



American FLOTUS

East Wing Magazine with Jennifer Taylor

Alan Lowe: Welcome to *American FLOTUS*. I'm your host, Alan Lowe. Thanks so much for joining us. *American FLOTUS* is produced by a partnership of the *American POTUS* podcast and the First Ladies Association for Research and Education or FLARE. I'm very pleased to welcome our guest today, Jennifer Taylor, the founder and editor of *East Wing Magazine*. Throughout her career as a journalist, Jennifer's work has been featured in publications like the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Kansas City Star*, and she's covered an eclectic set of topics ranging from education to conservation to business. But we're happy she's focusing on the first ladies with her work at *East Wing Magazine*, and we're especially happy that she's with us today. Jennifer, welcome to *American FLOTUS*.

Jennifer Taylor: Hi, Alan. Thank you so much for having me. I am very excited to be here.

Alan: I am a fan of your work. I'm a fan of *East Wing Magazine*. Can you tell us what first led to your interest in first ladies, and then why did you create the magazine?

Jennifer: Sure. So, my curiosity came from, actually, Abraham Lincoln's assassination.

Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin published the book *Team of Rivals* in 2005, and that's when I learned that the assassination was more than what we were taught in grade school, obviously. But I hadn't realized there was this coordinated effort to assassinate Lincoln, and also others in his cabinet. So, an image in Goodwin's book that has stayed with me was not of Lincoln or his wife Mary but of the attack on his Secretary of State William Seward and the witness trauma inflicted upon his wife Frances. And in the book, Goodwin writes, "convinced she has taken on the afflictions of her loved ones through vicarious suffering she collapsed and died" six weeks after the attack. Okay. And then of course there was Mary. While Lincoln lay dying from his head wound, she was ushered off into a separate room and inconsolable and not being told that her husband was dying until after he had died. So, all of that kind of got me wondering more about Mary Lincoln. And for as long as I can remember, narrative around her was one that she wasn't very well liked, she spent too much money on the White House, and that she was "crazy" when she was sent by her son to Bellevue Place Sanitarium in Batavia, Illinois, which just happens to be minutes from where I've spent most of my life. That building, from what I understand, still exists today as like apartment buildings or something. But all of that said, I felt like the narrative around Mary Lincoln was shortsighted, unsympathetic, and perhaps just wrong when viewed through today's lens of understanding how trauma impacts mental health. So, I began to read more about Mary Lincoln. There was a book called *Mrs. Lincoln: A Life* by Catherine Clinton, and that was published in 2009 that gives a much more holistic account of her complex life. So that's sort of the backstory on the history.

But in 2023, I graduated from a master's program in journalism at NYU. It's my second journalism degree. And before then, like you said, I'd been a staff reporter at the *Kansas City Star* and a full-time freelance reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. But I got my start in local journalism. At the time of my graduation, there was a major shift taking place in journalism, which is still taking place today, and legacy journalism was beginning to fracture, with audience beginning to abandon traditional broadcast news and newspapers while shifting to social media platforms, and we kind of still see that taking hold today. And because I have a foundation in building community journalism, I decided it might be interesting to create a news publication for an audience who is as curious about the women who have served as First Lady as I was about Mary Lincoln and of course, you know, other first ladies. So, I wanted the publication to be journalistically driven, to cover current and historical events relating to first ladies and the East Wing, and we launched it on August 2nd, 2023.

Alan: Well, as I said, I'm a fan, and just to double back for a minute, I agree with you on Mary Lincoln. I'm one of those out there saying she is unfairly treated by many historians. An amazing woman. I was director of the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum for a while in Springfield, Illinois, and they have an amazing set up Mary Lincoln archives there, by the way, if you ever wanna go dig through some great primary sources of Mary's. But truly an amazing person and a great thing you're doing with *East Wing Magazine*. Can you perhaps dive a little deeper into what's in each edition and then take us through how you assemble that and publish it.

Jennifer: Sure. *East Wing Magazine* is a digital publication that is housed on the Substack platform. So, this is like diametrically different than anything I ever did in my earlier journalism

years. But each week on average, we publish a calendar feature which gathers up all the first lady and East Wing events from around the country, and we compile that into a list. This can include panels with authors or historians, to events at the National First Ladies Library and Museum, or virtual programs put on by the First Ladies Association for Research and Education and so forth. I think what's really nice about the calendar feature is that readers can participate in these events.

Many are in person events, which people can plan for, but others are virtual, and people can just hop online and take part of that kind of enrichment. We also aim to run a reported feature a week. So, this week that included a preview of the Missouri Cherry Blossom Festival and that festival is celebrating its 20th year this year. It has a strong first ladies focus and a strong presidential descendants presence so that was our reported feature this week. And then at the end of the week, we run a feature called the Weekly Wrap and that is an aggregation of first ladies in the headlines from the past week. I like this feature because it gives readers a clear idea of how much these women are written about and how much they're in the news. It's a very interesting exercise, at least for me, to see it kind of week in and week out. Altogether, you just begin to realize how impactful these women are on culture and our society. And then we have several guest columns and pitched features from writers that I've enjoyed working with, including some in the first ladies studies space.

Alan: So who's on your team? How big is your team?

Jennifer: Our team includes of course me. I am the lead writer, the lead editor and reporter, and Erin Donaghue. She is my professional mentor, and she's also a contributing editor. You know, speaking of Mary Lincoln, Erin actually wrote a feature recently entitled "Mary Todd Lincoln and the Photograph That Captured a President's "Ghost." So this is a story that really helps make sense of the former first lady's coping with death. It explores Mary and the loss of her son Eddie at age 3 before reaching the White House, Willie at age 11, and Tad at age 18. And it examines the spiritualism movement at that time and how Mary and other women who suffered losses from the massive casualties of the Civil War used it to cope with grief.

So, Erin is a contributing editor. We have Madeline Taylor. She is a contributing digital reporter who has written news stories, edits the calendar, helps behind the scenes with social media and other projects. We have Will Wagner who is a contributing editor. He's an author and a freelance journalist who takes a close look at content when needed. Then we have Kevin Taylor who is a trusted advisor, who has a background in technology entrepreneurship. He's also a professor of entrepreneurship at Stetson University in Florida. And then as I mentioned, we have, you know, the guest columns and other writers who pitch for us from time to time.

Alan: Well, you know, in my day job, Jennifer, I run science museums and so people make fun of me for this, but I'm not Mr. Technology. So, when I learned about *East Wing Magazine* and I signed up, I realized it was a unique format, a new format, a really fascinating, easily accessible format. You mentioned Substack. Can you just explain a little bit about Substack?

Jennifer: Yes, I can. And you and I share this in common, that technology is often my weak spot in this journalism landscape right now, which is why I'm lucky to have the advisors that I do have. Substack is a new social media platform, and it traditionally has attracted writers, specifically writers, and that is one of the main reasons why I looked at Substack because I appreciated the platform's appreciation for the written word. I think even though we're moving into an area of a lot of video, a lot of audio, but I still think it's important that we have the written word, and so their platform was very conducive for print publication and it was also very easy to understand how to use. So, that was another aspect of the reason why I decided to take a step forward with the magazine is because finally the stars were aligning in journalism where you didn't necessarily have to have a staff of hundreds or dozens of people to run a website. Substack is really setting itself apart by giving independent journalists the opportunity to take on complete ownership of the publication and, so, that's why I like Substack and kind of where it's headed.

Alan: It is really interesting. It's kind of a new day. You mentioned earlier all the information and stories you gather and how the first ladies are so much in the news. How do you interact with or gather information about the current First Lady or the other first ladies that are out and about doing things still today?

Jennifer: It's a really great question. So, first, I'm a member of the White House Correspondents' Association which is an organization for all kinds of media with interest in covering the White House. The association vets its applicants. And so, with that membership, I keep tabs on the sitting first lady by communicating with the Office of the First Lady and her press secretary, and I also follow her schedule. As far as former first ladies go, since launching the magazine, like a good journalist, I've worked at growing my Rolodex. I'm particularly interested in speaking with former East Wing staffers because I think they give readers a unique perspective about the First Lady's time in the White House. For example, I recently had the opportunity to interview Pat Nixon's East Wing staffers about what it was like working for her given the weight of the Watergate scandal. That interview at moments was very emotional for some of them because they admired Pat Nixon so much, even to this day. Some even described her like a mother or a role model. And as far as early first ladies go, they are particularly interesting because I have the opportunity to interview the scholars, the authors, the historians, descendants, and other experts who have done the deep archival research.

Alan: Do those early first ladies stand out to you as someone that impresses you or is perhaps a model for you or that surprised you in some way?

Jennifer: Well, early first ladies. I guess I would say I still have a lot to learn but certainly women who stand out are Martha Washington, I think, you know, sort of obviously because of the pressure she must have been under just to pave a path to the future and for future first ladies. And certainly Abigail Adams for her famous quote, "Remember the first ladies." And of course you know we have our friend Nancy Kegan Smith and her co-authored book with that quote in the title. But those are some early first ladies.

I think before 2000 I probably mostly focused on Rosalynn Carter because I was particularly impressed with how she carved out a physical space in the White House for the first lady. And I know previous first ladies had some staff that they worked with, a lot of them sequestered in the residence of the White House. But I was really impressed with how Rosalynn Carter, especially during the women's movement, really kind of pushed that forward, carving out an office space. I would also say, obviously Eleanor Roosevelt and her contributions as First Lady, which are a lot. But one particular piece that I guess means a lot to me is Eleanor Roosevelt coordinated the press conferences for the first lady with an all-female set of reporters. And I just thought that was, you know, genius. Also because it shined a spotlight on the work that she was doing in the White House. Smart, because in some sense she's controlling a bit of the narrative, but also really progressive because she's helping women at that time have a place in the workforce. So these women reporters had a job and that has really impressed me along with obviously all her other really noteworthy accomplishments with the United Nations and the human rights declaration. Then I think obviously Hillary Clinton. During her time in the White House tried, although failed, with her attempt at reforming healthcare, but I think it paved a way to the evolution of healthcare and where it is today. And also just her advocacy for women's rights and of course her famous speech, "women's rights are human rights." Those are the ones that stand out to that particular question.

Alan: I was thinking as you were talking about Eleanor Roosevelt, but I really realized these two adjectives can apply to all the first ladies of being determined and fearless on difficult issues and putting yourself out there and making a real difference. Now we're talking about first ladies, but we had our first full *American FLOTUS* episode with Diana Carlin with FLARE, and we talked about there will be someday a first gentleman. When that happens, how do you see it changing the office and what effects, if any, would it have on your coverage of it?

Jennifer: Yes, an excellent question. From my perch, I have to say that this past election cycle with that in play was really, really exciting. Because what you bring up is everything that I'm sure most journalists' outlets were wrapping their heads around and I think certainly a first gentleman would be of tremendous interest to the public. Like I said, in this last election cycle, it was interesting to see Doug Emhoff, husband of Democratic presidential nominee Vice President Kamala Harris, because of his time serving as second gentleman and respect for the traditions of that office, you could see he also respected the traditions of the Office of First Lady. And I was expecting that we would have seen him maintain those traditions and perhaps even see him take up his own initiatives as someone who had championed gender equality, an issue reflective of him being married to the first female vice president of the United States. I also expected that he would have continued his advocacy for honoring his Jewish heritage. We'll never know for sure, but it is of my opinion, like Diana's, that Doug Emhoff was primed to serve as first gentleman similar to other former first ladies. The media though, at least in the first year of such a scenario, I believe would focus intently on it because of such a change comes a lot of firsts, right? And a lot of precedent making history. And there would be a lot of observations of what category of the presidential spouse, the first gentleman, would fall. You know, would he be an advocate first gentleman, would he be a traditional first gentleman, or does it change into

something that we haven't seen? And gender discussions, I expect would've been a large part of that.

Alan: I thought, over time, as this happens more, which I'm sure as the republic continues to endure it will just become a normal thing. So, they'll do some traditional stuff and then they'll have their own things that they focus on as individuals. But yeah, it's gonna be a lot of firsts when that happens, and it's gonna be fascinating to watch. There will be a lot of *American FLOTUS* episodes about it. I'm not sure what we'll call *American FLOTUS* at that point, but we'll figure it out.

Jennifer: Yeah. And just to piggyback on that comment, I think it's been really interesting in the last administration to watch Dr. Jill Biden, who stayed employed as a community college professor during her time in the White House. And I think that kind of helped pave the way for a first gentleman who may decide that they wanna keep their day job.

Alan: I'm sure that for women and for men, for sure, that will be the case in many instances. Stepping back a bit again, looking at what you've learned about the first ladies in this great endeavor, what's most surprised you or impressed you, either about them personally or about the office?

Jennifer: I guess what has really impressed me and surprised me -- I don't know if it's really surprised but maybe just like a level of ignorance -- is the degree to which some of the first ladies fulfill the role. And what I mean by that, talking about Dr. Biden again who obviously had an appreciation for the platform of first lady and how she could draw attention to her causes which were military families, education, women's health, and the administration's agenda. She opened up the White House to American people with regular receptions at the White House, including the first ever state dinner for educators. And by continuing to teach, like I said, at the community college, she called attention to the balance of women working while also running a household. I thought it notable the amount of engagements she managed and I didn't even mention the campaign. So, I think just the degree to which some first ladies fulfill the role was kind of surprising. I'm also impressed with their impact on policy, and I think we all kind of know, maybe superficially, that first ladies impact policy. But I think about Rosalynn Carter and getting the mental health bill passed, or Barbara Bush and her advocacy for the National Literacy Act, which passed in 1991 and how literacy remains the central focus for the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, and that foundation is still going tremendously strong. We even see the sitting first lady Melania Trump weighing in on a current proposed legislation by getting behind what's called the Take It Down Act. That's a proposed bill that would outlaw nonconsensual, sexually explicit "deepfakes." And that's currently working its way through Congress right now. So, I think it's interesting to see up close that kind of impact.

Alan: A huge impact in so many ways in policy and also just in the cultural, social image of the office. You know, I was seeing, perhaps in *East Wing Magazine*, I was trying to think where I saw this, the Easter Egg Roll with the president. Mr. Trump out there with all the kids and you realize

it humanizes the office in many ways and you see them out taking part in those types of activities, but at the same time important policy effects as well.

Jennifer: Yeah.

Alan: So tell me, you mentioned FLARE earlier. What's your engagement with FLARE?

Jennifer: FLARE has been a tremendous resource and organization. And when I first began assembling the magazine, before we launched, I saw that this organization existed, and I was just so thrilled to see that there was an organization with sort of this research component to it. So, *East Wing Magazine* is a lifetime individual member of FLARE since 2023. FLARE's mission, which is to create and sustain a network to promote and publicize research and education about the contributions, lives, impact, and lasting legacy of US first ladies, is very much aligned with the mission of our magazine which is to cover first ladies present and past and the greater East Wing, to tell more stories about these women who demonstrate they are historic figures in their own right. So again, I would just say that FLARE's been a tremendous resource for us as journalists because of its network of experts in the space -- authors, educators, scholars, historians, former White House staff, leaders of presidential libraries, curators, and so on. One of the goals of *East Wing Magazine* is to help build a community of people who have an appreciation and curiosity around the First Lady. So, we like to promote events that educate people about the history of first ladies. FLARE hosts a lot of educational events. We also cover the work that FLARE does in honoring the scholars in this space for their contributions to the research of these women who, many will tell you, have been unreported/underreported. The founding members of FLARE will tell you that presidencies can't be fully understood until the presidential spouse is equally examined through history and I agree with that.

Alan: Yeah, I fully agree with that. And FLARE, I think, is such a great organization. Programming is great. If our listeners haven't taken part and joined FLARE and taken part in these programs, they need to do it. I've known Nancy Kegan Smith for many years. She was on the committee that hired me at the National Archives as a young fellow out of the University of Kentucky. So, I'm forever indebted to Nancy, and Anita McBride and others there. Just really terrific folks and doing great work. So, Jennifer, I've really enjoyed our conversation. Where can our listeners go to learn more about *East Wing Magazine*?

Jennifer: Sure. Yes, absolutely. So *East Wing Magazine* can be found on our website at www.eastwingmagazine.com. And when you subscribe, stories can land directly in your email box. You can also find us on Instagram. Our handle is @eastwingmagazine and on X with the handle of @eastwingmag.

Alan: Very good. Well, thank you, Jennifer. Really fascinating conversation. So enjoyed it, and really enjoy *East Wing Magazine*. Thank you so much.

Jennifer: Thank you, Alan. It was a pleasure being here today.

Alan: And thanks to all of you for listening and for your support of our work. Please check out other *American FLOTUS* episodes at flare-net.org, americanpotus.org, or on your favorite podcast platform. Thanks so much, and I'll see you next time on *American FLOTUS*.