

History 365

Gender History

Topic: "Partners in the White House:

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

University of Detroit Mercy

Dr. Sumner

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Briggs 327

(313) 993-1121

sumnergd@udmercy.edu

In this course, students will survey the evolution of the "First Couple" in the White House, from the Wilsons to George and Laura Bush. We will focus in particular on the role the "First Ladies" (so far no men have served as spouses of the President) in wielding power, real and symbolic, through times of crisis and calm. While presidential marriages have often been less-than-perfect on a personal level, behind closed doors, every couple who has occupied the White House has worked together in some kind of partnership, with a varying division of duties and roles, and uneven levels of effectiveness. We will contrast the two models of First Spouse behavior: the "traditional" wife and mother, stereotyped as being most at home hosting Rose Garden tea parties and balls for charity; and the more activist, politically-engaged (and therefore more visible and controversial) woman, in the mold of Eleanor Roosevelt, attending official meetings, involved in advising the president and speaking out on policy issues, and in some cases pursuing and promoting her own agenda. We will consider First Couple dynamics in the context of the changing status of women in American society, the evolution of the mass media, and the progressively blurring lines between public and private behavior. We will conclude with speculations about the future of the quasi-official "institution" of "First Spouse" in the twenty-first century.

Texts. Students are required to purchase the following textbooks, available at the student center 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 responsibility 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 overall grade will be the result of FOUR equal components: a midterm examination (Wednesday, October 20); a (noncumulative) final exam (Wednesday of finals week); a term paper (due near the end of the semester, details to be announced soon); and “class contribution,” which will include the quality and consistency of your participation in class discussions, as well as weekly reading quizzes.

Agenda:

Week One: Edith and Woodrow Wilson

Weeks Two and Three: Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt

Week Four: Bess and Harry Truman

Week Five: Mamie and Dwight Eisenhower

Week Five: Jacqueline and John Kennedy

Week Six: “Lady Bird” and Lyndon Johnson

Week Seven: Pat and Richard Nixon

Week Eight: Betty and Gerald Ford

Week Nine: Roselyn and Jimmy Carter

Week Ten: Nancy and Ronald Reagan

Week Eleven: Barbara and George H.W. Bush

Week Twelve: Hillary and Bill Clinton

Week Thirteen: Laura and George W. Bush

Weeks Fourteen and Fifteen: Summation and paper presentations

