FIRST IMPRESSIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF FIRST LADIES AND THEIR INAUGURAL GOWNS FROM JACKIE KENNEDY IN 1961 TO MICHELLE OBAMA IN 2009

by

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The Presidential Inaugural Ball is a special moment for every president’s wife because it is her first official public appearance as first lady of the United States. Historically, the manner in which the first lady presents herself in the way she dresses often contributes to her public image. Scrutiny from the media includes a focus on what she wears to the inauguration, as well as examination and analysis of her inaugural ball gown that evening. The gowns have a tradition of setting the tone for the first lady in the new administration as well as providing glimpses of a first lady’s personality. The gown gives the world a look at her personal style and a glimpse at her potential influence on fashion trends. Most first ladies recognize and understand the expectations of the role and what it means to the public. Some, however, have questioned why their appearance should matter so long as they are true to themselves. In positions of power, though, appearances are important because the media can use fashion as a lens to filter and interpret information to the public. Research on the news media coverage of first ladies and their inaugural gowns identified four themes: Feminism and the media’s reflection of society’s changing views of the first lady’s role; the media’s descriptions of first ladies, specifically references to their dress sizes and their physique; ethnocentrism and the fashion industry’s unbridled interest in and reliance on what the first lady wears; and the perspective of moderation in that the inaugural gown should be nice but not too expensive. Each theme has an intrinsic news value interjected into that coverage as revealed by Herbert J. Gans: Individualism, altruistic democracy, ethnocentrism,
and moderatism, respectively. The media’s tendency to fixate on the first lady’s fashion style and clothing choices is best described as a fascination, almost an obsession at times, beginning with her selection of the inaugural gown. This thesis examines newspaper and magazine coverage and reaction to inaugural gowns from First Ladies Jackie Kennedy in 1961 to Michelle Obama in 2009.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone involved in helping and guiding me to the finish line, specifically my committee members and my parents. Thank you for your endless patience, guidance, and support, as well as your steadfast confidence in my abilities.
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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to many for their personal support and encouraging guidance through this journey, though it is only possible to mention a few.

Dr. Roberts, for the swift offer of the tissue box when the tears welled up from frustration, the pep talks that always gave me strength to keep moving forward, and the wonderful mentoring and advising you gave freely without judgment as your TA. Thank you, Dr. Bragg, for being an incredible role model, for your steadfast guidance and unrelenting patience with me, especially when learning Turabian, and particularly for filling in as my “mother” for that late hospital visit. Thank you, Dr. Thompson, for being so patient and understanding. You were a joy as a teacher and I admire your passion. Thank you, Dr. Clark, for your endless support, confidence in my abilities, and advising on life. Thank you, Mr. Meissner, for always keeping me from the brink with a smile and encouraging words as my undergraduate advisor. Thank you to my amazing, supportive graduate cohort. We laughed, cried, and persevered together and yet we still made it. I miss you greatly and hope you have all achieved your dreams.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Deny it all you want, cry sexism (though the equal opportunity coverage of Mr. Spicer’s sartorial choices would mitigate against that), but as Dana Perino, President George W. Bush’s last press secretary and now a Fox host, once told Elle magazine: “When I got the job as the press secretary, one of my first thoughts was, ‘Oh my God, what am I going to wear?’ People really focus on that.” Externally and, apparently, internally.¹


New York Times style writer Vanessa Friedman wrote this in response to criticism of Sarah Huckabee Sanders’ fashion sense, or in Friedman’s case, the lack thereof. Sanders, President Donald J. Trump’s new press secretary following Sean Spicer’s departure, found herself ridiculed by the media for her sense of style. Spicer, too, was heavily mocked for his disheveled appearance, in particular “his ill-fitting suits, frumpy ties and American flag pin discombobulation.” Friedman made similar remarks about Sanders. She noted that Sanders’ style affected how her words were received by the media and the general public. “No matter [Sanders’] words, they are framed by a style steeped in cheerful Hallmark history,” Friedman wrote. “That is bound to inform how they are received.”²

The New York Times’ Emily Eakin noted that “fashion is never just about clothes.”³ Psychological studies have shown that people tend to make their first judgments about others

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² Ibid.
within three to five seconds.\textsuperscript{4} However, other studies reveal that it can only take a mere tenth of a second to form a judgment.\textsuperscript{5} When the First Family of the United States makes their debut at the Presidential Inaugural Ball, there is no question that judgments are formed. Therefore, first ladies plan their outfits with intense thought, care, and caution. \textit{WhoWhatWear} magazine’s contributing editor, Jessica Schiffer, wrote that a first lady’s “every sartorial decision can be interpreted as a political statement in itself,” whether it is intentional or not.\textsuperscript{6}

This thesis examines media coverage of the inaugural gowns of First Ladies Jackie Kennedy in 1961 to Michelle Obama in 2009. History reveals that the first lady’s appearance and style often play a role in determining her public image. By studying the media’s coverage and how they portrayed each first lady and her respective gown, we can learn more about the perception that was created. Herbert J. Gans in his book, \textit{Deciding What’s News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time}, introduces an inherent value system in news coverage that attempts to project “a picture of nature and society as it ought to be.”\textsuperscript{7} Gans maintains that these “enduring values” are implicit and must be interpreted based upon which newsworthy people or events media chooses to report, what details are included, the style in which the coverage is presented, and whether the verbiage used to express common nouns or adjectives is stated in a neutral tone.\textsuperscript{8} He divides newsworthy individuals into two categories: “Knowns” and “Unknowns.” “Knowns” are “well-known” individuals

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\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, 41.
who “could be political, economic, social, or cultural figures.”9 “Unknowns” are “ordinary” citizens who rarely are newsworthy “except as statistics,” for example, crime victims, voters, or “participants in unusual activities.”10

Four enduring values Gans proposed that apply to media coverage of first ladies and their gown selections are individualism, ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, and moderatism. Gans defines individualism as “the preservation of the freedom of the individual against the encroachments of nation and society.”11 In other words, the media celebrate the individual who participates in an activity on his or her “own terms” rather than focusing on the group.12

Washington Post fashion critic Robin Givhan wrote in 1997 that while a first lady’s influence is apparent in several areas ranging from her political involvement to advocacy initiatives, the heaviest impacts arguably extend from her fashion sense with the inaugural gown being the most analyzed and dissected clothing selection.13 The first lady’s gown selection is the initial decision she makes to identify and introduce herself to the nation and the media on her “own terms” as described by Gans.14

Laurie Lucas of Riverside, California’s Press-Enterprise wrote that inaugural gowns have always served as a “political symbol, an expression of royalty and nationalism.”15 According to Catherine Allgor, a historian at Simmons College in Boston, the main focus of the inaugural dress is about “using women’s bodies as an expression of nationality, about

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9 Gans, Deciding What’s News, 8.
10 Ibid, 15.
11 Ibid, 50.
12 Ibid.
using dress as a political signal.”  

Gans states that ethnocentrism in news media coverage implies that “American ideals…remain viable” because the American news media “values its own nation above all.”  

Both Lucas and Allgor emphasize ethnocentrism as an important driving force to explain the relevance of the inaugural gown to the nation and an impetus for media coverage.

Another representation inferred in the gown’s media coverage signifies the enduring value, altruistic democracy, described by Gans as an ideal that American “democracy is superior,” as established by the Constitution.  

Givhan in 2000 listed the expectations of which the inaugural gown must meet. For the first lady, the gown has come to represent something even more than merely a glamorous debut. It is a “metaphor for the beauty and the spectacle of a new administration and the eloquent transition of power.” Furthermore, Givhan continued, there are expected requirements that the gown must meet. First, the dress’s creator must be an American designer. The citizenship of the designer is vital to the ethnocentric symbolism which the dress emulates. As first lady of the United States of America, of course her debut gown should be designed by an American citizen. Next, Givhan addressed the expected level of extravagance of the gown. It must be luxurious but not obnoxious, she wrote. “The gown needs to be grand but not overwrought. It’s an inauguration, after all, not a coronation.”  

This final requirement coincided with Gans’ enduring value, moderatism, which “discourages excess or extremism” as in a “lack of moderation” determined by method, tone, and language used by media to describe a person or event.

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17 Gans, Deciding What’s News, 42.
18 Ibid, 43-44.
A modern addition to this list of requirements is taking into consideration the gown’s appearance in modern visual media. In Givhan’s article, Bridget Foley, executive editor of major fashion journal *Women’s Wear Daily*, mentioned that the gown must also be photogenic and project well on television. Since each dress will ultimately join the Smithsonian’s collection of first ladies’ inaugural gowns, the designers need to be sure that the dresses they are commissioned to create reflect modern fashion since they will represent the era.

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22 Givhan, “Inaugurating a Gown.”
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

To gain a broad understanding of how these inaugural dresses and the first ladies who wear them are critiqued by the media, this thesis uses sources ranging from major newspapers, periodicals, and fashion publications, to smaller local newspapers, biographies, and digital sources. The Smithsonian National Museum of American History and the National First Ladies’ Library were also consulted as key historical references for the inaugural gowns’ tradition and significance.

All primary sources, including newspapers and periodicals, were accessed through the ProQuest Historical Newspapers as the primary database using keywords such as “first lady,” and “inaugural gown.” The major newspapers researched were the New York Times, Washington Post—formerly known as the Washington Post, Times Herald—the Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, Wall Street Journal, Newsday, and USA Today. These publications were selected based on both availability and circulation data reflected in a list of the top 10 United States daily newspapers updated in May 2016 compiled by Cision, the major global public relations service provider.23 The New York Times was specifically chosen because it is listed in the Encyclopædia Britannica as the “newspaper of record and one of the world’s great newspapers.”24 The Associated Press is another major news source that was consulted for similar reasons but also

because of its heavy presence as a news provider. Two other larger-circulated news sources that were used in this analysis are the Christian Science Monitor and the Boston Globe.

Local newspapers also provided useful insight into how the media covered each first lady in relation to her inaugural ball gown. These publications include the following: California’s Orange County Register, Desert Sun, Press-Enterprise, and San Francisco Chronicle; Colorado’s Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph; Connecticut’s Hartford Courant; Florida’s Orlando Sentinel, Palm Beach Post, and St. Petersburg Times (present-day Tampa Bay Times); Georgia’s Atlanta Journal, Atlanta Constitution, their former joint Sunday issue, the Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution, and their present-day version post-merge, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution; Illinois’ Chicago Sun-Times, Chicago Daily Defender, and the Daily Herald; Louisiana’s Times-Picayune; Maryland’s Sun (present-day Baltimore Sun); Michigan’s Detroit News; Missouri’s St. Louis Post-Dispatch; Ohio’s Cincinnati Post and Toledo Blade; Pennsylvania’s Philadelphia Enquirer; Texas’ Houston Chronicle and Austin American-Statesman; Virginia’s New journal and Guide; Washington D.C.’s Roll Call; and Wisconsin’s Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Internationally, the following sources were included in the analysis: London’s Independent, The Times, and Daily Mail; Edinburgh’s Scotsman; Canada’s Toronto Star and Ottawa Citizen; and Melbourne’s Herald Sun.

Finally, a small selection of online and print sources was retrieved for additional insight. These sources include articles from: InStyle magazine, Time magazine, Life magazine, CBS News, Hollywood Reporter, and part of a transcript from an audio blog post on the New York Public Library’s website.
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

The Presidential Inaugural Ball is the perfect opportunity for a first lady to influence public opinion about her. Although most messages stem directly from an administration’s political agenda, this is not always the case. They are also not always overtly simplistic, such as Republican red and Democrat blue. The public associates the first lady with her husband’s respective political party, beliefs, and values. Therefore, it is only natural for the media and the public to look for some sort of meaning in what is essentially the most famous outfit she will ever wear. Although several first ladies selected their gown designs simply for aesthetic appeal, symbolism is often taken into consideration. Regardless of how a first lady may feel about it, being a fashion trend-setter is viewed by the media, fashion industry, and the American public as a major part of the first lady’s role. It is likely that no ensemble has more significance than the inaugural ball gown.

Contrary to what many might assume, the tradition of the Presidential Inaugural Ball as a formal debut of the new first lady only began within the past couple hundred years. Until 1949, the event was not repeatedly held after each inauguration. In fact, only 14 out of 42 first ladies have attended inaugural balls. The National First Ladies’ Library states that some first ladies did not attend an inaugural ball for three possible reasons. They may not have been able to go, did

25 Friedman, “Sarah Huckabee Sanders.”
not have the desire to go, or their husbands chose not to have a ball altogether. Four presidents were widowed prior to their inaugurations: Thomas Jefferson (wife, Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson), Andrew Jackson (wife, Rachel Jackson), Martin Van Buren (wife, Hannah Van Buren),) and Chester A. Arthur (wife, Ellen Lewis Herndon Arthur). Only 13 first ladies and one “hostess” attended the Presidential Inaugural Balls during the time between George Washington’s swearing-in in 1789 and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fourth inauguration in 1945. These women included Dolley Madison, who is credited for hosting the first inaugural ball; Elizabeth Monroe, Louisa Adams, Sarah Polk, Mary Lincoln, Julia Grant, Lucy Hayes, Lucretia Garfield, Frances Cleveland, Caroline Harrison, Ida McKinley, Edith Roosevelt (Theodore Roosevelt’s second wife), Nellie Taft, and President James Buchanan’s niece, Harriet Lane, who acted as “hostess” since Buchanan was unmarried. After the tradition of inaugural balls was revived by Harry Truman’s second inauguration in 1949, only 11 first ladies have worn a special gown to the inaugural ball, six of whom wore two inaugural gowns because their husbands were elected to two consecutive terms.

More than two dozen inaugural gowns have been preserved and are on display at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. This would likely not have been possible, though, had it not been for socialite Cassie Mason Myers Julian-James and

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Rose Gouverneur Hoes, a descendant of President James Monroe. Together, with the aid of friends and relatives of previous first ladies, they opened the “Collection of Period Costume” exhibition in 1914 featuring 15 dresses. Since then, the Smithsonian has featured dresses worn by every first lady and hostess since George Washington. This exhibition spearheaded by these two women was the first female-focused display in the Smithsonian Museum.

The representation of first ladies and the First Ladies Exhibit at the Smithsonian Institute has been the focus of study and discussion. The topic is quite popular among Smithsonian curators. The First Ladies’ Exhibit, according to Dr. Barbara Melosh and Dr. Christina Simmons, “offer[s] an oblique view of popular historical understanding, refracted through the lens of curators’ ideas about their audiences.” In their essay, *Exhibiting Women in History*, Melosh, an associate curator at the National Museum of American History, and Simmons, a U.S. women and sexuality historian, discuss the Exhibit in depth and its underlying “guiding intention”:

The actual First Ladies assume second shaped by conventional political history. Depicting wives of famous men in itself assumes that history is about powerful political and economical figures—those who act in the public sphere. The families or friends of political figures and the duties, pleasures, or rituals of domestic life take on significance only because of their association with public figures. Not even Eleanor Roosevelt’s card suggests that she was more than a hostess. The ordinary duties of the First Ladies hold no interest from a traditional historical perspective, and hence require little suggestion of activity, choice, and or individual personality of their depiction.

Although the First Ladies as historical actors have little if any importance in the exhibit, their dresses provide historical information about the design, craft, trade, and manufacture... Visitors marvel at the construction of the dresses and debate about the most beautiful; a placecard even notes the perennial favorite, Buchanan's niece’s dress, a

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white wedding gown… In effect, visitors respond actively to the repetitive format of the exhibit by commenting on, judging, and choosing their favorite costumes.

College of William and Mary undergraduate Rachel Morris also analyzed the Smithsonian’s decision to depict the first ladies in their traditional role, despite the increase in activism by several. The office of first lady of the United States, Morris wrote, has traditionally been viewed as “predominantly a figurehead role and her most important responsibility was to represent her husband through proper dress and gentler behavior.” Most first ladies enter the White House already aware of the appearance and style requirements expected of them by the public. They embrace the expectations and what their role means to the public. However, as Time magazine contributing editor Kate Betts noted, other first ladies questioned these traditions, why the public should care, and have argued that such discussion and attention can be perceived as demeaning. Rosalynn Carter, for example, chose to disregard entirely the fashion aspect of being a first lady of the White House. In fact, in her autobiography, First Lady From Plains, the former first lady recalled a comment made by Margaret Trudeau, wife of former Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau, regarding the press and their attention to her clothes. Carter proudly wrote, “Margaret’s quip to the press when they kept pestering her about her clothes, ‘When you are interviewing my husband, do you ask him who made his suit?’, [sic] still delights me.”

Clearly, though, the press considers the first lady’s fashion to be worthy of coverage. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch’s Debra D. Bass wrote that the American first lady is an influential, national icon of style, fashion, and poise “because at any given moment, she is the snapshot of

the American woman.” Former *New York Times* style reporter Georgia Dullea wrote a satirical open letter to then-future First Lady Hillary Clinton, listing the fashion requirements and expectations that come with the position. Regarding the inaugural wardrobe, Dullea stated that she should look “good, but not rich, especially in hard times.” However, Dullea clarifies that being in hard times does not mean the first lady should resort to recycling an outdated, six-year-old gown like Rosalynn Carter infamously did. The first lady’s debut always warrants a new dress. When it comes to women, especially those in power, the media play a vital role in the shaping of their image. For first ladies, media can be a useful tool to promote their husbands’ political agenda, as they, themselves, support their husbands’ agenda. In his book, *Power Dressing: First Ladies, Women Politicians and Fashion*, fashion journalist Robb Young simplifies this concept eloquently:

> Many first ladies have been informal advisers or career confidantes to the men they call both husband and head of state. Some wield influence far beyond their social as the nation’s hostess, but their power is usually undeclared and unquantifiable. A first lady might make speeches and champion causes but, as the leader’s political consort, her voice is muted and her agenda a distant second to his. She knows that her image will be traded as political currency and that, for the duration of her husband’s tenure, she is in effect an extension of his government. It is with this in mind that such style-conscious first ladies as Michelle Obama follow the unspoken rule that has been passed down over the centuries: for the nation’s celebrity wife, power dressing is a matter of complementing, or, better still, enhancing the image of the leading man—both on the domestic front and in the eyes of the world.

In Dr. Rainbow Murray’s book, *Cracking the Highest Glass Ceiling: A Global Comparison of Women’s Campaigns for Executive Office*, she describes how the media framed the images of eight women running for an executive office. Murray discovered that media

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framing emphasized, perpetuated, and worsened female stereotypes.\textsuperscript{39} She recounts various studies revealing Americans’ beliefs on where women’s skill sets are best put to use regarding a male or female presidency. One cited study conducted by Delloitte and Touche in 2000 found that Americans believe male presidents would be better qualified to handle situations including law, economic issues, and foreign policy. Female presidents, on the other hand, are believed to excel in social issues such as education reform, poverty awareness, and other areas that require moral responses.\textsuperscript{40} Additionally, around the time when Hillary Clinton was rumored to run for president in 2008, a poll compiled by Gallup, CNN, and \textit{USA Today} revealed similar results: 42 percent of correspondents believed that a male president would be best at handling national security concerns, while 45 percent felt that domestic issues would be a female president’s strength.\textsuperscript{41} Interestingly, however, Clinton’s clothing or appearance was rarely discussed in coverage of her candidacy in 2008, according to a 2010 study. After analyzing 6,600 news articles and editorials ranging from the 2008 run-up to Super Tuesday, Melissa Miller, Jeffrey Peake, and Brittany Boulton found that a mere 2.4 percent mentioned Clinton’s physical appearance, “a rate significantly higher than Obama’s but statistically indistinguishable from those of [John] Edwards and [Bill] Richardson.”\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{39} Rainbow Murray, \textit{Cracking the Highest Glass Ceiling: A Global Comparison of Women's Campaigns for Executive Office} (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2010), 71-72.


\textsuperscript{42} Melissa Miller, Jeffrey Peake, and Brittany Boulton, “Testing the Saturday Night Live Hypothesis: Fairness and Bias in Newspaper Coverage of Hillary Clinton’s Presidential Campaign,” \textit{Politics & Gender} 6, no. 2: 169-198, \textit{Social Sciences Citation Index}, EBSCOhost, accessed August 21, 2017.
However, although scarcely discussed, such scrutiny is not only reserved for the first lady. According to *New York Times* fashion critic Vanessa Friedman, even the president must worry about what he wears:

I once asked a friend who was a crisis consultant for global leaders whether presidents really spent as much time and thought on a tie as I thought they did, and he said, ‘You have no idea.’ And if they spend that much time on a tie, imagine how much time and thought the first lady and her team spend on a dress seen around the world.43

Before the gown’s inception, the first lady must first select a designer. Tapping a designer who is a U.S. citizen has always been a vital part of the inaugural gown selection process. It symbolizes the administration’s patriotism and support for the American economy. As Givhan notes in her list of inaugural gown requirements, it is imperative that the first lady of the United States of America have a gown designed by a fellow American.44 These requirements for designer selection, though, evolve depending on the current administration’s agenda. Stemming from the most common theme being American citizenship, an emphasis on expressing support for small business owners and, more recently, immigrants have crept into the equation. However, the selection process has garnered a new requirement that has surprisingly been added by the designers.

The dress has now become a symbol of agreement on political policy. For the first time in history, instead of just being known for constructing an inaugural gown, several designers are perceiving this iconic moment as “an opportunity to put their political views out there in public.”45 Somehow, politics has entered the equation in a way that is quite unexpected. By

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44 Friedman, “Why Melania Trump’s Inaugural Ball Gown Matters.”
accepting this coveted invitation, designers have come to perceive it as a declaration of approval
toward the administration’s political beliefs and values. This was not always the case, as veteran
designers such as Arnold Scaasi have designed inaugural wardrobes for both Democrat and
Republican first ladies from Mamie Eisenhower to Laura Bush. Several designers now
consider their creations as an extension of themselves in the sense that their labels are a symbol
of association and alignment with the wearer’s political values.

46 Robin Givhan, “A First Lady's Natural Beauty; In Place of Dazzle, a Taste for the Simply Pleasing,”
CHAPTER 4

JACKIE KENNEDY (1961 – 1963)

INTRODUCTION

While comparing first ladies may be a challenge, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, wife of President John F. Kennedy, is most often recognized as the one who set the standard in both fashion and diplomacy. At 31 years of age, Kennedy was the youngest woman to hold the

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48 Ibid.
position and is often cited as the epitome of first ladies in both class and style.\textsuperscript{49} Oleg Cassini, designer and mastermind behind her Inaugural Gala gown, said that “the Jackie Kennedy look will sweep the country,” and he was right.\textsuperscript{50} Her “well-known interest in chic, avant garde clothes” made her popular with designers.\textsuperscript{51} However, in many ways, Kennedy was not what American women were accustomed to in a first lady.

During her husband’s 1960 campaign, Kennedy was heavily criticized for her frequent patronage of foreign fashion designers, specifically Givenchy, Balenciaga, and Chanel. It was reported that she had been spending some $30,000 a year on foreign fashions [nearly $250,000 in 2018 dollars, adjusted for inflation by the Bureau of Labor Statistics].\textsuperscript{52} In a \textit{New York Times} article, Kennedy was purported to be upset by the various reports of women “resent[ing] her because she is ‘too chic’ and spends too much money on clothes.” In the article, Kennedy denied spending such amounts on foreign clothes, and stated that, “I couldn’t spend that much unless I wore sable underwear.”\textsuperscript{53} The topic of clothing expenditures, and whether the clothes involved American designers and manufacturing, quickly turned into a campaign issue between Kennedy

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{49} “You don’t have to look hard… To see another Jackie,” \textit{Life}, January 20, 1961, 17.; Dorothy McCardle, “Jackie Learned Pat’s No. 1 Pick Was Mamie,” \textit{Washington Post, Times Herald}, September 30, 1960.\
\textsuperscript{50} Frances Cawthon, “Say Bye-Bye Frou-Frou; Simplicity Takes the Day,” \textit{Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution}, January 15, 1961. For reference on how greatly the “Kennedy look” impacted early 1960s fashion trends, see also: “You don’t have to look hard…” \textit{Life}, January 20, 1961, 17.\
\textsuperscript{53} Robertson, “Mrs. Kennedy Defends Clothes.”}

The Los Angeles Times wrote that Kennedy “fired the first shot” when she accused Nixon of spending more on fashion than she did.54 When pressed by the media for an opinion of Kennedy’s fashion preferences and the criticism against her and her “floor-mop” hairdo, Nixon held her tongue. She emphasized that she does not “criticize other women—I’ve made it a practice not to.” Regarding her personal shopping habits, Nixon added that she is “a careful shopper” who bought most of her wardrobe off the rack.55 Kennedy denied that: “I’m sure I spend less than Mrs. Nixon on clothes. She gets hers at Elizabeth Arden, and nothing there costs less than $200 or $300 [$1,682.37 and $2,523.56 in 2018].”56 Nixon made it clear that as far as designers were concerned, “I have always worn American clothes,” the Washington Post, Times Herald reported. The publication included that she saw herself as a savvy shopper who, in her words, looked “for bargains like all other women.” In Kennedy’s defense, she argued that she had lived in Paris at one point and often visited her younger sister, Lee Radziwill, commonly known as “Princess Radziwill.” “But I never buy more than one suit or coat from Balenciaga and Givenchy,” Kennedy concluded.57 Such comments did not necessarily help her cause. However, in an article published on November 12, 1960, in Baltimore’s Sun, the Associated Press reported that designers were very confident that Kennedy would focus on primarily supporting the

57 McLendon and Smith, “Elizabeth Arden or Balenciaga?”
American fashion industry upon beginning her tenure. They were so confident that they began “gallantly suggesting” that she continue patronizing foreign fashion houses for at least a few items specifically for benefiting foreign relations.58

On November 4, 1960, prior to the election, the *Atlanta Constitution* published results of interviews with several Atlanta women. Results showed conflicting opinions between which potential first lady the public liked best—Pat Nixon or Jackie Kennedy. The paper reported that five participants openly expressed “definite preferences” for Kennedy. One Kennedy supporter’s reasoning was that Kennedy was a “non-conformist but not to the degree of being ridiculous.” On the other hand, six women felt an “equally strong” favoritism for Nixon, with one recipient citing Nixon as being a “greater asset to the White House.” Two others declared neutrality, instead emphasizing their sole interest in the presidential candidates. An additional six participants, including several who did not wish to be named, responded with either ambivalence or disapproval of both candidates and their wives. Others just simply weren’t interested enough to hold an opinion.59

Leading up to John F. Kennedy’s election, there became a major issue of the popular women’s fashion journal *Women’s Wear Daily* printing false or exaggerated claims made by various brands and designers regarding having Kennedy as a patron and making purchases from their establishments. This prompted a written response from the White House directly addressed to the magazine’s publisher and editor in chief John Fairchild, chastising him for publishing the inaccurate information. On January 14, 1961, the *Washington Post, Times Herald*’s Elizabeth

58 Associated Press, “Mrs. Kennedy Brings Joy.”
Ford reported that the magazine “gallantly” published the letter, which was written at the behest of the in-coming first lady in order to quell the rumors:

Writing at the suggestion of her boss, whom she quotes as “distressed by the implications of extravagance, of over-emphasis of fashion in relation to her life, and of the misuse of her name by firms from whom she has not bought clothes” Miss Baldridge politely but firmly scores “Women’s Wear Daily” for printing pictures of dresses Mrs. Kennedy is supposed to have bought—but actually has never even tagged her eyes on.

And the same goes for other “erroneous” reports in the “Daily’s” reading matter, according to Miss Baldridge…. “Women’s Wear Daily” is quested by Miss Baldridge to backstitch all the way to July 13, 1960, when the publication printed a number of sketches claiming they were all ordered by Mrs. Kennedy from Paris designers. The truth is: “Of the nine costumes sketched, only three were ordered by Mrs. Kennedy—all from Givenchy, and at least two of the designers you mentioned are unknown to her.” One Givenchy coat was ordered not by her but by her sister who lives in London (Princess Radziwill).60

The letter went on to list other designers and items that had been named by the publication in association with Kennedy. Referencing the title of the 1938 autobiography of fashion designer and outspoken industry critic Elizabeth Hawes, Fashion is Spinach, Ford quipped, “Fashion may not have been spinach at all—but some of the fashion rumors, in regard to Kennedy, have apparently been lemons.”61 At a press conference on January 12, 1961, four days before Washington Post, Times Herald printed its article, Cassini informed the fashion media that Kennedy would from hereon after make future efforts to be more open with and cooperate in the releasing of her wardrobe details. He also added that she would, in fact, be a fashion leader.62

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61 Ibid.
INAUGURAL BALL GOWN

Instead of selecting a designer, Kennedy opted to design her own gown for the 1961 inaugural ball, which was created by Ethel Frankau of Bergdorf Goodman Custom Salon. The result was a sleeveless, ivory gown of silk chiffon over peau d’ange, a type of fabric finish that creates a dull, wax-like surface. The translucent chiffon veil draped over the bodice, which was elaborately beaded and embroidered with silver thread. Life magazine gushed that Kennedy’s ensemble looked “captivatingly contrived to resemble both a fairy princess at a fancy-dress ball and a little girl enjoying her first party.” Decades later, contemporary critic Valerie Steele of New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology was quoted in an article from 2014 on InStyle magazine’s website calling Kennedy’s inaugural gown a “triumph of her own personal style.” Steele said that using fashion as a way to embody a presidency by wearing something “modern, elegant, simple and American” is genius, calling the look incredibly “classic” and “a perfect kind of ceremonial dress for the president’s wife.” In a USA Today article from 2009, Nicole Phelps of Style.com defended Kennedy’s decision to stray away from the full skirt and gathered waist design chosen by previous First Lady Mamie Eisenhower by calling Kennedy’s decision a sign of confidence in her own style. “It wasn’t necessarily revolutionary in terms of what it looked

like, but it wasn’t glitzy,” Phelps added. “You could almost say it was restrained in a way and very elegant…”  

At a post-election press conference in November 1960, Kennedy said that she had no intention of being a trend-setter or fashion icon. According to Lisa Lytle of California’s Orange County Register, despite being considered one of the most stylish first ladies, Kennedy’s inaugural ensemble did not make as strong of a fashion statement when compared to the other inaugural gowns.

INAUGURAL GALA GOWN

Surprisingly, not much appears to have been written about what Kennedy wore to the Presidential Inaugural Ball. It seemed that the dress which Cassini designed for her to wear to the Inaugural Gala the night before her husband’s inauguration received the most press. In fact, the Atlanta Constitution reported that the future president himself assisted Cassini in the sketch selection. When asked to describe the new first lady in his own words, Cassini replied, “Beautiful, elegant, understated. She is the most perfect model that has ever been presented to me.”

“An elegant sedate look” was how Cassini described his vision for Kennedy’s gala gown. The white silk dress had a bodice that the Associated Press described as being gently form-fitting. The slim skirt featured soft pleats at the front of the waist and a “gracefully curved panel beginning from the waist at each side sweep[ing] to the floor.” As the feature piece, a

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69 Associated Press, “Mrs. Kennedy Brings Joy.”
small, subtle rosette was perched upon the waist slightly off-center toward the right. Before tapping Cassini to design her inaugural gala gown, Kennedy had not owned a single Cassini design. That soon changed when it was announced that Cassini would be Kennedy’s personal designer during her husband’s term in the White House. The Christian Science Monitor determined the decision to be one “of unusual feminine and trade interest.” The Paris-born couturier, however, defended his new position by stating that it was not an uncommon practice and “has been a tradition of past personages of history to select personal designers.” This decision shocked the fashion community and reportedly “stirred protests from other American couturiers,” according to the Associated Press. Masters of haute couture highly anticipated Kennedy’s tenure and predicted it would be one comparable to Dolley Madison’s, who is remembered for her lavish spending and starting the inaugural ball tradition. Although Cassini was known for designing clothes that the Christian Science Monitor described as “feminine and somewhat figure revealing,” he vowed to continue the “Kennedy look,” which the publication called “cool, understated.” Cassini and Kennedy could not predict that their tenure in the White House would end prematurely.

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73 Alexander, “Cassini To Design All Jackie’s Clothes.”
75 Hoffman, “Couturier Chosen.”
76 Associated Press, “Gala Attire Described.”
78 Hoffman, “Couturier Chosen.”
CHAPTER 5

LADY BIRD JOHNSON (1963 – 1969)

Figure 3 Johnson's inaugural coat, 1965

INTRODUCTION

After the November 22, 1963, assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Claudia Alta “Lady Bird” Taylor Johnson received the intimidating duty of following in the glamourous, trendsetting footsteps of Jacqueline Kennedy. Indeed, “Lady Bird Johnson had a very tough act to follow,” USA Today’s Tattiana Morales wrote more than four decades later. Kennedy’s youthful appearance and iconic fashion influence created this difficult position for Johnson.

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Johnson was 51 years old when she fully stepped into the role after husband Lyndon B. Johnson won a full term in 1964. Most of the media overlooked or discounted Johnson’s efforts to dress fashionably. As Givhan noted in 2007, Johnson was “in the unenviable position of having to follow Kennedy as first lady, a woman 17 years her junior and with an international reputation as a fashion icon.”

INAUGURAL GOWN

Very few articles focused on fashion have been published about Johnson. Research reveals that contemporary media commented little on her inaugural gown, especially when compared to the coverage Kennedy’s dress received. This analysis implies that the media found either her dress uninteresting, or that there was little to no interest in her fashion sense.

Universally defined as “classic” and “simple,” Johnson’s 1965 inaugural gown featured an A-line silhouette in jonquil yellow silk with short, capped sleeves and a matching yellow satin coat with a standing collar and Crown Russian sable cuffs. The dress was designed by John Moore, who in 1953 was 25 years old and became the youngest recipient of the Coty American Fashion Awards. Johnson’s press secretary, Elizabeth Carpenter, said the first lady wanted to wear a dress that “had timelessness and understated elegance.” The timelessness factor was

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81 Givhan, “A First Lady’s Natural Beauty.”
deliberately considered because Johnson wanted her gown to retain its essence once in the Smithsonian’s First Ladies exhibit.\textsuperscript{84}

The color yellow was chosen because it was a favorite of her husband’s.\textsuperscript{85} Prior to being primarily described as jonquil yellow, the gown was rumored to be closely associated with the patriotic yellow rose of Texas, because its designer and Johnson were both from Texas.\textsuperscript{86} Ironically, several wives of congressmen and cabinet members had also planned to wear yellow, some of a very similar shade, but learning of Johnson’s dress plans “shunned” the color completely.\textsuperscript{87} Those who decided not to purchase a replacement dress had another idea. As a way to avoid any embarrassment, the \textit{Washington Post, Times Herald} wrote that the guests merely referenced their dresses by other colors. The wife of the Secretary of Agriculture said her yellow gown was “citron.” The Postmaster General’s wife “stressed the ‘white threads’ in her yellow and white brocade dress.”\textsuperscript{88} Some critics cited the gown’s color as being Johnson’s first fashion blunder and she was heavily lambasted for it by the public.\textsuperscript{89} However, in a \textit{CBS News} article from 2005, Valerie Steele, director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, argued that although the color may very well have been an issue, the criticism was unfairly solicited because “anyone would have looked not as good after Jackie Kennedy….”\textsuperscript{90}

Although the color of Johnson’s dress was snubbed by many, it did receive some positive remarks. Press Secretary Carpenter said that “[Johnson] looks just lovely—as lovely as I’ve ever

\textsuperscript{84} Thomas and United Press International, “Satin and Sable.”
\textsuperscript{87} Page, “Pick Gowns for Jaunt to Washington.”
\textsuperscript{89} Morales, “Inaugural Gowns.”; Bass, “Fashion Icon.”
\textsuperscript{90} Morales, “Inaugural Gowns.”
seen her.”91 In 2013, Fashionista magazine’s Haley Phelan recalled the gown as having a message of “light and optimism” to a country that was still mourning Kennedy’s death. Phalen considered the dress a symbol of Johnson’s firm support in the American-made product industry. This was apparent, according to Phalen, through Johnson’s decision to tap Moore, a young American designer who was still considered “under-the-radar.”92 This was confirmed in an article by the Washington Post, Times Herald’s Ruth Wagner. Wagner commented that Moore did not open his own salon on Seventh Avenue, New York’s fashion and garment center, until 1963, only a year before Mrs. Johnson tapped him to be her inaugural gown designer. Until then, he had been designing for high-end brands such as Elizabeth Arden, Jane Derby, and Matty Talmack. The 1950s sex icon, Marilyn Monroe, was one of his clients while at Talmack. However, Wagner was quick to note that the designs Monroe wore by Moore were not the risqué garments she became known for and were actually quite modest.93 “Lady Bird was a very all-American First Lady…” said Beth Dincuff, a fashion history professor at Parsons School of Design. “You could not doubt that her tastes were very American, very Texas, which she made clear at the Inaugural Ball.”94

When it became common knowledge that Moore would be designing the first lady’s inaugural dress, Wagner said that choosing Moore “could only be a compliment to Johnson’s taste....” Wagner added that “Moore declared that anything he designs for Mrs. Johnson ‘will be extremely simple, because that’s what suits her.’”95 Moore mirrored this notion in a Los Angeles Times article when he stated that her gown would be “classically simple with no superfluous

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93 Wagner, “Texan May Win."
94 Phelan, “50 Years.”
95 Wagner, “Texan May Win.”
details,” adding that doing so would prevent it from quickly becoming outdated when placed in the Smithsonian.96

During the Kennedy Administration, Moore frequently and publicly criticized Kennedy on her style and “now he has been asked by Mrs. Lyndon Johnson to dress a First Lady the way he thinks one should look,” wrote Jean Sprain Wilson of Baltimore’s Sun.97 Moore defended Johnson’s “perfect size 10” physique by noting that she “is much smaller than she appears in her pictures,” and is aware of what does and doesn’t flatter her body. He went on to explain, almost somewhat defensively, that Johnson will never be a Jackie Kennedy. Unlike Kennedy who Moore concluded was “far more anxious” about being in the fashion community, Johnson focused her attention on other things.98 Reflecting on Johnson’s fashion sense and perspective of beauty, Givhan argued that the fashion community “would do well to thank [Johnson] for the way she looked at beauty.” In “a more general way,” wrote Givhan, the first lady “acknowledged that beauty comes in many forms and that everyone should have access to it. The fashion industry could not have asked for a better endorsement than that.”99

97 Sprain Wilson and Associated Press, “For the Inaugural.”
98 Hammond, “Texas Designer.”
99 Givhan, “Natural Beauty.”
CHAPTER 6

Figure 4 Nixon's first inaugural gown, 1969

INTRODUCTION

Thelma Catherine “Pat” Ryan Nixon, wife of 37th president, Richard Nixon, fell into a similar fashion rut as Johnson and also was unable to rise to the fashion prominence held by Kennedy. Karen Stark, designer of Nixon’s first inaugural gown, defined the first lady’s influence on fashion as fairly reserved rather than flashy. Fashion is not something that Nixon was synonymous with and thus not remembered for. As the Los Angeles Times’ Robin Abcarian

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wrote in 1993, Nixon is remembered for her staunch loyalty and support for her husband and his career, and is often referred to as the “perfect political wife.” In 2001, Valerie Takahama of the *Orange County Register* recalled Nixon as having had her own taste in fashion and “knew she had to stay with the times to a certain extent” during the 1969 inaugural week and ball. The 1960s was a period of major fashion evolution, with the latter half of the era known for daring, fashion-forward looks and trends. The hippie movement had a decade-defining effect on fashion and, unfortunately for Nixon, her husband’s political stance against the movement forbade her from incorporating those stylistic changes into her wardrobe. However, the *Washington Post, Times Herald* reported her confidently stating, “I realize there’s an age and time for everything and I don’t want to compete with the 18 year olds.”

Very little appears to have been written about Nixon’s first or second gowns, with a majority primarily focusing on her personal style or her social advocacy instead. In 1986, Anne Behrens of the *Washington Post* remembered Nixon as “a very practical woman” who preferred “comfortable clothes.” Nixon had a specific appeal to the middle-class, wrote the *Washington Post*’s Margaret Crimmins. “Some editors like the fact that the wife of the President-elect doesn’t go along with couture lines,” she continued, “but others, and the fashion industry, wish she’d put herself in the hands of one good designer.”

Crimmins interviewed several names in the fashion industry, as well as other journalists, prior to the first inaugural ball about Nixon’s fashion and whether or not her style would evolve.

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103 Valerie Takahama, “Remembering the Sunshine of Pat Nixon’s Style; Fashion Library Exhibit Shows the First Lady's Love of Color in Her Clothing,” *Orange County Register* (CA), May 25, 2001, accessed November 6, 2016, Global Newstream.
Opinions from both sides of the spectrum were expressed. Some had a hopeful perspective for the new first lady illustrated by the following observations: Carousel magazine’s Elaine Shepard called Nixon “a fashion knockout…” Christine Avery of Anne Klein noted that Nixon was “already sharpening up her image with shorter skirts and other looks for today’s middle-aged ladies.” Others, however, perceived her as a lost cause with one anonymous editor based in New York sardonically commenting that Nixon “has to do something—fast—if she wants to be anything other than dull, dull, dull. She’s papier mache now…” And yet, other interviewees by Crimmins could not avoid the ubiquitous comparison to Kennedy. Richmond Dispatch writer Sydney Vanlear confided that Nixon “will be a refreshing change in the White House because she is less influenced by the fashion industry than Mrs. Kennedy or Mrs. Johnson…” Barbara Sadtler of the Newhouse chain commented that Nixon has “got a good start, way over what Mrs. Johnson had when she moved into the White House…”107

The Washington Post, Times Herald expressed a similar variety of opinions. One of the top designers of the era, Adele Simpson, deemed Nixon’s style to be “very feminine…but conservative…. She could have a little more zip…but she is very refined.” Parisian designers such as Coco Chanel and Yves St. Laurent either had never seen her before or knew nothing about her. British designer Jean Muir thought she looked “rather divine” when they crossed paths in New Orleans and that she has “a style of her own,” but that was about it. Nixon was determined not to be destined for fashion fame.108

107 Crimmins, “Women Identify with Her.”
Nixon assumed her role as first lady to be a help mate for her husband as she was an active campaigner and consummate hostess throughout his career. Abcarian wrote, “Still, despite some feminist stirrings, Mrs. Nixon never had cause higher than her husband. She once said (and there is no reason to assume she changed her view): ‘A wife’s first duty is to help and encourage her husband in the career he has chosen.’”

FIRST INAUGURAL GOWN

Referred to in 2001 as “one of the most lavish gowns” by Lisa Lytle of California’s Orange County Register, Nixon’s mimosa yellow silk satin gown, designed by Ms. Stark for Harvey Berin, had a coordinating bolero jacket and cummerbund belt embroidered with gold and silver Byzantine scrolls and Swarovski Austrian crystal embellishments. The Washington Post, Times Herald described her gown as “resplendent,” and quoted President Nixon stating, “I am an expert on ladies’ dresses. I like all of Pat’s dresses, particularly this one tonight…."

SECOND INAUGURAL GOWN

For her husband’s second inauguration in 1973, Nixon did her research before selecting her gown. After heavily examining the Smithsonian’s First Ladies exhibit, she determined that embroidery was the key to having a successful gown. According to the New York Times’ Nina S. Hyde, Nixon’s reasoning was that those particular gowns seemed to stand better in their

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112 Casey, “At the Smithsonian Ball.”
respective cases and make the best statements. Its turquoise hue also was carefully considered based on its appearance on color television. The final product was designed by Adele Simpson, with whom Nixon had had a lengthy clothing history (Adele Simpson, January 30, 1973, letter of correspondence to Nixon’s press secretary Helen Smith). Hyde described the gown as “hand-embroidered with rhinestones and tiny synthetic blue pearl and silver embroidery, in a pattern taken from a book of costumes of the Renaissance.” Its silhouette was “princess style” with a V-shaped neckline and long sleeves. The article also mentioned her dress size, a “perfect size 8 figure.”

Mrs. J. W. Marriott, wife of the hotel magnate who was head of Nixon’s inaugural committee, said she thought the dress looked gorgeous, telling the Los Angeles Times that “she is going to look lovely in it. She’s a very pretty woman.” Being in the public eye was nothing new for Nixon; her husband was vice president in the 1950s under former-President Dwight D. Eisenhower. She mostly was associated with her advocacy of agendas such as education programs, training for the workforce, and counseling. She was also especially famous for her hospitality in the White House and is arguably recognized as the one who set the standard for the first lady’s role as hostess. Originally a shy and demure woman, she had overcome these characteristics by “on-the-job training” as hostess to international dignitaries from more than 60 countries when her husband was vice-president.

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114 Ibid.; Ibid.
Following the August 1974 resignation of President Nixon, Vice President Gerald Ford ascended to the presidency. Ford had no inaugural ball; he sought a full term in 1976 but lost to former Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter.
INTRODUCTION

Rosalynn Eleanor Carter was the wife of 39th U.S. President Jimmy Carter. She was 49 years old when her husband took office in 1977 and is well known for her non-traditional approach to fashion and the media. The world was not ready for her disregard of fashion trends, the fashion expectations of the public, and the reliance on the first lady’s influence by the fashion industry.

INAUGURAL GOWN

Instead of heeding tradition and commissioning a couture inaugural gown for President Jimmy Carter’s inaugural ball in January 1977, she insisted on wearing the same one she wore six years prior to her husband’s Georgia gubernatorial ball in 1971. The outdated design was by Mary Matise for Jimmae, one whom the Los Angeles Times labeled as a “relatively unknown designer.” The Atlanta Constitution described the six-year-old dress as “a combination of a sleeveless coat of blue chiffon, embossed with sapphire blue lurex and all-over gold design and edged in gold-embroidered bead trim, and a long sleeved dress of blue silk chiffon with the beading repeated as cuffs on the sleeves.” Originally purchased off-the-rack from Jason’s department store in Americus, Georgia, the dress received a slight fashion update—a wool, hooded cape— for the 1977 inaugural ball by little-known designer Dominic Rompollo. According to Jason’s owner, Jack Moses, Carter had worn the dress not once but twice before the Presidential Inaugural Ball. “She wore it in Atlanta, and I believe she wore it again when they went to a white-tie dinner at the White House,” Moses told the Los Angeles Times. He also included in the article Carter’s dress size as “size 8, sometimes size 6.” However, the “slim” first lady-to-be, as described by the Atlanta Constitution, would be splurging on a new wardrobe

for her term in the White House featuring New York designers such as Jerry Silverman and Mignon, purchased from A. Cohen and Jason’s respectively, in Americus.  

A few days after the inaugural festivities, the Washington Post’s Hyde expressed hope for the fashion industry’s future in relation to the first lady’s patronage. Citing Carter as a “businesswoman who understands the bottom line,” Hyde believed it “unlikely” that the first family would disregard “the fourth largest industry in the country.” Also noting the fashion business’ significant size, designer Bill Blass stated that Carter doesn’t have a choice but to support it. “No First Lady can afford to ignore it.”

This fashion faux pas was greatly discussed in the media. Designers were concerned that other women would follow Carter’s frugal example and harm the industry. In fact, some ballgoers opted to re-wear dresses according to a Washington Post article. However, several remained faithful to the trends of the time and purchased the latest fashion though not the customary glamorous or expensive ball gown. Ruth Lewis of Elizabeth Arden remarked how some of her clients were following the lead of Joan Mondale, wife of Vice President Walter Mondale, and purchasing “more casual…not elaborate, and not ultra-expensive” garments for the occasion.

Carter’s decision sparked controversy and confusion, resulting in a backlash from some members of the public and within the fashion community. Critics both from the era and

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126 Kunz, “How Designers Would Dress Rosalynn Carter.”


129 Ibid.
contemporaries such as *Time* magazine’s Katy Steinmetz deemed Carter’s choice to be a lost opportunity to sponsor and support the American fashion industry.¹³⁰ In 1997, the *Washington Post*’s Givhan quoted Nancy Reagan’s White House social secretary Gahl H. Burt, emphasizing the significance of an inaugural gown. Givhan stated that it “sets a tone for [the first lady] and for the country and for what the country can expect.”¹³¹ Most of the world, it seems, concurred with this and similar opinions. Marilynn Preston of the *Chicago Tribune* noted that “no one called [it] pretty and seven times, in front of seven different crushing inaugural crowds, she stood there and smiled her steel magnolia smile…”¹³² The *Atlanta Constitution* reported that Charlotte Ford, one of Henry Ford II’s daughters, denounced Carter’s “terrible” idea. “Even if [Carter] does want a serious image, people still want to look up to the first lady and admire how she looks,” said Ford.¹³³ Jean Mahlberg of the *Los Angeles Times* echoed this notion with a snarky, colloquial remark. “It’s all right if I wear dresses I’ve whipped up on my Pfaff” sewing machine, quipped Mahlberg, “but I’ll be darned if I want my President’s wife to wear a used gown to her husband’s inaugural balls.”¹³⁴

Other followers of Carter came to her defense. In a letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times* reader Joanna Ronyecz questioned the media’s obsession over the clothing choices of people in power and their potential hidden meanings. Ronyecz asked, “How can we know?” in regard to whether Carter wanted to re-wear her old dress as “a symbol of conserving resources or energy” or merely because she liked it and was “‘eccentric’ enough” to wear something more than once. A more important concern, the reader warned, is “mythologizing” people in the White House,

¹³⁰ Steinmetz, “Belles of the Ball.”
¹³¹ Givhan, “A Dress Says a Lot.”
adding that “Mrs. Carter’s choice of dress [should not] be placed in the realm of symbolic acts….” When the public expects its leaders to be on the same level as “superhuman, mythic in their wisdom and beauty,” she wrote, the public in turn perceives itself of “correspondingly less human. It weakens our sense that natural human beings can govern wisely, and this in turn affects our will to shape our own lives.”¹³⁵ Another Los Angeles Times letter to the editor also chided the country rhetorically for having its values misplaced, encouraging readers to ask themselves, “What is it that truly matters?” She iterated:

> Whether the moneyed upper class, who simply can’t stand to see the first family beneath them, or the star-struck middle and lower classes, who like to dream about wealth and position, it is equally distressing to see the willingness on the part of some people to trade in a new first family that has a basic set of down to earth values on some old one that was a grandly inflated spectacle.¹³⁶

Another reason that circulated through the media was that Carter’s choice symbolized the beginning of a new era, one of economical frugality. From a campaign perspective, the notion fit the Carters’ image perfectly. A separate reader wrote to the Los Angeles Times suggesting that Carter be applauded for her “thriftiness.”¹³⁷ In a 2014 article on InStyle magazine’s website by Grace Gavilanes, fashion historian Valerie Steele concluded that it was a political message of frugality, of “being economical” and “‘just folks.’”¹³⁸ Time magazine’s Steinmetz, a contemporary of Steele, believed that the mere act of wearing the same outfit “fit[s] the couple’s temperament.”¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Steinmetz, “Belles of the Ball.”
However, it has since been confirmed that Carter’s reasoning behind wearing her outdated blue chiffon ensemble was for sentimental reasons.\textsuperscript{140} The wife of Jimmy Carter’s director of the office of management and budget, LaBelle David Lance, clarified a few days before the inaugural ball in an \textit{Atlanta Constitution} article that Carter was “being sentimental and conservative.” Lance further emphasized that Carter “looked the best I’ve ever seen her in that dress” when she wore it to the 1971 Georgia Governor’s inaugural ball, and that she ought to wear it again if she so desires. She insisted that blue was a particularly favorite color and Carter had refined taste in clothing; therefore, no one should be concerned about her appearances.\textsuperscript{141} Designer Mollie Parnis told the \textit{Washington Post} that while she, too, had a dress she re-wore for sentimental reasons, each new first lady has an obligation to wear the top American clothing labels as she is always in the public eye and inspiring trends.\textsuperscript{142} The First Ladies’ National Library also concluded that the assumption of Carter intending her dress to be a political statement was a common misconception:

The only two examples [that the National First Ladies Library] know of where there was a conscious and specific message that might have been conveyed were the gowns of Caroline Harrison in 1889, who had an acorn sewn into the ornate design on the back of her dress as the symbol of her state Indiana, and Rosalynn Carter who wore the blue gown she had worn to her husband’s inauguration as governor of Georgia for sentimental reasons—and not as a sign of economic budgeting of family money, as many incorrectly interpreted it.\textsuperscript{143}

Although Carter’s inaugural dress did not meet wide approval from the public as previous first ladies’ gowns had, it definitely made a statement. Unlike her predecessors, Carter believed

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{141}] Alexander, “Who’s Wearing What.”
\item[\textsuperscript{142}] Hyde, “Inaugural Dress Designer.”
\item[\textsuperscript{143}] “First Ladies and Hairstyles,” National First Ladies’ Library.
\end{footnotes}
very much that what she wore was her own affair. Reflecting on Mrs. Lance’s statement, the 
*Washington Post’s* Hyde also labeled Carter’s style as “conservative,” clarifying that her 
clothing choices were not exactly “youthful but they don’t age her either.” Hyde concluded that 
Carter’s clothes tell the public who she really is, and they are always “pretty and neat, 
comfortable and appropriate and always American made.”

INTRODUCTION

When it became official that the former movie star, Nancy Davis Reagan, wife of President Ronald Reagan, would take Rosalynn Carter’s place as first lady, several Americans,
especially those in the fashion community, eagerly anticipated the change. “Dust off your tails, try to remember how to use your hair rollers, and brush up on your two-step,” wrote Gail Bronson of the Wall Street Journal. “Nancy Reagan is bringing her brand of elegance to the White House.”147 The Reagan administration ushered in a new era, one that New York Times’ John Duka believed to possess “a style of dress that shocked those who had grown used to the determinedly plain-faced style of the Carters.”148 As the New York Times’ Leslie Bennetts wrote, “Limousines, white tie and $10,000 ball gowns are in; shoe leather, abstemiousness and thrift that sacrifices haute couture are out, it seems….”149

After a two-decade fashion famine, Reagan signaled a return to old world glamour and extravagance to the White House. She was the opposite of Carter. According to the Atlanta Constitution’s Frances Cawthon, even people who did not vote for President Reagan believed his wife would provide stylish American women with “a special and needed quality as a role model,” something Carter deliberately left out. Designer Jerry Silverman, whose clothes had been worn by Carter, said he highly approved of Reagan, that “her elegance” would have an “enormous impact” on the fashion industry, and that she would be “very much a first lady in fashion.”150

Cawthon also took note of the opinions of former fashion editors Nina Hyde of the Washington Post and Eleni Epstein of the Washington Star, both of whom expressed very positive outlooks on Mrs. Reagan’s fashion future:

Both major fashion editors in the nation’s capital see Mrs. Reagan as a good influence for the industry. Nina Hyde of the Washington Post told the Hart Schaffner & Marx

Newsletter the Reagans appreciate “not only the creativity of American fashion and support it, but also understand that it’s a large and important industry and something to be admired and encouraged… Mrs. Carter never thought of clothing as important enough to talk about or felt that it made a big difference in her life or in anyone else’s life. In fact, it’s very important, not only to people individually but as an industry.” Eleni Epstein of the Washington Star observed, “Many Seventh Avenue designers may have voted Democrat, but deep in their hearts they lusted for a Republican first lady…”

Both believe Nancy Reagan will bring a “sophistication” to the White House. Certainly blue jeans are not going to be seen around the White House anymore, most say. They will be reserved for the California ranch.151

Some designers and critics have dared to suggest that Reagan was likely the first notable first lady to come closest in comparison to Kennedy. Bill Blass, one of the three masterminds behind Reagan’s inaugural wardrobe, is quoted to have stated, “I don’t think there has been anyone in the White House since Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis who has her flair.”152 The public expressed a mixture of optimism and skepticism regarding Reagan’s level of potential fashion influence, especially when compared to Kennedy. Los Angeles Times reader Dan Simmons acknowledged her style as “sophisticated” but noted that she would never be another Jackie. Similarly, reader Robin Braudy wrote that Reagan’s influence on fashion would be little, if any at all, adding that people generally tend to not copy the styles of presidents and their wives:

I’d call Nancy Reagan’s style conservative, but nice. She might cause a revival in ladylike fashions. But I don’t think either he or she will have any real effect on how Americans dress. Presidents and their families usually don’t. Look at Carter. He had a strong Southern style of dressing and living. We didn’t imitate him.

Reader Walburg Eipper from Beverly Hills denied the Reagans’ fashion impact altogether, because “fashion is for the younger.”153 Judging by Reagan’s taste, a few members of the fashion community said they believed Mrs. Reagan would appeal more to middle-aged women since she

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151 Cawthon, “Designers’ Votes.”
152 Bennetts, “Nancy Reagan.”
was 60 years old at the time of her husband’s first swearing in. Cawthon referred to this as “a sort of middle-aged chic”:

Many in the industry are convinced she will bring a sort of middle-aged chic in. Since she is attractive and makes tasteful choices of clothing without going overboard for fads or exaggerations, they believe this will have an important influence—especially since the American population in general is veering toward a strong middle-year shift.

Her choice in clothing is mature, as in wise—as opposed to mature, as in dowdy, many believe. “She has this quality of always looking simple and elegantly refined, and, perhaps quiet,” notes [inaugural gown designer James] Galanos, who adds that she understands herself, realizes she is small, and does not pick fashion which overwhelm her. She also has the “almost magical” quality of taking on a new aura in evening gowns, he said.

Hubert Latimer, a friend of Galanos and designer for veteran first ladies clothier Mollie Parnis, deemed the new first lady to be “the best [fashion] influence we’ve had in a long, long time.” Latimer also commented on her incredible ability to “get away with the simplest cut and fabric.”154

FIRST INAUGURAL GOWN

Reagan’s first gown in 1981 was one of opulence and grandeur, attributes that America had been deprived of for several years. Steele believes it exhibited “California pizzazz, very Hollywood.”155 Made of lace and satin, the one-shouldered sheath was covered in hand-embroidered, sparkling beads that took multiple seamstresses four weeks to complete.156 Known as “America’s foremost designer of elegant clothes” and the best “on both coasts,” designer James Galanos was selected to construct the luxurious white, hand-beaded gown.157 He was highly regarded for his designs’ exceptionally detailed beadwork.158 In Galanos’ obituary, the

154 Cawthon, “Designers’ Votes.”
155 Morales, “Inaugural Gowns.”
158 Barker, “Dressing the Part.”
New York Times included a most befitting quote from Vanity Fair by Harold Koda, a former curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute, detailing what it meant to wear a “Galanos”:

There was an establishment quality to Galanos, a sense of privilege around his clothes. A Galanos projected knockout glamour, absolute luxury, but the lightness of his handiwork prevented the clothes from ever looking like costume.\(^{159}\)

As expected, Reagan’s dress was arguably a showstopper. However, it received mixed reviews from the public. Early 1980s America was experiencing a recession, and people began to question whether her garment might have been a bit excessive. Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona claimed the level of extravagance of the entire affair to be “ostentatious,” particularly “at a time when most people in this country just can’t hack it.”\(^{160}\) Great luxury often comes at an even greater price and, as the Atlanta Constitution’s fashion editor Frances Cawthon predicted, if Reagan received any fashion criticism then it would “almost inevitably” be due to the cost.\(^{161}\) Designer Albert Nipon told Cawthon that he believes Mrs. Reagan always dresses appropriately for any occasion. “She knows herself, and I wouldn’t question what she does. People who have good taste wear what looks good on them.”\(^{162}\) The dress was estimated to cost $7,000, a little over $20,000 in 2018 when this thesis was completed, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.\(^{163}\) The total estimated price for Reagan’s inaugural wardrobe was at least $25,000, which the Bureau of Labor Statistics equates to just over $70,000 in 2018 American currency.\(^{164}\) Nancy Thompson, vice chairman of the Republican Women's Task Force, was shocked and


\(^{160}\) Bennetts, “Nancy Reagan.”

\(^{161}\) Cawthon, “Designers’ Votes.”

\(^{162}\) Ibid.


incredibly disappointed when she learned the “outrageous” number. Thompson argued that people do not necessarily need to spend such large amounts of money on their wardrobes for the sake of beauty, especially during a national financial crisis. People also criticized the one-shouldered style of her gown, deeming it unsuitable for a woman in her early 60s. Galanos, however, thought the style looked very attractive on her:

“I know her preference, her special liking for one shoulder and halter styles, and they become her,” said Galanos from his Los Angeles studio. “I wanted Nancy to really look glamorous. She’s representing the highest office in the country, in the world… I just wanted her to look elegant and in keeping with the new formality.”

Others loved the new flare she added to the White House and saw no issue with her spending habits. Mollie Parnis concurred, entertaining the assumption that the public mainly cares that their first lady looks beautiful, adding that the roles of President and First Lady of the United States are meant to be admired and revered.

SECOND INAUGURAL GOWN

Reagan once again turned to Galanos, named “master of the beaded dress” by the Washington Post, to create her second inaugural look in 1985. The dress was yet another white, heavily beaded ensemble but this time, Galanos took a more conservative approach by covering her shoulders, adding long sleeves, and a raised neckline. The bodice was cinched but featured a dropped waist, creating the illusion of a two-piece garment. Hand-embroidered to the form-fitting, chiffon creation were hundreds of thousands of white Austrian and Czechoslovakian glass beads. It reportedly took 300 hours for Galanos’ team to sew them on.

165 Bennetts, “Nancy Reagan.”
167 Hyde, “Having Designs.”
168 Bennetts, “Nancy Reagan.”
Although President Ronald Reagan’s second round of inaugural celebrations were more informal compared to in 1981, Reagan’s second inaugural wardrobe was still criticized for its high dollar.\textsuperscript{171} The cost of her gown, however, was never disclosed. According to \textit{Washington Post}’s Hyde, this should always be the case and that the price is a private matter between the first lady and her designer:

No one looking at them in the history books would have any trouble identifying them as strictly 1985 and flattering as well as comfortable for the first lady. Nowhere in history books or elsewhere will there be an indication of prices; it is a subject all designers sidestep as a private matter between designer and client. But a woman other than the first lady putting together the basic elements of such a wardrobe would have to pay well over $25,000 for the ball gown, evening dress, and coat and dress costume.\textsuperscript{172}

The Reagan administration brought back a sense of allure and appeal to the White House with an added touch of Hollywood flair. The Cuban-American fashion designer and Reagan-favorite Adolfo Sardiña, known professionally as just “Adolfo,” described Reagan as having “a thoroughbred American look: elegant, affluent, a well-bred, chic American look,” with expensive, feminine taste.\textsuperscript{173} Fellow designer Carolina Herrera said the first lady’s “style was very special, and she knew exactly what looked good on her.”\textsuperscript{174} Opulence began in the first term and was there to stay, said former \textit{New York Times} fashion and art critic John Duka:

When Ronald and Nancy Reagan came to Washington four years ago, they brought with them a style of dress that shocked those who had grown used to the determinedly plain-faced style of the Carters. For others, though, the Reagans symbolized an uplifting, welcome change. But whatever one felt, the Reagan style - one part tailored suit, one part ball gown and one part ranch mink - was discussed, debated, dissected and finally described as opulent.

Four years later, the country's clothing tastes have changed considerably. President Reagan seems to have singlehandedly revived the tuxedo. Women who would

\textsuperscript{171} Bass, “Fashion Icon.”; “Givhan, “A Dress.”
\textsuperscript{172} Nina Hyde, “Red, White & Nancy.”
\textsuperscript{173} Bennetts, “Nancy Reagan.”
never have worn a ball gown, or anything approximating one, are now wearing them. What was considered opulent is now traditional.\textsuperscript{175}

The former actress turned “social asset” to husband ‘Ronnie’ created a manner of elegance and style within the White House. It is no doubt that the Reagan administration ushered in a new era of glamour to the White House of which the public had previously been deprived.

INTRODUCTION

Barbara Pierce Bush was the wife of America’s 41st president, George H. W. Bush, Sr. At age 63, she was the oldest woman to step into the role of first lady of the United States. Not much of a clotheshorse, this first lady originally had the public saying “goodbye to the days of diamonds and hello to the era of pearls…,” wrote the *Los Angeles Times*’ Betty Cuniberti, likely

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referencing the fake triple strand of pearls Bush wore with her inaugural gown. The country would once again bid adieu to an era of glamour and experience a fashion drought, continued Cuniberti, but that was before Bush, Sr. was elected president. “Suddenly Barbara Bush has become a woman with her own style, a classic dresser who exhibits traditional taste.” She knew her style and what flattered her figure best, wrote the *Washington Post*’s Martha Sherrill on January 21, 1989, the day after the inaugural ball. With a style that Sherrill defined as “Yankee no-nonsense,” Bush was further described as being someone who doesn’t require “frills or makeup to look elegant, and she knows this.” Her candid approach to her outward appearance, added Sherrill, made the media and the public in general “feel almost embarrassed” for putting so much focus on it. “Not that [Bush] looked uncomfortable,” she clarified. “It’s just that she seems uncomfortable with the subject of fashion.”

In the same *Washington Post* article, designer Bill Blass said that he didn’t anticipate clothing to be Bush’s “preoccupation” following the inaugural ball as was traditionally the case with past first ladies. This did not seem to bother the public as much as it had in the past, though. Bush believed this was because of her non-competitive personality. “I’m not a competitive person,” said Bush in the *Washington Post* in 1980, “and I think women like me because they don’t think I’m competitive, just nice.” Even Arnold Scaasi, her inaugural gown’s designer, didn’t seem to mind. “I don’t think she’s downplaying her looks,” he commented in Sherrill’s article in regard to her wearing a fake three-string pearl necklace with her gown. In fact, he thought she was “very up about herself now” and that she loved the way she looked. “…She’s a

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178 Cuniberti, “Bush Brings Own Style.”
179 Sherrill, “The Look.”
180 Ibid.
real lady, and I think more than anything, that comes off.” On January 20, 1989, Brenda York, then-president of The Academy of Fashion and Image in McLean, Virginia, commented in an article from Florida’s Palm Beach Post describing the new first lady’s style as “very warm, up front and very honest.” Compared to Nancy Reagan, York said that Bush possessed a style that was “more Northeastern conservative than California pretentious,” and that she lived and dressed in a “family-oriented” manner.

INAUGURAL GOWN

To create her 1989 inaugural ball gown, Bush selected Arnold Scaasi, a legend in his career and one of her favorites. The sapphire blue dress, its color officially dubbed “Bush Blue” or “Barbara Blue,” was described by the Associated Press as having a low, square-necked, velvet bodice and long fitted sleeves with a dropped, asymmetric waistline and silk satin skirt draping down from a bow on the hip. “She had to look modern, like a woman of the

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182 Sherrill, “The Look.”
183 Lowell, “Gown and Out.”
187 Associated Press, “The Inauguration; She Wore Blue Velvet (and Satin) to the Balls,” Newsday, January 21, 1989, accessed November 6, 2016, Global Newsstream. For other descriptions, see also: Bohlen, “Brilliant in
‘80s,” recalled Scaasi in a 2009 *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* article by Lori Price. Scaasi said the sole intention of his design “was to transition [Bush’s] image from a vice president’s wife who had never really dressed glamorously to that of a first lady who could set a fashionable tone for the nation…”188 Remembering the audience’s reaction to Bush’s entrance at one of the numerous balls, the veteran couturier congratulated himself at achieving that very goal, citing the experience as one of the major highlights of his career.189 Multiple publications reported the massive, positive feedback from the crowd when Bush walked out on stage, resulting in multiple comparisons to “Reagan Red” and “Bush Blue.”190 “She looked wonderful, and this was confirmed by the ‘oohs!’ and ‘aahs!’ of the crowd,” said Scaasi in an article he wrote for the *Washington Post* in 1992. He recalled her looking “radiant—the most dazzling, glamorous grandmother we had ever seen. I still get chills up my spine remembering her entrance.”191

Very few articles were found that detailed negativity toward the design. “The official trend-watchers called [the dress] ‘refreshing,’ ‘striking,’ even, heaven help us, a true fashion statement,” wrote Ellen Goodman of the *Chicago Tribune*. “Words like ‘matron’ and ‘grandmother,’ banned from the vocabulary of East Wing reporters, began creeping back into the

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191 Scaasi, “Ladies First.”
papers.” Many references were made to Bush’s appearance on the cover of Time magazine headlined, “The Silver Fox,” which is her family’s endearing nickname for her. Bush had captivated the public and the media. The moment she walked on stage, as the Washington Post’s David Broder wrote, “the gush is on.” He remarked on how journalists who, for eight years, were so enthralled by “Nancy Reagan’s chic,” were all of a sudden “enchanted by Barbara Bush’s crow’s feet and comfortable stoutness.” During the inaugural week in 1989, Bush joked about her own fashion sense or lack thereof. She instructed the audience to take a good look at her glamorous appearance, paired with a full face of makeup and perfectly styled hair, because that might be the last time they would ever see her in such a way. Some critics perceived her playful comment as a subtle, sarcastic jab at her predecessor’s tendency for opulence. The Chicago Tribune’s Lisa Anderson said that Bush had “neatly put fashion in its place—not quite in the back of the White House closet, but somewhere far below her concerns with illiteracy, cancer, education, and even her expectant English springer spaniel, Milly.”

Bush was cited by multiple publications as having proclaimed herself to be a role model for older women. “My mail tells me a lot of fat, white-haired, wrinkled ladies are tickled pink,” she said.

192 Goodman, “‘the Silver Fox’.”
While there was no intended message in mind behind the gown aside from helping Bush transition her image, this blatant what-you-see-is-what-you-get attitude helped shape the public’s perceived message behind her gown. She and her dress began to symbolize a form of empowerment for older women. As the Chicago Tribune’s Goodman wrote, Bush taught women over 50 that they, too, can be stylish but more importantly, they can be comfortable in their own skin: “She would rather be known for graciousness than gray hair, for wit rather than weight. We will shift our gaze from her hairdo to her deeds.”

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199 Goodman, “‘the Silver Fox’.”
CHAPTER 10
HILLARY CLINTON (1993 – 2001)

INTRODUCTION

Compared to her predecessors, Hillary Diane Rodham Clinton, first lady to the 42nd U.S. President William Jefferson “Bill” Clinton, also possessed a conservative approach to fashion. Leading up to and during her husband’s first administration, Clinton was frequently criticized by the media and the public for her style, or lack thereof, and her tendency to push the limits of

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what was traditionally expected of the first lady. In her 1995 book, *First Ladies: An Intimate Group Portrait of White House Wives*, Margaret Truman (daughter of President Harry Truman) noted that this came as no surprise, saying Clinton had a history of being against traditional femininity. Clinton appeared to be a physical representation of the notion that a woman’s outward appearance is “unimportant,” Truman wrote. Clinton received plenty of negative remarks from the media as to her perceived stubbornness against traditional femininity. Some critics were optimistic about Clinton’s down-to-earth appearance. The day before the 1993 Presidential Inauguration, former *New York Times* fashion critic Anne-Marie Schiro labeled her style as “neither dowdy nor clothes-crazy.” Schiro continued with an observation of Clinton’s wardrobe as a “successful working” woman. “She keeps up with fashion without latching onto the extreme designs of fashion leaders,” wrote Schiro. “So she is not very likely to be seen in a Calvin Klein see-through georgette, but is highly likely to be seen in a Donna Karan long black skirt.” Attitudes swiftly changed, however, following the inauguration. Articles by Schiro and *USA Today*’s Elizabeth Snead reflect the public’s quick realization that this first lady’s priorities

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were much different than previous ones, with fashion near the bottom of the list. Some in the public and media were shocked by her sudden transformation, albeit a temporary one. Schiro even referred to her style evolution as a “Cinderella transformation” from “conservative to glamorous” between the election and her husband taking office.

FIRST INAUGURAL GOWN

Clinton’s first inaugural gown was the creation of Sarah Phillips, an unknown designer from Little Rock, Arkansas, where Clinton had resided and was first lady of Arkansas. The dress was made by New York-based costume designer Barbara Matera of Barbara Matera Ltd. The long-sleeved gown was covered with leaf-shaped lace and sequins from head to toe. It included a thin belt in the center separating the solid-colored overskirt, cited by different sources as mousseline or chiffon, which draped over the bottom half of the dress. As for the color, it appears no one could ultimately agree on a description. Although officially declared violet, Snead described the dress as being a shade of lavender while Schiro reported it having a blueish-violet hue.
Although the ballgown was not received well by most in the fashion community, a few sources expressed a more positive outlook. The *Los Angeles Times*’ Anne Conway plainly admitted that she would have scoffed at the idea of “Headband Hillary” blossoming into “one of the most glamorous looking creatures on Earth” if someone had suggested it the month prior. She continued:

Her shapeless hair framed a too-round face, and she had a frumpiness about her. Her square-shaped silhouettes said: ‘I mean business. Period.’ Put her in a glamour gown and she’d look silly. Wrong. Put Mrs. Clinton’s new, perfectly shaped hair into a softly woven braid that frames her (thinner) face, fit her in a sparkling violet that trails when she walks and—wow!—she takes your breath away. I can’t remember a more beautiful First Lady on Inauguration Night.²¹¹

Clinton experienced multiple fashion fumbles in the critics’ eyes throughout the entire inaugural week. Probably the most reported was the hat she wore to her husband’s first swearing-in. Officially described as cadet blue, the hat was designed by Connecticut-based hatter Darcy Creech. The *New York Times* described it as “upturned, off-the-face, with a graduated brim that tapered to the back. It was made of velour and trimmed in blue satin, with a pleated satin band and bow.” According to its designer, it was intended to “project confidence and strength, not dominance.”

Unfortunately for both women, the fashion community did not agree, nor did critics hesitate to make their opinions known. For example, Canada’s *Ottawa Citizen* published an article featuring a highlight reel of comments made by the *Boston Globe* about Clinton’s “fashion catastrophes” on Inauguration Day. One comment read, “What a dumb hat! Hillary, take that blue bowler with the perky brim, fill it up with kitty litter and recycle it. You are not a hat person.” Another likened Clinton to Queen Elizabeth, stating that, “Some women look more

glamorous and mysterious when they put on a hat. Not Hillary.” She was also described as “a cross between some sort of 19th-century fop and Mary Poppins,” with her ponytail being compared to one of the wigs from George Washington’s era.\textsuperscript{212} The criticism did not stop there.\textsuperscript{213} The \textit{Boston Globe} said that there was a “low-key but continuing public unhappiness with Hillary Clinton’s inaugural dress” when sketches of the gown were released and circulated through the news.\textsuperscript{214} “[The inaugural dress] was not perceived well,” recalled fashion critic Valerie Steele in a 2005 \textit{CBS News} article.\textsuperscript{215} Givhan recalled it in a 2001 article as “a rather dowdy and pedestrian assemblage of lilac mousseline and crystals,” and Clifford Pugh of the \textit{Houston Chronicle} cited it as being reminiscent of a “dowdy ‘mother-of-the-bride’” look in 2009.\textsuperscript{216} In January 1997, \textit{USA Today}’s Sell referred to Clinton’s first inaugural gown as “gauche.”\textsuperscript{217} Similarly, \textit{Newsday}’s Frank DeCaro and Barbara Schuler reported that Grace Mirabella, former editor-in-chief of \textit{Vogue} magazine, perceived the entire ensemble to be “a little overdone,” concluding with the old adage, “less is more.”\textsuperscript{218}

According to the \textit{New York Times}, however, the main negative remark about Clinton’s inaugural appearance that had even its designer, Judith Leiber, tilting her head in confusion was the purse. When Sarah Phillips suggested Clinton wear long white gloves, she assumed the first lady would place them in her pocket after taking them off. Instead, to much surprise, she had tied

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Snead, “Hillary, Tipper.”
\item Morales, “Inaugural Gowns.”
\item DeCaro & Shuler, “Clinton Inaugural Hat.”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
them to the shoulder strap of her purse. No one understood why, and her wardrobe consultant was not around to explain.219

In addition to all these blunders, another confusing blip on Clinton’s fashion record, albeit not highly reported on, occurred shortly before her husband’s swearing-in. There apparently had been a miscommunication between Press Secretary Lisa Caputo and inaugural designer Sarah Phillips and Barbara Matera Ltd. about payment for Clinton’s violet inaugural number. Originally, Caputo confirmed that the first lady was accepting it as a “a labor of love” by Phillips and Matera and “a contribution to the Clinton-Gore efforts.”220 Since no financial agreement had been officiated, Caputo claimed, it was her understanding that the gown was meant as a gift, rather than a formal purchase. Caputo later clarified that she had been “misinformed” and that Clinton had every intention of purchasing the gown. The Washington Post’s Cathy Horyn wrote that Phillips and Matera confirmed that cost had not been mentioned in their communication with the new first lady and that the gown had not been priced. “It was our intention to give the dress to Mrs. Clinton,” with the understanding that it would end up in the Smithsonian’s First Ladies’ Exhibit. Taking into account the effort and time it took for Matera’s talented staff to complete the embroidery and attach the crystals, which was reportedly almost five weeks, the costume designer said she “wouldn’t know where to begin to put a price on the dress.”221 Nonetheless, an unspecified price was negotiated, and Clinton paid for the gown.

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219 Schiro, “Settling In.”
221 Horyn, “First Lady Says.”
In 1992, days after her husband’s election, the Washington Post’s Cathy Horyn formed a conclusion about the first lady drawing from previous literature written about Clinton. According to Horyn, Clinton “cares about her appearance to the extent that she has consulted a fashion stylist, modified her hairstyle and makeup, and accepted advice from her closest friends. And while the idea of being courted, if not co-opted, by the fashion industry might seem a bit bothersome to a new first lady, Clinton may just find that fashion moves in ways more mysterious than she had imagined.”

SECOND INAUGURAL GOWN

Clinton’s second inaugural gown in 1997, however, garnered a more positive reaction and was well received. She had tapped the highly regarded Dominican-American designer Oscar de la Renta. This was a wise decision, according to Trish Donnally of the San Francisco Chronicle, who then snidely asked in her article, “Who has heard of Phillips since?” The second dress, reportedly one she chose from one of de la Renta’s collections, consisted of detailed embroidered gold tulle.

The dress gained wide approval from the crowd, particularly members of the fashion community. An “audible gasp” from the audience was reported by USA Today’s Sell as the first lady walked out onto the stage wearing a gold number that “shimmered as it fell in graceful folds” when she danced with her husband. The dress was “nothing less than sartorially

226 Sell, “Hillary and Oscar.”
splendid,” wrote Sell. Although the gown’s neckline was “so desperately high, clutching at
[Clinton’s] chin,” Givhan wrote, it was still “full of glamorous sex appeal,” and the first lady
“glowed.”\textsuperscript{227} Givhan, as with Clinton’s first dress, again interpreted Clinton’s selection of a de la
Renta as a reflection of “a more assured sense of fashion, a greater level of comfort with the
fashion industry and a better understanding of the nature and possibilities of Seventh Avenue.”\textsuperscript{228}

Once again, she had undergone a Cinderella transformation and was saved from what
Jackie Kennedy’s favored designer Oleg Cassini called a “dark hole of fashion.”\textsuperscript{229} Former
creative director for \textit{Allure} magazine Polly Allen Mullen also complimented Clinton’s fashion
choice in a \textit{Washington Post} article, stating that she was smart to select a gown that has “a
classic shape but isn't classical” and is “not overly constructed.” In the same article, \textit{Vogue}
magazine editor-in-chief Anna Wintour said that she saw it as a sign of a newly gained
confidence from a previously fashion-shy Clinton. “She’s showing that a highly educated,
articulate woman can also be a style setter,” said Wintour. Givhan perceived the selection as “a
more assured sense of fashion [for Clinton], a greater level of comfort with the fashion industry
and a better understanding of the nature and possibilities of Seventh Avenue.”\textsuperscript{230} According to
Givhan, Clinton was finally embracing fashion but in a way that still expressed herself. Givhan
interpreted Clinton’s dress as a statement to her critics that she was willing to “experiment” with
new looks but “was going to play the style game her way” and “will not be controlled by trends”
set forth by the world’s fashion capitals such as New York, Paris, or Milan. “[Clinton] is a
woman of restrained and traditional tastes who has begun to feel more comfortable with

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\textsuperscript{227} Givhan, “From Subdued to Sublime.”
\textsuperscript{228} Givhan, “Mrs. Clinton Picks an Oscar.”
\textsuperscript{229} Christine Montgomery, “It’s de la Renta to the Rescue; Pulling First Lady Out of Fashion ‘Black
\textsuperscript{230} Givhan, “Mrs. Clinton Picks an Oscar.”
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fashion…,” Givhan wrote. The second inaugural gown selection illustrated this point as Givhan acknowledged the dress “was a personal home run, but a fashion base hit.”

Particularly noteworthy for Clinton, women are often more scrutinized for what they wear rather than for their abilities, especially when compared to their male counterparts. If not their clothes, then their stereotypical traits and strengths as women are considered. In his book *Power Dressing*, fashion journalist Robb Young wrote that all this pressure even more so applied as Clinton began her transition from first lady to the U.S. Senate in 2000 by getting a new, shorter haircut and trading her ball gowns for pantsuits:

In a rather abrupt change of style, out came a battalion of tapered trouser suits, and the hair got shorter. Some of the public thought it looked as if she felt she had something to prove, or as if she were afraid of her own femininity; they wondered if this was a sign that she was uncomfortable in her own skin, if as a leader she would dither in important matters, as well.

Clinton has since been able to reminisce on her fashion follies with smiles and laughter. Young stated that she gave an “immediate yes” to selecting *My Worst Outfits Ever!* for an *US Weekly* photo spread and adding playful comments on a few images. Such remarks included, “Now you know why I stick with pantsuits,” and “This outfit isn’t *that* bad; it’s just an optical illusion.”

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231 Givhan, “From Subdued to Sublime.”
INTRODUCTION

Laura Lane Welch Bush, wife of President George W. Bush, joined the three first ladies since Kennedy in 1961 whose husbands served two terms as president and participated in two

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inaugural balls. Her tenure as first lady began in 2001 when she was 54 years old and again in 2005 at age 58.

During both of her inaugural seasons, Bush was frequently compared to Clinton in terms of their fashion journeys from subdued to glamorous. As with Clinton, Bush’s conservative tastes were “scrutinized and dissected” by the media up to her first inaugural ball. Unlike Clinton, though, they were “maligned, not necessarily because they were inappropriate or embarrassingly expensive, or kooky,” recalled the Washington Post’s Givhan in April 2001, “but for more subtle reasons: Their message is unclear, uninspired, and thoughtless.”

It was clear, wrote Los Angeles Times’ Valli Herman-Cohen, that the likelihood of Bush becoming a fashion leader was slim.

This opinion on her signature look of business suits with pants or pencil skirts was echoed by many in the exclusive, high fashion community. Steele was quoted in Connecticut’s Hartford Courant stating that she thought Bush’s style was “very frumpy.” On the other hand, in the same article, fashion designer and Birmingham, Alabama-native Marcia Sherrill of the Kleinberg Sherrill design house suggested that Bush could possibly just be a late bloomer like her predecessor, noting that Clinton also “started out really frumpy.” However, Valerie Takahama of the Orange County Register recalled the new first lady’s personal staff making it clear that she wanted to be judged more by her actions and less “by her hemlines.”

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237 Givhan, “Lasting Look.”
239 Morago, “Playing Dress-Up.”
240 Takahama, “Remember the Sunshine.”

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similar to Clinton, Bush opted to enlist a local designer from her home state of Texas to have the privilege of creating her first inaugural gown.241

FIRST INAUGURAL GOWN

For her first inaugural ball in 2001, Bush wore a long-sleeved gown that featured a scooped neckline and a fit-and-flair silhouette made of scarlet silk, draped in a layer of Chantilly lace, which was adorned with Austrian crystals.242 It was designed by Dallas couturier Michael Faircloth, with whom Bush had worked closely since 1994.243 Faircloth achieved his local prestige by being the in-house dressmaker for a boutique called Lilly Dodson in Highland Park, an affluent Dallas suburb directly adjacent to Southern Methodist University.244

The media found Bush’s color choice particularly intriguing because she was the first to wear a red inaugural gown.245 Faircloth confirmed that the reasoning behind this decision was specifically because it had never been done before. “White was done twice by Nancy Reagan, and blue was done by Barbara Bush, so those colors aren’t something we wanted to use,”

241 Givhan, “A Conservative Choice.”
244 la Ferla, “Designer Leads Mrs. Bush.”
Faircloth explained in an article in Texas’ *Austin American Statesman*. “So we said, let’s do red.” Feedback from the media, however, was mixed. The *Washington Post’s* Robin Givhan interpreted the confident color as a reflection of her evolving tastes and “comfort in bolder colors.” Vanessa Winans from Ohio’s *The Blade* deemed the bright shade “provocative” while the *New York Times’* Guy Trebay thought it complimented Bush’s pale complexion. Acting Director of the Smithsonian Claudia Kidwell agreed that Bush made a “very smart” decision, “because it will stand out.” Valerie Steele, fashion historian, curator, and director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, did not find the color to be appropriate. Steele, who did not appear to be a fan of Bush, thought the color was “more va-va-voom,” and had “the connotation of being sexy, red-hot, almost sinful—which seems so un-Republican.”

Although some critics such as Winans were concerned the red hue may have been a bit “provocative,” she determined that the actual design of the formfitting, beaded creation made it not so provocative. The crimson ensemble’s design caused quite a stir among fashion enthusiasts. When sketches were originally released to the media, reactions were lukewarm. The *Washington Post’s* Givhan declared it “neither enthralling nor inspiring.” Judging by these “decidedly tepid” reactions, the *New York Times’* Emily Eakin doubted that it would “earn such rave reviews, or provoke such alarming demonstrations of fandom.” Based on Bush’s traditionally subdued fashion, “she might get a wild reaction to the dress,” said Gina Cooper, editor of New York’s *Fashion Find* magazine, in an article from the *Cincinnati Post*. “It is a

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246 Wizda, “First Lady in Red.”
247 Givhan, “A Conservative Choice.”
249 Winans, “Inaugurating A New Look.”
250 Patteson, “A Bold Statement.”
251 Winans, “Inaugurating A New Look.”
254 Copp, “Inaugural Style.”
fancy dress,” said Elle magazine’s editor-in-chief Roberta Myers in the New York Times. “A little more festive than one might expect.” Some critics, such as European editor for Vogue magazine Hamish Bowles, suggested that the gown was far too unorthodox for her to have selected it without a little persuasion from Faircloth, which Faircloth confirmed. “Evidently Mr. Faircloth has had an influence in guiding her in a more daring direction,” said Bowles, being cautious about his wording. “I’d like the overall silhouette to be a little more subtle and contemporary.”

When Bush made her official debut as America’s next first lady wearing the dress, there were a wide range of opinions. Many were pleasantly surprised. The New York Times’ Trebay noted the gown’s flattering silhouette and “mediagenic” color choice. Givhan also expressed approval and called the “attention-grabbing dress” a perfect fit for the new first lady. Givhan continued:

Simultaneously bold and reserved, a blend of flashy Texas style and wariness of the limelight…. This dress…had a silhouette that followed Mrs. Bush's curves but from a respectful distance. There was adornment, but it wasn't overwrought or too fussy. The dress was comfortably glamorous. Reassuring. Memorable, not because it is exceptional, but because we've seen its ilk before. The dress makes its impact with color, not line or detail.

Other members of the fashion interpretation community had different opinions. In retrospect, fashion writers remember the dress as not necessarily being a crowd favorite. Chantal Lamers of the Orange County Register remembered the gown as being “unsophisticated.” USA Today’s Olivia Barker recalled in 2005 some of the responses ranging from “mixed to mean: too brash, too matronly, too much of an attempt to emulate Nancy Reagan—
unsuccessfully.” Cooper discussed the extravagance of Bush’s gown, noting that Democrats had been increasingly becoming as sumptuous as Republicans in recent years. Regarding the country’s economic state at the time of Bush’s first inauguration, “We are talking about a recession now, but we’re also coming from a time of wealth.” Research shows that fashion critics’ impressions of Bush’s first inaugural gown seemed to split down the middle.

SECOND INAUGURAL GOWN

For Bush’s second inaugural gown in 2005, fashion writers wondered whether she would remain with Faircloth or branch out and tap a major designer. Smithsonian First Ladies Collection curator Lisa Kathleen Graddy suggested in a Newsday article that first ladies who get a second go-around in the role have a little more leeway and often get a better fashion score from the critics. “The first lady has to project a certain amount of dignity and flash at the same time,” said Graddy. “The American people are not entirely sure where that line is—but we know it when we see it.”

Critics had more praise for her inaugural gown selection in 2005 when she followed Clinton in choosing Oscar de la Renta to design a second-term inaugural gown. Lamers concluded that the first lady took note of choices made by previous first ladies who had a second inaugural, specifically Clinton and Reagan, and looked to a different designer as they made “considerable efforts to get things right the second time.” Upon discovering that Faircloth clothed the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, some in the media assumed the decision to change designers was made for the sole purpose of selecting one with a different reputation, one that was

\[\text{261} \text{ Copp, “Inaugural Style.”}\]
\[\text{262} \text{ Denise Flaim, “Ladies Night; First Fashionistas; At Inaugural Balls, Critical Eyes Judge the First Lady’s Fashion Sense,” Newsday, January 17, 2005, accessed December 12, 2017, Global Newsstream.}\]
\[\text{263} \text{ Lamers, “Ceremonial Style.”}\]
deemed more appropriate for a first lady.264 “Perhaps that’s why, for the president’s second inauguration today, Mrs. Bush convened an assemblage of well-known designers to dress herself…,” wrote Lamers.265 Veteran fashion writer Givhan also applauded Bush’s decision of selecting a de la Renta creation but perceived it as merely a sign of fashion growth and palette extension. Comparing the president’s and first lady’s appearances pre- and post-first administration, she noted that Bush’s regal glow remained and actually increased. “…four years of public scrutiny, formal events and access to the best designers on Seventh Avenue have led to a remarkable transformation,” wrote Givhan. “First lady Laura Bush has never looked better or more obviously regal…”266 Royalty was the same impression that historian Catherine Allgor had when she first saw the sketches. In a New York Times article from January 11, 2005, Allgor said that the first lady “has gone from being just folks to being a bit imperial, assuming a bit more of a queenly role.”267 Throughout her first tenure, Bush sought the talents of de la Renta among other famed designers from New York’s Seventh Avenue garment and fashion center. Givhan suggested that it was this frequent exposure to and heightened awareness of high fashion in her first term that encouraged Bush to step outside her comfort zone. “In turning to de la Renta,” explained Givhan, “Mrs. Bush embraces the indulgent luxuriousness of high style…. De la Renta is grand. By working with him, Mrs. Bush signaled that she was ready to step into the limelight. At long last, she has stopped pretending that she is just like you, your mother and the folks back in Midland.”268 Not only was her decision a pleasant surprise for the media, but also for the designer himself. De la Renta frequently crossed party lines in terms of clientele,

265 Lamers, “Ceremonial Style.”
268 Givhan, “Stepping Out.”
particularly Bush’s most recent predecessor, Clinton, with whom he worked closely during her eight years. “I completely misjudged her,” admitted de la Renta. “The first lady is not that kind of person [who refuses to work with a designer based on his or her partisan association].” The Washington Post described the 59-year-old first lady’s second gown as “youthful and feminine, not sexy—the epitome of good taste.” 269 It had long, opaque sleeves, a V-shaped neckline, and embroidered tulle that was delicately dusted with Austrian crystals. 270 The New York Times reported that Bush’s bright blue eyes were the inspiration behind de la Renta’s specific color selection of a pale, silvery shade of ice blue. 271 This particular color choice, Givhan noted, expressed “fashion panache.” It further distanced Bush from the cliché in the political fashion world that one’s patriotism is defined and reflected by the amount of red, white, and blue draped around her body. During Bush’s selection process, she “focused on her own sense of style” instead of concentrating on the way the dress would photograph, appear on television, or withstand the test of time. “She’s very precise in what she likes and what is right for her,” said de la Renta. “She can almost wear any color. First of all, she’s a very handsome lady. But some people, because of their coloring, some things they can’t wear…. She’s also a regular size and so fitting isn't a problem.” 272

Interestingly, first ladies’ dress sizes were still being reported in the news at this time. USA Today’s Olivia Barker and Ruth la Ferla of the New York Times are two of several writers that addressed Bush’s reported drop in dress size to a size 6 since the expansion of her fashion preferences. 273 In response to this announcement, one Atlanta Journal-Constitution reader wrote,

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272 Givhan, “Inaugural Wardrobe Sparkles.”
273 Barker, “Evolution of Laura Bush.”
“You've got to be kidding! Republicans must know how to crunch more than numbers.”

The trend of discussing the dress sizes of first ladies seems less prevalent in articles about the next first lady, Michelle Obama.

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INTRODUCTION

Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama became the first African American first lady when her husband, Barack Hussein Obama, was sworn in as the United States of America’s 44th president on January 20, 2009. At just 45 years old, she was also the fourth youngest to become first lady.

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276 Ibid.
Obama’s youthful approach to style was one of the many reasons why a large portion of the public fell in love with her. Her uncanny sense of fashion led to frequent comparisons to Jackie Kennedy. In fact, multiple publications, both international and domestic, have written about the numerous comparisons between the two women. The *McClatchy-Tribune News Service* reported that Kennedy’s former social secretary Letitia Baldrige “is impatient with comparisons to Kennedy.” Before adding that “everyone will be happy with [Obama’s inaugural] dress,” Baldrige said she considered the comparisons “unfortunate.” “She (Obama) is herself,” she concluded. “It is a different time in history.”

The primary difference between Kennedy and Obama, stylistically speaking, was that Obama had a wider price range and broader fashion brand preferences. The *Wall Street Journal’s* Christina Binkley pointed out that previous first ladies were rarely seen in public wearing name brand items that were priced low enough for the average person to afford. Obama, on the other hand, “wore a Gap sweater to lunch with Nancy Reagan and also introduced the world to Jason Wu’s $1,500 dresses, influencing the way women dress at work.” Her feminist approach to

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incorporating femininity to the way women dress in the workplace was the result of her fashion “risk-taking.”

Indeed, throughout her tenure as first lady, Obama’s fashion preferences ranged everywhere from French couturier cardigans and $540 Lanvin tennis shoes to ready-to-wear Gap and J. Crew brands. This price gap, Binkley wrote, made her more relatable to the general public because she “cultivate[d] an everywoman persona.”

In December 2008, the *Washington Post* encouraged its readers to submit visual representations of how they thought the first lady should look for the 2009 inaugural ball, a design that would have “fashion connoisseurs hyperventilating with anticipation.” The challenge produced very different results than what Givhan was expecting with “almost 200 suggestions ranging from the staid to the va-va-voom.” It seemed that a “significant” portion of participants visualized Obama arriving at the inaugural ball as a “70-something mother-of-the-bride.” Givhan proceeded to chide her readers and emphatically draw attention the first lady-to-be’s younger age and “physically fit” body. Givhan concluded that participants:

> showed little interest in sketching something that might appeal to Michelle Obama’s youthful personal aesthetics, characterized by body-skimming silhouettes, bare arms, strong colors and lively prints. An awful lot of people expressed a fierce determination to shroud her in a caftan. “Modest” and “appropriate” were confused with dowdy and frumpy…

One *Washington Post* reader envisioned a dress that “seemed to have clouds silk-screened onto its blue background.” Another reader’s submission that received an honorable mention from Givhan took the patriotic route, which Givhan assumed to be an attempt at “a bravura expression

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280 Binkley, “Fashion Industry.”

of patriotism and propriety.” Unfortunately, the design was not a winner. “[Obama] might as well have been Wonder Woman,” wrote Givhan. The looks that exhibited the most drama quickly received a, “Feathers, people? Come on, now,” response from Givhan. Several of their designs emulated “Diana Ross circa the ‘Mahogany’ era.” These were submitted by readers whom Givhan assumed were merely somewhat over-zealous with anticipation for having a young, African American woman in the White House. She noted that Obama was no Diana Ross and should not have a gown that “calls to mind a showgirl.” What Givhan concluded that the first lady needed is a gown “that speaks to her personality,” typifies the occasion’s significance, and emits “optimism, democracy and elegance.” Most importantly, though, “it should be pretty.”

INAUGURAL GOWN

Although her husband served two terms as president, only Obama’s first inaugural gown from 2009 was included in this analysis. It was a white one-shouldered silk chiffon gown designed by Jason Wu, a Taiwanese-born Canadian designer based in New York City. Embroidered with silver thread, the dress was adorned with organza rosettes and Swarovski crystals. According to the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, the gown was intended to represent “hope,” which was one of the slogans on which her husband campaigned. Obama also reportedly did not use a professional stylist for her appearances, “and it shows,” wrote Alice Wyllie of Edinburgh’s Scotsman. “This is a compliment, by the way,

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282 Givhan, “Green Would Be a Go.”
283 Ibid.
284 “Michelle Obama,” The Smithsonian.
meaning that she never looks too ‘put together’ and always looks as if she genuinely likes what she’s wearing…”

As with other first ladies before her, Obama’s gown attracted both positive and negative attention. The dress’s single shoulder strap was a daring stylistic feature that shocked many. As Givhan pointed out, this is the first time a first lady has bared her arms and shoulders at the Presidential Inaugural Ball since Reagan did in 1981. “[Wu]’s dress…brought the first lady into the modern era, in which glamour is defined by Hollywood and the red carpet rather than protocol and tradition.” And later when Obama adopted the sleeveless look for her official White House portrait, the New York Times’ Maureen Dowd sang the first lady’s praises for being “confident in her own skin.” Most of this commotion around Obama wearing clothes that revealed her bare arms surfaced when this photo was released.

Other critics found the inaugural dress to be less than agreeable. In a Wall Street Journal article, CNN fashion contributor Robert Verdi appraised the entire outfit to be “a little bit of a disappointment,” with the reminiscent feel of Reagan’s similar number Citing the dress’s similarities to former first ladies,’ Verdi said that the silhouette was unexpected, as was the color. “Wearing white is the historical route and I thought she’d do something different,” he said in a Newsday article. Other critics felt differently about the color. The same Newsday article reported Andy Glassman, creative director of Oprah magazine, loving the fact that Obama

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selected a white gown. “It’s about optimism and a new start and a fresh moment…,” he said. “I think she looks modern, youthful, and fresh…” Other words used to describe the dress were “dazzling,” “ethereal and romantic,” “tender, elegant…glamorous and somewhat old-fashioned.”

As with Barbara Bush, Obama did not release any details of which dress she had chosen so when it was unveiled, the world would be surprised. Not even Wu, the gown’s own designer, would discover that his design had been chosen to represent the nation. He also never actually met her in person until after the grand reveal wrote the *New York Times*’ Eric Wilson:

It was Ikram Goldman, [owner of Chicago boutique, Ikram, and close friend of Obama’s] who has played a behind-the-scenes role in connecting designers with the first lady, who introduced Mr. Wu’s designs to Mrs. Obama. (She had previously worn one of his dresses for an interview with Barbara Walters; she bought it at cost — for a little less than $1,000 — through Ikram, he said.) After the election, Mr. Wu immediately sent sketches to Ms. Goldman.

“The only protocol, to quote Ikram, was that ‘It has to sparkle,’ ” [sic] he said. Ms. Goldman has not spoken publicly about her role. Two days later, Mr. Wu recalled, Ms. Goldman asked him to make the white dress. It was ready by Thanksgiving, when Mr. Wu, who is 5-foot-7, flew to Chicago, carrying the floor-length gown in a garment bag on his lap and hand-delivered it to Ms. Goldman. He was not paid for that dress or two more colorful designs he submitted later, he said, but made them with the understanding that if Mrs. Obama should end up wearing one, the dress would be donated to the Smithsonian Institution. “It’s priceless to be a part of history,” Mr. Wu said….

When asked how he felt after seeing his gown in motion on the stage, Wu said that it is “difficult to describe” and that he “was over the moon. I know I am an unusual choice for a first lady. I didn’t think it was my turn yet.”

Being the wife of America’s first African American president, Obama already had plenty of expectations to live up to. Active in her husband’s campaign for societal change, Obama had a

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290 Bratskier, “Their Tuesday Best.”
293 Ibid.
keen understanding of how her image could be beneficial.294 The Washington Post’s Givhan wrote that she believed that Obama’s style was used as a tool by the African American media to change the “generations of stereotypes about black women.” Citing Michelle Ebanks, president of Essence Communications Inc., Givhan concurred that “[s]tyle is dignity, self-respect and confidence.”295

Like Laura Bush and Hillary Clinton, Obama selected her first inaugural gown designed by a virtually unknown designer rather than an experienced, more established couturier. In addition to Wu, she sought the talents of Cuban-American designer Isabel Toledo to contribute to her inaugural wardrobe. The Wall Street Journal’s Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan accurately interpreted Obama’s inaugural dress and wardrobe as an attempt to fulfill the campaign promise her husband trumpeted in his platform of bringing hope and change.296

Fashion critics praised Obama’s decision to support young designers. “The symbolism of Mrs. Obama’s choice of such a young American designer is invigorating for the fashion industry,” the New York Times’ Wilson said, “especially at a moment when new companies are facing tight odds of survival.” In the same article, Harper’s Bazaar fashion features director Kristina O’Neill echoed Wilson’s excitement for Obama’s desire “to champion young designers.”297 Obama was very tactful when deciding who would design her gown. She had a strong understanding of image. “[She] recognizes that her responsibilities as First Lady go beyond matching a twinset with pearls,” said Wyllie. “In fact, with her cool, effortless approach

294 Wyllie, “Michelle, My Belle.”
297 Wilson, “Spotlight Finds Wu.”
to style, perhaps the person least concerned about what Michelle Obama will wear on this historic occasion is Michelle Obama."298

298 Wyllie, “Michelle, My Belle.”
CHAPTER 13

CONCLUSION

From Rosalynn Carter’s six-year-old recycled dress to Hillary Clinton’s matronly gown to the first red inaugural gown worn by Laura Bush, the dresses worn by America’s first ladies at the Presidential Inaugural Ball have undoubtedly influenced how these women, and often their husbands’ administrations, were perceived by the public and the media. However, while there are a multitude of studies and literature written about the ways women are portrayed in the media, there was a surprising lack of literature analyzing media coverage of the first ladies’ outward appearances and fashion style, specifically their presidential inaugural gown. This analysis of the research on media’s obsessive coverage on first ladies in relation to their inaugural gowns revealed that very little research had been done on the topic. Most literature about first ladies is either autobiographical or biographical, or focuses heavily on the general portrayal of women by the media, with a few discussing the changing role of the first lady institution.

This research on the news media coverage of first ladies and their inaugural gowns discovered four themes: feminism and the media’s reflection of society’s changing views of the first lady’s role; the media’s descriptions of first ladies, specifically references to their dress sizes and their physique; ethnocentrism and the fashion industry’s unbridled interest in and reliance on what the first lady wears; and the perspective of moderation in that the inaugural gown should be nice but not too expensive. Each theme has an intrinsic value interjected into media coverage of the gowns as revealed by Gans whose book, Deciding What’s News: A Study of CBS Evening
News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time, described news values in the media that include individualism, ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, and moderatism.

FEMINISM, MEDIA, AND THE ROLE OF THE FIRST LADY

The New York Times’ Vanessa Friedman’s reasoning on why the media heavily focus on first ladies’ fashion stems from mere curiosity. The degree of media coverage does not necessarily imply that the topic of what she wears is more important than the other issues currently affecting the country. “But one kind of analysis does not obviate the other, and can, in fact, elucidate it,” wrote Friedman. It conveys that the first lady’s sense of style and fashion preference are still relevant to present-day society. “We scour her wardrobe for clues as to who she is as a person and how she sees her role; where her values lie and how she will represent the country on the world stage…..,” continued Friedman. “The vehicles may be superficial. But they are also broadly accessible, and that makes them powerful. And power is a subject I don’t think any of us would dismiss.”

This analysis exhibits a seemingly reluctant shift in the role of first lady from what the Chicago Tribune called in 1994, “a time when the models of American womanhood were Mamie [Eisenhower], mom and Marilyn Monroe.” The office has since adopted many forms, from hostess to activist to adviser to a kind of co-president as seen with Hillary Clinton and Nancy Reagan. These changing roles are illustrated in the media coverage as defined by Gans’ enduring value, altruistic democracy, in that the role shifts progress with each succeeding administration and transfer of power. Moreover, the traditional aspects which the public and the media have

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been accustomed to expect from first ladies and their inaugural gowns have, for the most part, remained the same. Namely, as Givhan explained in 2000, the gown’s designer must be an American citizen; the gown must be moderately priced, not too extravagant; and the gown should project well on modern media formats.

Givhan described the dress as a “metaphor for the beauty and the spectacle of a new administration and the eloquent transition of power.” The “spectacle of a new administration” exhibits hints of Gans’ individualism news value. Gans’ argues that “the most pervasive way in which the news pays homage to the individual is by its focus on people rather than groups.” Media focus on the first lady and by default her inaugural gown is indicative of individualism.

The “eloquent transition of power” is an ideal every nation desires but oftentimes fails to meet, and can be linked to Gans’ altruistic democracy news value. Gans describes this value as domestic media “indicating how American democracy should perform by its frequent attention to deviations from an unstated ideal…” Now, the election of a new president is not exactly a deviation but it does add a bit of diversity in people’s normal everyday lives since it only occurs once every four years. Additionally, America’s ability to continue its superior form of democracy is tantamount in the celebration of the inauguration, and never more so than with the symbolic representation of the gown.

Before selecting the inaugural gown, the first lady must first consider a designer who is an American citizen. Ethnocentrism is another news value Gans lists in his book and it applies heavily to the media’s coverage on the inaugural gowns. “On ceremonial occasions,” Gans writes, “the nation is not only a unit by a Platonic one, defined by the American ‘spirit,’ …and

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301 Givhan, “Inaugurating a Gown.”
303 Ibid, 43.
aspiring to hallowed ideals…” 304 American news media value their own country’s news over others, Gans writes. 305 This ethnocentric view promotes the notion that the first lady ought to represent her country by selecting an American designer. Although, this factor seems to have become more lenient on the designer’s citizenship, only requiring that he or she be an American-based designer. For example, Arnold Scaasi and Jason Wu were both Canadian citizens but their design houses are based in America. Throughout this research, no comments were found about their citizenship being an issue and symbolizing a lack of patriotism.

Another major requirement of the inaugural gown that the first lady must abide by is that it must be elegant but only to a certain extent. Gans’ emphasis on moderatism as a news value is particularly relevant when covering the inaugural gown. Moderatism “discourages excess or extremism…,” writes Gans. 306 This was especially apparent with Nancy Reagan’s lavish gowns in 1981 and 1985, both designed by renowned designer James Galanos. The media lashed out at her for her excessive spending tendencies, thus reflecting Gans’ notion.

Because there is no official handbook on how to be a first lady, journalists rely on tradition and former first ladies’ behavior, actions, and appearances as a comparison. According to Dr. Lisa M. Burns, associate professor of media studies at Quinnipiac University and author of First Ladies and the Fourth Estate, journalists use “collective memory” and press frames such as “personification framing,” when covering first ladies. Burns describes “personification framing” as the process by which a person is installed as the epitome or representation of an ideal role and then consequently interpreting the complex functions of that role simply and superficially.

305 Ibid, 42.
306 Ibid, 51.
This process enables the media to assess the attributes or credentials of a first lady then blend with an evaluation of her performance in the role both personally and officially “in a manner that fits [her] own narrative style.” This type of press framing becomes “a powerful tool used” by media to form public opinion of the first lady’s role and person. Burns further asserts that journalists use “collective memory” from history to construct “symbolic bridges between [the] present and the past, using shared memories of the past” to better understand the present. These shared memories in turn both echo and establish “a society’s values, beliefs, and attitudes.” Gans’ enduring value in media coverage of individualism could characterize the personification framing which Burns discusses and is indicated by the expectations placed on the first lady as the persona of the ideal American woman. The first lady defines her role on her “own terms” in accordance with Gans’ research.

Dr. Jennifer Keohane, assistant professor of the Klein Family School of Communications Design at the University of Baltimore, suggests that perceptions of the first lady can be further attributed to the Smithsonian’s First Ladies Exhibit, which features first ladies’ inaugural gowns and other memorabilia. Keohane argues that the museum’s exhibit assists in the conditioning of the public to perceive the first lady through a lens of traditional femininity and domesticity, thus fueling the public’s hyper focus on what she wears. “In choosing to display dresses, the curators eschew displaying significant documents, showing speeches, and presenting memorabilia,” she writes. “These choices condition not just what we are invited to look at but how we are asked to do so.”

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As the roles and perceptions of women evolved over time, so too did the choice in vocabulary and topics used by publications to depict first ladies, although ample is still written on their fashion selection and personal style. Today, more media attention is drawn elsewhere to include and highlight a first lady’s activism, social involvement in various programs, and body positivity. This redirection of coverage is likely because of a gradual yet radical shift in the public’s perception of feminism and femininity and the frequent engagement of first ladies in societal issues post-Eleanor Roosevelt. This shift in acceptance of the first lady’s changing role within the realm of this analyzing can be attributed to Pat Nixon’s advocacy for numerous programs and in turn, successive first ladies’ decisions to champion social causes. It could also be a result of the increase in feminist ideologies and the gradual strides taken to normalize women’s advancement in non-traditionally female roles.

These societal shifts are reflected in the changing roles of first ladies as well as the discourse of media coverage that oftentimes defines the public’s perception of them, notably within the framework of this study of over the past fifty years from Jacqueline Kennedy in 1961 to Michelle Obama in 2009. The applications of media coverage of a first lady have ranged from the critical and penetrating analysis and examination of her advocacy selections to her outward demeanor and appearance. First and foremost, though, she captivates the media’s attention and thus the public with her fashion style, and none so exuberantly as the celebrated selection of her Presidential Inaugural ballgown.

MEDIA DESCRIPTIONS OF FIRST LADIES

First ladies’ dress sizes—essentially, physical details of the women who would wear the dress—were also a common appearance in reports discussing the inaugural gown. Initially the dress would be described in great detail, then either the fashion critic writing the article or the
designer would make comments about the gown, generally in relation to the first lady’s dress size.

REFERENCES TO DRESS SIZE

To gain a larger understanding of the evolution of the media’s descriptions of first ladies, particularly related to their inaugural gown selection process, this study analyzed 188 contemporary news articles and 20 modern news articles from 1960 through 2009. The examination revealed that first lady dress sizes were frequently publicized by the media. Discussions of and references to their dress sizes and physique ranged from neutral, plain descriptions to complimentary remarks. No sources were found that featured their dress size in a negative light, however. Forty-seven contained direct statements and/or references to the first ladies’ dress sizes.310 The first lady with the largest number of articles within the sampling that stated and/or referenced her dress size was Laura Bush at nine articles. The first ladies with the second largest number of references were Jackie Kennedy and Pat Nixon with eight articles each.

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Next were Hillary Clinton with six and Barbara Bush with five. Finally, the first ladies with the lowest number of articles stating and/or referencing their sizes were Michelle Obama, Nancy Reagan, and Lady Bird Johnson with three articles each, and Rosalynn Carter with just two articles.

REFERENCES TO PHYSIQUE

In addition to dress sizes, on two occasions the *Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution* and Baltimore’s *Sun* published a dual profile by the *Associated Press* of Jackie Kennedy and Pat Nixon that included Kennedy’s weight, “usually…about 125 pounds.”

Nixon’s weight, however, was not mentioned in either article. Although these were the first and only examples found that directly addressed a first lady’s weight, there have since been a few instances where her weight, size, or body shape was referenced. In the sampling of articles researched, more direct descriptions such as “petite,” “skinny,” and “slender” appeared earlier in the analysis. Moving closer to Barbara Bush, these direct descriptions seemed to gradually be phased out and replaced with various indirect and subtle references to the first lady’s physique. For Bush, several comments were made about her elderly appearance including occasional comparisons to her husband’s mother and passive, benevolent references to her age. In the political arena, image is everything. Stepping into the role of first lady invites an

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Citations about hair and his mom
intense degree of scrutiny from the press and the public. Several of these women likely had experienced varied levels of scrutiny of their behavior and appearance as wives of Congressmen and governors. The heightened scrutiny of a presidential first lady’s public image is not only defined by what she says and how she conducts herself, but also by what she wears.

The coverage between Kennedy in 1961 and Obama in 2009 exhibited a shift in society’s perception of women’s bodies. Obama was the first era in news publication when the first lady’s body size was reflected through the lens of body positivity. Before her, first ladies were labeled “slim,” “trim,” or faced with the reaction, “But thank God she’s skinny!” which is how one Houston Chronicle writer felt about Nixon, according to Crimmins of the Washington Post, Times Herald.315 Instead, Obama’s dress size reflected “real” women. As the Washington Post’s Givhan put it, Obama has “the figure of a real woman—a size 12 according to one fashion publicist.”316

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FASHION WERE NOT FOR MEN

Following the presidential election, the media almost immediately began speculating what, and whose design, the first lady would select to wear to the Presidential Inaugural Ball. Throughout this research, there was a trend depending on who wrote the articles and who were being interviewed. Articles discussing the first lady, particularly from a fashion perspective, were primarily written by women. Moreover, sources in the stories were usually women—unless the designer was male.

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315 Crimmins, “Women Identify with Her.”
316 Givhan, “All Hail the Leader.”
ETHnocentrism AND THE FASHION INDUSTRY’S INTEREST AND RELIANCE ON THE FIRST LADY

Research of news media coverage on first ladies and inaugural gowns has revealed that there are unwritten guidelines that the media and the American fashion industry expect the first lady to follow when she’s selecting an inaugural gown. These guidelines appear to be set by society and tradition and are therefore reinforced by the media. One such rule encompasses the notion that the first lady symbolizes American values. Gans noted that ethnocentrism underlies media coverage, which infers the attitude that American values are foremost beyond all other nations. Therefore, it is the first lady’s duty to only select an American designer to create the dress she will wear when introduced to the world as first lady of the United States of America. Her gown is ultimately a political symbol of American royalty and an expression of patriotism and pride in one’s country. That strong sense of ethnocentrism is most apparent by the citizenship of the gown’s designer.

This rule was especially apparent in 1960-61 coverage of Jackie Kennedy, who was frequently berated by the media for her lack of support for the America fashion industry in favor of foreign brands, mainly Givenchy and Balenciaga. A first lady is essentially a celebrity, or as Gans would describe, a “known” individual.317 People all over the world become familiar with her name and her realm of influence. The fashion community relies heavily on the first lady to promote their brands and keep the industry afloat. Getting tapped to design an inaugural wardrobe is arguably the best exposure and compliment a designer could ask for. It could turn a designer into a household name, as witnessed with Oleg Cassini in 1961 and Jason Wu in 2009. There is also the possibility of going down in history as having designed a gown no one liked, then to disappear from the fashion scene for nearly two decades. That’s what happened to Hillary

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Clinton’s first inaugural designer, Sarah Phillips, who lost financial supporters a few short months after the ball and left the industry to be a stay-at-home mom. However, as the coverage has proven, being asked to design a first lady’s inaugural ball gown is definitely worth the risk.

THE INAUGURAL GOWN AND EXTRAVAGANCE IN MODERATION

Another one of the many requirements that the media expects the first lady to honor is selecting a gown that is stately and luxurious but not excessively ornate. Although the First Couple is often likened to royalty, the Presidential Inaugural Ball is not a coronation and the inaugural gown should not translate that.

There were frequent comments made about the gown needing to exhibit extravagance, but within moderation. It seems that finding a perfect balance, though, is almost impossible. Being too frugal is often seen by the media as a lost opportunity. Some in the media were aghast when Rosalynn Carter re-wore the same dress she had worn to Jimmy Carter’s Georgia gubernatorial ball six years prior. Headlines across the country, such as “Mrs. Carter Shouldn’t Wear a Used Gown” from the Los Angeles Times and “Carter Gown Old, Designers Blue” from the Chicago Tribune, expressed shock and frustration. Nancy Reagan in 1981 and in 1985 was admonished for the excessively lavish gowns, both designed by veteran designer James Galanos. Throughout this analysis, no first lady has been acknowledged as having achieved that threshold of moderatism.

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CLOSING THOUGHTS

The media’s tendency to fixate on what the first lady wears is best described as a fascination rather than obsession. After analyzing articles covering the first ladies from Jacqueline Kennedy in 1961 to Michelle Obama in 2009 and their respective inaugural gowns, it seems that little has changed. In summary, the primary changes appeared to revolve around the media’s opinion of women in general based on societal shifts, how these shifts were translated through the gradual increase in the first lady roles, and the media’s framing of the first lady.
REFERENCES


“You don’t have to look hard… To see another Jackie,” *Life*, January 20, 1961.