

Ladies of Liberty: The Women Who Shaped our Nation

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It's wonderful to be with you today. I always love coming to the World Affairs Council. It's been three or four times that I've been to your chapter. It's always a pleasure and I love talking about this book because these are great, great ladies. I started in *Founding Mothers* writing about the women of the founding period and I did it because of my life and because of my work. In my work, I've always covered Congress and politics and always had a special emphasis on women in politics and women as voters for obvious reasons. I grew up in the 1950s in Washington where I saw my mother, who was a congressional wife, my father ran for Congress before I was born—and all of her friends, the other political wives, running everything. They ran their husband's campaigns, they ran their offices, they ran the voter registration drives, they ran the political conventions, and along with the African-American women who were in Washington they ran all the social service agencies. So, I knew that this was a highly influential group of women. And since I have to go back and read the Founding Fathers' debates all the time because of covering Washington politics, I knew those men very well I realized I knew nothing about that era of women, I needed to go back and learn about them.

I'd like to tell you, as an aside, after my mother had served in this capacity as an influential political wife for decades my father was killed in a plane crash in Alaska in 1972, and she then ran for his seat, won the election and served nine terms. She was always very interested in the difference between power behind the scenes and in front of the scenes. She would argue strenuously that a woman should be in any room where a decision was being made, but she did think there were times when she had more power behind the scenes and part of that was because she could do things without anybody knowing she was doing them, and that could be very useful. She then retired from Congress in 1990 having discovered that that was very hard work and in 1997, at the age of 81, she took a new job as the United States Ambassador to the Vatican. We all thought that was great, it was a wonderful capstone to a career in public service, and she could serve both her country and her church. Then what happened in this country happened. Mother found herself representing Bill Clinton to the Pope. Now, think a minute. It was basically the toughest job in the diplomatic service! She then went home to New Orleans where her home is on Bourbon Street – and I mean on Bourbon Street. If you've been to Bourbon Street you've been to mom's house. In fact, when my kids were small we'd walk down past the strippers and the other neighbors and I would say, "Through the woods and over the hills to Grandmother's house we go." When she moved from Bourbon Street to the Vatican I teased her that the costumes didn't change. It was still guys in dresses. I was reminded of it the other day because I got this absolutely fascinating and unexpected call from the White House press secretary. I don't know the White House press secretary, I don't cover the White House; she said, "President Bush would

like for you to ride with him and Mrs. Bush in the limousine out to Andrews to greet the Pope.” I said, “OK, I think I can clear my schedule.” So we went out and the president wanted to tell me how very excited he was about the Pope’s visit and how he was breaking precedent by going out to Andrews to meet him. He was really quite touching on the subject, although when you’re with him in the limousine he’s very funny because both he and Mrs. Bush are having to talk while waving. Spectators line the streets. We arrive and the president, Mrs. Bush and Jenna went to meet the Pope. I went off to the press stand. The doors opened to Shepard I and out they come – men in dresses, one after another – some with red sashes, some with the magenta sashes and then the guy in white. I thought, “See. I was right.” But, it is true that perhaps this is an example of a different perspective that women tend to have.

One of the reasons this is such fun history to write is because many of these letters have never been published before. What you have is women talking to you, you’re hearing their voices from over two hundred years ago. Almost every quotation in this book is either by a woman, about a woman, or to a woman, with the exception of maybe five. What you see as a result of this is, first of all, you meet these fabulous women and they’re terrific; and secondly you see a very different picture of the men, that we come to think of as the founding fathers—obviously are bronze and marble statues in our minds, deities. You can be sure their wives didn’t think of them as deities. So, you sift through the letters of the women or to the women and you get a much more complete picture of the men—much more human, flesh and blood, a picture of their hopes and dreams and fears and love and predicaments. John Marshall, you will see the connection with men in dresses in a minute, the great jurist, was out riding the circuit in North Carolina. You can be sure that this is not a letter he would have written to John Adams, It is a letter that he would write only to his wife. He arrives in town and discovers that he has no breeches and he write, “I immediately set out to get a pair made. I thought I should be sans culotte only one day.” He discovers that the tailors are all busy so he writes, “I have the extreme mortification to past the whole term without that important article of dress I have mentioned.” Now, what was he wearing? I’m having a lot of trouble with this. Did the robe cover him? You will never be able to look at him again, I promise you without wondering about this. So, it is a different history and I thought that I would write just one book about it starting in the period before the Revolution, when women were explicitly called upon to partake in the resistance to the British; even though they had no political rights—they were called upon for political action. I thought I would end it with the election of John Quincy Adams which is really the end of that era, and in the next generation the voters made it very clear. But, that was getting to be way too big a book, so I stopped it with the election of John Adams, which was the first contested election under the new constitution. The fact that the losers accepted the verdict meant that the country, the American experiment, would continue—and that’s a big deal. We take that so completely for granted, as we should but around the world it’s still an issue. Look at Zimbabwe right now. It may happen in this year’s Democratic nomination, but the fact was that wasn’t the logical place to end it and this book now goes from Adams to Adams and that is literally where it ends.

Abigail Adams in *Founding Mothers* you see as this wonderfully stalwart, brave, patriotic woman who is not only supporting the family and taking care of the children, but she’s also John Adams’ political advisor. She’s his eyes and ears and she’s the purveyor of political intelligence, and all that, because he has a tin ear. That was where I left her, and then she comes into this book as First Lady and it was so interesting how she loses her political instincts. I have seen this in every White House I know, and I’ve known them pretty well since the Johnson White House, which is that people get in there and they develop a bumper mentality—“we’re in here, we’re working so hard to do the right, the true and the just, and why are you out there taking shots at us and who are you in the press to be criticizing us all the time?” They feel like they’re under siege all the time,

and that presidency was really the first to feel that way. They had cause when the opposition was led by the vice president, Thomas Jefferson, which was a little close, and the press was scurrilous. But it led Abigail to support the Alien and Sedition Acts which were highly unpopular and went a long way towards defeating Adams in his run for reelection. But he was much more willing to support them because she was supporting them and he was so used to paying attention to what she advised, but she was giving him some very bad advice.

What really did him in, however, was Alexander Hamilton. Abigail Adams was spot on him and she never trusted him for a second. She was always comparing him to Caesar, Cassius, or some other Roman she didn't like. And, he completely convinced her of her suspicion of him back when he was Secretary of the Treasury and he had to admit publicly to having had an affair. He had to do this because he was being blackmailed. It was charged that he was being blackmailed because he had traded illegally in government securities and he had to go to public and say, "No. That's not it. I'm being blackmailed because I had an affair with the wife of the blackmailer. I don't say this without blush." And leaving the wife of Hamilton to serve as a prototype for that woman we have seen way too much of it in recent years – a political wife who stands behind her husband, smile fixed firmly on face as he admits to some scandal, probably wearing pearls. I made that joke recently and some woman wrote me a note saying, "Pearls behind swine".

Hamilton's wife saved his political life as have many of these wives since. He was brilliant but he was erratic. He was an illegitimate progeny of the West Indies and she was a Schuyler and a Van Rensselaer and the fact that she had married him in the first place and helped make his political career, and the fact that she stayed behind him saved his political career. Hamilton was able to go on and fight another day and succeeded in defeating John Adams even though he was of the same party by issuing this huge diatribe against him and sending John and Abigail Adams back to Quincy, Massachusetts and bringing Thomas Jefferson to Washington—without a wife and without someone to host events at the president's mansion.

So, Dolly Madison, the wife of the Secretary of State, basically set up a separate power base at her house on Ash Street from where she entertained everyone and made everyone come and sit down together and have a glass of Madera and behave because it was a time of fierce partisanship. It makes today look very namby pamby—rabid regionalism and the country was way too young and fragile to withstand that without somebody working to overcome it. We think of things that we have today but in the Jefferson administration the vice president of the United States, Aaron Burr, shot and killed his political enemy, Alexander Hamilton, over politics. The vice president today has had some problems with guns, but as far as we know it's not over politics, and it happened all the time. These duels were political duels, these were not romantic duels. They were all over politics and women would make the men just sit down and behave and keep functioning. And Dolly Madison did it with great aplomb. What surprised me in the first book is how without any political rights how deeply political the women were, how involved they were in politics, how interested they were in politics, how much they wrote about politics, how much the men listened to them about politics, and what ardent patriots they were. What surprised me in this book was how the women were recognized by the men for their political skills and credited with their political acumen so that when James Madison ran for president in 1808, he was not very popular. Jefferson's popularity was pretty much to his own person, he had been the writer of the Declaration of Independence and he had successfully presided over the Louisiana Purchase which was wildly popular in most of the country and by the end of his second term he had really stopped paying much attention. There was an embargo in place on shipping because the British and the French were fighting each other, as they did throughout the century which was interfering with our shipping, so in an attempt to forestall war the administration convinced

Congress to impose this embargo which everybody hated. The farmers hated it because they couldn't export anything, the merchants hated it because they couldn't import anything, the shippers obviously hated it and Madison was not going to have an easy time getting elected president, except that Dolly Madison just kept entertaining people, kept bringing them in, kept convincing them that he was the right man for the job. Charles Cotsworth Pickney said after the election, "Well, I was beaten by Mr. and Mrs. Madison. I might have had a better chance if I had faced Mr. Madison alone."

By the time of the next election in 1812, Madison was really unpopular, nobody like the war—Mr. Madison's war – and there was a breakaway faction of his own party, the Republican Party, backing DeWitt Clinton, the Governor of New York, and the federalists decided that was their best shot at ousting Madison so they backed Clinton as well and he did very well in the popular vote. He almost won but he lost in the electoral college and later in the century James G. Blain wrote, "Mrs. Madison saved the administration of her husband. But for her, DeWitt Clinton would have been chosen president in 1812." So, it was remarkable, the credit was given, and she was always seen as a great political force and then when the British invaded Washington and she saved the state papers and the portrait of George Washington, she became a national heroine. Her letter describing how she saved the portrait of George Washington is quite wonderful and I know that you will love reading it. What it meant was that when the British arrived they couldn't desecrate Washington's portrait and what they did instead was steal the portrait of Dolly Madison and did some disgusting guy things. In fact, she had been alone at what we now call the White House because Madison was out trying to gather some military intelligence and she had expected him and the cabinet and his military command to come back so she'd prepared a big meal for them. The British came into the White House, sat down and ate Dolly's dinner, and they felt a little guilty but not that guilty and then a set torch to the building. She became a great national heroine as a result of this and people really looked up to her.

You see Dolly as the epitome of the political wife at this time but there were also women of great influence in all kinds of other fields, shaping the nation's institutions. Women as writers, beginning to write about women's rights, women as educators, starting schools around the country, preschools, schools for people of color and native Americans, starting full separate educational systems. Then Elizabeth Ann Seton started the parochial school system in America. Done.

They were also social reformers and that is where you really start to see them putting together institutions that were essentially a social safety net for the people who were being left behind by this great exuberant expansionism that was going on in the country. Particularly after the War of 1812 when the country was feeling confident and cohesive having defeated the British and signed a peace treaty that was not in any way humiliating. There was this unbridled capitalism and a great sense of excitement but there were people being left behind and women understood that and they started benevolent societies for widows and creating orphan asylums and things like that. And, these were deeply political acts. They had to go to the state legislature and get incorporated. Married women couldn't own property so they couldn't own a facility so they had to form a corporation to own the facility. They often would insist a unmarried woman would have to be the treasurer so that a husband couldn't seize the assets of the society, and they would have to lobby the legislature for funds. These were women going about making things happen and you see them up and down the states, different women, very interesting women whose diaries and letters are here as they formed societies.

It was in Washington after the War of 1812 that Dolly Madison helped the local women. She was very much the precursor of what I saw in my childhood. They established orphan asylums because there were orphans as a result of the invasion. I work in my grandchildren's play room in the basement because it's the only place where I can make a big mess. I always, if I'm writing all day, stop at about 6:30, come upstairs and then start cooking dinner and this night I had just read this letter, and I read it and I read it again because it was just so much fun. It was a letter that Louisa Catherine Adams, the wife of John Quincy Adams, wrote in 1820, the year of the Missouri Compromise. That year, because of the Missouri Compromise, Congress had stayed in session much longer than usual. Usually they adjourned in March and that year they stayed in session until June and all kinds of things were happening as a result of that. They were running out of food because nobody was used to Congress being there that long and when they finally adjourned Louisa Adams discovered some other problems had emerged as a result of the longer session. She went to a meeting at the trustees of the orphan asylum and one of them said to her that they were going to need a new building and she said, "Why?" The answer was "Congress having many females and such difficulties as to make it probable they would beg our assistance." And she said, "What are you talking about?" The answer comes "The session has been very long. The fathers of the nation have left 40 cases to be provided for by the public and our institution was the most likely to be called upon to maintain this illicit progeny." There were 40 pregnant women, and Congress goes home to its wives leaving these forty women. Louisa Adams wrote these letters home to her father-in-law, John Adams, to amuse him—Abigail was dead by this time—after she realizes that's what's going on she says, "I recommend a petition to Congress at the next session for that great and moral body to establish a foundling institution and should certainly move that the two additional dollars a day which they have given themselves as an increase in pay may be appropriated as a fund towards the support of this institution." Now, it doesn't get any better than that. You'll not read this in the guide books. So, it's different views of the men who started our country, in more ways than one.

The Missouri Compromise, of course, gets me to the great issue of slavery. The Compromise did fend off the nation rending issue for a little while longer, but all of the movements against slavery really—there were some obviously earlier than this—but you start to see the great beginning of the abolition movement in this period Lucretia Mott in 1821 went to Philadelphia as a Quaker preacher, the Quakers actually let the women preach at times which was highly unusual. She preached publicly for freedom but when she went to abolition meetings and she was shut out because she was a woman, either not allowed to speak, not allowed to vote, or both, and that led her directly to suffrage. She actually met Elizabeth Cady Stanton at an abolition meeting in England and the two of them in the century met at Seneca falls and there wrote the Declaration of Rights.

So, all of the great social movements that have shaped the country started in this period and many of them started with these women. So, it is a very interesting time. But it was going to end; they were going to get to a time when the founding era was definitively over. And again, in some ways I hear echo today because in this election, for the first time since 1952, we have neither a sitting president nor vice president on the ballot. In the 1824 election, for the first time ever, there would be no founder on the ballot, no one who had written the Declaration, fought in the Revolution or written the Constitution would be running for president and everyone actually knew that as early as 1816 when James Monroe ran and he was called the last of the cocked hats and if you think this is a long election, they started nominating candidates for the 1824 election in 1818. And after Monroe was re-elected in 1820 the campaign for 1824 for the next generation started in earnest, with all of the politicking going on in Washington, because all the candidates ended up in Washington either in the cabinet or in the congress.

The wife of a newspaper man, named Sarah Seton, wrote to her parents: “The present incumbent is treated with very little ceremony while casting about for his successor.” Sounds familiar to me. She said joking that a committee should be appointed to wait on the president and ask him to have the goodness to resign “inasmuch as gentlemen were in a hurry and did not like to wait.” Well, the gentlemen were Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, John Calhoun, William Crawford. And there were others running. The whole Senate was running at some point. But Louise Catherine Adams, the wife of Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, which had been the stepping stone for Monroe, Madison and Jefferson was waging a campaign to elect her husband president and she called it that, she called it “my campaign” and she referred to “my vocation” which was to get him elected president and it was very, very clear what she was doing and everyone knew it and she knew it. This was her job.

So, the election comes, finally, and Calhoun realizes that he doesn’t have the votes so he drops out before he gets to the election. It ends up with Jackson getting the majority of the popular vote and the plurality of the electoral college vote but not the majority. So, it goes to the House of Representatives. Henry Clay drops off as bottom man. So, it’s Jackson, Adams and Crawford. Everybody expected that either Jackson would win or that Jackson and Adams would deadlock and the Congress might then turn to Crawford as a compromise candidate. Crawford deeply hoped for that Henry Clay then throws his support to Adams in what has come to be called by many historians a corrupt bargain, because Clay then became secretary of state in the Adams administration. But even with him having done that when the House of Representatives convened to vote nobody had the votes. There was wild politicking going on on the floor, arm twisting, etc. and the women in the gallery write all about it. One of the key votes was Stephen Van Rensselaer of New York who had promised all of his boarding housemates, because boarding houses tended to all vote together, that he would vote for Crawford. Then on the first ballot he voted for Adams throwing the whole New York delegation to Adams and much to everyone surprise, Adams was elected on the first ballot. Later when everyone was furious and his boarding housemates were furious at him the explanation came back that his wife made him do it; that he did everything that she told him to do. She was a Schulyer—she was Eliza Hamilton’s sister. But I actually think that Louisa Adams had wined and dined these members for so many years, and they knew her and John Quincy Adams both so well because of her that he was the safer choice. He was the one they knew best and he was more of a direct line rather than a real break and so he won the election. It was a truly a moment in history because it was the founding generation having to hand off this nation that they had fought for and crafted the laws for, and struggled to create, to the next generation and onto to the next generations beyond. Abigail Adams really thought about that before she left public office and offered something that I think of as a benediction to that forwarding generation saying “I leave to time the unfolding of a drama. I leave to posterity to reflect upon the times past and I leave them characters to contemplate.”

So, here are wonderful characters to contemplate. I know you’re going to love getting to know these women. I’ve loved getting to write about them and introducing them to you.

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