

off the fence.

First Ladies

4 x 60'

EPISODIC BREAKDOWN

1. The Power of Style

From her clothes to the way she styles the White House, the image of the First Lady is a political tool which helps brand the Presidency. This episode looks at three of the most stylish First Ladies: Jackie Kennedy, Nancy Reagan and Dolley Madison.

2. Twists of Fate

Featuring Lady Bird Johnson, Edith Roosevelt and Betty Ford

Not all presidencies begin with an election and not all First Ladies are prepared for the job – some inhabit the role by chance. Lady Bird Johnson has been in Washington for thirty years when JFK is assassinated and her husband becomes President – she is a time-served political wife. But, “I feel as if I’m on stage for a part I never rehearsed”, she says. And whilst it mourns, America compares Lady Bird to her predecessor, Jacqueline Kennedy; one of the most tragic, beloved and glamorous women America has ever seen. Yet she finds a way to make the role her own. She encourages her husband to run for President in his own right. If he is going to win, victory in the Southern States is crucial; but the Civil Rights Act of 1964 means he is extremely unpopular in his home territory. Lady Bird goes on a whistle-stop tour of the South. She travels on the “Lady Bird Special” train and in four days make 47 speeches in eight states. The FBI travels ahead of her, checking the rails because she receives bomb threats. She is jeered at and told to go home, but she doesn’t stop. When Lyndon Johnson wins by a landslide in 1964, Lady Bird pursues her own goal of making America a more beautiful place, seeing it as part of Lyndon’s ‘Great Society’

Edith Roosevelt also becomes First Lady because of a Presidential assassination and her husband Theodore becomes the youngest President in history. They are the largest First Family to occupy the Presidential home. Edith makes immediate and long lasting changes. She reorganizes the household and establishes the position of social secretary, to manage invitations and screen unwanted callers. Edith exerts a real but subtle influence over the President. Each morning they walk together in the White House gardens. She speaks freely to him; and he admits that whenever he fails to follow his wife’s advice, he pays for it. Edith is described as “the perfection of ‘invisible government’”.

3. In Times of War

When America is under attack, First Ladies play a vital role. Eleanor Roosevelt is the first to address the nation after Pearl Harbor; Laura Bush instinctively comforts America's children after 9/11; and Mary Lincoln cares for wounded soldiers in hospital.

4. Trailblazers

Featuring: Jackie Kennedy, Dolley Madison Nancy Reagan

A First Lady's style is not just personal but political. From her clothes to the way she styles the White House, the image of the First Lady is indivisible from that of the Presidency. Whether it be the "nation's grandmother" Barbara Bush or "everyday icon" Michelle Obama, the First Lady's image is scrutinised from the moment her husband hits the primaries. As Hillary Clinton once puts it, "If I want to knock a story off the front page, I just change my hairstyle."

More than any first lady before, Jackie Kennedy understands the connection between style and substance. Her image will play a crucial role in the Kennedy years; her style and glamour will help define her husband's Presidency, branding it, even mythologizing it. And when it's over, she will give it a name – Camelot.

One of her greatest contributions to the Presidency and to the nation is the restoration of the White House. Jackie is appalled there are so few paintings and furniture reflecting America's history. She sets up The White House Fine Arts Committee to track down historic objects and raise money for their purchase.