

Betty: The New First Lady

It was not long after the White House called to offer Gerald Ford the Vice Presidency when the telephone rang again: the Fords' eldest son, Michael, wanted to talk to his father. "Mother has been awfully good to us through the years," he said solemnly. "Are you sure you want to put her through this?"

As the Ford family well knows, 25 years of being both housewife and House wife has left its scars on Betty Ford—and she is quick to admit it. For the last nine years, while her husband held the hectic, day-and-night job of House Minority Leader, she was left almost singlehanded to cope with their then adolescent children. She developed psychosomatic pains, turned to psychiatry and tranquilizers (which she still uses daily) and

is more than the plain country girl she calls herself. She started taking dance lessons as a child of 8 in Grand Rapids and went on to study dance in New York at 20; she earned a living as a John Robert Powers model, danced with the Martha Graham company and was on the point of becoming a professional dancer when her parents asked her to come home and consider the decision. There she took a job as a fashion coordinator, started an amateur dance group and got married—but not to Gerald Ford. The marriage ended in divorce after five years, and at 30 she married Ford, just before his first election to Congress.

Betty Ford's divorce had been no secret in Grand Rapids, but the word didn't get to Washington until early this year,

She is no less the playmaker with her kids, who call her "Ma'am" to her face and "the Disciplinarian" out of hearing range. With Ford averaging 200 out-of-town speeches a year throughout his career, she says, "I never told the children they'd have to wait until Daddy came home [when they misbehaved] . . . He was always soft and lenient." But their youngest child, 17-year-old Susan, who attends the Holton-Arms School in Bethesda, Md., calls him "the perfect father."

None of the Ford offspring is exactly a straight-arrow conformist. Their 22-year-old son John, who majored in forestry at Utah State and shaved off his beard last year when his father became the Vice President, says appreciatively: "He never tried to mold us or direct us. He allowed us room to explore by ourselves." Michael, 24, who last month married a pretty schoolmate named Gayle Brumbaugh, attends a Massachusetts theological school, though he is not sure he wants to be a minister. And 18-year-old Steven is currently pondering whether to spend a year working out West before enrolling in Duke University.

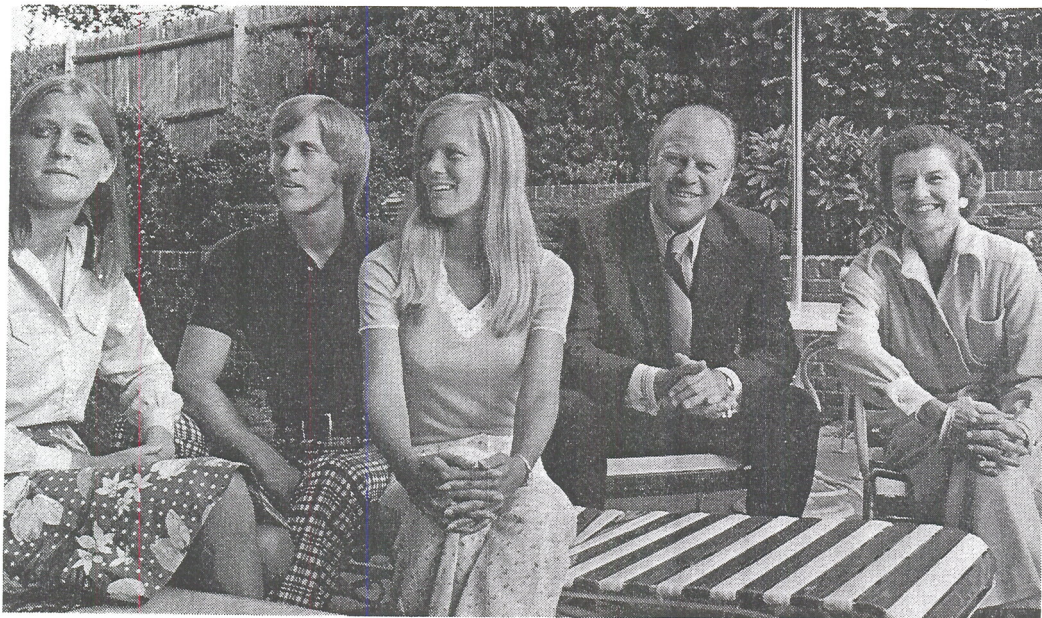
'BILLS AND CRITICISMS'

Nor does Betty Ford fit easily into a mold—political or otherwise. She favors day care and abortion, both anathema to the Nixon Administration. She considers herself something of a champion of women's rights as well. "Jerry always felt . . . I was the one to stay home and raise the family," she says. "But I firmly believe in equal opportunity." And it's fairly certain her views will not be lost on the new President; she leaves "bills and criticisms" on his bedroom bureau regularly.

What will the White House be like with Betty Ford as First Lady?

"I hope we can make it a happy and fun place," she told NEWSWEEK last weekend. "After all, if the son of Teddy Roosevelt could take his pony, we can bring our Siamese cat." But she takes her new role seriously. She held the Bible for her husband's swearing-in and says, "I really felt like I was taking that oath, too."

The phone in the Ford household has been ringing constantly since that event: what to do about all the flowers or the midweek arrival of the King of Jordan. Under such pressures, refreshing candor can quickly turn undiplomatic. "I'm just afraid the State Department is going to have to do something about the King of Jordan," she said, adding: "We'll just have to put on an official dinner for him if it's an official visit . . . I hope it's not." But she understands that all the confusion is the result of an unprecedented historical situation. "We didn't have an election and three months before going into office," she says with a sigh. "We had 24 hours."



Harry Naltchayan—The Washington Post

The First Family: Susan, Mike, Gayle, 'perfect father' and 'Disciplinarian'

even made her husband promise to quit politics after the next election. But now, barely reconciled to her Second Ladyship, she is moving to the White House—and into a role she never wanted.

Almost surely, those who know her say, she will do it well, with a forthright flair matching the candor of her husband. Despite her misgivings over his Vice Presidency, she has played her part with quiet grace—enduring his incessant travels, deciding on her own that she should represent the Administration at the funeral of Mrs. Martin Luther King Sr., and submitting to more than 200 interviews. "I've been asked everything except how often I go to bed with my husband," she told a friend not long ago. "If they had asked me, I would have told them."

They have lived for nineteen years in an unpretentious suburban house in Alexandria, Va., bringing up their four children in a middle-American idyll of knotty pine, celebrity photos, skiing vacations and Bible study. But Betty Ford

and it was a small sensation; she will be only the second divorcee in the White House.* But she shrugs it off as a marriage "I could have easily skipped" except that it helped her appreciate a good husband when she found one.

RELUCTANT TANGO

For whatever reason, she has also found the toughness to be a successful Washington wife. She tolerates Ford's public griping about her chronic lateness and shoulders her own burdensome schedule of speeches and appearances. But she demands her share of his attention. Once, coming home after a hard day as the Veep, he said he was heading straight to bed. "Oh no you're not," she announced, and promptly put on a record so they could practice their tango for a party. "Jerry was good but reluctant," she says with a giggle.

*The first was Florence Kling Harding. Mrs. Andrew Jackson was divorced but died before her husband took office.