First Lady Diplomacy: The Foreign Policy Activism of First Lady Clinton

by Glenn P. Hastedt and Anthony J. Eksterowicz

First lady activism is conditioned by many factors on various levels. There are personal, institutional, societal, and public policy levels, and many variables within each level contribute to first lady activism or performance. Former First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton was one of the most active first ladies in modern memory. This article explores the genesis of her activism in the foreign policy realm. We first discuss the general factors that affect first lady performance. These factors are arranged in various variable sets. We then apply these sets to First Lady Clinton in order to gain some systematic understanding of her activism. With such insight we next discuss the most important of these variables which have affected First Lady Clinton’s activism in foreign policy.

Factors Affecting First Lady Performance

Historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony once noted concerning first ladies, “Only the First Lady and the president determine the extent of her power, though frequently she has operated without his knowledge or permission.”1 Modern-day first ladies operate within a textured and complicated political environment composed of many variables that affect their power, influence, and ultimately, their activism. These variables are not only personal in nature but also involve the administrative environment within the White House and the Office of the First Lady. The public and the political climate during a first lady’s tenure can also affect her performance.

A list of factors affecting first lady performance or activism can be gleaned from the literature on first ladies.2 There are a series of personal attributes that can affect performance, such as the first lady’s background, her ambition, vision, and ideology. The first lady’s background consists of her personal, professional, and educational background, and general biographical information, such as employment history, schools attended, etc. A first lady’s ideology is developed from her background and consists of things like religious, moral, and political views. Ambition and vision develop from a first lady’s background. There seems to be a correlation between ambition and vision and the first lady’s attitude toward her office, which is in turn

Glenn P. Hastedt and Anthony Eksterowicz are professors in the Political Science Department at James Madison University, in Harrisonburg, Virginia.
linked to performance and activism. Performance can be defined in terms of how active a first lady will be in using her office to affect public policy and is determined not only by the first lady’s attributes, but also by those who have had an impact upon her in her formative years.

Certain administrative variables also affect performance. Resources, such as staff and budget, as well as the location of the Office of the First Lady and its relationship with the White House Office—highly integrated or barely integrated—set the stage for first lady performance. Resources can contribute toward increased activism, as can the location of the first lady’s office near the center of the policy action. More important is the level of integration of these resources and personnel with that of the White House Office. In addition, a first lady’s relationship with other governmental agencies can also affect performance and activism.

**Does she adopt a non-policy, traditional issue-oriented approach to her office, or will she take a policy-advocate approach and tackle controversial issues?**

How a first lady perceives issues can contribute to performance. Does she adopt a non-policy, traditional issue-oriented approach to her office, or will she take a policy-advocate approach and tackle controversial issues? If she adopts the latter she will most likely increase her interaction with interest groups, legislative committees, and bureaucratic agencies in pursuit of legislative success. If she adopts the former she will function as a spokesperson for charitable and social causes and, primarily, for the president’s agenda.

A first lady’s professional relationship with the president can largely impact her performance because a first lady’s performance is determined to some extent by the president’s performance in office. This is especially the case with the present high level of integration between the two offices. The level of performance is also tempered by the level of support the first lady receives from the president. If, within the nature of their professional relationship, the president is supportive and encourages the first lady to take a more active approach, she will be more inclined to perform a variety of duties, serving in capacities ranging from hostess to diplomat. She will also function as an active partner, presidential spokesperson, political player, and overall assistant to the president.

Finally, the public has an impact upon first lady performance. Events, the media’s interpretation of these events, public expectations, opinion polls, and public criticism and approval all affect the political climate within which a first lady operates. These variables are closely interrelated. Events such as social unrest, tragedies like September 11th, or other crises affect the political climate in which a first lady operates. What the media chooses to report or how it reports can affect public reactions and expectations, which in turn can affect the political climate and the first lady’s performance. Opinion polls reflecting public criticism or approval are extremely prone to change in time and may affect her performance. Witness the
different opinions of First Lady Hillary Clinton in the beginning of her tenure as opposed to those during the Lewinsky scandal.

One of the variables that might have an impact upon the public’s expectations of first ladies is the public’s knowledge of the historic duties and roles of first ladies. What does the public know about first ladies? This educational variable is important because it can affect public attitudes toward first ladies. In a study of American government and presidency textbooks Eksterowicz and Watson conclude:

Many of these texts portray the first lady as simply an appendage of the president. Her political agenda, duties, and influence are ignored…. While a few texts do offer glimpses of first ladies’ efforts on behalf of social causes, none gives the students enough information to understand why or how they were able to accomplish what they did. Moreover, a listing of first ladies’ “pet projects” fails to capture the essence and range of activism and influence of the first ladyship.4

The authors go on to suggest that American government and presidency textbooks devote increased coverage to the first ladyship as an institution.

The lack of coverage of first ladies in textbooks, especially in higher education general liberal studies courses, provides insufficient knowledge concerning the roles and responsibilities of first ladies. This in turn can affect public opinion and coverage of first ladies by the media. Most coverage of first ladies in the popular press appears in the style section of newspapers and in magazines such as Good Housekeeping.5 Such coverage can lead to simplistic public assessments of the first lady and her office and can affect the performance of first ladies.

VARIABLE SETS AND FIRST LADY CLINTON

As First Lady Clinton describes her commitment to civil rights and women and children’s issues, one can view an all-encompassing dedication to governmental policies that affect these issues. Mrs. Clinton was and remains involved in health care, adoption, the right to choose, mitigation of domestic violence, and electoral rights. During her tenure as first lady, she engaged in extensive contacts with legislators, testified before the Congress, and formed alliances both inside and outside Washington with groups such as Vital Voices and the Children’s Defense Fund. She had her failures, such as the unsuccessful attempt to introduce universal health care, but she also had successes such as the C.H.I.P. program.6 The following section briefly overviews the variable sets which have allowed her to perform well as an active, policy-driven first lady.

The personal attribute variable set forms the foundation for First Lady Clinton’s performance and activism. In her autobiography, Living History, Mrs. Clinton discusses her early years. She notes the importance of her family, especially her father, from whom she inherited a competitive nature. Her sense of optimism and vision for policy issues are derived both from her religious background and college education. Mrs. Clinton’s Methodist upbringing contributed to her combining the idea of religious good with that of public policy—she often writes of good public
policy as a duty with religious and moral overtones. Her education at Wellesley College blended classroom experience with real world activism, which resulted in her particular dedication to civil, women’s, and children’s rights.

During her tenure as first lady, Mrs. Clinton was doubtlessly aware of the contributions of previous first ladies such as Lady Bird Johnson, Rosalyn Carter, and Nancy Reagan, all of whom had increased the size, prominence, and influence of the first lady’s office. Mrs. Clinton did her share to uphold this trend. She was the first first lady to have her office in the West Wing, and she also had and additional office in the Old Executive Office Building, just down the hall from other offices in the president’s West Wing office. Mrs. Clinton’s second Chief of Staff Melanne Verveer indicated that such proximity to the Oval Office was important because of the integration of the two offices on public policy issues. Mrs. Clinton echoed this observation when she noted, “…some of my staff would be part of the West Wing team. I thought they should be integrated physically as well…. These physical and staff changes were important if I was going to be involved in working on Bill’s agenda, particularly as it related to issues affecting women, children and families.” Indeed, her work on the Health Care Task Force was integrated with the White House. Mrs. Clinton’s involvement in this issue was initially challenged and led to a federal court of appeals decision in Association of American Physicians and Surgeons v. Hillary Rodham Clinton. The court sided with the Clinton Justice Department’s argument suggesting that Mrs. Clinton was a government employee. This is the first formal court ruling on the position of the first lady, and it will serve to advance the Office of the First Lady as an institution. It is also an example of how location of office, resources, and integration with other governmental agencies (via health care task force work) and with the White House Office can facilitate first lady–policy activism.

By the end of the Clinton presidency, the public came to expect a certain amount of advocacy from Mrs. Clinton due to the evolution of her office.

Mrs. Clinton’s personal relationship with her husband and President Clinton’s own activism helped a great deal in her issue advocacy. Many of the first lady’s issues, ranging from health care to human rights, were also championed by President Clinton. Thus, the president and first lady were in synch in their policies. Their professional partnership also entailed First Lady Clinton’s campaigning vigorously for President Clinton while tending to her more domestic first lady duties. Thus, the strength of the Clinton presidency, policy synchronization, and the professional partnership of the Clintons all contributed to an activist Office of the First Lady.

In terms of public opinion, First Lady Clinton describes her ups and downs and the difficulty of managing public expectations for first ladies in general. The public’s expectations of First Lady Clinton shifted dramatically during her tenure, as did her approval and criticism from both the media and public. By the end of the
Clinton presidency, the public came to expect a certain amount of advocacy from Mrs. Clinton due to the evolution of her office. Thus as the Clinton Presidency evolved, so too did the public’s expectation concerning First Lady Clinton’s issue advocacy, and there was increasing support for first lady activism as the Clinton administration proceeded. Mrs. Clinton was one of the most active modern first ladies at home, as well as in the foreign policy arena. It is our contention that many of the above variables played a significant role in her foreign policy activism.

MRS. CLINTON’S FOREIGN POLICY ACTIVISM

Hillary Rodham Clinton first traveled abroad as first lady when she accompanied President Bill Clinton to the G-7 economic summit in Japan in July 1993. In early 1994, she made her first official trip abroad without the president, leading the American delegation to the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway. Later that year, in May, the first lady joined Vice President Al Gore as a last minute replacement for the president as a member of the US delegation to the presidential inauguration of Nelson Mandela in South Africa. In March 1995, she took her first extended trip abroad without the president when she traveled to South Asia. In September, she traveled to China, where she served as honorary Chair of the American delegation and delivered a key address at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. In November, 1995, she would join the president on an official trip to England, Ireland, Germany, and Spain. The next summer she would partner with United Nations Ambassador Madeleine Albright on a tour of Eastern and Central Europe. She accompanied the president to Australia, the Philippines and Thailand in 1996. Accompanied by Chelsea, as she often was on her foreign travels, the first lady returned to Africa in March 1997. In July, Hillary Rodham Clinton accompanied the president to a NATO Summit in Madrid, where she was the keynote speaker at the Vital Voices: Women in Democracy meeting. Before the year ended, she traveled to Great Britain and Northern Ireland for a Third Way meeting and to Central Asia. In 1998, the Clintons visited Africa, China, Russia, Ireland, and the Middle East. They returned to the Middle East in January, 1999, for the funeral of King Hussein of Jordan. The first lady would also make trips that year to Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and the Balkans.

The preceding overview does not constitute a full listing of the overseas trips taken by Hillary Rodham Clinton as first lady between 1992 and 2000. It does provide a sense of the frequency and scope of these travels. What are we to make of them? Traditionally, foreign travel by first ladies has been categorized under the heading of symbolic representation of the United States. This is one of three functions that diplomats perform, the other two being legal and political representation, and it is generally seen as the least significant to the overall conduct of diplomacy. Some of Mrs. Clinton’s trips certainly fall into this category.

However, as practiced by Hillary Rodham Clinton, first lady diplomacy was much more than an exercise in symbolism. Her diplomacy was consistent with the manner in which diplomacy is conducted in the contemporary international system.
At the same time, her diplomacy was the product of the interaction of a set of personal and institutional forces that are not present in every administration. There is thus no reason to expect that all first ladies that follow her will engage in non-symbolic diplomacy. There are several possible explanations for First Lady Clinton’s foreign policy activism.

Complex interdependence has enlarged the universe of political actors who can engage in diplomacy and the goals whose realization diplomacy can advance.

Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye identified complex interdependence as a prism through which to understand world politics today. The concept revolves around three characteristics of the international system: multiple channels of interaction, an absence of hierarchy among issues, and the lessened utility of military force to achieve policy ends. Together, these three characteristics hold profound implications for diplomatic activity. They leave unchanged the notion that the fundamental purpose of diplomacy is to lessen conflicts among states and promote peace. And, as Hans Morgenthau argued, diplomacy continues to be the primary mechanism for determining goals, strategies, and power relationships. The new nature of the international system has made diplomacy “messier” by permitting officials in one state to more readily reach citizens in another. Complex interdependence has enlarged the universe of political actors who can engage in diplomacy and the goals whose realization diplomacy can advance.

With these observations in mind, we can take a new look at the global travels and diplomacy of First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. The first point to stress is that her diplomacy was conceived of as part of a larger whole—it was never seen in isolation from the broader foreign policy goals of the Clinton administration. At one extreme, this took the form of being told to avoid Cuba’s Fidel Castro “at all costs” at a diplomatic function so as not to enrage anti-Castro factions in Florida. It also meant being sent to places the State Department felt were “too small, too dangerous, or too poor” to send the president. For instance, it was the first lady, not President Clinton, who was sent to Bosnia-Herzegovina to show American support for the Dayton Peace Process. On a different occasion, when US–Chinese tensions were running high due to conflicts over Taiwan, nuclear proliferation, and human rights violations, the pluses and minuses of her trip to China were weighed carefully and her speech was reviewed by UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright, Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord, and National Security Council human rights specialist Eric Schwartz.

With increased political resources and activism also comes the potential for pursuing one’s own foreign policy agenda. The first signs of this taking place came following her speech in Beijing. The first lady notes that “prior to Beijing when we traveled on official visits abroad I accompanied Bill where appropriate and attended spouses programs. In mid November (1996) when we made state visits to Australia,
the Philippines and Thailand, I followed my own agenda as well as Bill's." She continues, "I usually branched off from Bill's official delegation... and reinforced the message that a nation's prosperity is linked to the education and well-being of girls and women." 

Hers was a personal diplomacy rather than an institutional diplomacy. It substituted direct and individual contacts with foreign leaders for the carefully scripted interactions between diplomats occurring in an organizational context that characterized traditional diplomacy. In 1994, she accompanied President Clinton on a trip to Russia that was designed to strengthen ties between Bill Clinton and President Boris Yeltsin. During their discussions, the first lady met with Naina Yeltsin. While leading the US delegation to the Winter Olympics, she met with Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Brundtland, who would go on to head the World Health Organization, and discussed health care issues. Other trips would have her meeting with leaders such as South African President Nelson Mandela, Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Hungarian Prime Minister Gula Horn, Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa, Prime Minister Tony Blair of Great Britain, Ghana's President Jerry Rawlings, the Dalai Lama, Chinese President Jiang Zemin, and Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar of Slovakia.

While not consistent with the conduct of traditional diplomacy, personal diplomacy has become an increasingly important tool that heads of government use when trying to advance their international policy agendas. Foreign Policy has included the ability to establish good relations and rapport with world leaders as one of its evaluative questions in its Global Scorecard of presidential performance in foreign policy. This was President Clinton's highest scoring category and, conversely, one of President George W. Bush's lowest scoring categories.

In practicing public diplomacy, First Lady Clinton's principal audiences were individuals attending conferences or citizens to whom she sought to bring a message of hope.

In Living History, First Lady Clinton observes "one of the most important lessons I learned during my years as First Lady was how dependent the affairs of state are on the personal relationships among leaders.... But this sort of diplomacy requires constant nurturing and informal dialogue among the principals." She speaks of the importance of her foreign contacts in a language similar to that used by world leaders in describing why they sought out meetings with foreign leaders. Good relations between spouses also contributed to positive relations between heads of state: "Forging good relations with my fellow spouses provided a convenient low-key communication among heads of state." With regards to her five-day trip to Latin America, where she attended the annual meeting of the first ladies of the Western Hemisphere, she commented: "the personal interactions reinforced the value of building relationships that can smooth the path toward cooperation on
important projects.”

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton also undertook public diplomacy. Public diplomacy consists of statements and actions of representatives of states that are intended to influence the public rather than the official leadership in another country. It is a major shift from classic diplomacy, which emphasizes secrecy and confidential bargaining among like-minded elites. Public diplomacy has been described as the “theater of power.” It is conducted through such varied means as public statements, press briefings, and state visits. In the past, public diplomacy often degenerated into propaganda, but its importance has been reaffirmed after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, when it became clear that success in the war against terrorism required that the US find a way to reach out directly to people in the Middle East and elsewhere.

**Hillary Rodham Clinton’s foreign policy activism enhanced America’s soft power and provided a perceptual counterweight to official American foreign policy.**

In practicing public diplomacy, First Lady Clinton’s principal audiences were individuals attending conferences or citizens to whom she sought to bring a message of hope. On her trip to Japan for the G-7 summit attended by President Clinton, she visited with a group of prominent Japanese women, the first of a dozen meetings of this type she would hold in her travels as first lady. Her trip to South Asia was organized at the request of the State Department, which wanted to highlight the administration’s commitment to the region but was unable to arrange for either the president or vice president to make such a trip. In India, Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke at the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. In Nepal, she visited a women’s health clinic. Her most politically visible appearance came at the UN Women’s Conference in China where she asserted “it is no longer acceptable to discuss women’s rights as separate from human rights” and ended her speech with a call to action. The speech was politically charged both for its content and timing, coming shortly after the arrest, imprisonment, and then release of Chinese dissident Harry Wu. Later, she would deliver the keynote address at a Vital Voices forum in Vienna. A result of the Beijing Conference, Vital Voices was designed to bring together NGOs, US government representatives, and private corporations to further entrepreneurship by women, democracy, and peace. A trip to Latin America was designed to highlight US economic development programs, thus adding to the Clinton administration’s attempt to shift popular perceptions of US foreign policy in the region away from the US aid to the military juntas to its support for economic and political progress. Similarly, her trips to Africa were intended to highlight the self-help efforts of African women as supported by US foreign aid.

Her diplomatic efforts blended domestic and foreign policy in a manner that stepped outside of the traditional way of thinking underlining American foreign
policy, which stressed the primacy of American values and concerns over global ones. For example, it has long been recognized that the US position on international human rights emphasizes legal and civil rights to the detriment of economic and social rights, and that American international environmental policy has been driven by attempts to get other states to adopt American standards and to limit the cost of such policies to American firms.27

The issues Hillary Rodham Clinton chose to stress were those which have long been a staple of American domestic politics: healthcare, children, education, and the position of women in society. She saw them as key to America and to the world’s future as well: “In the new global economy, individual countries and regions would find it difficult to make economic or social progress if a disproportionate percentage of their female population remains poor, uneducated, unhealthy, and disenfranchised.”28

Where she parted company with the past was in a willingness to see the connections between foreign and domestic policy as being a two-way street in which not only the American experience held relevance for the world, but the experiences of others also held relevance to the United States. Prior to the Clinton presidency, during her husband’s term as governor of Arkansas, Mrs. Clinton noted the relevance of microcredit projects that she had learned about on a trip to Bangladesh to poor rural communities in that state.29 A trip to Nicaragua brought her attention to Mothers United, a microcredit organization supported by USAID, and inspired her advocacy in 1994 for a Community Development Financial Institutions Fund, which would provide financial assistance to distressed areas that were not being serviced by the established banking system.30 A visit to an AIDS Information Center in Uganda revealed how HIV testing at this USAID–funded facility had already been used in the United States.31 A final example comes from a trip to China, where she noticed parallels between the Center for the Women’s Legal Studies and Legal Studies of Beijing University and a small legal aid office she had run at the University of Arkansas.32

CONCLUSION

Two general sets of conclusions emerge from this study. First and most concretely, it identifies the most important variables that influenced Hillary Rodham Clinton’s foreign policy activism. Four stand out. First, her early life experiences were instrumental in forging the optimism and vision that she so passionately applied to the foreign policy area. Second, her knowledge of and commitment to the issues most important to her—healthcare, the status of women, and others—were especially important. These issues became central to her personal diplomacy. Third, her professional relationship with the president was also very important. Her office was highly integrated with the White House Office. Mrs. Clinton practiced foreign policy in synch with the Clinton administration, but she also achieved a certain amount of independence during her trips abroad. Fourth, the interplay between Mrs. Clinton’s issues and her alliances of power were crucial to her public diplomacy. She
forged alliances with various NGOs and interest groups to advance the cause of issues important to women and children on the international level. Overall, the variables which affected Mrs. Clinton’s foreign policy activism were personal, institutional, public, and issue driven. Mrs. Clinton’s foreign policy activism reflected the complex international environment within which she operated and her own forward-looking, energetic nature.

Second, in a more speculative vein, Hillary Rodham Clinton’s foreign policy activism provides us with a starting point for thinking about the conduct of foreign policy in a “flat world.” Thomas Friedman observes that we have entered into a third era of globalization where the principal actors in world politics are not countries or corporations but individuals. Moreover the dominant motif of international action is not domination, but collaboration. In analyzing impediments to the creation of a truly flat world, Friedman identifies a series of problems affecting individuals—illness, disempowerment, and feelings of alienation and humiliation. He speaks also of America’s place in this new world. Though he provide hints as to what type of foreign policy might address these problems and promote collaboration at the individual level, he does not discuss this in a systematic fashion.

The logic of his argument suggests that the answer is not to be found primarily in intergovernmental relations or the activities of large international organizations. Rather, it is found in the actions of individuals. Need these be private individuals such as Bill Gates? Might they not also be representatives of governments, such as a first lady reaching out to individuals abroad in the spirit of collaboration in order to address such problems through the establishment of microcredit organizations, the promotion of health care, and conferences designed to empower women? Hillary Rodham Clinton’s foreign policy activism enhanced America’s soft power and provided a perceptual counterweight to official American foreign policy. Where the exercise of American power typically occurs in conflict settings and often triggers cries of protest from individuals, Hillary Rodham Clinton’s messages were generally viewed positively by individuals (although not necessarily by governments), especially by those individuals whose condition would contribute to the “un-flatness” of the world. The United States’ ability to bring about and preserve a flat world may depend upon the successful pursuit of such track two foreign policy, in which official intergovernmental dialogue addressing existing problems are paired with individual activism on the part of government officials reaching out to individuals in a collaborative spirit.

Notes
4 Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Robert P. Watson, “Treatment of First Ladies in American Government and


8 Living History, 132.


10 The Presidential Companion, 119–120.

11 The Presidential Companion, 119.

12 For a discussion of these events see, Living History, 294–296, 474–475, 486–487.


14 Rosalyn Carter was also active in foreign policy. See Glenn Hastedt, “First Ladies and US Foreign Policy,” in The Presidential Companion, 192–209.


16 Politics among Nations, 540.

17 Living History, 235.

18 Ibid, 341.

19 Ibid, 302.

20 Ibid, 386.

21 Ibid, 388.


24 Living History, 409.


26 Ibid, 315.


28 Ibid, 298.

29 Living History, 284.

30 Ibid, 313.

31 Ibid, 405.

32 Ibid, 459.


The Journal of International Affairs is a leading foreign affairs periodical published by the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University.

The Journal has earned worldwide renown for its unique, single-topic format and for framing heated debates in international affairs for over fifty years.

The Spring/Summer 2007 issue of the Journal of International Affairs will trace the political, cultural, religious and socioeconomic evolution of Iran, offering a complete and complex view of a nation in transition. This comprehensive analysis will draw on scholarship from the world’s foremost academics and practitioners, identifying the themes critical to understanding the Iran of the present and looking critically toward its future.

$15.00

For subscription information, contact The Sheridan Press at 717-632-3535.

http://jia.sipa.columbia.edu

Journal of International Affairs
Box 4, International Affairs Building
420 West 118th Street
Columbia University
New York, New York 10027 USA

tel: 212-854-4775/fax: 212-662-0398

Columbia University | School of International and Public Affairs