

Give the First Lady a Break

Dear Fellow Presspersons:

Fun's fun, but the pummeling of Nancy Reagan has gone on long enough. The latest attack, by Post columnist Judy Mann (*Metro*, Nov. 20), rebukes Mrs. Reagan for being only a wife and finds "the trouble with Nancy Reagan's image is Nancy Reagan."

The article prompts me to blow the referee's whistle. When is the press going to give the first lady a break? When are you going to stop expecting her to conform to certain criteria to please the fourth estate—criteria, I might add, that change as frequently as the hemline and seem just as capricious.

How fickle you are and how short your memories. Only yesterday you were making fun of Bess Truman's avoirdupois and Mamie Eisenhower's bangs. You laughed at their dowdy clothes and pedestrian friends.

Along came Jackie Kennedy, and you extolled in her the very things you now deplore in Nancy Reagan. Jackie was quite regal; her

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clothes and tastes were elegant and expensive and her friends were indeed rich—though slightly more WASPish with slightly older money than the Reagan group.

Except for Mrs. Kennedy's highly praised restoration of the White House, which 20 years later Mrs. Reagan is striving to maintain, I cannot remember any worthy charities that had the benefit of Jackie's patronage. You liked Lady Bird Johnson, and she fared well at your hands thanks to expert advice from Elizabeth Carpenter, her chief of staff, who stroked the press and won it with her efficiency and humor. Mrs. Johnson was justly praised for her "beautification" project, and no one objected when her zillionaire friends gave tax-deductible gifts to help it along. Nor did the press take her to task for primping up the Mall while folks were suffering in the ghetto. And although Mrs. Johnson was one of the richest first ladies' in history, no one ever asked what she paid for her clothes or what she gave to charity.

You maligned poor Pat Nixon for being so determinedly middle-class. She was torn to pieces by the buzzards converging over the dead presidency of her husband, but she bore her anguish with great dignity despite the antipathy and heartlessness of the press.

Candid Betty Ford you liked for her gutsy battle with cancer and because she was an outspoken defender of the ERA and other pet projects of yours. She was good copy, but she shocked the less sophisticated hinterland with remarks often considered inappropriate for a first lady.

And finally, hark back to Rosalynn Carter, who only recently departed our fair city. You couldn't wait to pounce the minute she overstepped her "wifely" role. Remember the "Iron Magnolia"—the lady who had the temerity to sit in on Cabinet meetings and visit foreign heads of state to discuss substantive



By Harry Naltchayan—The Washington Post

matters? Remember how you made fun of her weekly lunches with husband Jimmy to tell him how to run the country?

Let's face it. Most first ladies can't win, whatever they do. But in the interests of fair play and to help understand Nancy Reagan, I would like to venture some observations about this first lady especially vis-à-vis the press:

- Mrs. Reagan is shy, sensitive and vulnerable. She is so reserved and private that to save her soul (and her image!) she cannot expound to strange journalists her innermost thoughts, her feelings toward those she loves, her philosophy of life, etc.

- She cannot dissemble. She is so honest she cannot "stage" events to make her look good. She has tried, but is not adroit at turning aside hurtful remarks with a quip. She never tries to control or manipulate interviewers so that they concentrate on subjects she wants to discuss. When you ask a question, she often answers hesitatingly and brief-

ly. (Hence, not an exciting story; hence annoyance and chagrin on the part of the journalist.)

- She feels apprehensive and defensive with the press. She is hurt and bewildered by their hostility. And it's no wonder, when even a kind gesture such as offering chocolates to the reporters on her campaign plane was ridiculed in a column by an arrogant young journalist.

- She is a real lady and a loyal friend. Those who have had the pleasure of meeting her in small groups find her warm and charming, especially when she is not on trial by the press. She is fun, relaxed, an excellent conversationalist, and interested in a wide range of subjects. She is also eager to listen and learn. She is not about to abandon her wealthier friends when they become politically inconvenient.

- She has no doubt about her priorities. Her life is dedicated to Ronald Reagan. She adores him, and her greatest joy comes from being his wife. She feels this even more keenly since the assassination attempt. Most Americans applaud her for this devotion and love, but the carping comes from younger women, especially in the press, who simply cannot identify with her and do not understand her priorities.

The column in *The Post* criticizes her for not being "substantively" involved in various charities and causes. While that is not true, it is also irrelevant. By simply focusing attention on and illuminating a problem or a need, Mrs. Reagan gives the most effective help a first lady can.

On the matter of priorities, Mrs. Reagan could well chide the press. Instead of writing reams about her clothes and hairdressers, it might report more fully her visits to drug centers, hospitals and other institutions. (For example, the youngsters she talked with at drug treatment centers felt that marijuana should not be legalized. All indicated that their addiction to hard drugs began with marijuana. The press gave this scant attention.)

Mrs. Reagan has been first lady less than a year. In this time she has suffered the shock of an assassination attempt on the president; she has renovated the White House in record time without spending a cent of public funds; she has taken the time to get acquainted with Washington and become a part of the community; she is learning about its institutions and discovering where she can be of help. She has been more accessible than almost any first lady in recent memory.

One need not agree with her viewpoints on everything. (I, for one, wish she would understand the importance of keeping abortion safe and legal.) But one has to at least grant her the right—indeed the duty—of being true to herself and to chart her course as first lady in keeping with her personality, her upbringing and her own interests.

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