

# JACKIE KENNEDY AND HER EMPIRE

BY ADRIENNE WOOD

*Adrienne Wood is a senior at Louisiana State University and will graduate in May of 2015 with a degree in History and a minor in Italian. She will attend the LSU Paul M. Hebert Law Center or the Pennsylvania State Dickinson School of Law in the fall of 2015. As for dedications, she would like to thank her family, friends, and the wonderful History Department of LSU and in particular, Professor Mona Rocha who aided her in her research. Last but not least, she would like to thank Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis for always being inspiring, captivating, and brilliant.*

The people of the 1960's remembered Jacqueline Kennedy for her appearance, whether it was her natural beauty, her Parisian style of dress, or her beautiful family. Although it has been over fifty years since her husband's death and her family's descent from the White House, Americans have yet to grow tired of the Kennedy family and the greatest, most tragic love story in American politics. Jackie breathed fresh air into the lungs of the American Presidency and gave life to the role of first lady. Despite living a tragic yet beautiful life, Jacqueline Kennedy augmented the role of the First Lady while maintaining a precarious balance between preserving and yet defying traditional gender roles associated with the position. Through her public work while in the White House, Kennedy redefined the First Ladyship position from a role many considered involuntary servitude to a role of major cultural significance.

Jacqueline Lee Bouvier was born on July 28, 1929 to John "Black Jack" Bouvier and Janet Lee Bouvier in Southampton, New York. Jackie and her younger sister, Lee, lived a privileged and happy childhood despite their parents' divorce in 1940. She was of Irish Catholic descent, which made her an acceptable marital candidate according to the standards of the Irish Catholic, Joseph P. Kennedy Sr., patriarch of the American political dynasty, the Kennedys. Jackie was an accomplished equestrian and attended the prestigious Miss Porter's School for girls then went on to Vassar College in 1947. As a child, she loved reading fiction and poetry, and her favorites included Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* and poetry by Lord Byron.<sup>1</sup> This love of reading followed her throughout her life and eventually led to her post-White House career as a book editor. Jackie attended Vassar for two years before studying abroad in Paris and

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<sup>1</sup> "Life of Jacqueline B. Kennedy - John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum, accessed December 6, 2013, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/Life-of-Jacqueline-B-Kennedy.aspx>.

finishing her collegiate career at George Washington University with degrees in French literature and American history. Her year spent in Paris instilled a love for Europe of which Jackie once said, "I am afraid will never leave me."<sup>2</sup> Her interest in European culture as well as the liberal arts would play a defining role in her White House career.

Post-college, Jacqueline worked as the "camera girl" for the *Washington Times Herald*. Through this position, she met many influential people in the political world and was eventually assigned to interview her future husband, Congressman John F. Kennedy, in 1952. They were married in a elaborate ceremony at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Newport, Rhode Island on September 12, 1953.<sup>3</sup> Since Jackie married into a family with grand political aspirations, the wedding was treated as a political event. The guest list stretched on for miles and included major diplomatic figures as well as Hollywood luminaries.<sup>4</sup> The extravagant wedding signified a momentous change in her life with John; from then on, her life revolved around appearances, as his ostentatious political hopes would become the focus of their life together. Her stepfather, Hugh Auchincloss, walked Jacqueline down the aisle in a fifty-yard long gown, as her father was too drunk to do the honor. The reception had 1,300 guests that Jack and Jackie spent three hours greeting.<sup>5</sup> The wedding was part of a larger political plot in the scheming mind of U.S. Ambassador to England and John's father, Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. From the beginning of the marriage, it was evident that there was a spotlight on both John and Jackie.

Three years after the wedding, Caroline Bouvier Kennedy was born on November 27, 1957. Two years later in early 1960, John F. Kennedy announced his candidacy for the President of the United States of America. Joseph "Joe" Kennedy had grandiose plans for his three sons and high hopes that one would reach the presidency one day. With the aid of political favors, strong rhetorical skills and All-American good looks, John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States on November 8, 1960 on marginal win against Richard Nixon. Throughout the campaign process, Jackie was considered almost a liability. In an interview with Jackie after her husband's death, she described her difficulty with the campaign when she noted:

Everyone thought I was this snob from Newport who had bouffant hair and had French clothes and hated politics.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Cavendish, "Marriage of Jacqueline Bouvier and John F. Kennedy," *History Today* 53, no. 9 (2003): 54.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

And then because I was off and having these babies I wasn't able to campaign and be around as much as I could.<sup>6</sup>

Overtime, public opinion toward Jackie changed significantly. The Kennedys' time in the White House was, in Jackie's opinion, their "happiest years."<sup>7</sup> Although originally considered a danger to her husband's campaign, she ended up being one of his best assets during his time in office. After less than a year as the first lady, *The Public Opinion Quarterly* reported that only 13 percent of men and 10 percent of women had unfavorable opinions of Jackie.<sup>8</sup>

She entered the White House at the young age of 31 and her family quickly became the most iconic family of their time. Well-dressed and beautiful with two young children, Jacqueline set the bar very high for presidential families. With the growing prevalence of television, the apparent dissimilarity between the Kennedys and the Eisenhowers would affect the American Presidency forever.<sup>9</sup> The American people experienced a huge shift from Mamie Eisenhower's matronly look of flowered hats and shirtwaists to Jacqueline Kennedy's French style of pillbox hats and collarless suits. Jackie's polished appearance and proclivity for fashion set the tone for future First Ladies. Herbert S. Parmet describes how Jackie shaped John's Presidential identity in *The Kennedy Myth and American Politics*:

Successors had to cope with the standards set by Kennedy-his rhetoric, his sparkling press conferences, the attractiveness of the First Family, his sense of style, his efforts to set the tone for American culture."<sup>10</sup>

Both John and Jackie embodied the ideal American man and woman, particularly in their sense of style and demeanor. The Kennedys were the closest thing to royalty America had ever seen.

Throughout Jacqueline Kennedy's reign as First Lady, she made it known that her role as a wife and mother came first. This reflected the

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<sup>6</sup> "Recordings of Jacqueline Kennedy," *PBS Video*, September 15, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Scott Janny, "In Oral History, Jacqueline Kennedy Speaks Candidly After the Assassination - NYTimes.com," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2011, accessed November 26, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Hazel Gaudet Erskine, "The Polls: Kennedy as President," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1964): 342.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert S. Parmet, "The Kennedy Myth and American Politics," *The History Teacher* 24, no. 1 (1990): 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

gender ideals of the time and made her irresistible to traditional Americans. She expressed her motherly passions frequently, and once told a reporter, "If you bungled raising your children, I don't think whatever else you do well matters very much."<sup>11</sup> She took her role as a mother seriously and revamped the White House into a child's dream play place by requesting a swimming pool, a swing set, and tree house to be built on the White House lawn.<sup>12</sup>

Jacqueline made sure Caroline and John Jr. felt at home at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. For example, she would not allow the children to move in until their rooms were painted their desired colors, despite complaints from their father who preferred to have his children nearby.<sup>13</sup> In Jackie's interview with Arthur Schlesinger, she described Jack Kennedy as an adoring father, citing little anecdotes about bath time fun with rubber ducks, sneaking candy, and play time in the midst of important meetings.<sup>14</sup> Classic photographs of John Jr. playing in the Oval office while his proud father lovingly looks upon him are a familiar image to the American people. Those images confirmed to the Americans that JFK was America's best dad. Jacqueline once told a reporter that what she really wanted was "to be behind [her husband] and to be a good wife and mother."<sup>15</sup> Her words reflect a mother who confined herself to the home.

Yet her trips abroad and her role in the White House restoration showed a completely different kind of First Lady than the American people had not seen since Eleanor Roosevelt. Jacqueline Kennedy's trips abroad as a Goodwill Ambassador for the United States paved the way for future First Ladies to extend their realms of influence. In contrast to Mamie Eisenhower who felt her role was primarily in the home, Jacqueline spent a significant time abroad such as trips to Paris, Vienna, Greece, Italy, India, and Pakistan despite her desire to stay within the realm of domesticity.<sup>16</sup> Her ability to speak French, Spanish, and Italian, as well as her knowledge and interest in other cultures, helped her husband in multiple aspects of his career.<sup>17</sup> In her 1961 trip to France with her husband, Jack capitalized on Jackie's ability to speak fluent French, her understanding of French culture (she lived in Paris for a year) and her

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<sup>11</sup> "Life of Jacqueline B. Kennedy," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Caitlin Flanagan, "Jackie and the Girls," *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 13, 2012, 137.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Diane M. Blair, "The Rise Of The Rhetorical First Lady: Politics, Gender Ideology, And Women's Voice, 1789-2002," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5, no. 4 (2002): 577.

<sup>16</sup> "Life of Jacqueline B. Kennedy," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.,

natural charm to improve France's view of America. Then President of France, the infamously imperious Charles de Gaulle, was impressed with Jackie though other French government officials did not take her young and relatively inexperienced husband seriously.<sup>18</sup> Jackie's appeal extended beyond France as she was selected as woman of the year in 106 international periodicals at the end of 1961.<sup>19</sup> Together, this illustrates Jackie's role outside the home and her importance to the national image.

One of Jackie's most noteworthy contributions to her husband's administration was the trip she took to South Asia with her sister, Lee, in 1962. Jackie originally planned to travel only to Pakistan but added a stop in India. India was the leading country in the nonaligned nations movement, a movement that at the time included many communist states.<sup>20</sup> Before Jackie's visit, India held significant anti-U.S. sentiments as tensions were growing between the two countries due to India's relations with the Soviets and the U.S.'s relations with Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> Despite the people's current distaste for the U.S., the people of India flocked to see Jackie. It was reported that Jackie's visit attracted more people than Queen Elizabeth's visit the previous year.<sup>22</sup> No other political figure could have generated such positive reviews in India.

The people of India appreciated Jackie's efforts to establish personal connections. For example, laying a wreath on Mahatma Gandhi's shrine, expressing genuine curiosity about Indian culture, and purchasing travel presents for her children in order to bring Indian culture back to the United States.<sup>23</sup> Her good work did not go unnoticed as her husband described her as his "number one ambassador of good-will." and he felt she "took all the bitterness out of our relations with India."<sup>24</sup> Jackie's ambassadorship overseas might signify a more liberal First Ladyship. However, a close study of her trip reveals a calculated attempt to exemplify gender norms associated with women at the time, such as her famous soft voice, her focus on children, and her lack of commentary. Thus, although Jackie was more active than previous First Ladies, she still

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<sup>18</sup> Barbara Marazani, "A First Lady Brings a French Icon to American Shores — History in the Headlines," *History.com*, January 8, 2013, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://www.history.com/news/a-first-lady-brings-a-french-icon-to-american-shores>.

<sup>19</sup> Carol B. Schwalbe, "Jacqueline Kennedy and Cold War Propaganda," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 49, no. 1 (2005): 113.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

adhered to the majority of gender norms of the time, precariously balancing the old and new.

The State Department and the United States Information Agency (USIA) recognized the potential of Jackie as an ambassador and used this to increase American presence abroad and better the national image of America so the USIA made two documentaries about her trips: *Invitation to India* and *Invitation to Pakistan*. According to the director, George S. Stevens Jr., the films were supposed to reflect, “America’s outward-looking interest in other peoples.”<sup>25</sup> The USIA had been making films for years but there was a distinct difference in the films made during the Kennedy administration: The films made during the Kennedy years were described as, “tolerant, nurturing, and culturally sensitive” whereas the films during the Eisenhower era were considered, “short, stiff ideological, and low budget.”<sup>26</sup> Although a film of that scale that focused on a First Lady was unprecedented at the time, the film still upheld Jackie’s motherly and feminine attributes associated with the First Ladyship by featuring Jackie purchasing presents for her family, visiting a children’s hospital, and having a male narrator convey the story.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the two films abroad, Jacqueline has another major documentary on her resume: “A Tour of the White House With Mrs. John F. Kennedy.” Besides family, culture was the other dominating force in Jackie’s life. She always was a lover of fashion, art, books, and history. So, when she moved into the White House, the most notable building in America’s history, it was only natural for her to champion the cause of restoring and revitalizing America’s mansion. In September of 1961, the First Lady was on the cover of *Life* magazine with the cover story on her very detailed plans for the restoring of the White House. Jackie’s sincere quest for historical accuracy and cultural revival were explicitly expressed when she told *Life* reporter, Hugh Sidney:

Everything in the White House must have a reason for being there. It would be sacrilege merely to redecorate it – a word I hate. It must be restored, and that has nothing to do with decoration. That is a question of scholarship.<sup>28</sup>

Jackie’s task was certainly ambitious for a first lady, requiring a great deal of knowledge and work. At the same time, this cause was still located

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<sup>25</sup> Carol B. Schwalbe, “Jacqueline Kennedy and Cold War Propaganda,” 119.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

<sup>28</sup> “Life of Jacqueline B. Kennedy,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum.

within the home and reinforced the idea of the cult of domesticity, thus making it a safe choice as far as first lady realms of influence.

On February 14, 1962, an estimated 46 million Americans watched Mrs. Kennedy give an hour-long tour of her home, the White House. The special played on three major television networks and later that year received an Emmy award.<sup>29</sup> The documentary became an international success and was distributed in 106 countries, making it the most widely seen documentary of the time.<sup>30</sup> Internationally, Jackie received widespread praise and managed to project onto other countries a more positive view of the United States without ever uttering a word of politics as Jackie did not feel it was her place to make political commentary as the political realm was her husband's domain. The newly refurbished White House became Jackie's new showplace that would attract a more diverse and lively crowd than the White House had ever seen.

Jackie Kennedy, a valued member of the political world by marriage and a patron of the arts by heart, reinvented White House events through an atmosphere that represented both spheres accordingly. Jackie took the typically stuffy White House dinners and turned them into an affair where artists like writers, poets, musicians could mingle with politicians and scientists could rub elbows with Hollywood celebrities.<sup>31</sup> Isaac Stern, a famous violinist, wrote to Mrs. Kennedy after a visit to the White House and expressed his gratitude for her, "serious attention and respect for the arts."<sup>32</sup> Jackie's knack for befriending artists paid off when she persistently called upon Andre Malraux, France's Cultural Minister and a fan of Mrs. Kennedy's. Jackie and Malraux began negotiations between France and the U.S. to arrange for Leonardo Da Vinci's masterpiece, the Mona Lisa, to make its first and only journey to America.<sup>33</sup> After much talk and negotiations, the Mona Lisa made her appearance in Washington, D.C. at a star-studded event on January 8, 1963. Every major political player and many giants in the art world came together to witness a beautiful moment between France and the United States. Once again, Jackie Kennedy somehow managed to create peaceful diplomatic relations while keeping the focus on culture, not politics.

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<sup>29</sup> Schwalbe, "Jacqueline Kennedy and Cold War Propaganda," 111.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>31</sup> "Jacqueline Kennedy Entertains: The Art of the White House Dinner," - John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum, April 11, 2007, accessed November 22, 203. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Exhibits/Past-Exhibits/Jacqueline-Kennedy-Entertains.aspx>.

<sup>32</sup> "Life of Jacqueline B. Kennedy," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum.

<sup>33</sup> Marazani, "A First Lady Brings a French Icon to American Shores — History in the Headlines."

November 22, 1963 is a day that can be identified with a strong and dignified Jacqueline Kennedy in a bloodstained pink Chanel suit as she watched the swearing in of Lyndon B. Johnson as the thirty-sixth President of the United States. On that fateful day in Dallas, John F. Kennedy was assassinated in the presence of his beloved wife. Jackie, a very private person by nature, never spoke of that day. The assassination of John F. Kennedy was a defining moment in American history. According to a 1983 Gallup survey, 65 percent of Americans felt the United States would have been “much different” if Kennedy had not been assassinated.<sup>34</sup> The assassination of John F. Kennedy is just another tragedy in the long line of what some speculate to be a curse upon the Kennedy family, and only the first of many tragedies Jackie Kennedy experienced.

Jacqueline Kennedy remarried and became a widow a second time before her death in 1994. Her later life, a life spent focused on books and her grandchildren, reflected her priorities well. Although the public kept a spotlight on Jackie’s life, she often preferred the comfort and privacy of her own home. Jacqueline Kennedy was a very smart woman whose time in the White House was spent focused on bettering her husband’s career, raising her children well, and pursuing culture. She changed what the American people considered the “ideal” woman by giving that archetype a brain without losing any femininity. Jacqueline Kennedy’s White House years are truly a social paradox as her words expressed a woman who desired to stay within the comfortable domestic expectations of her time. Yet her actions and interests reflect a woman whose thirst for knowledge and sophistication raised the bar for the American people’s expectation of the first lady.

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<sup>34</sup> Parmet, “The Kennedy Myth and American Politics,” 33.