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A Certain Comfort: Betty Ford as First Lady

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Chapter 16

Betty Ford

A Certain Comfort from a Candid First Lady

Nichola D. Gutgold and Linda B. Hobgood

Being ladylike does not require silence.

—Betty Ford

Her White House stay was short-lived, but the lessons of Betty Ford's experience remain vividly instructive. By accident of a national political crisis which catapulted her to the rank of first lady in 1974, Mrs. Ford's tenure lasted a brief two years until her husband, Gerald R. Ford lost his bid for reelection. During that time, she developed a relationship of candor with the press and public. She spoke her mind on social and moral issues that were at the forefront of public debate. The positions she took were not always popular with the majority of Americans, many of whom complained bitterly especially after her notorious interview on CBS's *60 Minutes*. Indeed, Mrs. Ford's rhetorical responses between 1974 and 1976 show how difficult it can be for a well-meaning public figure who must learn—"onstage"—to fill the role into which she had been so abruptly cast.

Taking full advantage of the considerable visibility and influence of the office of first lady, Betty Ford became a voice for the causes she supported. But public backlash and her reply are reminders that taking part in a controversy, even inadvertently, exacts a price. The risks taken by Mrs. Ford illustrate possible consequences when endearing traits of a first lady's character "collide" with the enduring values of many of her fellow citizens. An unintended effect of Mrs.

Ford's experience demonstrates that presidential campaigns do prepare candidates and their wives for interaction with a national audience that is eager to know them. Unfortunately, Mrs. Ford did not have this benefit.

Mrs. Ford's persuasive efforts as first lady grew in sophistication as she gained experience in that position; she continued to build upon what she had learned from being the wife of a politician and the other roles she had played. We begin with an account of Mrs. Ford's childhood, education, work experience, and marriage to show some of the qualities of character that she brought to the office of first lady. We trace her experiences as the wife of a senator and mother of four children to indicate how "ready" she was rhetorically to assume the position of first lady. Using articles in print media and personal interview accounts, we discuss the role expectations that many Americans held for a president's wife at the time when Mrs. Ford was called to serve. Finally, we show how all of these factors came into play when she spoke her mind candidly to the American public. We use excerpts from Mrs. Ford's speeches, but focus primarily on CBS's televised interview on *60 Minutes* between Mrs. Ford and interviewer Morley Safer. Aired on Sunday, August 21, 1975, this interview prompted thousands of letters, most of them negative. The way Mrs. Ford chose to answer her critics speaks to her own strength of character and her capacity to "measure up" and become accustomed to the demands of her position. Her rhetorical choices reveal an uncommon consistency. By virtue of those choices she was able to regain the admiration of an impressive majority of Americans, whose support she maintained through difficult times following her years as first lady. Indeed, over time Betty Ford learned to put her candor to use for the public good.

Biography

One can almost hear the enthymeme:

Betty Ford is so honest and forthright, so humble and friendly!
Well, of course—look where she's from!

To fully appreciate the character of Elizabeth Bloomer Ford requires understanding what it means to be "Midwestern." People from the Midwest are thought to be "comfortable with who they are. They have a common decency." There is more to it than mere birthright, though by virtue of her place of birth, Chicago, and her childhood home of Grand Rapids, Michigan, Betty Ford certainly qualifies as Midwestern. And despite subtle differences between, say, Hoosiers and Minnesotans, the similarities outweigh the differences and symbolically unify those who belong to the America's geographical "middle." If there is a single identifying attribute among all of those born "Midwesterners," it seems to be candor, including an appreciation for those who are straightforward in manner and speech.

New York Times reporter Jane Howard recalls:

When the President [Ford] promised "straight talk among friends" in his Inau-

gural Address, he was speaking at least as much for his wife, whose low-key candor quickly surpassed his own. She was full of surprises, this kindly matron from Michigan. (Howard 1974, 64)

Betty Ford scholars (Anthony, Caroli, Gould, Gutin, and Truman among others) all highlight her frankness, but to this most attach another trait, a genuine sense of concern for and about others. They tend to assign regional distinction to this virtue as well. Observes Howard:

In many ways she is ordinary, well schooled in the midwestern arts of assuaging and consoling. Her thank you notes are prompt and heartfelt. Nice gestures come naturally. . . . "Betty Ford was nice to me," recalls the ex-wife of one controversial Senator, "when other people weren't." But she's not just nice. No. The merely nice bypass the truth when it makes them or anyone else edgy, and that's something Betty Ford doesn't do. She never has. (Howard 1974, 64)

At least two additional qualities are implied in the kindness attributed to Betty Ford: a matter-of-fact, bedrock honesty, and a sense of humility. One of her friends, Jane Broomfield, who is the wife of a colleague of Gerald Ford's, offers tribute to this blend of honesty and self-effacement: "People in the Midwest are just open. Well, at least in Michigan they are. . . . They [the Fords] are great 'truth-tellers.' But she [Betty] could feel terrible and you'd never know it. There was no small talk about herself—ever" (Hobgood, 2000b). Biographer and daughter of another president, Margaret Truman, compared the preferences of two first ladies: "what Betty Ford shared with Bess Truman was a midwestern dislike for any and all kinds of pretentiousness" (Truman 1995, 133).

Mrs. Ford was not the first first lady to be embraced by "the folks back home" who claimed to know her best. For example, Lady Bird Johnson has, for many years, symbolized to Texans and non-Texans alike many of the qualities for which that state is so proud. But it is striking that Mrs. Ford is repeatedly viewed as personifying those same four virtues of frankness, concern for others, honesty, and humility. And while it is allowed that those qualities seem particularly evident among those whose origins are Midwestern, they are used in regard to Betty Ford in an apparent effort to associate her with qualities that are quintessentially American, too. Historian Lewis Gould, who calls her "outspoken—but never strident," assigns her other highly valued aspects of the American character such as an independent spirit and a sense of humor (1996, 553). Carl Anthony uses the first lady's own typically American tendency to convey her forthright attitude: "When somebody asks you how you stand on an issue," explained Betty Ford of her policy of candor, "you're very foolish if you try to beat around the bush—you just meet yourself going around the bush the other way" (1991, 553).

Mrs. Ford's character is thus clearly and uniformly understood, both by those who have known her and those who have studied her. According to Gutin, "Betty Ford is more sharply defined in the minds of Americans than most First Ladies" (1989, 122). One of the reasons for her popularity was the generally held opinion that this particular lady of the White House was the same person in

Washington political circles as the one who had grown up in Grand Rapids and who had raised a family in the suburbs of Alexandria, Virginia. But as Anthony notes, perhaps wryly, there were occasions when "the private person collided with the public persona" (1991, 225). The events she considered significant in her own life and the people Betty Ford most admired might help to explain such "collisions."

Evident in both of her memoirs, *The Times of My Life* (1978) and *A Glad Awakening* (1987), is Betty Ford's genuine fondness for people. But she reserves highest praise for a special few among them, such as her parents. Born in 1918, she was the only daughter of parents she describes as attractive, hardworking, and devoted to each other. Her father's sales career meant constant travel; Betty recalls with tenderness that her mother wrote him every night when he was away. Betty's mother was "rather formal" and protectively firm. She insisted her daughter wear hat and gloves when they went shopping and while Betty didn't object to the accessories, she tried to explain to her mother that other girls went without them. Mrs. Bloomer was adamant, and Betty comments almost as an afterthought that her mother might not always approve the more lenient approach Betty used with her own daughter. In her first memoir, *The Times of My Life*, Betty remembers her mother's resolve, this time in the midst of a rainstorm:

I can still feel my mother's arms around me, holding me as she stood on the porch and we watched a storm come rolling in across the lake, waves swelling, thunder crashing, lightning slicing the sky, and my mother telling me how beautiful it was. I found out later she was scared to death, but she taught me not to be afraid; I was safe in those arms. (B. Ford 1978, 7)

Later, she tried to emulate that resolve with her own children.

As an adolescent, Betty Ford enjoyed school and loved dancing classes. "Dance was my happiness," she wrote, and she dreamed of a professional dancing career. Her father's sudden, accidental death when Betty was sixteen meant, "It was rougher for everybody after that. . . . he was gone and we'd loved him" (B. Ford 1978, 22). Betty's dream of training in New York to further her career seemed extravagant and to her mother too risky for Betty at the time. "It wouldn't have done me any good to fuss, and I wasn't the kind to run away; the bond between my mother and me was strong" (23). Betty was, however, permitted to spend summers at the Bennington School of Dance in Vermont. It was there that she met Martha Graham, arguably one of the strongest and most lasting influences on Mrs. Ford's life. She says:

It's almost impossible to describe the impression made by Martha Graham on a girl who came to her straight out of high school. I worshipped her as a goddess. She was a tough disciplinarian. . . . But, as I've said before, I admired that kind of strictness. You can't be a dancer without it; not only your body, but also your mind must be disciplined. (B. Ford 1978, 24)

Betty went to New York to study with Martha Graham's troupe, and she also found work as a fashion model. But at her mother's urging she returned to

Grand Rapids where she taught dance. She married a friend from childhood, but it did not last. After the divorce, Betty devoted herself to a career in retail fashion at a local department store. In 1947, she met a very disciplined young man, Gerald R. Ford, whom Betty called "the most eligible bachelor in Grand Rapids" (B. Ford 1978, 47). She clearly admired his determination. In October 1948, they were married and within a month her husband defeated an incumbent congressman in his first election bid to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Neither Ford imagined that the victory in 1948 was the beginning of twenty-eight years in the nation's capital. The beginning of their marriage and the start of Jerry Ford's congressional career coincided. Betty recalls that she eagerly became dedicated to both. She was convinced that her husband's political success was made more likely by her support and involvement, but this did not always translate into traveling together back to the district, or routinely accompanying him on endless rounds of political and diplomatic engagements. In Betty's case, this meant remaining behind, managing a household flawlessly, and performing the role of both mother and father in the absence of her husband.

During these years, the Ford family grew to include three sons and a daughter, each of whom maintained an increasingly active schedule. Betty coordinated these schedules, provided all necessary transportation, and accepted the many volunteer tasks that school and extracurricular involvements demand of parents (B. Ford 1978, 64–69, 92–95). In addition, she did what many congressional spouses do to augment the constituent service provided by the congressional offices. She mastered the layout and schedule of activities in Washington, D.C., and became a travel guide for visitors from the Michigan district and elsewhere (B. Ford, 1978, 63). Furthermore, as her husband's stature and rank on the minority side of the aisle grew, so did Betty's understanding of the potential reach and influence of legislators' wives who volunteer in Washington-area civic and philanthropic activities. As her husband rose to the position of House minority leader, Betty's volunteer activities increased, and she helped to raise funds by drawing media attention and public support to a vast array of worthy causes (B. Ford 1978, 121–22). She goaded the wives of fellow Republican senators and congressmen into participating as models in charity fashion shows. Her own account is illustrative of her outlook:

Since Jerry had become an important Republican, I had taken it upon myself to shake up the Republican wives. I thought the Democratic wives were more effective. "If anybody asks you to do anything, say yes," I advised my peers. "Get off your duffs. It's always the Democratic wives who model in the fashion shows for Multiple Sclerosis or the Heart Fund." I coerced a lot of women who'd never done any modeling in their lives into chasing up and down runways for charity, and they got so they liked it. Nobody made me take on these jobs; I was convinced it was my duty. (B. Ford 1978, 121–22)

Betty's role as an active wife and mother sounds remarkably typical for a congressional wife of the '60s and early '70s. But the degree to which she succeeded is not. What is more typical in political situations such as hers is the gradual loss of attention to some aspect of life or another. The balance of family

life and political involvement can be daunting; the noteworthy element in this phase of Betty Ford's career while her husband served in Congress is her singular talent in achieving that balance. She was both model political partner and dedicated mother, and she remained as popular with congressional wives and with old friends in Grand Rapids as with the neighbors on Crown View Drive in Alexandria, Virginia. She had proven that she was a dedicated political partner who had even discovered ways to fit that lifestyle to her own particular talents. In some ways she appears to have thrived on the challenge of the balancing act. Had it not been for the aggravation of a pinched nerve that eventually led her to seek help from a psychiatrist, she might have survived painlessly, even triumphantly, a most demanding time (B. Ford 1978, 174-78).

In part, because of her physical discomfort, Betty had exacted a promise from her husband to retire from Congress. Watching his dream of becoming Speaker of the House grow dim in the early '70s, Jerry Ford had agreed to run one last time in 1974, and then retire. As minority leader he was attending more than 250 engagements annually and time with his family had become too infrequent. But the resignation of Vice President Agnew in the fall 1973 altered abruptly the Fords' plans. Instead of looking to retire, Gerald Ford was named Agnew's successor by President Nixon. Ten months later, Nixon resigned the presidency and on August 9, 1974, Gerald R. Ford was sworn in as president of the United States and Betty Bloomer Ford became first lady.

In the aftermath of the Watergate crisis, Gerald Ford made every effort to distance himself from former president Nixon and all that had characterized his presidency. Early on, he issued statements to indicate the kind of administration he intended to set up. The hallmark of his presidency, he vowed, would be a spirit of honesty and openness. Betty concurred in this commitment and tried to do her part. Both Fords were determined to be truthful and to them this meant being candid, even spontaneous in their interactions with the press. While not an uncommon initial approach for some candidates and their wives, political campaigns have a way of tempering this communication objective.

According to Jules Witcover in *No Way to Pick a President* (1999), national campaigns are essential to the electoral process. They help citizens assess candidates' fitness for office, and they help candidates articulate what values and initiatives to pursue. Campaigns also groom the teams of people closest to the candidates—family, staff, and aides—all of whom benefit from their interaction with media and public. They gather insights into national audience values and can then adapt their positions accordingly. Gerald and Betty Ford, thrust as they were into office by unusual circumstances, had no opportunity to learn from such national campaigns.

Gerald Ford, however, was accustomed to campaigning for state office; indeed, his seniority in Congress had been earned by twelve successful campaigns for the Michigan House seat. His constant travel on behalf of Republican colleagues had made him a familiar face across the country as well. But when Betty Ford considered what a national constituency might expect from her as a first lady, her thoughts turned to Grand Rapids and Crown View Drive. She had no familiarity whatsoever with any constituency beyond the Michigan congress-

sional district. Her Alexandria neighbors who knew her best liked her just as she was. Historian James T. Baker wrote: "Untrained to be a President's wife, she could be just the one to turn the First Lady into a human being at last" (Baker 1976, 864). And Anthony quoted Mrs. Ford as saying "I've spent too many years as me. . . . I can't suddenly turn into a princess" (Anthony 1991, 224).

Rhetorical Activities as First Lady

"What state dinner?"

Less than twenty-four hours after her husband's swearing-in Betty Ford received a call informing her that within the week she was scheduled to host a White House dinner for King Hussein and Queen Alia of Jordan. For events such as these, Betty's years as a Washington hostess came in handy. "I've been coming up through the ranks, so it isn't like being thrown into the front lines straight from Grand Rapids," she reminds readers in her 1978 memoir (162). By experience thus mobilized, the new first lady and her husband made known their intended *modus operandi*, a policy of availability and openness. President Ford, addressing a joint session of Congress on August 12, "[told] legislators he [did not] want a honeymoon with them. 'I want a good marriage. . . . My office door has always been open and that is how it is going to be at the White House'" (B. Ford 1978, 163).

In this spirit, members of the Ford family made themselves accessible to the media. Statements made by the Ford children, however, promptly placed the president in the position of accounting for their remarks and dissociating himself from some of their more extreme statements. Ford explained that his children had always been encouraged to speak their minds, though he did not always share their views.

Betty, too, was eager to meet with members of the press and did so in the East Room of the White House less than a month after her arrival. In what Gutin calls the first official press conference by a first lady in twenty-two years (Gutin 1989, 131), Mrs. Ford answered questions and echoed her husband's acknowledgment that as parents they made no attempt to regulate their children's comments. Relaxed and unrehearsed, Betty's maternal persona projected the means by which she sought to identify with the American press and public. Determined to convey accessibility, she announced those programs to which she would direct her attention and presented an agenda of her own. She spoke in favor of ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment and of increased participation by women in public office. On the issue of abortion she expressed support for the pro-choice position.

These were not official positions of the Ford administration. As the president had always emphasized, the first lady had a right to her own opinion and she felt free to offer it. Mrs. Ford herself writes:

I tried to be honest; I tried not to dodge subjects. I felt the public had a right to know where I stood. Nobody had to feel the way I felt, I wasn't forcing my

opinions on anybody, but if someone asked me a question, I gave that person a straight answer. I've been told that I didn't play it safe enough, but my husband has always been totally supportive. He's never stepped on my toes; he's never turned around and complained, "Well, that was a dumb thing to say." (B. Ford 1978, 205-6)

In any case, it became clear almost from the beginning of Ford's term that the statements coming from the East and West Wings of the White House in this administration might be distinctly different messages.

In mid-September 1974, President Ford issued a pardon for his predecessor, Richard M. Nixon. The pardon overwhelmed all actions prior to and many that followed Ford's decision. Betty recalls, "Jerry's administration had begun with a flood of good will and good wishes from all kinds of people who liked his decency, his friendliness, his accessibility, his ability to laugh at himself" (B. Ford 1978, 180). This amicable atmosphere (note Betty's use of the same "Midwestern" adjectives!) might have continued indefinitely, but President Ford's pardon of his predecessor marked its end. Then another one of those dramatic, unpredictable circumstances intervened to affect public opinion of the first lady in a manner both sympathetic and compelling.

Just weeks after the pardon, a malignancy was discovered during a routine medical examination of Mrs. Ford, and she underwent almost immediately a radical mastectomy. Gratitude for the assured success of the operation merged in Betty Ford's reaction to the ordeal with a sudden awareness of the power she held as a first lady:

I got a lot of credit for having gone public with my mastectomy, but if I hadn't been the wife of the President of the United States, the press would not have come racing after my story. . . . Even before I was able to get up, I lay in bed and watched television and saw on the news shows lines of women queued up to go in for breast examinations because of what had happened to me. Lying in the hospital, thinking of all those women going for cancer checkups because of me, I'd come to recognize more clearly the power of the woman in the White House. Not my power, but the power of the position, a power which could be used to help. (B. Ford 1978, 194)

It is hard to imagine anything that could have brought this realization into focus with greater clarity or impact.

Recognition of the power of the office coincided with an oversight by the president, which, although pale by comparison, heightened the Fords' sensitivity to image and protocol. In November 1974, not long after Betty's return to the White House following her surgery, President Ford departed for a scheduled visit to Japan. At a formal dinner, he was photographed with Emperor Hirohito. Ford's dress trousers, "left over from college," appeared too short, and he suffered a fair share of ridicule from the media. Betty commented: "Well, if you're going to assume the office, you have to assume the striped pants that go with it. The public expects a president to dress well; he can't just say to hell with protocol" (B. Ford, 197).

As Betty gained experience in the office of first lady, she increasingly un-

derstood the purposes protocol serves beyond mere conformity to expectations. She acknowledged this to the Carters who followed the Fords into the White House when she said:

The news out of the Carter camp was that they were going to do away with protocol, but I think they're gradually coming around to understanding there's a reason for the forms and the ceremonies, a certain comfort in being prepared. (Howard 1974, 68)

The irony of this statement, coming from a woman hailed for her spontaneity and her "impromptu valor" is striking. The context of her statement was intended as commentary on the comparative advantages of coming to the White House from a House or Senate seat as opposed to a gubernatorial position. Nevertheless, after two and a half years and a presidential race that had proved grueling for the Fords, this first lady who didn't stand on ceremony had acquired an appreciation for decorum. Admittedly, she was not a fan of protocol for its own sake, but she wisely recognized its advantages in enhancing incumbency and in sustaining a certain public ethos.

There were times when she intentionally flaunted traditional norms and was heralded for doing so. Congressional wives invited to lunch at the White House were seated by an egalitarian method, reaching for a number in a hat, rather than the routine hierarchical arrangement according to their husbands' level of seniority or leadership rank. On more than one occasion, she impishly clowned for reporters, and they demonstrated their appreciation by showering her with favorable attention. If taking credit for her husband's appointment of a woman, Carla Hills, to his cabinet, or an insistence that her mentor Martha Graham be awarded one of the nation's highest honors for her contribution to the arts seemed effrontery on Betty's part to some, it was praised by others. And when Rabbi Sage suffered a heart attack just as he was about to make a presentation to Mrs. Ford at the 1976 Jewish National Fund Dinner, she spontaneously led the assembled guests in prayer, amazing many by her sensitivity and presence of mind in a crisis. Betty Ford abandoned her prepared script and stated impromptu:

Can we all bow our heads for a moment for Rabbi Sage? He is going to the hospital and needs our prayers. Would you rise and bow your heads. (Pause) I'll have to say it in my own words. Dear Father in Heaven, we ask thy blessing on this magnificent man, Rabbi Sage. We know you can take care of him. We know you can bring him back to us. We know you are our leader. You are our strength. You are what life is all about. Love and love of fellowman is what we all need and depend on. Please, dear God. Let's all join together in a silent prayer for Rabbi Sage. (Silent prayer approximately 1 minute) Thank you very much. I know it will mean a great deal to him, and I know it means a great deal to me. (Ford Library, 1976)

In the aftermath of her episode with breast cancer, Mrs. Ford was unanimously praised for being so open with the public about her surgery, prognosis, and treatment in the months following the operation. In a phone interview with

Linda Hobgood (2000b), Jane Broomfield emphasized the unprecedented nature of the publicity that surrounded Betty Ford's cancer surgery. Prior to her potentially life-threatening experience, publication of such personal information and private details would have been unthinkable. As with so many events in her life, Betty Ford was denied the luxury of time to consider how she would share the news of her malignancy. Having acknowledged that she had sought help from a psychiatrist and benefited from his assistance, she must have judged breast cancer to be at least as important. Moreover, the first lady's experience might help to allay fears about cancer in other victims. Her decision to allow such publicity is one of several examples of what Gould refers to as "the combination of personality and circumstance [that] made Betty Ford a valuable First Lady who could not have been more in touch with her times" (Gould 1996, 553). After speaking with Mrs. Ford in a telephone interview, Nichola Gutgold (1998) calls this a reflection of Betty's "impromptu valor."

Still, there were those "collisions" noted by Anthony among others. Less than a year after her bout with breast cancer, Betty Ford began receiving, instead of the thousands of encouraging greetings from well-wishers around the world, expressions of indignation and resentment from those whose support the president most needed. This unfriendly mail, and the less-than-kind editorials that appeared in late August and September 1975, seemed something other than signs of a woman "in touch with her times."

Eleven days following Gerald Ford's official announcement that he planned to run for president in the upcoming 1976 election, CBS-TV promised "an unusual interview with an unusual woman . . . completely frank as she discusses her attitudes toward her role" for its popular Sunday evening program *60 Minutes* on August 21, 1975. Gerald Ford had just marked the first anniversary of his swearing-in as president. Morley Safer, in an exclusive interview with Mrs. Ford in the family quarters of the White House, selected a series of questions, some never before asked of a sitting first lady. According to Anthony:

She expounded on past revelations, speaking of seeing a psychiatrist, and on the Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* judgment. The First Lady said it was "the best thing in the world . . . a great, great decision. . . . She thought smoking marijuana had become as routine for youth as the "first beer" had been for her generation. The one answer of Mrs. Ford's that would spin the nation's TV antennae, however, was not a view she'd previously expressed. When asked about whether it was immoral for young people to live together before marriage, she retorted, "Well, they are, aren't they?" She thought it might even limit the high divorce rate. Then Safer followed up with "the question." "What if Susan Ford came to you and said, "Mother, I'm having an affair?" For a brief second, Betty was silent, then calmly replied, "Well, I wouldn't be surprised . . . she's a perfectly normal human being . . . if she wanted to continue . . . I would certainly counsel and advise her on the subject." (Anthony 1991, 248)

Betty Ford described what followed in a wry understatement: "My stock with the public did not go up. It went down, rapidly" (B. Ford 1978, 206). *Newsweek* reported that *60 Minutes* received more mail following the Betty Ford interview than at any time in the history of the CBS program. According to

journalists Peer, Whitmore, and Whitman, "by October, the mail totaled more than thirty-three thousand pieces, with letters opposing her opinion outnumbering those supporting it by two to one" (1975, 19). Gould called the reaction to the interview "astonishing" (1996, 548), and Anthony listed a variety of organizations and individuals who took issue with Mrs. Ford's comments: "the Los Angeles Police Department [and] a Texas minister [W. A. Criswell who] called it [a] 'gutter type mentality'" (1991, 250). Betty Ford became the first first lady since Frances Cleveland to be censured by the Women's Christian Temperance Union (Peer et al. 1975, 19). President Ford himself anticipated fallout: "Jerry remained his usual dear funny self," recalled his wife. "He told the press that when he first heard what I'd said he thought he'd lost ten million votes. 'Then when I read about it, I raised that to twenty million'" (B. Ford 1978, 208). Prominent individuals including evangelist Billy Graham and popular entertainer Bing Crosby took exception to Mrs. Ford's comments. The governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn were asked the same question about their daughter and reported they would be shocked by the circumstances that would not have surprised Mrs. Ford.

While most who registered a negative response cited disagreement with specific positions taken in the interview, at least one magazine, *Newsweek*, reported the obvious: "Not all Americans share Betty Ford's views—especially those who believe a First Lady should exemplify moral rectitude in speech as well as behavior" (Peer, Whitmore, and Whitman 1975, 19). Another editorial writer objected to her comments as representing "a manifest abuse of her position as First Lady. They constituted a failure of taste that reflected a failure of understanding":

the issue is therefore, one of propriety. As First Lady, Mrs. Ford enjoys a wide audience and some cultural power. This circumstance prescribes a sense of restraint. Mrs. Ford ought to know that it is not up to her to rewrite the Ten Commandments over nationwide TV. At the very least she ought to realize that many Americans entertain very different convictions on drug use and abortion. . . . What this suggests on this and previous occasions, is not so much a beguiling "candor" as the desire to exploit her position in order to establish a particular public personality. ("This Week" 1975, 922)

Weighing the prospects for incumbent Ford and his major challenger for the Republican nomination, Ronald Reagan, columnist George Will quipped: "If Reagan supporters had their way, Mrs. Ford would have a prime time television talk show" (Will 1975, 984).

In her own defense Betty Ford wrote: "Morley Safer caught me off balance" (B. Ford 1978, 207). She had expected to be asked questions about women's rights, especially about the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). In early 1975, thirty-four states had ratified the amendment, which was four short of the number needed for its passage. Several state legislatures were in the midst of considering the measure. Mrs. Ford was an active proponent of the ERA, lobbying actively for its passage in several states such as North Dakota, Illinois, Nevada, Missouri, North Carolina, Indiana, and Arizona. Members of

her staff provided her with background and tips on key legislators, whom she contacted and asked for support. With phone calls, letters, and telegrams, she laid out the case for the ERA (Gutin and Tobin 1993, 628).

After the interview, according to Gutin, Mrs. Ford was terrified by the reaction to her remarks. While Betty had vowed that nothing would interfere with her defense of women's rights, several of the questions posed by Safer had less to do with women's rights and more to do with parental responsibility. Such issues went to the heart of public sentiment in 1975; these were among the key values around which emerging candidates for the presidency were developing positions on which to run for office. If Betty was terrified, it was due to the growing certainty that her remarks might be a political liability for her husband (Gutin 1989, 132).

It was clear to all who knew her that Betty Ford was, above all else, a supportive spouse. That her answers to Safer's questions might have negatively affected President Ford's standing in public opinion surveys was anathema to her intentions. Anthony has observed that many Americans did not actually watch the Sunday night program, but instead heard or read sensationalized interpretations of it the next day (1991, 250). Stories about her comments far exceeded the dramatic impact of her own statements, removed as they were from their context. Betty had not experienced firsthand the epidemic influence of a news story in which she was the main figure; no sooner had she been buoyed by praise for her courage in facing cancer than she was cast into disfavor for frankness unbecoming to her stature.

In a personal interview with Linda Hobgood (2000a), Joe Bartlett, senior Republican staff officer of the House of Representatives who worked closely with Gerald Ford as minority leader, recalls Betty as "gracious always, to an incredible degree. . . . If she had an agenda it certainly was not obvious and it was not something that she brought into your presence. When you saw her you didn't see her as someone advocating a program. What you saw was a supportive wife." Her candor on *60 Minutes* was more a rhetorical slip easily attributed to Betty Ford's limited experience in such media settings and to her impulsive frankness, suddenly more a liability than an asset. The incident was hardly a premeditated declaration of values she chose to present. It represents a classic example of "gotcha" in televised interview technique extending to the wife of a sitting president.

If it is true that being an asset to her husband mattered most to Betty Ford and if she further believed that the causes she supported would fare best by returning her husband to the White House, the interview itself merits a second look. An "old friend" of the Fords told Jane Howard of the *New York Times*: "Jerry's always turned to Betty for the sensitive point of view. . . . He's often said she was the smart one when it came to politics because she sees the forest instead of the trees" (Howard 1974, 66). Agreeing to chat with Morley Safer was wholly consistent with Mrs. Ford's policy of openness with the media. However, the timing of the taping on August 10, immediately following a demanding trip to Eastern Europe with her husband was poorly planned by her staff. Press accounts of the European summit included speculation as to Mrs.

Ford's health and were based on obvious signs of exhaustion in Belgrade, Warsaw, and Bucharest. In addition, she admitted that the sheets of papers Safer held were filled with questions that "terrified" her, and she claimed that the fact that "they were taping" made her feel forced to answer the questions posed. Her reply to Safer's leading, even amphibolous question about people living together outside marriage—"Well, they are, aren't they?"—was actually very savvy, and shrewdly noncommittal. It established a rhetorical stance and cued her interviewer that she did not intend to use the interview to stand in judgment of others. Safer shifted, realizing he was eliciting the most "newsworthy" material from questions about her personal experience—the same realm in which she was notoriously loath to dwell. If she was uncomfortable with "small talk about herself," she was not about to speak for the actions of her adolescent and grown children. She defended their capacity for making wise choices and went on record as saying she would be there for them in the event of unwise choices. She allowed youth a certain immaturity.

There is reason to believe that Betty Ford was eager to identify with, rather than alienate, as many Americans as possible. In her support of women's rights, for example, she presented herself as a traditional wife and homemaker who also had a career outside the home and understood the challenges of women in the workplace. She saw herself as an ideal spokesperson because she could be a bridge between women's traditional values and those values favored by advocates of the Equal Rights Amendment or proponents of the pro-choice decision rendered by the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade*. It is arguable that no two issues sparked more controversy among women in the latter half of the twentieth century, and they both reached an inflammatory tenor during the Ford administration. Whether she wished to be or not, Betty Ford found herself near the center of power when women in America were becoming more politically divided than ever, at least in a public way. This may be why, beyond matters of decorum that change over time, public figures—especially in a democracy, and particularly unelected leaders in a democracy, that is, first ladies—are well advised to maintain a certain distance. But this distance is contingent, of course, upon a first lady's desire to contribute to her husband's political success. There was no question as to Betty's devotion to Gerald Ford's success as president, but in trying to relate to and unite such disparate constituencies she instead drew attention to their differences. There is something paradoxical in Betty Ford's approach: those who admired her traditional life found fault with the liberal views she expressed, while those who favored her liberal views may have had little in common with her traditional lifestyle. When Mrs. Ford was first lady she was truly located at an unusual cultural crossroad of values.

Had any other woman leader of her day made remarks similar to Betty Ford's it would not have made news. Betty Ford had probably expressed many, if not all of these opinions before. That as first lady she expressed these thoughts and did so in public where young and old alike could see and read her comments sparked the charges of impropriety and irresponsibility. First ladies, Baker observed, are eminently imitable (Baker 1976, 863).

Anthony contends: "to present political motivation . . . one must at least

attempt to understand human motivation" (Anthony 1991, 18). In 1975, *60 Minutes* sought an interview with Betty Ford because she was the first lady and, not incidentally, the wife of a newly declared presidential candidate. But this woman, so comfortable with her own identity, knew better than most that "First Lady" was a title she just happened to hold. How long she would be a first lady was, she understood, beyond her control. As Mrs. Ford put it in a conversation with Jane Howard: "I don't feel that because I'm First Lady I'm any different from what I was before. It can happen to anyone. After all, it has happened to anyone" (Howard 1974, 87). The fact that she was not subdued by the position may have angered and irritated many. But beyond the causes she espoused and the husband she clearly admired and adored was an incorrigible "Midwestern" honesty. There was also that sense of common decency; Betty may well have known friends or neighbors who had struggled as parents with the very issues Safer raised in his interview. She had no intention of permitting anything she might say to hint of condemnation. Friendship meant a great deal to Betty Ford, and on those rare occasions when being first lady and being a friend appeared to necessitate a choice, Betty Ford invariably chose the latter.

The public came to see and value that. By the end of 1975, national polls showed the first lady's popularity was rising. From a dismal approval rating of 50 percent, she had soared in less than three months to 75 percent. *Newsweek* called her "Woman of the Year." The manner in which she and her staff were able to bring about this change in public perception clearly shows their growth in rhetorical acumen. One of the ways Betty Ford changed negative perceptions was to answer every adversarial letter she received in the aftermath of the *60 Minutes* program. Significantly, her carefully worded reply was intentionally shared with the press. An excerpt, in which she defended her actions as reflective of any "mother next door" who is coping with the challenges of raising children in changing times, read:

We (Betty and Jerry Ford) have come to this sharing of outlook through communication, not coercion. I want my children to know that their concerns—their doubts and difficulties—whatever they may be, can be discussed with the two people in this world who care the most—their mother and father. (Truman 1995, 140)

Legacy

Gerald Ford came tantalizingly close to winning the presidential election of 1976. Results were not known until well into the night, and Ford, having lost his voice in the final hectic days of the campaign was unable to speak above a whisper. Betty, who had exhausted herself throughout the long campaign, was by family consensus elected to read Ford's concession speech the following morning in the White House pressroom. The departing president and first lady retired to Rancho Mirage, California.

Failure to appreciate what Mrs. Ford described as being "an ordinary woman who was called onstage at an extraordinary time," dims regard for the

remarkable stamina and resiliency imbued in the character of this nation's forty-second first lady. Any one of the major crises of these years—the suddenness of taking office, cancer and chemotherapy, the pardon of Richard Nixon, the hostility of the Equal Rights Amendment debate, the unanticipated political schisms that erupted over *Roe v. Wade*, and the *60 Minutes* interview and backlash—might easily have defeated someone with less fortitude. That her daughter Susan could say, following a White House state dinner that she looked across the room and saw “the same old Mother” is undoubtedly the compliment Betty Ford would most cherish.

Betty Ford is one of a handful of first ladies whose lives after leaving the White House has been enriched. But before her life became better, it first became bleak. Mrs. Ford acknowledged, in 1978, her addiction to alcohol and prescription medication. Her treatment, like so many things in her life, was public knowledge and led to greater national awareness of this life-endangering disease. The Betty Ford Clinic serves a worldwide clientele in the struggle to overcome substance dependencies. For her part in drawing attention to these challenges without drawing attention to herself, Betty Ford has, like her mother in the midst of a raging storm, sought to calm fears and lend a certain comfort. What Betty considered so “ordinary” about herself—her outspoken candidness—turned out to be an “extraordinary” part of her legacy to the institution of first lady.

Notes

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Chronology of Major Speeches

March 22, 1975	Gridiron Dinner, Washington, D.C.
October 10, 1975	International Women's Year Conference, Cleveland, Ohio
November 7, 1975	American Cancer Society Dinner, New York City
March 26, 1976	American Cancer Society's Courage Award, White House
April 8, 1976	<i>Ladies' Home Journal</i> Woman of the Year Award, New York City
June 22, 1976	Jewish National Fund Dinner, New York City
October 14, 1976	Martha Graham Medal of Freedom
November 1, 1976	Paul Harris Rotary Fellow Award and Rally, Harrisburg, PA
November 3, 1976	Concession Speech for Gerald R. Ford
December 1, 1976	American Cancer Society Communicator of Hope Award, New York City
December 19, 1976	University of Michigan Commencement, Ann Arbor, Michigan

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