

Free Spirit Meets Gilded Cage: Betty Ford as Second Lady 1973-1974

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December 12, 2019

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The short tenure of Betty Ford as Second Lady (1973-1974) coincided with great change and tumult in late 20th century American politics. Indeed, the decade of the 1970s marked what one scholar called a “dreary catalog of depressing events,” including economic recession, international uncertainty, and political scandal.¹ Issues like Vietnam, the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, and Watergate, galvanized the American public. Ultimately, it was political corruption and scandal in the Richard Nixon presidency (1969-1974) that proved the catalyst for the ascent of Gerald and Betty Ford into the national political spotlight.² On 10 October 1973, as congressional and public scrutiny of the Nixon White House intensified over Watergate, the administration was rocked by allegations that Vice President Spiro Agnew had evaded taxes and had taken kickbacks while governor of Maryland in the 1960s. Agnew, shortly thereafter, resigned the vice presidency, and Nixon—implementing the recently ratified 25th amendment—selected House Minority Leader Gerald Ford of Michigan as Agnew’s replacement. A couple of months later, on 6 December 1973, Ford was confirmed by the Senate and sworn in as Vice President of the United States. While Ford had served for twenty-four years in the House, neither he nor his family were prepared for the national attention and scrutiny they received following Nixon’s appointment. In the end, Betty Ford was forced to transition from the “free spirit” life of a Congressman’s wife, to the “gilded cage” of a Second Lady within weeks.

¹ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 2001), Xii.

² In 1972 there was a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office building. Most thought at the time that it was over-zealous Nixon supporters, but over three years it was revealed that the Nixon administration orchestrated countless illegal activities that all traced back to the president himself. This led to Nixon’s resignation in August 1974. The break-in, consequential events, and investigations are all referred to as “Watergate.”

Second Ladies historically did not play a significant role in the life of the nation—unless they, like Ford herself, eventually became First Lady.³ Overall, these women had no official function, definition, or expectation—except for presiding over the Red Cross Senate Wives, a community service organization. Also, a few Second Ladies, such as Jennie Tuttle Hobart (1897-1899), served as White House hostess when the first lady was ill or incapacitated. Their role, then, was grounded in general ambiguity and invisibility. The position was unsalaried, lacked a budget, and, until the 1950s, lacked staff support.⁴ Indeed, the term “Second Lady” was not even commonly used until the 1980s. Like their husbands, the vice presidents, Second Ladies were generally relegated to the political sidelines.⁵

Betty Ford, however, was a different Second Lady. She was visible, vocal, and independent. Ultimately, Ford helped define the role of the modern Second Lady.⁶ Overall, there were three circumstances that aided her in this arena. First, Ford served as Second Lady at a time when the vice presidency was gaining more prominence. Traditionally, the vice president merely presided over the Senate, and had very little contact with either the president or the White House.⁷ By the 1970s, that was changing.⁸ Vice presidents were now seen as representatives of the president abroad, and cheerleaders for the administration and its policies at home. Second, Ford was able to rely upon the legacies of some of her immediate predecessors, especially Pat

³ Since 1789, thirty-eight women have served as Second Lady.

⁴ To this day the position of Second Lady is not salaried. The staff usually consists of one or two friends or family that is paid for by the Vice President. It is unclear whether the Second Lady receives a budget for travel.

⁵ Before Pat Nixon redefined the role, the only significant Second Lady was Floride Calhoun. As the wife of Vice President John C. Calhoun, Floride led the “Petticoat Affair” which affected the president by socially ostracizing Secretary of War John H. Eaton and his wife. This was a minor event but the only notable reference.

⁶ Since the 1970s the role of the Second Lady has dramatically expanded. Jill Biden was the first Second Lady to hold a full-time job while in office when she worked as an English teacher at a community college in 2008. Karen Pence, the current Second Lady, also works part-time as a teacher.

⁷ Joel K. Goldstein, *The White House Vice Presidency: The Path to Significance, Mondale to Biden* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 3.

⁸ After World War II and the emergence of America as a world power, citizens increasingly looked to Washington to address both domestic and international issues.

Nixon (1953-1961). As Second Lady in the 1950s, Nixon established her own schedule, and traveled the world on goodwill missions. On these trips, Nixon visited—apart from the Vice President-- schools, orphanages, and hospitals. Ford, then, built upon this model established by Nixon, participating in public events without her husband, cultivating a close and open relationship with the media, and advocating both feminist and traditional causes. Third, Ford was a novelty to the public. Because of the nature of the Ford's ascension into the Vice Presidency via the 25th amendment, and because First Lady Pat Nixon (criticized as "Plastic Pat") was relatively quiet and private, there was curiosity surrounding the new Second Family. Indeed, by 1973, Nixon, *People* magazine noted, made "herself a virtual recluse in the White House."⁹

Ford was not without challenges or critics, however. Indeed, throughout her life Ford was known for her honesty and candor—two personality traits not always appreciated in national politics. For over twenty years Ford was a congressmen's wife who was meant to be seen but not heard. Suddenly, she had a platform sizeable enough for all of America to dissect her every decision. Ford's propensity towards complete honesty resulted in three main controversies that defined her short time as Second Lady-- her comments on abortion, (which had just been legalized in *Roe v Wade*) drug use, and pre-marital sexual relations.¹⁰ In many ways, Ford epitomized the traditional American women—loving wife, mother, and homemaker. She was not a college graduate and did not have her own career. Her identity was intricately linked to her husbands. However, her views about women's rights were expansive beyond her own experiences and preferences.

⁹ Will Swift, *Pat and Dick: The Nixons, an Intimate Portrait of a Marriage* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2014), 326.

¹⁰ Jane J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 13.

The historiography of Betty Ford, especially as Second Lady, is very sparse. While information on her time as First Lady is relatively plentiful, her time as Second Lady has been largely ignored by scholars. Furthermore, there are no scholarly or popular works in general on Second Ladies. Ford herself only wrote two books. The first, *Betty Ford: The Times of My Life* (1978), was a general recounting of her life, with a particular focus on her time as First Lady.¹¹ In *Betty: A Glad Awakening* (1987), Ford focused exclusively on her addiction to alcohol and prescription medications, and the development of her rehabilitation center; thus, it made no mention of her time as Second Lady. Gerald Ford's own memoir, *A Time to Heal* (1978), focused mostly on Ford's presidential years. While it also detailed the political workings of the Vice President in the final months of the Nixon presidency and conveyed the Fords' astonishment and disgust at the corruption at the highest levels of American government, it revealed little insight into his wife's specific role. This work was part of the husband and wife joint book deal that came with a contract of \$1 million. *A Time to Heal* spends more time addressing the complex legal causes of the Vice Presidency compared to other works focused just on Ford. Gerald's autobiography also gave insights into the Ford's strong and loving marriage.

Only two biographies have been written on Betty, and both, not surprisingly, detailed her time in the White House. In *Betty Ford: Candor and Courage in the White House* (2004), historian John Robert Greene provides a brief overview of Ford's life. Overall, Greene offers the first scholarly consideration of Ford and pays particular attention to her family life, including her alcoholic father and domineering and perfectionistic mother. In *Betty Ford: First Lady, Women's Advocate, Survivor, Trailblazer* (2008), Lisa McCubbin provides a more in-depth study of Ford,

¹¹ Betty Ford with Chris Chase, *Betty Ford: The Times of My Life* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishing, 1978).

and even includes a chapter on “Betty Ford, Second Lady.” In the end, McCubbin concludes, “It is impossible to quantify Betty Ford’s legacy or to overstate it. So many things we take for granted come as a direct result of her candor and courage.”¹²

The Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum in Ann Arbor, Michigan, is the home to over 1,000 primary documents from Ford before, during, and after her time as Second Lady. The bulk of these documents were letters that the American people sent to Mrs. Ford. The Second Lady replied to every single inquiry, with a few answers coming from her assistant, Nancy Howe. These letters revealed the opinions and interests of the American people through their inquiries, and Ford’s character through her replies. The information ranged from requesting pictures of the family cat, Sean, to attacking Ford for her opinions on political policies. Of the hundreds of letters she received while Second Lady, close to half were responses to her public statements on abortion.

Ford as Second Lady was the subject, of course, of many magazine and newspaper reports. Key works included “The Betty Ford Nobody Knows” (1974) from *Good Housekeeping* and “The New Second Family” (1973) from *Time*. Ford also appeared for a few television interviews during this time. One was for *The Dick Cavett Show*, in which the Ford family and their Alexandria home was first seen by the world. The other was with Barbara Walters on *Today*. It was there that Ford made her now infamous comments on abortion and marijuana that followed her for years.

The second wave of Feminism hit in the 1960s and 1970s, which produced important works of literature that impacted both Ford and the culture around her. Two of the most well-known leaders of this period was Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. Friedan’s work, *The*

¹²Lisa McCubbin, *Betty Ford: First Lady, Women’s Advocate, Survivor, Trailblazer* (New York, NY: Gallery Books, 2018), 348.

Feminine Mystique published in 1963, was a best seller that is largely attributed to sparking the second wave of feminism. *Mystique* details the confines of womanhood and limitations of being a housewife and mother. It gave a voice to the struggles and feelings of thousands of woman during this time period. Steinem was a columnist for *New York Magazine* and published a powerful article in 1969 called “After Black Power, Women’s Liberation.” “Women’s Liberation” outlined the movements across the country fighting for equal pay, property rights, and other legal measures for women. Most of these feminist works were inspired by *The Second Sex* by French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. *Second Sex* discusses the treatment of women throughout history and outlines their systematic oppression and mistreatment.

Several scholarly monographs exist on the issues that dominated the Ford era. For example, Donald T. Critchlow’s *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism* (2005) details the work and importance of Schlafly in the rise of modern conservatism and the “New Right.” The Fords were pragmatic and largely none-ideological Republicans. They were uncomfortable then, with culture wars, and the growing trend within their party to rail against measures like the Equal Rights Amendment. Other important scholarly works on politics and culture in the early 1970s include Laura Kalman’s *Right Star Rising; A New Politics, 1974-1980* (2002), Mathew Avery Sutton’s *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents* (2013), and Bruce J. Schulman’s *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (2001).

Betty Ford was born as Elizabeth Ann Bloomer on 8 April 1918 in Chicago, Illinois. Her father, William, was a traveling salesman and an alcoholic, who died when Betty was a teen. Her mother, Hortense, was domineering and often critical of her youngest child. From an early age, then, Betty felt both loneliness and scrutiny. Her response was fierce independence. Vivacious

and opinionated, Betty, as a youth, by-passed a college education and opted instead for a career in dance.¹³ In 1942, at the age of twenty-five, she married William G. Warren, and in 1947—after what she later called a “Five-Year Misunderstanding”—the two divorced.¹⁴ The following year, Betty met and married a fellow Michigan Republican congressional candidate, Gerald R. Ford.¹⁵ Following Ford’s election victory that November the two newlyweds moved to Washington D.C.

Over the course of the next twenty-eight years, the Fords welcomed four additions to their family: Michael (1950), Jack (1952), Stephen (1956), and Susan (1957). They also climbed the political ladder. In 1965, Congressman Ford was elected House Minority Leader, becoming the face of the GOP during the administration of Democratic president Lyndon Johnson. His ultimate ambition in life, was to be Speaker of the House. However, after Republicans failed to win the House in 1972—the year Republican President Richard Nixon won 60% of the popular vote—Ford believed the chances of a GOP majority in House in his lifetime to be slim.¹⁶ He and Betty, then, planned for him to retire from congress in 1976.¹⁷

It was not to be. In June 1972, five men broke into the Democratic National Committee Headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington D.C. to replace already installed surveillance cameras. The burglars were arrested and immediately connected to the Nixon campaign’s Committee to Re-elect the President (CRP). Initially, however, there was no connection to the Nixon White House itself. Indeed, Ford herself later recalled that it was “such an inept effort at

¹³ John Robert Greene, *Betty Ford: Candor and Courage in the White House* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 1.

¹⁴ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 41.

¹⁵ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 45.

¹⁶ Gil Troy, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Fred L. Israel, Ed, *History of American Presidential Elections 1789-2008*, vol III, (New York, NY: Infobase Learning, 2012), 1365.

¹⁷ Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishing, 1979), 99.

God knows what by God knows whom that it didn't affect the voters."¹⁸ Over the next year, however, it was slowly revealed that Nixon – while not specifically ordering the break-in— created an environment in the White House that was conducive to such illegal activities and that he attempted to cover up the burglars' connection to the White House. In early 1973, Congress began investigating “what the President knew and when he knew it.” The struggle between the Nixon White House and the Democratic controlled congress escalated over the second half of 1973, following revelations of a taping system in the White House that chronicled the President's conversations.¹⁹

Meanwhile, in October 1973, Nixon's controversial and polarizing Vice President, Spiro Agnew, faced a mounting controversy from his brief time as governor of Maryland (1967-1969). During his campaign for governor in 1966, Agnew received money from a number of contributors who hoped his victory would pay dividends for them. When confronted with incriminating documents later, Agnew denied any involvement and claimed that the money was simply campaign donations. The growing body of evidence against him finally forced him to resign on 10 October 1973.²⁰

In 1967, a constitutional amendment was ratified dealing with presidential and vice-presidential succession. Under the terms of this 25th Amendment, “Whenever there is a vacancy in the office of the Vice President, the President shall nominate a Vice President who shall take office upon confirmation by a majority vote of both Houses of Congress.”²¹ Nixon was the first president to implement this provision. A leading contender for Agnew's replacement was House Minority Leader Ford. He was well liked and highly regarded, by both Republicans and

¹⁸ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 156.

¹⁹ Gerald Ford, *Time to Heal*, 99.

²⁰ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 107.

²¹ 25th Amendment, *Legal Information Institute*, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/amendmentxxv>.

Democrats on Capitol Hill and was considered to be an easy confirmation. Embroiled in Watergate, Nixon wanted to avoid any other congressional difficulties. Conventional wisdom, then, was that Ford would be selected. Indeed, following Agnew's resignation, Ford's phone rang nonstop.²² One reporter, for example, called and asked Mrs. Ford, "Has your husband told you to get your hair done?" She replied, "I just had it done yesterday, and if you think my husband's worried about my hair you have a wrong idea of my husband."²³ In another inquiry from the media asked if Gerald told her to buy a new dress to which Ford replied, "That's the last thing he'd tell me."²⁴ A few days later, the youngest member of the family, sixteen-year-old Susan, strolled into the kitchen and asked her mother, "Do you think President Nixon is going to choose Dad as Vice President?" Ford replied confidently, "No, Susan, honestly I don't. Your father is much too valuable in the House getting legislation through. The President would never take him out."²⁵ After this exchange, Susan bet her mom \$5 that he would become Vice President. Ford later described her mindset during this time, "The possibility [of Jerry becoming Vice President] so terrified me that I was blocking it out."²⁶

On 12 October 1973, Congressman Ford received an invitation from Nixon to be the new Vice President. "I didn't know whether to say thank you or not," the Congressman later recalled.²⁷ Two hours later, the President made his selection public with the Ford's at his side. Ford herself was then led on stage by a female staff member and was told to sit with First Lady Pat Nixon. In the midst of the bright lights, enthusiasm, and ceremony, there was no seat for the wife of the new Vice President. As the cheering died down and people began assuming their

²² Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 161.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 110.

²⁶ Betty Ford with Chris Chase, *Betty: A Glad Awakening* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1987), 1.

²⁷ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 161.

seats again, Ford approached the First Lady and whispered, “They told me to sit with you.”²⁸ The First Lady graciously shared her seat with Ford before she stood with Nixon and her husband. For the new Second Lady, she was feeling a mixture of excitement and terror of what this role would mean for her and her family.

The fact that Ford did not have a seat on stage was metaphorical of how unprepared she was for the role of Second Lady yet how well she adapted. Immediately after the ceremony Fords’ life as Second Family began. There, they were introduced to Jerry Bechtle who became the agent in charge of security for the Second Family.²⁹ Although it was another two months before Ford was officially sworn in as Vice President—because he needed the House and Senate confirmation—the Ford family got around the clock protection.

All of Ford’s achievements as First Lady would not have been possible without her training as Second Lady, honesty and controversy, and traditional character. Although Ford is better remembered for her time as First Lady or her activism beyond, these eight months as Second Lady were a critical training ground for the rest of her life. This was truly the first time that Ford was in the spotlight and there she would remain until her death. Ford’s decisions in her political role, elements of her personality such as her honesty and controversy, and her traditional wife and family roles outlined not only her time as Second Lady, but her lasting legacy.

In her husband’s first meeting with the President and cabinet as Vice President, Ford sat stunned. “I still didn’t know what had hit us, but I was excited, and so were the children. We didn’t have a chance to think about what it really meant.”³⁰ Within a week the current Vice President stepped down and the Fords stepped up. Within the year, the Ford’s moved into the

²⁸ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 162.

²⁹ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 115.

³⁰ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 163.

White House. Ford's time as Second Lady was ultimately a training ground for her time as First Lady. The Vice president assured his wife, "Betty, don't worry. Vice Presidents don't do anything."³¹ After hearing the news that her husband was chosen, Ford remarked, "If I had known what was coming, I think I probably would have sat right down and cried."³²

³¹ Julie Hinds, "First Lady's Legacy is Openness," *Freep*, March 22, 2009.

³² Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 163.

Chapter 1

The Gilded Cage: Betty Ford in her Professional Role.

The role Betty Ford assumed in late 1973 was one that lacked either clear definition or official responsibilities. The position of Second Lady rested largely on tradition, and not any strict rules. Intricately linked to notions of the Second Lady were considerations of the vice presidency itself (which was also a vague position). Ultimately, Ford was forced to rely on the legacies of her predecessors-- especially Pat Nixon (1953-1961), Lady Bird Johnson (1961-1963), Muriel Humphrey (1965-1969), and Judy Agnew (1969-1973). Ford faced a plethora of additional challenges, both personal and professional, that included a lack of preparedness, staff, and housing. In the end, Ford-- in her public role-- proved to be an engaging, vocal, and transparent Second Lady. Overall, there were three main events that defined Ford's public capacity as Second Lady: her dedication of the Artrain museum (April 1974), her commencement address at Westminster college (May 1974), and her attendance at the Alberta King funeral (July 1974).

The first challenge Ford faced was that the Second Lady traditionally possessed no official roles or duties and was merely an appendage of the Vice President—which itself was a weak office. Indeed, John Adams, the nation's first Vice President once argued, “My country has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived.”¹ Ultimately, the only official responsibilities the Vice President possessed were to preside over the Senate and to be available if the president died.²

¹ Jamie Fuller, “Here are a bunch of awful things vice presidents have said about being No. 2,” *The Washington Post*, October 3, 2014.

² Roger Sherman, another founding father, commented, “If the Vice President were not to be President of the Senate, he would be without employment.”

Second Ladies matched their husbands in perceived value. For Betty Ford, there were few clear paths for her to follow in that role.

A second challenge Ford faced was while most Second Ladies went through the process of a presidential campaign, Ford had only days to prepare and accept her new role. After twenty-five years of public service, Ford was ready for retirement from political life both emotionally and physically. Ford's pinched nerve in her back gave her chronic pain and the constant separation from her husband was taking a toll. Expecting retirement and then jumping into a more public role was a jarring realization. Ford reflects on the ordeal, "I would have rather the whole thing hadn't happened, you know that role is only for a very small period in your life, and life is more important than a role."³

Not only personally did Ford have little time to adjust, but professionally her sudden rise created problems. A direct result of Agnew's resignation was that that Ford came into the role with no staff. Second Ladies historically had only one or two women to help with scheduling, but this help was vital. Friends started showing up at her doorstep and letters poured in from around the country to offer their assistance. Nancy Howe worked at the White House and met Ford through Susan when she interned at the White House selling books.⁴ Howe was then hired as Ford's personal secretary.⁵ It quickly became a full time position with Ford receiving as many as five hundred invitations a week. Instead of having a team to manage and organize Ford's growing responsibilities and respond to the hundreds of letters, it was between Nancy and the Second Lady herself to get the job done.

³ "First Lady wasn't what she had in Mind," Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady Correspondence File Gallup – Godwin, Box 72, Ford, Betty- 1918-(1989-1999).

⁴ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 121.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

The first modern Second Lady to have a direct impact on Betty Ford was Pat Nixon. One historian succinctly stated, "she helped to define this nebulous role for an entire generation of women who would succeed her."⁶ As a Second Lady, Nixon accomplished two seemingly contradictory goals-- a stay-at-home housewife and the full-time partner to her husband, the Vice President.⁷ Nixon's reputation in the press was "as a consummate political wife, reserved and in the background."⁸ During her husband's vice presidency, Nixon tried her best to support him in all areas of life. The press praised her country girl upbringing and supportive stance. As the years progressed, Nixon took on more responsibilities, such as joining her husband's small staff by helping organize his schedule and give input on his public addresses. *The New York Times* called her a "diplomat in high heels" and "self-possessed, self-made... orderly, precise."⁹ Although Pat did little to separate from her husband, as a team they both were very active politically for a "Second Couple" and paved the way for the Fords a few decades later. Nixon also occasionally filled in as hostess for the much older First Lady Mamie Eisenhower (1953-1961). Mrs. Eisenhower, suffered from shortness of breath and fatigue, and therefore Nixon often hosted dinner parties or attended events in the First Lady's stead.¹⁰ As active as Nixon was, there were some significant differences between Ford and Nixon.

Contrary to Ford who was known for her honesty and candor, the press nicknamed Pat Nixon "Plastic Pat" because of her robotic and impersonal public appearances. In social situations she appeared, "unnaturally perky and artificially perfect."¹¹ The Nixons were not physically affectionate, to the point that there were rarely seen touching in any capacity. This

⁶ Kate Andersen Brower, "Remembering Pat Nixon: A Fearless First and Second Lady," *The Hill*, June 24, 2018. <https://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/393855-remembering-pat-nixon-a-fearless-first-and-second-lady>

⁷ Swift, *Pat and Dick*, 118.

⁸ Brower, "Remembering Pat Nixon."

⁹ Mary C. Brennan, *Pat Nixon: Embattle First Lady* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 66.

¹⁰ Swift, *Pat and Dick*, 131.

¹¹ Brennan, *Pat Nixon*, 75.

was the opposite of the Fords who would affectionately kiss in front of campaign crowds. Pat relentlessly perfected her persona as the flawless housewife and supportive mother to the point that it was crippling. The Second Lady resorted to hiring cleaning staff for the house but refusing to give them credit. She was so overwhelmed that when the press came, she would stage photos of her vacuuming or ironing her husband's pants to preserve her image as the perfect housewife.¹² In many instances she refused to have company over because her house was not immaculately clean. In contrast, the Fords were unified both inside and outside the home and always portrayed a realistic yet strong face.

Another Second Lady to have an impact on Ford was Lady Bird Johnson (1961-1963). Per John F. Kennedy's request, Lady Bird stepped up and campaigned full time in his wife's stead during the election because of Jacqueline Kennedy's pregnancy. This gave her a full-time schedule of high-profile political events that she handled with grace and professionalism. Jacqueline preoccupied with delivery and a newborn, meant that Lady Bird continued to fill in at official events totaling more than fifty appearances in a little over three years. This involvement trained Lady Bird well for her time as First Lady after Kennedy's assassination.

A third modern Second Lady was Muriel Humphrey (1965-1969). Humphrey's time as Second Lady was a return to tradition. Overall, she was shy and uncomfortable sharing her opinions in public. She did, however, informally advise her husband and appeared with him frequently at campaign and official events.¹³

Judy Agnew (1969-1974) was the Second Lady prior to Ford and the fourth to have an impact on her time. Even more than Humphrey, Agnew was grounded in traditional womanhood.

¹² Swift, *Pat and Dick*, 132.

¹³ Jean Libman Block, "The Betty Ford Nobody Knows; It's taken years of pain and month of psychotherapy for the woman who could become First Lady to learn that a wife can be too self-sacrificing," *Good Housekeeping*, May 1974, 140.

She had no interest in politics or in the public arena. “I think the job of a Vice President’s wife,” she once insisted, “is to be a wife and look after the needs of her husband even if he is Vice President.”¹⁴ When she learned that Nixon had named her husband his running mate in 1968 she quipped, “Can you get out of it?”¹⁵ Later, she said of her husband, “He can take care of himself in any controversy. He doesn’t need me to defend him. Nor does he need me as his cheering section.”¹⁶ The Agnew family had four children, only one of which was still at home by 1969. Mrs. Agnew had the help of press and social secretaries, but generally kept away from the public and the press.¹⁷

Agnew was terrified of her husband becoming President of the United States. In a 1970 interview with *People* magazine Agnew remarked, “I stay out of the political end of it. When people ask what I majored in, I proudly tell them ‘I majored in marriage.’”¹⁸ Agnew did not support the women’s liberation movement, explaining in 1971 that, “Some of the things they do are silly, I’m fine, I don’t think I need to be liberated.”¹⁹ Agnew never fought for any political cause in or out of office and tried to distance herself from the political machinery. On the day of her husband’s resignation, Agnew, overwhelmed by the political and personal tragedy, broke down and cried at a public luncheon.²⁰ In the end, Judy Agnew was a silent supporter of her husband’s role as Vice President.

Ford’s professional relationship with Judy Agnew was minimal. Helen Thomas, from the *Detroit Free Press*, recorded one of the few interactions between the two. According to Thomas,

¹⁴ Ibid., 155.

¹⁵ Jules Witcover, *Very Strange Bedfellows: The Short and Unhappy Marriage of Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew*. (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2007).

¹⁶ Curran, *Spiro Agnew*, 154.

¹⁷ Ibid., 156.

¹⁸ Martin Douglas, "Judy Agnew, Wife of Vice President, Dies at 91," *The New York Times*, June 27, 2012.

¹⁹ Frederick N. Ramussen, "Judy Agnew, Vice President's Wife and Md. First Lady," *The Baltimore Sun*, June 28, 2012.

²⁰ Ibid.

who interviewed Mrs. Ford for the article, Mrs. Agnew called Betty to congratulate her following Ford's swearing in as Vice President and to offer "advice on her new role."²¹ Thomas' article was written only a week after the Ford's entered the vice presidency. It relayed, then, the hectic days of the family's "transition." Life, Mrs. Ford told Thomas, was "much more hectic and [that] the old adrenaline is working."²² Still, Ford – who often in the interview referenced Judy Agnew-- believed her transition to Second Lady would be relatively easy. "I've been through the mill and we have so many Washington friends," she said.²³

Of the numerous letters Ford received, only one mentioned the name Agnew. Frank E. Hayden, a constituent in Gerald Ford's Farmer House district, wrote to Ford inquiring about her opinion on the Agnews and their situation. Ford replied, "We do feel very badly for what happened to the Agnews, and Mrs. Agnew has always been very kind when I was in her company."²⁴ Ford later added, "I feel very strongly about the laws of the land and judicial process must be upheld at all times."²⁵ The Fords were careful to maintain political relationships from all sides, and worked to avoid being tainted themselves by Watergate, Agnew, and scandal in general associated with the Republican party. In her autobiography, Ford later conveyed her frustration with Agnew. "Agnew," she wrote, proclaimed his innocence, and I for once believed him. I mean I thought you'd have to be off your rocker to accept bribes in that position."²⁶

As Congressmen Ford assumed the vice presidency in late 1973, he was very conscious of the need to avoid scandal, and particularly Nixon's own battle with Congress and the courts

²¹ Helen Thomas, "Betty Gets Advice from Judy," *Detroit Free Press*, December 12, 1973.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Betty Ford to Frank E. Hayden, April 2, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 159.

over Watergate. By that time, “Watergate was on the front pages of newspapers every day,” and Ford as Vice President, was expected to defend the President.²⁷ “I couldn’t abandon Nixon,” the Vice President later wrote, “because that would make it appear that I was trying to position myself to become President. Nor could I get too close to him, because if I did, I’d risk being sucked into the whirlpool myself. It was a day-by-day balancing act and I detested the whole thing.”²⁸ Throughout his career, Ford believed having a sense of humor, and being able to acknowledge and laugh at one’s mistakes were essential for success in politics. “The trouble with Washington in the spring of 1974,” he later recalled, “was that nobody was laughing any more. The atmosphere was vindictive and mean.”²⁹

In the eight weeks between Gerald’s nomination and his swearing in as vice president, there was an intense investigation into his professional and personal life. It was commonplace for the government to do a background check on the higher officials before they took the position. However, the FBI’s investigation of Gerald was the most expansive and intensive probe that had ever been conducted.³⁰ Watergate and the Agnew scandal made the officials extra vigilant against corruption. The Ford’s tax returns were meticulously reviewed and some 350 agents interviewed more than 1,000 witnesses. In the end, Congress was presented with a report numbering 1,700 pages.³¹

The FBI reached back into his time as a teenager to interview teachers, peers, and friends. “The process was like undergoing a physical exam in public view,” Ford recalled.³² Remarkably, Ford—who already had a reputation on Capital Hill for fairness, honesty, and dignity—emerged

²⁷ Gerald Ford, *Time to Heal*, 120.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁰ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 134.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

³² Gerald Ford, *Time to Heal*, 110.

from the process unscathed. “Republicans were sure Jerry could get through those hearings,” Mrs. Ford later recalled, “there had never been a trace of scandal about him.”³³ Gerald Ford was confirmed on 6 December 1973 by a bi-partisan vote of 387 to 35 in the House, and 92 to 3 in the Senate.³⁴ He was sworn in as Vice President later that same day. “I am a Ford, not a Lincoln,” the new Vice President told those gathered.³⁵

An immediate result of becoming Second Lady was assuming the role of President of the Red Cross Senate Wives. Judy Agnew was unceremoniously relieved from her position and another wife filled in until Ford took over.³⁶ Ford rushed to get a Red Cross uniform that was marked appropriately to reflect her new position. Ford’s new duties mostly consisted of organization, planning, and volunteering. There is not much information on this organization besides that it was a charity and received little to no press because of its selfless premise.

Barely a few days after her husband’s inauguration, Ford was informed of a possible housing change for her family. The Ford’s first apartment in Washington was a one-bedroom place at 2500 Q street NW at the edge of Georgetown.³⁷ The location was a quick drive to downtown D.C. and the newlyweds had planned on staying in Washington for only a few years. The happy couple wanted a family as soon as possible and soon welcomed two boys only two years apart, Michael and Steven. With two young children in the home, they moved to a garden-level apartment located at 1521 Mount Eagle Place that had twice the amount of space in addition to a yard.³⁸ On good days, you could see the Washington Monument from the backyard. After her husband won his third election, Ford realized that their stay in Washington was going

³³ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 163.

³⁴ Gerald Ford, *Time to Heal*, 111.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁶ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 168.

³⁷ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 55.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

to be longer than anticipated. Six years after arriving in DC the Ford house was “wall to wall with tricycles and wagons and toys.”³⁹ Ford put her foot down, “If you are going to run for Congress again, we have got to buy or build or rent a house.”⁴⁰ With this mindset, the Fords went on to purchase their first home.

There was a plot of land being developed into houses called Park Fairfax just across the Potomac River in Alexandria, Virginia.⁴¹ The Ford’s worked with a developer to design a four-bedroom, split-level, brick home that would fit their family perfectly. There were many personal touches in the house such as wood paneling made from knotty pine from Grand Rapids, Michigan. There was no formal dining room because Ford did not anticipate hosting many guests. Years later they added a swimming pool in the backyard for her husband to exercise and the kids to play. 514 Crown View Drive became their permanent home until the White House. Ford had both Steven and Susan while in Alexandria and the Fords finally had a place of their own.

Before 1974, the Vice President never had an official residence like the President had the White House. This changed with Herbert Humphrey as Vice President, and Congress purchasing a piece of property with the idea of building an official Vice-Presidential home.⁴² This was passed in Congress in 1966, eight years earlier. However, Congress still had not appropriated enough funds for the project. When the building costs of the house were deemed too high, they abandoned the project and the land. The Admiralty House, located at the Naval Observatory, was already built and fit the requirements for a secure residence. In May 1974, the decision was made

³⁹ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 60.

⁴² Ibid., 166.

that the location would be a temporary residence for the Second Family.⁴³ The final project would total almost \$175,000. Ford commented later on the situation, “since this Bill has been passed by Congress, the Vice President can no more refuse to move into the designated home than the President of the United States can refuse to live in the White House.”⁴⁴ Unfortunately, the house was far from move-in ready.

The house desperately needed upgrades and updates and as Second Lady, Ford was expected to lead the remodeling process.⁴⁵ While touring the house, it was a blank canvas for design and furniture pieces. Her husband recalled the project as “far more expensive and time-consuming than anyone had expected, but Betty kept at it with her characteristic enthusiasm and drive.”⁴⁶ For months Ford met with officials of the Navy and the Secret Service to determine what changes would be made to the house. This process was exciting but also frustrating. Their Alexandria home was built for them and fit them perfectly. Now they had to begin again in a new area and new space. Even in June of 1974, there was uncertainty as to when the Fords would move. Ford expressed this frustration in a letter to her friend Mary Meyer, “When the move happens, I have decided I am going to the attic and just throw things out the window and have Goodwill come along and cart them away.”⁴⁷ This was a major undertaking during her time as Second Lady. Unfortunately, the Fords were never able to live in the house that she had so carefully planned out. Instead, the Rockefellers moved in as Second Family when her husband became president.

⁴³ Gerald Ford, *Time to Heal*, 7.

⁴⁴ Nancy M. Howe to Laurene Kreer, August 6, 1974, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File Issues – 1976 Election, Box 70, Issues: 1976 election.

⁴⁵ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 138.

⁴⁶ Gerald Ford, *Time to Heal*, 7.

⁴⁷ Betty Ford to Mary Meyer, June 13, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74.

Immediately after the Ford's assumed the role of Second Family, their Alexandria home was inundated with reporters. Ford recalled, "You couldn't move without bumping into a reporter, you couldn't go out your front door."⁴⁸ The family posed for countless photos and answered the endless questions shouted at them. In addition to the media frenzy, the Secret Service gave the Vice President around the clock protection. At the time, only the Vice President received protection and not his family. The vice-presidential limousine and follow car monopolized the driveway so the rest of the Ford family were forced to park in the street. The night that his father was nominated, Steve Ford had gone to the football game at his high school and was forced to park blocks away because of the press frenzy. Steve and his friend Kevin thought it was a good idea to hop the fence in the back to avoid the cameras. They were soon confronted with armed Secret Security officers who did not recognize the boys. Steve reflects on the story, "it's funny now, but at the time it was terrifying."⁴⁹ In another instance Steve's friend Bobby Hanback picked him up for a weekend of Quail hunting. Bobby strolled up the steps of the Ford residence with a shotgun in his hand. Secret Service quickly swarmed and subdued him.⁵⁰ After some time, the agents began to recognize the young Ford's friends so they did not treat them as a threat. These few incidents reflect the many adjustments that the family had to make.

The Secret Security moved into the house, changed the locks, kept the keys, and remodeled the home. The Fords were not able to enter or exit their home without security opening it for them. The team of men needed a 24/7 command center in the house with three shifts a day. Due to the size of their residence, the only realistic solution was to convert the

⁴⁸ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 117.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵⁰ Block, "Ford Nobody Knows," 138.

garage into the command center.⁵¹ The Secret Service decided to dig out the driveway and replace the garage door with a brick wall. The garage would then be fitted with a bathroom, kitchenette, sitting room, and an advanced electronic communication and security system.⁵² In addition to these major renovations, all the windows were replaced with bullet-proof glass and holes were drilled for new alarms and detectors. Another change was all telephone calls to the Fords had to pass through the White House switchboard and be screened by a Secret Service agent. The main phone in the family room went from having two to eighteen buttons.⁵³ Ford not only had to oversee the renovations of the new vice residence, but also deal with her own house being a construction zone.

In addition to these major responsibilities, Ford found time to be politically active. As the new Second Lady, Ford was also invited to countless dinners, galas, charity events, and other gatherings. Rarely, however, did Ford speak or have a major role in these ceremonies. There were three major exceptions: her dedication of the Artrain museum, her commencement address at Westminster College, and her attendance of the Alberta King funeral. Each revealed Ford's interest in providing the American people with a message.

The Artrain originated in Michigan and was founded by the Michigan State Council of the Arts in 1971. The concept was a train that was also an art museum with each train car holding a different art gallery. In this way, culture and art could be brought to even the most rural parts of the States. Between 1971-1974, the Artrain toured Michigan to an enthusiastic audience.⁵⁴ Then,

⁵¹ Ibid., 119.

⁵² Ibid., 120.

⁵³ Ibid., 142.

⁵⁴ Remarks by Betty Ford at Westminster Choir College Commencement, Gerald R. Ford Library, Gerald R. Ford Vice Presidential Papers, Box 133, May 31, 1974- Betty Ford Speech, Westminster Choir College Commencement, Princeton, NJ, 3.

in 1974, the Artrain took its first nationwide tour to stop in twenty-four small towns in six southern states.⁵⁵

Ford received an invitation to travel to Dalton, Georgia on 6 April to be the guest of honor at the grand opening of the Southern tour of the Artrain. This was the first solo trip Ford made outside of Washington as Second Lady. She was received by Governor Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, who staged a reception for the Second Lady at the governor's mansion. The parade and dedication ceremony for the Artrain took place the following day. "I was nervous," Mrs. Carter recalled, "she was the most distinguished guest we had ever had, but when she arrived, she was so warm and friendly that she immediately put me at ease and we had a goodtime together."⁵⁶ The reception that night at the governor's mansion went beautifully and Ford thrived in the spotlight. One friend who had known Ford for quite some time remarked to a reporter, "none of this has changed her. She has a great modesty. She's still as plain as an old shoe and sharp as a tack."⁵⁷

Ford's direct participation in the Artrain revealed her initial discomfort in a public role. In the parade opening the event, Mrs. Carter and Ford rode together in a convertible down the parade route in Dalton. The route was packed and Mrs. Carter—steeped in her husband's career-- was at ease and energetically waved and shouted at folks down the line. Ford, who had been Second Lady for just 4 months, had experienced very little campaigning even during her husband's years in the House. With Ford's discomfort growing more obvious, Rosalynn realized that Ford had spent her whole life at home with the children instead of going out with her

⁵⁵ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 128.

⁵⁶ Rosalynn Carter, "Remarks by Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter at the Funeral of Betty Ford," *The Carter Center* July 12, 2011, https://www.cartercenter.org/news/editorials_speeches/rc-remarks-betty-ford-funeral.html

⁵⁷ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 130.

husband and experiencing the world of politics. Mrs. Carter then gave Ford some suggestions and tips on how to interact with the people and she became more comfortable with the parade atmosphere.⁵⁸ Later, in a thank you note for the Mayor of Dalton, Ford wrote, “The parade that you arranged for Mrs. Carter and me was great fun. I especially enjoyed the opportunity to meet all the fine citizens of Dalton.... Thank you so much for one of the loveliest days I have had the privilege of spending in all my many years in public life with my husband.”⁵⁹

The official dedication of the Artrain awaited at the end of the parade. Sitting on the speaker’s podium with the Carter’s, Ford was expected to say a few words. In front of hundreds of people, the Second Lady grew nervous at the prospect of public speaking. At one point, Ford leaned over and whispered to Rosalynn, “Can’t I just thank the mayor and sit down? I don’t want to make a speech.”⁶⁰ Carter replied that it would be polite to say a few words. Ford not only did not have an official speechwriter, but in the moment, she had no prepared notes. Nevertheless, the Second Lady mustered up the courage and made a few brief comments on her love of dance and the arts and how much it taught her growing up. The crowd responded well by bursting into applause and, with that, Ford had conquered her initial fear.⁶¹ After a long day of firsts and fears, Ford seemed more at ease and was friendly and engaging. On the caboose a ceremonial ribbon awaited them, and Ford cut the cord amidst cheers. A beautiful piece of pottery was also presented to Ford as a representation of the Artrain.⁶²

⁵⁸ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 130.

⁵⁹ Betty Ford to Don Ellis, April 18, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

⁶⁰ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 131.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Betty Ford to Terry Lambert, April 18, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

Numerous thank you letters from Ford to various Artrain coordinators show the gratitude that Ford felt towards all involved. In one note Ford dotes, “I only wish that we could have had more time to visit with all of the wonderful people that came down to greet Mrs. Carter and me.”⁶³ In another letter thanking the mayor of Dalton, Walter Scott Bogle, Ford states, “Small towns are still the greatest places to live.”⁶⁴ The Second Lady also personally thanked the National Endowment for the Arts, “I, too, share your deep interest in bringing art to the people.”⁶⁵ Even apart from the well-known people and organizations that contributed, Ford found time to thank some of the little stops along the way. For example, the guest of honor thanked Sam Little for providing “wonderful tasty box lunches” and Alice for the “lovely corsage.”⁶⁶

Overall this Artrain trip to Georgia was significant for a number of reasons. The Georgia trip was the first real training Ford had on how to behave as the center of attention both socially and politically. Rosalynn Carter taught Ford countless valuable lessons during this visit. Summarizing her entire experience, Ford writes, “The people of Dalton and everyone involved with the Artrain would not have been nicer. I know that with such fine young people aboard the train, it shall definitely be a success wherever it travels.”⁶⁷ Ford’s development and growth during these few days lasted for her extended time in office. This visit was significant enough that Rosalynn Carter, in her speech at Betty Ford’s funeral in 2011, listed this visit as an

⁶³ Betty Ford to Meg Geobel, February 1, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

⁶⁴ Betty Ford to Valda Garrison, April 2, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

⁶⁵ Betty Ford to John P. Lefebure, July 8, 1974, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File Biography, Box 69, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74.

⁶⁶ Betty Ford to Sam Little, April 18, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

⁶⁷ Betty Ford to Burton Woolf, April 30, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

accolade, “and she had come to Georgia with the Michigan Artrain, a project taking six cars filled with great art to rural communities across the country.”⁶⁸ Around a month or two after, Ford experienced another first, with her first public speech.

Ford delivered the commencement address to the students of Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey on 31 May 1974.⁶⁹ Westminster was a music conservatory that offered degrees in voice, piano, and organ performance. In addition to music theory and composition as majors, Westminster had a focus on the religious uses of music and had religious themes throughout. It is not clear from the resources today why Ford would accept this invitation to speak and not others, perhaps it was her Christianity and love of the arts that drew her. Regardless of the reason, this was the only speech she made as Second Lady. At the time, the Second Family did not have Secret Service protection, so the college arranged for a single room to be given to Ford at a local hotel. Nancy Howe sent a request to borrow an academic robe “since Mrs. Ford does not hold a degree.”⁷⁰ With all the logistics in place, Ford went about writing her first speech.

Contrary to her husband, Ford did not have the luxury of speechwriters and she used this information to add a bit of humor in her opening paragraphs. “Now, I don’t have any speechwriters so I thought I might borrow from one of my husband’s speeches... I knew it wasn’t right for me when I came to the sentence, ‘And you may have heard I played a little

⁶⁸ Rosalynn Carter, “Remarks by Former First Lady.”

⁶⁹ Betty Ford to Robert W. Jones, January 30, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

⁷⁰ Nancy M. Howe to Robert W. Jones, March 28, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

football—and I did wear a helmet.”⁷¹ This type of humor was scattered throughout and was received well by the audience. Ford’s speech bolstered Nixon and Ford indirectly by praising their successes in office without mentioning their names. Ford states, “The riots and protests of just a few years ago have subsided; the rise in crime rates has slowed; we are out of the war in Vietnam and at peace; detente is easing Cold War tensions, and we have reestablished diplomatic relations with Communist China.” Ford ended the laundry list of U.S. improvements by saying, “the future is promising.”⁷²

The commencement went on to describe and explain the Artrain in addition to the other ways that the Arts were growing in the United States. Ford’s dancing past came out in her enthusiasm for the Wolf Trap Theater, Catholic University’s new Hartke Theatre, and the newly reopened Ford Theater.⁷³ The Second Lady transitions this into encouraging the graduates to get involved in their communities, “The list of possibilities is endless, but please do something.”⁷⁴

Ford mentioned her faith many times in her speech such as suggesting the graduates participate in “Sunday schools, summer bible schools, and church sponsored summer camps.”⁷⁵ In a later section Ford suggested, “don’t be afraid to experiment, or bring groups into your church, because a church is not intended to be used only on Sundays.... Think of ways of using your training which will help bring people back into the churches where they belong.”⁷⁶ Ford ended her five-page commencement with, “God Bless you all.”⁷⁷

⁷¹ Remarks by Betty Ford at Westminster Choir College Commencement, Gerald R. Ford Library, Gerald R. Ford Vice Presidential Papers, Box 133, May 31, 1974- Betty Ford Speech, Westminster Choir College Commencement, Princeton, NJ, 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

Another area where Ford demonstrated distinction in her public role as Second Lady was with the Alberta William King funeral. King, the mother of civil rights activist and preacher Martin Luther King Jr., was brutally murdered on 30 June 1974.⁷⁸ That Sunday morning, Alberta was playing the organ before the Lord's prayer at her home church of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia when Marcus Wayne Chenault shot her from the congregation with two handguns. The young, black man jumped up from the congregation and yelled, "you must stop this! I am tired of all this! I'm taking over this morning," before committing the act.⁷⁹ Members of the congregation subdued the attacker, and they described him as "delirious. He appeared to be in a fever. He said over and over, 'the war did this to me.'"⁸⁰ Chenault also killed another member of the congregation, Edward Boykin, in addition to wounding Mrs. Jimmy Mitchell.⁸¹ Alberta was sixty-nine when she passed away, and her killer was only twenty-three. Ebenezer Church was the same location that she married her husband almost fifty years earlier.

The King family, because of their outspoken activism, faced unimaginable tragedy in their lives. Alberta had three children, Martin was assassinated in 1968 and her other son drowned at the family pool in 1973. Only her daughter Christine survived. The New York mayor Abraham D. Beame summed it up well by stating, "once again a family that has contributed so much and sacrificed so much for this country has been struck suddenly into grief."⁸² Alberta was a strong activist but worked behind the scenes and had few public addresses. To those close to her she went by the affectionate nickname "Bunch" or "Mamma," while her husband was referred to as "daddy." One of the many reverends at the funeral commented, "through her, God

⁷⁸ "A Shy Mrs. King was Devoted to the 9 Children Her Sons Left: Teaches Education Daughter of Minister," *New York Times*, July 1, 1974.

⁷⁹ Simon Winchester, "Martin Luther King's Mother Slain in Church" *The Guardian*, July 1, 1974.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Drummond B. Ayres, "Mourners Pay Respects to Mrs. King," *New York Times*, July 3, 1974.

⁸² "Americans Mourn Mrs. King's Death," *New York Times*, July 1, 1974.

gave to this world the most peaceful warrior of the 20th century.”⁸³ To add to the trauma, Alberta was survived by her husband who happened to be walking into the church right before his wife was shot. Martin Luther King Sr. spent the funeral of his wife on the front row, leaning on the arm of his only surviving child, Christine. He was Chenault’s original target, who believed that ministers were “the enemy of the black.”⁸⁴

When Alberta died, Richard Nixon was in the Soviet Union meeting with Leonid Brezhnev, and Gerald L. Warren, the White House spokesman at the time issued a statement that said, “the President was saddened by the tragic and senseless act.”⁸⁵ Later, Nixon himself issued a statement that read, “It is a terrible irony that a family whose devotion to nonviolence has so greatly advanced the cause of social justice in the United States, should have two of its member struck down in this fashion.”⁸⁶ Jimmy Carter expressed his condolences over the phone to Mr. King, “his attitude in a time of personal grief is characteristic of him and an example of Christian love for us all.”⁸⁷

Betty Ford made the decision to pay respects at Alberta’s funeral despite having never met her. There was no pressure or obligation, just a strong inclination that Ford felt and acted on. In her autobiography Ford recalls, “nobody from the administration was planning to attend Mrs. King’s funeral, so I took it upon myself. I checked with Jerry first, and he said sure. ‘Go on down, somebody ought to be there.’”⁸⁸ At the time, only the Vice President was paid to travel and Ford traveled for free only when she was with her husband. For example, Ford sent a letter

⁸³ Drummond B Ayres, "Emotion and Eulogy Fill Final Rites for Mrs. King," *New York Times*, July 4, 1974.

⁸⁴ Paul Delaney, "Chenault's Road to Atlanta and Tragedy is Linked to a Bizarre Interpretation of Bible: Not Taken Seriously ' Death List' found in Chenault's Room the Real Truth' Marked' Men A Little Weird' A Move to Dayton the First to Kill' Not a Demonstrator at the Bus Station," *New York Times*, July 8, 1974.

⁸⁵ *New York Times*, “Americans Mourn.”

⁸⁶ "Nixon Sees 'Irony' in Mrs. King's Death," *New York Times*, July 2, 1974.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 170.

on 8 July declining the invitation to be the guest of honor at a dance reception in Michigan because, “due to the economy... the government does not provide her transportation unless the Vice President accompanies her.”⁸⁹ Her husband even had the use of his own private plane called the *Air Force Two*.⁹⁰ It was notable that Ford declined other offers but attended Alberta’s funeral.

Mrs. King’s body was moved to the Spelman College Chapel for a memorial service and the next day was the funeral service at Ebenezer church at 11 AM.⁹¹ More than 500 people packed the hot sanctuary of Ebenezer Baptist Church on July 2 to mourn the death of Alberta. Those who paid their respects were a majority African American, Ford recalls, “I can remember only two white people in the church—one was Jimmy Carter and the other was me.”⁹² All eyes were on the 70-year-old husband and pastor of the church, Martin Luther King Sr. When walking by the casket, King Sr mumbled, “I’ll be coming up there soon Bunch, I’ll be home most any old time now. We shall overcome.”⁹³ The first black mayor of Atlanta, Maynard Jackson, attended and called Alberta “a rock of ages” adding that “no bullet will ever change that fact.”⁹⁴ Jackson would later add, “Atlanta is in a time of great sorrow because of the loss of a women who truly must be one of the great women of history.”⁹⁵ Jimmy Carter and his wife were also in attendance with Ford.⁹⁶ In a powerful gesture, King Sr. made his way to the pulpit to say a few words. “I’m not going to let nothing stop me, we’ve got to carry on. We’ve lost Bunch and Martin and A.D.

⁸⁹ Nancy M. Howe to Jerome H. Wittwer, July 8, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74.

⁹⁰ Gerald Ford, *Time to Heal*, 13.

⁹¹ Ayres, “Mourners Pay Respects to Mrs. King.”

⁹² Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 170.

⁹³ Ayres, “Emotion and Eulogy.”

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ “Americans Mourn.”

⁹⁶ Ayres, “Emotion and Eulogy.”

all gone. But you thank God for what you have left. They say he came after me last Sunday too. Let him come back. He can't do nothing but kill this broken old body."

According to her official schedule, Ford took a commercial flight that morning from Washington National Airport to attend the services that day. After arriving in Atlanta, she was then received at the King's personal residence where she met with Mrs. Coretta King, widow of Martin Luther King Jr, Mrs. Christine Kin Ferris, sister of the late Martin Luther King Jr., and Daddy King, the husband and father. When Ford arrived, she went up to meet Daddy King. Ford recalled, "He was dressing for the funeral, and somebody took me up to his room. He had his pants and shirt on, but his suspenders were hanging down, and he hadn't put on his stiff collar yet. He took me in his arms and hugged me, and he cried. He was broken up; he'd been through so much."⁹⁷ After an hour of socializing, they traveled to Ebenezer Church for an hour-long service. Afterwards, Ford spent another hour at the cemetery before flying home.

To illustrate the racial tensions at the time, Mayor Jackson issued a statement at the time of Alberta's death beseeching the community to "remain calm."⁹⁸ Atlanta was the biggest and fastest growing city in the Deep South, but it held serious interracial tensions. The week of the funeral came at a turbulent time. The week before Alberta was assassinated, the police shooting of a young black man, who had violated his parole, caused an eruption of civil disturbances.⁹⁹ The mood of the city was uneasy and tense after the shooting took place. However, it was a positive factor that the Alberta's shooter was African American because it did not escalate tensions between white police officers and black civilians. The mayor of Fayette, Mississippi, whose brother was assassinated in 1963 commented, "nobody is safe anymore even praying in

⁹⁷ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 170.

⁹⁸ Winchester, "Martin Luther King's Mother."

⁹⁹ Ibid.

church. Nobody is safe as long as these people are running around with guns.”¹⁰⁰ Ford was accompanied by her secretary Nancy Howe and three Secret Service agents. Normally Ford would not have gotten protection, but safety was a concern with the climate in Atlanta

This decision by Ford to attend Alberta’s funeral went virtually unnoticed in the press. Alberta’s murder in general was not covered by major newspapers and the articles that were published focused on the mentally unstable assailant. The children’s clinic at the Martin Luther King Jr. hospital was named a few days later after Alberta with the title, “The Alberta King Children’s clinic.”¹⁰¹ A New York times article added, “including Mrs. Gerald Ford, the wife of the Vice President,” with no other information included.¹⁰² The little record of this event does not diminish the significance it had on her life. Attending the funeral was paying respects to not only Alberta, but her son’s religious and civil ministry that promoted equal rights for African American citizens and a faith and love for God. With so few official trips and events, this one stands out as deliberate decision that was out of the norm.

Ford, when replying to a personal letter about the King funeral, had this to say about the event:

As an American, I felt that it was my duty to represent not only myself but the Vice President on such a sad occasion and to extend personally my deepest sympathy to the King family. I am just sorry that I never had the privilege of meeting Mrs. King when she was alive. Everything that I have heard about her makes one realize what a wonderful person she was and what a senseless act was committed when that poor sick soul took such a beautiful life. I am sure that she will be greatly missed for many years to come by the people of her parish.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ "Nixon Sees 'Irony' in Mrs. King's Death."

¹⁰¹ "Dr. King's Mother Honored," *New York Times*, July 3, 1974.

¹⁰² Ayres, "Emotion and Eulogy."

¹⁰³ Betty Ford to Fred P. Jais, July 16, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74.

This letter is one of the only official documents that Ford personally recorded about attending the King funeral. Also, with the near media blackout of the event, it stands as some of the only evidences of the interaction. Ford even went as far as to call Alberta’s grieving husband. In another personal entry Ford writes, “The reverend King was most kind when I made a call at the house. It seems “to have known her was to love her.”¹⁰⁴ Martin Luther King Sr. Rarely if ever gave public speeches and similar to his wife, kept out of the media spotlight. Therefore, King Sr. has no record of this conversation, so what was said can only be speculated. These foundational events were occurring in the midst of the media frenzy.

In the end, Ford’s contribution to public life as Second Lady was—as these three episodes demonstrated-- rooted in her honesty, accessibility, and compassion. In the Artrain, Ford, who was an enthusiastic supporter of the arts, displayed humor, social graces, and an ability to quickly adapt to the demands of national scrutiny. In the Westminster speech, Ford revealed her propensity for public transparency and honesty. Finally, with the King funeral, Ford showed her compassion, as well as an understanding of the potential political ramifications of attending.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Chapter 2

The Free Spirit: Betty Ford and the Media.

Honesty was the cornerstone of Betty Ford's personality and earned praise from some and animosity from others. Upon becoming Second Lady in late 1973, one Ford admirer admonished, "please do not change. Washington is full of phony, self-righteous mannequins."¹ Ford, then, was a breath of fresh air for scandal-weary Americans. Honesty, of course, was not without controversy. Indeed, Ford as First Lady (1974-1977) was remembered for being a "trailblazer" and "pioneer," and for "her belief in radical honesty and personal transparency."² However, it was during her brief time as Second Lady that she first engaged in controversial social and cultural topics, even within her own Republican party. In general, these topics were associated with women's health issues and equal rights. Specifically, there were three major contentious subjects which Ford was embroiled in 1973 and 1974: abortion, marijuana, and pre-marital sex. These controversies were grounded not in Ford attempting to co-opt power or establish an agenda for the Second Lady, they were merely steeped instead in conversation i.e. she was asked questions (by both the media and ordinary americans via letters) and she candidly replied.

The most widely circulated controversy during Ford's time as Second Lady was her comments on abortion—mainly her support of both it and organizations like Planned Parenthood. The issue of woman's health in the United States had a long and complicated history. While not originally an abortion organization, Planned Parenthood, established by Margaret Sanger (1879-1966) in 1973 was consistently controversial. She was inspired after her

¹ Ann Wolcott to Betty Ford, August 12, 1975, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady Correspondence File Gallup—Godwin, Box 72, Ford, Betty, 1918- Letters to.

² Rick Perlstein, "Betty Ford: Pioneer," *The New York Times*, Ford, Betty, 1918-2011 Demise/Funeral Events- Tributes/Reminiscences.

own mother suffered and died at age forty-nine from tuberculosis after conceiving eighteen times and giving birth to eleven children. Working in the slums of New York City in the early 1900s, Sanger saw firsthand the negative health effects of multiple pregnancies and children. At the time, most birth controls were illegal and even spreading information on the topic was not allowed in a majority of states. After traveling to Europe in 1914, Sanger developed a pill that prevented pregnancy. The original founders of Planned Parenthood were often arrested or harassed for teaching information on the female and male reproductive systems. In the mid-1900s, there were hundreds of laws in place to limit sex education and birth control in the United States. Overtime these laws lessened and sex education slowly opened up to married then single women.

Planned Parenthood was formed in 1973 after the merging of the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau (BCC) and the American Birth Control League (ABC).³ The BCC was founded by Sanger in 1923 and was used to provide birth control to women and collect statistics about their health history. The ABC was a newer organization that examined the impact of population growth on a global scale. The 1950 saw the development of the contraceptive pill in the United States and it became safe for everyday use.⁴ Knowledge and safety were the core values of Planned Parenthood and they were able to help hundreds of women. Soon the one clinic grew into multiple and today there are hundreds across the United States.⁵

The landmark case *Griswold v Connecticut* in 1965 changed the legality of contraceptives in the United States.⁶ In Connecticut it was illegal to use any drug or instrument to prevent

³ “Our History,” Planned Parenthood Federation of America Inc. Accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/who-we-are/our-history>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

conception. Estelle Griswold, a married woman, went to a well-known and respect physician who gave her advice on how to avoid conception. Even a medical professional speaking to a patient on the subject was considered illegal. Griswold brought the case to the Supreme Court and the law was deemed unconstitutional by a vote of 7-2.⁷ According to the justices, the law violated the “right to martial privacy,” or the freedom within a marriage to make independent decisions about intimacy. This meant that constitutionally the government had no right to aid or inhibit women’s bodies, or in this case, birth control.⁸ Across the United States, contraception was now legal and it paved the way for abortion to come to the courts less than ten years later.

By 1970, some states, such as New York, legalized abortion. Indeed, the Planned Parenthood office in Syracuse was the first health center in the organization to offer abortion services after the state legalized it.⁹ While Planned Parenthood had not originally offered abortions, that changed as individual states made the procedure legal. On January 22, 1973, abortion¹⁰ was legalized in the United States in the landmark Supreme Court case *Roe v Wade*.¹¹ The case began three years earlier when “Jane Roe,” an alias for Norma McCorvey, challenged Henry Wade, the district attorney of Dallas county, Texas. After having multiple children, Roe wanted to abort her pregnancy and she was denied.¹² Roe argued that this was against her rights as a married woman and a violation of her privacy. Her claims were remarkably similar to the

⁷ *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479, June 7, 1965, Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/381/479>

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ “Our History.”

¹⁰ Merriam Webster defines abortion as “the termination of a pregnancy after, accompanied by, resulting in, or closely followed by the death of the embryo or fetus.” In short, abortion is the termination of a pregnancy either in the early or late stages of conception. Abortion in the 1970s had a different connotation than the modern-day understanding. In most states in the early 20th century, abortion can occur in later trimesters and the practice has expanded overtime as new drugs and instruments flooded the market. Abortion can also include minors, those who are not married, and occur without consent of a parent or spouse. The original legalization of abortion could only occur in the first trimester, using the limited resources available at the time. Therefore, the original legislation was not as expansive by later standards.

¹¹ *Griswold v. Connecticut*.

¹² *Ibid.*

Griswold v. Connecticut case. Although the Supreme Court disagreed with Roe’s claim that all women have “an absolute right to terminate pregnancy, in any way and at any time,” they did seek to balance women’s rights and state’s interests.¹³ Officially abortion was legalized, but only “at approximately the end of the first trimester” of pregnancy.¹⁴

Planned Parenthood began to receive federal funding in 1970 when Nixon signed the Family Planning Services and Population Research Act.¹⁵ This was part of the Public Health Services Act and was nicknamed Title X. Title X is the only federal grant program dedicated to providing all individuals with health services relating to conception and pregnancy.¹⁶ The Act was legally designed to prioritize low-income families, those who were uninsured, or those with little to no sex education. The purpose at the time was to empower women to choose how many children they wanted and at what times. By doing so, they hoped to reduce the amount of health issues with mothers and create a more happy and balanced family life. This legislation was supported by factions in both the Democratic and Republican Parties. In a practical sense, the act provided public funding for birth control and sex education services that were previously unavailable for those who could not afford it.¹⁷ Planned Parenthood fit into that description, so it also received funding in addition to other organizations. Betty Ford was supportive of both *Roe v Wade* and Planned Parenthood.

In early 1974 Ford agreed to do an interview with Barbara Walters of the *Today* show with one caveat: no questions on politics. Ford was not prepared to speak publicly on issues yet. The interview started and after the normal pleasant exchanges Walters asked, “How do you feel

¹³ “Our History.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

about the Supreme Court’s ruling on abortion?”¹⁸ Ford, visible surprised by the question, responded, “I agree with the Supreme Court’s ruling. I think it’s time to bring abortion out of the backwoods and put it in the hospitals where it belongs.”¹⁹²⁰ The Second Lady never formally campaigned or advocated for abortion, but simply stated her support of the decision. In a later interview she restated her support by saying it was appropriate particularly for “some high school girls who are forced to marry, have their babies, and end up in marriages that are fiascos.”²¹ These statements ignited a firestorm of criticism, from the most conservatives members of both parties. In a later statement Ford adds, “Maybe I shouldn’t have said it, but I couldn’t lie. That’s the way I feel.”²² A local newspaper article put it best, “whatever the question, Betty Ford doesn’t flinch.”²³

On 2 May 1974, Planned Parenthood contacted Ford to seek support for their annual Stitchery Faire, and Ford accepted.²⁴ The organization charged for general admission and to display people’s needlepoint work as a fundraiser. Stitchery included knitting, weaving, crocheting, needlepoint, and embroidery.²⁵ Skill levels ranged from professional to children’s works. The Faire was May 2 and in support Ford sent one of her daughters, Susan, stitched pillows in addition to a photo of Susan, her age, and why she learned needlepoint.²⁶ Susan’s pillow was returned promptly and none of the Ford family made an official appearance. Susann

¹⁸ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 123.

¹⁹ Unfortunately, the transcript of this interview is no longer available.

²⁰ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 123.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Francis Lewine, “On Being A First Lady, Betty Ford; Turning Unflinching honesty into a Political Asset,” *The Ann Arbor News*, March 7, 1976.

²⁴ Sonia Lamoreaux to Betty Ford, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977, Second Lady General Subject File Issues- 1976 Election, Box 70, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Nancy M. Howe to Susann Bowman, April 18, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

Bowman, head of the Faire, expressed her gratitude, “I am just delighted to have the privilege of displaying Miss Ford’s works and so appreciate your generous consideration to participate. I know they will be the highlight of the Faire.”²⁷ Loretta Knowles from California wrote Ford asking her opinions on contraceptives. Ford replied, “Yes I am in favor of Planned Parenthood and birth control. Under certain circumstances, I think abortion should be legally available; such as rape, incest, and when the mother’s life is in danger.”²⁸

The most common letters written to Ford were on the topic of abortion and most were scathing indictments against her comments. On New Jersey woman, for example wrote to inform Mrs. Ford that “Your statements cost your husband my vote... Its unthinkable that someone in your position should advocate pre-marital sex and abortion.”²⁹ God and abortion, she added, do not go “hand in hand.”³⁰ Other letters sought to “educate” Ford on abortion. “I can’t believe that you really know what abortion is all about,” Clifford Adams wrote in early January 1974, “and so I am enclosing a small brochure to give you some facts.”³¹ Adams also questioned how abortions were “good.” “[They are] good for who? The doctors, clinics and abortion referral agencies who are making money hand over fist at the expense of women and girls.”³² Ford simply and graciously responded, “Thank you so much for taking the time to send me the brochure and your comments on abortion.”³³ “Thousands of unborn children are being murdered

²⁷ Susann Bowman to Nancy M. Howe, March 25, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

²⁸ Betty Ford to Loretta Knowles, January 25, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

²⁹ John Richard Ghilon to Betty Ford, August 11, 1975, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady Correspondence File Gallup—Godwin, Box 72, Ford, Betty, 1918- Letters to.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Betty Ford to Clifford Adams, January 5, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

under this open abortion law...,” another letter read. God is watching us—and YOU! Re-think your views!”³⁴

Ford also received a letter from Maria Von Trapp, matriarch of the Von Trapp Family Singers and the inspiration for the Broadway musical and Hollywood film, *Sound of Music*.

“You may have noticed what an outrage was raised all over the country by your flippant remark on Television,” Von Trapp wrote. “I can assure you, you have done great damage to your husband’s political aspirations. Both of you have lost a great deal of respect and good will among the people of the United States... do you realize how much harm you have done to the American family and to the American youth? I pray that God will give you the necessary insight.”³⁵

A few letters praised her bravery and honesty. Donald G. Baird, the minister of Central Christian Church in California, wrote, “I simply wanted to thank you for your sensitive words about abortion on the December 11 *Today* show. Abortion is a serious and complex question... I thank you for your honesty and agree with your comments.”³⁶ Baird also acknowledged the firestorm against Ford. “I suppose,” he wrote, “that you have been the object of their wrath since you made your comments.”³⁷ Another letter, written by Ann Wolcott of New Jersey, sent along “cheers of appreciation.”³⁸ This fan from New Jersey described her interview as “charming, bright and a lovely change of pace.”³⁹ Wolcott went on to pledge her support to a women with her “own mind and convictions.”⁴⁰

³⁴ K. Blankenheim to Betty Ford, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977, Second Lady General Subject File Issues – 1976 Election, Box 70, Chronological file, personal 12-17-73 thru 8-9-74.

³⁵ Maria Von Trapp to Betty Ford, August 12, 1975, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady Correspondence File Gallup – Godwin, Box 72, Ford, Betty, 1918- Letters to.

³⁶ Nancy M. Howe to Rebecca Martin, February 28, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

³⁷ Donald G. Baird to Betty Ford, January 7, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady Correspondence File A, Box 71, Chronological file, personal 12-17-73 thru 8-9-74.

³⁸ Ann Wolcott to Betty Ford, August 12, 1975, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady Correspondence File Gallup—Godwin, Box 72, Ford, Betty, 1918- Letters to.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

The sheer number of letters the Fords received on this topic meant that most of the replies were automated in content. In every reply the information was added, “Thank you so much for taking the time to send me your comments on abortion. I read them with a great deal of interest since I am so concerned about this important issue. I am very pleased to receive your views on this subject.”⁴¹ Regardless if the letter was positive or negative, Ford would always add this section to respect either opinion. The beginning of the responses would normally be more personalized. Such as Ford thanking Adams for the brochure that he sent.⁴²

The letters were a very personal affair for Ford, and she added humor and vulnerability whenever she could. In a correspondence with Stella Hightower, Ford added, “The Vice President and I are keeping score to see who gets the most letters.”⁴³ Earlier Ford addressed a claim by a newspaper that she “arrived late for a diplomatic reception” by saying, “I must admit that I do have the habit of being a little tardy on occasion.”⁴⁴ This admittance is one of the many examples of Ford being transparent with the public.

The rise of reproductive rights went tandem with the Women Rights Movements of the late 20th century. Influenced by the French work *The Second Sex* (1949), Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan stood with Margaret Sanger as leaders of a new wave of feminism.⁴⁵ In 1963, Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, which explored the tensions between the professional and

⁴¹ Betty Ford to Marg Fratto, January 5, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

⁴² Betty Ford to Clifford Adams, January 5, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady Correspondence File A, Box 71, Chronological file, personal 12-17-73 thru 8-9-74.

⁴³ Betty Ford to Stella Hightower, March 6, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The *Second Sex* is the earliest attempt to look at history from a feminist perspective. The author, Simone De Beauvoir, argues that men have systematically oppressed women throughout history by treating them as objects to be controlled or manipulated. Steinem and Friedan both build on this idea.

home life of women. According to Friedan, the acceptable role of housewife and mother does not fulfill women and instead subjects many to identity loss and unhappiness despite having a home and family. Showing Ford's impact as a feminist, Friedan wrote to Ford while she was First Lady, "Courage and fortitude! You come across as the very best kind of liberated woman. Your sensitivity and strength is going to be a wonderful boost for millions of mothers and daughters and American Women generally."⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Steinem in her 1969 article "After Black Power, Women's Liberation" sought to redefine the cultural standards for women and prove that women across the country were rebelling against these norms. "Liberation," Steinem wrote, "isn't exposure to the American values of Mom-and-apple-pie anymore... it's the escape from them."⁴⁷ This radical author spoke to the capability of women and their systematic oppression. Both of these influential works became a rallying call for women across the nation.

Culturally this was a time that socially and politically active women began to have an influence on society. In 1961, John F. Kennedy created a Commission on the Status of Women or PCSW for the purpose of creating a fair workplace for women across the country.⁴⁸ Other legal actions followed such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Slowly but surely, women across America were gaining independence. In the 1970s, women's share of local political offices more than doubled showing that their influence politically was also growing.⁴⁹

Ford showed many feminist characteristics despite being family oriented. In an interview Ford stated, "I like to think of myself as a feminist although I haven't joined any women's

⁴⁶ Betty Friedan to Betty Ford, October 8, 1975, Gerald R. Ford Library, White House Social Files, Box 62, HU 2 Equality.

⁴⁷ Gloria Steinem, "The City Politic: After Black Power, Women's Liberation," *New York Magazine*, April 7, 1969.

⁴⁸ John F. Kennedy: Executive Order 10980—Establishing the President's Commission on the Status of Women". www.presidency.ucsb.edu.

⁴⁹ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 166.

liberalization organizations. I guess you could say I have tried to put family first.”⁵⁰ Ford’s image as a wife and mother was threatened by her support of the legalization of abortion and her support of Planned Parenthood. On some feminist issues she was silent, but she was vocal on others regardless of the support of her husband. In a speech during her time as First Lady on women’s rights “why should my husband’s job or yours prevent us from being ourselves. Being ladylike does not require silence.”⁵¹ Ford also encouraged her daughter Susan to explore non-traditional career fields, “Susan is a young lady who enjoys cooking, sewing, and needlepoint: but she feels this will not limit her in any field of higher endeavor.”⁵²

One letter to Bernard Willis in California gives insight on the Vice President’s opinions and activism for abortion. Willis wrote to Ford to ask for her husband’s views and she replied that her husband as minority leader “supported an amendment which would restore to the citizens of each State the power to regulate abortions.”⁵³ Ford expanded, “in regards to the proposed Human Life Amendments, he believes it would be desirable to amend the U.S. Constitution in order to change the 1973 Supreme Court decision on this matter.”⁵⁴ The Vice President believed in states rights over the federal government to resolve the issue.

Later in life, Ford reiterated her beliefs in an interview with Morley Safer. When asked about if she was worried about her husband philandering with “some of the attractions in this city,” Ford replied, “I have perfect faith in my husband. I keep him busy.”⁵⁵ The now President

⁵⁰ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 123.

⁵¹ “On Being a First Lady.”

⁵² Nancy M. Howe to William Zillman, July 12, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file, personal 12-17-73 thru 8-9-74.

⁵³ Betty Ford to Bernard Willis, March 20, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file, personal 12-17-73 thru 8-9-74.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 201.

turned red in embarrassment at the sexual implication while Ford showed a coy smile. Safer tried to keep her on her toes and throw questions that would catch her off guard. Safer questioned her admission that she had seen a psychiatrist and Ford added, “I found it very helpful,” without embarrassment or shame.⁵⁶ When asked about abortion again, Ford confidently stated, “I feel very strongly that it was the best thing in the world when the Supreme Court voted to legalize abortion... It was a great, great decision.”⁵⁷ Safer relished her frank answers.

The interviewer then zeroed in to ask a loaded question, “What if Susan Ford came to you and said, ‘Mother I’m having an affair?’” The word “affair” in this context meant having pre-marital sex. After a slight pause Ford replied, “Well, I wouldn’t be surprised. She’s a perfectly normal human being, like all young girls. If she wanted to continue it, I would certainly counsel or advise her on the subject. And I’d want to know pretty much about the young man she was having the affair with.”⁵⁸ As if this statement was not explosive enough, Ford added, “in some cases, perhaps there would be less divorce.”⁵⁹ This was in reference to if more couples slept together before marriage that there would be less divorce. After that shocking revelation, Safer dug deeper by asking if she had ever talked to her children about the danger of different drugs. Ford answered, “We’ve brought them up with a certain moral value, I’m not saying that they haven’t tried it, because I’m sure they’ve all probably tried marijuana.”⁶⁰ This was explosive for a politician’s wife to admit this on national television as marijuana was still illegal in all 50 states. In a later interview, Ford even “thought the penalties for marijuana should be reduced.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ Ibid., 204.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 205.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “On Being a First Lady.”

There was a media frenzy after the interview as newspapers across the nation picked up the controversial quotes and used them as they pleased. The *New York Times* ran a story stating, “Betty Ford said today that she wouldn’t be surprised if her daughter Susan, eighteen years old, decided to have an affair... Mrs. Ford suggested that in general, premarital relations with the right partner might lower the divorce rate.”⁶² There was a flood of letters as well that both praised and condemned Ford. The stream of condemnation was much stronger than the support. Ford was repeatedly asked about abortion even as a First Lady. In one instance in New Hampshire when pressed on how her views differ from her husbands, Ford blushed the question aside by replying “you know that.”⁶³

On American citizen, Betty G. Hempstone, commented the interview saying about Susan, “it is much better to guide them and be there if advice is needed rather than shut your child out of your life with a narrow mind.”⁶⁴ Hempstone admits that although she is Democrat, she will “be working hard for you in 1976.”⁶⁵ Ford’s honesty and candor was acknowledged and appreciated, “You are a very wise mother for acknowledging that perhaps your children will or have experimented with all phases of life, including marijuana, rather than stating that they would never do such things.”⁶⁶ The thick veil that separated the people from the politicians was torn and Ford was given everyone an intimate look into her life. However, not everyone loved the view.

On the dissenting side of her beliefs, Ruth Colletta of Niagara Falls, NY wrote in, “words cannot express the disappointment I felt as I read that you had stated in a televised interview

⁶² McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 206.

⁶³ Lewine, “On Being a First Lady.”

⁶⁴ Betty G. Hempstone to Betty Ford, August 12, 1975, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady Correspondence File Gallup – Godwin, Box 72, Ford, Betty, 1918- Letters to.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Betty G. Hempstone to Betty Ford.

your opinion and approval of premarital relations and use of marijuana.”⁶⁷ Colletta then attacked her role in office, her viability as a mother and wife, and her religious faith. “You do not have the right to weaken the already well-slidden morals of our country.”⁶⁸ The New York native ended the strongly worded letter with a promise that she would pray for Ford. Louise Garlord from Baltimore wrote to condemn Ford, specifically mentioning her son Mike currently enrolled at a seminary. “I can’t reconcile this stand with you being the mother of a seminarian. It is sad to think that our Second First Lady is not for life but the destruction of it.”⁶⁹ Even the church did not hold back their criticism.

Ford received correspondence from Tyson Garrison who was the minister of Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Tennessee. Garrison attacked Ford’s faith, “are we trusting in God when we place our approval on the very things God abhors?... Someday when God holds his final election, the majority of these won’t be registered voters.”⁷⁰ The minister continued about the moral decay of the country and the consequences of Ford’s actions. “As a mother Mrs. Ford, would you honestly be so permissive towards premarital sex if Susan contracted a venereal disease from an affair or if use of marijuana led to a heroin habit for her?” Garrison attacked Ford’s core morals because of her stance on these issues. Regardless of criticism, Ford continued to support and defend her position.

One irritated viewer expressed his disapproval of Ford’s statements.

“You are not an individual, an American woman with complete freedom of speech and action.... You are, because of the position your husband has assumed, expected and unofficially required to be PERFECT!... In this great country of our you must retain at all times a position of beauty queen, ‘Mother of the Year,’ high

⁶⁷ Ruth Colletta to Betty Ford, August 12, 1975, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady Correspondence File Gallup – Godwin, Box 72, Ford, Betty, 1918- Letters to.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Louise H. Garlord to Betty Ford, December 11, 1973, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady Correspondence Fil A, Box 71, Chronological file, personal 12-17-73 thru 8-9-74.

⁷⁰ Tyson Garrison to Betty Ford, August 13, 1975, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady Correspondence File Gallup – Godwin, Box 72, Ford, Betty, 1918—Letters to.

school prom sweetheart, ‘Grandmother of the Year,’ church leader, teacher, nurse, and counselor to American women and girls.”⁷¹

The most vocal opponents to her stance on abortion and woman’s rights was the growing conservative faction of the Republican party labeled the “New Right.” The New Right movement was characterized by “opposition to the status quo, rebellion against the establishment, a democratic faith in the people, and a deep suspicion of the wisdom of the liberal elites in government, the media, and academia.”⁷² Traditionally conservatism was grounded in support of big businesses and lower taxes. By the 1950s, it included a strand of anti-communism and small government advocates. By the 1970s, it came to also include social conservatives—i.e. those generally uncomfortable with Vietnam protests, feminism, and abortion rights.⁷³

Conservatism was steeped in anti-abortion sentiment. The New Right movement came out of the 1960s and 1970s and did not fully culminate until the election of Ronald Reagan in 1981.⁷⁴ The violence of Vietnam, racial tensions, and declining economy during the early 1960s was blamed on “liberals.”⁷⁵ This political force still holds influence today in the Republican Party. Conservative was the banner flag that unified the movement, suddenly the label of “liberal” was negative and politicians rushed to use the title conservative. Even in the Democratic party, many were dropping the title as to not be demonized.

There are so many elements that contributed to the rise of the New Right and all of the factors are only briefly mentioned in this research and context. In regards to Ford, many of her most vocal dissenters came from this rising movement and many historians cite the rise of the

⁷¹ Funeral program for Elizabeth Bloomer Ford, Gerald R. Ford Library, Ford, Betty, 1918-2011 Demise/Funeral Events- July 14-16 (Grand Rapids).

⁷² Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

New Right as a major factor why Gerald Ford did not win the election in 1977. Therefore, this faction of the Republican party grew into a formidable force that effected the Ford family and hundreds of others. Unlike in modern elections were there Republican party and conservatism go hand in hand, before Reagan the party was made up of moderates, liberals, and conservatives.⁷⁶ These party factions were constantly fighting to gain control. Nixon was first seen as a member of the New Right movement, but quickly showed his true colors of a more liberal president through his policies.

⁷⁶ Troy, *History of American Presidential*, 1256.

Chapter 3

The Wife and Mother: Betty Ford's Traditional Role.

Family was a preeminent concern for Betty Ford. For all of the controversy generated by her comments on social issues, Ford herself was at heart very traditional. She was also someone steeped in Christian faith. By the time she became Second Lady in late 1973, her children were ages 16, 18, 22, and 23. Steven and Susan still lived at home, which meant that Ford had to balance any public duties, with being a full time mother. “My duty to my children,” Ford later recalled, “obsessed me.”¹ Furthermore, her husband, fulfilling his duties as the Vice President, was usually away from home. As one Washington columnist observed in 1973, “There’s no one as neglected as an ambitious politician’s wife.”² Indeed, according to one modern Gerald Ford biographer, the new vice president “set for himself a killer schedule... altogether, he traveled 130,000 miles as Vice President and visited forty-one states. Most weeks, he flew coast to coast and back at least once.”³ Complicating her situation was the lingering physical effects of a pinched nerve in her back from 1964. She also continued to cope with the effects of a “mental breakdown” from August 1965. “I just wasn’t the Bionic Woman,” Ford later recalled.⁴ Ultimately, the role of Second Lady placed Ford—as a woman, wife, and mother --squarely in the center of public scrutiny. Specifically, the Fords, as Second Family, faced two public challenges: dealing with the national press and family security. As the new Second Family, the Fords were interviewed by news magazines, such as *Time*, and television news shows, such as NBC’s *Today* and ABC’s *Dick Cavett Show*. The children, meanwhile, had to grow accustomed to secret service protection, and limits on their teenage freedom. In all of the letters she received in

¹ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 134.

² Block, “Ford Nobody Knows,” 141.

³ Cannon, James Cannon, *Gerald R. Ford: An Honorable Life* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), 165.

⁴ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 139.

1973 and 1974, many were about her family-- including health, children, and Ford's own physical appearance. Second to the issue of abortion, these letters were the majority of what Ford received. Overall, these letters showed the predominate view that many Americans had on womanhood in the early 1970s.

Ford's purpose and focus in life was to be the perfect wife and mother from the perspective of those close to her and by societal standards. The traditional view in the 1970s was that women needed to be beautiful, fit, healthy, outgoing, and completely selfless towards their husband and children. Many took it to an extreme and sacrificed all personal interests to please their husband in both emotional and physical aspects. One popular book from the 1960s that promoted such a view and became the textbook for a traditional wife figure, was Helen Andelin's *Fascinating Womanhood* (1965). According to Andelin, a stay at home mother and a practicing Mormon, women should find purpose and fulfillment in their husbands. "If he doesn't love you," Andelin wrote, "your life will be an empty shell." For Andelin, then, equality was not a priority. Happiness, she insisted, could only be achieved by seeking the husband's best interests. Andelin even went as far as to teach "how to be cute, even adorable when you are angry."⁵ Ultimately, Andelin's book sold over two-million copies, and Andelin herself taught workshops and held conferences. A byproduct of this movement was a hyper-focus on women's physical appearance, of which Ford – as both First Lady and Second Lady-- bore the brunt. The media scrutinized her figure, hair, dress, diet, and her core values.

While Andelin insisted, "a man wants a woman who will place him at the top of his priority list, not second but first," Betty Ford struggled in her roles as a mother and a

⁵ "The Sexes: Total Fascination," *Time*, March 10, 1975.

congressman's wife.⁶ Between 1950-1957, she birthed all four of her children. Meanwhile, her husband, a rising Republican in the House of Representatives, spent more time away from home. "I saw that I would have to grow with Jerry or be left behind," Ford later wrote, "and I had no intention of being left behind."⁷ Home alone most days, Ford struggled with loneliness and feelings of inadequacy. "I was beginning to feel the tiniest bit sorry for myself for reasons other than it seemed always to be raining on me. Having got what I wanted—a house and children—I knew I couldn't start blaming anybody else, but, locked in, I suffered pangs of jealousy."⁸ Ford put her heart and soul into her role as mother, becoming a "zookeeper" to all the pets, a Sunday school teacher, and a den mother to the Boy Scout Troop.⁹ "The children were my whole life." Ford later insisted, "They brought laughter into the house. I often think how lost I would have been if I'd sent my children away to school. Especially in later years, when Jerry was so busy traveling."¹⁰

In addition to keeping the house and raising four young children, Ford had to fulfill her official duties as a congressman's wife. There were endless parades of lunch-ins and events. Book club meetings, bridge groups, and volunteering at the Red Cross were just a few of the many activities associated with the Congressional Club of which Ford was a member.¹¹ As her husband's position grew—he became House Minority Leader in early 1965-- so did Ford's social responsibilities. Ford developed strong relationships with the rest of the congressional wives and found solidarity in the struggle. "Some Congressional Wives drink, plenty of Congressional wives divorce.... The loneliness, the being left to yourself at night, is what makes marriages

⁶ Helen Andelin, *Fascinating Womanhood: How the Ideal Woman Awakens a Man's Deepest Love and Tenderness* (New York, NY: Random House, 1963), 91.

⁷ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 69.

⁸ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 87.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁰ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 99.

¹¹ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 59.

crack, makes liquor more attractive.”¹² Ford’s sister-in-law was prophetic when she told Ford right after her marriage, “With Jerry you’ll never have to worry about other women. Your cross will be his work.”¹³

By the 1960s, Ford had begun to develop unhealthy habits. In 1964 in the middle of the night, she woke up with a shooting pain in her neck and left arm. The next day, she went to the National Orthopedic Hospital.¹⁴ A pinched nerve in her neck was the diagnosis, but Ford could not identify the cause. She recalled, “The First time the hospital attendants took me for therapy, I cried from the pain.”¹⁵ When arriving home, she was hunched over and unable to put her arm down at her side. After weeks of therapy, education, and hot massage treatments, Ford was finally able to drive again and resume normal activities. The treatment for her pinched nerve also came with a host of painkillers and medication that were taken every four hours. This injury plagued her for the rest of her life, and she developed arthritis because of it.¹⁶

Ford was open about her injury once her husband was vice president, and the American people soon offered their observations and advice on pinched nerves and pain management. In one letter from early 1974, Ford was sent information on Chiropractic doctors. Douglas R. Aldrich, meanwhile, recommended a Russian therapist who relieved his pinched nerve.¹⁷ Others suggested simple fixes such as medication and waterbeds.¹⁸ Ford was appreciative of the letters, and conveyed that she used every resource at her disposal to try to “solve” her pinched nerve.

¹² Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 134.

¹³ Block, “Ford Nobody Knows,” 140.

¹⁴ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 128.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁶ Gerald Ford, *Time to Heal*, 99.

¹⁷ Betty Ford to Douglas R. Aldrich, January 25, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

¹⁸ Betty Ford to Mitsuye Yoshinaga, April 30, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file, personal 12-17-73 thru 8-9-74.

Ford's challenges brought her closer to her family. In 1965, Ford had a "mental breakdown" in their home. While standing at the sink, Ford started sobbing uncontrollably and Clara, the nanny, took the children and phoned the congressman. In that moment, Ford felt like running away to the beach, escaping, and not telling anyone where she went. She began ranting and pacing, while gathering her things getting ready to leave.¹⁹ Her hair was disheveled and eyes were wild; the children had never seen her like this before. In her own words Ford felt, "as though I were doing everything for everyone else, and I was not getting any attention at all."²⁰

After this "episode," Ford started seeing a psychiatrist twice a week. She attributed much of the stress to her nerve injury instead of mental issues, "I'd lost my feeling of self-worth, and that's what sent me for help."²¹ The growing independence of her children and her husband thriving apart from her made Ford feel worthless and empty. Right before her mental breakdown Ford recalled, "I was resentful of Jerry's being gone so much; I was feeling terribly neglected."²² Ford continued to see her psychiatrist for six months after the incident.²³ "I had to start thinking I was valuable, not just as a wife and mother, but as myself. And to myself."²⁴ The sessions helped Ford make room for herself, express her own feelings, thoughts, and frustrations. While counseling was helpful, Ford also turned to alcohol and pretended like her mental state could be fixed by "an afternoon of writing or some shopping."²⁵

Ford was not alone in her feelings of inadequacy. In 1963 Betty Friedan authored *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she outlined the problem that "most housewives have." Friedan called the issue "the problem that has no name," showing the widespread unhappiness of women

¹⁹ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 134.

²⁰ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 136.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

²² *Ibid.*, 135.

²³ Block, "Ford Nobody Knows," 141.

²⁴ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 95.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

in the 1950 and 1960s. The book was based on surveys, research, psychology, media, and advertising. According to Friedan, women in American culture were expected to be fulfilled by their housework, marriage, and children. Their purpose and drive in life always came from those three things. The result was that many women lost their identities.²⁶ Friedan, then, encouraged women to pursue education, getting involved politically, and possibly working non-traditional jobs. *The Feminine Mystique* was widely credited with sparking the second-wave of feminism in the United States. Only a year after its publication, it became the bestselling nonfiction book with over one million copies sold.²⁷

Overall, the Ford family was tight knit and the love for each other was evident. The many struggles and trials they faced unified them. In a response to one letter from 1974, Ford noted, “We are just a family that has devoted its entire life to public service.”²⁸ Ford’s son Michael later described his mother’s commitment to the family, “How she loved us, how she took the time to get to know us... she extended herself freely in love and compassion.”²⁹ The spotlight never eroded their family like it did so many other public officials and the distance never drove them apart. “We were really blessed, Man, she knew how to love,” son Steve remembered in 2011.³⁰

As the parents of teenagers, the Fords did their best to protect their children through various house rules. Each child got their first car when they were sixteen, but this was used as leverage if they ever misbehaved. There was an enforced curfew and if they were found drinking or smoking they were punished.³¹ All four of them worked jobs throughout school which kept them out of trouble. All the children besides Susan went to public high school. When Susan

²⁶ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1963), xi-xx.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, xi-xx.

²⁸ Betty Ford to J. W. Manuel.

²⁹ “Text of Speeches from Betty Ford’s funeral in Palm Desert,” *The Desert Sun*, July 12, 2011.

³⁰ Francis X. Donnelly, “Betty Ford Stood for ‘Good and Hopeful things,’ Mourners Told,” *The Detroit News*, July 14, 2011.

³¹ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 142.

turned twelve, she started at Holton Arms, in Bethesda, Maryland where she boarded during the week and came home for the weekends.³² Susan was supportive of this plan and enjoyed her time there. “We’re so fortunate,” Ford recalls, “We’ve never had any serious problems with the children. They know what we expect and they think so much of their father and me I don’t believe they’d ever let us down.”³³

Ford was incredibly close with her children and was insistent on teaching them about abstinence and sex education. Her husband was in charge of telling the boys and around thirteen it was Ford’s job to tell Susan. After coming back from a summer camp, Ford handed her a pamphlet on menstruation, female anatomy, and the mechanics of sex.³⁴ Ford also added, “It’s really about the relationship between a man and a woman. One day you will kiss a boy... but whatever you do, don’t ever let a boy stick his tongue in your mouth.”³⁵ Susan tried her best to keep from laughing at this blunt statement as Ford continued. “You know, a boy did that to me once, and I bit his tongue and got on the trolley and went home.”³⁶ This hands-on approach and honesty was characteristic of Ford’s parenting style and personality.

Each of the children responded differently to the media attention, however, the Ford family as a whole made an effort to support the patriarch through their interactions with the media. The limelight was at times enjoyable, but Jack and Susan resented constantly being on display and their privacy being compromised. Susan commented on the frenzy later saying, “for all of us, it was fun for about ten and a half seconds, and then it wasn’t.”³⁷ It was easier for Jack to stay out of the spotlight because he was attending Utah State University and majoring in

³² Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 145.

³³ Block, “Ford Nobody Knows,” 142.

³⁴ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 102.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

forestry while his father was in office.³⁸ Steve and Mike felt more comfortable with the media and accepted it as a part of life.³⁹ Mike, meanwhile, attended Wake Forest College in North Carolina with the idea of becoming a lawyer.⁴⁰ After undergrad and some time off, Mike chose Gordon Conwell Theological seminary in Massachusetts to pursue his calling as a minister. Mike, sheepishly told a reporter that, “he was sorry he’d caused his mother so many problems when he was little.” Steve once commented, “our parents have always let us use our own judgement and it’s worked out pretty well.”⁴¹

On 10 January 1974, the Ford family gave their first interview as the Second Family on ABC’s *The Dick Cavett Show* (1968-1974). Cavett was a beloved American television personality and talk show host. As part of the special, Cavett brought a full set of cameras, lighting, and audio to the Ford’s Alexandria home to show an intimate look at their life. Cavett promised that it would be presented as nonpolitical and was designed as a “get to know you” piece. The show crew moved in for the day and moved out furniture to fit their sets, much to Ford’s chagrin. The majority of the interview was with the Vice President, while the last portion included Mrs. Ford and the children. The Second Lady wore a beautiful, flowing blue dress with a statement cross necklace.

Despite his promise, Cavett peppered the Ford family with political questions. When asked if Nixon would be convicted of criminal charges, the vice president replied, “I have no doubt whatsoever that the president is not guilty of any criminal charges that might be forthcoming. I’m absolutely positive.”⁴² Cavett turned to use the same tactic with Betty Ford, “is

³⁸ Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 156.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴¹ Block, “Ford Nobody Knows,” 139.

⁴² The Dick Cavett Show, featuring Vice President Gerald Ford and the Ford Family, aired January 10, 1974, on ABC Late Night (Gerald R. Ford Vice-Presidential Papers: Audiotapes, 1973-74, AV82-14-R4, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI).

the thought of living in the White House appalling or overpowering?”⁴³ Ford snapped back, “I would say it is inconceivable.”⁴⁴ Her husband then switched the topic to avoid entertaining the possibility of a White House residence. Cavett then focused on the Ford children, Steve and Susan, who were both teenagers at the time.

A series of awkward questions ensued. Cavett inquired, “Do you know about the birds and the bees?” and “What about the drug scene around school? Do you see much pot or other hard drugs around school?”⁴⁵ The Ford children stumbled through these loaded questions as best they could while maintaining their composure. Cavett even had the boldness to ask sixteen-year-old Susan if her father is a “male chauvinist or a woman’s laborer?” The Ford family found the whole experience extremely uncomfortable with the addition of political inquires and taboo subjects. Later, the Ford family laughed at the awkwardness of the situation. Betty Ford recalled later, “I was never so glad to see a bunch of people get out in my life.”⁴⁶ Despite the negative feelings, the interview was popular with viewers and strengthened their image.

A classic tradition of the Ford family that kept them close was to visit Vail, Colorado every Christmas for two weeks to ski.⁴⁷ This started back in 1968 when they took their first Christmas vacation there at the insistence of a family friend.⁴⁸ With both Ford parents being from Michigan, they were no stranger to winter sports and had taken skiing vacations previously. However, other locations paled in comparison to Colorado. Susan recalled her first visit to Vail “It was amazing. The mountains were so much bigger, and there was so much snow.”⁴⁹ They instantly fell in love and later bought a third-floor, three-bedroom condo priced at fifty

⁴³ The Dick Cavett Show featuring Vice President Gerald Ford and the Ford Family.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 122.

⁴⁷ Block, “Ford Nobody Knows,” 141.

⁴⁸ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 98.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 99.

thousand.⁵⁰ To pay for the expense, the Fords rented out the house during the year and stayed only around Christmas time. Even though it was pricy, the Fords thought of the purchase as an investment.

This family tradition of visiting Vail did not change in the eight months that her husband was Vice President and the Ford family took their trip as usual. The Secret Service sent out an inquiry for any agents that could ski and rented a condo across the street.⁵¹ The small location meant that there was no space for a command center inside the condo. Therefore, they parked a truck on the street below and set up a table outside the door where the agents would guard around the clock.⁵² The Fords were also followed by a small group of press. After her pinched nerve injury, Ford avoided skiing, and instead, shopped for Christmas gifts and décor. The Ford family insisted on a live Christmas tree every year and this year it nearly touched the ceiling and was filled with childhood ornaments, fragile glass balls, and foreign souvenirs. Susan recalled, “It was our last private Christmas. The last one where we could just be ourselves.”⁵³ Back in Washington picketers outside the White House carried signs against Nixon, one of them read, “Pick out your curtains, Betty.”⁵⁴

Many letters were written to Ford about her teenage daughter Susan. Nicholas Gimbel from Pennsylvania tried to set Susan up with his son to which Ford kindly replied, “your son sounds very delightful.”⁵⁵ There were a few requests for pen pals that were kindly rejected

⁵⁰ Ibid., 124.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 126.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Betty Ford to Madeleine Gimbel, May 30, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

because of Susan's "busy schedule at school."⁵⁶ Even in the summer, Susan was unable to keep a pen pal because she was busy "pursuing studies in English and typing."⁵⁷ Some were little kindnesses, such as Pedersen sending the "Kalanchoe, Lryaphyllium leaf to add to their garden."⁵⁸ The American people felt a connection to Susan and it is shown by these interactions.

In early March of 1974, a left-wing revolutionary organization called the Symbionese Liberation Army or SLA was created.⁵⁹ The SLA was a very small but radical group that was created after college students from the University of Berkley in California visited the nearby prison of Vacaville and interacted with the inmates. Originally these interactions were to tutor the inmates, but soon they were learning from each other creating a politically charged atmosphere.⁶⁰ A perfect blend of circumstances produced a group of no more than twenty people who were violently anti-capitalist and anti-wealthy. Donald DeFreeze, or better known as Cin: general field marshal in the United Federated Forces of the Symbionese Liberation Army, was the leader, and in the fall of 1973, its members wrote a constitution.⁶¹ They created a physical list of three targeted individuals that was then found by authorities. The first person on the list, a school super intendent, was shot and killed. The second person targeted was newspaper heiress

⁵⁶ Nancy M. Howe to Collins Chijioke, March 6, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White house papers, 1973-1971, Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

⁵⁷ Nancy M. Howe to Marvin Doster, July 15, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74

⁵⁸ Betty Ford to Dayton R. Stemple Jr., March 8, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74.

⁵⁹ Jeffrey Toobin, *American Heiress: The Wild Saga of the Kidnapping, Crimes and Trial of Patty Hearst* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2016), 26.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

Patty Hearst, who was kidnapped from her apartment.⁶² The third, terrifyingly enough, was Susan Ford listed simply as “the daughter of the Vice President.”⁶³

When asked by a *Washington Post* reporter, Betty Ford commented, “They [SLA] didn’t mention Susan by name and they may not have known who the Vice President was. But we had to be very quiet about it because the FBI didn’t want to lose its contact.”⁶⁴ This was the same radical group that raised Sara Jane More, who attempted to assassinate President Ford over a year later.⁶⁵ Threats against the President or Vice President were not terribly uncommon. However, to threaten a teenager and follow through on the first two threats was cause for concern.

This group joins a long list of radical organizations during the 1960s and 1970s that came together in response to the turbulent political climate. Another example was the Black Liberation Army and members of the Black Panther Party between 1970 to 1981, whose stated goal was to “take up arms for the liberation and self-determination of black people in the United States.”⁶⁶ The BLA committed bombings, pre-meditated murder of police officers, and robberies.⁶⁷ While these radical groups created chaos and took some lives, they remained in relatively small numbers. The SLA quickly faded into cultural obscurity as its few members were thrown in prison or scared off. However, in 1973 it proved to be a very real threat.

On 8 June Nixon signed the authorization for the protection of Susan Ford.⁶⁸ Apart from this threat, there had been other anxieties related to Ford’s safety. Every Friday and Monday,

⁶² Betty Ford, *Times of My Life*, 169.

⁶³ Donnie Radcliffe, “Betty Ford: Coping with New Visibility Not Quite the ‘Plain Country Girl,’” *The Washington Post*, July 21, 1974.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Toobin, *American Heiress*, 78.

⁶⁶ Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas Ed, *Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Black Panthers and Their Legacy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014) 47.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Maxine Cheshire, “Security for Susan Ford,” *The Washington Post*, June 20, 1974.

Susan would drive herself from Virginia to Maryland to spend the week at her overnight girl's school. The Secret Service agents were "concerned that she might be forced off the road" while on the beltway and gave her tips on how to elude pursuers.⁶⁹ Another threat to the young, attractive teenager was a reported rapist "operating in the Ford's neighborhood for the past year" who has yet been caught by the police.⁷⁰ In an official statement by the Secret Service on the possible rapist they answered, "we are aware of this situation, it was a factor in our decision to provide protection to Miss Ford, but only one factor."⁷¹

Susan, as a sixteen-year-old girl trying to have a social life, was not happy about this new security detail. The time that she received 24/7 protection from the Secret Service, Susan had a "hot weekend" planned with her boyfriend Palmer Holt.⁷² On Friday, when Susan came home from her boarding school for the weekend, Ford calmly explained to her the situation and in classic teenage fashion Susan replied. "But Mom, I've got plans this weekend! Palmer's coming up. I don't want Secret Service agents following us around! No Way!"⁷³ Ford insisted that it was for her own safety, but Susan did not care. "Daddy is ruining my life!"⁷⁴ Bob Innamorati was the agent assigned to Susan and informed her of the new restrictions.⁷⁵ Innamorati and one other agent would be with her at all times where-ever she went. Susan informed him, "We've got tickets to see a concert in Georgetown tomorrow night." The agent replied, "you can't go to the concert."⁷⁶ For a high schooler this was debilitating, "They were shutting down my social life, and I was pissed."⁷⁷

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 126.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 127.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

The agents had their hands full keeping up with Susan. She was strong willed and against her two male chaperones. She explains, “My parents thought if you had the agents, you were safe. It was kind of a joke. Because their job was not to be your parent. Their job was to watch your behavior, not to correct your behavior; to make sure that I was safe.”⁷⁸ The agents had to devise creative ways to keep her safe while also giving her freedom. Two grown men following a teenage girl around is far from normal, so the protection had to be discrete. Susan recalls, “I used to carry a little remote that looked like a cigarette lighter that I could put in my pocket. It was a panic button. And that way; they could back off me.”⁷⁹ The agents followed her to frat parties, weekend BBQs, watched her drink (despite being underage), and generally let her assume teenage life unhindered.

Once when visiting a McDonalds after a road trip, the agents and her friends were waiting for their food when the girls went to the bathroom. Suddenly, a high-pitched alarm went off. The agents, assuming it was the panic button that Susan was given, raced into the girl’s restroom with their guns drawn. The employees and patrons were stunned. “Turns out, it was actually the chime on the French Fry cooker. So we just kind of took out bags, walked out the door, and quickly got into the car before anyone could recognize me.”⁸⁰ The story is remembered with laughter by Susan, but shows the challenges of the arrangement.

A major event that happened in Ford’s life was the engagement and marriage of their oldest son Mike to Gayle Brumbaugh. Mike met Gayle while they were both students at Wake Forest in North Carolina.⁸¹ In the spring of 1974 Mike announced the happy news of their

⁷⁸ Ibid., 133.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 134.

⁸⁰ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 134.

⁸¹ Betty Ford to Ruth Schowalter.

engagement. The original wedding date was August 10, 1974.⁸² Ford suggested July instead to give them more time to enjoy married life before school started again. This instinct by Ford was critical because her husband became president a few days before August 10. July 5th was the new wedding date and Ford recalled the date change as, “somebody up there has been looking out for me for years.”⁸³

Due to her husband’s high office, a much bigger wedding reception was planned separately to honor all of their political allies. The date of the wedding reception was planned for Wednesday, June 19, 1974 at the Congressional Country Club’s main ballroom.⁸⁴ Around four-hundred people were invited and a full dinner was served.⁸⁵ Those invited were friends of the Fords as well as Mike and Gayle’s friends. There was a full list of appetizers such as quiche Lorraine and hot rumaki in addition to the main meal and dessert. Ford planned this event herself with input from the couple.⁸⁶ In reflecting on the reception Ford wrote,

The reception according to all reports was a great success. I hope so because we so wanted all of our friends to meet Gayle and to appreciate what a wonderful girl she is as well as show our approval of Mike’s fantastic choice for his wife. Gayle is definitely the perfect young lady for him as she also shares Mike’s deep love of God and church.⁸⁷

The wedding planning was largely left to Gayle and her family and the event was kept small. However, with the security and high-profile people attending, there was a lot of coordinating that had to be done. The wedding couple only allowed four reporters from *The*

⁸² McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 127.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁸⁴ Banquet Party Order for the Congressional Country Club, May 11, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File Issues—1976 Election, Box 70, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

⁸⁵ Wedding Guest list of Gayle and Mike Ford, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File Issues—1976 Election, Box 70, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

⁸⁶ Banquet Party Order for the Congressional Country Club.

⁸⁷ Betty Ford to Alex M. Martin, July 9, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74

Washington Star, *The Washington Post*, *Baltimore News*, and *Catonsville Times* to cover just the ceremony.⁸⁸ Ford expresses her relief to a friend, “I am just so glad that the wedding involves a son rather than a daughter since I spend a couple of hours each day talking to friends about the even. I am sure if it was Susan, I would never get a thing done.”⁸⁹ Everything came together beautifully in spite of the obstacles.

Only fifty to sixty people attended the wedding at Chapel Hill United Presbyterian Church. The best man was non-other than Gerald Ford with Jack and Steve as groomsmen and Susan as a bridesmaid.⁹⁰ The wedding ceremony was very biblically focused. There were countless scripture verses used, prayer times, and a short biblical message. Reverend Cox ended his speech with, “Most important we see marriage as a responsibility to an eternal, unconditional commitment before God to one another.”⁹¹ Betty Ford was in charge of the wedding reception and dinner that was held at the Holiday Inn in Baltimore, Maryland. The party started at eight o’clock at night with ten rooms reserved for the various families and couples attending.⁹² The colors were a beige and orange with a full buffet and open bar throughout the night.⁹³

⁸⁸ Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File Issues—1976 Election, Box 70.

⁸⁹ Betty Ford to Theresa M. Symans, June 12, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74.

⁹⁰ Order of ceremonies for the wedding of Mike and Gayle Ford, July 5, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File Issues—1976 Election, Box 70, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74

⁹¹ Script for Reverend Cox for the wedding of Mike and Gayle Ford, July 5, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File Issues—1976 Election, Box 70, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74.

⁹² Audrey Arnold to Nancy M. Howe, April 24, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File Issues—1976 Election, Box 70, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

⁹³ Banquet Reservations from the Holiday Inn, July 4, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File Issues—1976 Election, Box 70, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74.

The experience was a joyous affair filled with love and laughter. Ford wrote, “The wedding went off without a hitch and the bride was just lovely.”⁹⁴ In another correspondence Ford comments, “We are so excited about her and feel that we are not losing a son, but gaining a wonderful daughter.”⁹⁵ After the wedding Mike commented, “marriage is great, sorry we didn’t do it sooner.”⁹⁶ This was Ford’s last breathe of air before her husband became President.

The May 1974 issue of *Good Housekeeping* by Jean Libman Block ran a seven-page spread on Betty Ford. It was her first full magazine feature and summarized her time as Second Lady well. The piece focuses on all aspects of Ford’s life from her personal struggles and appearance to the possibility of her becoming First Lady. The subheading was, “It’s taken years of pain and months of psychotherapy for the woman who could become First Lady to learn that a wife can be too self-sacrificing.”⁹⁷ This was referring back to her mental breakdown down while her husband was minority leader.

Block’s first paragraph notes about Ford, “when her husband becomes Vice President of the United States—and could just as suddenly become President.”⁹⁸ This was alluding to the possibility of her moving into the White House. Block goes on to describe Ford’s children and home life. Keeping the family close despite the newfound fame was a high priority to Ford, “We’ve always been close as a family and we’re going to stay that way.”⁹⁹ The article asked the important question, “Are these people real? Is such perfection possible in this very imperfect

⁹⁴ Betty Ford to William C. Logan, August 2, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File Issues—1976 Election, Box 70, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74.

⁹⁵ Betty Ford to Sally D. Allen, June 10, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File Issues—1976 Election, Box 70, Chronological file general 6-1-74 thru 8-9-74.

⁹⁶ Betty Ford to William C. Logan.

⁹⁷ Block, “Ford Nobody Knows,” 88.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

world? With their good looks, good health, good fortune, their hard work, their devout prayers, the Gerald Fords do come miraculously close to embodying our collective fantasy of the faultless folks next door.”¹⁰⁰ Just three paragraphs down the point was reiterated on the possibility of Ford becoming First Lady, “this country’s Second Lady faced from day to day the possibility of becoming its First Lady.”¹⁰¹

Even in this friendly, conversational article on the life of Betty Ford, it addresses her controversies. “Betty looks over a sheaf of letters that arrived in response to her statement that she approves of abortion when it is done to preserve the mother’s health, ‘there’s been a lot of mail on that,’ she says.”¹⁰² Block goes on to comment on her “forthright talk” that is not common among Washington Wives. Ford’s abortion comment was the only controversy mentioned, but it showed that even in a less sensational news setting, Ford’s honesty was highlighted.

This article also gives a detailed description of Ford’s physical appearance. Block writes, “She is a very pretty woman-blue-gray eyes that change with the clothes she is wearing; reddish-blond hair waved softly back to show a smooth forehead and slight widows peak; expressive eyebrows.”¹⁰³ Block also added how perfectly her makeup was applied, suggesting that her time as a dancer contributed to the skill. Frankie Welch, a designer who owned a dress shop in Alexandria Virginia, was Ford’s choice for expanding her wardrobe. Ford’s personal style led to “tailored wools and prints for daytime, simply cut, beautifully colored long hostess gowns for at home.”¹⁰⁴ The *Good Housekeeping* article then chronicles Ford’s life from her childhood days in

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 89.

¹⁰² Ibid., 142.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 138.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 142.

Michigan to the resignation of Agnew and the possibly of the White House. Ford's manners were described as "her skin glows, her eyes sparkle, her manner is warm and open."¹⁰⁵ After naming all the challenges that Ford faces Block asserts, "One thing is sure—her children will never be shortchanged."¹⁰⁶ Overall, this article highlights all the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of Ford's life with a focus on her role as a wife and mother.

The media coverage was not all positive and a few outlets tried to stir up scandal. *Newsweek* published three pictures of the Vice President with an old girlfriend at a ski retreat thirty-four years previously.¹⁰⁷ Susan was appalled by the photos and Ford calmed her down by assuring her that he "was only 26 years old and still at Yale."¹⁰⁸ Another more controversial photo spread was when *People* magazine published a picture of Susan "cavorting in the family's backyard swimming pool."¹⁰⁹ The Ford family "did everything we could to prevent them from being published."¹¹⁰ Even though the photo was published, Ford was thankful "at least they didn't use the one against the tree, looking like a sex symbol."¹¹¹ Although they were worried about the publication, it did not generate significant controversy and Ford handled the situation calmly knowing that her attractive, young daughter would be a focus for the press.

With the exception of the abortion issue, most of the letters and press that Ford received was for trivial and superficial purposes. As Second Lady, many focused on her weight, figure, and diet. Ford was only 5'5 and tried to stay around 105 to 106 pounds. A healthy weight for her height is around 125 pounds, but Ford found that she needed to keep skinnier "to offset the extra

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ "Coping with New Visibility."

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

poundage added by the TV camera's eye."¹¹² Ford's figure was a size 10, the overall sizing chart has changed overtime, but that number was slim at the time. Other comments by Ford about her weight include that she "sticks to her diet by will power and cutting down on starchy foods." In a normal day, Ford would consume two soft boiled eggs and rye toast for breakfast in addition to drinking tea without sugar. For lunch, Ford would eat cottage cheese with triscuits and beef bouillon. Finally, for dinner, the Second Lady would stick to lean meats, a salad with diet dressing, and plenty of vegetables with no potatoes or bread. In addition to these specifics, Ford tried not to consume any soft drinks or desserts.¹¹³ There was a focus on her looks and how she maintained them in both the press and the letters she received. There were even false claims. In one letter, Ford refutes the claim that one newspaper made that she was on "a 500-calorie diet" and took "20 vitamins" a day.¹¹⁴

On October 14, 1973, the *Grand Rapids Press* published an interview with Ford on the prospect of her becoming Second Lady. This exchange mostly focused on her external features and included positive anecdotes. The publication mentioned her "chestnut-hair" and how "tremendously excited" Ford was on the prospect of becoming Second Lady.¹¹⁵ In another publication, *the Knight Newspaper*, focused on her physical appearance. Berman commented that Ford at fifty-five, "still had the bone structure and figure of the high-fashion model she used to be."¹¹⁶ There are just a few examples of her press based on physical attributes.

¹¹² Excerpt on Betty Ford, *Detroit Free Press*, November 2, 1975, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady Correspondence File Callup-Godwin, Box 72, Issues: 1976 election.

¹¹³ Nancy M. Howe to Louise Nelson, February 25, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File Issues—1976 Election, Box 70, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

¹¹⁴ Betty Ford to Joan Erlagen, April 2, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady General Subject File: Biography, Box 69, Chronological file (general) 12-17-73 thru 5-31-74.

¹¹⁵ "Mrs. Ford 'Greatly Excited,'" *The Grand Rapids Press*, October 14, 1973.

¹¹⁶ Laura Berman, "Just a 'Plain Country Girl,'" *Detroit Free Press*, August 9, 1974.

Due to her traditional position as a homemaker, many women wrote in asking for recipes. The most requested was Ford's recipe for sweet and sour carrots. In response, Ford or her secretary would give a full ingredient list and step by step instructions to anyone who asked. Some requested more complex recipes such as Chinese pepper steak, ruby red grapefruit chicken, and prawn madras curry. Many individuals requested recipes to compile into cookbooks. John H. Lysaker, for example, requested a recipe because he was "writing a cookbook of recipes contributed by people throughout the United States... If you have any favorite or interesting recipes, I would like very much to include them in the book."¹¹⁷ In another correspondence, Barbara Delmar asked for the details of the Fords wedding cake from twenty-five years earlier. Ford obliged by giving as much description as she could. These traditional requests, pressures, and expectations continued when the Fords moved into the White House. When informed by her husband of the escalating political situation, Ford remarked, "My God, this is going to change our whole life."¹¹⁸ Ford was exactly right.

¹¹⁷ John H. Lysaker to Betty Ford, March 5, 1974, Gerald R. Ford Library, Betty Ford: White House Papers, 1973-1977: Second Lady Correspondence File Gallup—Godwin, Box 72, Correspondence, Gallup-Goodwin.

¹¹⁸ Gerald Ford, *Time to Heal*, 9.

Conclusion

On the possibility of her husband being chosen as President, the Second Lady remarked, “I hope lightning doesn’t strike.”¹ Unfortunately for Ford, lightning did strike, and on 9 August 1974, Nixon resigned the presidency and the Fords became the new First Family. Ford’s ascension to First Lady cemented her place in American history and in the hearts of the people. “When the final tally is taken,” her husband later recalled, “[Betty’s] contributions to our country will be bigger than mine.”² Ford’s eight-month stint as Second Lady was a whirlwind that allowed her to familiarize herself with a national public role and to find her own voice. Indeed, it was a training ground for her time as First Lady.

By building on the legacies of previous Second Ladies and making her own critical political decisions, Ford found her voice in politics and culture. She was more dynamic and engaging than both Judy Agnew and First Lady Pat Nixon. When she became Second Lady in late 1973, Ford stepped up to fill the position of both Second and First Lady in many respects. In addition to the normal challenges of being a wife and mother, Ford had to prepare her family for a new home in the Vice-Presidential residence—not to mention the challenges of security concerns and Secret Service protection that impeded the family’s everyday life.

Between December 1973 to August 1974, Ford participated in three major political events that defined her short time as Second Lady. Ford’s involvement in the Artrain event in Georgia in 1974 demonstrated her support of the arts and trained her on public political appearances, a skill that she would use often as First Lady. Second, Ford’s Commencement address at Westminster Choir College that May—her only formal speech as Second Lady showcased her Christian values but also gave her experience in delivering public remarks.

¹ “The Family Life of the Gerald Fords,” *Detroit Free Press*, October 14, 1973.

² Cannon, *Gerald R. Ford*, 453.

Finally, Ford's attendance at the funeral of Alberta King, the mother of Martin Luther King Jr., demonstrated her compassion and her awareness of the need to reach beyond her own comfort level. Ford made the decision to attend the funeral having never met Alberta and without Nixon or her husband. This was a bold decision and showed her support of the African American community even if on a small scale.

As Second Lady, Ford was known for her honesty and candor—and for the controversy that sometimes caused. This character trait was best reflected in her relationship with the media and in the letters between herself and the American people. Her statements on abortion, marijuana, and premarital sex generated the most controversy. Ford supported *Roe v Wade*, placing her at odds with many members of her own party, which was increasingly moving to the Right on social and cultural issues. The Second Lady received many letters from across the United States. Some attacked her as a wife and a mother. Others attacked her Christian faith (or lack thereof) and dismissed her as a feminist. While Ford created controversy with these topics when she was First Lady, it was during her time as Second Lady that she first articulated her views publicly.

Despite her more liberal views on cultural issues, Ford was rather traditional in her own personal life, valuing her role as wife and mother. With a husband that was almost continually gone for a majority of their marriage, Ford had to learn how to be completely independent. This hyper focus on her children and husband led to detrimental health leading to a severe pinched nerve and mental breakdown while her husband was a congressman. Ford's more traditional role as the protector of the family was threatened with the Symbionese Liberation Army targeted their youngest daughter Susan leading to increased security protocols. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Mike was married in July and the wedding was a family affair with all of the Ford

boys taking part. Ford's traditional role led to scrutiny from the press and a focus on her physical appearance such as her figure, diet, and attractiveness. The Second Lady had to learn how to combat false claims with grace and how to create positive press for herself.

After leaving public life, Ford later raised awareness for Breast cancer, fought for the Equal Rights Amendment, and spoke out on the dangers of drug and alcohol addiction. She won accolades from the public and various other organizations for her efforts. In 1991, Ford was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by George Bush. Then in 1999, she was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. This award recognized "dedicated public service and outstanding humanitarian contributions to the people of the United States." She was also inducted into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame and the National Women's Hall of Fame. (ERA)

Ultimately, Ford's personality, character, and political choices made her one of the most beloved First Ladies in American history. In rankings and polls by both scholars and civilians, Betty Ford was highly admired and respected. In the Gallup's yearly poll of the most admired woman, Betty Ford topped the list in both 1978 and 1975 joining the ranks of Mother Teresa and Eleanor Roosevelt.³ In 1985 *Good Housekeeping* conducted a poll with their readers to determine the "Most Admired Women." This included not just political figures, but activists as well. For example, Mother Teresa was ranked number two while Diana, Princess of Wales was ranked fifth. Ford came in eleventh.⁴ In another poll to find the most influential First Lady taken by thirty-six presidential scholars, Ford was placed in ninth place right behind Jacqueline Kennedy.⁵ In another study, *The Washington Post* polled over one-hundred historians across the country to identify the top First Lady in 1982. Each scholar had to rank each individual First

³ Most Admired Man and Woman, Gallup, Inc., 2019. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1678/Most-Admired-Man-Woman.aspx>.

⁴ "Most Admired Women Poll," *Good Housekeeping*, January 1985.

⁵ "Grading the First Ladies," *Detroit Free Press*, January 1983.

Lady on 10 characteristics: value to country, background, integrity, leadership, intelligence, being their “own woman,” accomplishments, courage, public image, and value to the president. Ford ranked sixth behind Rosalynn Carter and Dolly Madison.⁶ Among scholars and the public, Ford enjoyed considerable popularity and respect that still remains today.

On 8 July 2011, Betty Ford died at the age of ninety-two.⁷ “Throughout her long and active life,” President Barack Obama declared, Ford “distinguished herself through her courage and compassion... giving countless Americans a new lease on life.” George and Barbara Bush echoed the President, insisting that she was “courageous” and left behind a “lasting legacy of care and concern.”⁸ Vice President Joe Biden, meanwhile, emphasized her “strength, courage, and determination.” In the end, Betty Ford was a “free spirit in a gilded cage”—i.e. she was honest, candid, and authentic despite the public arena in which she was in, and in which she had no control. Her brief time as Second Lady was marked by public cynicism and pessimism toward American government. While Ford was without question defined (in part) by her time and place, she nevertheless forged new ground and expectations for Second Lady. Indeed, her successors—from Joan Mondale to Jill Biden—were all more visible and accessible, and equipped with staffs and budgets to achieve the specific public aims—such as the arts-- that the Second Lady hoped to achieve.

Betty Ford was a unique dichotomy of feminist and traditional values that helped American women to both embrace their traditional roles and look beyond to life outside the home. A close friend described Ford as, “perhaps her greatest accomplishment was to help liberate us all from the crippling limits of labels. At once a traditionalist and a trailblazer, a

⁶ John Malloy, “Historians Rate First Ladies,” *The Washington Post*, September 3, 1982.

⁷ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 3.

⁸ Hinds, “First Lady’s Legacy is Openness.”

Sunday School teacher and a Seventh Avenue model.” Moving into her time in the White House and beyond, December 6, 1973 to August 9, 1974 was a defining time For Ford. After hearing the news of Nixon’s resignation, Ford recalled, “Okay, I’ll move to the White House, do the best I can and if they don’t like it, they can kick me out, but they can’t make me somebody I’m not.”⁹

⁹ McCubbin, *Betty Ford*, 151.

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