

History 355

Recent America

Topic: “Partners in the White House:

Presidents, First Ladies, and Power in the Twentieth Century”

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In this course students will survey the evolution of the “First Couple” in the White House, from Woodrow and Edith Wilson through George and Laura Bush. We will focus in particular upon the role “First Ladies” (so far no men have served as spouses of the president) in wielding power, real and symbolic, through the many trials and triumphs we have experienced as a nation through war, economic depression and other times of testing. While presidential marriages have been less than perfect on a personal level (and some would today be considered downright “dysfunctional”), every couple who has occupied the White House, from both parties and from all sections of the country, has worked together in some kind of partnership, with varying degrees of effectiveness. We will contrast the two “models” of first spouse behavior: the “traditional” wife and mother, stereotyped as most at home hosting Rose Garden tea parties; and the more activist, politically-engaged woman, in the mold of Eleanor Roosevelt, involved in advising and sometimes challenging the president on policy issues, pursuing her own agendas, and in general being more visible—and therefore typically more controversial—in the public sphere. We will consider individual cases against the changing status of women in American society, the evolution and role of the mass media in covering public figures, and the blurring of lines between public and private behavior in the past century. We will conclude with speculations about the future of the institution of First Spouse as our country moves forward in the new millennium.

Texts. Students are required to obtain the following textbooks, on sale at the McNichols Campus Bookstore:

Kati Marton, *Hidden Power: Presidential Marriages that Shaped Our History* (2001)

Gil Troy, *Mr. and Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons* (1997)

Grades. In order to do well in this course it is essential to make a commitment now to keep up with assigned readings and come prepared to class each week—the semester goes by very quickly, so establish good habits now and don’t fall

behind. You owe this above all to your fellow students, and if you cannot live up to it please drop the course and take another—many still have seats available.

Your grade will be composed of FOUR equal components: a midterm in-class examination; a noncumulative, in-class final exam; a term paper due near the end of the term, details to be discussed soon); and “class contribution,” which will include weekly quizzes.