

Three Women on The Firing Line

BETTY FORD: Balm for the Ego

It was particularly cruel that Betty Ford, 56, was struck by serious illness just when she was beginning to love political life for the first time in all her years in Washington. Last week she returned elated from a campaign trip to Chicago, where some 600 Republican women cheered her. "This does a lot for the ego," she beamed. "It gives me an independence after years of just coping. It's more fun being here."

Not that she had ever counted on moving into the White House; it was not even a remote dream. Though adept at politics, she never reveled in it. When Ford was elected to Congress in 1948 and the pair moved to Washington, life began to close in on her.

But it was not until Jerry was elected House minority leader in 1965 and began spending as many as 200 nights a year on the road that she became one more Washington wife widowed by politics. Recalls Betty: "Jerry would fly in from somewhere in the middle of the night, go to the office early the next morning, send for a change of clothes, and then take off again. He was missing the best part of his children's lives." Two of their four children had reached their teens, and Betty had to act as counselor and disciplinarian. Ford turned up for his sons' football games, but that was about it. He missed the midweek scrimmages, when the boys would break legs and collar bones. Says Betty: "There was a time when the car would automatically find its way to the emergency room of the hospital."

During that time, when "I had to do it all . . . to be everything to everybody," she developed a pinched nerve in her neck that doctors and painkillers

FRANKEN—GAMMA



BETTY FORD AT PRESS CONFERENCE

could not relieve. She was forced to give up skiing and golf, and a disconcerting weight gain followed for the former Powers model. She finally took her problems to a psychiatrist. "I completely lost my sense of self-worth," she admits. The psychiatrist persuaded her not to continue to sacrifice everything for her husband and children. "I also had to think about things that mattered to me."

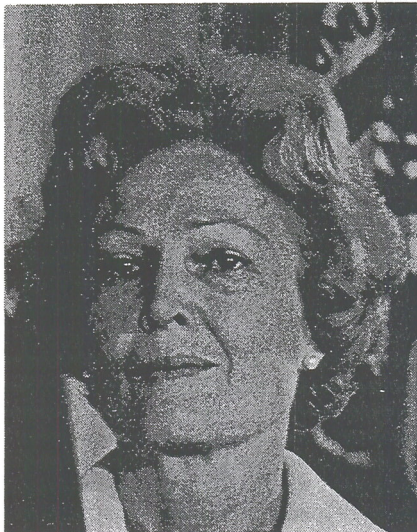
Betty exacted a promise from Jerry not to run for Congress after 1974. "I felt he had given a quarter of a century to public life and that he now could think about himself and his family. Making some money was a factor too, since the children were all of college age." When fate intervened in the form of Watergate, Ford had to renege on his promise to get out of politics. Once in the White House, she began to speak out with refreshing candor. "Jerry has supported me in the things I've said," she remarked. "At least he hasn't stepped on my toes yet." Added Betty: "After 25 years of coping, it's very satisfying."

PAT NIXON: Again the Solitude

Pat Nixon, 62, never sought political fame, though her husband desperately desired it. When he fell so ignominiously, he took her down too. With him, she retreated to San Clemente, and in her despair she did not even communicate with her closest friends. For a while her daughters, always anxious about her welfare, comforted her. When they were away, she sometimes tried on dresses she had saved from happier times for what she thought would be a serene retirement. Once when she ventured out the door, a photographer's plane flew low overhead. She fled back inside, as if in protest against all the forces that have conspired over a lifetime to deprive her of her privacy and happiness. "I don't think I would have chosen politics for my life," she admits. "It was what my husband wanted and there was a part for me to play, so I dug in and played it. If you really put your heart into something and work hard at it, you generally end up liking it." On her own as First Lady, a frothier, breezier Pat Nixon began to emerge, one not above teasing her staff or kidding the press corps, using such slang words out of her college past as "kiddo" and "big deal." She especially enjoyed traveling. "I think this is the real me," she said after one trip to Oklahoma. "I'm a frontier woman at heart."

But whenever she was around her husband, she seemed to revert to the old "me"—plastic Pat, with the frozen appearance and forced speech. "Maybe she should carry a wind machine around to tousle her hair," says Helene Drown, a longtime California friend who grows impatient with people who do not realize how warm and lively Pat can be.

En route home from South America in March with a case of the flu, Pat



PAT NIXON AT WHITE HOUSE FAREWELL

learned that her husband had scheduled a birthday celebration for her at the Grand Old Opry in Nashville. It was not that he liked country music; he was anxious to stay on the good side of the South in his fight against impeachment. "I do or die," says Pat, "but I never cancel out." For much of the evening Nixon was obsessed with trying to work a yo-yo up on the stage. "It hurt me to see it," said one of Pat's aides. "He ignored her all evening while he messed with that silly yo-yo." Pat offered no complaint. "I just don't tell all," she says.

The image of the plastic Pat may be frozen into the public mind for all time now. The last sustained view of her was at the White House, while her husband bade farewell to his staff. For a moment, tears glistened in her eyes and she bit her lip to hold them back; then her incredible self-discipline reasserted itself. After that she disappeared into the house at San Clemente and into the solitude that has so often been part of her life as a politician's wife.

JOAN KENNEDY: Escaping Anxiety

On the surface, Joan Kennedy, 38, seems the ideal politician's wife: a stunning, unself-conscious blonde—open, affable and generous. But the word used most often to describe her is vulnerable—the quality that made political life such a burden for her. Her vulnerability led her to react with special despair to the assassinations of her brothers-in-law, the airplane crash that almost killed her husband, three miscarriages and the cancer that caused her eldest son to lose a leg. Beyond these afflictions, she was vulnerable to the dynamic Kennedy clan, which never quite accepted her.

Brought up in upper-middle-class Bronxville, N.Y., she had not even heard of the illustrious Kennedys until she met Ted. At school, grades were not a primary concern. "Joan, your college days should be the happiest of your life," her father, Harry Bennett, an amiable ad-

vertising executive, told her. "Don't plug away at the books all the time." The competitive Kennedy spirit belonged to an alien world.

She did her best to adjust to it. She rode, though she was allergic to horses. She tried to water ski, though she invariably fell off. "They do it so well," she said of her sisters-in-law. "I'm a flop." But for a time she held her own. When Ted lay in a hospital with a broken back in 1964, she shook thousands of hands a day, campaigning for his reelection as Senator. He won with 74.3% of the vote. Says Sister Hargrove, associate professor of religion at Manhattanville College and long a confidante of Joan's: "She has projected onto the screen of her imagination these mythical Kennedy women. She doesn't understand that she could project an image of herself as a woman of strength too."

Ted has not been much help, with his frequent absences and his magnetic attraction for women. "She is almost never alone with him," notes a family friend, "although she is always hopeful. There are always ten advisers around the house, 84 people on the boat, and sisters-in-law and kids everywhere." Ted does not deliberately ignore her, but he scarcely treats her as his equal. Though he did take her to Russia last spring and let her meet Party Leader Leonid Brezhnev, he wanted her to listen without asking questions.

As the strains mounted, Joan turned more often to alcohol for support and escape. She has been under treatment at Silver Hill in Connecticut, where her divorced mother had gone, and in Southern California. For several years she has also gone to a psychiatrist. Ted's withdrawal from the presidential race will not remove all of Joan's anxieties, but in a world that she already finds too harsh and competitive, she will be spared the added anxiety of a presidential race and perhaps have a chance to recover her health and develop a greater sense of her own self.



JOAN KENNEDY IN BOSTON