Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century in Tientsin, China the whistle of artillery shells cut through the quiet streets and bullets sprayed the air. In a large, stately house a tall and graceful young woman sat in her parlor playing solitaire. She heard two consecutive shells land unnervingly close to her home. She knew from experience that shells always came in successions of three. The third shell detonated directly on her staircase. This woman calmly continued her game of solitaire and said simply, “That was Number Three and the last in this neighborhood for the present anyway.”¹ This brave woman was none other than Lou Henry Hoover, wife of soon to be president Herbert Hoover. Lou and “Bert” were married in 1899 and immediately thereafter traveled to China where Mr. Hoover had a position with the mining firm Bewick, Moreing and Company.² Their timing coincided with the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion. For her part, Lou never succumbed to fear and treated their precarious situation with wry humor. In her diary on June 1, 1900 Lou wrote of the Chinese Dragon Festival, “We are all to be massacred by 8,000 heavenly soldiers, but the day passed quietly here.”³ In extreme contrast to her successor Eleanor Roosevelt’s enduring fame, this strong and vibrant woman has been unjustly excluded from historical memory.

Soon after Lou Henry Hoover wrote of “heavenly soldiers,” Eleanor Roosevelt was married to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1905.⁴ The young bride was upstaged at her own

³ Young, 15-16.
wedding by her famous and charismatic “uncle Teddy.” According to Roosevelt historian Maurine Hoffman Beasley, this kind of upstagement was par for the course for Eleanor. By this point in her life, “Eleanor Roosevelt was used to being eclipsed by others.”5 Eleanor’s early life was lived in the shadows and she continued to reside there during the first decade of her marriage. Beasley explains that Mrs. Roosevelt was “either pregnant or recuperating from childbirth for most of this period, she possessed little energy for public activities, but even if she had summoned it, family friction would have ensued.”6 This restriction to the maternal realm is a far cry from Lou Henry Hoover’s residence in a war zone halfway around the world.

Despite the radically different beginnings of their adult lives, both Eleanor Roosevelt and Lou Henry Hoover made pivotal changes to the role of the first lady. These innovations are still in practice today. Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Hoover carved out a public role for the first lady beyond the silent figure waving at her husband’s side. Historian Betty Houchin Winfield argues that the changes that early 20th century first ladies made will forever dictate how first ladies operate in and out of the White House. “The first lady will not go back to the 19th century days of the retreats to the upper floors of the White House as an invalid,” Winfield insists, “No longer is there an option of a private first lady.”7 These women not only set irreversible precedents and expectations for future first ladies, they also actively shaped the roles and expectations of all American women. Eleanor Roosevelt at least, continues to serve as a role model for independent, strong women everywhere.

5 Maurine Hoffman Beasley, "Eleanor Roosevelt and the media: a Public Quest for Self-Fulfillment" (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 7.
6 Ibid., 8.
The aim of this paper is not to idolize Lou Henry Hoover or to undermine the accomplishments of Eleanor Roosevelt. Each woman was a unique and multifaceted human being with their own strengths and failings. This paper will not pass judgment on which the better or more successful first lady was. Instead, I hope to determine what factors allowed Eleanor Roosevelt to ascend to historical fame and relegated Lou Henry Hoover to obscurity. Both first ladies had a great deal in common. In order to understand why the two women diverged so greatly in their methods and outcomes I will highlight their similarities and isolate the fundamental differences that overshadowed those similarities. I will first compare their reluctant entrances into public life through their husband’s campaigning practices. I will also explore how each woman balanced expectations of tradition and transcendence. I will ultimately illustrate how Eleanor Roosevelt successfully navigated these expectations while Lou Henry Hoover did not.

Both Lou Henry Hoover and Eleanor Roosevelt occupied the White House during unique and tumultuous times. The passing of the 19th amendment had given women a political voice (at least in theory). In response to this transitional period, both women embodied a paradoxical, conservative feminism. Even without these momentous yet gradual changes, the coming of the Great Depression would have had a profound impact on the way these women carried out their roles as first ladies. The circumstances of the late 1920s and the 1930s dictated a revision of the expectations of the first lady. The idea of the president’s wife as a “silent partner” who “gives no interviews [and] makes no public utterance” had given way to the American people’s need for public reassurance from the woman who was closest to the leader of their country. Although Lou

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Henry Hoover was an innovative and independent female figure, she failed to navigate the evolving expectations of a public first lady while Eleanor Roosevelt played an active role in defining those new expectations.

**Political Helpmates: Reluctance, Training and Tradition**

Both Lou Henry Hoover and Eleanor Roosevelt were married to presidential candidates at a time when political usefulness associated with candidates’ wives was increasing. While both women were expected to conform to current societal standards in their support and participation in the campaign, they were also recognized as potential political tools. Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Hoover each approached these expectations with mixed feelings. The two women had both been burned by previous public interactions with the press and they accepted their new roles as strategic campaign supporters with trepidation towards the media.

During the 1932 presidential campaign, Mrs. Roosevelt stood reluctantly beside her husband waving to crowds of well-wishers and supporters. Roosevelt confided in her autobiography *This I Remember* that she did not want FDR to win the presidency. She wrote,

> From a personal standpoint, I did not want my husband to be president. I realized, however, that it was impossible to keep a man out of public service when that was what he wanted and was undoubtedly well equipped for. It was pure selfishness on my part, and I never mentioned my feelings on the subject to him.\(^9\)

Regardless of her later political involvement, her statement expresses her early reluctance to be involved in the presidential race. Mrs. Roosevelt’s ambivalence towards being a public figure can also be detected in her long running column *My Day*. On January 7, 1936 Roosevelt compared the life of the first lady to that of the goldfish in a bowl that she had recently received as a gift. She wrote, “I doubt if anyone living in the White house needs such a constant reminder, ___

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for whether they write themselves, or just trust those who write about them, no goldfish could have less privacy from the point of view of the daily happenings of their existence.”

Although Eleanor Roosevelt would later develop a rich and complex public life, she began her public role as a political help mate to her husband with ambivalence and trepidation towards the unofficial post.

Mrs. Hoover was equally reticent to occupy a presence in the media. Her first unpleasant encounter with the press occurred when her obituary was printed rather prematurely during the Boxer Rebellion. According to Hoover scholar Nancy Beck Young, Lou was deeply worried about how this false reporting would affect her family and loved ones back in the U.S. This distrust of the press was later reinforced by a wildly exaggerated account of her involvement in a car accident. The Washington Post story titled “Mrs. Hoover Escapes Death in an Auto Crash” depicted a harrowing tale of survival in a near fatal situation. In reality Mrs. Hoover skidded on a patch of ice and ran into a fence post. She responded to the story by telling a news correspondent, “I do hope you did not receive a sensational news item which came from Winchester about our hanging precipitously, jumping from the car, and otherwise having an exciting time. Alas that did not happen to us. The story was the exaggeration of some garage man or reporter.”

Despite her unpleasant encounters with the press, Lou Henry Hoover dealt with reporters (albeit reluctantly) in her public life in order to fulfill he role as both candidate and president’s wife.

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Mrs. Roosevelt’s early experiences with the press before her husband’s presidential candidacy also made her understandably reluctant to occupy a public role during the campaign. In 1917 she gave an interview for the *New York Times* concerning wartime conservation. During this interview, she naively explained how the ten servants of the Roosevelt household went about conserving for the war effort. The media backlash portrayed Mrs. Roosevelt as hypocritical and elitist. According to Eleanor Roosevelt historian Maurine Hoffman Beasley, Mrs. Roosevelt was sharply reprimanded by her husband and in response she wrote that “I shall never be caught again that’s for sure and I’d like to crawl away from shame.”

This early experience made Eleanor Roosevelt temporarily reluctant to address the press. She would later be forced to overcome this reluctance in order to occupy a supportive public presence in her husband’s presidential campaign.

During the 1932 presidential campaign both candidates’ wives were encouraged to speak to the press to advance their husband’s candidacy. Associated Press reporter Lorena Hickok was assigned to report on the Democratic candidate’s wife Eleanor Roosevelt. She conducted several interviews with Mrs. Roosevelt during the last month of the election. These interviews were used strategically to garner support from female voters. Beasley wrote in her book *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media: a Quest for Self-Fulfillment*, “As the sole reporter assigned to Mrs. Roosevelt before the election, Hickok turned out a stream of stories used primarily by the pro-Roosevelt press to keep the candidate’s name before women readers.”

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14 Ibid., 29.
15 Ibid., 31-32.
camp tried with limited success to match Mrs. Roosevelt’s public presence by pushing their own
candidate’s wife into the public eye. Beasley also wrote that reporter Bess Furman was

summoned into Mrs. Hoover’s private car for a single interview as the Hoover campaign
train pulled through Ohio. Mrs. Hoover discussed her great-grandfather, who had
founded Wooster, Ohio, but Furman was allowed to use the information only as if
gleaned from a library. It provided a pale contrast to the stories on Mrs. Roosevelt that
were punctuated with direct quotes.16

While both candidates’ wives were encouraged to speak to the press to support their husbands,
only Eleanor Roosevelt was able to adapt her public persona to the changes that would
accompany the great depression and the onset of World War II.

Lou Henry Hoover was actually quite successful in rising to the traditional expectations
of silent, indirect support that the public called for before the onset of the great depression.17

During this campaign, Lou took on a slightly more vocal role and even outstripped her husband
in public approval. Hoover scholar Nancy Beck Young wrote, “While traveling through Illinois
on a train with her husband, she proved to be a crowd favorite… The GOP loyalists needed
someone to cheer, and Lou easily outstripped Bert in that two-person contest.”18 While president
Hoover’s approval ratings dropped as the depression progressed, the press portrayed Mrs.
Hoover as a sincere, concerned figure. A New York Times article covering the campaign praised
Mrs. Hoover for reminding her husband to signal a crowded audience of disabled veterans to be
seated when he gave his speech. This article went on to commend Mrs. Hoover for showing
concern for the people in the crowd of spectators, stating that, “Mrs. Hoover remained serene and
smiling, fearful that ‘someone’ in the crowd might be hurt, anxiously turning at times to make

16 Ibid., 32.
17 Young, Lou Henry Hoover: Activist First Lady, 44.
18 Ibid., 154.
sure that no one had fallen or been trampled on.” At least in contrast to president Hoover’s perceived failings, Mrs. Hoover appeared as sympathetic and concerned.

During the campaign, Lou made no official speeches but would often make some unofficial remarks. Young asserted that Lou’s unofficial speeches had a transformative impact on the role of the first lady in campaigns: “She was the first first lady to address crowds on behalf of a presidential candidate, and in doing, she helped infuse her post with substantive responsibilities along with the traditional ceremonial duties.” Here Young has demonstrated how Lou Henry Hoover attempted to navigate the divergent expectations of a first lady to be both traditional and publically accessible. In the end however, Mrs. Hoover’s motherly concern and token informal talks paled in comparison to Mrs. Roosevelt’s success with the public.

Mrs. Roosevelt’s success in the public eye was far from accidental. According to first lady scholar Betty Boyd Caroli, FDR’s political advisor Louise Howe recognized Mrs. Roosevelt’s potential as a political tool early on in her husband’s career. He first recognized Eleanor’s usefulness during FDR’s 1920 campaign for the vice presidency; his inclinations towards utilizing Mrs. Roosevelt’s public presence became a necessity when FDR was incapacitated in 1921 by infantile paralysis caused by his bout of polio. From that time until Howe’s death, he constantly encouraged Mrs. Roosevelt to occupy a public presence and better herself as a public speaker in order to support her husband’s campaigns and causes. After Franklin’s illness Eleanor wrote in her autobiography that her political activity “was done largely at the instigation of Louis Howe, who had again become my husband’s secretary and assistant.”

20 Caroli, First Ladies, 189.
21 Roosevelt, This I Remember, 29.
Howe encouraged Eleanor to become involved in political groups not only to keep her husband’s name in the political sphere but also to keep FDR interested and engaged in political life during his recovery. In her autobiography Eleanor wrote, “I was pushed into the women’s division of the Democratic State Committee, not because Louis cared so much about my activities, but because he felt that they would make it possible for me to bring into the house people who would keep Franklin interested in state politics.”

Howe acted as a catalyst to jump start Eleanor’s political career despite her early reluctance to enter the public sphere.

Louis Howe heavily influenced the nature and quality of Eleanor Roosevelt’s public appearances that have come to shape public perceptions of her legacy. Roosevelt wrote in *This I Remember*.

Louis also insisted that I learn to make speeches; he even went and sat in the back row when I was speaking and told me about my mistakes afterwards… It was not obvious to me at that time why making speeches was necessary… Now I can see that Louis felt that unless I learned to be useful to the party in this way, I would not get much consideration from any of the leaders.

Through his tutelage, Louis Howe both improved Eleanor Roosevelt’s public presence and also made her aware of the potential impact that she could have on her husband’s political career.

Howe was also not above tricking Eleanor into carrying out a political objective. Soon after FDR entered the White in March 1933, World War I veterans were marching in a call to receive bonuses for their military service. Howe had asked Mrs. Roosevelt to take him for a drive and directed her to the veteran’s camp. Roosevelt wrote, “When we arrived [Howe] announced that he was going to sit in the car but that I was to walk around among the veterans and see just how

22 Ibid., 30.
23 Ibid., 32.
Mrs. Roosevelt’s inspection of the veteran’s camp was the first of many public outings with political agendas and implications. This was the first of many public appearances that was strategically planned or supported by the administration. These appearances also served to endear Mrs. Roosevelt to the public.

**Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Back: Lou Henry Hoover advances but Falls Short**

Although Eleanor Roosevelt has become known for her strong public presence and groundbreaking spirit, many of her innovations stood on the precedents set by Lou Henry Hoover. Mrs. Hoover was the first president’s wife to have her own radio broadcasts. Hoover’s first broadcast in 1925 addressed the Daughters of the American Revolution regarding their dedication of Constitution hall in Washington. Later that year, in June, Mrs. Hoover addressed the Third National 4-H Club Camp Meeting via radio broadcast. This innovation took place nearly eight years before Eleanor Roosevelt’s groundbreaking first press conference in 1933. Mrs. Hoover used her radio broadcasts in a strategic effort to support her husband’s depression relief efforts. Hoover historian Lewis L. Gould explains that when the severity of the depression became apparent in 1931, Mrs. Hoover adapted her radio appearances to rally support for her husband’s programs to alleviate the impact of hard times. She spoke several times during the year on that subject. She gave a radio broadcast on March 23, 1931 on behalf of the Women’s Division of the President’s Emergency Committee for Employment (PECE), during which she discussed the role of the Girl Scouts in pursuing volunteer campaigns to relieve the depression.

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24 Roosevelt, *This I Remember*, 112.
26 Gould, 65.
28 Gould, 65.
Mrs. Hoover used her public presence to endorse her husband’s administration just as Mrs. Roosevelt would later do. However, Lou’s traditionalist approach was not enough to inspire the hearts and minds of the American people.

Although Lou Henry Hoover’s radio broadcasts were innovative in the context of the role of first lady, the content delivered in her speeches was outdated and ineffective in their purpose to inspire the American people to embody the Hoover administration’s volunteerism approach to the depression. Hoover historian Nancy Beck Young critiques Mrs. Hoover’s address to the 4H conference by asserting that,

Though meant to be empowering for her young audience, the [4H] speech also reflected a narrow view of the depression… Without considering the psychological trauma of poverty, she then encouraged her listeners to face economic hardship cheerfully and without complaint because such a demeanor would benefit the family. ‘There is nothing much more discouraging than a moody, complaining child, - even one eighteen years old!’ argued the first lady.\footnote{Young, 103.}

Mrs. Hoover failed to understand what the American people really needed to hear during a time of such great turmoil and fear. Her traditionalist and almost naïve assessment of the depression negated any ground that she would have gained by creating a public role for herself via radio broadcast.

Mrs. Hoover’s constant public endorsement of the American Girl Scouts as the solution for the great depression also created a view of the first lady as narrow and inadaptable. In a radio broadcast on March 23, 1931 Mrs. Hoover said that Girl Scouts represented “the girls and women of the country, in meeting and to a large degree overcoming the threatening disaster of the national situation.”\footnote{Gould, 73.} Mrs. Hoover unveiled her “Rapidan Plan” which envisioned 250,000
American Girl Scouts coming together in philanthropic endeavors to alleviate the effects of the depression.\textsuperscript{31} Throughout her time in the White House, Mrs. Hoover clung to this plan regardless of its varying levels of success. She refused to speak of any political subject outside the realm of the Girl Scouts. During a rare formal interview at the 1931 Girl Scout National convention, Mrs. Hoover was asked if her husband would seek reelection. She responded to the question by saying rather imperiously, “Young man, I rarely give interviews and when I do the limit of time permits me to give them only on stated subjects. The stated subject today is the Girl Scouts. I am afraid your question is not pertinent.”\textsuperscript{32} Although it is understandable that she would hesitate to answer a question regarding her husband’s reelection, her emphatic statement represents her unwillingness to expand her public discussions beyond the Girl Scouts. Mrs. Hoover used her public presence to endorse the group that was nearest and dearest to her but she stalled at that point and was unable to use her public role to create an open discourse between herself and the American public.

**Eleanor Roosevelt’s Innovative Tradition**

Mrs. Roosevelt, too, had her share of missteps and contradictions in the White House as she adjusted to her traditional role as America’s hostess. Early on in her White House tenure, Mrs. Roosevelt acquired a notorious reputation for shirking the duties expected of the first lady. In her autobiography, Roosevelt quoted a particularly critical letter that she received scolding her for neglecting White House cleanliness. Her critic wrote, “Instead of tearing around the country, I think you should stay at home and personally see that the White House is clean. I soiled my

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 74.
\textsuperscript{32} Young, 156.
white gloves yesterday morning on the stair-railing. It is disgraceful.”33 Although at least a portion of the American public seems to have disapproved of Mrs. Roosevelt’s breaks from tradition, her own emphasis on the traditional and the mundane calls into question just how ground breaking she truly was.

Early on in her time in the White House, Mrs. Roosevelt expressed ambivalence towards the seemingly frivolous duties of the first lady. She felt that White House tea parties were rather unimportant during a time when the nation was so unstable. But the first lady soon came to realize how important those seemingly superficial functions were to the nation:

Indeed there never came a point when I felt the world was sufficiently stable for us to take time to think very seriously about purely social matters. Certain duties, however, which I thought at first were useless burdens, I later grew to realize had real meaning and value.34

Mrs. Roosevelt had come to realize the symbolic importance that the duties of the first lady as national hostess held to the American people:

I soon discovered that, particularly to people from out of town, the White House has a very deep significance. I was only a symbol, as wives of presidents have always been and would always be… I think to many people the White House, in itself, symbolizes the government, and though standing and shaking hands for an hour or so, two or three times a week, is not exactly an inspiring occupation, still I think it well worth while.35

Mrs. Roosevelt expressed here both weariness for White House tradition and an awareness of its importance. This tension between acceptance of tradition and the desire to transcend it was a main component in the shaping of Mrs. Roosevelt’s public life.

Regardless of what Mrs. Roosevelt might have said about her enthusiasm or lack thereof for traditional social functions, she spent a great deal of time and energy informing the American

33 Roosevelt, This I Remember, 92.
34 Ibid., 88.
35 Ibid., 89.
people of her social occupations in the White House. During all her years of White House press conferences, Roosevelt included a list of her social engagements in almost every one.\textsuperscript{36} In her work \textit{Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media: a Public Quest for Self-Fulfillment}, Beasley virtually summarized pages of press conference transcripts by stating that Mrs. Roosevelt would stick to social topics “such as housing, married women working, education for peace, and not about pending legislation.”\textsuperscript{37} Although Roosevelt was an innovative figure through her institution of first lady press conferences and her prolific public writings, the content of what she had to say often acted to reinforce her traditional role as national hostess.

Mrs. Roosevelt also devoted many pages in her autobiography and hours in her press conferences to illustrating her traditionally feminine role in White House holiday traditions. Mrs. Roosevelt outlined in her Autobiography the extensive organization and preparation devoted to the holiday season. She gushed about her Christmas plans writing,

\begin{quote}
I bought toys by the dozens, ordered the candy and cakes and ties or handkerchiefs well ahead of time. The lists of [White House] employees and their families, with the names and ages of the children, were furnished me by the housekeeper and the ushers. Early in the fall, the gifts for the children were wrapped in tissue paper and the Christmas cards with the money enclosed addressed for each person. This was really a big job and had to be done carefully, for I wanted no one to be overlooked through inadvertence.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

Roosevelt also devoted copious amounts of time to her holiday traditions during her press conferences (to the chagrin of the reporters). Press conference transcriber and reporter Bess Furman made a note in the December 19, 1938 press conference that said simply, “Same old Christmas plans, pages of ‘em.” In that same press conference, an entire section was devoted to

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{36} Beasley, ed., \textit{The White House Press Conferences of Eleanor Roosevelt}, references throughout.
\textsuperscript{37} Beasley, \textit{Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media}, 49.
\textsuperscript{38} Roosevelt, \textit{This I remember}, 156.
\end{quote}
the topic of the Roosevelt family’s stocking stuffing traditions.\textsuperscript{39} Furman’s apparent boredom with Mrs. Roosevelt’s Christmas plans shows that Roosevelt failed in some ways to deliver the innovative and ground breaking content that the public was looking for.

Eleanor Roosevelt’s White House press conferences also provide copious examples of the first lady’s paradoxical traditional and activist roles. In the space of one press conference Mrs. Roosevelt could shift easily from topics concerning New Deal policy to whether or not she would dance the “bunny hop” at her son’s wedding.\textsuperscript{40} Roosevelt was able to occupy both a traditional and political role in the same press function. In one press conference in April of 1939, Roosevelt bounced between topics regarding preparations for the impending visit of British monarchs, outdoor entertainment for Norwegian and Danish royalty, relief payments, bridge lessons, ghosts in the White House, and ping pong.\textsuperscript{41} Beyond illustrating the contradictory nature of Mrs. Roosevelt’s public role, her emphasis on both the mundane and the politically relevant demonstrates her ability to appease both traditionalist and progressive expectations.

Through her press conferences, Mrs. Roosevelt was able to sneak in relevant issues of substance amongst the traditional commentary of her social functions. The conferences served as a forum for women reporters to learn about and discuss serious and relevant issues ranging from economic recovery to the likelihood of U.S. participation in World War II. In a White House press conference, Mrs. Roosevelt made public and decisive statements regarding pending legislation for the first time. When asked about the 1939 Wagner Act which would admit 10,000 German refugee children into the U.S., Roosevelt stated that, “I hope the Wagner Act on

\textsuperscript{39} Beasley, ed., \textit{The White House Press Conferences of Eleanor Roosevelt}, 63.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 98-101
Refugees will pass. I think it a wise way to do a humanitarian act. Other nations take their share of the child refugees, and it seems a fair thing to do.” Transcriber Bess Furman noted that this was the first time that she had seen Mrs. Roosevelt publicly endorse pending legislation during a press conference.42 The White House press conferences allowed Mrs. Roosevelt to weave her political endorsements into traditional expectations of her duties as first lady.

As the war in Europe escalated, Mrs. Roosevelt’s press conferences took on a new role and importance in informing and reassuring the nation. In a September 1939 press conference, Roosevelt diplomatically stated her views on pacifism and national defense by stating,

I have never been a pacifist in the sense that I don’t believe in defending this country, but I am most anxious to do everything possible to prevent war wherever one possibly can; because whenever there is a war anywhere, there is danger also to all the other nations that are happily not at war. I am just as anxious as I have ever been to see this country remain at peace, if it is possible.43

This statement reflects Mrs. Roosevelt’s ability to both reassure the nation and prepare it for the possibility of involvement in World War II. Later the press conference reporters turned to Mrs. Roosevelt as a sort of representative of American sentiments regarding the war. In the May 13, 1941 press conference, Mrs. Roosevelt was asked, “What is the country thinking about war, etc.?”44 Through her press conferences, Roosevelt transformed into not only a source of information to the American public but also a coherent voice of the American public. Mrs. Roosevelt used her press conferences to actively weave her traditional role as first lady with an expanding role as a political activist and voice for the American people.

**Traditionalist Feminists: Piecemeal Women’s Advancements**

42 Ibid., 90.
43 Ibid., 126.
44 Ibid., 196.
While both Lou Henry Hoover and Eleanor Roosevelt implemented different public strategies, they both occupied the public sphere at a time when feminine expectations were evolving in an often contradictory manner. Beasley identifies Roosevelt as a social feminist, a group she defines thusly: “Unlike radical feminists, social feminists did not view women as a disadvantaged class. Instead they sought greater opportunities for individual women to serve society without altering their traditional family role.”45 This characterization can also be applied to Lou Henry Hoover. In order to occupy a successful public role, the two women needed to tread carefully with regards to the proper role of women in American society. Lou Henry Hoover approached this challenge by endorsing women’s education (being a college graduate herself) and providing an example for American women not only of a progressive, intellectual woman, but also of a devoted wife and mother. Eleanor Roosevelt also portrayed herself as being passionately devoted to her family. The two women diverged in their public roles however. Where Lou Hoover’s accomplishments clearly set her apart as a capable modern woman, her unwillingness to discuss those accomplishments publicly prevented her from displaying or advocating any advancement in female roles. Eleanor Roosevelt was able to navigate the ebb and flow of public opinion towards feminism. She used her public role to endorse feminist causes when public and political sentiment allowed it.

An account of Lou Henry Hoover’s early life would suggest that she embodied a progressive feminist perspective. However closer inspection of her public role in the White House would suggest otherwise. Mrs. Hoover was the first woman to receive a degree in geology

45 Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media*, 16.
from Stanford University in 1898.46 After graduation, Lou was both frustrated and realistic when she assessed her career options. In 1898 she wrote to her close friend Evelyn Wight Allan expressing how entrance into a geology career would be easier if she were a boy. She believed that if she were male, “They would not want me to stay meekly at home – I would still have to face that old question of how far obedience is dutiful and I would have something to work for.”47 She went on to question how female career opportunities would be shaped in the future, asking, “Where will we be in five years – ten – twenty!”48 Years before Mrs. Hoover entered the public role of the first lady she was both realistic and ambitious in her aspirations to transcend female professional roles.

Mrs. Hoover’s stance on female career opportunities remains ambiguous due to her own abandonment of a pursuit of a professional career in favor of marriage and her encouragement of other women to do the same. A June 1928 New York Times article praised Mrs. Hoover for her intellectual training stating that, “Her equipment for the place of mistress of the White House is rare indeed, and she would be another one of the few who have been college graduates.”49 Despite this praise for her education, Mrs. Hoover chose to marry Herbert Hoover directly out of college in 1899.50 The same New York Times article that commended Mrs. Hoover for her education also praised her encouragement of other women to become educated, noting that, “She has helped many ambitious young women with the completion of their college courses...” The article went on to explain how these young women were later employed by Mrs. Hoover in her

48 Ibid.
50 Young, 13.
secretarial team and “from this position many have either married or gone on to more important secretarial work elsewhere.”51 The context of traditional feminine expectations prevented Mrs. Hoover from extending her avocations of female education to female professionalism.

Eleanor Roosevelt too struggled with the traditional expectations of her time. But Mrs. Roosevelt was far more successful than her predecessor in discussing feminist topics more strategically in order to create tangible change. Mrs. Roosevelt carefully navigated both the proponents and the opponents of women in the workforce when she advocated for the 1937 repeal of the “married person’s clause of the Economy Act.” This clause dictated that female government workers must give up their jobs if their husbands also worked for the government. In the face of criticism towards her support of the repeal she appeased her opponents by admitting in her “My Day” column that, “Many women can find all the work they need, all the joy they need and all the interest they need in life in their own homes and in the volunteer communities of their environment.”52 She went on to rebut the argument that women in the workforce are working simply for luxuries and that they were taking away jobs from men who had to support their families. She explained,

I have investigated a good many cases and find that, on the whole, the love of work is not so great. Those who are gainfully employed are usually working because of some real need… It seems to me that the tradition of respect for work is so ingrained in this country that it is not surprising fathers have handed it down to their daughters as well as their sons.53

Through this column, Mrs. Roosevelt was able to navigate a minefield of volatile opinions and present a position that could be acceptable to all. Her shrewd manipulation of public opinion is

51 “Mrs. Hoover Famed as Capital Hostess,” 3.
52 Roosevelt, My Day, 19.
53 Ibid.
one of the many attributes set her apart from Mrs. Hoover’s more traditional approach to public life.

**Public Recognition and Emotional Validation**

Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Hoover were also distinguished by their very different emotional states during their tenure in the public eye. Lou Henry Hoover grew up a confident and adventurous young woman and entered into a marriage of intellectual equality and mutual respect. Eleanor Roosevelt grew up an orphan in the shadow of her famous “uncle Teddy” and glamorous socialite cousin Alice Longworth Roosevelt. Historians have speculated along with Mrs. Roosevelt’s close friends and family that her emotional fragility inspired her to seek validation through her public career. The confident and secure Lou Henry Hoover needed no such reassurances from the public, nor did she seek them. While it is difficult, if not impossible, to truly know the inner motivations for these two women, their perceived emotional differences warrant careful study.

Mrs. Hoover’s stable and equal marriage endowed her with confidence that negated any need for public validation. Lou and Bert occupied the same intellectual footing, both having graduated from Stanford with degrees in Geology. Contemporary publications during the 1928 and 1932 Hoover campaigns as well as during the Hoover administration applaud Mrs. Hoover as a supportive partner to the president. One 1928 *New York Times* article highlighted the Hoover partnership by stating that, “The bond between Mr. and Mrs. Hoover has continued close through all the years. She worked by his side in all his travels.” A *Literary Digest* article also from

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Murray 20
November of 1928 applauded the Hoovers’ equal relationship. The author wrote that from the beginning of their marriage,

    his career has been hers. She has walked beside him through the years of peace and war, revolution, famine and ceaseless work to ultimate success with the same happy helpfulness that she gave him as a fellow student, and with a sureness that must often have been a secret source of strength for him.\textsuperscript{56}

At least according to public portrayals, the Hoover marriage was built upon intellectual equality, mutual respect and collaboration.

    In contrast to the Hoover marriage, Eleanor and Franklin occupied a marriage of convenience. This marriage nearly ended in 1918 when she discovered that Franklin was having an affair with his secretary Lucy Mercer.\textsuperscript{57} Upon her discovery, Eleanor first offered Franklin a divorce which he seriously considered. It was Louis Howe who convinced them of the disastrous repercussions that divorce would have upon FDR’s political career.\textsuperscript{58} So the remainder of the Roosevelt’s marriage would be based upon political expediency. First lady historian Betty Caroli argued that the Roosevelt marriage was strategic from the beginning, and that FDR “Urbane and handsome … could not have seen beauty or sophistication or confidence in his bride in 1905, but like many of the men who later became president, he made an advantageous marriage.”\textsuperscript{59} The Roosevelts’ relationship was formed and perpetuated based upon social and political advantages rather than love or companionship.

    Historians and intimates of Eleanor Roosevelt alike have argued that she sought public recognition to escape the shadow of an unhappy marriage. Eleanor’s son-in-law Dr. James A.

\textsuperscript{56} “Mrs. Hoover’s International Housekeeping,” \textit{The Literary Digest}, Nov. 24, 1928, 46.
\textsuperscript{57} Maurine Hoffman Beasley, \textit{Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady} (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 23.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{59} Caroli, 186.
Halstead speculated that Eleanor’s career enabled her to handle “emotional problems resulting from disclosure of her husband’s infidelity with Lucy Mercer.”

Roosevelt historian Maurine Beasley goes even further to claim that Mrs. Roosevelt’s career pursuits were born from an effort to achieve or even outstrip her husband’s influence. She speculated that Mrs. Roosevelt “wanted to match her husband’s accounting to the public, as chief executive, with a parallel explanation of her performance as the chief executive’s wife, subconsciously trying to make her role somewhat comparable to his.”

According to these claims, Mrs. Roosevelt worked actively to create a public role for herself in order to find validation.

Ultimately Mrs. Roosevelt’s tumultuous marriage proved an asset for her success as a public figure. Her search for self-fulfillment and validation catapulted her into a public and political role that was transcendent of previous first lady traditions. Mrs. Roosevelt’s insecurity inspired her to actively create a role for herself in the public sphere. Mrs. Hoover had no such emotional motivations to seek public validation. Hoover historian William Seale explained that Lou Henry Hoover’s historical obscurity came down to her disinterest in self-promotion: “[Mrs. Hoover] was not to become one of the legendary first ladies because she simply did not seek self-promotion. Protective of her own private life, she steadfastly avoided featuring herself in public ways at the White House.”

Mrs. Hoover failed to navigate the changing and conflicting expectations of the first lady simply because she had little motivation to concern herself with creating an innovative public role.

**Lou Henry Hoover’s Fall from Grace**

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60 Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media: A Public Quest for Self-Fulfillment*, 68.

61 Ibid., 90.

Although Mrs. Hoover ultimately failed to conform to evolving public expectations over the course of her husband’s presidency, she enjoyed great approval upon her entrance into the White House. As Herbert Hoover was elected, Mrs. Hoover had seemingly universal public endorsements as the ideal first lady. Reporter Helen B. Pryor wrote soon after Hoover’s 1929 inauguration that Mrs. Hoover was “the most fully experienced First Lady ever to enter the White House. All first ladies learn the traditions, duties, graces and limitations of living in the White House. Lou Hoover already knew them.”63 A June 1928 New York Times article described Mrs. Hoover as “popular in Washington in many walks of life, her interests being varied. Her equipment for the place as mistress of the White House is rare indeed.”64 When President Hoover entered the White House, Lou Henry Hoover fit the bill for the traditional first lady that the American public wanted. The honeymoon didn’t last. As circumstances changed during the presidency, Mrs. Hoover failed to adapt and change accordingly.

During the onset of the great depression, the American public sought reassurance from not only the president but also from the first lady. Despite Mrs. Hoover’s work to support her husband’s volunteerism policy to alleviate the depression, her perceived aloofness from the press isolated her from the favor of the American public. Historian Nancy Beck Young speculated that Mrs. Hoover’s “reticence [towards the press] stemmed from a number of journalistic miscues in the years before her husband’s presidency. She was so guarded in her public and private statements that her closest associates knew only certain aspects of her personality.”65 In order to guard against further ‘miscues,’ Mrs. Hoover refused formal interviews and instead asked

65 Young, 142.
reporters to sit with her cross-legged on the floor as if they were at a Girl Scout meeting. This tactic only furthered her negative public image. Mrs. Roosevelt faced similar criticism when a photograph of her second press conference in March of 1933 surfaced. The picture showed Mrs. Roosevelt surrounded by female reporters, some sitting on the floor at her feet. While Mrs. Roosevelt learned from this mistake and thereafter always provided chairs for all her reporters, Mrs. Hoover failed to address the criticism associated with her practices towards the press. She failed to understand, as Mrs. Roosevelt had, that she could have used the media to actively shape her public role.

Beyond simply being unable to adapt to the demands of the press, much scholarship has portrayed Mrs. Hoover as being downright uncooperative towards the media. When Mrs. Hoover resisted formal interviews reporters turned to more creative means to get the inside scoop on life in the White House. During Mrs. Hoover’s time as first lady, reporter Bess Furman, desperate to get a story, dressed up as a girl scout and sang Christmas carols to gain access to the White House. There were however, mixed assessments of Mrs. Hoover’s attitude toward the press. One journalist stated soon after the 1928 election that, “Mrs. Hoover is a favorite with newspaper women.” A female journalist stated diplomatically that although Mrs. Hoover was receptive to the press, “it greatly displeases her to have her little philanthropies and acts of kindness and charity discussed.” These statements illustrate the fact that Mrs. Hoover did indeed work with the press albeit grudgingly.

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66 Ibid., 144.
68 Ibid., 39.
69 Young, 143.
70 Ibid.
Mrs. Hoover’s awkwardness towards the press reflects the difficulty she experienced in attempting to conform her previously outgoing and outspoken lifestyle into the mold of rigid and contradictory expectations of the first lady. A 1932 article the *New York Times* portrayed Mrs. Hoover’s pre White House life as if it were an action-adventure epic that reads,

> Long hot days through the mud roads of old China, traveling in splendor as the wife of the director of mines for the Emperor, days of terror and hunger and strain in beleaguered Tientsin under the Boxers, when, every afternoon for six weeks, at the risk of her life from bullets, she served tea to the defenders – Lou Henry took all the days as they came.\(^{71}\)

Even at the peak of her husband’s unpopularity, the press still acknowledged Lou’s extraordinary life prior to the White House. Historian Nancy Beck Young suggested that Lou Henry Hoover’s pre-White House life clashed with the traditional expectations of the first lady. She wrote in her work on Mrs. Hoover,

> Although the suffrage movement specifically and the women’s movement generally had remade gender roles for average, middle-class women, first ladies were still expected to adhere to traditional feminine behavior; first ladies were to be ornamental, ceremonial counterparts to their political husbands. Lou Henry Hoover never possessed those characteristics.\(^{72}\)

Rather than use the media to create a new and unique role to fit her lifestyle, Mrs. Hoover simply conformed as best she could to the often contradictory expectations placed upon her.

After President Hoover’s defeat in the 1932 election, the expectation imposed upon the former first lady was silence. The wounded Republican Party made it a point to highlight the traditional qualities of Lou Henry Hoover to illustrate the inappropriate conduct of her successor. Nancy Beck Young explained that, “[Lou Henry Hoover] and her allies downplayed her many innovations in favor of demonstrating her conventional traits in order to draw a sharp contrast


\(^{72}\) Young, 140.
between Lou Henry Hoover and her immediate successor as first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt.”

Mrs. Hoover essentially swept her vibrant career and innovations under the rug to portray herself as the antithesis of Eleanor Roosevelt. The lack of memory of Mrs. Hoover’s accomplishments was compounded by the fact that Herbert Hoover dictated that his wife’s papers would be sealed to the public until twenty years after his death. Whatever Herbert Hoover’s reasoning for sealing his wife’s papers might have been, Mrs. Hoover’s memory remained unchanged and unjustified due to the lack of evidence to present the first lady beyond her awkward relationship with the press. As a result, public memory sees Lou Henry Hoover as stodgy traditionalist who failed to adapt to a new media society.

**Construction of a Unique Public Role: Mrs. Roosevelt Breaks Free of the Administration**

Eleanor Roosevelt was able to not only navigate the public’s often contradictory expectations, but she also created a role for herself beyond the administration and her beyond her duties as the first lady. Her adaptability and resourcefulness in the face of difficult situations allowed her to be mindful of public expectations while occupying the role of the first lady in a way that the American public had never before witnessed. In short, Eleanor Roosevelt made her own rules. By contrast, Mrs. Roosevelt’s predecessor was unable to navigate the challenging and often contradictory expectations placed upon her.

Eleanor Roosevelt began her public career as little more than a strategic extension of the Roosevelt administration. Mrs. Roosevelt’s press conferences provide an excellent example of her ability to create a unique public persona for herself despite the administration’s involvement. According to Beasley, presidential press conferences differ from those of a first lady in that they

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73 Young, 187.
“serve a democratic purpose – to permit the direct questioning of the chief executive on policy issues by reporters acting as representatives of the public.” In contrast, first lady press conferences lack democratic weight because, “The president’s wife lacks any constitutional authority… She acts as an informal representative of the administration.”  In the beginning, Mrs. Roosevelt truly was little more than a mouthpiece for the Roosevelt administration. In April of 1933, the first lady’s press conferences were used strategically to discuss the serving of beer in the White House following the repeal of prohibition. Mrs. Roosevelt stated very diplomatically, “No matter what the legislation, I myself do not drink anything with alcoholic content but that is purely an individual thing. I should not dream of imposing my own conviction on other people as long as they live up to the law of our land.” The administration placed the announcement in the hands of the first lady because they knew that Mrs. Roosevelt’s own status as a teetotaler would make the idea of serving alcohol in the White House more palatable to prohibitionists. This would certainly not be the last time that the first lady’s press conferences would be used as a tool of the administration. However Mrs. Roosevelt would also use her press conferences as a tool of her own.

Amongst her announcements of social engagements and her endorsements of the presidential administration, Mrs. Roosevelt also used her press conferences to advance her own personal causes. The first lady publically endorsed a constitutional amendment to outlaw child labor. She supported legislation to regulate work wages and hours. As noted earlier, she advocated for the passage of a bill allow the admittance of 10,000 German refugee children into

76 Beasley, ed., The White House Press Conferences of Eleanor Roosevelt, 8.
the United States. The shrewd first lady managed to weave her controversial political involvement into her press conferences amongst frivolous yet traditional topics. Mrs. Roosevelt spoke about child labor and an equal rights amendment during the same press conference that she discussed the “unstable temperament” of the White House dog. Eleanor Roosevelt was able to walk a tightrope balancing her own political agenda and the traditional expectations of both the administration and the American public.

Aside from easing political statements in amongst traditionally female topics, Mrs. Roosevelt also utilized guest speakers to indirectly advocate certain social and political causes. During a March 1941 press conference, Mrs. Roosevelt invited Dr. Martha Eliot of the Children’s Bureau to speak at her press conference. The first lady turned the tables by taking on the role of reporter. She asked questions and Dr. Eliot discussed her work in the Children’s Bureau. Mrs. Roosevelt’s tactic both endowed her with a powerful reportorial role and allowed her to use others to voice her social and political causes. Her strategic navigation of her press conferences allowed her to advocate causes that she personally supported while remaining acceptably within the traditional boundaries of the first lady’s sphere of influence.

Mrs. Roosevelt was able to grow beyond this sphere of influence after her time in the White House. Despite the influence that the Eleanor Roosevelt had wielded during her time in the White House, she still felt stifled. In This I Remember, the first lady wrote,

On the whole, however, I think I lived those years [in the White House] very impersonally. It was almost as though I had erected someone a little outside myself who was the president’s wife. I was lost somewhere deep down inside myself. That is the way that I felt until I left the White House.

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79 Ibid., 178.
80 Roosevelt, This I Remember, 351.
Mrs. Roosevelt’s public independence would only become complete once she was free of the constraints of the White House. In December of 1945, President Truman chose FDR’s widow to act as an official delegate for the United Nations General Assembly.  

Mrs. Roosevelt became the link between the public and the United Nations through her reports in her “My Day” columns. Her daily column evolved from a smattering of political statements and frivolity to a controversial and impactful statement of her opinions. The former first lady expressed her opinions on such matters as the origins of the Korean War, the UN Human Rights Commission, and even the practical versus the theoretical merits of communism. Mrs. Roosevelt’s careful manipulation of and conformation to public expectation during her time in the White House, prepared her to occupy an even more outspoken public presence after her time as first lady.

**Conclusion**

Although both Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Hoover faced the same rigid yet contradictory expectations of the role and behavior of a first lady Eleanor Roosevelt succeeded in remaking the rules associated with the first lady while Lou Henry Hoover floundered in her attempts to conform to conflicting demands of traditional silence and openness towards the press. The two women provide an area for comparison because of their similarities in traditional and familial values. Their contrasting tactics during their time as first ladies highlight a fundamental difference in White House strategies. In 1932 a *New York Times* writer pointed out that,

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82 Ibid., 167.
83 Ibid., 185.
84 Ibid., 221.
Lou Henry Hoover and Anna Eleanor Roosevelt are both remarkable women. There is no question of comparing them – each is a personality distinct. Yet contrasts are few and far to seek, for, broadly speaking, their lives run parallel. In quality of mind, in education, in spiritual independence, in vivid approach to living and in depth of experience they are sisters.\textsuperscript{85}

The parallel lives that this reporter claims exist between these two women invites study of how and why the first ladies differed so greatly in their conduct in the White House.

The two women’s contrasting White House careers produced widely different historical memories. While Eleanor Roosevelt went on to occupy a prominent role in popular memory, Lou Henry Hoover has been largely forgotten. Eleanor Roosevelt’s shrewd use of the media allowed her to remain in the public eye long after she left the White House. Mrs. Roosevelt continued to submit her “My Day” column to newspapers across the nation until her death in 1962.\textsuperscript{86} The former first lady was also encouraged to run for New York senate and a 1945 poll had her in fourth place as a potential presidential candidate.\textsuperscript{87} Mrs. Roosevelt clearly continued to hold public attention and wield political influence after her time as first lady. Her use of the media to fashion herself a unique role in the White House extended into her life outside of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Understanding both Mrs. Roosevelt’s and Mrs. Hoover’s legacies and how they were shaped by their actions in the White House allows us better understand how American role models are created. Eleanor Roosevelt has been for generations a benchmark to which all first ladies must measure themselves. Our current first lady Michelle Obama has occupied a trajectory eerily similar to that of Eleanor Roosevelt. A recent \textit{New York Times} article defines her career in

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85 Hager, np.
86 Beasley, \textit{Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media}, 85.
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the White House in three stages: “glamour (magazine covers, a high-flying social secretary)… advocacy (for child obesity prevention and military families) [and] a third stage: as an upbeat ambassador for a struggling administration…”88 While Mrs. Roosevelt never had to be “an ambassador for a struggling administration” to the degree that Mrs. Obama has, Mrs. Hoover’s popularity during the 1932 election is reflective of her capacity to become a redeeming face for her husband’s failing presidency. While Michelle Obama, and indeed all contemporary first ladies, would almost certainly strive to emulate Eleanor Roosevelt, they unknowingly reflect the work of both Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Hoover.

Eleanor Roosevelt has also become a great symbolic figure for professional and activist women everywhere. Many a great woman has drawn strength and inspiration from the memory of Eleanor Roosevelt. We must ask ourselves whether Lou Henry Hoover could have provided similar strength and inspiration had she been able to navigate contending virtues of traditionalism and accessibility in the same way that Eleanor Roosevelt did. Perhaps if we take a second look at Lou Henry Hoover we can find another great figure to draw our strength from.

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