

Jill Abraham Hummer. *First Ladies and American Women: In Politics and at Home.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017. 256 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-2380-8.

Reviewed by Katherine Jellison

Published on H-FedHist (February, 2018)

Commissioned by Caryn E. Neumann (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

Although Jill Abraham Hummer's new book does not explicitly characterize it as such, *First Ladies and American Women* is a study of the first lady's role in the age of mass media. From Lou Hoover in the era of radio and the first talking newsreels to Michelle Obama in the Internet age, the fourteen first ladies who resided in the White House from 1929 to 2017 were accessible to the American people in ways that their predecessors were not. And the images that the media projected of these women during their time in the White House contributed significantly to their historical reputations. Eleanor Roosevelt's ubiquity on radio and in the newsreels solidified her historical image as an activist first lady, while Bess Truman's relative media absence guaranteed she would go down in history as a "reluctant" first spouse. Jackie Kennedy's televised tour of the restored White House forever linked her name to historical preservation, and Betty Ford's comments about sex, drugs, and abortion on TV's *60 Minutes* ensured her reputation as a "candid" first lady. In examining first ladies' experiences of the past ninety years, Hummer relies on extensive research in presidential library collections, first family memoirs, and contemporary press accounts. In the end, however, the portrait she draws of each woman deviates little from the im-

age that the media projected during her time as first lady.

Hummer divides *First Ladies and American Women* into three sections structured around the history of organized feminism. In the book's first section, "After Suffrage," the author discusses first ladies from Hoover through Kennedy as exemplars of women's post-suffrage political empowerment. Like other American women, however, the post-suffrage first ladies balanced new political opportunities with traditional domestic responsibilities. Foremost, they projected a comforting image of White House family stability to a nation dealing with the upheavals of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. In "The Second Wave," Hummer examines how presidential spouses from Lady Bird Johnson through Rosalyn Carter responded to the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, with particular attention to the involvement of Ford and Carter in the campaign for an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Hummer addresses the aftermath of the ERA's defeat in the book's final section, "After 1980," in which she characterizes first ladies from Nancy Reagan through Obama as walking a delicate path through the political minefields of third-wave feminism and anti-feminist backlash. After the Republican Party dropped its long-time endorsement of the ERA in 1980, for instance, Reagan ap-

parently hoped to placate both feminists and their detractors when she called for “equal rights for everyone, not just women” (p. 154). Thirty years later, Obama attempted to make Americans more comfortable with the idea of a first lady who was a black Harvard law school graduate and successful career woman by emphasizing her role as the mother of two young daughters.

Hummer’s central argument is not a startling one: “As women’s social and political roles have changed, so too have first ladies’ actions” (p. 221). In their general outlines, her portraits of individual first ladies likewise provide no surprises. Hummer largely reinforces the characterizations of previous journalists, biographers, and historians. Just when the reader thinks Hummer has nothing new to say about a particular first lady, however, she provides a previously unpublicized detail or forgotten fact. Hummer reports, for example, that homebody Truman enabled her husband’s appointment of more women to public office, and notes that traditional housewife Pat Nixon supported the ERA. Hummer also reminds the reader that Hoover—like her more celebrated successor Roosevelt—embraced the power of radio and weathered criticism for promoting racial integration.

Yet readers looking for compelling new insights into the women who served as first lady between 1929 and 2017 will not find them in Hummer’s book. Her study serves instead as a useful starting point for readers interested in the history of America’s media-age first ladies. Hummer’s research yields a detailed accounting of first ladies’ public activities and the ways in which their choices and experiences reflected changing expectations for US women in general. In connecting changes in the first lady’s role to the triumphs and setbacks of the women’s movement, Hummer also provides a basic history of American feminism over the past ninety years. If readers want a truly in-depth analysis of any of the first ladies profiled in Hummer’s book, however, they should consult

one of the many scholarly biographies she recommends in the work’s extensive bibliographic essay.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-fedhist>

Citation: Katherine Jellison. Review of Hummer, Jill Abraham. *First Ladies and American Women: In Politics and at Home*. H-FedHist, H-Net Reviews. February, 2018.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50856>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.