



Burt Glinn—Magnum

On the podium: Out of the wings

PAT NIXON DOES IT ON HER OWN

She has always been the kind who waits in the wings," declared actor James Stewart, narrating a ten-minute film tribute to the First Lady at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach last week. "Always there, always ready to help her husband and her country." That much was true enough—for the 32 years of their marriage, Patricia Ryan Nixon has played the role of dutiful wife at her husband's side. But when the film ended and Mrs. Nixon, clad in a demure, long-sleeve blue dress, stepped smilingly to the podium to the strains of "Lovely to Look At," the huge Convention Hall erupted in a thunderous ovation that lasted almost as long as the film itself—and it was plain that the First Lady had finally stepped into her own.

From her very arrival with daughters Tricia and Julie at Miami International Airport on Sunday, the woman the press once called "Plastic Pat" proved to be one of the few flesh-and-blood performers the prepackaged forum produced. Plunging into a crowd of some 3,000 well-wishers who turned out to greet her, Mrs. Nixon signed countless autographs, pressed countless hands and left one young admirer squealing, "She touched me! She touched me!" She touched a good many more at a rally for 1,000 volunteers at the Hotel Fontainebleau that afternoon. Responding to the thump of a rock band, Mrs. Nixon

threw up her hands, dipped her knees and executed a dignified but unmistakable little frug, exclaiming, "Oh, that music!" And so, for four breathless days, the First Lady whirled through a seemingly endless array of caucuses, speeches and receptions, shaking hands, signing autographs and quite thoroughly charming the assembled Republican multitudes in Miami Beach.

Helpmate: Is there a new Pat—or simply a new media creation? "Mother," Tricia Cox says, "has always been the same: outgoing, vivacious, talented and capable." Adds adviser Henry Kissinger: "Ever since I've known her, she's been confident." And certainly, elements of the familiar, self-effacing helpmate remain. "I want to support my husband in all the fine things he is doing throughout the world," the First Lady enthused at the convention last week.

Still, a change is evident—at home and abroad. The old, diffident Pat would hardly have plumped in public for the Vice President as she did last week. In Moscow last May, when no women were invited to the signing of the SALT agreements, Mrs. Nixon coolly slipped in by herself to view the historic occasion—from a vantage point behind a pillar. With a nod to Mrs. Nixon's solo trips as special Presidential emissary to Africa and earthquake-stricken Peru, Congresswoman Margaret Heckler says flatly: "I call Mrs. Nixon the No. 1 liberated woman. She started with nothing. Look at her now."

Change: To look at the First Lady last week was to see a woman markedly more at ease in public than the one who moved into the White House three and a half years ago. But Mrs. Nixon, now 60, ascribes the change more to her job than to herself. "When Dick was Vice President, I did most of the things I do now—travel abroad, entertain our foreign guests and all that," she explained to NEWSWEEK's Nancy Ball. "But as the wife of the President, I get more coverage. People see me more, see more what I'm like and what I do."

And they'll be seeing a lot more of her in the weeks ahead. The convention behind her, Mrs. Nixon took off with the President for the San Clemente White House to begin sorting out her campaign schedule from the hundreds of invitations that have poured in. Tricia and her husband Edward Cox and Julie Eisenhower will be hitting the campaign trail, too (David will be on sea duty). But it is Mrs. Nixon who will likely be drawing the warmest crowds. "Campaigning has never been a burden to me," said the First Lady last week. "Sometimes the days are too long—but I like people very much."