



# American FLOTUS - Envisioning the Role of a First Gentleman

**Alan Lowe:** Welcome to American FLOTUS, a partnership of American POTUS and the First Ladies Association for Research and Education, or FLARE. I'm Alan Lowe, your host, and before I turn to our guest in this episode, I'm so glad to be joined by my good friend, Nancy Kegan Smith, the president of FLARE.

**Nancy Kegan Smith:** It is an honor for me as FLARE's President to welcome you on behalf of the First Ladies Association for Research and Education to our new podcast series collaborating with American POTUS and my friend Alan Lowe to do podcasts on US First Ladies called American FLOTUS.

The First Ladies Association for Research and Education (FLARE) was launched on June 21, 2021 bringing reality to a dream of seven founding members who wanted the first interdisciplinary association dedicated to the study of the evolving roles, history and legacies of America's First Ladies and continuing the work of the pioneer of first ladies studies, Dr. Lewis Gould, by providing networking, hosting programming, and encouraging further education and research on first ladies and the important role and work they do.

FLARE has been enhanced by our partnership with American University's School of Public Affairs First Ladies Initiative and our 12 institutional lifetime members who collaborate with us on our programs and events along with our lifetime individual and other FLARE members.

Please see our website [flare-net.org](http://flare-net.org) for more information and we encourage anyone who is interested in knowing more about first ladies to join FLARE.

Our three-year-old organization is a leader in examining the role first ladies performed while in the White House, in American society and globally.

It is fitting that we are collaborating with American POTUS a leader in doing excellent podcasts that enlighten its audience on the American Presidency, to introduce American FLOTUS which will include a series of podcasts demonstrating the important role of US first ladies and their lasting legacies.

Now it is my pleasure to turn the program over to moderator Alan Lowe and Diana Carlin, FLARE VP and Professor Emerita of Communication at Saint Louis University for what I know will be an outstanding podcast on Envisioning the Role of a First Gentleman.

**Alan:** Thanks so much. It's a real honor for American POTUS to join with FLARE to advance the understanding of the First Ladies of the United States. I'm really excited about the American FLOTUS episodes we're going to create together. And I can't wait to see how this partnership grows. With that, let's turn to our topic today.

At some point, our nation will elect a woman as president, and we likely then will have our first First Gentleman. How will he approach the duties that have in the past been undertaken by First Ladies? To discuss this topic, I'm very pleased to welcome on this episode of American FLOTUS, Dr. Diana Carlin.

Diana is Professor Emerita of Communication at Saint Louis University and a retired professor of communication studies at the University of Kansas. She's a respected lecturer and has been widely published, including serving as co-author of *U. S. First Ladies: Making History and Leaving Legacies* and *Remember the First Ladies: The Legacies of America's History Making Women*.

She's a founder and current vice president of the First Ladies Association for Research and Education. Diana, welcome to American FLOTUS.

**Diana Carlin:** Thank you very much, Alan, for having me on and also for this partnership. We're very excited to kick it off.

**Alan:** As are we and thank you for being our first guest. This is a really interesting topic. We will, at some point, have a First Gentleman rather than a First Lady of the U. S. To start, let's talk about a baseline, shall we? What, in general, in the modern era, have been the duties of a First Lady?

**Diana:** Well, the interesting thing, to provide a little context, is that there are no official duties. You know, this is not an official role, it's not constitutionally provisioned, it's not legislatively provisioned. It's simply happened over time, starting with George and Martha Washington. Part of the reason that our First Lady has been so important throughout history is that unlike other governments that separate the role of the head of government, often a prime minister, with the head of state, which might be a monarch or a president or whatever. We put it all into one. So, George and Martha realized that he couldn't do all of the ceremonial rituals, some of the kind of soft diplomacy work, without her by his side, and they'd always been partners. Over time, this role has become far more public, especially after women got the vote and were more active in politics. In recent years, I think especially since Jackie Kennedy started the White House Historical Association and took that on as one of her causes. Lady Bird Johnson with the environment. And then we've had so many other projects that First Ladies have done since then. There's an expectation that the First Lady will have an issue.

Barbara and Laura Bush were very interested in literacy, libraries, and education. Pat Nixon, volunteerism, Rosalynn Carter, mental health. Nancy Reagan had drugs, [you know], "Just say no." Hillary Clinton started out with health care, which was a little different from the other types of projects First Ladies had had, and then really took on children's and women's issues. And then Michelle Obama had education and her healthy children's programs. Melania Trump, "Be best." And then Dr. Biden has looked at women's health and military families, as did her predecessor, Michelle Obama. So, we've had these very highly visible projects that the First Ladies have worked on, but they also continue to play the role Martha Washington played, and that is being the official hostess, traveling with their husbands and visiting various places; doing cultural diplomacy on international trips.

All of those are very important. Campaigning, and not just for their spouse, but also in the midterms. First ladies have become very important surrogates for their husbands during the midterms. So, [First Ladies participate in] any number of activities. And then Dr. Biden has, I think in many ways, been the pathway for the first gentleman. She's working outside of the White House. You know, it's very likely that our first First Gentleman, and any that come after are likely to want to continue some type of professional role if they've had one and they aren't retired. She's kind of opened that door as well.

**Alan:** Well, speaking of that, when we have that First Gentleman, and if they continue, let's say, a career outside of the White House, how will those more traditional roles be accomplished? Perhaps they have no interest in the social

part of the job or the other elements of taking on a specific cause. How will that then move forward under a First Gentleman?

**Diana:** Well, we've had many examples throughout history where the president's wife had someone else fill in because of illness or other issues, or they just simply, some of them weren't really very interested in performing the roles. So, there've been other family members. There didn't used to be staff for the first lady. Really the staffing didn't start until Edith Roosevelt with one person. And then Rosalynn Carter really expanded that. She was the first First Lady to actually have an office outside of the private residence rooms. And so now there's a professional staff. They can take on much of that and often, you know, consult with the first family about who they want sitting where or whatever, because some of that is political and diplomatic, but we certainly have examples from the past of where other family members have filled in. Or, like I said, we have professional staff who can help with some of that.

**Alan:** And the first gentleman may well want to do that, but, um, it's still an unknown quantity at this point. So, what about the causes? First ladies adopting these very important causes, how do you think a first gentleman would approach that? And not to be too gender specific, but would they think about perhaps men's health or fatherhood, or do you think they'd be less gender specific in how they choose those causes?

**Diana:** Yeah. Causes they adopt are deeply rooted in something they're passionate about. Jackie Kennedy, for example, visited the White House when she was a girl. And there was no brochure to provide anything [about the White House]. She couldn't believe how shabby things were because Congress in the past had not really done a very good job of allocating money and the furniture was coming and going with various presidents. That made an impression on her, and she also had studied in Europe, and she really wanted to see this as a living museum. So that was a passionate thing for her. Lady Bird Johnson grew up loving nature, the environment, that was a very important thing for her. So that became part of what she was interested in. So, I think when we have a First Gentleman, it's going to be defined by that person's background, and we found that with all of our studies -- you know, you mentioned the two books that I've co-authored with Nancy Kegan Smith and Anita McBride -- we found that every woman brought to the position her own background, her own interests. What she and her husband together wanted to accomplish; what she could do, especially in the modern era of complementing what his positions were. I think once again, Eleanor Roosevelt was an excellent example of that, where she was really an ambassador for her husband because of his physical limitations. Lady Bird promoted Head Start and a lot of the new Great Society programs, and

we've seen that with other First Ladies, what they've done on the campaign trail. So, I would guess that given there is a marital partnership and how that has played out in the wife's political career, will have a great deal of influence, and then the First Gentleman's own interests and causes.

**Alan:** I see. Put their own stamp on it. As we think about precedence, we have a second gentleman right now with Vice President Harris, as we taped this episode, the Second Gentleman, Doug Emhoff. How has he approached that position? And what precedence, if any, do you see that setting for future First Gentlemen?

**Diana:** Well, I do think that Doug Emhoff has shown us very likely the direction that a First Gentleman might take. He, like Dr. Biden is working. He is a law professor at Georgetown. He gave up his private practice because he had to avoid potential conflicts of interest. So, he is teaching now, but he has often traveled with Dr. Biden. They have done some things in common. He has been at social gatherings, where both couples were, he has been given a project of his own that he took on, and that was looking at the anti-Semitism issue. He is Jewish and this is something that he has looked into because of what's happened, especially in the last year or so. And, so, he has had a cause, but he's shown that you can balance being a Second Gentleman along with having a career. And when he's been interviewed, he's been asked what his main responsibility was. And his answer is pretty much what most of the First Ladies have said, and that is to support his wife. As they've all wanted to support their husband. And if that meant being a hostess, if it meant traveling abroad with them, if it meant having a cause that's going to get some good attention, that's what they've done. And that's pretty much what I think any First Gentleman will do.

**Alan:** What if we look at the states, or perhaps other countries—husbands of governors, or prime ministers, or presidents elsewhere, are there any precedents, are there any examples that maybe we should be looking at to see how a First Gentleman might act?

**Diana:** Well, I think what we've seen, especially in the U. S. with governors. I'm in a state, Kansas, it's on its third woman governor. And certainly, had plenty of experience with it. There are, I think, 13 women governors right now. And very similarly to first ladies, it's really all over the map. Whether or not they are still actively involved in a career is one thing. If they are retired, they may take a little more active role in some of the social activities. Kansas' current governor is Laura Kelly; her husband is a physician and, he basically summarized it. He said she does leadership. I do medicine. So, that's pretty

much the way it is. He shows up at social events and does some of that but has not played a major role.

Her predecessor woman governor was Kathleen Sebelius, who then became secretary of HHS [Health and Human Services]. Her husband was a federal judge who could not participate in politics. So, unless it was something that was nonpartisan, he was simply not visible. The first [woman] governor, Joan Finney, her husband was retired, and he didn't like politics very much, but he [Mr. Finney] did entertain all the legislative spouses every year when the legislature started, but he pretty well went on with his own life.

And, of the current governors, I think one interesting example is Sarah Huckabee Sanders in Arkansas. Her husband is a political consultant, so there are really no problems in terms of, know, the governmental issue. But he's an outdoorsman and they are known as the natural state, so she appointed him to chair a committee on promoting Arkansas as a great place for tourism and outdoor activities. He's become this goodwill ambassador and has a committee and, that's pretty much, I think the way it's going to go, as once again, what their interests are, what their position is, how much time they have, how active they've been in their wife's political life all influence it.

**Alan:** What about other nations? I know some of those aren't heads of state, as you noted at the beginning. But are there examples of husbands of presidents of other countries that we'd be looking at or as [are] the examples so different, it wouldn't really apply?

**Diana:** Yeah, it's more difficult to apply [as] the prime minister is the one we hear about most, and they're the head of government. So, for instance, with Margaret Thatcher, we knew her husband's name was Dennis, but Dennis certainly wasn't out doing any of that because that's the royal family's responsibility. And it's the same way with male prime ministers. You don't hear much about their wives. Tony Blair's wife was a sitting judge and continued with that position. Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, who was a prime minister. Her husband probably got a little more attention because he was a television personality to begin with.

Actually, they weren't married during most of her tenure, but he was referred to as her partner. And during COVID, he actually created a few problems for her with some of the things he was saying. I co-authored a, another book a few years ago called *Gender and the American Presidency*, and we looked at what it was going to take to get a female president. And one of the nine things we concluded after looking at nine women who had a shot as either president or

vice president was that they couldn't have a spouse that was detrimental to them, uh, [or] detracted. And we gave the example of Geraldine Ferraro, first woman to be on a major party ticket as vice president, and her husband's finances became an issue. And so, it needs to be somebody non-controversial. And for the most part, you just don't hear a whole lot about the spouses of women heads of state in other countries. And I don't think other countries have really had this concept of a first family the way that we have had. It's been unique to us because of that dual role.

**Alan:** So, you mentioned controversies prior to election. We know that sometimes the First Ladies, as great as they are, have created some issues of controversy. Think about Nancy Reagan and the astrologer issue, Betty Ford, very outspoken on abortion. Hillary Clinton, you mentioned healthcare.

When that type of issue, I think, inevitably arises with a First Gentleman, will it be seen by the public in the same way, you think? Will the president address it similarly, or will it be in some way different?

**Diana:** Each of those examples you just gave was very different. Nancy Reagan was very upset, as anyone would be, with the attempted assassination. And she needed, she wrote this in her memoir, to try to help her just get a handle on it. So that's why she consulted her astrologer. Mary Lincoln had had an astrologer. Jane Pierce held seances in the White House, as did Mary Lincoln, Jane was talking with her son. So, you know, we've had some spiritualism in the White House before. But there were other controversies that Nancy Reagan had, and Ronald Reagan addressed them. With Hillary, she was asked to do something no one else had ever done. And that was head up developing legislation. They very quickly found out that was a bridge too far. And I don't think we'll ever see that happen at that level again. So, if there is a controversy, it's going to be a unique situation again, which will have to be handled based on what that controversy involves, just like Ferraro had to have news conferences and lay out her financial background and her husband's, and it's just one of those things where you have to meet the moment, and come up with a solution. And once again, how they have dealt with politics as a couple prior to the presidency is going to have a lot to do with how they would address that.

**Alan:** Now, I know [this] last question for you, Diana, is kind of rooted in the fact that we do have persistent sexism in how we view kind of gender dynamics. So, when we have a [woman] president and a First Gentleman, how will that couple avoid misperceptions of the First Gentleman's involvement in decision making and all kinds of things, or in campaigning?

**Diana:** Yes, the first gentleman's background. You know, had Hillary Clinton become our first woman president, we would have had a very unusual scenario, which is unlikely to ever appear in American history again, at least in my lifetime, most likely, where you would have had the First Gentleman being a former U.S. president. And stop and think about that. I mean, how do you ever separate that out? Especially when you have a personality as strong as Bill Clinton's and someone who is comfortable and likes being in the limelight, you know. He had said that he would probably be like a diplomat at large or something because he did have a lot of foreign policy experience; [they] would have found something for him. But I do think that would have been a difficult presidency from the perspective you're talking about is: how much is he advising her? If you look at some of the other women who have been in the Senate or like these women governors, if any of them would move up, if their husbands have just pretty much stayed out of the political scene. If anyone were to expect them to be involved. It would be a rarity, I would think, because they don't have that political background.

They don't have that expertise. I think anyone who walks into this role as the first is going to be under a magnifying glass. Subsequent ones, it'll be a little bit different once we have several women presidents. And so, I think they will have really thought through the optics and whether or not the person does something like sit in on cabinet meetings or, you know, what they might be appointed to -- an honorary position in X, Y, or Z. But if they're not an expert in something and you suddenly see that they're being involved in decision making then I think the public has a reason to kind of question. I don't see that as a problem. I look at the women who are in positions who could eventually be a president, and their husbands really are in the background. You stop and think about 2020, and we had several women in the Democratic primary; it wasn't just Harris. You had Elizabeth Warren. You had Amy Klobuchar. You didn't hear much of anything about their husbands during the campaign. And they all, once again, have professional positions, and that's where they were spending their time. So, I'm a little less concerned about that one.

**Alan:** I did find the other day, Diana, when the possibility existed with Hillary Clinton, uh, I, I purchased a political button, which I am want [wont] to do, and it had Bill Clinton's face on it and said, first dude, so I, I don't think that name's going to stick when it does happen, but I thought that was interesting.

**Diana:** Yeah, I believe, when she was governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin's husband referred to himself as first dude. And I believe, if I remember right, Kathleen Sebelius's husband, I think he called himself first dude. Uh, it's a little



different with a governor. You know, you have to have a certain amount of decorum to make a decision [about a title].

**Alan:** I think that's right. There you go. Well, that's a great way to end this conversation. A really fascinating conversation, Diana. Thank you so much for joining me today and for this great partnership.

**Diana:** Well, thank you for asking. I really believe at some point this will become a reality and we'll have to go back and listen to this and see if we were right.

**Alan:** Right. Well, again, I'm thanking you and Nancy and all the members and your colleagues at FLARE for this partnership. For more information, listeners, please go to [flare-net.org](http://flare-net.org) and to [AmericanPOTUS.org](http://AmericanPOTUS.org). Thank you so much for joining us on American FLOTUS.