



Yoichi Okamoto / Reuters

PHOTO GALLERY

• A Texas Wildflower

She rose from Texas ranch country to the pinnacle of power. Lady Bird Johnson is one of the few people in American political life who actually made the country a more beautiful place. A look back at her life.

The First Professional First Lady

Perhaps mainly remembered for her 'beautification' work, Lady Bird Johnson forged a new role for women in the White House, shaping the way for her successors.

July 13, 2007 - Lady Bird Johnson loved history. And it helped her survive what she called "the harness of hairdo and gloves." Though the duties of First Lady were suddenly sprung upon her, Johnson was probably as best prepared as anyone could be. She had read about First Ladies for years and, as a congressional wife, she took constituents to a Smithsonian exhibit on presidential wives. As a young political spouse she came to personally know Edith Wilson and Eleanor Roosevelt, exemplars of personal influence and policy power, respectively, in the presidency. Learning from their lessons, she forged a new First Lady role that remains the basic model: loyal spouse, accessible chatelaine, self-determined political figure and expert advocate for policy that "makes your heart sing." In her case, that was famously her "beautification" efforts, a ladylike word for her umbrella of serious environmental projects.

My first interview with Johnson, in 1987, ran nearly two hours over the time limit she initially set. This was not uncommon for her. Few former White House residents ever cooperated so thoroughly with and granted such unprecedented access to historians and journalists. A person of depth, analysis and contemplation, she often seemed more comfortable studying history than making it. She read voraciously. She quoted the ancients and took solace in their wisdom. She relished the chance to know figures such as Charles Lindbergh and Carl Sandburg.

As the size of her massive published White House diary attests, she loved the art of words. In fact, before she met LBJ she had intended to pursue a journalism career. With such sensibilities, she spoke with intention, perfecting a euphemistic yet rich tone. "History thunders down the hall," she quipped about living in the White House. She also chose her words carefully to suggest her opinion but avoid controversy. When asked about the mixed-race marriage of a cabinet member's daughter, for example, she remarked, "I do hope things go well for those two young people." Without denial, she responded to tales of FDR's womanizing as a "fly on the wedding cake."

In later years, her carefully chosen words suggested an ambivalence about the Vietnam War's escalation, which broke her husband. It was, she said in 1987, "long" and "undeclared," and that if ever a similar situation arose, "it had sure better be preceded by an Alamo or a Pearl Harbor so that there is a clear-cut declaration and coalescing of the American people." When John Hersey publicly threatened to read his antiwar poem "Hiroshima" at an arts festival she sponsored as First Lady, she made it clear that she wanted him not to. Yet Lady Bird refused to censor him—and sat in the front row listening to it.

It was more than Vietnam that morphed a nation from one that entertained itself with "Gunsmoke" (her favorite TV show) to "Star Trek" during her tenure. Even on the lighter side, she stayed acutely conscious of the changing culture, whether it was the pop art of Andy Warhol, who attended a New York museum opening along with the First Lady, or the music of Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass, who she had perform at the White House. "What a decade, what a remarkable generation I live in," she once said. The necessary changes also came about by force of "Women's Lib" and "Black Power" during her tenure. Although First Lady Johnson also became a target of antiwar vitriol, she determined not to "live only in the White House, insulated against life. I want to know what is going on...." And she did.

During her whistle-stop train tour to campaign for LBJ's 1964 election, she gently but firmly advocated the Civil Rights Act he had signed a month earlier, speaking of its aid to a "New South," as only a daughter of the Old South could do. She made the case that it would benefit black and white alike, make the region more economically viable and remove the stigma of racism from it. Ignoring Klan bomb threats and looking past "Fly Away Black Bird" posters, Lady Bird permitted segregationists to vent their rage as a demonstration of fairness, but she made it crisply clear to her cultural kinfolk that the future had come. Head Start, urban renewal, higher education, arts funding, historic preservation—Johnson involved herself in numerous pieces of War on Poverty programs, public policy and privately funded programs to benefit Americans of all colors and classes.

Despite her Southern belle demeanor, Johnson was actually a feminist in her own way. A media-conglomerate CEO (she used an inheritance to buy an Austin radio station that grew

into a radio-TV group), Lady Bird was as comfortable dispensing her pecan divinity recipe as she was her reasons for supporting the Equal Rights Amendment. She especially pushed to give women equal access to education and professional status and hosted a series of "Women Do-er" luncheons, to which she invited women experts to address contemporary social issues. Speakers ranged from Dr. Mary Bunting, the first woman on the Atomic Energy Commission, to Judge Marjorie Lawson of the D.C. Juvenile Court. In raising the role of First Lady to a level comparable to the professional woman, she trusted her genius friend Liz Carpenter, a working journalist who became the first-ever staff director to a First Lady, as well as press secretary.

Ultimately, Lady Bird succeeded in meeting the challenge she presented to the 1964 graduating class of Radcliffe College: "If you achieve the precious balance between a woman's domestic and civic life, you can do more for zest and sanity in our society than by any other achievement...." The last third of her life was spent as an active widow involved in the University of Texas, the LBJ Library, the National Park Service, Austin civic affairs and numerous national and state environmental projects, including her creation of a national wildflower center to propagate the use of indigenous flora and fauna. Despite her national stature, she remained an unapologetic liberal. When the Reagan cuts threatened social-welfare programs, she bluntly stated that "rich folks like me" should pay more taxes to ensure that the poorest citizens lived with basic needs met. She most feared that education cuts "put our future in peril."

As her White House years receded further, Johnson especially relished a life with the luxury of time, unencumbered by public expectations—exploring world civilizations on educational tours, pursuing friendships with her individual grandchildren in a way she could not with her daughters, and letting herself laugh loudly, throwing her head back in a raucous guffaw. Yet she was never far from history. After a 1998 lecture that touched on the quackery of John Harvey Kellogg, she amazed guests at dinner by recalling the smallest details of her own childhood visits with an aunt to the homeopath's Michigan sanitarium. Even after her eyesight deteriorated, she had new works of history and biographies read to her, often by grandchildren—thus giving her family time, as well.

Somehow, Lady Bird integrated the past into her present without permitting it to arrest her endless pursuit of knowledge. During one of our last interviews, she told me of a summertime lunch under an arbor, facing the Atlantic, with a woman to whose historical fate her own was inextricably intertwined. In retrospect, the reunion had left her with a feeling of "ineffable sadness," but not because it stirred memories of Dallas. "We talked about authors and the books coming across her desk and into her life, and the children," Lady Bird recalled of her last meeting with Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, in August 1993. Lady Bird's sadness came from the realization that her predecessor's life had "come to an end" after she'd "just reached this quiet harbor of doing things she wanted to do...."

Most Americans living today have no memory of Johnson in the White House, yet so much of what she said then serve as timely warnings to the iPod generation: "Civilization grows more complex ... as things get easier, they get harder to understand." Long before threats of global warming, Lady Bird was green. Yet beyond her asking us to "don't be a litterbug," or to "plant a tree, a bush, a shrub," the specific clean air and water legislation, the national park promotions, the removal of billboards and junkyards from highways, she grasped the biggest picture: environmentalism was humanism. "The environment is where we all meet; where all have a mutual interest. It is the one thing all of us share," she remarked. "For the bounty of nature is also one of the deep needs of man."

Carl Sferrazza Anthony is the author of numerous works on First Ladies and consulting historian to the National First Ladies Library. Through his work he came to know Lady Bird Johnson.

© 2007 Newsweek, Inc.

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19751550/site/newsweek/>