

The Positivity of Pat Nixon

What better subject for a biography than an influential public figure who did not want to be known?



Pat Nixon, August 19, 1970. White House photo office via Wikimedia Commons



CARL ROLLYSON

Friday, August 16, 2024
04:05:00 am



Gift this article

'The Mysterious Mrs. Nixon: The Life and Times of Washington's Most Private First Lady'

By Heath Hardage Lee

St. Martin's Press, 416 pages

This deeply admiring biography provides a behind-the-scenes look at what may be America's most inscrutable first lady. In public, she could appear impassive; she was called "plastic." What better subject for a biography than an influential public figure who did not want to be known?

Even those who detested President Nixon, who thought of him as “Tricky Dick,” armed with a perpetual scowl, were nonplussed by that Pat Nixon smile, immaculate in its warm yet aloof affect that intrigued her admirers and infuriated detractors, who concocted malignant stories about her.

ADVERTISEMENT

Pat Ryan in this biography is an independent woman. Richard Nixon had to remain patient while wooing a beauty who had him drive her to dates with other men. She grew to admire his persistence and sensed she was in the presence of a promising man.

Even so, Pat Ryan would have preferred a life without politics. She did not want to make an exhibition of herself. Always guarding her privacy, she was a mystery, as her biographer acknowledges. Yet what Heath Hardage Lee does not know about Pat Nixon is not a problem. The biographer shows that once Pat Ryan made the decision to marry Richard Nixon, she committed herself to becoming his stalwart supporter, participating in his campaigns for Congress and the White House.

What you will not learn from this biography is Pat Nixon’s positions on most of the issues her husband confronted. Even in private, what she thought about her husband’s decisions, she mostly kept to herself — with a few notable exceptions. She was convinced he was better on foreign affairs than any other president or presidential contender of her time. She was sure Nixon would have handled the Cuban Missile Crisis better than President Kennedy.

Ms. Lee's accounts of Pat Nixon as a superb diplomat on her trips around the world made her the perfect complement to her husband's handling of foreign affairs. She treated foreign leaders and their wives with such openness and good cheer that she broke down barriers, making negotiations with them far more emollient than would have been the case if she had merely observed foreign protocol, under which wives were not supposed to show themselves publicly.

The wives of public figures in other countries behaved differently in the first lady's presence, more openly than had been expected of them. These first lady triumphs were not merely a matter of her engaging personality but stemmed from a conviction that women should exercise their independence.

Pat Nixon's belief in women's independence — that women could be anything they chose to be, including Supreme Court justices or American presidents, had a powerful impact on Richard Nixon, even if, in the end, he could not buck the opposition of the American Bar Association, which continued to believe women were “too emotional” to serve on the highest court.

Perhaps the most striking part of this biography comes near the end, when the diligent Ms. Lee cannot find anyone to corroborate the accounts in Woodward and Bernstein's "Final Days" that both Nixons were drunk during Watergate. Interviewing an impressive array of those close to the Nixons, the biographer finds no evidence whatsoever of excessive drinking.

Ms. Lee reports strains in the Nixon marriage, but nothing close to a breaking point because Pat Nixon never doubted her husband, and her husband, right from the beginning, appreciated the intelligence of his wife, who also stood for the power of all those Republican women who worked to get him elected and were eligible themselves for public office.

In the end, as Richard Nixon reluctantly realized he would have to resign the highest office that had been his ambition to occupy for most of his political career, his wife, children, and closest advisors wanted him to fight on. He realized that notwithstanding their support, his term in power was no longer sustainable, and decided that it was better to retire with his family — who saw no need for him to be pardoned because, with his wife in the lead, they felt no reason to think of him as a guilty man.

Mr. Rollyson's work in progress is "Making the American Presidency: How Biographers Shape History."