

Focusing on the First Ladies

Lesson Plan #3:
The Various Roles and Responsibilities of a First Lady of the United States

Subject: U.S. History, Government

Grade level: 8-12

Rationale or Purpose: In this lesson the students will learn about the many different expectations that are placed on the woman who holds the position of First Lady. The students will discuss and reflect on these roles and draw conclusions about the personality traits a good First Lady needs to be successful in her job.

Materials:

- Copies of the eight photographs of First Ladies needed for this lesson. These photographs may be projected onto a screen or downloaded to reproduce as transparencies (NOTE: See Web Site Resources for Lesson Plans page).
- Discussion guide for pictures.

Objectives:

- U.S. History 21. A -- how individual people from various groups contribute to our national identity
- U.S. History 21.D -- identify the political, social, and economic contributions of women to American society
- U.S. History 24 -- applying critical thinking skills to organize and use information from a variety of sources including electronic technology
- U.S. History 25 -- communication in written, oral, and visual forms
- Government 3 -- the roles played by individuals in the U.S. political system past and present
- Government 21 -- applying critical thinking skills to organize and use information from a variety of sources including electronic technology.

Activity: The teacher will present the pictures to the class and lead a discussion about the role or responsibility that is suggested by the picture.

Modification: Individual students could choose one picture to report on to the class.

Student Product: participation in a classroom discussion

Closure: The students will write a one paragraph response to what they have learned about the roles and responsibilities of the First Lady.

Assessment or evaluation: student's participation in the class discussion

Extension:

1. Go back and look at the individual pictures from the perspective of a historian. What historical information can be gained from the photographs?
2. Go back through the photographs and imagine that the president is a woman and her husband is being asked to fulfill these roles. Do you think there would be a difference in the types of duties assigned to the First Husband? What kinds of changes might be made in the roles and responsibilities for the First Husband?

Roles and Responsibilities of the First Lady

Discussion Guide

1. U.S. representative at ceremonial functions in other countries.

Photograph:

<http://www.cah.utexas.edu/photojournalism/detail.php?nickname=nixon&picid=8>

Wally McNamee, 1972

President Richard Nixon, First Lady Pat Nixon and Henry Kissinger (in the foreground) dine with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in Hung-chiao. The U.S. began re-establishing diplomatic relations with China during Nixon's tenure, and he was the first president to visit the communist nation while in office.

Interesting Fact: To prepare for her historic visit to China, Mrs. Nixon learned to say several key Chinese phrases and spent time studying the party structure and philosophy of the Chinese Communist Party. Chou En-lai, the Chinese Premier, was so impressed with Mrs. Nixon's warmth and charm that he gave her two rare giant panda bears as a gift.

Questions:

1. How do you think the First Lady goes about preparing to participate in ceremonial functions in other countries? How does she learn the protocol of that country so that she does not make a mistake in manners or customs?
2. How can a First Lady's actions in another country effect the way she is perceived by the people of that country? Is it important that she make a good impression? Why or why not?
3. When the President is unable to attend, the First Lady is often sent to the funerals of important people in other countries. What role is she playing in a situation such as this and why is it important to the U.S. as a country?

2. Official White House Hostess

Photograph:

http://www.cah.utexas.edu/photojournalism/detail.php?nickname=cah_reading&picid=2

Diana Walker, 1985

First Lady Nancy Reagan and Raisa Gorbachev meet for tea during the Geneva summit.

Interesting Fact: Nancy Reagan's decision to spend \$200,000. for new china dishes to be used in the White House set off a public relations fire-storm because the announcement of the

purchase was made one day before the announcement of a plan to decrease nutrition standards for school lunch programs.

Questions:

1. The President and the First Lady entertain many important visitors from other countries. What kinds of information does the First Lady need to serve as a good hostess to the visiting dignitaries?
2. In the photograph, Nancy Reagan is hosting a tea party for Raisa Gorbachev. At the time this photo was taken, the United States and Russia had been enemies for many years. It was rumored in the press that Mrs. Reagan and Mrs. Gorbachev did not like each other. Why would it be necessary for a First Lady to be polite and put away her personal feelings in order to perform her role as the White House hostess?
3. Thousands of Americans visit the White House each year. What responsibility does the First Lady have to American visitors?

3. Comforter in times of a national distress or crisis

Photograph:

<http://www.cah.utexas.edu/photojournalism/detail.php?nickname=reagan&picid=13>

Diana Walker, 1986

President and Nancy Reagan are surrounded by the families of the lost astronauts at the Challenger memorial service at Johnson Space Center in Houston.

Interesting Fact: Mrs. Kennedy's dignity and grace after her husband's tragic death provided a model for a grieving nation to follow.

Questions:

1. Often the First Lady must attend funerals or visit scenes of natural disasters in America. What value does her presence have at a funeral or in a hospital visit to someone who was injured?
2. How does the way the First Lady acts during these occasions affect the way the American public responds to the crisis?

4. Ambassador for the United States to other countries

Photograph:

<http://www.cah.utexas.edu/photojournalism/detail.php?nickname=carter&picid=14>

Diana Walker, 1979

First Lady Rosalynn Carter visits Cambodian refugees at the Sa Kaew camp in Thailand. Commenting about this photo in Diana Walker's book, *Public & Private, Twenty Years Photographing the Presidency*, Mrs. Carter said, "This was devastating to me. The refugees had just come in from Cambodia to the Thailand border. I picked up a baby and put it down on a blanket on the ground. They started crying and when I turned around the baby had died."

Interesting Fact: After her husband's election, Rosalynn Carter traveled to seven Central and South American countries to meet with the each country's leaders to discuss trade and foreign policy issues. She was the first First Lady to travel in this capacity.

Questions:

1. As the wealthiest country in the world does the United States have any responsibility to the poor in other countries? What role can the First Lady play in the way the America public views other countries problems?
2. What value does her visit or concern to a country's poor people have to American social or foreign policy?
3. Some critics say that the First Lady should stay home and deal with our problems in America. Do you agree or disagree with this statement.

5. Champion of Causes

Photographs:

<http://www.cah.utexas.edu/photojournalism/detail.php?nickname=ford&picid=5>

David Hume Kennerly, 1974

President Ford visits his wife at Bethesda Naval Hospital after her mastectomy. Betty Ford was known for her candid nature, and she reassured many Americans by openly discussing her battles with cancer and drug and alcohol dependency.

Interesting Fact: When Barbara Bush was photographed holding a child with AIDS it helped reduce the public's the fear of catching AIDS through casual contact.

Questions:

1. Each First Lady since Jacqueline Kennedy has had at least one cause that she publicly supports. Is that a necessary part of being a First Lady? Why does her attention to specific problems have value to the people who share that problem?
2. Sometimes a First Lady has a personal issue that she chooses to be candid about with the American public. When Betty Ford went public with her breast

cancer thousands of women made appointments with their doctors for their own physical examinations. Why do you think she inspired so many women to schedule these doctor visits?

3. What role does the First Lady play in the way the American public perceives a sensitive subject such as breast cancer or AIDS?

6. Just One of Us

Photograph:

<http://www.cah.utexas.edu/photojournalism/detail.php?nickname=bush&picid=4>

Diana Walker, 1989

First Lady Barbara Bush warns the students at an adult education center in London that her piecrust is not exactly something to write home.

Interesting Fact: Hillary Rodham Clinton was a Girl Scout.

Questions:

1. Why is it important that the American public feel that the First Lady shares common characteristics with the “regular” people of our country?
2. How does the way the First Lady dresses, does her hair, and deals with her children have an effect of the daily lives of many Americans?

7. Wife

Photograph:

<http://www.cah.utexas.edu/photojournalism/detail.php?nickname=clinton&picid=10>

David Hume Kennerly, 1998

President Clinton, Hillary Clinton and Vice President Al Gore attend an event in the Rose Garden.

Interesting Fact: Many of the First Ladies had to closely monitor their husband’s schedule to make sure that he took time for regular meals, rest, and relaxation.

Questions:

1. Long before she was the First Lady -- and for many years after she leaves the White House -- these women were the wives of powerful and ambitious men. What personality characteristics or interpersonal skills does a woman need to be a good wife to the President of the United States?

2. Presidents Carter and Clinton received a great deal of criticism because their wives were perceived as having “too much power.” What role should the First Lady play in helping the President create policy or make decisions about the personnel that are appointed to important jobs?
3. First Lady’s Lady Bird Johnson and Barbara Bush presented themselves to the public as traditional wives who had little influence or input into their husbands’ Presidential administration. However, after their husbands left office the historical record showed that each of these women were very involved in their husband’s professional life. Is it an asset or a liability to allow the First Lady to be seen as an active partner in her husband’s job?
4. Is it the First Lady’s responsibility to always publicly agree with her husband’s stand on national issues? For instance, if the President does not support gun control but the First Lady does should she offer her own opinion on the subject or should she keep quiet about the disagreement?

8. Stand-in for the President when he is ill or incapacitated

Photograph:

<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/photojournalism/detail.php?nickname=reagan&picid=11>

Diana Walker, 1985

The Reagans give reassuring waves from Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland after the president's cancer surgery.

Interesting Fact: Lady Bird Johnson ran her husband’s congressional office while he recuperated from a heart attack, allowing him to maintain his place as Majority Leader.

Questions:

1. Occasionally the President becomes too ill to fulfill his duties. An example of this is when President Reagan was shot in an assassination attempt and then again later when he had cancer surgery. During this time Mrs. Reagan represented him at official functions and carefully limited the amount of people who had access to the President. What responsibility does the First Lady have for maintaining the President’s duties when he is unable to do them himself.