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**Civics 101**

**Episode 99: First Ladies**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:00] Civics 101 is supported in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

[00:00:04] Who is the current speaker of the House? Uh don't even know. Will they rule in the president's favor or will they send to the Supreme Court? You can't refer to a senator directly by their name. Congressional redistricting. Separation of Powers. Executive orders. The national security Council.

[00:00:23] Civics, civics, civics... 101!

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:23] I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101, the podcast refresher course on the basics of how our democracy works. Today, First Ladies: the office comes with a great deal of responsibility, but is more custom than law. So what is expected of a First Lady, and how has the role changed over our history?

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:41] Joining us is Susan Swain. She's host of C-SPAN's year long series First Ladies: Influence and Image, editor of the accompanying book for the series, and the @FirstLadies Twitter feed. Susan, great to have you with us.

**Susan Swain:** [00:00:53] Thanks Virginia. Thank you for being interested in First Ladies. They're fascinating.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:57] They are absolutely fascinating and so little history is devoted to them, as we're finding. So what is the role of the First Lady?

**Susan Swain:** [00:01:06] Well, it has changed over the course of time as the role of women in society has changed, as our media culture has grown. And also in the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st, there's obviously been a great advantage to interested First Ladies and using the tools available to them to advance the family business: the husband's political career. We don't pay them obviously for the work that they do but they do have quite a bit of tools available. In Michelle Obama's case, she built the office up to a staff of 24 people with a budget of 1.25 million a year.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:45] Can the spouse of a president say no to the job and keep her career?

**Susan Swain:** [00:01:49] Well, I think so. And in fact we're seeing that with our current First Lady. She is really a very private person and she is writing the rules to suit herself. And that's not uncommon with First Ladies who have had small children to really focus on their well-being because it's such an incredible fishbowl.

[00:02:11] But it was interesting when we did an interview with Michelle Obama, she said that she had been advised by Laura Bush to make the job her own, make the role her own. That each one that was in it had to be true to themselves. Otherwise the pressures and all the advice and guidance from so many political people around the president wanting the First Lady to do this and that would become overwhelming and you might even lose yourself in the process. All the way back to Grace Coolidge's day.

[00:02:39] I was struck by a quote that she had made about the job that she really couldn't be herself. She created a public Grace Coolidge and she said it was I, and yet not I. The dichotomy of the public person where the image is sort of shaped by the public scrutiny versus what she was like as a private person and I think all First Ladies have to adjust to this enormous fishbowl. Some of them have been wanting to be more private about it, not so much in recent times. When I look at Melania Trump, I think most of Bess Truman who really was an accidental First Lady herself even though she had been a political spouse for many years and she spent much of the time away from the White House back home in Independence, Missouri out of the limelight.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:24] So the role of the First Lady is as you said, is a very public role but there's a private woman behind there or a person behind there. At first, the First Lady was a hostess, you know, managing social life in D.C. We think of Dolley Madison serving ice cream at the White House. Tell us a little bit more about that role in the early days. Were some of them able to be more than hostesses?

**Susan Swain:** [00:03:48] Well I look at them and of periods. Martha Washington, Abigail Adams Dolley Madison, were of the generation of revolutionary women and they by their nature were political because the country was going through an enormous founding period and they were very much part of that process as they could be in the women's sphere at that time. Dolley Madison understood not just the social aspects of it but the importance of diplomacy and getting an agenda passed. She used to bring women from Washington into the House chamber to listen to the debates to encourage them to be understanding of what was going on in the country and that was a role that she kept up until she died. In fact, she had honorary recognition from the House of Representatives later on in her life because of her interest in the policy side of what was happening in Washington. We then went into a period when the country was established where the domestic role became really much more important. And in fact the role of the president really subsumed after Jackson for a while, really up until the end of the century, except for of course during the War and Abraham Lincoln. But women were expected to stay in the domestic sphere.

[00:05:03] Congress was more ascendant in many of these presidencies than the White House was. And so, backstage really for the people in the White House with a couple of notable exceptions. Then at the beginning of the 20th century we have Theodore Roosevelt coming in. We have a big rise in competitive newspapers and a great deal of interest in what was happening and looking to fill copy and compete with one another. And they had a very photogenic family in the White House, lots of kids bustling around and there was enormous interest and it really has continued to build since then, with both interest in the White House and presidents and First Ladies using that to their best advantage politically.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:43] So you have the dawn I guess of the celebrity First Lady at that time.

**Susan Swain:** [00:05:47] That's right. Actually Mrs. Roosevelt was not so much interested but she had a husband who more than made up for it. But Florence Harding interestingly enough we don't know much about Florence except her philandering husband. But Florence Harding was, came from the newspaper business and was very well aware of the power of celebrity and she was the first to invite Hollywood stars into the White House. And we know how much that has built up over time.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:15] Who are the women who really defined the more modern image of the first lady?

**Susan Swain:** [00:06:21] Well, first comes to mind of course, Eleanor Roosevelt. She was enormously influential because of the amount of time she held the role but also because of her own policy agenda, sometimes in conflict with FDR. She worked very hard to advance the role of women and also of African-Americans in society and was, as we learned through history, very involved in pushing Roosevelt towards a better position towards Jewish refugees during World War II. She really deserves a lot of attention but she was followed by two First Ladies who really went into the traditional role after that who weren't so interested in politics and policy other than being a helpmate to their husband, the president.

[00:07:00] When you get into the modern age really you think of Jacqueline Kennedy. But in fact she was a reluctant first lady and spent a lot of time out of the White House. Her main interest was in her children, certainly preservation of her husband's legacy, and also the preservation of the White House. What we get to the next, the next White House and that's the Lady Bird Johnson. Lady Bird really began to make the change into the modern first lady. Enormously political, was a very big political adviser and helpmate to Lyndon Johnson. There's some wonderful audio clips in the White House tapes that Lyndon Johnson made of her coaching him before and after speeches. She could say things to him that no one else around him could. And she also kept a diary of her time in the White House and was enormously influential in conservation issues and in the Head Start issue getting preschool education for young children. So she really sort of began to define the modern age. We really began to think about every First Lady having an issue from that point forward. Roslyn Carter, mental health. Nancy Reagan, saying no to drugs. Hillary Clinton had a number of policy agendas, most notably of course health care issues. And from that point on every First Lady was really expected to have a signature issue that she advanced during her years in the White House.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:20] It is however an unelected role. So, have any of these women helped shape national policy in a way that they were regarded as missteps or overreach by a First Lady?

**Susan Swain:** [00:08:32] Hillary Clinton comes immediately to mind because she overreached with health care and it was a political liability for the Clintons as a result, one that we still hear about today as a matter of fact when she was mounting her own presidential bid. And that's the funny thing about Americans is that we want a First Lady who is a support but the voting public doesn't seem to like the idea of buy one, you get two. So that's that ying and yang of the role of First Lady that we've always had in this society. We're not electing you. We want you to be supportive and add to the package but not to go too far in a policy direction that we didn't vote for.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:23] I read in your book that Edith Wilson actually was filling in for the president.

**Susan Swain:** [00:09:28] Edith Wilson is perhaps the first lady that we look to that overreached perhaps with the best of intentions to keep the country which was in a very volatile state historically at that time, to keep the economy going, and foreign policy issues not get roiled by an incapacitated husband. But in fact President Wilson had had an enormous debilitating stroke and spent much of his time in bed and, with the collusion of their doctor, Edith Wilson essentially ran the White House. And when people look back in history to that we say how inappropriate. It could never happen today. But at that time there were, she managed to shield the president from visiting congressional delegations, would prop him up just enough to get by when they would check in on him and then basically was responsible for all access: signing papers, memoranda going back and forth, and trying to keep the White House in shape but they should have turned the White House over to the vice-president at that point. He was not capable of doing it. And Edith was part of a collusion that kept that from the public.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:37] And as you said this could never happen now.

**Susan Swain:** [00:10:39] It could never happen now.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:39] First Ladies live on such a public stage, now more than ever with our 24 hour news cycle. So how has that changed the role, this kind of constant scrutiny?

**Susan Swain:** [00:10:51] I think it makes it much more difficult. The universe of social media is so demanding and so critical and anonymously so. And the echo chamber is really so large that every single move that a first lady makes out in public -- what she's wearing, what her face looks like, turns into memes and edited videos. And of course the political shops will use that where they can to their advantage. Melanie Trump has her own Twitter feed. There was there was one for the First Lady during Michelle Obama's days. So certainly they have those tools available. But the large echo chamber of social media, when they get on a rant about a direction, it's really becomes challenging I think for a first lady. And I can see why Melania Trump has chosen to enter slowly into the process, especially with her own husband being a pretty polarizing figure. In today's social media age, we scrutinize every little bit of what these people do in the White House.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:11:58] Well so at least initially when President Trump took office there was talk that Ivanka Trump, his daughter, might take on some of those First Lady-like responsibilities. Has that ever happened in the past?

**Susan Swain:** [00:12:10] Oh sure. There have been a number of surrogate First Ladies over the years. One that immediately comes to mind: Jefferson was a widower and his daughter filled in in the role when he was in the White House. We also had, Mrs. Tyler was incapacitated. She had two daughters that took over for her. Not a daughter, but there was a instance of Harriet Lane who was a niece as it were of President Buchanan and she fulfilled the role. So there have been surrogates over history, never quite to the extent of an official counselor to the president as we have in this instance. The Trumps are certainly setting some new standards along the way here. But we have had relatives over the course of history who have filled in when there was either no First Lady or the First Lady was unable or unwilling to do the role.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:13:03] You mentioned earlier that the First Lady, their mark in office is often dictated by the view of the female sphere at the time. So what happens if and when we elect a woman as president? Do you think those expectations for the First Gentleman will change?

**Susan Swain:** [00:13:19] You know, other countries do it. And I always look to the example in modern times of the vice president's spouse. In the last two vice presidencies, we had working spouses who continued with their jobs. They had interests that they, they from time to time were very public about. But they managed to have a somewhat normal life while still working on things that they cared about but without being completely subsumed about it. As you will remember Jill Biden taught school. She was a college professor. And prior to that Liz Cheney had been a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and she continued to do that during the vice presidency. That model to me seems more realistic and it's the way that first spouses in other countries really approach the job. They avoid conflicts of interest. They understand the public role but they aren't completely subsumed by it in their lives. And maybe there's a more practical future for us in this role of First Lady as we've come to expect it.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:14:22] What do we learn about American history when we learn more about its First Ladies?

**Susan Swain:** [00:14:26] Well it's a window into the presidencies in the White House obviously which is how we got interested. We had done a couple of biographies series on the Presidents and they were always an ancillary part of the story and we felt like it was time to really understand their role. But it's also throughout history a great mark of the changing role of women in American society. Always they came from the more privileged class and so you're looking at that sector of American society but you really can see the role of women grow and change over time by looking at the women who occupied this role in American history.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:15:03] Susan, you spent a year thinking and learning about these women. This is something that fascinates you. Would you want to be a First Lady yourself?

**Susan Swain:** [00:15:12] Never.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:15:14] Why not?

**Susan Swain:** [00:15:14] Never. I really would. I'd misstep a lot, I'm sure! I really... I mean my job is slightly public and even that part of it I'm very much cautious about my privacy and concerned about not... I represent 285 people at my company and I'm always conscious of that. The... Imagine representing the entire United States or being a visible representation of a presidency, I just wouldn't like to have to look over my shoulder all the time like that and worry about every little bit. The advantages of course are a chance to do good about issues that matter to you. But it's a big tradeoff.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:15:56] Susan Swain, thank you so much for speaking with us.

**Susan Swain:** [00:15:59] Thank you.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:16:00] Susan Swain's been a 30 year veteran on air at C-SPAN. She's host of CNN's yearlong series First Ladies: Influence and Image. She's also editor of the book that accompanied the series and the @FirstLadies Twitter feed. We highly recommend you follow it.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:16:21] This episode was produced by Justine Paradis with help from Erica Janik and Taylor Quimby. Music from Broke for Free. I'm Virginia Prescott. Civics 101 is a production of New Hampshire Public Radio.