



Rising to the Occasion

Rising to the Occasion focuses on the role of eight First Ladies during times of war, assassinations, and national tragedies. First Ladies featured in this exhibit rallied people at times of national hardship. They were determined, patriotic, and sympathetic to the needs of a suffering and confused country. Privately they grieved, but took the initiative to calm public fear. They were courageous enough to do what was right rather than what was popular. All were confident in their husbands' leadership, unflinching in their loyalty to them, and served as a safe harbor and trusted partner to their President.



Dolley Madison
National First Ladies' Library Collection

The country in wartime: First Ladies fight back

Dolley Madison and The War of 1812 (1812 - 1815)

During the War of 1812, the British considered Dolley Madison (1768-1849) a coveted war prize - a rare distinction for a woman in her time. As the social leader of the country, Mrs. Madison's "Wednesday Night Receptions" saw an increase from 300 to 500 in weekly attendance during the war. Since this was the first declared war of the new nation, the popularity and coverage of Dolley's social events served as assurance of confidence and strength. Therefore when the British torched the President's House on August 24, 1814, the charred ruins of the structure was demoralizing in its symbolism.

As the enemy advanced on Washington City, Dolley's own safety was of no concern to her; foremost in her thoughts

were the safety of her husband and making sure important government documents were not looted or destroyed by the British. She stayed alert to the chaos as people fled the city, bravely refusing to leave until she had carefully packed as many valuables as possible. She would become famous for saving the beloved Gilbert Stuart painting of George Washington that hangs in the White House to this day. The patriotic and determined Dolley Madison returned to the smoldering ruins of the city optimistic for the future. While Congress heatedly argued whether to move the nation's capital to Philadelphia, New York, or Baltimore, Mrs. Madison began entertaining in one of the few homes not destroyed in "Washington City" by fire; the Octagon House. Though it was smaller and less elegant inside, people "squeezed" in to enjoy the genuine warmth of this remarkable woman. "Queen" Dolley continued her rein and a grateful people began to return and rebuild Washington, DC.

Mary Lincoln and The Civil War (1861 - 1865)

Though Mary Lincoln (1818-1882) was vilified during the Civil War, her wartime efforts were no less important or impressive. Many families from the border state of Kentucky fought on both sides of the Civil War; the Todd family was no exception. Mary's brother, half-brothers and brothers-in-law all fought for the Confederacy. Mary, however, remained staunchly committed to the Union and her husband's leadership. The South considered her a traitor; the North suspected her of treachery.

She was criticized for using government funds to purchase badly needed china for State Dinners. Mrs. Lincoln chose a deep purple border for each piece. This color was deemed a symbolic statement of her royal attitude. Like Dolley Madison, she gave many receptions for foreign heads of state - but unlike Dolley's soirees, Mary's were judged excessive for a war-torn country. Following the death of her son Willie in 1862, Mrs. Lincoln was in deep mourning; customary for the Victorian Era. The absence of receptions during her

period of mourning - according to her critics - was a sign of lax attention to her duties as hostess.

There was scant media attention paid to Mrs. Lincoln's frequent visits to hospitalized Union troops. She bought and served food to the injured, placed flowers at their bedsides, wrote letters to their loved ones, and read books to them. She helped raise money for needed hospital supplies. Mary reviewed the troops in Washington alongside her husband and sometimes with her son, Tad. The Union troops were so grateful for her support and care that they dubbed "Camp Mary Lincoln" in her honor.



Mary Lincoln
*National First Ladies'
Library Collection*

Edith Wilson and World War I (American invasion 1917 - 1918)

In her autobiography, *My Memoir*, Edith Wilson (1872-1961) confides that her first concern during World War I was for her husband's physical and mental health. She was relieved whenever he was able to take time for personal enjoyment from the long toiling hours of warfare concern. She planned her activities around his; her evenings were devoted to sitting near him as she knitted garment after garment for the Red Cross to send to overseas troops. She was entrusted by President Wilson to decode the top secret messages between him and his close advisor on foreign policy, Colonel Edward M. House.

Her patriotic dedication during World War I was tireless. In addition to knitting, she set up a Red Cross unit in a White House guest room for the express purpose of sewing garments and bandages. Edith was the first woman to sign

the Food Administration pledge for food conservation. She carefully observed the White House rations of wheatless, meatless, heatless, and gasless days during the week. Mrs. Wilson was dubbed "The Shepardess" when a flock of sheep was purchased to trim the White House lawn. The sheared wool was donated and auctioned to raise funds for the Red Cross. Taking the afternoon shift, she donned a Red Cross uniform and took a bus to Union Train Station to serve coffee and sandwiches to the young servicemen leaving for Europe. Most of the men never recognized her; however, the times that President Wilson could pick her up the crowd would break into cheers. She would observe the warm bond between the men and the President, but on the way home she would witness his private agony.



Edith Wilson
*National First Ladies' Library
Collection*

Barbara Bush and The Persian Gulf War (1990 - 1991)

On August 2, 1990, Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces bombed Kuwait City, defiantly ignoring the ultimatum of military intervention issued by thirty-four countries from the United Nations. It was clear that President George H. W. Bush needed to stay in constant touch with other heads of state since the U.S. would carry the majority of the military might. The upheaval it would cause thousands of military and their families as American troops began arriving in Saudi Arabia worried the President and First Lady. But Barbara Bush (1925 -) also proudly pointed out, "They (were) the only thing keeping the peace in the Middle East." That November, the Bushes spent Thanksgiving Day in the Persian Gulf with the troops. They shared Thanksgiving services with the crew aboard the USS Nassau, Thanksgiving dinner with the 197th Infantry Brigade, visited an air base in Dhahran, and spent time with a Marine Tactical Unit. Barbara wrote in her diary, "Thanksgiving Day, 1990 - The best we ever had."

Operation Desert Storm was a war fought for a specific

purpose: to stop Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Once the mission was accomplished, the U.S. and its allies called a halt to the conflict. President George H. W. Bush officially declared an air attack against military targets in Iraq and Kuwait on January 16, 1991. The ground war started February 24th with a cease-fire on February 27th. Iraq agreed to abide by the resolutions set by the U.N. on March 6th and Desert Storm was officially over by April 6th. Mrs. Bush had her own personal crisis when she broke her left leg two days before the air attacks; a war was fought

Barbara Bush
*George Bush Presidential Library
& Museum*



and over in the time it took for her leg to mend. Barbara wrote in her autobiography, *Barbara Bush: A Memoir of the tension filled days in the silent White House once war was declared*. Air travel was affected by fear of terrorist attacks, and commercial flights suffered huge losses. Barbara began flying commercial airlines to visit military base after military base across the country. She greatly worried about the toll the Gulf War took on her husband; he privately grieved over any grave news regarding American and Allied troops. In

1993, the former-President and Mrs. Bush were invited for a visit by the Kuwaiti government. They listened to accounts of horror endured by the people, and witnessed the devastation of buildings and blackened oil fields. Yet people were busy rebuilding their lives and their cities, and patches of green sprouted through the scarred earth. Writing of this moving experience, Barbara noted, "...nature and the human spirit are amazing."

Presidential Assassination: First Ladies' private loss and public mourning

The United States is almost 236 years old – a very young country. Yet in that time, its people endured four Presidential assassinations. Americans struggled to understand the senseless death of a mortal man who was also the symbol of a free nation. During the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy, a "blues singer" from New York was quoted, "It's not so hard to believe, it's just so hard to take."

Four First Ladies lost their husbands, but like all Americans they also lost their President by assassination. Of the four, only two played a large role in holding the nation together. People focused their attention on those two First Ladies, Lucretia Garfield and Jacqueline Kennedy, as they led by example.

*Lucretia Garfield & 80 days that changed
her life (July 2, 1881 - September 19, 1881)*

President Garfield was leaving the heat of Washington, DC to speak to his alma mater, Williams College before rejoining his family along the New Jersey shoreline on July 2, 1881. His wife, Lucretia Garfield (1832-1918), was recovering from malaria in a cottage near Elberon, New Jersey. At the Union Train Station, an assassin fired a shot into James Garfield's lower back. He fell to the floor, but did not lose consciousness. Not understanding the cause of bacterial infection in 1881, several doctors stuck their fingers into the entry wound in an unsuccessful effort to find the bullet lodged within.

The President's first wish was to have word sent to his wife to return to the White House as soon as possible. Lucretia arrived the next evening and went immediately to his room. Her calm and confidence in his recovery never wavered; she was the last to give up hope. She listened to the doctors recommendations and faithfully followed the restrictions of his diet. They recommended extreme rest with no

stimulation; she agreed to have the three oldest children's visits restricted to once a week and sent her two youngest sons back to Ohio. She fanned her husband as he lay in the extreme heat of the Washington summer. She helplessly watched his suffering as his body wasted away. Lucretia sat next to his bedside on a special train that took them to a cottage in Elberon, New Jersey. She read him newspapers, telegrams and letters from well-wishers along the route. On September 19, 1881, as his heart stopped beating, she held his hand quietly. Once he was gone, she went to her room and privately mourned, but soon returned and sat alone beside him for some time. When his body was returned to Washington to lie in state at the Capitol, she requested a private viewing alone in the rotunda with him for the last time. She made the arrangements for his funeral and attended the proceedings heavily veiled. Her quiet devotion made her a hero to her country.



Lucretia Garfield
*National First Ladies'
Library Collection*

*Jacqueline Kennedy: the fraction of a second
that changed her life (November 22, 1963)*

At 11:37 a.m. Friday morning, November 22, 1963 Jackie Kennedy (1929-1994) arrived with her husband on Air Force One at Love Field airport near Dallas, Texas. This was a delightful surprise to many; it was only her second official appearance since the recent death of her infant son, Patrick. As always, the media focused on her. She shook the hands of well-wishers along the airport fence with President Kennedy before climbing into the backseat of the Presidential limousine beside him. By 11:52 a.m. the motorcade was heading to downtown Dallas for a political parade. So many people turned out for a glimpse of the President and First Lady that the crowd spilled out into the streets. Seconds after the motorcade turned left onto Elm Street,



Jacqueline Kennedy
*National First Ladies' Library
Collection*

the assassin fired the first of three shots. As the President turned to the right to wave to the crowd, the first shot struck his head; at 12:30 p.m. he collapsed over onto his wife's shoulder. A second shot rang out, then a third shot that again struck the President's head. In the chaos and frenzy, Jackie cradled and shielded her husband in her lap as the car sped to Parkland Memorial Hospital. The doctors examined the President in the emergency room as Jackie stood outside the door. She finally insisted on being allowed to enter. When she was given permission, the First Lady stayed in a corner of the small room. As the priest gave her husband his last rites, she took his hand in her own. She took a ring from her finger and placed it on one of his. As she prepared to leave the room she bent down and kissed his right foot. Lyndon Johnson learned that he was President by 1:00 p.m. and was ordered to board Air Force One and return to Washington, but he refused to leave without Mrs. Kennedy and her husband's casket. Once aboard, Jackie

stood beside Johnson as he took the oath of office. Johnson stated, "I shall never forget her bravery, nobility and dignity." The same plane that landed at 11:37 a.m. took off at 2:40 p.m. and Jackie left Dallas a widow.

Mrs. Kennedy stayed by her deceased husband's side, riding in the ambulance with the casket to Bethesda Hospital. While waiting there, she called the White House to request a book containing the details of Abraham Lincoln's funeral; she would plan John F. Kennedy's funeral proceedings to resemble that of Lincoln - another slain leader of the United States. The casket was placed in the East Room of the White House early the next morning, and Jackie kissed her husband for the last time before it was sealed. Jackie and her children

began the country's public mourning by following the casket to the Capitol Rotunda to lie in state on Sunday morning. She requested an eternal flame be placed near the gravesite at Arlington National Cemetery. On Monday, the casket was moved with a long procession of dignitaries from around the world to Saint Matthew's Cathedral for the funeral service before its final journey and resting place at Arlington. Mrs. Kennedy lit the eternal flame at the end of the burial service. When she returned to the White House, she gathered family members together to have a small party for her son's third birthday; in the face of tragedy and sorrow, she remembered to celebrate life.

National tragedies: First Ladies comfort

National tragedies threaten what our country stands for, freedom and democracy. Though unexpected attacks are shocking, they have a unifying affect on the citizens of the United States. No matter where a disaster may strike within this country in places like Oklahoma City, New York or Pearl Harbor, history has proven that Americans all unite as one on the stricken part of its great nation.

*Eleanor Roosevelt and the Bombing of
Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941)*

On Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962) was looking forward to a luncheon with Franklin and some of his cousins. The United States remained neutral, but President Roosevelt was increasingly worried and occupied with the war raging in Europe. So she wasn't surprised when he sent notice at the last minute that he would not attend. It wasn't until lunch was over that the party learned of the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese air forces. In her autobiography, *This I Remember*, she recalled the stunned silence and that all the guests dispersed. Then Eleanor did what she always did – she got to work. She immediately sat down and wrote her address to the nation for her popular Sunday night radio show. She wrote in her memoirs, "It is curious how at such times one's anxiety for the nation and one's personal anxiety merge as one goes over and over all the things that have happened and may happen. For a woman, the personal side comes more strongly to the fore." Her broadcast that night was a personal



Eleanor Roosevelt
*Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential
Library and Museum, Hyde Park, NY*

call of support for all the mothers, like herself, who had children who would now be called into active military service.

Eleanor left the next day for the west coast with others from the Office of Civilian Defense as a symbol of hope for public morale. Upon landing in Los Angeles, she rode to each stop by night train with concealed lighting. Air travel was forbidden after dark since the attack on Pearl

Harbor. Preparation for war meant she ordered black-out curtains for the White House, but she would have rather avoided the basement shelter being constructed below the Treasury Department. Gas masks were dispersed and air-raid drills were held for White House staff. The Secret Service closed the White House to visitors, and gun crews were placed on the roof and East and West wings. The only restriction she appreciated was the quiet it afforded her husband when planes no longer flew over the White House. During her South Pacific tour in 1943, Mrs. Roosevelt observed the salvage operations at the Pearl Harbor Navy Yard and visited wounded service men at the U. S. Naval Hospital nearby. But she was personally aghast and publicly opposed to the relocation of Japanese-American citizens to internment camps – the remnants of the fear and distrust caused by the attack. After visiting a camp in 1943, she poignantly wrote, "We have no common race in this country, but we have an ideal to which all of us are loyal: we cannot progress if we look down upon any group of people amongst us because of race or religion. Every citizen in this country has a right to our basic freedoms, to justice and to equality of opportunity. We retain the right to lead our individual lives as we please, but we can only do so if we grant to others the freedoms that we wish for ourselves."

*Laura Bush and the Terrorists Attack
(September 11, 2001)*



Laura Bush (1946 -) was preparing for a busy Tuesday as she went over her statement to the Senate Education Committee early that September morning. Later that afternoon she and President Bush would be hosting the annual Congressional Picnic on the South Lawn of the White House. As she was leaving for the Capitol a few minutes before 9:00, the head of the Secret Service whispered that a plane had crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. As her car motored up Pennsylvania Avenue, she received word that the South Tower had also been hit. As she stated in her memoir, *Spoken from the Heart*, "In the time it had taken to drive the less than two miles between the White House and the Capitol, the world as I knew it had irrevocably changed." Once news was received of the plane crash into the Pentagon, all were ordered to evacuate the White House and the Capitol immediately. Laura and her staff were relocated to the Secret Service headquarters as Flight 93 crashed into a Pennsylvania field. In an underground

room she witnessed the mayhem above on television. As she watched the towers give way and collapse, she said personal prayers for the victims. Reunited with her husband in the underground Presidential Emergency Operations Center beneath the White House that evening, the Secret Service recommended that they sleep on the fold-out bed installed there during the FDR administration. Declining this offer, they slept in their own bed, though they descended to the bunker once again that night after another false alarm – the first of many that would send them dashing down to the bunker throughout their tenure in the White House. Just like Eleanor, Laura would feel shut off in the White House as tours ceased and security increased. Countless times she would hear a plane from above and hope it was “one of our own.”

As a mother and educator, Mrs. Bush’s natural concern was for children traumatized by the events of 9/11. In the months and years that followed the tragedy, hers was a continual voice stressing the importance of comforting and assuring children that they were safe. Through the bleakness that followed, she also witnessed the best in Americans as they reached out to help in many different ways. She wrote, “As I look back now at that fall, for all the worry and the darkness, I do still see...so much goodness in the land of the living.”



Laura Bush
*National First Ladies’
Library Collection*

As she learned more about the impoverished plight of women and children in terrorist-run Afghanistan, Laura looked for ways to help them recover their own voices from al-Qaida’s tyranny. On November 17, 2001, she became the first First Lady to address the nation during a scheduled Presidential speech. Her message included, “All of us have an obligation to speak out. We may come from different backgrounds and faiths – but parents the world over love our children. We respect our mothers, our sisters and daughters. Fighting

brutality against women and children is not the expression of a specific culture; it is the acceptance of our common humanity – a commitment shared by people of good will on every continent.” She continues to serve as the Honorary Advisor of the U. S. Afghan Women’s Council.

*First Ladies find their voice can be
heard in the elevated position they
share with their husbands. They
listen and empathize with the problems
throughout our country and the entire
world - and then they rise to the
occasion.*

This exhibit is made possible by the following individuals and institutions:

C-SPAN

The Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum, Hyde Park, New York

The George Bush Presidential Library and Museum

The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum

James Madison's Montpelier, Orange, Virginia

The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library

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The Western Reserve Historical Society

The Woodrow Wilson House, a National Trust Historic Site, Washington, D. C.



September 15,
2011
through
May 4, 2012

TOURS

All tours are guided and include both the changing exhibits at the Education & Research Center and the Saxton McKinley House, the restored Victorian home of First Lady Ida Saxton McKinley. Tours last about 1 1/2 hours.

Tour Hours: Tuesday - Saturday at 9:30 & 10:30 a.m. and 12:30, 1:30 & 2:30 p.m., plus Sundays in June, July & August at 12:30, 1:30 & 2:30 p.m. **Tours Begin at the Education and Research Center, 205 Market Ave. S.**

Reservations are required for groups of six or more, recommended for all others.

\$7 adults, \$6 seniors, \$5 children under 18 - includes both buildings; \$3 Education & Research Center only

Free Parking, Buses Welcome!



Education and Research Center - 205 Market Avenue S

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