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Book Review: Betty Ford: Candor and Courage in the White House

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Betty Ford: Candor and Courage in the White House. John Robert Greene. 2004.
Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas. 166 pp. (+ Photos and Index). \$25.00.
(Hardcover).

Reviewed by Jessica Burstrem¹

John Robert Greene's *Candor and Courage in the White House* covers Betty Ford's entire life, but, as suggested by its title, its focus is on her short time in the White House. In the relevant sections of the book, Greene explores Ford's life as First Lady markedly more thoroughly than he does the rest of her life, but that is probably primarily due to the stipulations of the Modern First Ladies series, of which this book is a part. Greene demonstrates his meticulousness as a researcher throughout the text; that makes the necessary concision of this work all the more regrettable, as he could likely share a deeper perspective on Ford given a different writing situation. The focus is also bitterly ironic given Greene's message at the end of the book:

*That woman is going to be long remembered—and not as
the wife of the President of the United States (123).*

Yet that phrase – “the wife of the President of the United States” – *is* the last description of Ford given in the book, and it is as the former First Lady that Ford gets the most attention there.

Greene seems determined to conclude that society did not always hold Ford up to its gender norms, but I see neither evidence nor purpose for such a conclusion. It would be more valuable, I think, to acknowledge the impact(s) of gender norms on society's responses to Ford's life and to then discuss them accordingly. For instance, Greene indicates that the American people seemed to embrace Ford for her frankness and honesty but that it was not enough to convince them to re-elect her husband. Might it not just as well be the other way around? Perhaps the American people did embrace Ford's candor, but it is no secret that when a woman exhibits “traditionally masculine” characteristics, such as outspokenness, society concludes that the men around her must be emasculated as a result. Indeed, that perception of Gerald Ford could have been a reason for his defeat.

Likewise, as Greene also discusses at length in the book, the American people seemed particularly moved by Betty Ford's struggles against breast cancer, drug addiction and alcoholism, and Greene's focus on those subjects indicates that he finds them just as important himself. Perhaps because society is so quick to identify a woman's weaknesses? Of course, those issues did become the central ones during and after Ford was the First Lady, but, as Greene also indicates, Ford campaigned heavily for the Equal Rights Amendment as well. That fact, however, is not as much a part of Ford's legacy in our society. While Greene suggests, in an instance of rather circular reasoning, this is because the ERA was less popular and successful than some of her other endeavors (117-118), I propose that it may also be due to its perceived incongruity with her role as First Lady. That incongruity was likely exacerbated by her representation – in both her husband's political campaigning and memoirs and in her own – as primarily a

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“traditional” wife and mother throughout her life. Certainly adherence to that image restricted Ford in a number of ways, while at the same time she changed its meaning by behaving in “nontraditional” ways. In fact, she did the same for the role of First Lady itself; indeed, this focus would be an excellent way to use this book in the classroom.

I once had a student in a writing class at the University of Florida who wanted to write on Jacqueline Kennedy-Onassis’s impact on American fashion. However, after doing some preliminary research, the student realized that Kennedy-Onassis’s influence ranged much further than that even though many people may not realize it, since she had to be careful to make such an impact without society realizing that she was doing so. As my student ultimately concluded, Kennedy-Onassis changed what being First Lady involves and allows, as did Eleanor Roosevelt before her and Hillary Rodham Clinton after; I only wish that I had read this book before then to suggest that my student investigate Betty Ford as well. Being First Lady is, of course, a momentous responsibility: simultaneously an immense challenge for the incredible expectations that it involves and a fabulous opportunity for its capacity to affect the expectations of all American women as their leader. At the same time, it remains a sign of our ever-present glass ceiling: The First Lady is always a leader for American women because the U.S. President is always a man. I suspect that it may be for that reason that we so often neglect discussions of First Ladies in Women’s Studies classrooms. But, just as I do not believe that Greene accomplished much by neglecting certain considerations above, I do not think that we in Women’s Studies are well served in that approach either.

In fact, the very characteristics that are in some ways shortcomings of *Candor and Courage* also make it well-suited to classroom use. It is short – only 123 pages of actual text – and highly accessible, and its lack of critical commentary or in-depth exploration on many subjects would leave plenty of room for students to debate over it with one another in the classroom and to do their own additional research on Ford on their own. It would also lend itself well to a course on American First Ladies, which also presents all sorts of potential directions for discussion, as I suggested above.

Perhaps the point that impressed me the most about this volume, however, is the fact that Greene admits his own regret about his ignorance of the extent of Ford’s involvement in her husband’s political career at the time when he wrote a “scholarly analysis” of the former President himself (xiv). Indeed, I had the same reaction myself after reading this book. Ford was not only an outspoken supporter of ERA, but she was also a dancer, a career woman, a divorcée, and a supporter of family planning, when all such things were more than uncommon for the wife of a Republican President of the United States. These fascinating revelations ought to be better-known; Greene’s laudable goal is that, starting with this book, they will.