First Women: The Grace and Power of America's Modern First Ladies

Kate Andersen Brower
author of The Residence
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Discussion Questions

1. What were your impressions of the First Ladies before you read this book? Did reading the book change those impressions?

2. Do you think that the private lives of these public people sheds any insight onto their persona? Is it fair to judge people by how they act at home versus how they act in public?

3. How do you think you would react in the position of First Lady (or First Gentleman)?

4. Were there any specific First Ladies that you identified with?

5. In your opinion, what would be some of the best benefits of the position? What would be some of the worst drawbacks?

6. What were your impressions of raising a family in the White House? What were some of the strongest benefits and drawbacks of such an opportunity?

7. In your opinion, what are some of the most important qualities of a First Lady? What do you think should be the priorities of such a position?
From your perspective and breadth of experience, is there some hallmark moment in this election process in which you realized we’d crossed a historical line?

Probably in the primaries when Trump was talking about the size of his, you know, genitalia. Or whatever you want to call it. When he was actually going there, I think that brought it to a whole new level, but the gloves were clearly off for Trump and Clinton from day one. I thought it was interesting when he talked about being president and putting her in jail; that’s another point we’ve never had in history. Talking about appointing a special prosecutor? That’s never been said during a campaign. That’s the most recent red flag, I think. I mean, it’s never been this personal before.
The two of them — Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton — you’re just not surprised by any of the allegations or any of the behavior. Even with her being ultra secretive, it’s kind of in keeping with how she was in the White House as First Lady, maybe a bit paranoid — and probably rightfully so — about people listening in on conversations, stuff like that. And nothing surprises me about what he says. When you hear that tape — if it was any other presidential candidate, you’d be shocked, but with that tape, it was just like, “Oh yeah, that’s Donald Trump.” That was in keeping with the way he speaks.

I want to ask you about that, too, about the idea of what we think of as “presidential.” Because Hillary is a woman (and because Trump is Trump) we’re in this place where what we’ve thought of as “presidential” in the past might look very different.

I think it will be really interesting to see a woman in this role, and how she navigates these expectations of her as president. I thought it was strange during the primary when she said that she would also help do some traditional East Wing activities, like looking at china, or looking at flower arrangements. No president in history has really been asked to do that, so there are these kind of gendered expectations of the role of First Lady. Bill Clinton won’t have to do any of it, and nobody would expect him to, but is it because he’s a man, or because he’s a former president? I mean, I think the idea that a woman would be expected to be, you know, a hostess and the leader of the free world is a little bit of a double standard. When I talk to Clinton staffers, they say that she’ll hire a really experienced social secretary to do a lot of this. I mean, there’s a lot of work that goes into planning state dinners, and guest seating charts and all of that, it’s very kind of, feminine, and therefore people think it’s less important, but it is important. I mean, you cannot do that and also make a deal about arms control. It’s too time-consuming. I was actually a little annoyed at that. I felt it was sort of pandering. You shouldn’t have to be in the Oval Office dealing with the East Wing staff at the same time. It’s never happened before, and it shouldn’t have to happen for future women presidents. I guess that’s just the feminist in me, but I found that to be really bizarre. ...

When she was First Lady, she got into a lot of trouble for having a West Wing office. ... So I think this history of overstepping what is expected of you as First Lady — hopefully she’s moved beyond that, having been a senator and a Secretary of State.

She’s been quoted as wanting her tombstone to read something other than “Former First Lady.” She wanted to be elected herself, and when she got it, she was so empowered. For my first book about the White House staff, I talked to butlers and florists, and they described how the mood totally changed when she was campaigning, when she was out on her own and the president was supporting her, and one of the staff was quoted as saying that “Bill Clinton was in such a doghouse, he would’ve done anything for her.” He felt she deserved that. People forget that her star was on the rise when they met, and they’ve really traded off over the years.

You covered both President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama in the White House. In the same way that there’s a lot of talk about us holding Secretary Clinton to extremely rigorous standards about conduct and morality, I think there have been those high-bar sorts of expectations of the president and First Lady, which they seem to have met with grace and intellect, and without being disingenuous. Does it feel that way to you?

[Michelle Obama] has kept very true to herself, and he has, too, but I mean, people criticize the president for not golfing enough with members of Congress, or inviting them over in the way that
Reagan did with Tip O'Neill. There’s definitely a level of arrogance there, but that’s also just his personality. He’s just more introverted and not as much of a glad-hander as someone like Bill Clinton. So he doesn’t do a kind of phony thing.

**Do you think that would have helped him bridge a bipartisan gap?**

It definitely would have looked good in the press, but in the end, I don’t think it would have mattered how many times he golfed with John Boehner or Paul Ryan. It’s a partisan country right now, and I think they saw that and thought, “It’s a waste of our time. The president has limited time he can spend on things, and maybe that’s not a great use of it.” It would have been a nice gesture, but it probably wouldn’t have changed the course of the legislature in any way.

I couldn’t help but think, when reading excerpt from “The Residence” about the mainstay staff in the White House who are African-American, that it would be fascinating to talk to some of them about how they saw Obama’s presidency — particularly at the beginning — or about the way the staff in general views a potential Trump presidency.

It was very emotional for some of them, especially on Inauguration Day, when the Obamas officially moved in. … I interviewed some of them about working there under Donald Trump, and one of them said he wouldn’t go back if they paid him three times as much as he was paid when he worked there. … You serve at the pleasure of the president, but it’s not like a regular government job, you can be fired for any reason. Everything is very regimented in the White House, and he could come in and maybe bring his own chef. Some of them might take early retirement, I was told. Hopefully we won’t see any of this happen, but the idea of his presidency reverberates everywhere, especially to the housekeepers at the White House.

**Right. It’s hard to think of the “You’re fired” guy as having the power of making sweeping changes that affect people who have worked there long enough to have built a career.**

There are certain things he can’t touch, like the Green Room and the Red Room, really historic rooms. Like, he can’t go into the East Room and paint it pink. You can do almost anything to the second floor, though, or the third floor, the residence. He could do some crazy stuff, interior-decorating-wise, but it’s more the kind of human toll that could take if he did fire people. I have no sense of whether or not he’d fire anybody, but he’s been so unorthodox, I think that makes people wonder if he would also apply that to even the most basic things. I mean, he has a huge staff and a big entourage, and that could change a lot.

About half of the butlers — three of them — are the same butlers who worked for the Clintons when they were in the White House. There’s one butler there named Buddy Carter who I couldn’t interview because he’s still there, but he’s due to retire, and a friend of his said he’d probably stay if the Clintons come back, because he’s really close with them. They become like family with the president and the First Lady, and I think that’s very sweet.

**Do you watch “House of Cards?”**

I love “House of Cards.” It’s funny because in my book, I talk about Laura Bush and how, at the end of the day, she and the president would sit in the Treaty Room on the second floor and smoke together. She would smoke a cigarette and he would smoke a cigar, and crack the
window, and the Secret Service would always get so mad because they would sometimes forget to close the window. They had to put in a whole process in at the usher’s office to make sure someone checks the window at the end of the night in the treaty room. Not that Claire is modeled after Laura Bush at all, but I always love the scene of Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright smoking at the end of their day. You wouldn’t think that about the Bushes, but that is what they did. Except, you know, not plotting to kill people.

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The First Ladies' Dos and Don'ts of Getting Ahead While Staying True to Yourself

By Megen Angelo, April 12, 2016 8:00 am

Think all the authority in the White House is concentrated in the West Wing? You won’t after reading Kate Andersen Brower’s First Women: The Grace and Power of America’s Modern First Ladies (on sale now), which delves into the legacies of presidential spouses from Jackie Kennedy through Michelle Obama. While researching her book The Residence—last year’s bestselling chronicle of White House support staff—Brower found that interviewees were all too eager to dish on the first ladies and their canny ability to run game from their offices in the East Wing.

So Brower kept digging, interviewed over 200 people about these enigmatic wives, and wrote First Women. In the process, she learned a lot about how to succeed without selling out. Here, she shares her first-lady-inspired Dos and Don'ts. (Former President Clinton, you may want to jot down some notes, just in case.)

DO turn to the women who came before you for inspiration, no matter what field you’re in. “Hillary Clinton really admired Eleanor Roosevelt,” Brower says. “She would have imaginary conversations with her. When the ’94 midterm election results came in and Democrats lost control [of Congress], Hillary blamed herself in a lot of ways for that loss. She had this framed photo of Eleanor on her desk. She looked at it and said, ‘What would Eleanor do?’ And she told herself to ‘develop a skin as thick as a rhinoceros hide,’ which is something Eleanor said once.”

DON'T let different belief systems keep you from respecting—and befriending—other women. “The really interesting thing I found while writing this book is that the relationships between first ladies don’t depend on their political parties,” Brower says. “Laura Bush and Michelle Obama have a good relationship, even though they’re on different sides of the aisle. Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush were both Republicans who had known each other for eight years when the Bushes moved in, because President Bush had been President Reagan’s vice president, but Barbara had never been up to the Residence. There are deep friendships and deep rivalries, and they don’t have much to do with partisanship.”

DO know who you are—and stick to it, even under pressure. “President Kennedy would come to Jackie with letters that criticized her for wearing shorts that were too short,” Brower says. “And Jackie would just say, ‘But they’re not too short.’ She wouldn’t change herself just because people wanted her to—and then, people ended up imitating her style.”

The other transition: from Michelle to Melania

By Kate Andersen Brower, Updated 4:52 PM ET, Wed December 21, 2016

Editor's Note: Kate Andersen Brower is the author of the best-sellers "First Women: The Grace and Power of America's Modern First Ladies" and "The Residence: Inside the Private World of the White House." Unless otherwise noted, facts in this piece reflect research from those works. The opinions expressed here are hers.

(CNN)Every four to eight years, the peaceful transition of power occurs that is so crucial to our democracy. But this time, because the campaign was so full of vitriol, it is even more consequential. And it is first lady Michelle Obama who must serve as the welcome committee.

Less than 48 hours after Donald Trump's surprise victory, Michelle Obama sat down for tea in the Yellow Oval Room with the president-elect's wife Melania. "We are going to be there for the next president and do whatever we have to do to make sure that he is successful, because if he succeeds we all succeed," the outgoing first lady said in her interview with Oprah Winfrey that aired Monday night on CBS.

Her door, she said, is always open to Melania and her East Wing staff.

Now we know that in addition to discussing with Melania the challenges that come with raising young children in the White House, the first lady extended a peace offering, one that had been extended to her eight years earlier by Laura Bush.

The first lady's honesty was remarkable to me because she openly expressed what so many of the women before her have felt: allegiance to the American presidency and dedication to the peaceful transfer of power mixed with very real human emotion.
Instead of leaving a letter behind, as presidents traditionally do for their successors, outgoing first ladies give a tour of the residence to the women who follow them. During that tour, they position the incoming first lady at a specific spot in the first lady's dressing room. Here, Hillary Clinton told Laura Bush: "Your mother-in-law stood right here and told me that from this window you can see straight down into the Rose Garden and also over to the Oval Office." Eight years later, when Michelle Obama came for her first tour of the White House, Laura showed her the exact same spot.

The transition from the Bushes to the Obamas has been among the most pleasant in modern history. When I interviewed her for my book "First Women," Laura Bush's chief of staff, Anita McBride, described her meeting with Michelle Obama's staff, including her then-chief of staff Jackie Norris, and the day they spent together in the East Wing in late December 2008 before the Obamas moved in.

They broke up into groups and exchanged detailed information, down to lists of specific events typically attended by the first lady, including those that could be safely skipped and those commitments that had to be honored. Michelle Obama surprised Laura Bush when, on the morning of the inauguration, she presented her with a leather journal and engraved silver pen knowing that she was working on her memoir. Since then, Laura Bush and Michelle Obama have forged a friendship working on humanitarian initiatives together, even as President Obama campaigned in part against President Bush's policies.

Not so for other first ladies. One of the most difficult transitions came in 1960, when Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had been supreme commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II, was replaced by the young, privileged Democrat John F. Kennedy, whom he called "the boy."

Mamie Eisenhower, 64, resented Jackie Kennedy, who was only 31 years old at the time, and she caustically referred to her as "the college girl."

During her White House tour, Jackie was recovering from a cesarean section for the birth of John Kennedy Jr. and she had been told that a wheelchair would be made available. After more than an hour and a walk-through of some thirty rooms with Mamie Eisenhower, Jackie emerged from the White House looking pale and worn out. Later, Jackie would say she was "too scared" of Mamie to ask where her wheelchair was.

On the cold January day in 1969 when Richard Nixon was sworn in, LBJ's wife, Lady Bird, made small talk with Pat Nixon during the awkward ride the outgoing and incoming first lady take together to the Capitol swearing-in ceremony.

As it has been on every Inauguration Day in modern history, a car packed with Secret Service agents separated them from the car their husbands shared. "I'm so happy it didn't sleet today," Lady Bird said. "We might get lucky and have no rain," Pat replied as they drove down Pennsylvania Avenue. The ride was familiar: Lady Bird and Pat had made the same trip eight years earlier as second ladies, when Pat was leaving Washington and Lady Bird was taking her place.
Twelve years later, when they rode in a limo from the White House to the Capitol on Inauguration Day, Rosalynn Carter "just looked out the window," Nancy Reagan wrote in her memoir, My Turn. "She didn't say a word."

Rosalynn Carter told me she still remembers those agonizing weeks after her husband lost and before they moved out: "You lose the election on November 4, and then you're just ready to go home." For Rosalynn, it was especially difficult as she watched her husband work to free American hostages held in Iran only to have them released minutes after President Reagan was sworn in.

When Nancy Reagan came for her tour of the residence, Rosalynn walked her through the second and third floors and talked about her work to showcase American art. But the tour was short and she never showed Nancy the presidential bedroom and study.

Their relationship was not helped by rumors that Nancy wanted the Carters to move out a few weeks before the inauguration and live in Blair House, across the street from the White House, so that she could begin redecorating.

One would think the transition from the Reagans to the Bushes would have been smoother, since Barbara Bush had been the second lady for eight years. But Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush were not close and Barbara had never been in the residence.

In an interview, Barbara Bush told me that the chief usher came to the vice president's residence to show her pictures of the rooms on the second and third floors of the White House. "I really didn't know anything about the upstairs at the White House to speak of."

After her husband was elected, Barbara's chief of staff, Susan Porter Rose, said, "Although I immediately gave Mrs. Bush the floor plan of the White House so she could be thinking about their new living arrangements ... She would have loved to have actually seen the place, what the closets were like, et cetera, but that unfortunately was not to be."

No transition has been entirely smooth, whether because the president is being replaced by someone from an opposing political party or because personal relationships have been frayed among politicians within the same party.

But, just as there is among presidents, there is empathy and understanding among the women who have served as first lady. As Lady Bird Johnson boarded the plane that would take her and her husband home to Texas, she was touched when she found a large bunch of yellow roses from the Nixons at her seat. Pat knew they were her favorite flower.

Michelle Obama told Oprah Winfrey, "The next family that comes in here, every person in that family -- every child, every grandchild -- their lives will be turned upside down in a way that no American really understands." No matter how difficult this transition is, she is extending the tradition of an unshakable bond among first families that is embodied by the first lady.