

Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy was uniquely poised to take on the difficult role of the first lady during the Cold War, a time when diplomacy could make the difference between peace and the destruction of life on Earth. However, while Jackie often made the first ladyship seem effortless, her tenure was anything but easy. During the campaign and the early portion of the presidency, people feared that Jackie would alienate voters with her aristocratic style. The 60s brought upheaval on the Homefront as women fought for greater rights; Jackie had to balance both traditional femininity and modern womanhood to remain popular. Not to mention that Jackie was uncertain she wanted to take on the very public role of the first lady.

However, the things that could have made Jackie a liability instead strengthened her ability as a cultural diplomat. Her aristocratic background gave her knowledge of languages and cultures which made her an expert in diplomacy. Her status as wife and mother contrasted with her career in preservation and editing, endearing her to traditional women and feminists alike. Her desire for privacy caused her to set boundaries between her public and private life that fostered the public's fascination. Altogether Jackie Kennedy was a huge political asset in the cultural cold war. Her keen fashion sense, cultured upbringing, and interest in the arts and preservation allowed the United States to demonstrate its superiority over the USSR.

Jackie Kennedy remains one of the top five most popular first ladies in opinion polls and had a 66% approval rating during her term as a first lady. Yet, reporters consistently attacked Jackie during the campaign for the things that would later make her so popular.<sup>1</sup> Jackie Kennedy became the first lady at a time when the definition of womanhood was changing. Feminist causes were beginning to take root, and while Jackie never explicitly supported these causes, she

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth J. Natalle. *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2018.) 13.

challenged them in her own way. An educated, intelligent, and independent aristocrat who had had a career before marriage, she was something the presidency hadn't seen before. JFK and his advisors hesitated during the campaign to display Jackie as they weren't sure she would benefit their bid for the presidency. As Brown states, "JFK's advisors wrestled with the gap between domestic expectations and the sophisticated, Francophile wife. A decade before Richard Nixon wondered what would play in Peoria, Kennedy's advisors suspected Mrs. Kennedy wouldn't"<sup>2</sup>. President Kennedy brought his wife to tears when he suggested to her that, "He thought her too aristocratic for the average voter; she had too much status, he joked, and not enough quo. 'The American people just aren't ready for someone like you. I guess we'll just have to run you through subliminally in one of those quick flash TV spots so no one will notice.'"<sup>3</sup> Jackie was seemingly endlessly criticized by the media for how much she purportedly spent on her clothes, her mannerisms, and every little thing about her. She caught her husband's ire when retorting back to a report that she spent 30,000 dollars on clothes by saying she would not be able to spend that much if she wore "sable underwear".<sup>4</sup> However, after she became first lady things changed; Jackie stated

I was never any different once I was in the White House than I was before, but the press made you different. Suddenly, everything that had been a liability before—

your hair, that you spoke French, that you didn't just adore to campaign, and you

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Pascarell Brown. "Pretty in Pink: Jacqueline Kennedy and the Politics of Fashion". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Pascarell Brown. "Pretty in Pink: Jacqueline Kennedy and the Politics of Fashion". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Pascarell Brown. "Pretty in Pink: Jacqueline Kennedy and the Politics of Fashion". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012. 15.

didn't bake bread with flour up to your arms—you know, everyone thought I was a snob and hated politics...And when we got in the White House all the things I'd always done suddenly became wonderful because anything the First Lady does that's different, everyone seizes on<sup>5</sup>

Jackie's liabilities during the campaign made her first ladyhood unique and exciting and are some of the things we still remember her for today.

Jackie is most well-known as a fashion icon. She carefully curated her unique and glamorous sense of style during her time as first lady. Before taking on the role of first lady Jackie had a love of French couture, but realized it would be inappropriate to wear the designs of another country as the woman tasked to represent the United States at home and abroad.<sup>6</sup> She worked with Oleg Cassini (the European-born son of a Tsarist Russian diplomat)<sup>7</sup> to develop her signature style for her time in the White House. As Oleg Cassini said, "We spoke of how fashion is a mirror of history; we discussed the message her clothes would send — simple, youthful, elegant — and how she would reinforce the image of her husband's administration through her presence."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Pascarell Brown. "Pretty in Pink: Jacqueline Kennedy and the Politics of Fashion". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012. 73.

<sup>6</sup> Greg Lawrence. *Jackie as Editor: the Literary Life of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis*. 1st ed. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2011.) 39.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Severo and Ruth La Ferla. "Oleg Cassini, Designer for the Stars and Jacqueline Kennedy, Dies at 92." The New York Times. The New York Times, March 19, 2006. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/19/fashion/oleg-cassini-designer-for-the-stars-and-jacqueline-kennedy-dies-at.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Oleg Cassini. *A Thousand Days of Magic: Dressing Jacqueline Kennedy for the White House*. (New York: Rizzoli International, 1995.) 20

Jackie was aware of the power of fashion. As a scholar of the arts and the daughter of the New York Elite, she understood that what you wore sent a message to others. Many in the United States saw her careful curation of clothes for what it was- an attempt at smoothing over diplomatic relations. Still, some accused her of spending too much money and time on her wardrobe.<sup>9</sup> While her accusers saw Jackie as nothing more than a spendthrift, Jackie's careful thought about her clothes often came in handy in diplomatic situations. The greatest example of this regarding the cold war was the Vienna Summit where JFK and Jackie met with Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev and his wife Nina. Jackie's dress exemplified Hollywood glamor with its ample sequins and sophisticated cut. Nikita Krushchev remarked that the gown was "beautiful" upon his introduction to Jackie.<sup>10</sup> In the photos of the Vienna summit you can see that Jackie shines, dazzling Krushchev with her dress and refined manner. The Associated Press reported, "The tough and often belligerent Communist leader looked like a smitten schoolboy when the ice thaws along the Volga in spring-time"<sup>11</sup> Jackie's gorgeous dress set the tone and allowed a conversation to begin in what was otherwise a rather tense summit.

However, while Jackie may have been able to break the ice with Krushchev, no further diplomatic advances were made. Krushchev later recollects that while he "liked [Jackie] very much" he found her to be of no great beauty, and while he found her to be intelligent he stated that "as the head of the Soviet Delegation I couldn't care less what sort of wife [John F Kennedy] had."<sup>12</sup> However, this may be due to the underlying sexism of the era rather than any missteps on

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<sup>9</sup> Barbara Ann Perry. *Jacqueline Kennedy : First Lady of the New Frontier*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004.) 65

<sup>10</sup>Oleg Cassini. *A Thousand Days of Magic : Dressing Jacqueline Kennedy for the White House*. (New York: Rizzoli International, 1995.) 75.

<sup>11</sup> Hamish Bowles. *Jacqueline Kennedy : the White House Years : Selections from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum*. 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001) 132.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth J. Natalle. *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2018.) 73.

Jackie Kennedy's part. Jackie Kennedy put great thought into her self-portrayal through how she dressed. She knew that something as simple as a dress could send a sometimes complex message about international cooperation.

While Jackie had a passion for fashion, her greatest passion was preservation. Jackie made it her mission while serving as the first lady to restore the white house. Jackie was careful to distinguish between restoration and redecoration to Life magazine, saying, “it would be sacrilege merely to *redecorate* [the White House] — a word I hate. It must be *restored* and that has nothing to do with decoration... that is a question of scholarship”<sup>13</sup>. The first lady cared deeply about history and the past. She said it would have been “criminal” not to restore the White House to its past splendor after Truman renovated the house.<sup>14</sup> Jackie took her job seriously and wanted the white house to be a presidential house that rivaled other countries. Jackie felt that the United States should better compete with other countries’ cultural palaces<sup>15</sup>. During the broadcasted tour of the White House Jackie stated, “It’s so important the setting in which the presidency is presented to the world, To foreign visitors. The American people should be proud of it. We had such a great civilization and so many foreigners don't realize it.” The tour was broadcast not only in the United States but around the globe, projected via diplomatic posts or USIA to a few countries behind the Iron Curtain, including within the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> While Jackie was trying to demonstrate that the United States was just as culturally relevant as our

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<sup>13</sup> Barbara Ann Perry. *Jacqueline Kennedy : First Lady of the New Frontier*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004.) 102

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Ann Perry. *Jacqueline Kennedy : First Lady of the New Frontier*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004.) 95

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Ann Perry. *Jacqueline Kennedy : First Lady of the New Frontier*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004.) 102.

<sup>16</sup> Carol B. Schwalbe. “Jacqueline Kennedy and Cold War Propaganda.” *Journal of broadcasting & electronic media* 49, no. 1 (2005): 116.

more established allies, the restoration of the White House also served as a message to the Soviets that the rich cultural history of the United States could rival Russia's and that - unlike the Russians-they were willing to celebrate their history. In fact, during the CBS broadcast of the white house tour JFK stated, " when [the United States] was founded there was a king in France, a czar in Russia, an emperor in Peking all that's been wiped away and yet this country continues". John F Kennedy realized that his wife's mission to connect the White House to its past would demonstrate the longevity of the United States to its Soviet rivals, who were relatively young as a nation. In a way, the White House restoration told the Soviets we were here long before the USSR, and will be here long after the USSR dissolves.

Jackie was uniquely positioned to turn the White House into a place of historic beauty as her high-class upbringing meant she was familiar with foreign cultural mansions. She was quoted as saying, "Perhaps it was a bit chauvinistic- I had seen palaces or official residences abroad- Why should not the residence of the President of the United show all that is finest in our heritage" <sup>17</sup>. Jackie had difficulty in furnishing the White House that these other residences often had not, she had a stringent and small budget. However, instead of letting her budget serve as a boundary, Jackie used it to build relationships with wealthy donors and statesmen who could help further her mission to restore the White House to its former glory. Adlai Stevenson, the United States ambassador to the United Nations during the Kennedy administration, had expressed interest in purchasing something for the Lincoln Bedroom as he was a former governor of Illinois, Lincoln's home state. Jackie, unaware of Stevenson's willingness to purchase a specific set of items, arranged for someone else to donate them for fear of losing them. Jackie expertly smoothed any hurt feelings by writing to Adlai and stating if he still

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<sup>17</sup> Barbara Ann Perry. *Jacqueline Kennedy : First Lady of the New Frontier*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004.) 102

wanted to give something she would ask him to help with the next set of items for the Lincoln bedroom. In addition to managing her budget, Jackie also had to oversee various committees responsible for finding and approving objects to go into the White House. It was reported that Jackie was a “great manager” who was “skilled at coordinating antagonistic temperaments of the decorators and collectors she employed to serve her”.<sup>18</sup>

The first lady's diplomatic skills extended beyond her White House project onto the global stage. Jackie's wealthy parents raised her to be culturally fluent. She was multilingual, speaking English, Spanish, French, and Italian. Her appreciation of culture and the arts made her especially well-poised to be a tool for the Kennedy administration abroad. On their visit to Latin America, the first lady was a huge hit and praised by both Americans and Latin Americans for her success at building relations. One newspaper reported on their trip that “President and Mrs. Kennedy scored a smashing personal triumph in their visit to Venezuela and Columbia... on streets where Nixon three years ago encountered hostile mobs, the president and his lady found roses, roses, roses all the way... we have said all along that the best thing about Jack Kennedy was Jackie Kennedy and this last trip confirms it”<sup>19</sup>. It wasn't hard to see why Jackie would be so popular in Latin America; she delivered multiple speeches in Spanish and that made her, according to an interpreter, a ““smashing success’... she delivered her words ‘in very good Spanish. And it... wasn't so much what she said but the idea of here is an American who has bothered to learn our language.”<sup>20</sup>. A Mexican reporter also commented that “her words

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<sup>18</sup> Barbara Ann Perry. *Jacqueline Kennedy : First Lady of the New Frontier*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004.) 103

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth J. Natalle. *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2018.) 99.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth J. Natalle. *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2018.) 105.

pronounced in correct Castilian Spanish, made a big impression”<sup>21</sup>. Jackie made an effort to memorize the speech; while it was a short and simple speech, her effort endeared the Latin American people to her. Not only was Jackie's knowledge of language important for her diplomatic efforts, but Jackie studied for her visits in other ways. For example, she prepared for her trip to France by reading de Gaulle's memoirs and when she returned from India she corresponded with Ambassador Nehru and talked about two books he had recommended to her as well as about Hindu life stages. One thing she didn't talk about was politics. An ambassador remarked about Kennedy that “she celebrated her detachment” from politics.<sup>22</sup> Her trip to India and Pakistan was unique because she traveled without her husband, an uncommon occurrence in that era. Her focus in the region was on humanitarian and arts pursuits. As a mother, Jackie was interested in interacting with children during her trip, which became a diplomatic focus.. In a speech she gave after presenting Indira Gandhi with the Children's Carnival of Art she stated, “I've often noticed, especially this morning at the Bal Saharjoug that the art of children is the same the world over and so, of course, is our feeling for children. I think it is good in a world where there is quite enough to divide people that we should cherish a language and an emotion that unite us all”<sup>23</sup> Jackie knew how to use shared experiences to connect with other nations and build relationships. She could focus on what united nations rather than what divided them. Her trip to India and Pakistan was so successful it became the subject of not one but two propaganda films, *Invitation to India* and *Invitation to Pakistan*, a senior propagandist said “it would have

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth J. Natalle. *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2018.) 106.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth J. Natalle. *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2018.) 126.

<sup>23</sup>Elizabeth J. Natalle. *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2018.) 123.



been negligent not to have done so”<sup>24</sup>. Even after JFK’s assassination, Jackie was still working on building bridges. In a letter to Nikita Khrushchev, Jackie thanks him for sending a representative to the funeral and reminds him about the dangers of another world war. She states,

I know that President Johnson will continue the policy in which my husband so deeply believed—a policy of control and restraint—and he will need your help. I send this letter because I know so deeply of the importance of the relationship which existed between you and my husband, and also because of your kindness, and that of Mrs. Khrushcheva in Vienna. I read that she had tears in her eyes when she left the American Embassy in Moscow, after signing the book of mourning. Please thank her for that.<sup>25</sup>

Jackie’s upper-class upbringing trained her in matters of etiquette that allowed her to handle even difficult situations gracefully. In one of the worst times of her life, she had the foresight to send a letter to the greatest adversary of the United States and plead with him to plan for peace in her husband's memory.

Her ability to charm people came in handy when dealing with the Russians again in her life after the presidency. Jackie worked as an editor on *In the Russian Style*, a book about Tsarist Russia and the objects and fashions that characterized the reigns of various Russian czars. The book was a collaboration with the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the Met Gala. *In the Russian Style* was only one of two books during her career as editor

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<sup>24</sup> Carol B. Schwalbe. “Jacqueline Kennedy and Cold War Propaganda.” *Journal of broadcasting & electronic media* 49, no. 1 (2005): 120.

<sup>25</sup> Jacqueline Kennedy. “Letter From Jacqueline Kennedy to Chairman Khrushchev.” U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State. Accessed February 10, 2023. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v06/d120>.

for which she was credited.<sup>26</sup> She deserved that credit. Judith Straeton, an assistant curator at the Met recalled, “The Russians were not very impressed with Mrs. Vreeland. That was a nightmare from ground zero. There were a lot of things that she wanted that the Russians didn’t want her to have until Mrs. Onassis stepped in. They sent them to us because of her.”<sup>27</sup> Jackie had a special way with people throughout her life that made her especially poised to handle difficult situations. It was something uniquely Jackie that enabled her to be the diplomatic powerhouse she was.

Caroline Kennedy once said, “My parents believed America should lead with her ideals, not just with economic, or military power, and they wanted to share our artistic and cultural achievements with the world. My mother played a critical role in developing what is now called ‘soft diplomacy’”<sup>28</sup> Despite her somewhat rocky start in politics Jackie Kennedy was one of the most significant assets to the Kennedy administration overseas and domestically. Jackie’s greatest passions, fashion, preservation, arts and culture made her a near-perfect ambassador for the missions of the Kennedy administration and helped build goodwill among allies and adversaries.

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<sup>26</sup> Greg Lawrence. *Jackie as Editor : the Literary Life of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis*. 1st ed. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2011.) 44.

<sup>27</sup>Greg Lawrence. *Jackie as Editor : the Literary Life of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis*. 1st ed. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2011.) 41.

<sup>28</sup>Elizabeth J. Natalle. *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2018.) 10.

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