

America's Most Influential First Ladies

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Posted Thursday November 06, 2008

From [WWD Issue 11/06/2008](#)

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Abigail Adams



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First Lady Dolley Madison



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American President Woodrow Wilson with his wife Edith Wilson.



Photo By: Diana Walker/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

Hillary Rodham Clinton

What does influence mean when it comes to the first lady of the United States?

Ruth Mandel, a founder and former director of the Center for American Women in Politics, noted there are different ways to approach that term: A first lady can be influential to her husband, to society during her husband's presidency, or even after his presidency has ended.

"I've always said that the first ladyship is a gigantic opportunity to make a contribution, and at the same time, it's a very symbolic, public role," she said. "We don't have kings and queens, but we have the first family, so we let them symbolize the country as a family."

With regard to Michelle Obama, "She's highly educated, and she's also a deeply devoted mother and family woman. She'll pay great attention to how her husband's presidency works for her family and her children. But she'll also be likely to say, 'What issues can I bring forward that would be valuable to me and to my country?'"

Below, Mandel's take on some of the most notable first ladies in American history, and how they were deemed as "influential."

Abigail Adams (Years in the White House: 1797-1801): Adams worked tirelessly to fight for equal public education for women and the emancipation of African-American slaves. In 1776, she made her strongest appeal for women's rights in a letter to her husband John, who was a member of the Continental Congress at

the time. “In the new Code of Laws, which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would Remember the Ladies,” she wrote, “and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors.”

Dolley Madison (1809-1817): More of a social influence than anything else, Madison made her home the center of society when husband James began his eight years as then-President Thomas Jefferson’s secretary of state. Serving as the unofficial first lady during Jefferson’s years in office (1801-1809), she assisted at the White House when the president asked her to host various social events. She was also a woman of the finest fashions, and her taste made her a major influence in helping Jefferson invent new standards of etiquette.

Edith Wilson (1913-1921): She’s been labeled the “secret president” and “the first woman to run the government.” Wilson essentially ran her husband Woodrow’s presidency after he suffered a stroke in 1919. “She became the sole conduit between the president and his Cabinet, requiring that they send to her all pressing matters, memos, correspondence, questions and requests,” noted the National First Ladies Library. She also was a catalyst in the dismissal of key staff members, such as Secretary of State Robert Lansing.

Eleanor Roosevelt (1933-1945): Because her husband Franklin was confined to a wheelchair, “Roosevelt brought her husband the outside world,” noted Mandel. “She was his eyes and ears during his presidency.” And there was more: “She left us with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for God’s sakes. I mean, talk about a contribution.”

Jacqueline Kennedy (1961-1963): Kennedy changed the image of the first ladyship forever, from her personal style — wearing designers such as Oleg Cassini, Givenchy and Christian Dior — to her taste in remodeling the look of the White House. Kennedy was the first to invite the news media into the home to share the new decor. She is also credited with bringing the arts to the forefront as a key issue, inviting major musicians, writers and artists to state dinners.

Lady Bird Johnson (1963-1969): Said Mandel, “She was married to a man [Lyndon] who took up the whole canvas, really. But what she did was leave a huge mark on the beautification of highways and roads. She was so committed to this movement.”

Betty Ford (1974-1977): Ford’s influence picked up momentum even after she left the White House. While her husband Gerald was in office, however, she shared with the public that she had breast cancer at a time when people didn’t talk about the disease as openly as they do now. “Ford had a huge following in the Seventies, even among a bipartisan group of women. People admired her for her openness,” said Mandel. She was also open about her substance abuse. In 1982, Ford opened the Betty Ford Center, which remains a major rehabilitation center.

Rosalynn Carter (1977-1981): “The Carters had a different kind of relationship when they entered the White House,” said Mandel. “They were friends and had a working partnership. They were a joint venture.” Because of this partnership, her husband Jimmy wanted her involved on key decisions — she sat in on cabinet meetings, and he sent her as his personal emissary to Latin American countries. From 1977 to 1978, Carter served as the honorary chairwoman of the President’s Commission on Mental Health.

Nancy Reagan (1981-1989): Reagan wasn’t interested in the big public platform that her husband Ronald’s presidency gave her. Rather, her interest was literally running the home, and her ultimate influence was on her own husband. She also had a major impact on fashion and style, attracting her glamorous Californian friends to Washington and wearing the likes of Adolfo and James Galanos. “She was very protective of her husband, and she made key decisions in the house’s staff changes — not the government,” said Mandel. “Her goal was always to determine what was the best for ‘Ronnie.’”

Hillary Clinton (1993-2001): Clinton has been an influential public figure before, during and after her husband’s presidency. “She had an enormous public platform while he was in office, and she used it,” said Mandel. Clinton brought major initiatives, such as the ill-fated Clinton health care plan, to the forefront. She became the first former first lady to run for, and win, a Senate seat, as well as the first to join the race for the presidency itself.

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