

Before Hillary Clinton, there was Rosalynn Carter

By [Elizabeth Flowers](#)

October 18, 2016

Since occupying the White House as first lady in the 1990s, Hillary Clinton has served as a senator and secretary of state. But the fierce criticism she encountered as first lady still shapes the rhetoric of her detractors. Because of her feminist-inspired and activist approach to the first-lady position, some accused her of being co-president; others called her [Lady Macbeth](#); and Rush Limbaugh famously denounced her as a “[feminazi](#).”

Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter faced similar hostilities during the 1970s. Until then, the public had viewed the first lady’s responsibility as primarily social. So when Ford and Carter lobbied heavily for the Equal Rights Amendment, they were condemned. Ford’s endorsement was anticipated, and it was curtailed by an abbreviated presidency. But Carter’s took many off-guard—provoking the religious right that would become Clinton’s nemesis. Carter’s largely forgotten story marks the beginning of the bitter controversy over faith and feminism in the White House—and sheds light on the gendered nature of some of the accusations against Clinton.

Born in Plains, Georgia, in 1927, Carter hardly seemed a ready-made feminist. She married Jimmy at 18, had three sons in six years, and was a stay-at-home wife and mother. She was so shy that the feisty Lillian Carter feared her eldest son had wed a shrinking violet.

Yet there were hints otherwise. Having grown up in the Depression-era household of a struggling widowed mother, Rosalynn was no stranger to women’s paid labor and gender inequities. And she was smart, graduating salutatorian of Plains High School. Marriage to a naval officer soon took her north, causing her to question southern ways.

They returned to Plains in 1953 so Jimmy could take over the family farm. Rosalynn handled the accounts, and when Jimmy was elected to the state senate, she assumed full control of the business. In 1966 and 1970, she helped oversee his

gubernatorial campaigns. By the time their daughter Amy arrived, Rosalynn could hardly be considered a traditional mother.

So in 1974, when Governor Carter announced to anti-ERA demonstrators “I am for [the amendment] but my wife is against it,” the first lady was flabbergasted. The next day she showed up at the capitol wearing an “I’m for ERA” button.

Because of Watergate, the ERA did not prove much of an issue during Jimmy’s ensuing presidential campaign in 1976. But that soon changed. By the midterm elections in 1978, Phyllis Schlafly had organized an attack that pulled heavily from the South, catered to evangelical sentiment, and targeted both Carters.

Like Jimmy, Rosalynn supported the ERA as an extension of civil rights and an avowal of her religious convictions. But the questions she faced concerned her endorsement as a woman. A survey of the negative media surrounding Rosalynn as first lady is telling. Her hesitancy to spend money on high fashion and presidential china was critiqued as an unsophisticated neglect of her role. More scathing criticism was aimed at her political engagement. Whether traveling on a diplomatic mission or testifying before Congress, Rosalynn’s activism was often interpreted as an inappropriate will to power.

Most damning was the accusation that her ERA politicking signaled a betrayal to her faith and family. Long before Hillary Clinton’s time, Rosalynn Carter was called “co-president” and “Lady Macbeth,” with one tabloid predicting a Rosalynn presidency.

Recognizing the danger this criticism represented, Carter sought to temper feminism’s radical aspects. First, she insisted that the ERA was different from abortion, which she rejected on religious grounds. Her White House files on feminism, the ERA, and women’s issues were crammed instead with articles addressing poverty, unemployment, health care, and education. Second, she courted homemakers and housewives, maintaining that they had misunderstood the ERA and in fact stood the most to gain. Finally, she urged Jimmy to hire a White House religious liaison with strong evangelical connections and, late in his presidency, to replace certain feminists in White House positions with others with less strident personalities.

The Carter presidency crumbled, for a variety of reasons. Rosalynn said that the failure of the ERA was her greatest disappointment.

Rosalynn Carter recognized the purposes of the emerging religious right; she also served those purposes. That paradox is apparent today in the historic potential—and the gendered criticism—of a female presidential nominee who was once a first lady. As “equality between the sexes” struggled to replace the prevailing hierarchy, the White House itself became a public battleground, with the lives of its occupants scrutinized around gender and its first ladies vilified accordingly.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward Carson](#) and [Beth Shalom Hessel](#).*