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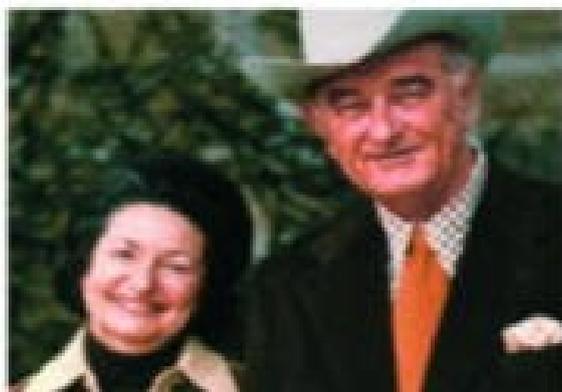
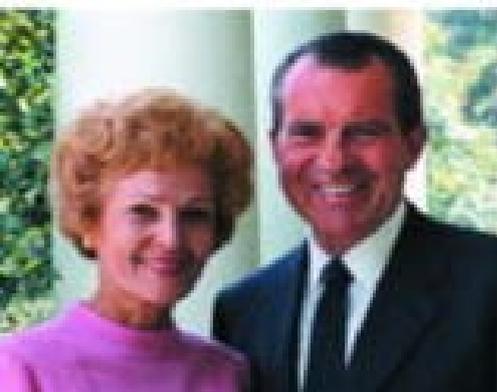
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HIDDEN POWER

*Presidential Marriages
That Shaped Our History*

KATI MARTON

WITH A NEW CHAPTER ON LAURA AND GEORGE W. BUSH



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HIDDEN POWER

PRESIDENTIAL MARRIAGES THAT
SHAPED OUR HISTORY



KATI MARTON



ANCHOR BOOKS
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC. NEW YORK

FOR

RICHARD, ELIZABETH AND CHRISTOPHER—

the three who make all else possible



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INTRODUCTION

I never wanted your advice and assistance more in my life. The times are critical and I must have you here to assist me I can do nothing without you.

—JOHN ADAMS TO HIS WIFE, ABIGAIL

I hope some day somebody will take time to evaluate the true role of wife of a President and to assess the many burdens she has to bear and the contributions she makes.

—PRESIDENT HARRY S. TRUMAN

IT IS MORE THAN STYLE, MORE THAN HAIRDOS AND WHITE HOUSE DECOR AND inaugural gowns and controversies over china and guest lists. The role of presidential spouses (so far only women, hence the ubiquitous unofficial title “first lady”) is vital to a full understanding of their husbands’ administrations and the presidency itself. It is time to take up President Truman’s challenge.

What is most private in most lives—marriage—inevitably has a huge public impact once a couple reaches the White House. At the same time, the public pressures of the presidency reshape the private marital relationship, strengthening some marriages, deadening others, reshaping still others. Some first ladies crumble, like Mary Todd Lincoln; others take over in crisis, like the second Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, without doubt the most powerful first lady in history. For some first ladies, like Pat Nixon, one can only feel immensely sorry, as they seem to wither away from neglect. Others, like Eleanor Roosevelt, Nancy Reagan and Hillary Rodham Clinton, become highly controversial in their own right. And some, like Betty Ford and Lady Bird Johnson, emerge as nationally admired women who seem to transcend their husbands’ difficulties.

Inevitably, presidential marriages are different from all others. To get elected to America’s pinnacle of power requires absolute commitment not only from the candidate but from his spouse as well. Presidential couples must surrender most of their privacy and many aspects of family life for their dream. What sort of marriages have as their central purpose the fulfillment of a single burning ambition? What sort of wives are willing to share the exhausting, sometimes humiliating journey? And what happens when they reach the promised land at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue?

The most confident presidents generally have been those with the healthiest respect for their wives, men who sought and listened to their wives’ personal and political advice. Whatever Americans may fear about the “hidden power” of presidential wives, it is unrealistic and unreasonable to expect the president

to do without a full partner, both public and private.

A politician needs more than ambition and stamina to succeed. Ideally, he needs a partner who will be a trusted sounding board, a link to the real world from which his power and position isolate him. He needs someone completely trustworthy to whom he can confide his deepest fears and insecurities, a person to whom he can reveal his full appetite for power. "I am so devoured by egoism," wrote Winston Churchill, whose marriage was among the happiest and most productive of any world leader in the last century, to his wife, Clementine, in 1916. He continued: "... I would like to have another soul in another world and meet you in another setting and pay you all the love and honour of the great romances." Unfortunately, devouring egos are rarely capable of paying their partners that sort of romantic attention.

It is as difficult to stop a politician obsessed by power as it is to stop a fast-moving train. The human sacrifice is enormous, but the reward great. The presidential couple instantly becomes two of the most famous people in the world. They are surrounded by sycophants and ceremony. Their arrival is accompanied by the sound of "Hail to the Chief"; their first view in the morning is of the Washington Monument; their backyard is the Rose Garden; his office, the Oval; their transportation, *Air Force One*. Loved or reviled, their names forever evoke a time in our lives.

This volume is not another anthology of the lives of first ladies. Rather, it is a study of husbands and wives at the precarious intersection of power, love and marriage. How did both the inner life and public face of White House marriages shape presidential history?

I focus only on the twentieth century, as this is a study of both marriage and the presidency as we have come to know them in the recent past. Still, earlier presidential marriages carry similarly dramatic stories, from John and Abigail Adams's astonishingly tender and productive partnership to the tragic collapse of Mary Todd Lincoln. They are worthy of equal study. While each couple's story is of course unique, they all illustrate that the effect of marriage on the presidency (and presidency on the marriage) is far deeper and more profound than commonly realized.

If the present account is sometimes tipped to the women's side of the story, this is deliberate. Too little attention has been paid to the role of first ladies in relation to the policies and administrations of their husbands. A successful presidential candidate identifies the pulse of his time, the issues that most concern people, whereas a first lady's success depends on her grasp of the essence of her times. Lady Bird Johnson, for example, embodied the Ideal Woman of her era: modest but fearless, supportive but smart. During the greatest crisis since the Civil War, she stood by her man without losing her own identity, and in so doing won admiration even from those who disliked her embattled husband. On the other hand, Pat Nixon, withdrawn and self-effacing, seemed out of step with the nation, and her decision to disengage from her marriage and the resulting lack of involvement in her husband's

struggle to survive the Watergate fiasco hurt him.

Ironically, while women have been breaking down the last remaining barriers toward full equality, the first lady's political role remains circumscribed, as the backlash to Hillary Clinton's effort to make radical changes in the role of first lady clearly demonstrated. It was no accident that both Tipper Gore and Laura Bush presented themselves in the 2000 campaign as "anti-Hillarys," more traditional wives.

But the institution's outer face has never been the primary source of the first lady's power. The quality of her relationship with her husband has been the key factor in determining the extent of her influence. For any real understanding of presidents, knowing the inner life of presidential couples—the human chemistry behind the formality of the office—is essential. Measuring the indirect and subtle role of a wife on a husband is the quicksilver part of the historian's task. In studying the way a president relies on his wife, we learn something profound about that commander in chief.



WHEN WE ELECT a president we are electing more than a man or—eventually—a woman. Presidential couples rise together, serve together and, sometimes, fall together. Although Hillary Clinton set new standards for the public role of a first lady, the Clintons were not the only presidential couple who blended the political and the personal in their marriage. In fact, the intense mingling of the public and private has been more the rule than the exception among presidential couples. His career is their career. As careful as the wives are about hiding this fact, they sometimes slip. "When we were President ..." Barbara Bush has said more than once; every first lady thinks and sometimes talks the same way.

Most politicians are, almost by definition, performers. They are nearly always "on," aiming to please whatever audience they are addressing. It is not easy to have an intimate relationship with anyone sustained by love of not one person but the many. Is it possible for the most famous person on the planet to have a "normal" marriage? Can anyone—even a spouse—speak frankly to someone the world flatters and fears? In healthy marriages, power is distributed evenly. One-sided adulation, self-pity, intense scrutiny and loss of privacy all mitigate against such a union. A public show of distress or disapproval by a wife can be fatal for the politician. Yet there have been some very strong presidential marriages in which husband and wife shared almost equally in rewards and sacrifices. The nation benefited from such solid partnerships. But in part because of a squeamishness about unelected power, Americans tend to undervalue or deride the role of the president's spouse, even while subjecting her to the most relentless scrutiny and occasional adulation. Yet all but two of the first ladies discussed in this volume played a positive and consequential role in the presidency. And two saved their husband's administrations.

Presidents need to be married. (Only one, James Buchanan, was not.) The public expects it. Even today, in our cynical, media-intense age, the country looks at the president and first lady as role models. Beyond public expectations, it is a fact that no man needs a strong partner more than the president, isolated and cocooned as he is in what Truman called the Great White Prison. With the exception of Woodrow Wilson and his second wife, the presidential couples of the last century began their political ascent together. No one knew these presidents or understood their obsession better than their wives. "He might live longer if he didn't run for president, and if he did [live longer], would it be worth it?" Lady Bird Johnson wrote in her diary in May 1964.

The quality of presidential marriages differs widely, of course, but they do have some things in common. The couples tend to be solid and middle-aged. (The most obvious exception was the Kennedys, whose youth was one of the animating factors of their special aura.) The extraordinary pressures and the sheer invasiveness of the modern presidency tend to draw couples closer. No divorces have followed tenure in the White House. If the relationship between the politician and his wife is inherently unequal, the presidency tends to balance it. "One thing that happens to a president is that his ties with the outside world are cut," Jacqueline Kennedy noted, "and the people you really have are each other" Lady Bird agreed: "If you weren't close before, you'd sure better get close now." Kennedy, Johnson and Clinton, famous philanderers, leaned on their wives more in the White House than before, whether or not they still misbehaved. "The White House has been good for us," Bill Clinton said near the end of his second term, and this despite the most sordid scandal in presidential history.

The presidency does not strengthen all couples. The White House did nothing for the Lincolns. At times during the Roosevelt years, the presidential home was divided into almost openly hostile "Franklin" and "Eleanor" camps. Eleanor Roosevelt may cast a shadow over her successors, but her marriage was dysfunctional. The saddest modern presidential story may well be that of the Nixons. Richard Nixon married the girl he thought he loved and then abandoned her for his real passion: politics. A strong, honest, clear-eyed partner who could have calmed his anger and given him the love he missed as the child of a cold, withholding mother would have benefited him enormously. Instead, he turned his back on Pat, and they both suffered from incurable loneliness and self-fulfilling paranoia.

First ladies form part of our national folklore. They conjure up a specific time in our country's life. Whether as soul mates, helpmates or those who are essential to their husbands' political survival, all first ladies have played a part in history. Yet we often see them through a prism that oversimplifies the complexity of their roles. Bess Truman and Jacqueline Kennedy played more substantial roles in their husbands' administrations than is usually recognized. For all her grumbling about being a prisoner of the White House, Bess kept her husband steady and anchored to their small-town values. Jackie put an

indelible stamp on the Kennedys' thousand days by inventing Camelot as a preemptive strike against historians only a few days after the assassination. John F. Kennedy, the supreme ironist, "would have been derisive of such a romantic idea," according to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., but Jackie's image of a magic time and place endured. Nancy Reagan's image as couture-obsessed would-be royalty obscured her generally constructive role in the Reagan presidency. In fact, Reagan could not have been elected without Nancy (she tried to set the record straight in a bitter memoir, revealingly entitled *My Turn*). Barbara Bush's chosen image of herself as a mild, white-haired grandmother was deceptive; a sharper politician than her husband, she was his tart-tongued sounding board and his first line of defense in private and public. As controversial as any first lady, Hillary Clinton, at a critical moment, saved her husband's presidency, then rewrote American political history by running and winning a Senate seat while still first lady—and evoking dreams for some of another Clinton in the White House.



CLEMENTINE CHURCHILL MIGHT HAVE SPOKEN for many presidential spouses when she wrote Winston, without irony, "You took me from the straitened little by-path I was treading and took me with you into the life of color and jostle of the highway." Lady Bird, wife to perhaps the most "devouring ego" of the American presidency, made a similar point. "Lyndon stretched me to the last limit of my capacity I did enjoy the opportunity of living in that House ... with that man."

Most men who win the presidency nurture that dream from an early age. Franklin Roosevelt, Kennedy, Johnson and Clinton, for example, chose their partners with the final prize already somewhere in their minds. The wisest chose partners who could tell them bad news when no one else dared. "There is a danger of your being generally disliked by your colleagues and subordinates," Clementine wrote her husband on June 27, 1940, "because of your rough and sarcastic and overbearing manner ... and you are not so kind as you used to be." On another occasion, she wrote, "I beg you not to do anything without telling me first, and giving me time to give you my valuable opinion on it." Many first ladies spoke in similar terms to their husbands. Roosevelt, Johnson, Jimmy Carter, George Bush and Clinton married such partners. While their choice of wives did not guarantee success, it gave them an advantage over those presidents, such as Wilson and Nixon, whose wives could not deliver hard news. The less streamlined the politician—Carter and George Bush père come to mind—the more important his spouse's ability to compensate for his shortcomings.

Presidents and first ladies are not always the best sources for their own history. Rarely departing from their "story line," they fix their eyes firmly on their legacy, as well as on the day's headlines. They are seldom interested in the confessional culture. From the second Mrs. Wilson's sorry attempts to justify her bad judgment, to Nancy Reagan's view of herself as "Ronnie's

lightning rod,” first ladies hold to their predetermined roles. For the story behind the image, aides, friends and Cabinet members are often more revealing than first couples.

Ironically, those presidential couples most cautious about revealing themselves—who have given the fewest interviews and have not published correspondence or diaries—have missed a chance to present their own version of themselves. The greatest love story of the modern presidency, that of Woodrow and Edith Wilson, is revealed in their extraordinary letters, which show clearly a passionate man underneath the stern Presbyterian moralist of the history books. Eleanor Roosevelt’s deeply moving expression of her need of intimacy, and her anguish at her husband’s inability to provide it, are both revealed in her letters. FDR, not a self-revealing man, left no such correspondence. When Harry Truman caught his wife burning their letters and protested, “Bess, think of history,” she replied dryly, “I am.” But in fact, she was wrong. Harry’s surviving letters to his wife reveal a human and vulnerable man, fearless about expressing his need for the gruff Bess. How endearing to read Truman’s letter to his wife, written during the historic meetings with Stalin and Churchill in Potsdam. “No, your taste in hats is not screwy,” he reassures Bess, then apologizes for his inability to shop during the meetings: “I can’t get Chanel N° 5... not even on the black market” The senior George Bush also offered a moving self-portrait in his collection of letters to family and friends; he reveals a sweet nature that his politics often masked. The Clintons, probably the most scrutinized presidential couple in history, may never reveal themselves in letters or truly candid memoirs. However sound their reasons for discretion, their search for privacy will leave others to define this polarizing political couple.

The partnerships described in this book are both personally compelling and important for our time. Woodrow and Edith Wilson represent a stunning parable of the danger of true romance in the White House. Successful first ladies enlarge the president’s world. Edith, who embodied the hypocrisies of Victorian society, power veiled by the parasol and pearls of the antebellum South, shrank her husband’s world even before his stroke. With the Twenty-Fifth Amendment, no first lady today could behave as she did once Wilson was bedridden and isolated.



DESPITE EDITH WILSON’S ANTI-FEMINISM, however, the Great War changed the role of women in American society. From munitions factories to universities, girls and women found their way into male bastions. Jeannette Rankin, a Republican from Montana, was now a member of Congress. In 1920, she helped the House pass the Nineteenth Amendment—for female suffrage—by a single vote.

After a taste of global engagement and social upheaval, the country’s conservatism reasserted itself. Between the two world wars, the United States

turned toward a selfish insularity. There was a general fatigue with sacrificing for war, with Woodrow Wilson's moral rebukes and with Europe's blood feuds. While the Old World lay prostrate, America's business was business. The booming new field of advertising targeted women not as citizens but as consumers. They were now bombarded with messages telling them that their home was the temple where they could best fulfill themselves. Women's suffrage was cleverly translated into the right to shop. A 1930 ad for household products in the *Chicago Tribune* cleverly merged the two, foreshadowing many later ad campaigns. "Today's woman gets what she wants. The vote. Slim sheaths of silk to replace voluminous petticoats. Glassware in sapphire blue or glowing amber. The right to a career. Soap to match her bathroom's color scheme." The march toward full equality for women would take many more twists and turns.



THIS BOOK DOES NOT DEAL with every twentieth-century presidential couple. The stories of Warren and Florence Harding, Calvin and Grace Coolidge and Herbert and Lou Hoover simply do not resonate today. They were not figures who, by force of their personalities or their actions, shifted historic currents. The long shadows cast by their predecessors, the Wilsons, and their successors, the Roosevelts, eclipse them.

All presidential couples since the Roosevelts, save one, are included because each has something to teach us about the intersection of power and marriage and about the evolving role of women in society. The exception is Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower. Like the Hardings, Coolidges and Hoovers, the Eisenhowers did not leave a deep, historic imprint as a couple. Mamie's role in the presidency was a simple extension of her many years as a dutiful army wife. She played no significant role in her husband's administration. As a couple, the Eisenhowers were a nostalgic throwback and suited America's postwar age of conformity.

This is a work of history and interpretation, and wherever possible I have used primary sources: extensive interviews with participants and eyewitnesses to the presidential events, oral histories and correspondence. I have also relied to a considerable extent on presidential studies by Michael Beschloss, Alan Brinkley, Robert Caro, Robert Dallek, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Henry Graff, David Maraniss, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Carl Anthony Sferenza, Jr. and others. They are listed, with my thanks, in the notes that follow the text.

The lights of public scrutiny turn ever brighter on the occupants of the modern White House. The twenty-four-hour news cycle, the constant need to fill the airwaves, leaves them ever less privacy. Leadership needs a certain aura to thrive, but mystery is no longer available to the president. We live in peaceful, prosperous times, but we do not yet know the long-term consequences of stripping our leaders to their under-shorts.

Our system endows the presidency with the powers of both the chief of

state and the head of government. The president can rise to great heights, but to do so he needs a strong relationship with the people, a relationship based on more than competence. For this reason, and perhaps a residual nostalgia for the monarchy that once ruled the colonies, there has always been a regal tint to the office. Paradoxically, the most decent presidents, and best husbands, have not always excelled in the office; Carter, Ford and the senior Bush come to mind. Thus, one can argue, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has, that a public obsession with the private lives of presidents is not healthy for the nation. No less a figure than the nation's most revered ex-first lady shared this view recently. In January 1998, observing the White House sex scandal and the nation's addiction to it, Lady Bird Johnson expressed concern. "We will all lose," she told me. "We are narrowing the number of people who will be willing to run." But there will always be those "consumed whole" by the temptation to claim a place in history. May they choose their partners carefully and well. Like it or not, the state of presidential marriages matters to us all. As we shall see.

CHAPTER 1



EDITH AND WOODROW WILSON

FOOLS FOR LOVE



I am absolutely dependent on intimate love for the right and free and most effective use of my powers and I know by experience ... what it costs my work to do without it.

—WOODROW WILSON TO EDITH GALT, August 16, 1915

The dear face opposite me was drawn and lined; and as I sat there watching the dawn break slowly I felt that life would never be the same; that something had broken inside me; and from that hour on I would have to wear a mask—not only to the public but to the one I loved best in the world; for he must never know how ill he was, and I must carry on.

—EDITH WILSON, *My Memoir*

ON JANUARY 1, 1900, TWO THOUSAND WASHINGTONIANS BRAVED THE BITTER cold and falling snow and patiently waited for the White House doors to open for the traditional New Year's reception. They came by trolley and in elegant carriages to mark the dawn of a new century and with it, as the presence of dozens of diplomats in the queue signaled, America's emergence as one of the world's most powerful nations.

The day also marked the hundredth anniversary of the death of George Washington, but America was now an altogether different country than the fledgling republic bequeathed by Virginia's "First Gentleman." In the past twenty years, seven million Americans had abandoned roots and rural traditions and joined the great urban migration. "America fever" was sweeping the muddy villages and mining towns of Central and Eastern Europe. An entire Italian family could buy steerage tickets from Naples for as

little as \$15. Half a million immigrants were expected to arrive in New York that year. The combination of the rich land, a fearless, mobile population and breathtaking new technology—from the combine to alternating-current electricity—was allowing America to challenge the rest of the world.

Inside the White House resided a Victorian man and his withdrawn, sickly wife. William and Ida McKinley, good-natured, well liked and unchallenging, had little interest in the new age. While the country had stretched and grown, the White House had not. It had been built as the home of the president of a small republic. The presidential offices were a rabbit warren of jumbled rooms, alongside the First Family's private quarters. A handful of men in formal morning attire, black cutaway coats, gray-and-black-striped trousers and silk ties jockeyed for space in the overcrowded, ill-lit offices. Down the hall in the presidential bedroom, Ida spent much of her time crocheting. She neither had, nor wished for, her own staff or an office of her own. But the American people felt close to their president, who was still accessible to citizens. When he was in residence in the White House, hundreds of them arrived every weekday, expecting to meet him.

It would take another year and an assassin's bullet to bring to power the first twentieth-century president, Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was not content for the United States to be the world's economic giant; his sights were set on global military and diplomatic might. Colorful and ebullient, he and his coolly confident second wife, Edith, were the first modern presidential couple. They and their six children filled the mansion with the boisterousness associated with the family. Roosevelt decreed that henceforth the Executive Mansion would be called the White House, a name he considered less stuffy and more in line with the democratic image he intended to convey. Edith, meanwhile, began to institutionalize the office of first lady. She persuaded Congress to finance the mansion's modernization, adding the West Wing and—for the first time—allocating space for the first lady's offices. She hired the first fulltime White House social secretary. Edith ran the White House with the ease and detachment of a born chatelaine, though she treated the public and political aspects of the role with aristocratic disinterest. Nevertheless, in both style and substance, Edith and Theodore Roosevelt virtually initiated the ascendancy of an imperial presidency. Though Edith did not personally make use of the first lady's own pulpit, she helped lay the foundation for her successors. Another Roosevelt would take it into territory Edith never could have imagined.

Helen Herron Taft, the wife of President William Howard Taft, who succeeded Roosevelt, achieved a number of breakthroughs as first lady between 1909 and 1913. She was the first woman to be allowed a seat within the bar of the Supreme Court, the first to publish her memoirs and the first to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. But her historic role is overshadowed by the second Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, with whom this narrative of marriage and power truly begins.

Edith Wilson became first lady during a period when the inherent inequality between men and women—society’s patriarchal nature—was beginning to be questioned. Since the 1890s American women made up one-third of college students and more than one-third of professional workers. Edith, however, seemed content with the crumbs of education reserved for a Victorian woman. She wanted no part of the generation of college-educated women who were forming local suffrage associations and going door-to-door to enlist support. She would have found repellent Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, which sparked a national scandal. So great was the uproar caused by this story of a country girl who uses sex to climb out of poverty that the publisher was forced to withdraw the book after selling only 456 copies. Another book, *What a Young Husband Ought to Know*, fared better. The book advised men that “the sexual impulse in the male ... marches like a mighty conqueror, arousing and marshaling the mightiest human forces [leading to] the attainment of the world’s greatest and grandest achievement in art, in letters, in inventions, in philosophy, in philanthropy, and in every effort that is to secure the universal blessing of mankind.” The book went on to assure readers that with patience and self-control, husbands could teach their wives to accept sex as a necessary hardship on the road to motherhood.

Edith willingly accepted the role her nineteenth-century southern upbringing assigned to her. She embraced the Victorian feminine ideal of the virtuous, compliant and passive child/woman. She proudly proclaimed both her disapproval of women she called “devils in the workhouse” and her adherence to women’s subservience to men. She called Woodrow Wilson “My Lord and Master” and he called her “Little Girl”—not for her the nascent female solidarity movement. Yet no presidential wife ever wielded more real power than she did, the first lady who said she wished only to be a good wife.

The Wilsons’ story is perhaps the most poignant in the chronicles of presidential marriages, and among the most controversial. In rapid succession it encompassed death, bereavement, unexpected bliss and sudden physical decline. It is also the story of an astonishing White House cover-up in which the first lady was the main perpetrator. At a time when American women still could not vote, rarely held jobs beyond that of a domestic or a grade-school teacher, a woman ran the White House and the executive branch. Woodrow and Edith embody the White House’s greatest love story, one that had the most tragic outcome for the nation and the world.



NO CEMENT BARRIERS or electric fences imprisoned the White House’s residents in the early years of the century. At first glance, it was just a very large house in the heart of a medium-sized city. Until the 1860s, Washington had remained a winter outpost where politicians converged to debate a handful of subjects not controlled by the states. Humidity drove residents away for the summer. New York was the country’s financial capital, Boston its cultural mecca. But the Civil War had changed Washington, as it became the hub of wartime

operations. “Slowly,” historian Henry Adams wrote, “a certain society had built itself up about the Government. Houses had been opened and there was much dining; much calling; much leaving of cards.”

In the waning years of this era, Woodrow Wilson, a man past his middle age, and Edith Bolling Galt, a woman well into hers, fell in love and carried on an ardent affair in the White House.

The fifty-nine-year-old president was widowed in 1914, during the second year of his first term. Ellen Axson Wilson’s sudden death coincided almost exactly with the outbreak of World War I, and the convergence of the two events shattered Wilson’s well-ordered world. His famously stern demeanor masked a passionate and emotionally needy man. It is hard to imagine an isolation greater than the one that fell over him, suddenly alone in that house. Wilson had always preferred the company of women to that of politicians. His daughter Nell recalled, “Father enjoyed the society of women, especially if they were what he called ‘charming and conversable.’” His first wife and daughters had been the core of his existence. “My heart has somehow been stricken dumb ...,” Wilson wrote at the time of Ellen’s death. “She was beyond comparison the deepest, truest, noblest lover I ever knew.” The following year he would marry again.

In March 1915, Edith Galt recalled later, “I turned a corner and met my fate.” Invited to tea at the White House by a cousin of the president, she stepped off an elevator and ran into Wilson. Edith would later revealingly recall the encounter primarily in sartorial terms. How fortunate, she wrote, that she had “worn a smart black tailored suit which Worth had made for me in Paris and a tricot hat which I thought completed a very good looking ensemble.”

Wilson was immediately smitten. Invitations to dinner and hand-delivered letters from the White House to her town house soon crossed Washington almost daily. So did shipments of Edith’s favorite flower, orchids. “The orchids carried a certain significance,” White House chief usher Irwin Hoover recalled, “and when she appeared it would always be with just one of them, worn high on the left shoulder.”

Two hundred and fifty surviving letters chronicle their love affair in remarkable detail. They form an indispensable window into the passionate courtship and the simultaneous entry of the United States into world affairs. “My dear Mrs. Galt,” Wilson wrote on April 28, 1915, “I have ordered a copy of Hamerton’s *Round My House* I hope it will give you pleasure—you have given me so much! If it rains this evening would it be any pleasure for you to come around and have a little reading—and if it does not rain, are you game for another ride?”

On the surface, they seemed almost bizarrely unsuited. At forty-two, she was tall and buxom. Wilson was ramrod straight and thin as a rake. His face was long, his features sharply chiseled and lined. Her face was smooth, her cheeks full. Where she was impulsive, he was logical and loved elaborate

argument. Where he was rational and careful, she was jealous, self-indulgent, intuitive, judgmental and seemingly fearless. He was a scholar who loved the company of books and, at the same time, a deeply moral man who believed America must be an example to other nations. Edith was interested primarily in travel and fashion. A substantial portion of her memoirs is devoted to descriptions of what she wore to which historic event. Politics, she thought, was a bore.

But deeper ties pulled Woodrow and Edith together. Both were Virginians, Edith the granddaughter of a slaveowner, the child of once prosperous gentry. Both were enthralled by the romance and the mythology of the Old South. As a little boy, Wilson had seen Robert E. Lee pass through Atlanta after the surrender. Though he had no southern ancestry, Wilson once said that the South was the one place on earth where nothing had to be explained to him. Edith shared this powerful connection to land and place and spoke with a soft southern lilt that Woodrow admired. Left financially independent by her first husband, she combined traditional southern charm with the surface worldliness of a well-traveled woman. With neither a husband nor children to look after, Edith was a free spirit, with the seductive air of a much younger woman.

Events in Europe intensified the courtship. Wilson was under tremendous pressure during those early months of 1915. The Kaiser's army had launched gas warfare against the French and British. Germany warned American travelers that if they sailed on British ships, they did so "at their own risk." In his letters to Edith, Wilson shared his innermost thoughts. "Here stands your friend, a longing man, in the midst of a world's affairs—a world that knows nothing of the heart he has shown you Will you come to him sometime without reserve and make his strength complete?"

On May 4, 1915, Wilson took Edith onto the south portico of the White House and, drawing his chair close to hers in the chilly air, told her he loved her and asked for her hand in marriage. Feigning shock, as her nineteenth-century upbringing prescribed for such a sudden proposal, Edith turned him down. "You cannot love me," she wrote him that same night, "for you really don't know me, and it is less than a year since your wife died."

But she kept the courtship going, adding, "I am a woman—and the thought that you have need of me is sweet!" Still, she seemed to shun her suitor's more explicit physical advances. She told him that her first marriage had been "incomplete." Her reserve only enhanced his zeal. "For God's sakes," he wrote her, "try to find out whether you really love me or not."

The presidency was a powerful courtship tool for Wilson. He made Edith feel that she shared the burden of the office. During the very week Woodrow first proposed marriage, on May 7, 1915, German submarines torpedoed the great British liner *Lusitania*, killing 1,200 civilians, including 128 Americans. "I need you," the president wrote two days later, "as a boy needs his sweetheart and a strong man his helpmate and heart's comrade Do you

think that it is an accident that we found one another at this time of my special need and that it meant nothing that we recognized one another so immediately and so joyously?... I hope you will think of me tonight. I shall be working on my speech of tomorrow evening and on our note to Germany. Every sentence of both would be freighted with greater force and meaning if I could feel that your mind and heart were keeping me company.” That night, in what some historians have called “a state of ecstasy,” the president gave one of his most powerful speeches.

On May 10, Edith wrote Woodrow that his “wonderful love can quicken that which has lain dead so long within me.” As American neutrality hung in the balance, the president personally typed a letter of protest to the German government. The same day he wrote his beloved. “And, oh, I have needed you tonight, my sweet Edith! What a touch of your hand and a look into your eyes would have meant to me of strength and steadfastness as I made the final decision as to what I should say to Germany.”

In another letter he wrote her the same day, Woodrow’s mind was not on Germany but on his overwhelming physical desire, which he made clear was not yet “complete.” Referring to himself in the third person, Wilson wrote her the very next day, virtually announcing his intention to consummate their relationship. “He has been permitted a sacred enterprise: there is a heart to be rescued from itself—which has never known that final divine act of self surrender which is a woman’s way to love and happiness. If she cannot be taken—taken away from herself by siege, *she must be taken by storm*—and she shall be!”

How seductive it must have been to have this austere, powerful man want her. “The clock is striking midnight and I must go to bed. I have on my wrapper and am by the window,” she replied. “I also have on one pair of the lovely white silk stockings [a gift from Wilson] and they are a joy—and make me feel so very rich A fond and very tender kiss my precious Woodrow before we put out the light—and I feel your dear arms fold around me.”

While their personal drama continued, Wilson wanted her involved in affairs of state. He described his troubles with Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, who opposed the president’s hard line with Germany. And Edith offered her opinions without reserve or much understanding. “I think it will be a blessing to get rid of him [Bryan],” she wrote on May 5, “and might as well frankly say I would like to be appointed in his place—then I should have to have daily conferences with you—and I faithfully promise not to interfere in any way with your continuing to do all the work!” The tone was playful, but this letter marks her entry into affairs of state—with ultimately historic consequences.

“And how you can hate too!” Wilson replied. “Whew! I fancy this very sheet lying before me on which you have written about Mr. Bryan is hot under my hand And yet Sweetheart, I must add that in my secret heart (which is never secret from you) I love you for that too. For he is a traitor, though I can

say so as yet only to you.”

All the untapped sensuality and the strength of character that until then Edith had masked behind a southern belle’s veil of frivolity had found a focus. “He came in from the Blue Room,” she wrote later, “looking so distinguished in his evening clothes and with both hands held out to welcome me. When I put mine in them and looked into those eyes—unlike any others in the world—something broke down inside me, and I knew I could and would go to the end of the world with or for him.”

Theodore Roosevelt had scoffed that Woodrow Wilson possessed all the passion of “an apothecary clerk.” But Wilson’s women knew better. During his first marriage, Woodrow had written about the temptations he felt when he was away from his wife. He dared not stay overnight in New York on his own, given “the imperious passions” that fired him. At least at home, he wrote her, he “must stay out of mischief.” His temptations, he told Ellen, meant “not one wit of real infidelity to you—it is anatomical and not of the heart.” Ellen Wilson’s reaction to this astonishing missive is not recorded.

By the end of May 1915, Woodrow’s “siege” must have been successful, for he wrote, “I venture to say, my Lady, my Queen, that never in your life have you looked so wonderfully beautiful as I have seen you look when the love tide was running in your heart without check I have seen a transfiguration, and it has filled me with as much awe as ecstasy! I can’t think this morning, I can only feel and only realize the exquisite thing that happened to me, the beautiful love I have won the sweet woman who has given it to me.”

The American people scarcely would have recognized their stern Presbyterian leader. But in those pretelevision days, politicians could present almost any image of themselves. Wilson conveyed the image of a church elder who read Thucydides in his free time. With his soaring oratory—tinged with a faint Scottish burr—invoking the blessing of God, his speeches often sounded like sermons. His idealism and his morality were the qualities that Americans associated with him. Few people saw the man Edith fell in love with.

His personal happiness was in stark contrast to the turmoil around him. Though Edith rejoiced when Secretary of State Bryan resigned, much of the country was shocked. Americans were divided over the prospect of engagement in a European conflict. While they wanted the president to defend their right to travel safely on the seas, they did not necessarily want to go to war over it. In 1915, Wilson shared that view. As the European conflict grew daily closer, the president had a secret source of strength. “My love for you,” he wrote Edith, “has come to me in these days when I seem to be put to the supreme test of my life, like a new youth You are oh so fit for a mate for a strong man!”

Though not yet married, the president wanted Edith by his side. He invited her to the summer White House in Cornish, New Hampshire, where, away from the prying eyes of the capital, the couple spent lazy days picnicking and