

WOMEN/COVER STORY

The Relentless Ordeal of Political Wives

As Betty Ford was in the hospital battling cancer, the nation thought of her with warmth and sympathy. She was undergoing a physical ordeal that all Americans dread and that has become almost familiar. But for many years she has also undergone a psychological ordeal, far less serious and less familiar, but nagging and pervasive: the tribulations that befall so many wives of politicians. Though at the center of a close and apparently happy family, Betty Ford has often come near the end of her nervous resources. It is a rather special occupational disease that has become a serious factor in America's political life.

The psychological ordeal suffered by the former First Lady has been far worse. Several times last week Pat Nixon visited the bedside of her husband as he underwent treatment for a blood clot in the lung—not quite two months after his humiliating resignation. Now she shared his exile, a bitter reward for a life of self-effacing, tireless and often joyless devotion to the relentless demands of a unique political career.

Rigid Control. In a sense, both Betty Ford and Pat Nixon were veterans. Not so the younger, more fragile blonde who last week sat silently in the Heritage Room of Boston's Parker House and watched her husband bow out of the 1976 presidential contest. Joan Kennedy, demonstrating the rigid control expected of political wives in America—especially Kennedy wives—stayed calm and clear-eyed, her gaze focused on a point near her husband, her hands folded demurely in her lap. She remained all but immobile when her husband said that he would not subject his family to the rigors of a presidential campaign. Then her control began to give way at the edges, and she blinked back tears. Joan, whose life has been made miserable by a political role she neither sought nor was capable of handling, could no longer completely conceal her feelings. Said a longtime Washington friend who watched the drama on television: "You could feel her relief 500 miles away."

The ordeal of the political wife, and the somewhat lesser strains borne by the political husband (see box page 19), is more than a matter of mere gossip, more than a personal problem. It was important enough to help knock the leading Democratic contender out of the 1976 presidential race. Under the steady glare of television, the personality and character of the political wife is more crucial than ever, but the treatment she receives has not caught up with her importance. Torn between the role she feels she ought to fill and the part that is handed her, she understandably grows

distraught. The problem is most conspicuous in the U.S., where traditionally politicians' wives have played a far more public role than elsewhere. But it is growing in other countries, particularly where press and television coverage is intense. Early in September, the vivacious 26-year-old wife of Canada's Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau entered Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital and said, "I'm under psychiatric care for severe emotional stress, but I think I'm on the way to recovery."

Some women, to be sure, would be unhappy no matter what their husbands' occupations and would turn in their despair to drink, to drugs, to affairs. But probably no other career makes such relentless demands on wives and families as politics. Witness Pat Nixon in virtual exile at San Clemente. "We are worried about Pat," an associate of the Nixons confides. "She has not been in touch with any of her close friends. It's not like her." Witness Eleanor McGovern, once again on the stump in South Dakota, confessing with her customary candor: "I would like to have had another year before campaigning."

Marriage to a high-level corporate executive, educator or military officer has similar strains—but not really comparable. Those pressures can be worked out in relative privacy and obscurity. Not so with the officeholder's wife. She becomes public property, an extension of the public man, subject to unending scrutiny, judgments, accolades and criticism. She is often used and then abandoned or ignored or forced to turn the other way as "power groupies" cluster around the Big Man. She must sparkle to help her husband but beware of outshining him. She must know the issues and the arguments for and against. She must often maintain two homes without really living in either. Many such women want out. And yet, for all the pressures and drawbacks, quite a few would have it no other way, particularly after their husbands reach the real heights.

Almost all resent the near-total loss of privacy. Ellen Proxmire, former wife of Wisconsin's Democratic Senator William Proxmire, characterizes the experience in a book about her life in politics, *One Foot in Washington*. "I sometimes think that goldfish in a bowl are much better off than the public figures they resemble," she writes. "Those

who study their silky movements from outside the glass don't criticize what they are wearing, what they do, what they say, what they mean, nor do they ask the fish lots of questions or expect them to do much more than entertain."

While many wives prefer to remain in the bowl, an increasing number are openly expressing discontent and looking for means to change the system that ensnares them in a variety of ways. Some, like Abigail McCarthy or Mieke Tunney or Phyllis Dole, have left their husbands and named politics as the correspondent. Others, like Betty Ford and Joan Kennedy, have sought psychiatric

REGAN—CAMERA 5



TED & JOAN KENNEDY IN BOSTON FOR ANNOUNCEMENT
Relieved of an unsought role.

help and owned up to it—something that would have been unthinkable a few years ago. Occasionally there appears a Cornelia Wallace or a Martha Mitchell who does not hesitate to speak her own mind whatever her husband may think.

A political wife, in a sense, is a contradiction in terms. She is expected to manage a household and raise a family, often with little or no help from her husband; yet, at the same time she is called upon to make speeches and win votes for her husband. She must be the model of purity and probity at home, but she must be Everywoman outside, with a ready smile and a cheerful word for all the importuning bores on the campaign trail. Writes Ellen Proxmire: "She is first and always a mother, a cook, a chauffeur, a seamstress and a homemaker, but she is also an adviser, a social secretary, a campaigner and even a TV personality."

In a book of reminiscences just pub-

THE NATION

lished, appropriately titled *Uphill*, Eleanor McGovern tells about being late for a press conference during the 1972 Democratic National Convention in Miami. "I was in the penthouse pullman kitchen washing the dishes after cooking bacon and eggs for George and the children and the grandsons and the other relatives and staff who wandered in and out." One of her aides reprimanded her: "I can't tell the press that you're late to talk about being a potential First Lady because you're scrubbing a frying pan." Eleanor shot back: "Then go and find me a cook." That night she got one.

During a campaign, a wife is considered a surrogate for her husband and the closest approximation to him. She

BRACK—BLACK STAR



HAPPY ROCKEFELLER AT HEARINGS
End of an idyllic time.

must perform as skillfully as he does but without his experience or all-consuming drive. Seasoned campaigner that she became, Joan Kennedy was forever wondering whether Ted would approve of what she said. Even such an articulate speechmaker as Abigail McCarthy worried constantly. In her reminiscences, *Private Faces/Public Places*, she wrote, "After every interview, I lay awake in a black nightmare of anxiety, fearful that I had said something which would do Gene irreparable harm."

Occasionally this nightmare becomes a reality for political wives. During the critical New Hampshire primary campaign in 1972, Jane Muskie was reported in the Manchester *Union Leader* to be fond of drink and salty jokes. Incensed at what he considered to be a snide attack on his wife, Muskie was reduced to tears in a public appearance one snowy evening. This display of emotion, observers agree, cost Muskie a considerable number of votes in the primary and slowed his momentum as a Presidential candidate.

The political wife is essential to the campaign, and then again she is not. For the jealous staff surrounding the candidate, she may become an adversary—a rival claimant on their hero's time, which they think should be devoted exclusively to getting elected. "The wife sees the staff as a rapacious group of self-serving people, and they see her as a jealous old bag," says Washington Psychiatrist William Davidson. "The political wife is at the whim of the staff," adds an aide to Eleanor McGovern. "When the candidate can't be there, she is expected to give the speech and know the issue. When he *is* there, she is expected to cross her legs at the ankles and listen adoringly." Eleanor, in fact, got in trouble with the staff in 1972 when her speeches began to earn better press notices than her husband's. She was instructed, in so many words, to cool it. Be good, but not too good.

Can a more dutiful, adoring, enduring wife be found on the campaign trail than Muriel Humphrey? Nor is her husband inconsiderate. Nevertheless, she was taken by surprise when Hubert announced that he would run for the presidency in 1960. She sent him a wry wire: LET ME KNOW IF I CAN BE OF HELP. During the 1972 Florida primary, she was bone tired, homesick and "sobbing my heart out." She asked her husband if she could go home to Washington for her birthday as she had been promised. Replied Hubert: "I want you there." There she stayed.

Double Jeopardy. Given the conflicting demands, a political wife begins to wonder who she is. She may lose her sense of worth and identity. "Politics has nullified my personality," claims Joy Dirksen Baker, who has suffered double political jeopardy, as it were. Her father was the sonorous Senate orator Everett Dirksen; her husband is Tennessee Senator Howard Baker. "The problem started with my father, who was famous," she says. "Then the Watergate hearings came along, and Howard catapulted to prominence. I've always felt I was sort of an appendage."

To avoid that danger, political wives are carving out lives or careers of their own. Says Marion Javits, who has managed to do so with considerable éclat: "The wife who accompanies the man who shakes the hands knows what 'impersonal' means best of all. She is completely left out . . . You become part of your husband's audience. Although the ego of people in public life doesn't quite equal that of Orson Welles, who is supposed to have wanted applause when he climbed out of the bathtub, it is there."

It was after being elbowed aside once too often that Angelina Alioto decided to punish her husband Joseph, the ambitious mayor of San Francisco, by disappearing for 17 days last year without telling him where she was going. "At five feet," she says, "I'm the right size to be elbowed in the head." Her husband often failed to introduce her at

functions they attended together; he even appropriated her quotes, she claims, without giving her credit. "Son of a biscuit-eater, I'm nobody's robot."

Henry Adams wrote that "a friend in power is a friend lost"; that may apply to a husband as well. He becomes a different man, and not necessarily a better one. However humble his office or aptitude, he develops an exaggerated notion of his power. "His ego is constantly fed," observes Jane Muskie, who periodically denies such nourishment to her own husband. "A little kick in the behind sometimes helps," she adds. "Politicians are not a lovable lot," says an internist who has treated countless numbers of them and their wives during nearly 30 years of practice. "They are self-serving egomaniacs, and I take off my hat to their wives. I don't know how the husbands get away with it." He believes that no more than 3% or 4% of political wives genuinely enjoy what they are doing. "There's a lot of resentment under the surface. They always start out

REBBOT—CAMERA 5



CANADA'S MARGARET TRUDEAU
Severe stress.

with 'my dear, darling husband' and how much he's doing for Cayuga County or wherever the hell he comes from. But if you listen long enough, you find out she doesn't give a hoot about Cayuga County. If you really establish rapport with one of these wives, she will come right out and tell you how horrible her life is."

Political wives find that theirs is the last cause to which their husbands devote themselves. California Representative Pete McCloskey, recently divorced from his wife, regretfully seconds a friend's assessment: "Pete's a great guy. He'll do anything for his country, his friends and his family, in that order—which is not very good for his family." Adds McCloskey: "You get so in-

volved with the cause that you lose your sensitivity to people." Nancy Riegle, who is divorced from Michigan's Democratic Congressman Donald Riegle, acidly agrees, "The trouble is these guys think that what they're doing is so important they lose perspective. They think they're being unselfish worrying about the kids in Viet Nam and the poor in the ghettos, but that's a bunch of crap. All they want to do is see their name in print. It's all for their own aggrandizement. When it comes to being a daddy or a husband, there is no time."

Psychiatrist Davidson, who traveled

with the McCarthy presidential campaign in 1968, argues that "politicians have overextended themselves physically and emotionally to the point where their judgment is impaired." Rather than lead the errant husband back to reality, the family tends to become over-protective for fear of letting him down. Through the best of intentions, they thus confirm him in his illusions. Barbara ("Bootsie") Mandel, whose husband of 32 years, the Democratic Governor of Maryland, deserted her last year in order to marry a younger woman, concurs. "A man like Marvin Mandel, he

starts to believe what his staff tells him, and they only tell him what he wants to hear. Then he comes home, and his wife tells him the truth."

A constant stress on politicians' wives is the frequent absence of their busy husbands. "Those wives may talk about hating politics," says a Washington woman who has worked closely with the wives of two presidential candidates. "But what they really mean is that they hate being abandoned. It would be interesting to see statistics on how many political husbands haven't been at the hospital when their babies were

born." When Abigail McCarthy was rushed to X ray after complications developed in giving birth, Gene left her to make a roll call on the Hill. The doctor was astounded but not Abigail.

After having her husband to herself for much of an idyllic summer, Happy Rockefeller frets about the separation that the vice presidency will bring. She greeted the appointment with distinct coolness. It is not that she is displeased says a family spokesman, but she is "less than enchanted with the idea, and her sons are having trouble getting used to it." Said a family friend: "She's not throwing her hat in the air about getting back into public life, but she is throwing her hat in the air because her husband is so happy."

Left very much on her own, a wife learns to cope with problems that a more conventional husband might take off her hands. Knowing that she will be seeing even less of her husband than before, Helen Jackson, wife of Democratic Presidential Hopeful Henry ("Scoop") Jackson, has enrolled in a course in home maintenance so that she will be able to repair plumbing and electrical appliances. Last year two Senate wives—Barbara Eagleton and Ann Stevens—took an auto-repair course.

Long or frequent absences by a politician father can be hardest on children. Susan Ford, 17, wandering about the White House family quarters in T shirt and carpenter's pants, recalled that "not having a daddy at home made it really hard on Mother. She had to put up with three boys—and me." But she added, "Dad really just wasn't home a lot, so when he was there, it was so special we did everything we could to make him happy—and he did everything he could to make us happy." When John Lindsay was a Congressman he left his family at home, as do many others. His wife Mary recalls that "when our daughter Margie was six, John walked in with a couple of friends and she said in a loud voice, 'How come everybody else gets to see Daddy and we don't?' That did it. We moved to Washington, and I think it saved the children."

Unlikely Casanovas. There is also the danger of an absent husband's taking permanent leave. Other women are an ever-present threat. Political office, or campaigning for it, can convert the most unlikely prospect into a Casanova. For the first time in his life, he discovers that he is irresistible to certain women with a craving for power. The temptation is hard to resist, and many scarcely try. "It's a very heady business," says Jane Muskie. "You go to a party alone, and when your husband arrives you see all those women advance on him like vultures. Well, that does something to a man that's not normal."

Barbara Howar, a shrewd observer and participant in the Washington sex-and-politics scene, refers to all the secretaries and stewardesses available to the vulnerable politician as so much

"cannon fodder." Says Howar, who has been linked more than once with familiar Washington names: "The kind of man who will stand up and say, 'Vote for me because I am better than he' has just the kind of ego that needs that physical contact, that someone saying, 'I want you.'" The protective devices against these dangerous liaisons have broken down, she feels. "Washington never has had any standards. This town has no morality at all. It was always the stern standards of their home communities that people brought with them to Washington." Now, she maintains, morals are almost as relaxed in the provinces as in the nation's capital, and wives suffer for it while their husbands make the most of it.

Troubling Eyes. Beyond these already severe stresses is one that plagues every political family: the hatred that even the well-motivated, understated politician arouses. "I'm no stranger to hard-fought politics," says Jo Hall, wife of Oklahoma Governor David Hall. But she was appalled at the vehemence of the attacks on her husband, who lost a recent bid for re-election. "You can't imagine how troubling it is to look into the faces of people with absolute hatred in their eyes. I've caught myself remembering that these were the people who cheered when President Kennedy was assassinated. If you love someone, be prepared to be hurt, and hurt often, in today's political climate."

Though it is something of a minor miracle, given the problems, some wives survive and even thrive in politics. To do so, they must set some of the rules and reserve some time, space and independence for themselves. One way is to insist on the primacy of the home. Except during a crisis, Mary Lindsay took the phone off the hook at Gracie Mansion for 1½ hours every night of the week during her husband's mayoralty. While all callers—county bosses, job seekers and cranks—got busy signals, John Lindsay had an interval of enforced leisure during which he could catch up with his family.

When he is not embroiled in campaigning, Pittsburgh's Democratic mayor, Pete Flaherty, makes a habit of coming home for dinner every night so that he can chat with his five children. Once he is finished, he usually goes off to an officially scheduled dinner. "He gets there after everybody has eaten," says his wife Nancy. "But they don't seem to mind." And meanwhile, she adds, "Pete has told me and the children what is going on." Junie Butler, wife of a Virginia Congressman, states this creed for the wife determined to avoid being submerged by the political life: "If my husband doesn't like my image, he can get a new model. If his constituents don't like my image, they can get a new Congressman. I feel my part is to have a solid family."

Other wives are striking out on independent courses of their own. Betty Talmadge, wife of Georgia Senator Her-

THE NATION

man Talmadge, manages a meat business, Talmadge Farms, which grosses \$3.5 million a year. "I have shaken hands," she says, "but I have never made a campaign speech in my life." Even Muriel Humphrey, a notably docile political wife, recently declared a measure of independence from the indefatigable Hubert. She now spends most of her time at their lakeside house in Waverly, Minn. "What is the life of a Senator's wife anyway?" she muses. "I find more satisfaction in doing the things I really care about, seeing my children and grandchildren, playing the piano, the artistry of needlepoint. I love being alone."

Some wives turn out to be a political match for their husbands. Jane Hart, who holds a helicopter pilot's license, is often a provocative step ahead of her husband, Michigan Senator Philip Hart. She refused to pay her 1972 federal income tax because of the Viet Nam War and journeyed on her own to Hanoi to talk to American P.O.W.s. Hart, who candidly admits that his wife financed his political career, quips, "Bedfellows make strange politics." Carolyn Bond, wife of Missouri's Democratic Governor Kit Bond, relishes campaigning as much as her husband. She has visited every state hospital in Missouri and is considering running for office herself some day.

Full Disclosure. Where does the American political wife go from here? Will increasing TV and press coverage make politicians more open and honest—on the job and at home as well—or simply more cautious? It is difficult to see how, in the present climate, Franklin Roosevelt could have kept his affair with Lucy Mercer Rutherford secret for so many years. The growing concern with candor, the insistence on full disclosure, would seem to discourage the long-accepted hypocrisies—the tendency, as one observer puts it, "to be the gingham-checked girl back in the state and the most sophisticated, intelligent, glamorous female in Washington." The capital, in fact, is blessed with what seems to be the most frank and outspoken First Lady since Eleanor Roosevelt, and the atmosphere may be catching. In Colorado, Lee Hart notes that when she campaigns for her husband Gary in the gubernatorial race, "people care about issues. I am never asked about clothes and recipes." In Pennsylvania, Claire Schweiker, wife of the Republican Senator, contends that "wives are expected to be seen and heard now, instead of seen and not heard as they used to be."

Political wives are agitating for something more than politics as usual. For them a career of scrambling for office and then struggling to stay there is not enough. The rebellion of the political wife—and her passive protest of divorce, alcoholism and withdrawal—is a plea not just for women but also for a more humane politics.