland and, as such, Helen Taft began being more careful to conceal her interest for gambling, drinking, and the occasional cigarette. After her experience in Manila came to light in the modern press, Helen Taft worried on the campaign trail in 1908 about previous times she opted to play bridge on a Sunday. She feared “voter reaction to her gambling on the Lord’s Day” and vowed to stop gambling and do no harm to her husband’s campaign, understanding the important role she would play in the election.¹⁵⁸

Most articles during the election, however, attempted to assess the preparedness of William Taft and his wife for the position of president and first lady. The *New York Times* noted that, “Typifying the best American traditions, the Secretary and his wife have naturally won hosts of friends here and in the

¹⁵⁷ “Mrs. Taft at a Card Party,” *The New York Times*, October 24, 1907.

¹⁵⁸ Anthony, *Nellie Taft*, 203.

colonies.”¹⁵⁹ By highlighting William and Helen Taft’s service in the Philippines, the press hoped to constructed an image of themselves as a couple who were bred to occupy the White House and would be adept in their positions there since they had already served in America’s overseas empire in much the same capacity. Helen Taft acted much like a first lady in her position beside William in the Philippines. She presided over a large household, complete with servants, in addition to taking up traditional maternal public reforms, such as infant mortality, by introducing nutrition campaigns using American food and medicine to care for pregnant women and babies in the Philippines. At the same time, Taft used these activities to promote bolstering pro-American sentiment to forward United States’ imperialist endeavors.¹⁶⁰

Aside from her public and political experience, Helen Taft made a conscious effort to promote her likeability and popularity as a woman. The *New York Times* noted that Taft was, “Never the richest or most ambitious of women of her set, [she] is nevertheless one of the most popular and highly esteemed members of her wide circle.”¹⁶¹ Her popularity continued to be a theme in the *Los Angeles Times* as well, noting in 1908 of the prospective first lady’s impending trip to Washington, D.C. that, everyone in the capital city was “on tip

¹⁵⁹ “The Family and Home Life of Mr. and Mrs. Taft,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 1908.

¹⁶⁰ Anthony, *Nellie Taft*, 155.

¹⁶¹ “The Family and Home Life of Mr. and Mrs. Taft,” June 21, 1908.

toe” waiting to pay “high tribute to her popularity.”¹⁶² Along with her popularity, Taft promoted her pedigree to strengthen her potential as a successful first lady. The *New York Times* revealed, “Accustomed from her birth to the advantages of wealth, education, and culture, she is a woman of many accomplishments, an exceptionally good musician, a fair linguist, and a most appreciate and discriminating judge of literature. It is a matter of common report that she finds more recreation in a good novel than in gossip.”¹⁶³ In this way, Helen Taft negotiated an image of herself as a cultured elite woman but, in keeping with the master plot of true success, she was not spoiled by her wealth and position, finding pleasure in high minded activities.

Adding both to her appeal and sense of democracy, another article in the *New York Times* noted, “Mrs. Taft has quiet tastes. She does much of her own shopping and patronizes local shops.”¹⁶⁴ So although a woman of considerable means, she was not someone who abused her significant wealth or power and showed this by doing most of the everyday tasks most women completed on a daily basis while also displaying a superior form of intellect. The *New York Times* revealed “Mrs. Taft has brains and uses them without being in any sense aggressive or pedantic.” The press argued she was not harsh or masculine in her approach to discussing complicated subjects but still providing her husband ample

¹⁶² “Capital on Tip Toe to Honor Mrs. Taft,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1908.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ “When Mrs. Taft Succeeds Mrs. Roosevelt,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 1908.

intellectual stimulation and companionship.¹⁶⁵ In fact, the modern press couched Helen Taft's obvious intellect and interest in political matters as a serious advantage to her husband's presidency, while never placing her femininity or appeal in jeopardy.

While Helen Taft's intelligence and opinions were celebrated in the modern press, journalists also noted that Taft's astuteness did not mean she was a woman that did not know her proper place. The *New York Times* reported "It is notable that Mrs. Taft, without putting up any noticeable barrier, is never drawn into expressing an opinion on any current political topic." The press believed this was "A most valuable asset to her husband's success" since few people would accept or embrace a first lady who used her political acumen for reasons other than forwarding her husband's career.¹⁶⁶ The modern press effectively couched Helen Taft's intelligence and involvement in William Taft's presidency as an asset instead criticizing her for meddling in political affairs traditionally left to men.

Despite her impeccable breeding and international experience as head of society in the Philippines, during the election the modern press continued to balance this with a traditional image that highlighted her simple approach to housekeeping, motherhood, and domestic life in general. Although modern industrial cities were more accepting of changing roles for women, most of

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Katherine Graves Busbey, "Mrs. Taft's Home-Making," *Good Housekeeping*, September 1911, 298.

American society was not yet ready to embrace a first lady that did not embody, first and foremost, the best and most traditional roles a woman should fulfill.

Therefore, as first lady, Helen Taft was charged with crafting an image as modern and traditional, capable and demure, strong but feminine. Though she was the hostess for the most famous house in the United States, she still felt the need to be as hospitable as if the guests of White House were entering her own home.

Despite her position and her readiness for it, Taft was quick to point out that she still possessed the instinct and inclination towards simplicity and tact that most women across America hoped to embody in their own lives and homes.

The image of simplicity and democracy was an important ideal to promote in the 1908 election as the American public could easily have seen the Tafts as a wealthy, world traveling, couple who made their home in an exotic locale, like a palace in Manila and thus not voted for Taft. However, the modern press, purporting to peek inside the private life of the Tafts, found political reasons to vote for Taft. The *Los Angeles Times*, who endorsed William Taft's presidential bid, revealed "There are no luxuries in the Taft home. And there are no airs about Mrs. Taft. She talked as simply and as naturally as if she were the wife of a War Department clerk."¹⁶⁷ According to Ponce de Leon's master plot of success, a look at the Taft's private, and presumably authentic, lives showed readers they lived practically, if not humbly, despite their position. This image of their private selves benefitted Tafts during the election by allowing them to disassociate themselves with the elite lifestyle of the businessmen and corrupt politicians who

¹⁶⁷ "Is Politician of the Family," *The Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 1908.

were the target of progressives during this time period. Reflecting this idea, Helen Taft told the *Los Angeles Times*, she “values culture and accomplishments over social prestige” attempting to distance herself from the “new rich” businessmen of the Gilded Age that were symbols of excess and corruption.¹⁶⁸

Women’s suffrage was an important issue during the presidential campaign of 1908 and, like other prospective first ladies before her, Helen Taft was asked her opinion about the controversial issue, which the Republican Party did not support. Despite the incredibly prominent and vocal role Helen Taft played in William Taft’s political life, she publicly denounced the idea that women should run for public office on the grounds that women might attempt to shirk their duties as wives and mothers in favor of any other callings. But she did believe that women should vote. Helen Taft revealed to the *Los Angeles Times*, “I have always believed women should vote. I favor bestowing on them every civic right, but I should like to put in the prohibitory clause barring them from running for public office.”¹⁶⁹ Taft argued that allowing women to run for office would disrupt the natural order of society and ultimately result in the destruction of the home. Because Taft felt the right to vote could not be disassociated with the right to hold office, she indirectly towed the Republican Party line against women’s suffrage.

¹⁶⁸ “Some Matters of Special Interest to Women,” *The Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1908.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Helen Taft revealed her stance on women's suffrage as well to the *New York Times* when she stated "I am not a sympathizer with the woman suffragists, for though it may be all right for women to vote, I do not believe in their holding office...My opinions are the same as those of Mr. Taft."¹⁷⁰ Helen Taft's softened position on women's suffrage reflected changes in the American West, which included four states that allowed women to vote. By agreeing with her husband and party's position against women's suffrage, Taft appealed to more conservative Republicans in the East. By explaining her position on women's suffrage, that she believed women should have the right to vote but not hold office and forsake their roles in the homes, Taft also appealed to more progressive Republicans living in the West and Midwest, who generally supported expanding democracy by giving women the vote. Helen Taft also potentially appealed to women voters in the Colorado, Idaho, Wyoming and Utah, all of whom had secured the right to vote by the 1908 election.

Shifting roles for women in society were also reflected in Helen Taft's views on education and the role of women within the home. The fact female journalists, such as Margaret B. Downing of the *Los Angeles Times*, who regularly reported on female political figures in the early twentieth century, were asking questions about education and politics were indicative of these shifting roles. But the prospective first lady's answers to these prompts are even more telling because of their traditional tone. For example, in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Helen Taft argued that higher education for women is not for

¹⁷⁰ "Glorious Says Mrs. Taft," *New York Times*, July 29, 1908.

everyone because women must choose between wisdom and pleasure. With her own daughter entering Bryn Mawr College on a scholarship in the fall, Taft relates, “I cannot say I definitely approve of a college course for every girl. It puts her entire life out of balance.”¹⁷¹ The prospective first lady then conveyed worries about her daughter’s ability to find a husband and become a mother if she stayed the entire course of study in college. Despite these worries, the younger Helen Taft would graduate with her bachelor’s degree in history in 1917, earn a doctorate from Yale University in 1925, and return to Bryn Mawr in 1926, this time as Dean of the college, with the support of both of her parents.¹⁷² On the campaign trail in 1908, however Helen Taft appeared traditional in that time period in her views on education and a woman’s place in society as a whole, placing the highest priority on women’s roles as wife and mother over a career.

Although she advocated for more traditional roles for women, these were not roles Helen Taft fulfilled herself as first lady. One of the first, most visible, controversial, and lasting changes Taft made to the role of the first lady was accompanying the president in his carriage to his inauguration. “For the first time in the history of the country, the wives of the President and Vice President will, on March 4, participate in the inaugural parade,”¹⁷³ reported the *New York Times* just days before the parade. This sparked a response of letters both supporting and criticizing Helen Taft’s “bold” move to make the decision to ride with her

¹⁷¹ “Some Matters of Special Interest to Women,” May 10, 1908.

¹⁷² Anthony, *Nellie Taft*, 369-370.

¹⁷³ “Washington Ready for Large Crowd,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 1909.

husband during the celebration. The *New York Times* dramatically reported that Helen Taft would “smash all precedents” by riding with her husband while the *Washington Post* characterized her participation as “establishing a graceful precedent.”¹⁷⁴ Taft knew her actions would not go unnoticed and would possibly be subject to criticism but she reasoned, “Since the ex-President was not going to ride back to the White House with his successor, I decided that I would...Of course, there was objection.”¹⁷⁵

Since Helen Taft promoted her political acumen and her involvement in William Taft’s career, some newspapers wondered if Taft’s position by her husband’s side during the inauguration indicated broader role for the first lady in political matters. The *New York Times* reported:

When Mrs. Taft and Mrs. Sherman take part in the inauguration ceremonies to morrow they will be establishing a new precedent by giving the women of the land a change to figure in an event of this importance. The women seem to recognize this, and an unusually large number of them and especially of the more prominent among them, will be here to signalize by their presences the first event of the kind in which women will play almost as large a part as men.¹⁷⁶

Although there is no clear criticism, there is worry about women participating more fully in what was a traditionally male event. Helen Taft did find some support for her position. One female reader of the *New York Times* wrote a short editorial piece asking, “Why should not the wife of the President-

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. And “William H. Taft Inaugurated as President,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1909.

¹⁷⁵ Taft, *Recollections of Full Years*, 331.

¹⁷⁶ “Woman’s Large Part in Inauguration,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 1909.

elect on the day of his inauguration ride to the Capitol by the side of her husband and otherwise share with him the honors of the occasion?"¹⁷⁷ Despite any objections, Helen Taft chose to ride with the president anyway, as have all able-bodied first ladies after her. Taft disclosed in her 1914 memoir, *Recollections of Full Years*, "For me that drive was the proudest and happiest event of Inauguration Day. Perhaps I had a little secret elation in thinking that I was doing something which no woman had ever done before."¹⁷⁸ Helen Taft did not shy away from the spotlight or her opportunity to not only be the first lady but also a trendsetter for other first ladies after her, securing a legacy for herself as a political and public figure.

Despite writing in 1914, "My very active participation in my husband's career came to an end when he became President," Helen Taft continued playing an integral role in her husband's administration throughout his term.¹⁷⁹ Helen Taft's political role was not limited to her well known involvement in her husband's campaign for president. While many articles focused on Helen Taft's fashion sense or the gown she wore at the latest White House social function, some attention was also given to her interest and attention to affairs outside of the White House, before and after her debilitating stroke in 1909. A significant proportion of these affairs involved women's issues, which continued to surface at

¹⁷⁷ "'Would Inaugurate' Mrs. Taft," *The New York Times*, February 18, 1909.

¹⁷⁸ Taft, *Recollection of Full Years*, 365.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 366.

the forefront of American politics, as women continued to demand a voice in government affairs on various levels.

One example of this is the issue of temperance, which was inextricably linked with the very powerful Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The *New York Times* reported, "Women in this city have started a movement to send a petition to Mrs. W. H. Taft asking her to follow the example set by the wife of Rutherford B. Hayes in not permitting intoxicating liquors to be served on her table."¹⁸⁰ Since Lucy Hayes' tenure as first lady, the WCTU asked every first lady, Republican or Democrat, to consider eliminating alcohol from the most prominent dining table in America in order to set an example for the rest of the nation.

The issue of temperance was a popular yet highly divisive issue that Helen Taft knew she must handle carefully, especially since many Republicans, like Hayes, were traditionally supporters of the temperance movement.¹⁸¹ Appearing on the surface as a purely domestic, the issue was also an opportunity for a political statement to be made in outlawing liquor in the White House, which would also be seen as supporting certain religious women's group's efforts to have a larger hand in issues pertaining to women, children, family, and temperance.

¹⁸⁰ "Women's Plea to Mrs. Taft," *The New York Times*, March 7, 1909.

¹⁸¹ See Judith Ellen Horton Foster, *The Republican Party and Temperance: An Address (1888)* (New York, Kessinger Publishing Company, 1999).

Soon WCTU groups from places such as Indiana began adding their voice to the petitions Helen Taft was receiving to keep the White House dry. Careful to not distance herself too far away from these women's groups but also unwilling to carry on the example set by "Lemonade Lucy" Hayes, Taft answered the petitions not as the first lady but as any home keeper, entitled to do as she pleased within her home. Taft knew the criticism faced by Lucy Hayes and the "dry" White House and understood the importance of alcoholic beverages to successfully entertain prestigious guests. The *New York Times* reported, "Doubtless Mrs. Taft, in her new capacity as first lady in the land, will receive patiently and graciously the demands of her sisters in Indiana in regard to her entertainments at the White House...But she may content herself with receiving their petition and managing her household in her own way."¹⁸² In this way, she made it known that although she graciously listened to and carefully considered the request of the temperance women, but she was also entitled and able to run her house in her own way, even if that house happened to be the White House. By crafting her response in the modern press as a domestic, rather than political issue, Taft effectively made a decision as a woman and home keeper instead of first lady and political figure just as first ladies before her had done when they, too, refused to comply with WCTU demands for a "dry" White House.

In order to show herself, and by association, her husband and the Republican Party as concerned with working class issues, early in her tenure as first lady, Helen Taft accepted the honorary chairmanship of the Woman's

¹⁸² "Cats and Cattiness," *The New York Times*, March 7, 1909.

Department of the National Civic Federation (NCF) in New York. The NCF, a product of the progressive Republican agenda, was an organization comprised of business and labor leaders that sought to reconcile disputes between industries and organized labor in order to address increasing unrest amongst the working class.

A women's branch was founded to petition for better working conditions and later, relief services in time of war. The NCF was the Republican Party's answer to the rising labor movement. Helen Taft took an active and visible role in the organization while she was first lady, demonstrating her predisposition to be vigorous in the public as well as private sphere. At the opening meeting of the NCF, organization president Mrs. J. Borden Harriman, a New York socialite and wife of a prominent banker who would later become active in the women's suffrage movement and serve as U.S. Ambassador to Norway, spoke. She asked of those prominent women assembled, "'Should not the women who spend money, which the employees help to provide, take a special interest in their welfare, especially in that of the woman wage earner?' She cautioned, however, that 'Neither emotional philanthropy nor ignorant indifference must influence us.'"¹⁸³ Like other elite women's groups, the NCF wished to be viewed with seriousness and professionalism and, as such, attempted to differentiate themselves from other groups in the press. Taft's involvement in this specific group indicated not only her status but also her concern over specific issues

¹⁸³ Christopher J. Cyphers, *The National Civil Federation the Making of New Liberalism* (Connecticut: Praeger & Co, 2002), 69.

pertaining to women workers and other disadvantaged segments of the population. Her involvement was also in keeping with the Republican Party notion that the best way to quiet labor, or worse, possible Socialist uprisings, was to resolve disputes by mediation. In this way, her participation in the NCF was an attempt to appeal to both conservative and progressive Republicans.

As first lady, Helen Taft gave her first public speech at the NCF's December 1908 meeting, calling for reforms in the American workplace that included better sanitation services, lighting, appropriate breaks, and improvements to poor ventilation and working conditions that resulted in the deaths of thousands of American workers each year. In support of the Republican Party's stance against child labor, she followed her speech up just a week later with a tour of mills in North Carolina where she viewed, first-hand, the working conditions for men, women, and children in America.¹⁸⁴ While she was interested in these issues prior to her tenure as first lady, Taft was acutely aware that in such a position, she could bring special attention to these problems that continued to grow as American cities and consumerism expanded. At the same time, she promoted a progressive image of the Republican Party and their concern for the working class, which was increasingly important following the Roosevelt presidency.

Helen Taft's efforts to appear more progressive and concerned with the plight of the working class increased as the 1912 election approached and

¹⁸⁴ "Mrs. Taft Volunteers Help: Interested in Uplift of Working Women," *Washington Star*, March 16, 1909.

Theodore Roosevelt entered the election in the Progressive Party, effectively splitting Republicans between conservative and progressive lines. By 1909, William Taft began to fall under criticism by progressive Republicans and Democrats for his alleged abuse of power and undermining Theodore Roosevelt's efforts to prevent exploitation of public lands. The most well known example of this was the Ballinger-Pinchot Affair. In this controversy, which resulted in a significant amount of bad press for Taft, Richard Ballinger, appointed by Taft as Secretary of Interior, was accused by Gifford Pinchot, appointed under Theodore Roosevelt as Chief of Forestry, of selling coal-rich lands in Alaska to a group of investors despite Ballinger's promises of conservation. Taft fired Pinchot for insubordination and Ballinger subsequently resigned; however, Taft was left with a scandal that made him appear corrupt and willing to misuse power for profit.¹⁸⁵

The first lady showed her political acumen and purported concern with the treatment of women and children in society and the workplace by attending various public events, the most significant of which was the House Rules Committee hearings on an incident which occurred during the Lawrence Strike of 1912. The strike, one of the most dramatic confrontations to date between labor and industry, occurred in January, 1912 after owners of the American Wool Company responded to a new state law, limiting the work week for women to fifty-four hours, by slashing wages, prompting nearly thirty thousand mill

¹⁸⁵ Coletta, *The Presidency of William Howard Taft*, 88-98.

workers, nearly all immigrants, mostly women and children, to walk off the job.¹⁸⁶

The strikers met with Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) leaders to organize a set of demands and create a network of services to combat American Wool Company owners' tactics, which included using fire hoses on the striking workers. After one female worker was killed in an attempt to break the strike lines, the IWW arranged to have many of the children strikers sent to New York City, away from the danger. Socialists, numbering in the thousands, including Margaret Sanger, a nurse who would later champion the cause of women's suffrage and birth control, assisted the children on their travels as the public's concern for the children grew. Mill owners then refused to let strikers continue to ship children to New York; allegedly supporters of the mill physically abused women and children in an effort to stop strikers from shipping the children away.¹⁸⁷

In March 1912, the *New York Times* reported, "While Miss Tema Camitta, a Philadelphia Sunday School teacher, was telling the House Rules Committee today how the strikers committee endeavored to pilot women and children out of Lawrence in the mill riots, Mrs. William Howard Taft...entered the room and became an interested observer of the proceedings."¹⁸⁸ Helen Taft's presence at the

¹⁸⁶ John Bruce McPherson, *The Lawrence Strike of 1912* (Boston: The Rockwell and Church Press, 1912), 31.

¹⁸⁷ Bruce Watson, *Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 141.

¹⁸⁸ "Mrs. Taft Listens to Strike Charges," *The New York Times*, March 6, 1912.

hearings to listen to the testimony of the women who were present at the strike brought even more attention to the events in Lawrence. As first lady, Taft never publicly commented on the strike, however, her presence suggested an awareness of both her popular and political clout. As a female celebrity, her presence increased the attention the strikers received and, as a politician, her presence reflected her desire to promote the Republican Party's position as pioneers in opposition to child labor, despite their relationship with big business.

By the time of the hearings, Theodore Roosevelt had entered the 1912 presidential race on the Progressive Party ticket, which attracted progressive Republicans who lost faith in William Taft. Helen Taft's presence at the hearings may have indicated an increased effort to appeal to some progressive Republicans who Roosevelt had yet to persuade to join his party. Her attendance might have also been an effort to appeal to both conservative and progressive Republicans, suggesting both sides of the strike, business and labor, should listen to each other. As openly political as her attendance at these hearings was, her presence was also widely accepted. Because the hearings pertained to issues concerning women and children, which were often viewed through a maternal lens, upper class women, such as Helen Taft, could claim a maternal authority, making their participation acceptable.

In perhaps her boldest political move, Helen Taft, in 1912, attended not only the Republican Party convention but also attended the opposing political party's national convention. Taft was the first incumbent first lady to ever attend a national convention much less that of the opposing Democratic Party. In a

moment by moment report on the events of the convention, the *New York Times* featured the presence of Taft:

Mrs. Taft Is Guest Of Democrats To See Who Will Run Against Her Husband...Mrs. Taft...accompanied by a party of ladies, takes a front seat in one of the front boxes immediately flanking the platform...Mrs. Taft returns from to the night session expecting to see nominated the man who will oppose her husband.¹⁸⁹

To the press, Taft suggested that she attended the convention to see who would oppose her husband but political scientists and historians have surmised that her distrust of Theodore Roosevelt, who was also running against her husband, provided significant motivation. Historian Carl Anthony suggested when hopes wavered for William Taft's election to a second term, Helen Taft wanted to be sure that if Taft would not win the election, then neither would Roosevelt.¹⁹⁰ Using traditional gender notions to her advantage, Taft's presence indicated her hope that her attendance, as a woman at the Democratic convention, would make an attack on her husband seem in poor taste.

The *New York Times* reported that William Jennings Bryan, when throwing his support behind the presidential candidate for the Democratic Party, Woodrow Wilson, "restrained an attack on President Taft ...in the Baltimore Convention because of the presence there of Mrs. Taft."¹⁹¹ Bryan later confessed that he planned to reference William Taft in proposing anti-Wall Street legislation, criticizing the "privilege seeking class." He intended to name Taft

¹⁸⁹ "Tale of Convention As Told In Flashes," *The New York Times*, June 28, 1912.

¹⁹⁰ Anthony, *Nellie Taft*, 346-47.

¹⁹¹ "Bryan Spared Mrs. Taft," *The New York Times*, July 12, 1912.

amongst the likes of big businessmen J.P. Morgan and August Belmont but after seeing Helen Taft, “he did not have the heart.”¹⁹² Helen Taft effectively used her presence to silence political attacks on her husband by using traditional gender notions to her best advantage, preventing her husband’s political opponent from attacking him in her presence.

Helen Taft also used domestic affairs or “unofficial spaces” to make certain political or social statements in Washington and American society. She often used popular ideas about the ideal American household in the modern press to frame these changes. The *New York Times* reported “Mrs. Taft is clearly going to manage her home in her own way...Republican simplicity, to be sure, has prevailed in the White House since its earliest days.”¹⁹³ This report seems particularly ironic given the state of the White House before and during Helen Taft’s tenure in office. First, as first lady, Helen Taft threw lavish balls and parties, which were never described as simple or republican in the press but as glittering affairs befitting American royalty.¹⁹⁴ Additionally, one of Taft’s innovations that newspapers reported on as “minor” was employing an all African American staff on the White House grounds. Using the very popular and, as Taft herself admits, overused idea of “republican simplicity,” Helen Taft attempted to

¹⁹² Anthony, *Nellie Taft*, 346.

¹⁹³ “The Lady of the White House,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 1909.

¹⁹⁴ See *New York Times*, 1908-1912 for a description of the multitude of social events at the White House. For a description of one of the larger events see, “Season at Capital Opened by Tafts,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1908 and “Tafts Receive 5000 on White House Lawn,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1911.

make the White House less pretentious in appearance while making a fairly controversial change in employing African Americans.

The *New York Times* reported, “That the main entrance of the White House may present as near as possible the appearance of a private residence, the uniformed police officer and frock-laden doorkeepers have been eliminated, and in their place are negro footmen in livery.”¹⁹⁵ This change, which Helen Taft was careful to couch as one making the White House simpler in appearance, was also a comment on Republican ideas about race and colonialism. These ideas about race, which William Taft referenced in his inaugural speech encouraging, years after abolition, African Americans “to make themselves useful members of the community” further entrenched African Americans as second class citizens.

Helen Taft also abolished the idea that there should be rank amongst the servants and employees in the White House, much less the idea that some should be treated better than others. The *New York Times* reported “Mrs. Taft has given the men and women servants to understand that there is no rank in their positions, and no chief except the housekeeper who rules them all.”¹⁹⁶ Prior to this, the Roosevelts had a system of hierarchy in place that, with her “democratic” ideals, Helen Taft immediately sought to do away with:

Mrs. Roosevelt, who brought with her from New York a number of white maids and nurses, drew a distinction between ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ servants, the distinction running through every relation in life below the stairs. Mrs.

¹⁹⁵ “Mrs. Taft To Make White House A Home,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 1909.

¹⁹⁶ “All Servants Equal By Mrs. Taft’s Rule,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 1909.

Taft has eliminated the actual as well as imaginary line as to privileges, food, or compensation, so that there are now no social distinctions in the kitchen and the same consideration is shown for one set of workers as for another.¹⁹⁷

In the modern press, Helen Taft presented this change as a way of enacting a system of equality within the household of the White House, between black and white, male and female, that was absent in the society around it. However, in reality, Taft was more familiar and comfortable with hired help that considered themselves servants, all of which were under the keeper of the house, the first lady, reflecting her experience as the “first lady” of the Philippines. There, she presided over a palace served by natives, all of which understood their station as a servant under her. She reveled in this environment, referring to her times in Manila as “some of the happiest of my life,” and hoped to duplicate the arrangement in the White House.¹⁹⁸ Helen Taft appeared completely unconcerned with the possibility of social mobility for these workers under her direction.

Modern press coverage highlighted her international experience, which contributed to these innovations, enabling Helen Taft to negotiate an image of herself as a well-traveled woman, bringing the best of her exotic tastes and experiences to the United States. Indicative of this, early in her tenure, Helen Taft moved the traditional White House band concerts from the lawn into a shelter in Potomac Park. “Mrs. Taft got the idea of having the weekly public band concerts

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ See Anthony, *Nellie Taft*, 127-145 and Taft, *Recollections of Full Years*, 39-65.

transferred from the White House lawn to the river front as a result of her visits to the Luneta in Manila,” the *New York Times* reported, but not everyone was pleased with these affairs.¹⁹⁹

Helen Taft hoped to appear more democratic by offering concerts traditionally confined to the White House in a public park; however, the absence of seating, which required one to have an automobile in a time when only the wealthy could afford such a luxury, prompted the *New York Times* to criticize the innovation as elitist. The publication reported, “That the public is not expected to interfere with society’s weekly meet was indicated today by the conspicuous absence of benches or seats.” On the other hand, Theodore Roosevelt’s oldest daughter, Alice Longworth, one of Washington’s most visible elite, complained her clothing became “sooty from the automobile fumes.”²⁰⁰ In an effort to please the public, Helen Taft immediately added seating for those without automobiles at her next concert while Alice Longworth was conspicuously absent from the guest list. Shortly afterward, Taft decided that the popular concerts needed a proper backdrop so she looked to Japan for inspiration.

Perhaps one of her greatest legacies as first lady, Helen Taft was the architect behind the blossoming cherry trees that have become a hallmark of springtime in Washington, D.C. Using her extensive international experience and habit of bringing precious things from the far corners of the globe back to the United States, Taft, “thought we might have a Japanese Cherry Blossom season in

¹⁹⁹ “Washington Drive Opened,” *The New York Times*, April 18, 1909.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.* See also Anthony, *Nellie Taft*, 248.

Potomac Park...I wonder if any of them will ever attain the magnificent growth of the ancient and dearly loved cherry trees of Japan.”²⁰¹ Taft used her international connections made during her husband’s overseas assignments to secure the trees and create a proper backdrop for her now famous band concerts. In 1910, the *New York Times* reported that “Two thousand Japanese cherry trees, the gift of the corporation Tokio [*sic*] to Mrs. Taft and the city of Washington arrived here today. As soon as the weather is favorable, these trees will be set out along the drive in Potomac Park.”²⁰²

Surely the flocks of visitors the cherry trees bring to the nation’s capital on a yearly basis over one hundred years later is evidence that Helen Taft’s hopes for their survival and growth was fulfilled. Helen Taft used her international political connections to secure for herself not only the trees but a physical legacy of her tenure as first lady that continues to bloom in the capital city. In addition, the trees were public expressions of the relationship with Japan the United States hoped to foster under the Taft administration to prevent Japan from monopolizing investments in China, as an extension of Taft’s “Dollar Diplomacy” program. Importantly, however, William Taft carried on the same domestic policies towards Japanese Americans as Theodore Roosevelt, restricting their immigration and not allowing them to own property in the United States, despite America’s desire for an economic alliance. Thus, Helen Taft forwarded her husband’s political agenda by attempting to win favor with the Japanese by promoting the

²⁰¹ Taft, *Recollections of Full Years*, 363.

²⁰² “Tokio’s Gift to Mrs. Taft,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 1910.

acquisition of the cherry trees, a symbol of the natural beauty of Japan, despite the president's harsh policies against Japanese immigrants. For its part, the modern press promoted it as an effort towards beautifying the capital city, which was a traditionally acceptable activity for a woman in the early twentieth century.

As a female celebrity in the early twentieth century, Helen Taft understood her political and public contributions must be tempered in the modern press, in order to appeal to more traditional citizens. According to the master plot of true success, Taft's true happiness was found not in her public affairs, but her private life. The modern press was able to promote its opportunity to offer readers an exclusive look at the first lady's "true self," satisfying the public's desire for authenticity, while the Helen Taft negotiated an image of herself as a woman fulfilled by her domestic pursuits.

Although Taft was a very different woman than her predecessor, Edith Roosevelt, who easily fit in the maternal and domestic roles, she was portrayed much the same way as Edith Roosevelt was by the popular press. In an effort to promote Taft's abilities as a wife, mother, and housekeeper, articles discussed her approach to everything from decorating to parenting to exercise and entertaining. *Ladies Home Journal* reassured readers in 1908 that despite her wealthy and cultured upbringing, "In the everyday affairs of life Mrs. Taft is most practical," and would be a first lady that held up the very best American traditions in her household.²⁰³

²⁰³ Hill, "The Wife of the New President," 71.

The article, an effort to reveal more about the wife of the new president, is strikingly similar to an earlier article extolling Edith Roosevelt's notion on childrearing and management of the household. Central to crafting an image of a first lady that embodied the very best ideals of American republicanism was portraying her not only as a devoted wife and mother but also striking a careful balance between these important roles and an ability to be worldly when needed. When discussing her ability to hold a stimulating conversation with the president or any other possible dignitary, *Ladies Home Journal* reported "Mrs. Taft defends her own opinions and wishes with almost masculine vigor, while her husband assumes his most judicial attitude."²⁰⁴ This idea of Taft as "masculine" in demeanor is quickly tempered by a thorough and favorable description of her abilities as a mother and wife, "With her three children – the daughter Helen and the sons Robert and Charlie – Mrs. Taft is as a mother as she is as a wife: a sympathetic companion and confidant."²⁰⁵

This image of Taft as the doting wife and mother is followed by praise for her enjoyment of outdoor activities and the "occasional" horseback ride, though it was well known by those closest to Taft that she much preferred riding in an automobile. However, since Edith Roosevelt promoted her robust constitution, Helen Taft followed suit. In order to be ideal woman, as the first lady should be, Taft had to be a wife, mother, independent yet subservient, a lover of reading as

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

well as exercise while being an adept housekeeper and glittering hostess in the White House.

Helen Taft entrusted Katherine Graves Busbey, author of the book *Home Life in America*, to write an article for *Good Housekeeping* in 1911, focusing almost solely on her abilities for running, decorating, and making decisions in the domestic, yet very public, sphere of the White House. Taft attempted to negotiate an image of herself as a woman, despite her position, who maintains a practical household. Busbey suggests the White House is “an ideal American home presided over and managed by an ideal home-maker. Mrs. Taft is the type of women we would all like to be,” thus giving American women and their own households an ideal which to strive toward.²⁰⁶ In describing Mrs. William Howard Taft and her abilities in the White House, the *Good Housekeeping* article reveals an image of a Taft, purported to be her “true self,” who literally does it all. The image of Helen Taft in the press was not only of a domestic genius but also a world traveler. In these travels, she found a way not only to enrich herself but also contribute toward creating a perfect household by decorating it with trinkets from far away places. Busbey boasted that “Nowhere has Mrs. Taft’s gift as a decorator found fuller and truer expression. These precious bits were collected by her all over the world.”²⁰⁷ In this way, Taft is able to highlight her international experience while couching it as a way to make herself more adept domestically.

²⁰⁶ Busbey, “Mrs. Taft’s Home-Making,” 291.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 292.

So as not to appear pretentious in her travel pursuits the article goes on to describe Helen Taft's zeal for the simpler things in life such as working in the garden, cooking, or tending to her children in an attempt to make the first lady seem like "every woman" and once again to strike the right balance between "republican simplicity" and the status, pedigree, and breeding that were also key in crafting the right image for the first lady as a modern female celebrity. Making use of the White House green house, *Good Housekeeping* relates that "Mrs. Taft thoroughly enjoys her work among the fresh and fragrant blooms" of the gardens and even arranges floral pieces for featured spaces around the White House.²⁰⁸

After she is finished in the garden, Helen Taft moved to the kitchen where she is busy making treats for her children and the president using the special foodstuffs that were shipped to the White House on a regular basis. When presented with a jar of mince meat, Mrs. Taft set to work making pies in the White House kitchen. Busbey reveals, "In fact, this particular brand of home-made mince meat came into the White House last winter in a jar direct from Mrs. Knox's hands and was made into pies by Mrs. Taft herself, and the President approving, the recipe was incorporated into her remarkable volume on cookery."²⁰⁹ Helen Taft negotiated an image of herself in the modern press as a woman, despite being first lady and all of the public duties corresponding to that position, she was not too busy to do things that every woman does on a regular basis such as pick flowers and make pies, to the delight of her friends and

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 294.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 296.

husband. Furthermore, as Ponce de Leon argues, this image fulfills the modern female celebrity's formulaic approach to domestic life and the happiness and fulfillment she finds there.

In an effort to advance a more practical representation of herself in the press, that would appeal to a more progressive set of constituents, the first lady's shopping trip or car ride became noteworthy events. For her, the personal was the political and an opportunity to use unofficial spaces to promote her party's agenda. When Helen Taft was spotted out on the street or in the shops, newspaper coverage was soon to follow, most of it carefully crafting her image as a true "woman of the people," despite her high position. Almost completely overlooking the fact Helen Taft was responsible for spending thousands of dollars upgrading the White House horse and carriages to a fleet of new automobiles, her ability to take a drive without her husband was celebrated as the ultimate difference between monarchy and democracy. The *New York Times* reported, "No greater constant can be found between the pomp and state of a European court and the democracy of America than to see the wife of the President driving her own automobile in the streets of Washington."²¹⁰

Not only was it a great novelty that a woman could drive alone but that one in such a prominent and visible position could do so fed nicely into American society's need to tout itself as simple and tasteful compared to its European counterparts. By giving the modern press access to her personal life and moments, such as going out for a drive, Helen Taft was able to exchange this

²¹⁰ "Mrs. Taft Drives Alone," *The New York Times*, April 25, 1909.

access for the ability to shape a narrative around her life, promoting her agenda. By carefully juxtaposing herself with European royalty, some of whom were still being transported in horse drawn carriages, surrounded by servants and maids, the first lady was effectively promoted herself as independent, practical, and democratic, despite the thousands of dollars spent to purchase the automobiles and convert the carriage houses to garages.

Helen Taft was also careful to change any tradition, old or new, that could be read as pretentious, going so far as to contrast herself with Edith Roosevelt in an attempt to appear more democratic. The *New York Times* reported that although they were as elaborate as ever, “It would be a mistake to gain the impression that these White House musicales are pretentious affairs or that the guest list is limited” noting that “Mrs. Taft invites whom she pleases with no reference as to whether the chosen friends or acquaintances be within or without the circle of officialdom.”²¹¹ Taft’s musicales were quite different than the musicales under Edith Roosevelt’s reign. Roosevelt’s events were generally characterized by a very limited guest list, consisting of mainly cabinet member and their families. In contrast, Taft characterized her musicales as more egalitarian affairs that had representatives from all levels of society.

Unfortunately, Helen Taft suffered a stroke fairly early in her tenure as first lady. Yet even private matters such as one’s health became public for the first lady. While she did recover from the ailment, the stroke left her with a

²¹¹ “Music Room Plays Large Part in White House Life,” *The New York Times*, May 8, 1910.

speech impediment and forced her out of the public spotlight to focus on her recovery. Her illness became a matter of public interest and she had considerable difficulty in keeping it private and speculation down to a minimum. The White House attempted, largely in vain, to minimize the seriousness of Taft's "attack." The office report released on the first lady's health charged that, "Mrs. Taft, suffering from a slight nervous breakdown, was taken ill to-day while on her way from this city to Mount Vernon...It was said at the White House tonight that there is no cause for alarm and that Mrs. Taft will probably be all right again in a few days."²¹² The term nervous breakdown was generally used to explain ailments stemming from general exhaustion in the early twentieth century. The situation was considerably more serious. With the great concern and interest from the public, the press continued to dig for details regarding Helen Taft's condition and reported on it with great frequency.

Although Taft found it difficult to negotiate her image in the modern press from her sickbed, Taft continued to control what the media wrote about her by releasing updates. Press releases and coverage reported that Helen Taft had a "slight" attack and would be back to normal quickly; however, she disappeared almost completely from the public eye. Knowing how much Taft enjoyed the spotlight and public life, many Washingtonians surmised the situation was quite serious. The press tended to couch her illness in light stories such as one that reported on a gentleman's only affair that took place at the White House after her episode, reporting that, "No ladies were included among the guests, the dinner

²¹² "Mrs. Taft Stricken By Nervous Attack," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1909.

being entirely a stag affair. The illness of Mrs. Taft permitted such an arrangement.”²¹³

As concern and inquiries continued to grow in her absence, the White House reassured Americans on July 9, 1909, nearly two months after the stroke took place, that “Although Mrs. Taft...has been at the ‘Summer White House’ but four days, she has showed a marked improvement in health.”²¹⁴ The first lady’s popularity and celebrity status was a mixed blessing during this time period. While Taft enjoyed many get well wishes, she also sought protection from reporters and others looking for a story. Nearly three months later, Taft still had not emerged from her illness back into public life. Finally, in early October, 1909, the press reported that according to the White House, “Mrs. Taft will continue to rest, and will take no part in social affairs until Jan. 1,” over six months following her “slight” nervous attack.²¹⁵

When she did finally emerge from her illness, the press purported to scrutinize Helen Taft’s actions for evidence of remnants of her ailment in an effort to help the first lady to establish herself as fully healthy again. The *New York Times* reported that Helen Taft, after shaking hands with over five thousand guests at the White House, “showed little evidence of her recent illness as she walked through the long corridor or during the hour in which she stood by the

²¹³ “Dine on the White House Roof,” *The New York Times*, June 29, 1909.

²¹⁴ “Mrs. Taft’s Health Better.” *The New York Times*, July 9, 1909.

²¹⁵ “Mrs. Taft Returns To The White House,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 1909.

President.”²¹⁶ Her first appearances back in the spotlight, however, always found the president close to her side, and in this case, at the World’s Sunday School Association, he welcomed her back himself. The *New York Times* reported, “Mrs. Taft made her first public appearance since she was taken ill about a year ago at tonight’s session of the World’s Sunday School Association...she accompanied the president. Mr. Taft introduced her to the immense audience as ‘the real President of the United States.’”²¹⁷ The impact of Helen Taft’s advice, judgment, and ambition – and its absence – was felt not only by the nation but also by William Taft himself.

Despite her recovery, Taft’s health continued to be an issue throughout her husband’s presidency. Vacations and missed events all became subject to speculation. The press wondered if trips were taken due to Helen Taft’s poor health. The *New York Times* reported about a planned trip to Lake Erie, “The trip is taken in the hope that it will do Mrs. Taft much good, as her health has not been of the best lately.”²¹⁸ Although she relished her role as first lady, Taft confessed later in her memoirs, “But even then my own problems became to me paramount and I began to give them my almost undivided attention and to neglect political affairs...perhaps with my husband safely elected I considered all important affairs

²¹⁶ “Taft Shakes Hands With 5,575 Persons,” *The New York Times*, January 2, 1910.

²¹⁷ “The Real President, My Wife, Says Taft,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 1910.

²¹⁸ “Lake Trip for Mrs. Taft,” *The New York Times*, June 11, 1910.

satisfactorily settled.”²¹⁹ A debilitating stroke, however, was not how Taft envisioned setting the tone for her tenure as first lady. And because of the image of herself she negotiated with the modern press, it did not. Instead, her story became one of perseverance over health issues, the press never mentioning in print the first lady had, in fact, suffered from a stroke.

Although the stroke left the nation without an acting first lady for over a year, Helen Taft resumed her activities, determined to craft her legacy as first lady and be an active participant in her husband’s political career, including the 1912 campaign. Taft’s presence at the 1912 Lawrence Strike hearings was an effort to appeal to both progressive and conservative Republicans but Helen Taft’s involvement in the *Titanic* disaster produced a decidedly undemocratic effect. On April 14, 1912, the *Titanic*, loaded with passengers, collided with an iceberg four days into its maiden voyage. Among its passengers were American and European elites in its first class quarters and immigrants and working class in steerage. 1522 passengers were lost while 704 were saved, mostly women, who told stories of the heroism of men, who sacrificed their lives to save other passengers. William Taft’s Chief Military Aide, Archibald Butt was one of the men who perished on the ship and, as accounts of those passengers who were saved were revealed, people learned that Butt acted with heroism, taking women from steerage and placing them on life boats instead of frightened men who tried to take their place. His loss left the president grief stricken.²²⁰

²¹⁹ Taft, *Recollection of Full Years*, 324.

²²⁰ Anthony, *Nellie Taft*, 335.

Two weeks after the sinking of the *Titanic*, Helen Taft became the first woman in America to make a donation of one dollar toward the erection of a memorial arch dedicated to the bravery of the men on the *Titanic* from the women in the United States. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Helen Taft was the first woman to contribute one dollar towards the erection of a monument to memorialize the “men of the *Titanic*.”²²¹ The first lady’s donation of one dollar appeared very democratic; an effort to make the opportunity to donate accessible to all American women, as a way to be included in what the *Washington Post* termed “A Woman’s Tribute to Heroic Manhood”²²²

The democratic appeal Helen Taft hoped for quickly turned to criticism after it became clear the monument was not an homage to all men on the *Titanic* but only the brave white men in first class. Carl Anthony argues “Attacks on the memorial – and, by association, Mrs. Taft – came swiftly.”²²³ Suffragettes were offended by the suggestion that women would not have made the same sacrifices as men, given the opportunity, and were displeased with the memorial being devoted to men alone.²²⁴ In addition to not memorializing the heroines of the tragedy, engineers, certain immigrant groups, and working class men were all

²²¹ “Mrs. Taft Heads the List for Men Lost on the Titanic,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 1912.

²²² “Mrs. Taft Honors Heroes,” *The Washington Post*, May 3, 1912.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 338.

²²⁴ “Suffragettes Deny Chivalry on the *Titanic*,” *The New York Times*, April 21, 1912.

conspicuously not included in the memorial, making the monument appear racist and elitist.

On the eve of the 1912 election, Helen Taft's association with the *Titanic* memorial was particularly damaging. Her participation in the memorial linked President Taft with the elitist white men, who had little regard for and discriminated against the working class. This connection was offensive to progressive Republicans, who looked to Theodore Roosevelt for a more democratic candidate for president. The elitist tone memorial also offended suffragists, some of whom could vote in the West. Now that Roosevelt supported women's suffrage, they had little incentive to vote for Taft. Finally, as president, William Taft's failure to respond to the grief of his nation after the *Titanic* disaster by calling immediately for an investigation, lowering flags to half mast, or issuing a statement, made him seem uncompassionate and cold. Anthony argues that "His [Taft] presentation of the Congressional Medal of Honor to Captain Arthur Henry Rostron of the *Carpathia* for his response to the *Titanic's* distress signals only bolstered the impression that he dealt only with prominent figures tied to the tragedy."²²⁵ In his final days as president, William Taft ultimately failed to appeal his constituents, many of whom sought a more progressive agenda by voting for someone else.

Helen Taft's association with the *Titanic* memorial and William Taft's inability to connect with a grieving nation, on top of the scandals that riddled his administration with charges of elitism and corruption, were ultimately fatal to

²²⁵ Ibid., 338.

Taft's reelection bid. Theodore Roosevelt and Taft split the Republican vote while Woodrow Wilson, the Democratic candidate, garnered an impressive 453 electoral votes and over forty-one percent of the popular vote to win the election.

In her last day as first lady, Helen Taft appeared to be depressed. The very public life that she lived for the past several years was now coming to an end. On that day, she sat, front and center, to observe the suffragists' parade with over five thousand participants, organized just in time for the Wilson's inauguration, an act which some have interpreted as her "true" position on women's suffrage. Nothing Taft wrote in her later years indicates a pro-suffrage stance but Taft was adept at keeping her personal beliefs separate from her political life. Her interest in politics, outward ambition, and belief in women's inherent right to cast the ballot would indicate she privately sympathized with suffragists. However, an astute politician, Helen Taft also understood the importance of towing the party line and keeping her personal views to herself.

Unlike Edith Roosevelt, whose husband was ambitious and often considered domineering and, at times, obnoxious, Helen Taft's husband did not provide an easy foil for her to promote herself as a traditional woman. Taft's husband was much less ambitious, with a jolly demeanor, making her role as a political wife more difficult to reconcile with her domestic fulfillment. Helen Taft openly encouraged her husband to pursue political opportunities and provided ambition where he fell short. Instead of this relationship being characterized as backwards, in terms of gender roles, the modern press framed the relationship as one where William Taft secured for himself a wife that helped

bring out his best self. In a time when marriage was starting to be redefined as a modern vision of a more equal partnership, Taft embodied this ideal in the press while personal letters between her and William reveal she clearly drove him to do things he did not want to do.

Helen Taft's image as first lady in the modern press, by her own design, embodied the very best parts of traditional and modern womanhood. By allowing the press access to what was, ostensibly, her private life, she purported to reveal her private and true self which was fulfilled by domestic pursuits and family, despite her lofty public role. She also highlighted her power, strength, and intellect that, at the early part of the twentieth century, was part of being something new, a modern woman. As the wife of a politician, then president, she was expected to be exceptionally informed to provide appropriate companionship to her husband while not abandoning her traditional roles as a woman. Unlike Edith Roosevelt, who easily fulfilled these traditional roles, Helen Taft worked hard, with the modern press, to promote her domestic side and, more importantly, reveal that she was practical, unspoiled, and able to maintain her moral self despite having access to wealth and power other women did not.

Although the modern press purported to uncover Helen Taft's authentic self, her memoirs, correspondence with her husband, and public and political activities as first lady, suggest Helen Taft was a woman motivated by power and more interested in public issues such as labor and politics than domestic pursuits, such as motherhood and home keeping. Taft's political side and thirst for power bubbled to the surface despite her best efforts to conceal it; however, she was

careful to negotiate these outward expressions of politics and desire for influence as manifestations of ambition and intellect that were appropriate for women of her social set. In this way, Helen Taft effectively negotiated an image of herself in the modern press that, like her predecessor Edith Roosevelt, featured her domestic pursuits while simultaneously promoting her husband's and party's political agenda and fulfilling the master plot of true success. Despite being two very different women and first ladies, Edith Roosevelt's and Helen Taft's public images were very similar, reflecting the impact of modern journalism at the turn of the century as a means of promoting a certain image and narrative for modern female celebrities.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ellen Wilson seemed purposefully meant to juxtapose herself with the previous first lady Helen Taft's unbridled zeal, girlhood dreams of becoming a first lady, and, as critics would charge, unladylike pursuit of power. Wilson responded, when asked about becoming first lady during her husband's, Woodrow Wilson's, 1912 presidential campaign, that "she had never thought of living in the White House" and had no real ambitions of her own as first lady.²²⁶ Her response marked not only a stark departure from the rhetoric often associated with previous the first lady but also the start of her tenure as first lady, which was strikingly different than her two predecessors. Unlike Edith Roosevelt and Helen Taft, who had limited formal educations, Ellen Wilson was a college educated, southern woman who had a professional career as an artist before and during her tenure as first lady. She opted to promote these roles in the press, along with her propensity toward domesticity, to negotiate an image of her celebrity self as modern.

Unlike her two Republican predecessors, who were well-known Washington society insiders, Ellen Wilson promoted an image of herself as a woman who needed to use her inherent talents and charms to earn friends in the nation's capitol. Having never lived there, her image made her appear above the scandal and gossip that were hallmarks of Washington, D.C. high society. Another significant point of departure was that Ellen Wilson was part of the newly anointed Democratic administration, which replaced sixteen years of Republic rule in the White House. As such, the political messages she promoted

²²⁶"Mrs. Wilson Planned Visit to England," *The Hartford Courant*, July 3, 1912.

in official and unofficial spaces differed from the previous first ladies.

Washington society wondered, sometimes in the pages of the newspaper, how the changes she made would impact their social lives. Additionally, Ellen Wilson was first lady for only seventeen months. She passed away shortly after Wilson was elected to his first term in office from complications due to Bright's disease.

Despite these differences, like Edith Roosevelt and Helen Taft, Ellen Wilson's tenure as first lady effectively illustrates how the first lady, as a political figure and celebrity, used the modern press to negotiate an image of herself for the benefit of her husband, the president, and his party. Although she was the most publicly political first lady to this point in American history, as first lady, Ellen Wilson used "unofficial spaces" to promote a Democratic image and agenda and, by allowing the press access to these spaces, she was able to widely promote this agenda. At the same time, the image she crafted purported to reveal the first lady's true and authentic self. This modern self fulfilled, during this time, both traditional and modern notions of womanhood, and, in keeping with the master plot of true success, revealed that despite her public position, her true fulfillment came through her roles as wife and mother, even though she occupied the highest and most visible political position of any woman in the country.

Ellen Louise Axson was born in Savannah, Georgia in May, 1860. The daughter of the Reverend Samuel Edward Axson, a Presbyterian minister, and Margaret Jane Axson, Ellen was the eldest of four children. Ellen Axson was afforded an education during her childhood. She was initially homeschooled by her mother before she began attending Rome Female College, where she studied

German, literature, music, and art. At an early age, art became an important part of Ellen Axson's life and she would continue to pursue oil painting as both a hobby and profession in her later years.²²⁷ After graduating from Rome Female College in 1876, Ellen spent time with her family and building close friendships while working toward a position at the Art Students League, a program designed to foster budding artists, in New York City. Although she had met Woodrow Wilson before as a small child, not until 1883, when Ellen Axson was twenty-three years old and already set to work making a pact with her closest friends to never marry, that she met Thomas Woodrow Wilson, a bright, young lawyer visiting from Atlanta.²²⁸

Thomas Woodrow Wilson was born in Staunton, Virginia in 1856, the third of four children born to the Reverend Joseph Ruggles Wilson and Jessie Janet Woodrow Wilson. His father, like Ellen Axson's father, was a Presbyterian minister who served briefly as a chaplain for the Confederate Army during the Civil War. A bright child, Woodrow Wilson, as he became known, did not learn to read until he was nearly ten years old because war made access to education difficult. He took classes at a small school in Augusta, Georgia, where he spent most of his childhood. Following the Civil War, the Wilsons moved to Columbia, South Carolina, where Woodrow Wilson's father became a professor at Columbia Theological Seminary. In 1873, Woodrow Wilson enrolled in Davidson College in North Carolina before transferring to Princeton University in New Jersey. He

²²⁷ Saunders, *Ellen Axson Wilson*, 16.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

graduated from Princeton in 1879, studying politics and history, before enrolling for one year at the University of Virginia Law School. Wilson never graduated from law school but instead chose to start practicing law in Georgia after passing the Georgia Bar exam in 1882.

1883 was a monumental year for Woodrow Wilson. It marked not only the start of his doctoral studies at Johns Hopkins University, where he pursued a degree in politics and history, but also the year he became reacquainted with his future wife, Ellen Axson. The two had previously crossed paths as children and met again in Rome, Georgia when Woodrow Wilson was visiting his cousin, Jessie Wilson. Ellen Axson was still living at home, with her father, in the wake of her mother's death in 1883. Although she traveled to New York to study art in 1882, she returned to Georgia to watch over her ailing father, who continued to reel after the death of his wife. On April 8, 1883, Woodrow Wilson attended Reverend Axson's services at the First Presbyterian Church of Rome and came to his house afterward to call on the Reverend and his daughter, Ellen. A five month courtship followed before Woodrow Wilson proposed marriage and the two were married nearly two years later on June 24, 1885 in Savannah, Georgia.

At this time, Woodrow Wilson had nearly completed his doctoral degree in history and political science and accepted a teaching position at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania. In 1888, the Wilsons moved to Connecticut so that Woodrow could begin his new teaching position at Wesleyan University. During this time, Ellen Wilson gave birth to the Wilson's three children: Margaret Woodrow Wilson in 1886, Jessie Woodrow Wilson in 1887, and Eleanor

Randolph Wilson in 1889. In 1890, Woodrow Wilson was offered a position at Princeton University and quickly rose through the ranks to become president of the university in 1902 at the age of forty-five. Wilson biographer John A. Thompson argues, “The position gave Wilson public standing and visibility that he took advantage of to make political addresses on national politics, and in some of these, he spoke as an avowed member of the Democratic Party.”²²⁹

The Princeton position effectively launched Wilson’s political career and, as early as 1906, his name began to be mentioned as a presidential nominee. Wilson remained president of Princeton until 1910 when he ran for the governorship of New Jersey and prevailed over Republican candidate Vivian M. Lewis, despite the state being carried by Republican presidential nominee William Howard Taft in the 1908 presidential election. Running on the platform that, because he was not a professional politician, he would fill his position with the single purpose of being the representative of the people – a message which appealed to progressives – Woodrow Wilson quickly ascended the political ranks as citizens grew increasingly weary of political machines and corruption.²³⁰

Because of his decision to run for governor, Ellen Wilson, too, was foisted into the public spotlight, giving her first interview, as wife of the governor, to Cloe Arnold of the *Delineator*. “‘One of the most interesting things about Woodrow Wilson is his wife,’ Arnold began.”²³¹ The article went on to discuss

²²⁹ Thompson, *Woodrow Wilson*, 43.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

²³¹ Saunders, *Ellen Axson Wilson*, 211.

Ellen Wilson's talent as an artist as well as her three daughters, all of whom pursued an education and prepared to "earn a living." The promotion of such attributes of the Wilson daughters was reflective of changing gender roles during this time period, as it became increasingly accepted, if not expected, that women would work outside the home at some point in their lives. The attention and press coverage was an aspect of public life that Woodrow and Ellen Wilson would become well acquainted with, particularly after 1912, when Woodrow Wilson became the Democratic nominee in the crowded presidential race that included Republican incumbent William Howard Taft and a third challenger, Theodore Roosevelt with the Progressive Party.

Woodrow Wilson said "The public man who fights the daily press won't be a public man very long." He understood the power of the press and so did Ellen Wilson.²³² During the presidential campaign and Wilson's administration, Ellen Wilson crafted her image in the press much like any politician. She answered criticisms when she had to but controlled her image by only giving interviews and access to her private life to specific journalists from traditionally friendly publications such as *Good Housekeeping*. When Ellen Wilson acted outside the domestic sphere, she typically received little criticism. By choosing which publications to speak to and work with, Wilson skillfully navigated the partisan media in order to get the most positive coverage. For example, when she toured the allies of Washington, D.C., a writer from *Survey*, a journal sympathetic to social reformers, accompanied her and provided an exclusive account of the

²³² Startt, *Woodrow Wilson and the Press*, xi.

events that eventually turned into the first piece of legislation ever attached specifically to a first lady's name.

Like Woodrow Wilson, who often wrote editors from major newspapers when he found a story disagreeable, Ellen Wilson also answered stories published about her in newspapers that she found inaccurate.²³³ Instead of writing to the offending newspaper as Woodrow Wilson did, she offered exclusive interviews to more friendly publications, like the *New York Times* for example, to respond to inaccuracies printed in other newspapers. She began negotiating her image this way during the 1912 election, where she campaigned during alongside her husband.

Ellen Wilson's name began to appear in major newspapers during the presidential election of 1912. A reflection of shifting roles for women during this time period, the election generated some issues and controversy on the campaign trail that thrust Ellen Wilson into the spotlight in ways few first ladies had been forced before, pushing her to take a public stance on some controversial issues of the day. In essence, Ellen Wilson publicly campaigned with Woodrow Wilson. Ellen Wilson was required to go on the record in one incident over her stance on smoking, particularly women smoking. She claimed to be misquoted by an Ohio newspaper that reported her asking, "Why shouldn't a woman smoke, if she enjoys it?"²³⁴ The article discussed Wilson's arguments for smoking by women, including its calming effect on the nerves.

²³³ Chalmers Roberts, *Washington Post: The First Hundred Years* (New York, Houghton Press: 1977), 108-190 and 142-145.

Ellen Wilson did not take long to answer this article, which painted her in an unflattering light as the potential first lady. She went directly to the media to address charges that she was a smoker, taking a direct role in shaping her image in the modern press. The *New York Times*, who endorsed Wilson in the election, reported “For the first time since Woodrow Wilson became the Democratic presidential candidate, Mrs. Wilson appeared in his campaign today...although heretofore she has made special requests that she not be quoted or written about in the papers.”²³⁵ Despite purporting to not want to talk to the press, Ellen Wilson clarified her position on smoking in the *New York Times* by releasing an interview that revealed she would not keep cigarettes at her personal desk if she becomes first lady. Shelly Sallee argues that Ellen Wilson took her own press release to reporters because “she understood the relationship between her stance on moral and political issues and her husband’s political agenda.”²³⁶ Whether or not Ellen Wilson was a smoker is not known; however, since women’s smoking was a controversial issue, she spoke out against it in an effort to bolster her and her husband’s image during a crucial time in the election.

Another issue that forced Ellen Wilson to speak publicly during the campaign was the charge that she had been caught spending an exorbitant amount of money on clothing in Philadelphia, which did not coincide with her and her

²³⁴ “Mrs. Wilson Against Smoking By Women,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 1912.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Gould, ed., *American First Ladies*, 232.

party's image as democratic and unpretentious. Ellen Wilson again answered critics who tried to craft an image of her in the press as an elitist. As a popular publication with special access to the first lady, *Good Housekeeping* reported, "it was with disturbing consternation that she opened the morning paper one day last fall during the political campaign to read that the wife of the Democratic Presidential candidate on a shopping tour to Philadelphia had just purchased some seven gowns at from \$200 to \$300 a piece" which was considered exorbitant for the time period.²³⁷ Ellen Wilson moved quickly "to deny this extravagance, promptly sent to the newspapers an exact list of that day's shopping, which covered her purchases for one season."²³⁸ Ellen Wilson knew that for the sake of the campaign, she needed to maintain a certain image that agreed with the Democratic Party agenda, which promised to pare down the size and expense of government, sending the message to voters that the time of excess is over and a shift in focus on more social issues is at hand. For Ellen Wilson, the personal became highly political as she worked to negotiate an image of herself in the modern press as frugal, moral, and democratic, the same as Woodrow Wilson's political agenda.

The same *Good Housekeeping* article covered another crucial issue for Ellen Wilson: her professional career. *Good Housekeeping* assured readers that Wilson, although formally education in the arts in her home state of Georgia at

²³⁷ Mabel Potter Daggett, "Woodrow Wilson's Wife," *Good Housekeeping*, March 1913.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

Shorter College and at one time, a professional artist, happily married and had children. “She found greater happiness in training them. But now that they have grown up she is once more devoting some time to her old work,” which was acceptable since her duties as a mother had been largely fulfilled at that point.²³⁹ Indeed, the article believed that her training and work as an artist could serve her well in the White House, making it “a home where the arts are not only appreciated but pursued.”²⁴⁰ The potential first lady-to-be possessed talent and skill that she used first, to be a good wife, mother, and home keeper, and secondly, once all her duties were met, as an artist. Additionally, the pursuit of painting was considered more feminine than the study of law or science, for example, making Ellen Wilson’s career as an artist less controversial, particularly for a wife of a presidential candidate and potential first lady.

Ellen Wilson was not the first prospective mistress of the White House to have a college degree. Before her, Lucy Webb Hayes was the first woman to hold the title of first lady to also possess formal higher education, but it is significant to note that Wilson was the first potential first lady who pursued and held a professional career, even while her husband was in office. Still, the *New York Tribune* was careful to report on the prospective first lady that, “Mrs. Wilson is a home woman through and through, interested and eager for the success of her husband and daughters and devoted to each one of them.”²⁴¹ Yet, reflective of the

²³⁹ “Woodrow Wilson – the Family Man, the Scholar, the Statesman,” *New York Tribune*, November 10, 1912.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

era's tension between women's private and public lives, the article goes on to state that Ellen Wilson "believes that the intelligent woman of today has a duty both to the home and the community. And she does not feel that in order to be a good wife and mother, a woman should bury herself in her home and pay no attention to the outside world."²⁴² Ellen Wilson's image on the campaign trail was crafted as a modern woman who has struck a balance between the roles of woman as wife, mother, home keeper, and volunteer.

The upper crust of Washington, D.C. society wondered out loud about the impact of a Democratic first lady on the Washington social scene. The *Washington Post* reported that women were constantly asking "I wonder what it will be like at the White House when the Wilsons come?"²⁴³ A change of regimes of this sort meant that families who once enjoyed prominent social standing might be demoted. More than this, Democratic publications, such as the *Washington Post* in 1912, speculated that the lavish parties that became the hallmark of the Washington social scene under the Roosevelt's and Taft's administrations would become a thing of the past. As the *Washington Post* summarized, "All eyes are on the Mrs. Wilson and her three daughters in whose hands, for the most part, will rest the building of the new social structure."²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ "Social Life of Wilson Regime A Subject of Popular Interest," *The Washington Post*, November 18, 1912.

²⁴⁴ "Social Upheaval Anticipated in Washington with the New Administration," *The Washington Post*, December 22, 1912.

When this article was published in 1912, on the eve of Wilson's inauguration, anxieties appeared to be high.

Once the Wilsons moved into the White House, some papers declared the changes were a welcome return to a more subdued style of social life, indicative of a Democratic administration.²⁴⁵ An article in the *St. Louis Republic* titled "Toning Down the White House" reported that:

A change as pronounced as was the sudden transition from Republican to Democratic politics has stolen over Washington society since the coming of the Wilsons. The old order of happy-go-lucky, semi-formal entertainment, enlivened by lilting strains of ragtime music, gay parties and late suppers has given way to more decorous social functions. Sociology, philanthropy and the arts have replaced the latest Parisian styles, the newest play and the most popular novel as topics of conversation.²⁴⁶

This reassessment of the priorities of Washington society declared that the parties were different and that the first lady Ellen Wilson, as head of Washington society, supported and developed these changes in her personal habits and style. These social changes were an important element of her husband's presidential campaign and continued to be a closely examined subject through the first months of the Wilson administration's reign. After sixteen years of Republican rule, welcoming a new president and first lady, who never figured prominently in life in Washington society before the election, proved to be a difficult yet important transition.

Before her husband's election, Ellen Wilson had never lived or navigated in the social circles of Washington society and that made her even more of an

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ "'Toning Down' the White House," April 6, 1913.

enigma to the social elites and the local press. Local shops hung photographs of the soon-to-be first lady and her daughters in store windows so people could identify them, since many Washington, D.C. residents did not know what they looked like. This represents another point of departure between Wilson and the previous first ladies, in that Ellen Wilson was not a member the inner circles of the Washington elite. Without knowing what to expect however, the *Washington Post* reported although “Mrs. Wilson has never lived in Washington, and of course does not come into the Executive Mansion with the host of friends with which her predecessors ushered in their regime, but she is the sort of woman who will make them.”²⁴⁷

Yet the situation remained that a virtual outsider would soon be taking the helm of perhaps the most important social circle in America. The *Washington Star* reassured readers after the Wilson’s first official reception that, Ellen Wilson “has entertained much, she has traveled considerably, she has kept up with the times, and even amongst strangers she moves and speaks and acts with quiet ease of one who is sure of herself.”²⁴⁸ Washington society, though, had to take the press’s word for Ellen Wilson’s social graces as it had, to that point, not born witness to them. Democratic publications, such as the *Washington Post*, highlighted the first lady as an outsider, in an effort to reinforce an image of the incoming regime as unpretentious and free from the corruption and scandal that

²⁴⁷ “Social Upheaval Anticipated in Washington with the New Administration,” December 22, 1912.

²⁴⁸ “In the World of Society,” *Washington Star*, March 1913, news clippings, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

tended to be a part of upper class Washington, D.C. society life. Despite being an outsider, the *Post* also stressed that, using her inherent potential, she would make an excellent first lady.

Ellen Wilson vigorously promoted the theme of simplicity in the modern press when discussing her lifestyle and habits. In keeping with the master plot of true success, she crafted an image of herself as not only unspoiled by her position and wealth but also used the idea of minimalism to promote her party's agenda that included a government focused more on political and social problems than social events. Ellen Wilson made a splash when news broke that "Mrs. Woodrow Wilson says \$1000 per year is too much to spend for gowns. Washington society leaders yesterday agreed and disagreed with her."²⁴⁹ Again, using unofficial spaces, like the dress shop, Ellen Wilson purposefully juxtaposed herself with the notoriously well-gowned and fashionable former first lady, Helen Taft, eliciting a litany of responses when the *Chicago Sunday Examiner* reported, in an interview directly from the first lady-elect:

"I am not buying a large and elaborate wardrobe for my Washington debut," laughed Mrs. Wilson, good naturedly. "Neither I nor either of my daughters is fond of clothes in the sense that many women are. I like pretty things, naturally, being a woman, and I like to be tastefully gowned, but to spend lots of time and money on clothes, we are not given to that. I think women acquire a real happiness by being interested in other things much more worth while."²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ "Mrs. Wilson's Views on \$1000 a Year for Gowns Bring Various Opinions From Society Leaders," February, 1913, news clippings, Woodrow Wilson Papers.

²⁵⁰ "Simplicity to Be Keynote of White House Society," *Chicago Sunday Examiner*, February 23, 1913.

Wilson went on further to say, the *Examiner* reported, that she found the sum of one thousand dollars a preposterously high amount of money to spend on clothing and, even as first lady, she had no intentions of making such lavish expenditures on gowns for the season. Wilson made it a point to note that good taste did not go hand in hand with spending a large sum of money and that she was more interested in more high minded, although unnamed, issues.

The news of Ellen Wilson's thoughts on spending \$1000 per year on clothing reached as far away as Europe and reaction was mixed. The *Observer* reported that, "Mrs. Woodrow Wilson's protest against extravagance in dress, and the comments of a 'close friend of Mrs. Taft' that a mistress of the White House cannot manage without a wardrobe estimated at 1,400 pounds has been the subject discussed at [European] tea-tables during the last few days."²⁵¹ Some society women were quick to praise Ellen Wilson for her sense of thrift and her ability to relate to "every woman." The society reporter for the *Washington Post* lauded Ellen Wilson's thoughts on her clothing budget, saying:

Mrs. Wilson, is speaking for her daughters, as well as herself, says, they 'are not fond of clothes but like to be tastefully gowned,' which is certainly a hopeful sign for all sane-minded women the country over – the golden mean between the extravagance of the very rich and very thoughtless...and that other variety of women who considers it a sign of righteousness to impose her old fashioned frocks on smart society.²⁵²

Transcending party lines, socialite and wife of the Republican Senator from Michigan, Mrs. Edward Breitung, who was known as the "most well gowned

²⁵¹ "Feminism & Fashion in Paris," *The Observer*, March 2, 1913.

²⁵² "Fashions at the Capital," *The Washington Post*, March 2, 1913. Also "Their Wives Not Agreed," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 2, 1913.

woman in the west” and regularly appeared on newspapers’ society pages, also praised Wilson’s idea in a *Washington Post* editorial stating “Mrs. Woodrow Wilson’s expressed sentiments on sensible and economical dressing, I think, are splendid...a woman occupying the highest position in the country that she spends less than \$1000 a year on clothes is an object lesson to women in general and women of extravagance in particular.”²⁵³ However, Breitung did go on to suggest that despite Wilson’s sentiments, she knew of many society women in Washington that had a difficult time spending under \$25,000 a year on clothing and this was far more common than Wilson’s budget. By her own design, Wilson’s publicized commitment to spending less than \$1000 on gowns for a season, despite her position as first lady, was touted in the American and international press as a means of promoting her image in the press as thrifty. In essence, Wilson wanted to make herself, as a female symbol of the Democratic Party, appear more democratic while also fulfilling the master plot of true success, which revealed Ellen Wilson’s true self as a woman that was frugal despite her wealth.

Continuing to use unofficial spaces, through fashion, Ellen Wilson presented herself as a woman of class and taste, opposing emerging trends which encouraged women to dress more like their younger counterparts. Fashion during this time period was a touch point for the larger changes taking place in American society, which had a significant proportion of women dressing more provocatively than their Victorian counterparts. A woman’s dress not only

²⁵³ “Praises Mrs. Wilson’s Idea,” *The Washington Post*, March 18, 1913.

signified her socioeconomic class but potentially her views on current issues pertaining to women's rights, such as suffrage and changing gender ideals. The *Washington Post* related to its readers when it described Ellen Wilson's gown in a pre-inaugural Washington event:

Mrs. Wilson's gown, as the careful observer saw, was much more sedate in line and color than those of her young daughters, thus recognizing a well-established idea abroad, frequently discarded in America, where mother and daughter wear practically the same hats, gowns, furs, totally regardless of necessary discrepancy between 25 and 45.²⁵⁴

This not only presented Ellen Wilson as a woman of class and taste but also distanced her from the ideas and values of her daughters, at least one of whom was a well known supporter of women's suffrage. Furthermore, it aligned her with the more desirable European breeding that often was used to distinguish older ruling classes of Americans from their less established, but wealthier counterparts. This was particularly important for Wilson, as the first Southern Democrat first lady, in an effort to establish herself as who possessed the taste and breeding to be first lady.

During this time of change in American society, as the tensions between traditional and modern women increased, opinions on what was "proper" to wear also increased tensions. Because fashion was a physical manifestation of a woman's beliefs about her place in society, the first lady, and in this case, the Vice President Marshall's wife as well, both sought to take a position against some of the newer styles in favor of more modest garments and cuts. Shortly after the presidential inauguration, the *Washington Post* reported:

²⁵⁴ "Fashions in the New Regime," *The Washington Post*, March 9, 1913.

When it became generally known yesterday that Mrs. Wilson, wife of the president, and Mrs. Marshall, wife of the vice-president, strongly disapprove of the accepted style of dressing – tight skirts and slashed skirts and draped and convoluted skirts and all other such varieties, which have taken the place of the full and more or less straight lines of former days – the information produced a tempest in the social teapot.²⁵⁵

Wilson and Marshall spoke out against these skirts, a fashion fad imported from Paris, in adherence to more traditional positions about women and their sexuality. Because the skirts were cut tightly to the figure to show a woman's body, they became part of a larger controversy about women's sexuality becoming public and thus more daring. As the article points out, however, not everyone in Washington society was willing to defer to the "first ladies" judgments on modern styles of dress.

The commentary following the article reflected on the opinions of other prominent women who both supported and opposed the idea. Countess Macklin, for example, disagreed with Wilson saying that she found slashed skirts both "correct and charming" when worn correctly, which she had never see otherwise in polite society.²⁵⁶ Some unnamed sources deferred to Wilson's contention that they were much too busy with other matters to worry about something as trivial as the newest style of skirts, while still others referred to some of these garments, which were so tight that they needed to be cut up to the knee for the woman to move around properly, as "vulgar."

²⁵⁵ "'First Ladies' Ban Tight Skirts; Tempest Results," *The Washington Post*, March 12, 1913.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

The varied response from the elite in Washington society indicate that not only fashions, but women's roles, were certainly changing though no one seemed to agree on whether or not this was a good or bad thing. However, as first lady, Ellen Wilson promoted an image of herself in the press, by publicly condemning the modern, fitted cut of the skirt, as a traditional woman and once again, used unofficial space to promote the Democratic agenda that celebrated women's traditional role and domesticity despite education and professional experience, values which had been firmly in place since the Cleveland administration.²⁵⁷

Margaret W. De Peyster, a female journalist for the *Los Angeles Times*, covered Ellen Wilson during the campaign and after the election, almost exclusively.²⁵⁸ Although a traditionally Republican publication, *Los Angeles Times*, who endorsed William Taft in the 1912 election, Wilson skillfully allowed De Peyster access to her private life, and purported true self, to help shape an image of herself in the largest publication in the western states as a traditional and democratic first lady. One in a series of articles that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* shortly after Woodrow Wilson's election highlighted the first lady-elect's skill as a baker, embroider, and pianist, noting "In common with most Southern women, Mrs. Wilson is an expert in home-making."²⁵⁹ The article also published

²⁵⁷ Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery*, 63.

²⁵⁸ Articles appearing in the *Los Angeles Times* on Ellen Wilson are almost exclusively authored by De Peyster, who worked at the New York and Washington, D.C. Bureau of the *Los Angeles Times* as indicated on the byline of her articles.

²⁵⁹ "Mrs. Wilson's Cake Recipes," *The Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 1912.

some of Wilson's personal recipes thus offering readers an exclusive look at the first lady, while at the same time, allowing the first lady to negotiate an image of herself as the embodiment of traditional womanhood. The *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the first lady during and after the election also shows that the first lady's ability to negotiate her image in the modern press often transcended the political affiliations of newspapers.

Like other first ladies before her, Ellen Wilson's celebrity coupled with emergence of the modern press made it nearly impossible for her to go about her everyday life without being observed. Wilson used the public and modern press's interest in her to negotiate an image that was, in keeping with her party's ideals, democratic and sensible. The press, particularly the *Washington Post*, portrayed her as both a woman of tastes but also one who was down to earth and sensible when it came to her purchases, comparing her to most American women shoppers. The *Washington Post* reported that the Wilson women were really no different than others relating that, "When Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, wife of the President, and her daughters go shopping in the stores of Washington, as they often do, they go about their proceedings much in the same manner as do all American women."²⁶⁰ Although a woman of obviously means, the paper reported that the ladies never flaunted their wealth but instead went to great lengths to be prudent and use discretion when doing the most common tasks. Unlike most upper class women who would not be seen carrying their own purchases, "They

²⁶⁰ "Mrs. Wilson and Daughters Noted for Courtesy When Shopping," *The Washington Post*, September 26, 1913.

[the Wilsons] have even practiced their democracy to the extent that when it is not absolutely necessary they do not send their bundles home,” electing to bring their packages with them instead.²⁶¹

The paper even went so far as to interview shopkeepers to find out what the Wilsons were buying. A shopkeeper in one of Washington’s most exclusive boutiques confessed, ““She is so unpretentious. She has wonderful taste, however, and thereby is slightly different than [other] women....She is the true mother, and has brought up her daughters in the same way.””²⁶² Not only did the article present Ellen Wilson as an example of democracy and thrift but it also spoke to her adeptness as a mother to foster those same values in her daughters. In this way, Wilson embodied the traditional values held by all first ladies to this point but also crafted an image of herself in the press, by publicizing these kinds of shopping trips, as a woman who also embodied the frugal ideals of the Democratic Party, which most Americans living in the early twentieth century could relate to in their everyday lives.

The evening before the inauguration, the *Washington Post* reported on a dinner held by one of the Wilson’s cousins in their honor. Giving Americans and other Washingtonians a sense of the new style of entertaining that was about to become the hallmark of the White House, the *Washington Post* reported that, “The dinner, simple and homelike, was served in glass and silver service never

²⁶¹Ibid.

²⁶²Ibid.

before used.”²⁶³ The article focused on the plainness of the dinner, as if this was a dinner that could have been served in most any household in the country. Even the dinnerware was described as uncomplicated and democratic in nature, as if the Wilsons had meant to set the tone for future dinners they would attend. The *Washington Post* also described, in great detail, what the ladies invited to this event were wearing, with special focus on the first lady-to-be. The article describes Ellen Wilson’s green gown, specifically noting in both the byline and text of the article, “She wore no ornaments.”²⁶⁴ A conscious and promoted decision to forgo any kind of jewelry not only helped craft an image for herself as unpretentious but, in her personal choice, supported the overall agenda of the Democratic party to show itself as a departing from the old Republican regime, more in touch with the common American citizen.

Ellen Wilson’s first official function as first lady was attending her husband’s inaugural celebration. With the press allotting a significant amount of coverage to the event and the festivities surrounding it, Ellen Wilson was under careful scrutiny as she, for the first time, acted as the first lady of the land. When the *Washington Post* reported that, “At this very interesting and important period of her life, she was standing tiptoe on a chair by the side of the platform looking proudly, and with no loss of dignity, into the face of her distinguished husband,” it appeared as if the paper was defending Ellen Wilson’s undignified actions as

²⁶³ “Wilson Dinner Party,” *The Washington Post*, March 4, 1913.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

regal.²⁶⁵ Expressing her innocent awe of the spectacle, the *Washington Post* reported Mrs. Wilson saying, “‘Oh, isn’t it wonderful,’ . . . as she looked out over the immense gathering that extended so far that faces were not recognizable.”²⁶⁶ Adding to this image of wonderment and unpretentiousness was the description of Ellen Wilson’s gown, worn at the luncheon following the ceremony. “Mrs. Wilson wore a tan cloth dress, trimmed with golden brown ribbed silk, over which she wore a coat of the same material.”²⁶⁷ Compared to descriptions of other gowns worn by first ladies for this important event, which often included rich and luxurious materials such as silk and velvet, Wilson’s garment was more simple, made of cloth, reflecting the tone and style of her party and was another way the first lady used fashion to promote the party’s message of democracy, simplicity and frugality.

Ellen Wilson did not limit her political activity to the use of unofficial spaces. She was, inarguably, one of the most overtly political first ladies to date, becoming active in matters far outside the kitchen or parlor. Despite this, the *Chicago Sunday Examiner* reported that “One of the most democratic women to grace the White House as its mistress, Mrs. Wilson does not aspire to high social distinction other than that which her high position gives her.”²⁶⁸ Although Ellen

²⁶⁵ “Hush, Then Cheers,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1913.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ “White House Luncheon Served to 200 Guests,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1913.

²⁶⁸ “Simplicity to Be Keynote of White House Society,” *Chicago Sunday Examiner*, February 23, 1913.

Wilson may not have aspired to a higher social distinction, there is considerable evidence that she aspired to a higher political distinction, supporting reform bills and having her name attached to a piece of legislation that would leave her a mixed legacy.

Ellen Wilson was an important a political figure as well as a symbol of ideal womanhood or celebrity, for as Lisa Burns relates, in a 1913 article, Wilson said, “I wonder how anyone who reaches middle age can bear it if she cannot feel on looking back that, whatever mistakes she may have made, she has on the whole, lived for others and not for herself.”²⁶⁹ Perhaps Ellen Wilson was simply referring to her duties towards her husband and daughters but Burns goes on further to assert “Recovering Ellen Wilson’s discourse, for example, shows her to be an exemplar of progressive ideas and a ground breaking first lady.”²⁷⁰ Given her active but short public life, Ellen Wilson presents an image of the first lady as not only a political figure, representing her husband and her party, but an example of a progressive woman in the White House.

Even before her tenure as first lady commenced, Ellen Wilson confessed to the press, “I am tremendously interested in all the social and industrial reforms of which Mr. Wilson has made so close a study for years, and shall be interested in keeping touch with the development and working out of his plans for industrial betterment,” making it clear her interest in specific public issues pertaining

²⁶⁹ Wertheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice*, 92.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

particularly to her husband's politics were more the just superficial.²⁷¹ This type of revelation was new for first ladies. Ellen Wilson was the first to admit her interest in matters of reform, reflecting her image as a modern woman but also the political and social climate of the Progressive Era.

Like other first ladies before her, Ellen Wilson kept herself busy during the presidential campaign by reading various newspapers and keeping track of responses to her husband's speeches, often assisting him in formulating comments to be released to the press. Like presidents before him, Woodrow Wilson thought of his wife as one of his closest advisors and there exists considerable correspondence between the two that provides ample evidence of this element of their relationship.²⁷² In public, Ellen Wilson initially spoke out on issues that were fairly common for women in her position to comment on, one of which was the serving of alcohol at the White House during her tenure as its mistress.

Women's groups such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union petitioned Ellen Wilson, as they had with Edith Roosevelt and Helen Taft before her, to ban wine and liquor from the White House table. Although a public and political decision, the press and most of Americans saw this as a matter pertaining to the domestic sphere and therefore one that could be decided by the first lady. The *Washington Post* reported nine days after the inauguration that, "The President and Mrs. Wilson have not decided whether or not they will have wine

²⁷¹ "Simplicity to Be Keynote of White House Society," February 23, 1913.

²⁷² See Saunders, *Ellen Axson Wilson*, which is based on correspondence between Woodrow Wilson and Ellen Wilson. Also, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Series 2, Reels 38-66.

served at the White House state dinners.”²⁷³ Yet the decision, which ultimately fell on Ellen Wilson, was already made. Alcohol would be served at the White House, though the *Washington Post* was quick to note that Ellen Wilson did not drink herself and that this was allowed more as a courtesy for foreign dignitaries and guests who were accustomed to wine with meals.²⁷⁴

The public issues of alcohol consumption once again took center stage a short time later when prominent society women of Washington waited until the last possible moment to decide if attendees would be allowed to sip on mimosas and Bloody Marys at the “national welcome breakfast” being given in Washington, D.C. With the first ladies and her daughters as honored guests, several women’s groups asked that alcohol not be served. After much back and forth, the *Washington Post* finally reported that, “Until last night it was not definitely known whether or not there would be wine at the breakfast. Out of deference to Mrs. Woodrow Wilson and her daughter, Miss Eleanor...it was decided not to have any of the sparkling fluid, as Mrs. Wilson is a total abstainer.”²⁷⁵ In another instance where a personal decision became highly political, the article highlights Ellen Wilson as abstainer from alcohol and a sympathizer with middle class women across the nation who flocked to groups

²⁷³ “Wilson May Serve Wine,” *The Washington Post*, March 13, 1913.

²⁷⁴ “Society Above Party,” *The Washington Post*, March 30, 1913.

²⁷⁵ “Bar Breakfast Wine,” *The Washington Post*, April 5, 1913.

like WCTU in order to take a stand against the consumption of alcohol and the problems it produced.²⁷⁶

Soon, Ellen Wilson became more visible in less domestic types of issues. As first lady, Ellen Wilson's presence at certain meetings functions as an indicator of the approval of the president. Often her attendance, however, was couched as an attempt to find entertainment or pleasure in a presentation or discussion. For example, in April 1913, the *Washington Post* covered Ellen Wilson's attendance at a meeting of the Washington, D.C. Chamber of Commerce. At the meeting, which "prominent society folk" of Washington and Baltimore attended, William Elliot, a Baltimore architect, spoke about the establishment of a forest reserve between Baltimore and Washington²⁷⁷ Though presented as a leisure activity for the elite of Washington society, the issue of land conservation stood as an important political issue. The first lady's very public attendance at the meeting indicated support for the establishment of more natural reserves around urban areas like Washington and Baltimore, as part of the larger "City Beautiful" movement, which preserved and created natural spaces within large cities.

²⁷⁶ By the early twentieth century, the WCTU attracted almost 150,000, most of whom were white, middle class Protestant women. Because of its religious affiliation, the WCTU was a popular way for Christian women to enter the public sphere within the larger context of the rise of women's associations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

²⁷⁷ "Hear Talk on Forest," *The Washington Post*, April 9, 1913.

Although she earlier told the press she had little time to attend women's groups meetings, lest she miss an opportunity to be there for her husband should he need her, Wilson appeared to have time to attend other types of meetings, usually political ones that did not have a large number of other women in attendance. For example, harkening back to her Southern roots, Ellen Wilson attended a meeting of the Southern Industrial Association, a group which promoted industrial business growth in the south, which continued to lag behind the north, well into the twentieth century. The press reported, "Realizing what the active interest of the President's wife meant to the work of the Southern Industrial Association, Mrs. Wilson's appearance at the seventh annual meeting of the association gave satisfaction to the large Southern contingent in Washington."²⁷⁸ Ellen Wilson's presence implied the approval of President Wilson, which would be popular with his constituents in the South and in the capitol. Furthermore, the article acknowledged the first lady's power as a political figure by implying her attendance at the meeting meant the Southern Industrial Association's goals would receive more attention.

As first lady, Ellen Wilson did not strictly limit herself to work on public matters directly connected to her husband's presidency. She also used her influence as first lady to push her own agenda, which often included civic reforms that corresponded to the larger Democratic Party agenda of improving working conditions for the lower class. When Ellen Wilson became aware of poor

²⁷⁸ "Society of Capital Finds Wilson Girls Splendid Hostesses," April 1913 news clippings, Woodrow Wilson Papers.

working conditions in government offices, particularly the Post Office in Washington, she first discussed the issue with Postmaster General Albert Burleson and then investigated the problem further by touring the offices herself in order to gain a better understanding of the troubles affecting workers. Her tour was well publicized in the press. The issue was feminized in the *Washington Post*, which reported, “Mrs. Woodrow Wilson has taken an active interest in the betterment of conditions under which girls and women work here in the various government departments...She is said to have urged the President to help improve condition.”²⁷⁹

Ellen Wilson called for more comfortable break areas for women employees while also urging the Postmaster General to improve the conditions of those who worked with mailbags to limit the spread of infectious diseases. The *Washington Post* noted that in her tours of these offices and facilities, Wilson sought no special treatment. Rather she desired to observe the conditions as they were day in and day out for the workers. By performing these “inspections,” Ellen Wilson advocated on behalf of female government employees but also used her position as first lady and wife of the president to improve working conditions for those whose jobs meant exposure to possible disease. Months later, conditions for women workers improved markedly while the first lady enjoyed increased popularity because of her advocacy and, as the press reported, her democratic habits that required no special accommodations for her visit to government offices.

²⁷⁹ “Saves Guide, His Job,” *The Washington Post*. November 1, 1913.

Ellen Wilson's reform work did not stop with improving the working conditions for female government workers. Wilson would also become active in reforms affecting the African American community in Washington, D.C., which took on special connotations given her and Woodrow Wilson's background. Both Woodrow and Ellen Wilson were born during the Civil War in the South, and, as such, their position on race became an issue not only for Woodrow Wilson as president but also for Ellen Wilson as first lady. Ellen Wilson's parents were Southern slave owners and both the president and first lady's families were on the side of the Confederacy during the Civil War. Although African American men had the right to vote following the Civil War, after Reconstruction few in the South could exercise this right and those that did typically voted Republican, the party of Lincoln and emancipation. Woodrow Wilson's Progressive Party opponent, Theodore Roosevelt, attempted to lure black voters from the South by promising a progressive platform that would be an improvement over the complacency demonstrated by the Republican Party, which did little to improve conditions for African Americans yet expected their vote. Despite Roosevelt's promise, African American leaders, such as W.E.B. DuBois, endorsed Wilson's bid for the presidency on his word that he would work to integrate the government even more than Roosevelt or Taft.

This endorsement was betrayed by Wilson's decision to make interracial marriage a felony in the District of Columbia and to segregate jobs in the Post Office and Treasury which had been integrated since the Civil War. When Woodrow Wilson's cabinet met on April 11, 1913, Southern born Postmaster

General Albert Burleson expressed his dissatisfaction with conditions that meant that blacks and whites worked together and, in racist prose meant to incite racial animonies, were “forced” to use “the same drinking glasses, towels, and washrooms.”²⁸⁰ Soon, Woodrow Wilson began segregating the Post Office and the Treasury at the urging of Burleson and other cabinet members.

Historian Kathleen L. Wolgemuth, who condemned the segregation as racist, described the changes as “discreet and gradual,” noting even reputable newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* largely ignored the segregation, despite covering Ellen Wilson’s efforts to improve working conditions for women in the same government offices in detail.²⁸¹ When African Americans presented the president with a petition signed by twenty thousand Blacks from thirty-six states in opposition of these changes, the only publication to cover the event was the Black newspaper, the *Washington Bee*.²⁸² Woodrow Wilson later justified his actions as an “act of kindness” to “avoid friction” in federal government offices even though there were no reported incidents on record, indicating the offices operated normally since desegregating after the Civil War. These kinds of events were not well publicized by the Wilson administration whereas Ellen Wilson’s trip to view the working conditions in government offices and, later, her tour of the slums of Washington, D.C, were

²⁸⁰ Kathleen L. Wolgemuth, “Woodrow Wilson and Federal Segregation,” *The Journal of Negro History* 44, (April 1959): 158.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁸² Saunders, *Ellen Axson Wilson*, 246.

well exposed in order to show her, and the Wilson administration, in the best possible light.

Despite or perhaps because of Woodrow Wilson's racist leanings, in addition to Ellen's interests in reforming working conditions for women and children. She, as first lady, attached her name to a bill to help clear the slums of Washington, D.C., an area inhabited by mostly African Americans, in order to make way for green areas in the city. When Wilson put her name on the legislation, the first lady to ever do so, her plan included the construction of new housing for the former occupants of the alleys. But this was ultimately not a part of the bill that was pushed through following Ellen Wilson's death, producing charges that she was racist and did not consider the plight of the displaced population of the slums.²⁸³

A major article on Ellen Wilson's efforts in the slums appeared in the *Survey*, a publication popularized by social reformer and described as "a journal of constructive philanthropy." In the article, paradoxically titled "Home-Maker of the White House," Mrs. Ernest Bicknell, wife of the National Director of the Red Cross and herself a social reformer, describes the time in March of 1913, "when Mrs. Wilson announced her intention of seeing conditions [of the slums] for herself and of helping in the work of improvement, a new hope and inspiration came to the social workers of Washington."²⁸⁴ The plan, according to the *Washington Post*, was for Ellen Wilson, the women's department of the National

²⁸³ Constance M. Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capitol* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 175.

²⁸⁴ Bicknell, "The Home-Maker of the White House," October 3, 1914.

Civic Federation, and, Charlotte Hopkins, a prominent social reformer who was active in housing reform in Washington, D.C., to tour the most impoverished areas of the city, specifically its narrow alleys, populated by a largely destitute African American population. These alleys, the bill proposed, would be cleared of all squalor and converted into green areas or parks; their residents would be relocated to a different area of the city. Like Helen Taft before her, Ellen Wilson agreed to be the honorary chair of the women's department of the National Civic Federation. But unlike Taft, she subsequently commenced an investigation of these alleys.

Mrs. Bicknell's article in *Survey* portrayed the first lady as brave and courageous in her quest to inspect these conditions, revealing to the reader that, "Mrs. Wilson said that the President has cautioned her about going into the alleys, as he believed most of the cases [of smallpox] were there, but she thought we might visit some institutions or settlements."²⁸⁵ In addition to touring the alleys, the first lady was also taken to a different area to see housing that would perhaps provide a reasonable alternative for families displaced by the clearance of the alleys and slums. Bicknell reported, "The houses were constructed for the sake of demonstrating that small, sanitary houses could be built, rented for a reasonable sum and yet, by good management, be made to pay for a fair profit."²⁸⁶ Ellen Wilson found these houses suitable, if not preferable, alternatives to the current housing situation for these citizens. Bicknell framed Wilson's efforts as evidence

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

of her true self, a “Southern Christian woman working for the good of the Negro,” appealing to her southern constituency while, at the same time, hoping to win favor with African Americans, despite her husband’s lesser publicized segregation of federal offices as well as appeal to middle class white progressives in the North.

Not long after Ellen Wilson’s tour of the alleys, news of “A concentrated effort of both branches of Congress to clean up the undesirable condition of Washington alleys is expected to begin at noon Tuesday, when bills will be introduced in the Senate and House to condemn Goat alley and Snows court to make interior parks or playgrounds of them.”²⁸⁷ The press reported that the bill was a result of Ellen Wilson’s and Charlotte Hopkins’s visit to the allies as representatives of the National Civic Federations.²⁸⁸ This marked the first time that a first lady ever had her name formally and publicly attached to a piece of legislation.

Ellen Wilson’s influence and work on the bill did not stop there. When the bill went to the House and Senate for approval, progress stalled. As first lady, Ellen Wilson, believing strongly in her legislation, sought ways to reinvigorate support for the action. She worked quickly. Not long after the bill was hindered in the Senate, Wilson wrote a letter to the chairman of the House District Community asking him if he could give her any suggestions as how to help along

²⁸⁷ “Alleys Must Go, Bills Are Ready,” September 1913, news clippings, Woodrow Wilson Papers.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

the bill.²⁸⁹ In an attempt to not appear overly vigorous in her pursuit of the passage of this bill, Ellen Wilson did what any socially elite woman would do in order to gain support for her position. She had a party. Bicknell reported that Ellen Wilson gave a tea at the White House, inviting senators and representatives and their wives. Bicknell, going on further to disclose, “It was an informal, pleasant time, and I believe we made some friends for our bill.”²⁹⁰ Despite the image she crafted for herself as a Washington outsider, above corruption, Ellen Wilson was a shrewd lobbyist, with an obvious understanding of how to navigate the Washington political scene. She effectively used her position and status to push her bill while being careful to maintain a certain decorum and femininity in her pursuits, so as to not alienate or aggravate lawmakers or Americans, who maintained their watchful eye. Lisa Burns argues that, “Women had been fighting for political change for many years...Ellen [Wilson’s] innovation comes in her use of her institutional position, independent of her husband, to legitimate her participation in the male political sphere.”²⁹¹ Ellen Wilson, in a time where first ladies had yet to openly and publicly support specific legislation, managed to not only accomplish this while maintaining her popularity but also, eventually, got the bill passed as well.

Ellen Wilson was publicly and politically active in areas outside of her alley bill, providing advice, expertise and expressing interest in other pieces of

²⁸⁹ Bicknell, “Home-Maker of the White House” October 3, 1914.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Wertheimer ed., *Inventing a Voice*, 97.

legislation. For example, the *Washington Post* covered Ellen Wilson's skill as a negotiator when a dispute arose between the National Social Welfare League and Florence Crittenton Mission following the passage of the Kenyon Bill, which cleared "The Division," a segregated and impoverished part of Washington. The bill, which allotted \$25,000 to assist residents displaced by the slum clearing, was the source of the disagreement. Leaders from the National Social Welfare League, who promoted the social uplift of women, and Florence Crittenton Mission, founded to establish places for prostitutes and unwed mothers to live and learn life skills, both wanted control of the money and the responsibility of determining how best to provide relief to the poor with it.²⁹² Ellen Wilson suggested the two organizations form a joint committee to decide how best to spend the money to benefit the poor and homeless. The *Washington Post* reported the idea was agreed upon unanimously and the well publicized meeting assisted Ellen Wilson in portraying herself in the press as a diplomat and capable first lady.

Maintaining an image that embodied the best notions of traditional and modern womanhood in public and in the modern press was as important on the campaign trail as when Ellen Wilson assumed the role of first lady, particularly given her vigorous political activities. One of the most well-known yet difficult aspects of Wilson's life to reconcile with the ideals of traditional womanhood was that Ellen Wilson was a formally educated and professionally trained painter, a profession which she continued to pursue during her time in the White House.

²⁹² "She Stops Their Spat," *The Washington Post*, February 1, 1914.

She was the only first lady, at this point in American history, who maintained a professional life while serving as first lady and fulfilling her roles as wife and mother. As Lisa Burns points out in her study of Ellen Wilson, “The May 1913 issue of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* contained full color reproductions of two of her works to illustrate the artistic talents of the new first lady. The press seemed to accept and admire her talent, particularly because it did not interfere with her womanly duties which were still being touted as traits of the ‘true woman’ in most magazines.”²⁹³

In addition, Burns points out that what Wilson did with her modest income as a result of the sale of several of her paintings also figured prominently into the acceptance of her position as both a first lady and professional. “She was independently employed, earning an income that she did not turn over to her husband. Yet, reflecting the progressive ideals of philanthropy and volunteerism, she donated her earnings to a needy cause.”²⁹⁴ In fact, shortly before the presidential inauguration, the Wilson’s publicized Ellen Wilson’s donation of proceeds from some of her paintings to a school in Georgia.²⁹⁵ The article carefully noted that Wilson was not making the donation or creating the paintings in order to achieve celebrity or capitalizing on her status as soon-to-be first lady of the land. The article observed “A modest ‘E.A. Wilson,’ inscribed in the lower right hand corner of a number of the pictures, is the only mark which identifies

²⁹³ Wertheimer ed., *Inventing a Voice*, 79.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ “Mrs. Wilson Aids School,” *The Washington Post*, February 21, 1913.

the landscapes as the work of the coming ‘First Lady of the Land.’”²⁹⁶ Not desiring notoriety or fame, according to this sympathetic press article, the first lady was simply doing charitable work with the skills she possessed as a talented artist, which was not uncommon for upper and middle class women during the early twentieth century.

Later during her reign as first lady, she did accept money, albeit a modest sum, to create painting for those desiring a work by the first lady, supporting Burns’ contention that Wilson was the initial first lady to have a profession and income during her time in the position and, furthermore, enjoyed her profession. For example, the *Washington Post* reported that Ellen Wilson received money for a painting on one particular occasion when, “Mr. Smith wrote to Mrs. Wilson and enclosed a check for fifty dollars, complimenting her on the fact that she found time among her many duties, both private and public, to follow up her art, and expressing the feeling that he would greatly appreciate something she had painted.”²⁹⁷ The request could be construed as fairly unflattering for Ellen Wilson and certainly not an example of ideal womanhood during this time period, given many considered it fairly radical for women of her status to openly pursue careers, especially in so public a position. The press was careful to follow up that:

Mrs. Wilson’s career as an artist has been very successful and the material gained from the major part of her work has gone to charity. Despite her busy program at the White House, she finds time to practice her art and to take a personal interest in its result among people she does not know, it is

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ “Mrs. Wilson’s Art Work Here,” February, 1913 news clipping, Woodrow Wilson Papers.

evidenced by the letter she had written Mr. Smith and the painting she had sent him.²⁹⁸

The article, while highlighting the desirability of Ellen Wilson's paintings, the sale of the painting was also an opportunity for Wilson, as first lady, to emphasize her sense of charity and personal connection with her artwork as well as noting that her pursuits did not get in the way of her other duties as wife, mother, and then first lady.

The considerable amount of attention Ellen Wilson's career as an artist received in the press reflects the first lady's desire to address anxieties felt by more conventional Americans that the first lady strayed too far away from notions of traditional womanhood. Once again drawing on her talents as an artist and how they contribute to her fulfillment of the image of ideal womanhood she was meant to portray and, in keeping with the master plot of true success, Mabel Potter Daggett, who wrote on most first ladies during this time period, noted in her 1913 *Good Housekeeping* article, "Woodrow Wilson's wife has a talent for painting. She has a genius for home-making."²⁹⁹

Ellen Wilson's education, professional training as an artist, and aspirations for a career were also cause for considerable concern amongst her family. Her younger brother, Stockton Axson, noted in his personal reflections, part of the Woodrow Wilson Papers that were later edited into a biography on Woodrow Wilson, that:

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Mabel Potter Daggett "Woodrow Wilson's Wife," March, 1913.

I may remark that she was the amazement of her very practical uncle in Savannah...who was devoted to her, but never believed that she had any turn whatsoever for practicality. However, when one of the first steps in her married life, she attended Mrs. Rohrer's Cooking School in Philadelphia and learned to be a perfect queen of cooks, her uncle's astonishment knew no bounds.³⁰⁰

Her lack of "practicality" as a woman centered on her focus on education and career matters as opposed to more domestic concerns. Her brother later related that Ellen Wilson's uncle's concerns about her domesticity were further allayed when she finally married Woodrow Wilson and they started a family, noting, "This is merely characteristic of this early married life – she gave herself up completely to practical things. She, who was a reader of poetry and a painter of pictures, now collected, as her most valuable library, books on cooking and the rearing of babies."³⁰¹ Once she had children to raise, a house to keep, and a husband to care for, according to family lore, she dutifully abandoned all of her personal pursuits as a traditional woman was expected to do, even in the twentieth century. Significantly, Ellen Wilson had to read book on how to complete these traditional tasks, reflecting her unconventional upbringing.

Other publications spoke to the same issue. *Good Housekeeping* continued to reinforce Ellen Wilson's devotion as a home keeper reporting that, "In their first home at Bryn Mawr, he discovered that, having married an artist,

³⁰⁰ Stockton Axson, *Brother Woodrow: A Memoir of Woodrow Wilson* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1993), 91. The memoir was not published until 1993 under the direction of Arthur Link. Stockton Axson's memoir was archived as part of the Woodrow Wilson Papers. Axson's observations were made after Wilson's presidency, mostly on his pre-presidential years.

³⁰¹ Axson, *Brother Woodrow*, 91.

happily he had found a housekeeper!”³⁰² In addition, the image Ellen Wilson negotiated for herself in an article in *Current Opinion* argued that Wilson’s training and upkeep of her talents as an artist made her a better home keeper than she might have been otherwise, revealing “She has always kept in touch with artistic matters, however, in her successive homes have shown the effect of her trained hand as well as her trained eye.”³⁰³ In this way, Ellen Wilson’s pursuit of a career in art was continuously couched as something that made her a more skillful housekeeper, adding to her domestic prowess.

Having addressed her career as an artist, attention turned to Ellen Wilson’s ability to provide love and companionship to a partner as intelligent and important as her husband, the president. According to the master plot of true success, despite Wilson’s wealth and position, her true happiness and greatest fulfillment came from her personal life and domestic pursuits. As such, tending to her husband and children were the activities, Daggett reported, that made her happiest. With respect to her aptitude as a wife, *Good Housekeeping* reported that, “His [Woodrow Wilson] newspapers he has always found ready to his reading on his study table. His dinners have ever been served on time. His daughters have been reared to adore him.”³⁰⁴ Ellen Wilson went to great lengths to make the stressful life of her husband a bit easier by taking these steps in

³⁰² Daggett, “Woodrow Wilson’s Wife,” March 1913.

³⁰³ “The New Mistress of the White House,” *Current Opinion*, March 1913.

³⁰⁴ Daggett, “Woodrow Wilson’s Wife,” March 1913.

streamlining his time at home, making it as comfortable and problem-free as was possible.

Ellen Wilson's brother corroborated the *Good Housekeeping* assertions stating that to the best of her abilities, "She sheltered him from interruptions of his work...planned small masculine dinners for him that would stimulate him, packed him off by sheer will on short pleasure trips (theaters) to New York – never dreaming of accompanying him, for their funds were limited."³⁰⁵ As a partner, Ellen Wilson was willing to give of herself in order to make her husband's life more comfortable, an attribute present in every ideal woman and wife.

This comfort, however, was not to suggest that Ellen Wilson was a complacent partner without intellect or curiosity, as was desirable by a man in Woodrow Wilson's important position. Stockton Axson revealed, "Mrs. Wilson did criticize very freely his judgments, and he always would seek her objections as well as her praise" noting that in being a good wife and his best critic, "She merged her life in Mr. Wilson's, but she never lost her personality or independence of opinion."³⁰⁶ She read newspapers and books with great zeal in order to have a better understanding of issues pertaining to her husband's work but also educated herself in various other disciplines, using her keen intelligence to guide her through difficult material even the keenest of minds would have trouble navigating. "She was a vast reader," wrote Stockton Axson, "in pure

³⁰⁵ Axson, *Brother Woodrow*, 103.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 102. "Hibben" refers to John Grier Hibben, a philosopher, who succeeded Woodrow Wilson as president of Princeton University from 1912-1932.

literature and in philosophy. Mastered Kant, Hegel, Fichte, &c. Hibben said she understood Hegel better than most professors of philosophy.”³⁰⁷ Her brother thus portrayed her not only as a woman of incredible domestic skill but also one of splendid intellect. As the wife of the president, she was to be not only a wife, but an adviser as well, which reflected changing notions of what it meant to be a good wife and that the ideal marriage was more of a partnership than subjugation.³⁰⁸

Because she was the most overtly political first lady, using both official and unofficial spaces to promote her party’s agenda, the image Ellen Wilson negotiated in the modern press had to temper her political activity with a more traditional representation. Therefore, with the help of publications such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Current Opinion*, both geared towards women, Ellen Wilson crafted an image that purported to reveal her true self as a woman whose true fulfillment came from her roles as wife, mother and home keeper. This image, which appealed especially to the target audience of the magazines, benefitted both the first lady, who retained her popularity because of such flattering articles and the publications, which enjoyed exclusive access to the personal life of the first lady.

As the first southern first lady since the Civil War, articles on Ellen Wilson featured her roots in the south as particularly important to her domesticity. *Good Housekeeping* revealed, “She [Mrs. Wilson] has the Southern woman’s love of domesticity, and from the first her duties as home-maker have come ahead of

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 105.

³⁰⁸ D’Emilio and Freedman, 266.

all other considerations.”³⁰⁹ The home Ellen Wilson kept was characterized as one of peace and order with a focus on southern traditions and warmth. Daggett reported, “This is the house you feel instinctively that no one ever hurries, no one ever worries, and there is comfort always, everywhere.”³¹⁰ In order to achieve this kind of atmosphere, Ellen Wilson had to carefully manage her household with what she described as a “passion for order” that was exhibited in her neatly organized and well maintained living quarters, never mind that she had maids and servants to help her with these tasks at every turn. She was the manager of them all, thus responsible for the successes and failure of her home as a place of tranquility. Daggett went on to tout Ellen Wilson’s numerous domestic skills included that of being “an expert needle-woman” and adept cook. In fact, when observing one of her servants mixing a corn bread batter for dinner that evening, Daggett noted, “As we watch the deft swift strokes of the spoon, Mrs. Wilson is saying, ‘A cook from my household has to learn all of the Southern recipes and I train her myself,’” again emphasizing the benefits of her Southern roots in matters of domesticity.³¹¹

Focusing on her domesticity, the article also served as an opportunity to promote her party’s agenda through unofficial spaces and, again, focus on the simplicity that served as the cornerstone of the Democratic Party’s agenda throughout the recently concluded campaign. In addition, Wilson’s domesticity

³⁰⁹ Daggett, “Woodrow Wilson’s Wife,” March 1913.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

provided the basis to discuss a more controversial topic, the Wilson's well educated and politically active daughters. Daggett reported that Ellen Wilson's focus on simplicity in home keeping, entertainment, and in dress, "as has been a distinguishing characteristic with her," was a reflection of her traditional values that were extended in raising her three daughters, who all possessed college educations.

In a climate of change with regards to women's education, Ellen Wilson proceeded carefully when her daughters became young women and prepared for the last phase of their schooling. *Good Housekeeping* revealed:

When they were ready for college, the higher education in the fashionable institutions of learning for women had developed radical tendencies that taught new doctrines of woman's place and work in the world. Ellen Wilson has always believed that woman's best place is in the home. So she sought for her girls the education that should preserve the older traditions.³¹²

College educated herself, Ellen Wilson educated all three of her daughters within the home as children. But despite Ellen Wilson's purported efforts to provide a more traditional education, conditioning her daughters to believe a woman's work was in the home, not one of Ellen and Woodrow Wilson's daughters chose to forgo a career. In fact, Jessie Wilson, perhaps the Wilson's most visible and oft-written about daughter, was an ardent supporter of women's suffrage. Educated at Goucher College in Baltimore, Jessie Wilson worked for three years at a settlement house in Philadelphia before becoming involved with the Young Women's Christian Association.

³¹² Ibid.

Although *Good Housekeeping* reported, “Ellen Wilson did not want votes for women. The strange unrest of the sex that clamored for citizenship, she did not understand.” Wilson did concede that her daughter’s assertions about women’s suffrage did give her pause. Daggett reported, “Today Ellen Wilson has said, half-wonderingly, half-hesitantly, ‘The arguments of my Jessie incline me to believe in the suffrage for the working woman.’”³¹³ This strategic comment reflected the Democratic Party’s efforts to improve working conditions for the lower class but, in keeping with the party line, not overtly support women’s suffrage. Her comment may have also been an effort to appeal to both pro- and anti-suffrage groups, by appearing to understand the position of both sides.

Ellen Wilson’s sympathy for the working woman would be reflected later in her political activities but, in early 1913, when asked to speak in connection with issues in women’s work, Ellen Wilson “smilingly refused. ‘No,’ she said, “my woman’s work is at home with my husband and daughters.”” When asked to join certain organizations that supported not only better working conditions for women but also women’s suffrage, Mrs. Wilson replied similarly, “I cannot belong to things,” she said, “I have to keep myself free to be ready always when Mr. Wilson needs me.”³¹⁴ Skillfully, according to Ponce de Leon’s master plot of true success, Ellen Wilson showed herself as a woman who declined public political pursuits to attend to her husband and family, first and foremost. She thus

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

also appealed to her traditional constituents, revealing that her most important work took place in the home.

Ellen Wilson's distinction as being one of the most politically active first lady, one that had a career, and, by her own design, was also reported to be the best wife, mother, and home keeper was a reflection of the changing times she served as first lady in American history. In addition, Ellen Wilson also possesses a less fortunate distinction. She was never able to complete her tenure as first lady, dying in the White House in August 1914 from complications due to Bright's disease. On August 6, 1914, the *Washington Post* somberly broke the news that, "Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, wife of the President of the United States, is lying at the point of death."³¹⁵ The president responded by sitting patiently at the side of his dying wife, appealing to European monarchs as America teetered on the cusp of entering World War I, to stay their conflict so he could lend his full attention to his "constant helpmate and advisor."

Once news broke that the first lady was on her deathbed, the press revealed that she had been ill for some time. "One day last March," the *New York Times* reported, "Mrs. Wilson slipped on a rug at the White House, injuring her spine. An operation was necessary. After weeks of convalescence, she finally rose from her bed but the burden of a winter's activity at the White House, together with charity work, brought on nervous prostration."³¹⁶ The press never

³¹⁵ "President's Wife Sinking Fast," *The Washington Post*, August 6, 1914.

³¹⁶ "President's Wife Is Sinking Fast," August 1914, news clippings, Woodrow Wilson Papers.

mentioned her affliction of Bright's disease and Ellen Wilson passed away, with her husband at her side on August 6, 1914. A nation mourned.

The coverage of the first lady's death was somber yet flattering. It also reflected changing gender notions in America, focused on her reform work as much as her roles as a woman, wife and mother. The *Washington Post* described Ellen Wilson as, "Well born, of noble character, and with many charming accomplishments, this woman, of whom so little was known a few years ago was in every way qualified for the eminent position fate held in store for her."³¹⁷ The article, which was more a call to action than obituary, then disclosed that Mrs. Wilson's thoughts on her deathbed, in addition to her husband and daughters, was of her legislation. "Mrs. Wilson was deeply interested in the work of the National Civic Federation, of which she was an honorary member, and the closing up of all the alleys of Washington and the removal of their denizens to better environments was a subject which engaged her thoughts to the last."³¹⁸

Prominent newspapers from across the United States reported on the first lady's preoccupation with the passage of the alley bill during her illness; the press suggested that, perhaps, she began to contemplate her own legacy as first lady. The *New York Times* revealed, "But during all this time of illness and anxiety, Mrs. Wilson did not lose interest in her bill even though she heard nothing of it. On the very last morning of her life, she said to the President: 'I should be happier

³¹⁷ "Death of White House Chatelaine Brings Gloom to Nation's Capital," *The Washington Post*, August 7, 1914.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

if I knew the alley bill had passed.”³¹⁹ Some suggested a more traditional tribute to the first lady. Yet given the first lady’s focus on the alley bill in the moments leading to her death, there seemed to be only one clear way to pay tribute to her. In October 1914, the *New York Times* reported that, “Mrs. Wilson’s dying wish was that a bill for the elimination of unsanitary alleys of Washington be passed, and since her death this has been done.”³²⁰ So in death, Ellen Wilson achieved what she had hoped to in life: the passage of a bill with her name attached to it in order to better the living conditions for the poverty-stricken.

As grief stricken as Woodrow Wilson was, he remarried just fourteen months after the death of his first wife, making Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, a fellow member of the Virginia aristocracy, first lady. An intelligent, outspoken, and larger than life first lady, who some accused of running a “petticoat government” the wake of Woodrow Wilson’s stroke, Edith Wilson’s tenure and legacy as first lady often overshadows her predecessors. Despite her short time as first lady, Ellen Wilson negotiated an image of herself in the modern press that embodied what most Americans believed were the very best ideals of both modern and traditional womanhood. Wilson revealed her true self herself as the most progressive, independent, and modern first lady to date but also one, in keeping with the master plot of true success, who found true happiness and fulfillment in her life as a wife, mother, and home keeper.

³¹⁹ “Mrs. Wilson,” *The New York Times*, August 8, 1914.

³²⁰ “A Memorial to Mrs. Wilson,” *The New York Times*, October 14, 1914.

CHAPTER FIVE

In many ways, Edith Bolling Galt Wilson was the most traditional and most political of first ladies. Scholars Amy Slagell and Susan Zaeske argue, “Her notions about the proper role of women in society and her commitment to being the wife of Woodrow Wilson rather than the ‘first lady’ significantly shaped Edith Wilson’s rhetorical practices. Hers was rhetoric not of words, but of actions.”³²¹ As first lady, Edith Wilson said very little in public and maintained one of the most traditional images of any first lady during the early twentieth century, yet during her tenure she was accused by many of running a “petticoat government” after a stroke confined Woodrow Wilson to his bed. But because she maintained such a traditional image, she was able to effectively use her roles as wife and confidant to her ailing husband to exert perhaps the greatest control over the office of the President of the United States that a woman ever has, carving for herself one of the most unique tenure’s as first lady in modern history. She occupied the position of first lady through the First World War and the era when American women finally gained the right to vote but also serve as a symbol of ideal American democracy and womanhood on the international stage following World War I.

Edith Wilson’s tenure as first lady was highly unconventional one. She became first lady on the heels of Woodrow Wilson’s first wife and previous first lady, Ellen Wilson, dying of Bright’s disease. Then Edith Galt was a very different woman than her predecessor. Whereas Ellen Wilson worked vigorously

³²¹ Wertheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice*, 104.

using official and unofficial spaces to promote the Democratic Party's agenda, characterized by simplicity and thrift, on the surface, Edith Wilson did not appear concerned with such matters. The widowed wife of a wealthy jeweler, before and during her tenure as first lady, Wilson was seen adorned in lavish jewelry, the latest European fashions, and driving around town in her own car. Still, the modern press, with Edith Wilson's intervention, crafted an image of the first lady as domestic, practical, and, in keeping with the master plot of true success, unspoiled by her wealth and success. Edith Wilson's courtship with the president played out in the modern press. She skillfully said nothing but was able to effectively shape an image of herself as a woman wholly uninterested in political matters, hoping only to be a good wife and companion to the president, not a political figure.

As first lady, Wilson gave one public statement during her entire tenure as first lady. Thus she was able to successfully negotiate her image in the modern press as a traditional woman, placing her duties as a wife above all else, including her duties as first lady, which she initially appeared to take little interest in. During the war, Edith Wilson used unofficial spaces to promote her husband's party's agenda, particularly overseas, yet crafted an image of herself in the press as simple and democratic, despite her personal wealth, independence, and affinity towards the latest Parisian fashions. The traditional image she promoted, which the modern press purported to be an exclusive look at the first lady's true self, allowed her to appeal to her constituents while also exercising, the extent of

which is highly disputed, a degree of political power that no first lady has had before or since.

Edith Bolling was born into a wealthy family in Wytheville, Virginia in 1872, the seventh of eleven children, only nine of which survived past infancy. Her father, William Holcombe Bolling, fought on the side of the Confederacy in the United States Civil War then served as a circuit court judge and a lawyer after studying law at the University of Virginia. Her mother, Sallie White Bolling, was also a native Virginian. The Bolling family was prestigious before the Civil War and owned a plantation, proudly tracing their ancestry back to colonial Virginia settlers and the Powhatan tribe's Pochantas. The Bollings lost their plantation near Lynchburg, Virginia during the war but still maintained their standard of living by moving to Wytheville, Virginia, where William Bolling pursued a career in law.³²² Edith Bolling was home schooled until she was a teenager when she entered Martha Washington College in Abingdon, Virginia; but, she dropped out after one year when she returned from school thin and tired.³²³ When Edith Bolling was sixteen years old, she enrolled at Powell's School in Richmond, Virginia but when the headmaster fell ill and the school closed, Edith's parents ended her education with less than two years of formal instruction.

³²² Robert P. Watson and Anthony J. Eksterowicz, ed., *The Presidential Companion: Readings on the First Ladies* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 102.

³²³ Gould, ed., *American First Ladies*, 237.

At eighteen years old, Edith Bolling traveled to Washington, D.C. to spend time with her sister, Gertrude. By her own admission, Edith found “a new world was opened to her” as she discovered all of the things the nation’s capitol had to offer, such as theater, opera, and the high fashion she would go on to display as first lady.³²⁴ At this time, during her four month stay in Washington, D.C., Edith met Norman Galt, a partner in his family’s silversmith firm. A four year courtship ensued and on April 30, 1896, twenty-three year old Edith Bolling married Norman Galt, who was eight years her senior. The Galts lived comfortably in Washington, D.C. While Norman ran his family’s silver and jewelry store, Edith enjoyed the spoils of her husband’s substantial income by attending the theater, driving her car, and dressing in the latest fashions. However, as historian James S. McCallops notes, despite their wealth, because the Galts were in “the trades,” which included shopkeepers, the highest levels of Washington society were not open to them.³²⁵ Still, Edith Galt enjoyed regular trips to Europe and touring around Washington, D.C. in her car, one of the first women in Washington society to do so.

In 1903, Edith Galt became pregnant with a son. Shortly after his delivery, the child, who was never named, passed away. This left Edith unable to have another child. Five years later, tragedy struck again when Norman Galt was diagnosed with a rare liver disease and passed away on January 28, 1908. Edith inherited her husband’s jewelry business. She promptly hired a manager to

³²⁴ Wilson, *My Memoir*, 16.

³²⁵ Watson, ed. et al., *The Presidential Companion*, 103.

oversee daily operations and the business continued to turn a profit that kept Edith Galt comfortable in her current lifestyle. Through her friend, Alice Gertrude Gordon, Edith became acquainted with Dr. Cary Grayson, Woodrow Wilson's personal physician in the White House. Through Dr. Grayson, Edith Galt met Helen Woodrow Bones, the president's cousin, and commenced a friendship with her that would eventually lead to her meeting President Woodrow Wilson in March 1915, less than a year after his first wife's death. Woodrow Wilson invited Edith Galt to the White House for dinner in late March 1915 and their courtship began soon after.

One the eve of his bid for reelection in 1916, the president had a close female companion and the public and press quickly picked up on this novelty. The press dissected the relationship in articles that hit a fever pitch when, three months after their first date, Edith Galt became the fiancée of the President of the United States. Concern over how Woodrow Wilson's engagement less than one year after the death of his wife of thirty years would effect his reelection in 1916 prompted both Edith Galt and Wilson's closest advisers to ask the president to wait a year before proposing marriage. Long time White House Chief Usher, Irwin "Ike" Hoover articulated some of the immediate concerns with the president's budding relationship on the eve an election and an ongoing war in Europe, suggesting the president was neglecting his administrative duties, when he wrote:

The President was simply obsessed. He put aside practically everything, dealing only with the most important matters of state. Requests for appointments were put off with the explanation that he had important business to attend to...It had always been difficult to get appointments

with him; it was now harder than ever, and important state matters were held in abeyance while he wrote to the lady of his choice. When one realizes that at this time there was a war raging in Europe, not to mention a Presidential campaign approaching, one can imagine how preoccupied he must have been.³²⁶

Nevertheless, Woodrow Wilson did not want to wait to make Edith Galt his bride and proposed marriage in October, 1915, just five months after the sinking of the *Lusitania* by German U boats off the coast of Ireland, which killed nearly two thousand people.

Political and social instability in Mexico and war in Europe were the foremost issues of the 1916 election. Woodrow Wilson, running against Republican Charles Evans Hughes, proposed a platform that featured “reasonable preparedness” in case of a direct threat to the United States security and progressive social legislation that left the issue of women’s suffrage in the hands of the states. The centerpiece of Wilson’s platform was his commitment to neutrality in the face of war, running on the slogan “He kept us out of war.” Hughes, a Supreme Court Justice and former governor of New York, posed a considerable challenge to Wilson and therefore, his pledge for neutrality in the face of war became increasingly important, as did making sure press coverage of his fiancée remained as favorable and apolitical as possible.

Because of the timing of the engagement and her propensity toward luxuries, Edith Galt and the Democratic Party immediately set to work negotiating an image of the soon-to-be first lady in the modern press as a traditional woman and, despite her engagement, a non-political figure. Edith Galt was relatively

³²⁶ Personal diary notes, n.d., Irwin Hood Hoover Papers, Box 6, Folder 8, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

unknown prior to her engagement to the president. As such she was able to begin crafting an image of herself in the press from scratch. The modern press purported to offer its readers an inside look at life of the president's fiancée. Edith Galt, with the press and the White House, negotiated an image of herself as a woman who embodied the most traditional notions of womanhood and, at the same time, possessed an air of intelligence and breeding required to fulfill her unique position as future first lady and wife to a head of state. The *Washington Post* described Edith Galt's propensity towards all things domestic as well as a complete description of her appearance, which was consistently stressed in the modern press.³²⁷ The article sought to answer questions for a public insatiably curious about the president's fiancée, "Who she is, what she does and how she will measure up in her duties as mistress of the White House as a successor to ... a very long list of others whose skill at entertainment made famous the season's receptions and state dinners, are topics which are all-absorbing throughout the Capital."³²⁸ After all, only a year passed since Ellen Wilson died, leaving Washington society without a proper figurehead.

In the fall of 1915, the American public remained unclear how Edith Galt would "measure up" to previous first ladies, especially her deceased predecessor, but the forecast on this situation described by the *Washington Post*, which was largely supportive of Woodrow Wilson and his administration, was a positive one. When discussing the many attributes of the future first lady, the *Post* reported:

³²⁷ "Mrs. Galt Wears Ring," *The Washington Post*, October 10, 1915.

³²⁸ "Mrs. Galt's Dimpled Beauty Lends Charm to Sterling Merits," *The Washington Post*, October 10, 1915.

What the glare reveals is a very normal woman, dimpled and smiling, pretty to look upon, domestically inclined and fond of the great outdoors, studied, companionable and well-born. She is a homemaker, thoroughly conversant with the responsibilities of the management of a large house; she is practical and business-like, an accomplished musician, simple in her tastes and exceedingly sweet of disposition.³²⁹

The modern press was also able to infer a seemingly infinite amount of information, since so little was known about Edith Galt, from her looks. “Mrs. Galt is about 5 feet 4 inches tall and a trifle plump. Her hair, which is abundant, is a very dark brown, seeming black at first glance, and wavy. She wears it simply. Her large, well set eyes are full of soft hazel...Her eyes speak pages,” and further postulated that “It does not take a seer to tell by her mouth, she is sympathetic and sincere.”³³⁰ Just a little over a week shy of her forty-third birthday, Edith Galt was not a traditional beauty so numerous descriptions of her looks focused on meaning and importance behind a few of her more compelling features and flatteringly glossing over the rest.

Given this article was, for many readers, their first exposure to the first lady-to-be, the *Washington Post* also made a point to reveal Edith Galt’s distinguished and unique pedigree. The article revealed that Galt was a descendant of famous Native American princess, Pocahontas. It remains unclear whether or not the *Washington Post* ever worked to substantiate such a claim; however, no one seemed particularly intent on checking this element of Edith Galt’s heritage. Subsequent investigations, including one by the National Trust of

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid.

Historic Preservation, indicates that Galt actually was a distant relative to Pocahontas, through her marriage to John Rolfe, although she was seven times removed from the famous Native American princess.³³¹ Historians, such as Philip J. Deloria, have argued that, although Edith Galt was not “playing Indian,” this kind of association with Native American heritage was increasingly common during the early twentieth century. Deloria defines “playing Indian” as a activity that became increasingly popular at specific points in history, where people without Native American ancestry dressed, acted, or participated in Native American ceremonies. He suggests “playing Indian helped nervous city dwellers deal with modernist concerns about nature, authenticity...and various forms of

³³¹ Although it is not clear if the press substantiated Edith Wilson’s claim about her ancestry, subsequent investigations substantiate her claim. The National Trust of Historic Preservation trace Wilson’s heritage as follows: “Pocahontas first became acquainted with the English colonists who settled in Jamestown around 1607. In 1614 she converted to Christianity and married John Rolfe, a Jamestown colonist. In 1616 Pocahontas, together with her husband and their young son, Thomas, traveled to England. There Pocahontas was presented to King James I, the royal family, and the rest of London society. Before returning to Virginia, Pocahontas fell ill. She died in Gravesend, England in March 1617. Thomas Rolfe, the couple’s only son, returned to Virginia in 1635 at the age of 20. His daughter, Jane Rolfe, married Colonel Robert Bolling, a direct ancestor (7 times removed) of First Lady Edith Bolling Wilson. The descendants of Jane Rolfe Bolling, including Edith, were known as “Red Bollings” as opposed to “White Bollings,” because of their Indian heritage.” The National Trust of Historic Preservation also has an unfinished belt, beaded by Pocahontas, which was presented to Edith Wilson in January, 1916. John Powell, “Edith Bolling Wilson: America’s First Native American First Lady?”, National Trust of Historic Preservation, accessed March 3, 2011, <http://www.preservationnation.org/issues/diversity/native-american-heritage-in-preservation/non-nthp-blogs/edith-bolling-wilson.html>. The National First Ladies Library also appears to support Edith Wilson’s claim in their biography on her. National First Ladies Library, accessed March 3, 2011, <http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=29>.

relativism.”³³² Edith Galt’s relationship to Pocahontas would be brought up many times in subsequent publications, and was even made known to the Queen of England before she met Galt so she was aware that the first lady, too, was descended from royalty. In this way, the soon-to-be first lady essentially equated herself to American royalty in the press while also appealing to modern society’s need for authentic experiences by touting her link with Native American culture, which became an increasingly popular with modern city dwellers in the early twentieth century.³³³

In addition, readers were told that Edith Galt was very well read, providing suitable, if not stimulating companionship for the president, noting that she spends several hours a day in her personal library at her home on Twentieth Street, where she reads the most important and “choice” volumes. Despite her distinctive looks, breeding, ability to drive, and breadth of knowledge acquired through reading, the *Washington Post* noted that in some ways Edith Galt was a normal woman. For example, she attended baseball games with President Woodrow Wilson although, the press revealed, she did not fully understand the nuances of the game. The article appearing in the *Washington Post* was the first in a long line of items on the soon-to-be first lady that were, at once, an effort by the modern press to offer an inside look at Edith Galt’s true self but also an effort by Galt, herself, and her party, to negotiate an image of her press that would

³³² Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1998), 99.

³³³ For a full discussion a rise in the popularity of representations of Native American culture and modernity see “Natural Indians and Identities of Modernity,” in Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 95-127.

appeal to Democratic Party constituents, despite her decidedly undemocratic habits and tastes.

Emphasizing her role as a modern celebrity, the contents of the Edith Galt's bridal trousseau were the subject of many articles, mostly because what the first lady wore and the styles she favored often became the standard for Washington society. As Edith Galt assembled her trousseau, the modern press covered her purchases intently, understanding the importance for other society women to know what the first lady would be wearing following the late December nuptials. It would, given her status as modern celebrity, dictate the fashions that would be in demand for next season:

To the role of first lady of the land Mrs. Galt will bring rare beauty and charm, and she bids fair to rival in popularity Mrs. Grover Cleveland, the last woman to come to the White House as the bride of a president. She is a notably well dressed woman. She knows what to wear, when and where to wear it, and her example will, without doubt, have considerable effect on modiste in the Capital. It will be a restraining effect, however for her gowns and hats display a strong tendency to simplicity and conservatism.³³⁴

Despite this report, the “strong tendency to simplicity and conservatism” was not manifested in Edith Galt's shopping habits. Galt bought several outfits from different designers in order to keep the fashions she intended to wear following her wedding a surprise, which only fueled additional speculation by the ladies of Washington society, who surmised they must be on the cutting edge of fashion in order to keep pace with the new first lady. All of Washington's society women held their breath while Edith Galt shopped, while the modern press continued to

³³⁴ “Few Brides in White House Brought Personal Fortunes to Distinguished Husbands,” *The Washington Post*, October 24, 1915.

describe Galt's habits and tastes as "simple and conservative," purporting to reveal this as her true self, though she was independently wealthy and remained, even under scrutiny, unafraid to indulge in expensive clothing and jewelry.

In many ways, Edith Galt was the opposite of Ellen Wilson. Whereas Ellen always shied away from the spotlight and demonstrations of what she thought were "excesses," Galt seemed very comfortable in this position. Often seen wearing luxurious fabrics like velvet and satin, decked out in diamonds, Paris fashions, and wearing a fresh orchid corsage on a daily basis, Edith Galt demonstrated little of the modesty and restraint held by Ellen Wilson in these types of unofficial spaces. In a similar vein, whereas Ellen Wilson was the first mistress of the White House to have her name attached to legislation and also one who spoke out on certain issues to the press, Edith Galt never made a statement to the media as first lady and when she was asked to make public comments, it often reflected her desire to be avoid becoming a political figure.

Notably, when she was asked to say a few words after presenting a group of Girl Scouts with an honorary flag for selling the most Liberty bonds, she said "It gives me great pleasure to present this flag. I have never made a speech so I can only wish you well, and say that you are all very good little Americans,"³³⁵ This was literally the only public statement Galt would make as first lady. In contrast to her predecessor Ellen Wilson, who was more comfortable dealing in political matters or social problems as opposed to society gatherings, Edith Galt

³³⁵ "First Lady of the Land Presents Flag to Troop 57, Girl Scouts, For Selling Largest Number of Liberty Bonds," *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, June 27, 1918.

appeared every bit a traditional society woman in the sense that she enjoyed dressing up, entertaining, and being by the president's side but would not act as a political or public figure, outside of appearances in traditionally feminine spaces.

A bride in the White House was also something that was fairly unique but Edith Galt and modern journalists' handling of the event made it even more of a spectacle. Not since Frances Folsom, at age twenty-one, became the wife of then-president Grover Cleveland in 1886, at the age of forty-nine, had a president taken a bride during his tenure in office. This generated a special fervor in Washington and increased Edith Galt's status as a modern celebrity. The *Washington Post* noted, "So many letters have come for Mrs. Galt since the announcement that an extra postman has been put on to deliver her mail."³³⁶ Significantly, Edith Galt seemed to purposefully increase the enthusiasm surrounding her impending nuptials and manipulate the modern press by keeping everything from the date of the wedding to her selection to the contents of her trousseau a deep secret. The *Washington Post* reported, "Friends of Mrs. Galt said yesterday that she is planning to leave Washington for a few days, but has kept her destination a profound secret."³³⁷ It remained unclear if she was leaving to be wed, to shop for her trousseau or simply to visit friends but the modern press further noted that, "The curiosity regarding Mrs. Galt is almost unbelievable," often it seemed, by

³³⁶ "Dine at White House," *The Washington Post*, October 19, 1915.

³³⁷ "Wedding Day is Near," *The Washington Post*, October 29, 1915.

her own design.³³⁸ This curiosity also created a large demand for stories pertaining to Edith Galt.

Finally, in late October, the wedding day was announced. The *New York Times* reported “In order to quiet speculation, President Wilson and Mrs. Norman Galt today authorized the announcement that their marriage will take place near the close of December. Their plans are for a very simple ceremony.”³³⁹ Yet this announcement only awakened conjecture regarding the day, the hour, and place for the ceremony not to mention what the bride would be wearing for her gown. Shortly after announcing her wedding date, Edith Galt took a well publicized trip to New York City in order to find her dress. The *New York Times* reported “Mrs. Norman Galt, the President’s fiancée, arrived in New York yesterday afternoon, and will spend the next few days making purchases for the trousseau of the First Lady of the Land” since Washington D.C. shops did not carry fashions that were as quite “of the moment” as the European imports to be found on Fifth Avenue.³⁴⁰

This shopping trip marks another sharp contrast between Edith Galt and former first ladies, who worked hard to promote an image of themselves as practical and democratic. While some first ladies, such as Edith Roosevelt and Ellen Wilson, were less fashion conscious women and only wore American made

³³⁸ “Going to Shadowlawn,” *The Washington Post*, October 31, 1915.

³³⁹ “Wilson Wedding Set for Year’s End,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 1915.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

fashions, Helen Taft enjoyed wearing expensive clothing yet she not make a spectacle of her love of the latest fashions, as did Galt. The *Washington Post* disclosed that “Mrs. Norman Galt has left a trail of anguish and uncertainty in New York that extends clear through the organization of at least three of Fifth Avenue’s swellest dress making establishments...At each of the establishments Mrs. Galt has selected several creations but she has refused to even let the makers know which will be her choice for the gown of gowns.”³⁴¹ While the bridal gown of the first lady had to be special, there was a certain gamesmanship in Galt’s approach to its purchase that invited attention. While Edith Galt did not want to be a political figure, she enjoyed her role as a modern celebrity, promoting her opulent lifestyle and image as a traditional Southern belle.

Another element that set Edith Galt apart from other first ladies was that she was a woman of means before she became engaged to the president. The widow of a jeweler, she owned property and amassed a modest fortune in the wake of her husband’s death, continuing to oversee the business end of Galt Jewelers until she remarried. Before her wedding, the press reported “She [Edith Galt] is almost constant consultation with her lawyers as she wishes to dispose of the Galt Jewelry Store and settle her financial affairs before the wedding.”³⁴² While conventional society considered it acceptable to own and run the jewelry store while she was single and needed to provide for herself, once she took

³⁴¹ “Puzzled by Mrs. Galt,” *The Washington Post*, November 7, 1915.

³⁴² “Going to Shadowlawn,” October 31, 1915.

another husband, this situation would need to change if she wanted to retain the image she was negotiating with the press as a traditional woman.

Still, the press noted, that Edith Galt had done sufficiently well for herself in the time between her husband's passing and her engagement to Woodrow Wilson. The *Washington Post* reported, "The \$300,000 fortune of Mrs. Norman Galt, who is to be the next 'first lady of the land,' although small as fortunes are accounted at the present day, would have seemed large to the former mistresses of the White House, for very few of them were heiresses."³⁴³ Edith Galt was not an "heiress" but she was able to support herself and live comfortably; her tastes and habits indicative this. These tastes and habits did not change once she became the president's fiancée. Galt enjoyed wearing lavish jewelry, high end European fashions and, everyday, a fresh orchid with coordinating ensemble.³⁴⁴

One of the reasons Edith Galt, even as soon-to-be first lady, did not use unofficial spaces to promote the president's party's agenda and was able, for a time, to avoid becoming an overtly political figure, was because of her announcement that she would become the president's wife but first lady in name only. Edith Galt would not take on any of the official duties of first lady, despite her marriage. After the death of Ellen Wilson, her cousin Helen Bones and eldest daughter Margaret, took up the official duties as mistresses of the White House and Galt gave little indication this situation would change. The *New York Times*

³⁴³ "Few Brides in White House Brought Personal Fortunes to Distinguished Husbands," *The Washington Post*, October 24, 1915.

³⁴⁴ "Lunch with Mr. Galt," *The Washington Post*, October 24, 1915.

reported, “It has also been clear in the last few days that Mrs. Galt, even when she becomes Mrs. Wilson, will assume no leadership in social affairs such as has distinguished the regime of former mistresses of the White House.”³⁴⁵ Given the circumstances of her first ladyship, which included a campaign, World War, and presidential illness, there were few opportunities for official entertainment; however she, by necessity, did assume many of the duties of first lady after Wilson’s 1916 re-election. Before the 1916 election Edith Galt remained, by her own design, a non-political, non-partisan figure in the modern press and in Washington society.

On December 18, 1915, given away by Mrs. William Bolling, Edith Bolling Galt became Edith Wilson and Americans from across the country were delighted. Edith Wilson used her wedding as a way to promote herself as a traditional Southern belle. Although few details on the ceremony were reported, the articles that surfaced were a testament to Edith Wilson’s traditional outlook on a woman’s place in a marriage and in society. The wedding was very small, taking place in the Galt’s home with only forty guests in attendance. The bride, who, in Southern tradition, was dressed by “the loving hands of her old black mammy,” wore a black gown, surrounded by bouquets of roses and, of course, orchids in what was described as a traditional and simple ceremony that ended, in an effort to appear democratic and practical, with the bride cutting the wedding

³⁴⁵ “Mrs. Galt Remains True to Old Church,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1915.

cake with a regular table knife.³⁴⁶ Edith Wilson publicized that the ritual of Protestant Episcopal Church, in which wife promises to ‘obey,’ was read by the Reverend Herbert Scott Smith.³⁴⁷ This was in contrast to the Frances Folsom Cleveland, the most recent White House bride before Edith Wilson, who read the vows “love, honor, and keep” as opposed to “love, honor, and obey” in 1886.

Edith Wilson’s first formal appearance as Woodrow Wilson’s wife came three weeks later at a reception given for the Pan American Congress at the White House. Wilson’s initial outing as first lady as well as the character of the reception, which was being held in place of the normal international diplomatic reception because of the outbreak of war in Europe, was well received in the modern press. Shortly after the first of the year, the Washington social season started with, as the *Washington Post* reported, “A brilliant reception given at the White House last night by President and Mrs. Wilson crowned the social attentions paid visiting delegates to the Pan-American Scientific Congress during the past two weeks.”³⁴⁸ This was a brilliant yet somewhat delicate affair given the United States consistent effort to keep from entangling itself in foreign alliances in the pre-World War I time period. As first lady, Edith Wilson moved easily amongst the guests and, for her part, looked every bit the role of American aristocracy, the *Washington Post* reported that:

³⁴⁶ “‘Old Black Mammy’ Will Dress Mrs. Galt on her Wedding Day,” *The Washington Post*, December 2, 1915.

³⁴⁷ “Orchids and Roses Frame Scene When Troth is Plighted,” *The Washington Post*, December 19, 1915.

³⁴⁸ “White House Open to Pan-Americans,” *The Washington Post*, January 8, 1916.

Mrs. Wilson was lovely in a gown a white satin brocaded in silver, the upper part trimmed in pearls. She wore a jeweled pin in her dark hair and single orchid at her waist. Like the President, she shook hands with every guest and responded graciously to many expressions of good wishes. Her charming bearing and magnetic smile won her at once a place in many hearts.³⁴⁹

Unlike the former first lady, who often downplayed the lavishness of White House events, including her dress, and did not delight in shaking hands but did not shy away from voicing her point of view on political matters at the dining table, Edith Wilson was content to present herself, bejeweled in satin and silver, as the president's agreeable wife.

In contrast to Ellen Wilson's more simple and democratic taste, Edith Wilson's affinity for high fashion sent society women into frenzy each time a formal reception was held. The *Los Angeles Times* reported of Edith Wilson's first official reception as the mistress of the White House, "For a week, the only real object in anyone's life in Washington was to get an invitation to Mrs. Wilson's party...The first invitation that went out to Mrs. Wilson reception caused a boom through the whole shopping district. For a week, every modiste's shop has been making a tearing scramble."³⁵⁰ In this way, Edith Wilson embodied some of the most traditional roles held by high society women, that of trendsetter and fashion connoisseur, while also maintaining her status as a modern celebrity as first lady that was only matched by fellow "glamour girl" Frances Folsom Cleveland, who dazzled the public and press with her costumes after becoming the youngest first lady at the age of twenty-one. However, this image

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ "First Lady Receives," *The Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 1916.

hardly reflected the Wilson administration's emphasis on moralism in social legislation, business, politics and foreign policy, which were hallmarks of his tenure in office.

Once Edith Wilson became first lady, there was a notable shift in the way she was portrayed in the modern press. Although she continued to negotiate an image of herself as a non-political figure, articles in the modern press after she became first lady, attempted to show her in a more democratic light. Regardless of political affiliation, a special importance was placed on the first lady's sense of "democracy" and simple tastes. In one particularly revealing article, the *Washington Post* reported on Edith Wilson's attendance at a discount lunch in the Baltimore area, relating to readers that "Mrs. Woodrow Wilson came to Baltimore today and in democratic fashion enjoyed a 30-cent luncheon, which included Maryland biscuits."³⁵¹ While feasting on a thirty cent luncheon appeared simple and democratic in nature, the article goes on to describe the outfit which the first lady selected to wear to this specific event, a description which appeared in nearly every article describing the first lady's attendance at any function. "Mrs. Wilson wore a beautiful tailored suit in violet shade and a small black turban. She also wore orchids, her favorite flower, with which President Wilson keeps her supplied. She wore a number of diamond rings and several handsome pins completed her jewelry."³⁵² Though Edith Wilson did not make any kind of public statement at this event, the idea that she was dripping in diamonds and orchids to

³⁵¹ "Bride Takes Pot Luck," *The Washington Post*, January 27, 1916.

³⁵² *Ibid.*

attend a modest luncheon indicates that she was not necessarily concerned with appearing “democratic” in her tastes or “unadorned” as Ellen Wilson was described before her.

Even Republican first lady Helen Taft, who is closest in style and habits to Edith Wilson, did not have as well publicized a jewelry and gown collection. Still, the volume of newspaper and magazine articles on Wilson is a testament to the idea a glamorous first lady could be as popular, if not more so, than a simple one, regardless of political affiliation. It also demonstrates the unconventional approach Edith Wilson used during her tenure as first lady. Appearing uninterested in anything pertaining to politics or public speaking, Edith Wilson was content to dress the role of American aristocrat by the president’s side and when the crowd exclaimed “‘Isn’t she beautiful!’” Edith Wilson would smile, wave, and be silent.³⁵³

As first lady, Edith Wilson continued to widely publicizing her Native American lineage. The *Washington Post* covered the meeting between the first lady and a Mohawk woman, who also claimed to be a descendant of the Native American princess Pochontas, so she could “pay her compliments in person.” While the episode appears in neither Wilson’s memoirs nor the biographies on her and Woodrow Wilson, it represents a significant effort on the part of the first lady to use her Native American roots as a means of showing her authentic self. As Deloria explains, in the modern city, representations of Native Americans were

³⁵³ “Play Wedding March for Mrs. Wilson as She Appears with Husband in Pittsburgh,” *The Washington Post*, January 30, 1916.

increasingly desirable and associated with the natural or authentic world. Edith Wilson used this to her advantage by agreeing to meet with the Mohawk princess and her husband and chief of the Mohawk tribe.

The article recaptured the events of the cordial meeting and gave readers a sense not only of the interactions between the first lady and the Native American woman but also the scene such a unique assembly created. Traveling from New York to meet the first lady in Cleveland, the Native American group met with Edith Wilson in the presidential suite at Hotel Holenden. The *Washington Post* reported “The Indians were all garbed in their native raiment and afforded a picturesque scene as they stood gazing at the first lady of land,” giving readers the sense that the meeting was not between two princesses as much as it was intended show colorfully dressed Native Americans paying the first lady homage.³⁵⁴

Edith Wilson would draw on her connection to Pocahontas later, when in the midst of World War I, she was asked to name a fleet of 120 vessels for the United States Navy and christen them before they left port. In selecting a set of names for the ships, the first lady chose carefully, the *Washington Post* revealing that “The president’s wife, a close student of the American Aborigines and a direct descendant of Pocahontas decided the vessels could perpetuate the history of America’s place in the world in no better fashion than through reversion to the language of the red man.”³⁵⁵ The first lady named each vessel after a Native American word or place, reemphasizing her connection to the distinguished place

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ “Mrs. Wilson Names New Ships,” *The Washington Post*, March 6 1917.

of American history in the context of the world but also that of the United States Armed Services. By promoting her Native American ancestry in the modern press, Edith Wilson negotiated an image of herself that associated her with America's earliest roots and the authenticity associated with Native American culture. At the same time, she disassociated herself with recently admitted immigrants, who were traditionally confined to the working class and often ostracized during and after World War I, when nativist sentiment was at a high.

Edith Wilson's Native American ancestry was also important to her image during her tour of Europe with the president following World War I. Slagell and Zaeske contend:

Indeed, according to Edith's memoir, an old French Duchess disdained the very idea of meeting the common Wilson until she learned of Edith's ancestral link to Princess Pocahontas. Though the Duchess found Edith royal lineage compelling, the first lady herself made little of it and instead negotiated the issue of status by making it clear that she represented, rather than ruled, the women of America.³⁵⁶

Edith Wilson was, at once, able to secure an image of herself as American royalty and democracy by promoting herself as a benevolent representative of American women, though few could, in reality, match her style, pedigree or manner.

As the president's wife and companion, Edith Wilson exerted a certain amount of influence, the kind which any wife might have over her husband, and promoted it in the press to increase her popularity. In this case, she suggested that the Inaugural Ball, which her predecessor Ellen Wilson had done away with, viewing it as a symbol of the excesses of preceding Republican administration,

³⁵⁶ Werthheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice*, 113.

should be reinstated. Much to the delight of high society in Washington, the *Washington Post* reported that “President Wilson’s opposition to the old custom of holding an inaugural ball has been overcome, it is stated here on good authority, by the persuasiveness of Mrs. Wilson. The first lady of the land enjoys functions of this sort and there is joy in Washington at the news.”³⁵⁷ Washington society was so thrilled, in fact, that the *Washington Post’s* Society Page printed a very flattering commentary on Edith Wilson as first lady on the day of her first anniversary to President Wilson, celebrating a return to the traditional womanhood and elitism that had been part of White House culture for the better part of the twentieth century:

Mrs. Wilson has made a wonderful record as the first lady of the land in this one short year. For grace and charm, she has had few superiors in the difficult position and she has made hosts of friends during this time. She was plunged into the most prominent place in the country from a quiet, secluded life in residential society, with no experience whatever in official society, and has triumphed over all obstacles and won friends on every side.³⁵⁸

As Washington celebrated the Wilson’s anniversary and anxiously awaited the return of the first inaugural ball in eight years, Washington society was abuzz with speculation as to the degree of brilliance of a ball that would bear the first lady’s mark. In addition, because it was her husband’s second term in office and the election was over, Edith Wilson prepared to take up more of the official duties as first lady and hostess at the White House yet never made any sweeping or

³⁵⁷“Plan Inaugural Ball,” *The Washington Post*, November 13, 1916.

³⁵⁸ “Society,” *The Washington Post*, December 18, 1916.

crucial changes as had the first ladies before her in order to remain as apolitical as possible.

One of the minor yet significant changes Edith Wilson did make was opening the blue room in the White House to all guests during official receptions, which under Roosevelt, Taft and the previous Mrs. Wilson, was reserved for dignitaries. The change was well-publicized and an effort to promote the first lady as more democratic, aligning her decision with Jeffersonian ideas about egalitarianism. The *Washington Post* reported, “The blue room was open to all guests...A tribute must be made to the first lady of the land for this radical change, as it is due to her ideas of the real Jeffersonian simplicity to do away with barriers between the distinguished and the less distinguished.”³⁵⁹ The *Washington Post* went on to celebrate the accomplishments of Edith Wilson. In addition to her devotion to “Jeffersonian simplicity,” the press acknowledged the very arduous position Edith Wilson occupied when she became the president’s companion, then wife and first lady. “No woman has ever stepped into the difficult position of White House hostess who has had less criticism than has the present mistress, who will continue in this trying role. With no experience in official life, little errors were to be expected. But they have not been found.”³⁶⁰

Because she negotiated and maintained such a traditional image in the modern press, Edith Wilson was the subject of very little criticism. She was not aloof like Edith Roosevelt, domineering like Helen Taft, or uninterested in the

³⁵⁹ “Greet the Congress,” *The Washington Post*, January 24, 1917.

³⁶⁰ “Stay Society Heads,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1917.

social aspects of White House life like Ellen Wilson. Instead, by saying little and being a constant and always stylish, companion to the president, Edith Wilson won the accolades not only of the *Washington Post* but of the public and press in general.

One of Edith Wilson's greatest appeals was her ability to represent the most traditional notion of womanhood during uncertain times in American politics and society. While Woodrow Wilson, on the eve America's entrance into World War I, dealt with delicate situation not only in warring Europe but also continuing problems in neighboring Mexico, Edith Wilson continued to be a symbol of normalcy and convention. When the United States declared war on the Axis Powers on April 6, 1917, Edith Wilson would be required to become more than a modern celebrity. As first lady, she now needed to negotiate an image of herself as ideal example of feminine patriotism for American women during world war. Her patriotic efforts maintained her traditional and apolitical image, at the same time, offering American women an example to emulate with their own contributions.

The Committee on Public Information under George Creel worked feverishly to create propaganda posters to bolster American support of the war effort, which remained, for most, a remote ideal. Edith Wilson, as a first lady, also played an important part in attracting women to the war effort. Even though she continued to avoid making speeches or any kind of public commentary to the press, she understood her visible position required her to do what she could to

support to war effort. In this sense, the first lady was considered especially patriotic. After the outbreak of war, *Ladies Home Journal* reported:

Mrs. Wilson is not, of course, unaware of the prestige that accompanies her name and position. She has accordingly lent the use of her name, and has accepted honorary appointments, when convinced in doing so she could further the advancement of commendable causes, even though she, herself, might be unable to undertake active direction of, or participation, the work itself³⁶¹

So although she allowed her name and personage to be used in public to support the war effort, she remained committed to her traditional image by revealing she only did so because of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding her tenure as first lady.

America's entry into World War I offered the first lady and the modern press an opportunity to highlight Edith Wilson as a symbol of ideal American womanhood and patriotism. By revealing her private – and traditionally feminine – contributions to the war effort, the modern press purported to reveal the first lady's true self and, in keeping with the master plot of true success, show her private self as someone unspoiled by her wealth and position.

In 1918, *Ladies Home Journal* published an article that compared the efforts of the women of the White House to the efforts of the women in other households in America, noting that the status of their addresses made no difference in the nature or importance of their work. *Ladies Home Journal* revealed:

Nor are these women at work in the war because they are members of the immediate family of the president, but because they are deeply, like all of

³⁶¹ “What is Mrs. Wilson Doing?” *Ladies Home Journal*, July 1918.

the other women of America, deeply patriotic. No fanfare heralds forth to the world their contributions to the war; what they give they are giving for its own sake and not for purpose of pageantry or show. No privileges to do what other women may not do, no exemptions from the doing of what other women must do have been claimed by the women of the White House in their work in the war.³⁶²

One of the most important attributes of charitable work for wealthy women was modesty and the article revealed that this was in abundant supply in the White House. Noting that there were no secrets and no “blowing of newspaper trumpets” either to call attention to their work, “The average resident of the capital can no more tell you of Mrs. Wilson’s war work than he could describe the hours of the war service of any other woman with whom he was not personally acquainted.”³⁶³

Attempting to shape an image of the first lady who was not beneath doing “war work” such as knitting, sewing, and bake sales, *Ladies Home Journal* addressed rumors that Edith Wilson made remarks indicating that these kinds of jobs were crucial to the war effort. “She knows that our soldier must have their bodies warmed by these woolen garments and their hearts warmed for their grim task by the evidence the women of America are cooperating with them.”³⁶⁴ By offering readers a look at the first lady’s private life inside the White House, *Ladies Home Journal* sold magazines based on their exclusive access. The publication was allowed this access in exchange for promoting a specific image of

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

Edith Wilson, showing her true self as democratic, patriotic, and, significantly, much like every other American woman.

Another war matter was fashion. Shortages in fabric and dye encouraged a more utilitarian style of dress for women in Europe and in America. The press publicized that even the very fashionable first lady reflected these changes. The *Washington Post* reported “Europe’s ‘war dress’ soon will be taken across the sea to milady in America...It is endorsed and worn as a patriotic conservation measure by women in all walks of life in Allied countries, from queens and ladies to wives of laborers and shop girls.”³⁶⁵ Edith Wilson, like other American women, regardless of their lot in life, would be turning in their once glamorous gowns in for more modest attire, reflecting the seriousness of the times and efforts at conservation. The importance of these efforts was not lost on the president, who noted in a 1918 speech on the importance of women’s roles in the war effort:

I think the whole country has appreciated the way in which women have risen to this great occasion. They have not only done what they have been asked to do, and done it with ardor and efficiency, but they have shown a power to organize for doing things on their own initiative, which is quite a different thing and very much more difficult thing.³⁶⁶

This foreshadowed the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, which was passed shortly after the conclusion of the war, drawing heavily on women’s participation in the war effort as a reason for its ratification. In the modern press, Edith Wilson showed herself akin to the rest of American women in her commitment to the war

³⁶⁵ “‘War Dress’ is Coming,” *The Washington Post*, July 7, 1918.

³⁶⁶ Pictorial Review, September 1918, Woodrow Wilson Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

effort yet, in the same sense, the media noted she was not most American women. She was the first lady and, as such, carried with her a certain responsibility to set an example.

Many women's suffragists saw participation in the war effort as key to gaining the vote as suffrage movement remained an important issue, even during wartime. Edith Wilson, like other first ladies, claimed not to support women's suffrage, yet joined forces with Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, ardent suffragist and the Chairman of the Women's Committee of Council of National Defense, to issue a letter to women of the United States, France and Britain during World War I. But the joint letter did not indicate Wilson's support of women's suffrage as much as it did an effort to show the first lady as a patriotic participant in the war effort, in what were considered contributions acceptable for traditional upper and middle class women.

Historian David Kennedy sheds light on the purpose of the Women's Committee of the Council of National Defense, created by Woodrow Wilson. He argues the Women's Committee was created as an afterthought in April, 1917 to provide a vehicle for "organizing traditional middle-class women's 'volunteer' activities – helping to establish children's healthcare programs, rolling Red Cross bandages, and distributing food."³⁶⁷ Woodrow Wilson chose Shaw specifically to lead the committee as a more traditional and well-established suffragist, who openly disagreed with the tactics used by women like Alice Paul, who continued

³⁶⁷ David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 286.

to picket outside the White House during wartime to encourage the president to give women the right to vote. *Ladies Home Journal* revealed, “Mrs. Wilson has joined with the women of the cabinet in support of a program of individual and national economy in wartime. With Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, chairman of the Women’s Committee of Council of National Defense, she addressed a letter to the women of the Allied countries urging the importance of maintaining the moral standards of the men of the forces fighting against Germany.”³⁶⁸ While women’s suffragists hoped the Women’s Committee would provide opportunities to perform “significant war work,” William O’Neill argues “it became evident that the government viewed the Women’s Committee as a device for occupying women in the harmless activities while men got on with the business of war.”³⁶⁹ The council, therefore, was an ideal place for the first lady to participate in the war effort but maintain her traditional image in the modern press, even during wartime.

Although Edith Wilson’s teaming with Shaw on the Women’s Committee did not indicate her support of women’s suffrage, there was some early suspicion about her position on women’s suffrage and her ability to influence the president. In fact, the same day the president announced his engagement to Edith Galt, he also came out in support of women’s suffrage. The *New York Times* quickly suggested that, despite appearances, there was not a relationship between the

³⁶⁸ “What is Mrs. Wilson Doing?” *Ladies Home Journal*, July 1918.

³⁶⁹ William L. O’Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1969), 191 as quoted in Kennedy, *Over Here*, 286.

announcements, reporting that “Mrs. Galt is not identified with women’s clubs or other activities. After the engagement became known, tonight it was at first taken for granted that Mrs. Galt was a suffragist, and had helped bring the President to the support of the cause he had announced earlier in the day.” But revealed to readers that Edith Galt never supported the suffrage movement and her engagement to the president had no impact on his decision, for if it had, the announcement of his support would not have been made on the same day.³⁷⁰

Carl Anthony, an expert on first ladies, asserts that Edith Wilson was not a suffragist in public or in private. “To support his judgment, Anthony cites Edith Wilson’s statement in her memoir that the only speech of her husband’s she disliked was one supporting woman’s suffrage. In addition, Mrs. Wilson referred to suffragist who picketed the White House as ‘detestable creatures.’”³⁷¹

However, Shaw, along with other influential members of the women’s suffrage movement, such as Carrie Chapman Catt, leader of the National Women’s Suffrage Association, also disagreed with the tactics of Alice Paul and her group of followers that carried signs outside the White House comparing Woodrow Wilson to the German Kaiser.

Edith Wilson’s willingness to be associated with Anna Howard Shaw and the fact that once women did gain the right to vote, Edith Wilson was one of the first of her sex to cast a ballot belies Anthony’s argument. In their work on Edith

³⁷⁰ “President to Wed Mrs. Norman Galt, Intimate Friend of his Daughters; Also comes out for Woman Suffrage,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 1915.

³⁷¹ Wertheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice*, 108.

Wilson, Slagell and Zaeske contend that “On October 31, 1920, the *New York Times* made much of the occasion of Mrs. Wilson casting her first ballot, noting that she was among ‘the first of the great army of women enfranchised by the Nineteenth Amendment to vote in the 1920 election.’”³⁷² Because Edith Wilson never supported women’s suffrage publicly, her casting of the ballot likely indicates an inherent support of women’s voting rights or, at the very least, support of the Democratic Party agenda, which promoted women’s participation in the war effort and a desire for women to support the party that granted them suffrage. Since women received the right to vote under Wilson’s Democratic Administration, by publicizing the first lady casting her ballot, the party used her influence to encourage other women to do the same and vote Democrat.

As the war in Europe drew to a close, Woodrow Wilson began formulating his contribution to the Paris Peace Conference, which would place the United States at the center of the debate on how shape the post-war world. On January 8, 1918, Wilson delivered his Fourteen Points to Congress, which called for open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, armament reductions, and the formation of a league of nations as a means to stave off future conflict. Wilson hoped the Fourteen Points would not only create a more peaceful world but also assure the Allied Powers that the United States’ involvement in the war was for “noble purposes,” not an effort to acquire land and influence. On January 18, 1919, Woodrow Wilson traveled to Europe to present his Fourteen Points and take his

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 109.

seat at the Paris Peace Conference and on the international political stage. And his wife came with him.

Together, President Wilson and the first lady decided she would accompany him on a tour of Europe following World War I, as Woodrow Wilson presented his plan for peace to the warring nations. Slagell and Zaeske write, “When she landed with her husband in Brest, France...the Wilsons became the first American presidential couple to travel aboard while in office.”³⁷³ Although the first lady was keenly interested in the proceedings of the peace conference, in the modern press, Edith Wilson couched her trip in the most traditional terms. The *New York Herald* reported, “When a President’s wife decides to go to Europe with a peace delegation, the question of clothes becomes to many persons almost as important as the terms of the peace treaty.”³⁷⁴

Instead of discussing what role the first lady might occupy on such an important voyage or why her presence was indicated in the first place, articles focused on what she would wear and what impression these selections might make to European dignitaries and the people. The *New York Herald* continued, “Mrs. Wilson is taking along several sets of furs, which she will need while at sea and which will be most necessary on all the automobile trips she and the President will take through France, England, possibly Belgium, and most certainly Italy.”³⁷⁵

³⁷³ Ibid., 113.

³⁷⁴ “Mrs. Wilson Has Complete New Wardrobe for Journey Abroad,” *New York Herald*, November 2, 1918.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

Considerable concern was expressed for the comfort and place of the first lady on a vessel filled with only men that would transport her and the president to the European continent.

This was an unprecedented, if not unusual arrangement, however, the *Herald* reassured readers, “The wife of the President knows how to dress most becomingly and suitably on a steamship...bringing an assortment of sweaters containing many bright hued ones that will impart a note of cheer on the grayest of days at sea.”³⁷⁶ This way, the first lady’s trip was framed, by her own design, in the most traditional of terms, focusing on fashion and femininity rather than her crucial role in placing the first family of the United States in an international context amongst European monarchs after the war.

On her trip to Europe with the president, Edith Wilson became an international political figure and representative of ideal American womanhood in Europe, appearing to embrace the role with great zeal, despite her traditional notions on a woman’s place in society. Slagell and Zaeske argue that, during her trip to Europe following the war, “Edith Wilson became for the world, a representative of American womanhood and played important symbolic role in American diplomacy.”³⁷⁷ While she was representing American women, she also had little trouble fitting in amongst European royalty in dress, demeanor, or ability to command a crowd. As Woodrow Wilson attended meetings and mingled with male royal dignitaries, Edith Wilson was left to converse with the

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Wertheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice*, 113.

queens, princesses, and duchesses. The *London Chronicle* was impressed with Edith Wilson's ability to navigate amongst royalty noting "No queen could have a more queenly manner, no great lady could be more gracious, no women more utterly winning than President Wilson's wife."³⁷⁸

Articles focused on the first lady's charm and dress, noting that she was often the center of attention, even amongst her famous travel companions. "Mrs. Wilson, who drove with the Queen and Princess Mary in the second carriage, was the cynosure of every feminine eye. The women wanted to see Mrs. Wilson. They were discussing what clothes she might wear," particularly since she had a reputation for her stylish dress, even overseas.³⁷⁹ As first lady during the World War I time period, Edith Wilson's modern celebrity extended to Europe and, as publicity during her tour proved, she could outshine royalty but, at the same time, appear uniquely approachable and democratic.

According to the modern press, the European public was struck with the first lady's ability to mix aristocracy and democracy in one well dressed package. The *Los Angeles Times* described the first lady's as "a pleasant, comely woman, chatted busily with the queen in the second carriage. She was a little afraid, it seemed, to take the cheers meant in any way for herself, but now and again, she smiled delightfully at the crowd, and the women liked her kind, motherly face."³⁸⁰

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 115.

³⁷⁹ "Where British Royalty Entertain Wilsons," *The Los Angeles Times*, December 27, 1918.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

By describing her interactions with European royalty this way, the press purported to have insight into the first lady's private feelings and therefore, true self, which portrayed Edith Wilson as a woman did not seek attention but knew how to receive it graciously, careful to never upstage her hostesses or appear too eager in her manner.

Drawing on the image of the common American woman as wholesome and congenial, Edith Wilson was able to negotiate an image of herself that embodied these characteristics with charm and ease. *The London Chronicle* declared "Mrs. Wilson had become 'the living symbol of the American ideal.' She was, they continued, 'the most picturesque expression of her husband's ideal that it is character which counts in that beside it rank in riches and power are little things.'"³⁸¹ In the pages of the modern press, the first lady made an excellent impression on the grateful people of Britain and France, effectively embodying the qualities that Americans became known for in Europe and, in keeping with the master plot of true success, revealing her true self as modest and democratic.

Edith Wilson's trip to Europe with her husband was not comprised only of photo opportunities beside queens and princesses. As her husband's constant companion on the diplomatic envoy to Paris, the *Washington Post* reported that she was the only woman to have witnessed negotiations during the peace congress. But she was not pleased with her limited role, wishing she had the opportunity to attend more of the conferences, in order to see her husband on the world stage. The *Post* reported "Mrs. Woodrow Wilson can boast of being the

³⁸¹ Wertheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice*, 114.

only women to have attended any session of the peace congress in Paris,” but also noted “how much she regretted to not have been permitted to witness the spectacle of her husband’s [full] participation in the this époque making congress.”³⁸²

Edith Wilson and the modern press framed her unprecedented access to international peace negotiations as only of interest to her as the wife of the president, who was an active participant, whereas she was just an observer. She lent her presence to the meetings but continued to remain silent in public and the press. The *Washington Post* argued, “By attending an international peace congress of this nature, Mrs. Wilson has broken all precedents.”³⁸³ Despite breaking these precedents, Edith Wilson still invoked an image of a traditional woman and devoted wife, the only exceptional thing about her situation was that her husband was the President of the United States.

When Edith Wilson returned home, she continued to receive accolades in the press while President Woodrow Wilson fell under criticism. Newspapers wrote tirelessly about her widespread popularity overseas, popularity she hoped to promote in the United States. Upon her return, the *Atlanta Constitution* reported:

Mrs. Wilson, the lady of the White House, was heartily cheered by the thousands that came to greet the President on his return from France. Mrs. Wilson’s appearance in the boulevards of Paris was always noted with a favorable comment by the French people.³⁸⁴

³⁸² “Mrs. Wilson The Only Woman to See Peace Envoys at Work,” *The Washington Post*, March 27, 1919.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ “Mrs. Wilson Responding to Greetings,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 15, 1919.

But accolades for the first lady were tempered by criticisms from a nation that suffered an economic crisis in the wake of the war while the Wilsons mingled amongst the wealthy in Europe. Of the Wilson's return to the United States following their tour of Europe, James S. McCallops asserts:

Upon arrival they immediately became aware of the post war issues facing the nation in their absence. Unemployment, poverty, and inflation were causing hardships that needed to be addressed. Some newspapers criticized the President for 'abandoning' his country during the difficult time. They made much of the official gatherings in which the Wilson participated in Europe and alluded to extravagant gifts received from foreign heads of state.³⁸⁵

Because Edith Wilson was active in negotiating her image in the press, as first lady, she did not fall under the criticism that her husband did since she attempted to remain apolitical. By her own design, the modern press focused on her celebrity and good impression she made on the people of Europe, remaining untouched by the issues that faced her husband.

After her tour of Europe, Edith Wilson accompanied her husband on a cross country speaking tour in order to convince America that its membership in the League of Nations was crucial in preventing future world wars. The League of Nations, one of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points that he presented at the Paris Peace Conference, was designed to avoid conflict through disarmament, arbitration, and negotiation, its major goal to avoid another world war. Critics of the League of Nations, including Henry Cabot Lodge, the Senator of Massachusetts, argued that joining the League of Nations would compromise American sovereignty in international matters. Since joining the League of

³⁸⁵ Watson and Eskerowitz, ed., *The Presidential Companion*, 112.

Nations was dependent upon Senate approval, Woodrow Wilson traveled across the nation to promote his idea, particularly because Lodge and other Republican critics had been busy building opposition while the president toured Europe and the American economy suffered.

Although the speaking tour had a highly political purpose, the first lady resumed her role as modern celebrity, making appearances on the cross-country tour that were carefully promoted in the modern press to balance her role as celebrity and symbol of ideal American womanhood that became increasingly popular after her trip to France and Britain. The *Los Angeles Times* reported, “Mrs. Wilson was a cynosure of all eyes in Los Angeles yesterday, from the time she arrived at the Santa Fe Station until she left Shrine Auditorium last night...She arrived at the station wearing a very modish gown of blue cloth, the cut of which surely indicated that it was purchased in Paris.”³⁸⁶

After noting the exotic cut and origins of the first lady’s gown, the article went on to discuss Edith Wilson’s less material attributes, many of which were celebrated by European women during her tour of the continent and also focused on her looks. “She’s an ideal type of American woman – thoroughly at ease and evidently belonging to that type of aristocracy which is the only kind that can be natural and democratic. She is distinctly the Southern type of beauty,” revealed the *Los Angeles Times*, “She appears to be deeply interested in everything about

³⁸⁶ “Mrs. Wilson’s Gowns Triumphs in Coloring,” *The Los Angeles Times*, September 21, 1919.

her and that perhaps is the reason she keeps so young and alert.”³⁸⁷ Interestingly, after the threat of war was over, the first lady’s image in the modern press returned to the one she fulfilled most easily, as a modern celebrity. Her presence on the political tour of the country remained, by her own design, as non-political as possible.

Despite the modern press focusing on Edith Wilson as an example of traditional womanhood, they also attempted to place the first lady’s unprecedented accompaniment to her husband on his trip to Europe and subsequent speaking tour in a larger context. The first lady’s commitment to promoting her strictly conventional roles as a wife and companion gave Edith Wilson the ability to make these kinds of unprecedented moves, almost undetected.

While some contemporaries questioned Helen Taft’s motives for wanting to accompany the president in the motorcade on the way to the inauguration, Edith Wilson’s voyage to Europe, attendance at diplomatic meetings, and presence on speaking tours was not questioned in the modern press or by the public precisely because she negotiated and maintained such a traditional image of herself in the press. In fact, her companionship to the president, even in affairs where it was unusual to find a woman, was celebrated and made Edith Wilson, a first lady who never spoke to the press or made a speech, one of the most recognizable faces of her time. The *Salt Lake Tribune* wrote of the first lady’s celebrity:

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

Her constant presence with the president upon his extended travels, and it's especially upon his triumphal tour of the most of the European capitals since the close of the war, have made Mrs. Wilson a most prominent personage, through reports of festivities – and her pictures which have appeared in all leading magazines and newspapers in Europe and America, and have been flashed upon the screens of every moving picture theater of note throughout the world.³⁸⁸

Edith Wilson embodied the most traditional notions of American womanhood in her dedication to her husband and family while striking a balance between being a common woman and one befitting the title of first lady, in her dress and demeanor. In a time of great uncertainty in American life due to the horrors of war, the faltering economy, and half of the country's population demanding the right to vote, Edith Wilson represented a constant to the people. She could be counted on to fulfill the most time-honored functions at the side of the president and look elegant doing so, without overstepping her bounds as a woman.

In late 1919 and early 1920, the first lady's popularity faltered as her role became not only of wife to an ailing husband but also, as some would charge, the "chief executress" of the United States of America. Woodrow Wilson suffered a stroke on October 2, 1919 after falling ill on his cross country tour to support the ratification of the League of Nations. The stroke occurred at a very inopportune moment in his administration, just as his efforts to gain support for the terms of the Versailles Treaty gathered steam. Suspected to be, in part, a result of his tireless cross-country campaign, the stroke came at a time when the terms of peace from World War I were still being debated. Woodrow Wilson, having suggested the League of Nations at the Paris Peace Conference, returned with the

³⁸⁸ "Woman of Salt Lake Extend their Greetings to 'First Lady of the Land,'" *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 22, 1919.

Versailles Treaty in hand, hoping to convince his skeptical nation that joining the pact was in the best interest of American security. His cross-country campaign, which emphasized the dire consequences of not ratifying the treaty, including the threat of another major war, came to an abrupt end. Woodrow Wilson all but disappeared from politics during one of the most crucial moments of his presidency.

After it was announced the president was “ill,” the press initially looked with great favor upon Edith Wilson’s ability to be both a wife and aide to her husband. *Ladies Home Journal*, a publication which targeted and celebrated traditional women, reported, “Mrs. Wilson, wife of the President, has become one of the most important functionaries of the government as a result of her husband’s illness and the difficulties of carrying on the administration without an active Executive.”³⁸⁹ However, the press noted, that Edith Wilson began to occupy a space in United States government and in public that most men would never achieve. Using her position as his wife and guardian of his health and recovery, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, with some degree of implied suspicion, “Mrs. Wilson has become the chief assistant of the President in transacting public business. She keeps his papers in shape for reference and executes his instructions. She is the repository of state secrets and frequently is the only

³⁸⁹ “Wilson’s Chief Aide, A Most Capable Wife,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 1919.

person who knows what the president has done or contemplates doing in regards to public questions.”³⁹⁰

In this way, Edith Wilson was not charged with making official decisions for the president but she was, in every way, controlling what information and matters the president would and would not be exposed to, indirectly subverting a significant amount of authority from his position. Since Edith Wilson, along with her friend and Woodrow Wilson’s physician Dr. Cary T. Grayson, did not allow the president to receive visitors during this time, as they deemed them a direct threat to his health, no one was certain what condition the president was in and some would even speculate that he was dead and the first lady was running the government single handedly.

Shortly after his stroke, on October 16, 1919, the White House issued a statement to major newspaper outlets indicating the president was getting better and able to function on his own, citing a “slight headache” as one of the symptoms prohibiting him from returning to work full time.³⁹¹ But as days turned into weeks without any sight of the president, worry about his condition increased. Concern reached a fever pitch on November 30, 1919 when Senator Gilbert Hitchcock, the Democratic Senator from Nebraska and one of Woodrow Wilson’s staunchest supporters in passing the terms Versailles Treaty, including the League of Nations, was denied a promised visit with the president. An article

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ “Wilson “Getting Better” Is Report From White House,” *The Hartford Courant*, October 16, 1919.

that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* indicated increased concern about the president's condition and revealed how very little was known about true state of the president health.³⁹²

Still, the press remained largely silent on Edith Wilson's "stewardship" of the presidency and what was written was supportive of her efforts to help her husband through his illness, the nature of which was still unclear to the American public. The *New York Times*, in December 1919, continued to extol Edith Wilson's sacrifices as a wife devoted to her husband's care, reporting that Edith committed herself "absolutely and entirely" to her husband's well being and entertainment, shirking all other social duties as first lady to be by Woodrow Wilson's side.³⁹³ Meanwhile, the *Washington Post* expressed concern over the disconnect between Congress and the president as they awaited a message from Woodrow Wilson, hoping to verify with experts it was actually from the president, and expressing comfort when it was delivered in the first lady's handwriting.³⁹⁴

Edith Wilson may have escaped the scrutiny of the press, however temporarily, but Dr. Cary Grayson did not. While White House press releases, listing Grayson as Woodrow Wilson's attending physician, continued to characterize the president's condition as "nervous exhaustion," Woodrow

³⁹² "Cannot See President," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 1919.

³⁹³ "Only Intimates Visit White House," *The New York Times*, December 14, 1919.

³⁹⁴ "Wilson's Message Anxiously Awaited," *The Washington Post*, December 2, 1919.

Wilson's complete absence from the public eye during a critical time during his administration raised serious questions. After Republican Senator George Moses published a letter in the *New York Times* stating the president was very ill and "suffered some kind of cerebral lesion," Grayson answered these charges by playing dumb, denying the rumor. Subsequent articles in the *San Francisco Bulletin* and *Harvey's Weekly* criticized Grayson, charging "to conceal the president's actual condition 'was an impropriety and injustice so gross and at the same time so stupid as to defy temperate description.'"³⁹⁵

Although no one had seen or heard from the Woodrow Wilson since his stroke in October 1919, the president was still purportedly able to carry on his task of convincing the Senate to approve joining the League of Nations from his bed, through the hand of his wife and first lady. In a litany of official correspondence, Edith Wilson articulated the president's thoughts on the League of Nations, making a case as to why the United States must enter in the context of global peace.³⁹⁶ Edith Wilson also handled various other correspondences between the president and senators, picking and choosing which letters she would present him with on a daily basis and determining if she thought he was up to the task. In this way, she prioritized issues for him, exposing him only to those she felt were most pressing in nature.

³⁹⁵ Levin, *Edith and Woodrow*, 354.

³⁹⁶ Edith Wilson to George Creel, November 18, 1919, Edith Bolling Galt Wilson Papers, Container 13, Folder 1, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

After Senator Hitchcock's failed visit to the president, despite Edith Wilson's well crafted image as a traditional and apolitical woman trying to protect the best interests of her ailing husband, the first lady fell under heavy criticism in Europe and the United States. "We have petticoat government!" "Mrs. Wilson is president!" Shouted Senator Albert Fall, pounding his fist on a table during a fall 1919 Senate committee meeting. Fall's was only the loudest of many voices murmuring that Woodrow Wilson had suffered a stroke and that the United States was being run by 'presidentress' Edith Bolling Galt Wilson."³⁹⁷ Albert Fall's concerns were echoed in the press as reports trickled in from European news outlets, exposing what several diplomats thought was "inappropriate behavior" on the part of the first lady.

After Edith Wilson adamantly argued against Vice President Thomas Marshall assuming the presidency, even temporarily, evidence that Edith Wilson exerted an incredible amount of power during Woodrow Wilson's illness began to surface. She pushed for the replacement of Secretary of State Robert Lansing with Bainbridge Colby after learning Lansing held Cabinet meetings without informing the president. The first lady considered this treasonous behavior an outright act of deceit, and advocated for his removal. More than the meetings, Edith Wilson took exception to Lansing being the first to call for the vice-president to assume the presidency during Woodrow Wilson's illness and resented that he did not feel the League of Nations was a crucial part of the Versailles Treaty, as the president did. In an article titled "Wilson In Control Again," the

³⁹⁷ Wertheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice*, 103.

New York Times revealed Woodrow Wilson's alleged outrage at Lansing's behavior while suggesting that the president was ready to assume all official executive duties again.³⁹⁸

In another suspicious incident that pointed to Edith Wilson's hand in the presidency, Woodrow Wilson purportedly refused to accept the credentials of the British diplomat Edward Grey, who came to the United States in an effort to support the president's position on the League of Nations. The president demanded he release a member of his entourage, Charles Crouford-Stuart, who allegedly made some off-colored jokes at the first lady's expense on a previous occasion. Crouford-Stuart also boldly suggested to the British press that Edith Wilson's only reason for being included in the peace talks in Paris was to "attain the social status she was denied in Washington."³⁹⁹ Grey would not accept this kind of demand and initially refused to remove the offending member of his entourage. Understanding the importance of his work to the ratification of the League of Nations, Grey finally agreed to demote Crouford-Stuart; however, the president, under the first lady's continued "stewardship," still would not accept the delegation.

Edward Grey reported the incident to the British press, where rumors began to swirl about the first lady. After the Edward Grey incident, little doubt was left in the minds of Washington insiders that the president's condition was worse than previously thought and that Edith Wilson was, indeed, running the

³⁹⁸ "Wilson In Control Again," *The New York Times*, February 16, 1920.

³⁹⁹ Anthony, *First Ladies*, 378.

government. However, the image of Edith Wilson crafted by the press belied the idea that she would ever be capable of, much less desire, such power over so many Americans, although the White House did deny Edith Wilson's role in the Grey incident in the press.⁴⁰⁰ The modern American press continued to print stories referring to the first lady as a "heroine" as Edith Wilson continued to negotiate an image of herself in the newspapers as a dedicated wife, attending to her husband on his sickbed. Because of her traditional image, the public and government officials alike reserved judgment, waiting for the president's condition to improve.

In Britain, where her traditional image was not as firmly negotiated and maintained in the modern press, newspapers began asking questions. Four months after Woodrow Wilson's stroke, in February 1920, the *London Daily* reported, "Nothing more startling has been disclosed in this week of endless sensations at Washington than the fact the wife of President Wilson has been for months past acting as President of the United States."⁴⁰¹ The British may have been particularly bitter over the first lady's snub of Edward Grey but historian Carl Anthony argues that rumors continued to spread stateside as well.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported on February 27, 1920 that a popular French newspaper, the *Paris Midi* printed a story that said "'The American press admits that America is now governed by a woman...the perplexed American

⁴⁰⁰ "Mrs. Wilson Caused Grey Snub Is Denied," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 1920.

⁴⁰¹ *The London Daily*, February 22, 1920. Also, Wertheimer, ed., *Inventing a Voice*, 118.

Senators are to be pitied.’’⁴⁰² Depicting the American government as bumbling figures under the direction of an unelected woman president, the *Los Angeles Times*, a strongly Republican paper, was uniquely critical of Edith Wilson and her “stewardship.” Other major publications, including the Democratic-leaning *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, both remained supportive of the first ladies efforts to assist her husband.

The *Los Angeles Times* continued to print unflattering stories about Edith Wilson, including one published in March 1920 which described the French Ambassador to the United States, M. Jean Jusserand’s, disappointment with his “undignified treatment in Washington.” Jusserand filed a report stating that his efforts to meet with the president to discuss the peace treaty were denied and instead, he was forced to discuss American reservations about the treaty with the first lady, Edith Wilson.⁴⁰³ The article went on to reference the previous controversy with the British diplomat Edward Grey, and the first lady’s possible involvement in that scandal, which denied him access to the president.

In early spring 1920, Edith Wilson finally acquiesced to the requests of many Cabinet members and arranged a meeting between the president and Republican Senator Albert Fall and Democratic Senator Gilbert Hitchcock. She presided over the entire meeting, carefully attempting to show the president in the best possible light by purposefully shadowing the side of his body that was still

⁴⁰² “Mrs. Wilson Governs America, Paris Told,” *The Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 1920.

⁴⁰³ “‘Mme. Wilson’ Is On European Tongues,” *The Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1920.

incapacitated as a result of his stroke. The president's communication skills were nearly what they had been before his illness and Fall was appeased enough with the meeting to not reiterate his charges of a petticoat government in public again.

After Woodrow Wilson's most ardent supporters, such as William Jennings Bryan, split with him on the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations, hopes of achieving the two-thirds majority needed to pass the measure were all but lost. On March 19, 1920, the treaty fell short of passage and on May 20, 1920, Congress declared the war over. Although Wilson vetoed Congress' declaration, it was later passed on July 2, 1921, under President Warren Harding.

The United States would never join the League of Nations. Some scholars, such as Judith L. Weaver, blame Edith Wilson's manipulation of the president, which prevented him from receiving outside advice and assistance from his advisers.⁴⁰⁴ However, in assigning such blame, historians also have to acknowledge the incredible amount of authority she wielded while her husband was ill. Some newspapers that were more critical of Woodrow Wilson's administration, like the *New York Herald*, argued in an editorial that the first lady made a better president than the president himself, and that "if the president does not interfere too much, she will strengthen the government."⁴⁰⁵ As Woodrow Wilson's condition continued to improve and he began to assume a more public role once again, Edith Wilson slipped off into the background, never fully

⁴⁰⁴ Judith Weaver, "Edith Bolling Wilson as First Lady: A Study in the Power of Personalities," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 2, (Winter 1985): 51.

⁴⁰⁵ *The New York Herald*, n.d., Edith Bolling Galt Wilson Papers, Box 2, Folder 6. Also, Ishbel Ross. *Power with Grace: The Life Story of Mrs. Woodrow Wilson*, (New York: Putnam, 1975) 206.

answering charges that she had run the government for a time, because after all, she would not speak to the press, even if it meant defending herself.

Not long after her tenure as first lady came to an end in March 1921, an article appeared in the *Ladies Home Journal* titled “Mrs. Wilson.” The piece, that was carefully written to highlight the Edith Wilson’s traditional image she negotiated with the press throughout her tenure, answered some of the charges leveled at the former first lady, and furthermore argued that her efforts to sustain the president during the darkest days of his life were uniquely patriotic. As the article dramatically put it, “The doctors themselves admit that. It is they who say that the life of the President was saved by his wife,” noting in addition to being first lady, Edith Wilson “was wife, nurse, and secretary.”⁴⁰⁶ The first lady, *Ladies Home Journal* argued, ignored the hostile attitudes of Washingtonians and whispers that she was running the government in order to buffer her husband from the stress and concern that caused his illness in the first place. As his wife, “Mrs. Wilson furnished that indispensable something more. She succeeded so wonderfully in saving the President from anxiety and unhappiness that the doctors had the chance to make their part count.” The article suggested her “understanding, devoting, sympathy and endless tact and wit” were responsibly for delivering the president from death’s door.⁴⁰⁷

The article directly answered criticisms surrounding accusations she was running the government. Even though Senator Albert Fall, who had been the

⁴⁰⁶ “Mrs. Woodrow Wilson,” *Ladies Home Journal*, October 1921.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

loudest of those declaring Edith Wilson usurped her husband's executive power but eventually conceded this was not the case, the damage was already done.

Newspaper outlets at home and abroad kept the rumor mill running steady in an effort to uncover the petticoat government. *Ladies Home Journal* refuted this idea:

She never dreamed of trying to run this Government. Her task and her religion were to keep alive and restore to health the man whose business it was to run this Government. She never dreamed of exerting the slightest personal influence in the determination of any matter of state. She never thought of such a thing as trying to bring about the appointment to office of this man or that man. She is not and never has been a political woman. Her intense interest in national and international politics has been solely to the fact that those affairs have been a vital part of the very life of her husband...She has no personal political ambition and has none now.⁴⁰⁸

The article suggested that not only was the first lady not trying to run the government or be a "political woman" but that the country owed her a debt of gratitude for sacrificing and placing herself in such a precarious position in order to save its leader. By claiming to delve into the former first lady's private life and feelings, *Ladies Home Journal* uncovered the first lady's true self as a selfless, hard working wife who, despite her wealth and position, found fulfillment in taking care of her ailing husband to the best of her abilities. This not only answered rumors she ran the government but also, in keeping with the master plot of true success, showed her true self as a woman who took the most joy in her traditional and private roles as wife and home keeper.

Still, there is little other evidence than *Ladies Home Journal* article that juxtaposed Edith Wilson's control over government affairs with her intensely

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

domestic nature that suggests she was a woman concerned with domestic issues or work. Reviewing her tenure as first lady, she clearly worked more easily amongst the queens and kings in Europe than amongst the plantings in the White House gardens and was more interested in the latest fashions from Paris than afternoons on horseback. And while her status as a modern celebrity and elegance as first lady is not debated, the role she played during her husband's illness is less clear. While Judith Weaver argues the first lady assumed control of the presidency during her husband's illness, historian John Milton Cooper asserts that the first lady tried to stay away from political matters though he contends that if she did serve as President Wilson's surrogate for a time "she would have been well qualified to do so" given her position as his closest political advisor.⁴⁰⁹

Because she made no statements, never demonstrated an outward interest in public affairs, always appeared bright and smiling at the president's side, and, most importantly, because she was able to negotiate her image in the press as a traditional woman and modern celebrity, Edith Wilson was able to exert what could conservatively be termed significant control over government and public policy. In fact, as time passed, an article appeared in the *Times-Picayune* in 1924 that half jokingly suggested "Mrs. Woodrow Wilson would make a desirable candidate for the Democratic nomination for president of the United States, thinks

⁴⁰⁹ Frank Friedel and William Pencak, ed., *The White House: The First Two Hundred Years* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), 75-99.

one political observer in New Orleans.”⁴¹⁰ She had more experience than some of the male candidates, the paper argued, so why not Mrs. Wilson?

Edith Wilson’s tenure as first lady came at a tumultuous time in American history, which made it impossible for her to keep the low profile she purported to desire. Becoming the fiancée then wife of a standing president, Edith Wilson assumed the role of first lady during the peak of the women’s suffrage movement, the outbreak of the First World War, and a debilitating presidential illness. During such a politically and socially challenging time, Edith Wilson negotiated an image of herself in the modern press as a traditional woman and modern celebrity who was content to take care of her husband, dress in Parisian gowns, and, unlike her predecessor Ellen Wilson, stay out of political matters completely. As his fiancée and wife, Edith Wilson showed little interest in promoting the Democratic Party agenda in unofficial spaces the way Ellen Wilson had. In fact, as first lady, Edith Wilson continued to dress in luxurious clothing and jewelry and revived the tradition of the inaugural ball, which the previous Mrs. Wilson did away with because she felt it was too excessive and did not represent the practicality and egalitarianism that Democratic Party promoted in the election. But Edith Wilson did not consider herself a political figure, therefore she did not use unofficial spaces for political messages. This changed when the United States entered World War I. During the war, Edith Wilson promoted a more democratic image of herself and, reflective of the master plot of true success, showed the

⁴¹⁰ “Why Not Mrs. Wilson,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 24, 1924.

American public that she was one of them by contributing to the war effort through domestic activities that were well publicized in the press.

The traditional image Edith Wilson negotiated and maintained in the modern American press would influence her image in Europe when she toured and attended meetings with international dignitaries, winning praise in the European and American press for her ability to combine democracy and aristocracy, a representative of ideal American womanhood overseas. Her traditional image in the modern press would continue to be critical after President Wilson's stroke, which left him debilitated and the first lady in a decision making position she framed as care any devoted wife would give her ailing husband. However Edith Wilson's husband was the president and, as such, her decision to exert a significant degree of control over Woodrow Wilson's private and political affairs was controversial. Although she claimed she was never a political woman, when Edith Wilson became engaged to Woodrow Wilson, she became a political figure by default. However, by negotiating her image in the modern press as a traditional woman and modern celebrity, Edith Wilson was able to maintain a more apolitical role than her predecessors, which ironically allowed her to access the most political power under the guise of traditional womanhood.

CHAPTER SIX

The centerpiece of the Smithsonian Museum of American History's permanent exhibit "First Ladies at the Smithsonian" is a collection of twenty-four gowns worn by first ladies. The popularity of the dresses and their place at the center of the exhibit are a testament to the place first ladies have traditionally occupied in American society, political landscape, and scholarship.

Historian Edith Mayo, curator emeritus of the first ladies collection at the Smithsonian, has acknowledged the public popularity of the gowns but also attempted to place the first ladies in a broader context in a section of the exhibit called "First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image." In this portion of the exhibit, Mayo argues

Throughout our history, the first lady has been a central figure in extending political roles for women and gaining acceptance for women in public life. As the most visible women in America, the first ladies have evolved from the president's social and ceremonial partners to advocates of social causes and political allies in their own right. This evolution places the first lady at the center of both presidential history and women's history.⁴¹¹

The exhibit, which contains one hundred fifty artifacts, including ten gowns as well as political memorabilia, is a small but important step in beginning to evaluate the role of the first lady in a more meaningful way. Its aim - to show first ladies in a broader political context - is an effort to demonstrate to the public that first ladies are much more than the gowns that most Americans associate with them.

⁴¹¹ "First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image," The Smithsonian Museum of American History, <http://www.sites.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibits/ladies/main.htm> (Accessed March 6, 2011).

The Smithsonian will open a new exhibit on March 10, 2011, “A First Lady’s Debut,” that focuses on the first ladies’ opening appearances and media speculation about what role she might play in the White House.⁴¹² By using articles that addressed what kind of household the first lady might run, the new exhibit may perpetuate the same traditional tone of the original exhibit by highlighting the changes each first lady made in décor and dinner service rather than examining those changes as part of a larger political agenda. Nor does the exhibit look at the first lady as a political figure and an active and powerful member of her party. Significantly, the new exhibit will feature only the first ladies who served from the 1950s forward, leaving first ladies during pivotal time periods for women, like the Progressive Era, relegated to a collection of gowns with little interpretation.

Scholars have only begun to discuss first ladies and the role they played in politics and society. This is partly a reflection of the media’s portrayal of first ladies. Examining the image first ladies during the Progressive Era crafted of themselves in the modern press provides an important and useful means of understanding the ways subsequent first ladies were portrayed in the press that transcends balls gowns and china patterns. By promoting themselves as independent and intelligent women who found fulfillment in their roles as wives, mothers, and home keepers, first ladies of the Progressive Era negotiated an

⁴¹² “First Ladies at the Smithsonian,” The Smithsonian Museum of American History, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibition.cfm?key=38&exkey=1239> (Accessed March 6, 2011).

image of their celebrity selves as modern. Using modes of modern human-interest journalism, which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, first ladies used the media to promote a specific image of themselves that reflected not only their party's agenda but also fulfilled the master plot of true success. By crafting a narrative of their lives that showed themselves as moral, domestic, and practical, despite their wealth, position and success, first ladies of the Progressive Era appealed to readers and their constituents, while the modern media enjoyed exclusive access to the private, and ostensibly authentic, lives of the most visible woman in the American political landscape.

The template first ladies of the Progressive Era filled in the press closely reflect the patterns that recent first ladies fill today in order to appeal most broadly to their husbands' constituency. In 2011, articles about first lady Michelle Obama follow a similar narrative, highlighting her democratic sensibilities in matters of fashion and domesticity instead of her Ivy League education or career as an attorney. In June 2008, after a strenuous campaign during which Michelle Obama was the headlining speaker at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, the *Pasadena Weekly* reported on Obama's "commitment to be away overnight only once a week and to campaign only two days a week and be home by the end of the second day" for her two children while her appearance on popular daytime television show *The View* celebrated her sense of thrift in wearing a dress that was purchased at a retail store in the mall.⁴¹³

⁴¹³ Joe Piasecki, "Mother, Wife, Superstar," *Pasadena Weekly*, June 5, 2008.

When first ladies strayed too far from a traditional model of womanhood, depending on the image she previously crafted for herself in the modern press, there was criticism. For first lady Hillary Clinton, the first presidential spouse to hold a post-baccalaureate degree, her open involvement in political matters, specifically healthcare, and the idea that she and her husband were a political team, led critics to ask if the first lady was overstepping her bounds. Referring to Bill and Hillary Clinton's tenure in office as a "co-presidency," Republican pundits wondered if the first lady was going to be the ideal model of the American homemaker or an inappropriate policy maker.⁴¹⁴ Critics further argued that no one elected Hillary Clinton thus she had no place in political matters.

Hillary Clinton chose not to conceal her political ambitions in the modern press during her husband's campaigns and her tenures as first lady. Had she promoted a more conventional representation of herself as first lady, she might have experienced as relatively little public criticism as Wilson did when she, in effect, acted as the singular liaison between the president and the outside world during part of her husband, Woodrow Wilson's, tenure in office. For first ladies in the Progressive Era, and first ladies after that, the media became not only an important way to promote a specific image of themselves but also a way for them to exercise power, even when it was not traditionally considered appropriate to do so. It also illustrates, given Hillary Clinton's experience as first lady, that even as times change, expectations of the first lady remain largely unaltered.

⁴¹⁴ See Paul Greenberg, "Israel's New Friend: Hillary," *Jewish World Review*, July 15, 1999 and Karen N. Peart, "First Lady: Homemaker or Policymaker?," *Scholastic Press*, August 22, 2006.

Although first ladies have used the modern media to promote ideal images of themselves while fulfilling the master plot of true success, that is not to say the image they crafted did not also include an important political message. In many ways, deeper messages hidden in objects such as gowns and dinner plates is as much a part of their husband and party's political agenda as more established matters of state. By examining these objects as unofficial spaces, particularly for the first ladies of the Progressive Era, who left scarcely little behind other than remnants of their domesticity, the importance of the first lady as a political figure and symbol of her party emerges. As Michelle Obama's inexpensive fashions became a symbol of her husband's and party's sense of democracy, nearly one hundred years before this, Edith Roosevelt revealed she wore only American fashions, sometimes even twice in a season, as evidence of Theodore Roosevelt's platform that promised solidarity with every day Americans. First ladies across history have used traditional habits and domestic spaces to promote their political agenda; therefore, the Smithsonian collection of gowns, dinner plates, jewelry, fans, and other traditionally feminine objects have as much to tell about the politics of the age as they do of the tastes of the women that used them, if placed in a deeper political and social context.

First ladies of the Progressive Era were unique women who occupied an exceptional place in American politics during a transformative time period for women in American history. Torn between the Victorian and modern era, these women were faced with the challenge of being examples of ideal womanhood in a time when that ideal was rapidly shifting. At the same time, these women were

very different from each other, in personality and in habits, who despite the prescribed modes of modern human-interest journalism, fulfilled these similar ideals in different ways.

All of the first ladies of the Progressive Era, regardless of party affiliation, highlighted their domesticity as well as independence in the press, albeit they did so differently. The intensely private Edith Roosevelt only allowed media access to those parts of her life that highlighted her role as a practical wife and mother, and denied access to the rest of her life, citing Victorian notions of modesty. Helen Taft, a woman who thrived in the public eye and openly engaged in politics, argued her activity in the political and public sphere made her a better wife, mother, and home keeper. Ellen Wilson was not particularly interested in performing all of the traditional hostess duties that came with being first lady. She limited the time she spent entertaining by asserting she did so to support a more democratic White House. At the same time, she gained time for herself and her artistic pursuits. Edith Wilson, who did not have children and came to the White House as the second wife of President Wilson, found it difficult to appear democratic given her personal wealth and propensity to wear expensive clothing and jewelry. By negotiating an image in the press as a woman who, despite being first lady, was not a political figure, Edith Wilson promoted her image as someone who was solely interested in her husband's well being, even if her husband was the president and taking care of him meant, for a time, being accused of running the country. So although each of these first ladies used the modern press to negotiate an image of themselves that highlighted their independence and

domesticity, they each accomplished this in different ways, reflecting their individual personalities and habits in the processes as well as different political agenda of their husbands themselves.

Examining the political role of the first lady in the context of her party's agenda and her negotiation of a certain image in the modern press sheds new light on notions of ideal womanhood during Progressive Era America while, at the same time, revealing the first lady's role as a powerful and unique politician, one of the most public women in the nation. Acknowledging the link between the image the first lady negotiated in the press, the clothing she wore, the way she entertained, and her ability to reflect and support her party's agenda, demonstrates the importance of the first lady in American political and social history that far outweighs, whether they are made from fine Parisian silk or Alabama cotton, an aging collection of dresses under the dim lights of a museum exhibit.

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APPENDIX A
POLITICAL AFFILIATIONS OF NEWSPAPERS

Title Year	Political Affiliation Determined by Support of Presidential Candidate by Election			
	1900	1904	1908	1912
<i>Atlanta Constitution</i>	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
<i>Boston Herald</i>	Independent	Independent	Independent	Independent
<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican
<i>Hartford Courant</i>	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican
<i>New York Times</i>	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Democrat
<i>New York Herald</i>	Independent	Independent	Independent	Independent
<i>New York Evening World</i>	Independent	Independent	Independent	Independent
<i>New York Word</i>	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
<i>Philadelphia Public Ledger</i>	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
<i>Washington Post</i>	Independent*	Independent*	Independent**	Independent**

* Independent leaning Republican
**Independent leaning Democrat

The papers listed above were examined extensively through Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 of my dissertation. In order to understand better the political affiliation of these papers I have looked at their reports and editorials during the presidential election years between 1900 and 1912. In addition, I looked at Elizabeth Burt's *The Progressive Era: Primary Documents on Events from 1890-1914*, Bob Gottlieb's *Thinking Big: The Story of the Los Angeles Times*, and Chalmers Roberts' *The Washington Post: The First 100 Years* to explore the political leanings of major papers.