Pretty in pink: Jacqueline Kennedy and the politics of fashion

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PRETTY IN PINK:

JACQUELINE KENNEDY AND THE POLITICS OF FASHION

by

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Abstract

When John Fitzgerald Kennedy began his long-shot quest for the presidency, he and his advisors feared his wife was a political liability and would alienate American voters with her aristocratic bearing and tastes. Not only did the Sorbonne-educated Jacqueline Kennedy cultivate a sophisticated style and dress in the slim sheaths and tight slacks favored by Parisian couturiers, she spoke in a cultured, whispery voice and was fluent in several languages. She exuded glamor. To an America used to its First Ladies looking and dressing like Bess Truman and Mamie Eisenhower, Mrs. Kennedy was an anomaly. In this analysis, I trace Mrs. Kennedy’s evolution from a political liability to a political secret weapon. By focusing on three foreign trips, to Ottawa, Paris, and to several cities in India and Pakistan, I document the changing lens through which she was viewed by the press abroad, by the press at home, by her husband’s political advisers, and – most importantly to her - by her husband himself. By being true to her inner muse, Mrs. Kennedy became an international star and a major political asset to the New Frontier.
INTRODUCTION

Before she was iconic Jackie, back when her husband was a senator from Massachusetts campaigning for the presidency, Jacqueline Kennedy was a political liability. John Fitzgerald Kennedy and his political advisors feared the educated, elegant, expensively-dressed, whispery-voiced Francophile would somehow alienate the very voters he was trying to reach. During the 1960 presidential campaign, much ink was spilt on Mrs. Kennedy’s heels, hats and hairstyles. Her glamour somehow reflected poorly on her husband. But once the stylish couple was in the White House, those qualities that had so rattled his advisors and riveted the attention of reporters covering the campaign became political assets, integral to the success of the Kennedy Administration; intertwined with and indistinguishable from the New Frontier itself.

Not that his chic wife was his only political burden. Kennedy had much to overcome in his quest for the White House. Most obviously – and most likely to do him in – was his religion, Roman Catholicism. 1950s America imagined Catholics marching in lock-step, acceding to the orders of the Roman Pope, putting religious fealty above national loyalty. Kennedy addressed those issues head-on in a speech to Baptist ministers in Houston during the primary season, a forthright and stunning speech on the separation of church and state that quelled much of the concern.1

1 “…. I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for President who happens also to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters; and the church does not speak for me. . . But if the time should ever come – and I do not concede any conflict to be remotely possible – when my office would require me to either violate my conscience or violate the national interest, then I would resign the office; and I hope any conscientious public servant would do likewise. . . But if this election is decided on the basis that 40 million Americans lost their chance of being President on the day they were baptized, then it is the whole nation that will be the loser, in the eyes of Catholics and non-Catholics around the world, in the eyes of history, and in the eyes of our own people.” Sept. 12, 1960 to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association
In addition to those qualms about his religion, doubts lingered, too, about his gravitas and his ability to hold his own with the grown-ups. Eleanor Roosevelt, the Democratic grand doyenne publicly attacked him, mocking his money and his manhood.² The tangled troika of Kennedy’s wealth,³ health, and relative inexperience dogged him throughout the primary campaign and into the general election after the Republicans nominated Richard Nixon, the former senator from California, who was wrapping up eight years as Dwight D. Eisenhower’s vice president.

JFK himself summed up his negatives succinctly, if cruelly, when, well-before the campaign got underway, he said to an aide to Illinois Sen. Adlai Stevenson, “If I had to live my life over again, I would have a different father, a different wife, and a different religion.”⁴

Since the Massachusetts senator was linked by blood ties to his father, many wondered if he wasn’t also linked to his father’s conservative, isolationist foreign policy views.⁵ Joseph P. Kennedy, the multi-millionaire ambassador to the Court of St. James’, resigned his diplomatic position after drawing President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s

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² Perret, Geoffrey. Jack A Life Like No Other (New York: Random House, 2001), p.241 and p. 259 “Her scorn was withering. She described Jack Kennedy as ‘someone who understands what courage is and admires it, but has not quite the independence to have it.’” She changed her mind a few months later, after a meeting with him in Hyde Park. “He will make a good president,” she wrote, in a memo describing the session, adding she had misjudged him previously.

³ Perret, Jack A Life Like No Other, p.246. Although JFK campaigned in the bitter Wisconsin cold, often without a hat or an overcoat and shook thousands of hands outside factory gates, rumors persisted that his father was buying the primary election. He decided to joke about it. “I’ve just received the following telegram from my generous father,” he’d remark in an offhand way. “It reads - Dear Jack: Don’t buy a single vote more than is necessary. I’ll help you win this election, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to pay for a landslide.”

⁴ Kremer, John and friends. If I Had My Life to Live Over . . (Taos, NM: Open Horizon Books, 2008) possibly apocryphal

⁵ In 1940, JFK published “Why England Slept,” a re-working of his senior thesis at Harvard, which examined and analyzed the reasons England did not rearm between the world wars until war seemed inevitable. It was notable for not pointing the finger at any one politician and for concluding that had England moved sooner to stop Nazi Germany, the consequences of that action may have unleashed even greater destruction. Kennedy wrote the thesis and published the book before America entered the war and, obviously, before he knew how the war ended.
displeasure. Joseph Kennedy, even as the United States was tilting toward war against Nazi Germany, believed that Adolph Hitler was someone with whom the United States could work. A whiff of anti-Semitism followed the father thereafter but it was more likely fear of what war - should it come - would mean to his children that animated his world view.6

Ten years past the halfway point of the 20th Century, as the 1960 presidential campaign got underway, Americans began to focus their attention on the junior senator from Massachusetts. And what did they see? A man swaddled in wealth with a perpetual tan, who exuded the aura of a playboy, and carried enough baggage that defeat must have seemed just an election away. And added to that list of liabilities was his wife.

The roles of “wife” and “mother” were poised on the brink of major social change just as Jacqueline Kennedy made her first appearance on the national stage. Americans were watching “Leave It to Beaver” on television; a black-and-white homage to the nuclear family that highlighted gentle humor, lowered voices, and a bread-winning, wise father who knew best. The impeccably dressed – and loving - mother, in full-skirted dresses and a single strand of pearls, occupied herself in her well-appointed kitchen. This value-laden ode to domestic bliss and buying power would end its run in September 1963, two months before the Kennedy Administration’s abrupt end. In February of that year, Betty Friedan published “The Feminine Mystique,” and introduced into the culture

6 Joseph Kennedy’s apprehensions were well-placed. His oldest son and namesake, a Navy pilot, was killed flying a mission over the English Channel; his daughter, Kathleen, was killed in an airplane crash just months after her British husband died in combat; and JFK himself was injured (and officially missing-in-action for a week or so) after the PT boat he commanded was rammed by a Japanese destroyer in the South Pacific.
“the problem that has no name.” Some women, or rather some educated white women, who hoped and expected to achieve fulfillment through marriage and motherhood, were finding, instead, an emptiness in their lives that neither children nor consumer goods could fill.

A college-educated woman in 1959 in America was in a minority, and a shrinking one at that. While 47% of the student population was female in 1920, by 1958 that figure had dropped to 35% and those women earned fewer degrees.\(^7\) While barriers to women in higher education had shrunk during the years surrounding World War II, a college or post-graduate degree then did not assure a woman entry into the labor force at the same level as a similarly educated man. Likely because of that, more than half of all women college students dropped out to marry and/or to support their husbands through college.

While some women struggled with the issues Friedan raised, others reveled in the domesticity of the era. The glorification of *kinder, kuche, kirche* was perhaps best – and ironically – highlighted by the so-called Kitchen Debate between Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. During two full days of debate in Moscow in 1959, the Soviet leader and the American vice president challenged each other, not over weapons systems, but over washing machines. Nixon boasted that “our goal is to make life better for our housewives” while Khrushchev decried that “capitalist” view of women and instead lauded the Soviet women who worked outside the home, in factories.\(^8\) So housewives – and consumer goods – were glorified at the highest level of the US government.

That “happy housewife heroine,” as Friedan called her would be “young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive, gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies and home.” That caricature, slyly personified by Betty White’s character Sue Ann Nivens, also known as The Happy Homemaker, on CBS’s The Mary Tyler Moore Show from 1970 – 1977, delighted in a traditional, male-approved way of living. The face the happy homemaker presented to the world was inoffensive, comforting, focused on the domestic arts. She was busy being a “good wife,” busy raising her children. As Mrs. Kennedy said, “If you bungle raising your children I don’t think whatever else you do well matters very much.” By tempering her intellect and tamping down her talent (at least publicly) she was embracing a cultural ideal. “This career girl turned housewife validated the choice millions of women had made.”

As The New York Times noted in January 1962, “It now quite all right for a woman to be a bit brainy or cultured as long as she tempers her intelligence with a ‘t’rific’ girlish rhetoric.” It was a fine line to walk.

In an interview on Sept. 29, 1960, just a few months before Americans were to go to the polls, the future First Lady was asked about the “major role” of the First Lady. “To take care of the president,” she replied, “so he can best serve the people. And not to fail her family, her husband and her children.”

In an conversation recorded for the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library’s oral history project, just six months after her husband was murdered, Jackie elaborated on this theme: “In my marriage, I could never conceive – and I remember I said it in an interview

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9 Troy, Gil. Affairs of State The Rise and Rejection of the Presidential Couple Since World War II (The Free Press, 1997), p. 110
10 Troy, Affairs of State The Rise and Rejection of the Presidential Couple Since World War II, p. 110
once, and all these women – we got all these irate letters – someone said, ‘Where do you get your opinions?’ And I said, ‘I get all my opinions from my husband.’ Which is true. How could I have any political opinions, you know? His were going to be the best. And I could never conceive of not voting for whoever my husband was for. Anyone who I’d be married to. I suppose if I was married to – well, you know. So that was just so strange because that was – I mean, it was really a rather terribly Victorian or Asiatic relationship which we had, which I had.”

As many women did in those few years before the Eisenhower 50’s became the swinging 60’s, Mrs. Kennedy defined herself, publicly at least, only in relation to her husband and her children. The social battles yet to come would place women front and center on the barricades of social upheaval. Whether the issues were reproductive – abortion, contraceptives – or cultural – working women, working mothers – or fashionable – mini-skirts, hot pants – American women would find themselves on the cutting edge. But not just yet.

Jacqueline Lee Bouvier, whose ambition had been, according to her Miss Porter’s School yearbook, “not to be a housewife,” was married for almost six years when the 1960 presidential campaign kicked into high gear. Her husband, twelve years her senior and already a senator when she married him, had been eyeing the White House for a while. Just four years earlier, he had come within a whisker of being Democratic nominee

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Adlai Stevenson’s running mate when the Illinois senator threw the vice presidential choice to the delegates at the Democratic National Convention. The eventual ticket, Stevenson/Kefauver, was soundly defeated by Eisenhower/Nixon on their way to a second term.

Pregnant in March 1959, and with a two-year-old daughter to care for, the 30-year-old Mrs. Kennedy was not relishing the idea of a national campaign and the wardrobe needed to pull it off. She would have to put aside the casual windblown look she had affected and which pleased her husband for a more structured style. Never keen on the full skirts and twin sweater sets ubiquitous then, she began building a wardrobe around a chic European look, simple sleeveless sheaths and tight capris, popularized on the silver screen by Audrey Hepburn in both “Roman Holiday” and “Sabrina.”

Mrs. Kennedy’s desire to support her husband conflicted with her distaste for his chosen profession. Politics had been the “other woman” in her married life. “I was alone almost every weekend. It was all wrong. Politics was sort of my enemy,” she said of her early years with the senator. But even with that, and with an interest in American political history that had always taken a back seat to her fascination with all things French, Mrs. Kennedy climbed onboard the campaign, albeit expressing her dismay. “It isn’t the right time for us,” she told her husband when he told her he was going to run for president. “We’re still young. We should be enjoying our children and having fun.”

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13 Perret, Jack A Life Like No Other, p. 237
15 Perrot, Jack A Life Like No Other, p. 237
But for the duration of the campaign, she was campaign wife, the necessary component in a winning formula - a crucial accessory, the one a successful politician could not afford to be without. The family-centered culture of the 1950s placed a premium on married political candidates. As a “wife” Jackie advertised domesticity, one of the keys to political success at the national level. But this particular wife needed to be remade in the image of traditional, doting wife. Being pregnant, while it limited her physical mobility, helped the campaign, subliminally advertising her husband’s virility, his commitment to family and her mom-and-apple-pie-ness. Regardless of what she actually was, or how she approached the roles of wife and mother, or how she saw her place in her family, she needed to be seen as ordinary, as one-of-us. JFK’s advisors wrestled with the gap between domestic expectations and the sophisticated, Francophile wife. A decade before Richard Nixon wondered what would play in Peoria, Kennedy’s advisors suspected Mrs. Kennedy wouldn’t.

CAMPAIGNING

After her husband declared his candidacy in January 1960, Mrs. Kennedy wanted to contribute to the campaign effort. But JFK was initially dubious about her political value. He thought her too aristocratic for the average voter; she had too much status, he joked, and not enough quo. “The American people just aren’t ready for someone like

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Perry, Barbara A. *Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), p. 36 Perhaps the marriage was a requirement then as now for candidates aspiring to higher political office; but in the past the marital surface was rarely scratched. Politicians today endure personal scrutiny of the sort JFK could not have withstood.
you. I guess we’ll just have to run you through subliminally in one of those quick flash TV spots so no one will notice,” he said to her, reducing her to tears.¹⁷

Mini-profiles of the candidate’s wives ran in a February 1960 issue of *U.S. News and World Report*. Muriel Humphrey, wife of Sen. Hubert Humphrey, the happy warrior from Minnesota, was called a “Homemaker First;” Pat Nixon was tagged with the phrase “Self-Discipline;” and Lady Bird Johnson was called a “Human Dynamo.” Mrs. Kennedy was described as a “Stunning Egghead.”

In an anecdote replete with the casual and condescending sexism of the time, the magazine reporter began by describing an informal conversation in the Kennedy living room in which the senator was discussing the election of demagogues in ancient Greece. “From her graceful repose on the thick carpet, his beautiful wife chimed in: ‘That’s where the word ‘ostracize’ came from. The Greeks used to drop their ballots in a jar called an *ostrakon*.’” The reporter thought it “incongruous” that the “young brunette in the purple Pucci slacks,” until that moment occupying herself with “a pile of the latest Italian and French popular records,” had chimed in “to deliver an item of Athenian esoterica.” The candidate’s wife’s “incongruities” were then catalogued: “She comes close to being a certifiable egghead, who speaks French, Italian and Spanish fluently, reads voraciously in history, biography and current affairs, helps her husband with his highly literate speeches, and paints with flair. Yet her favorite expression in everyday conversation is “Oh yeah?” – not a cynical phrase, as she uses it, but one of guileless wonderment and approbation.”¹⁸

¹⁸ All quotes from *U.S. News and World Report*, Feb. 22, 1960
An egghead with fashion flair? That seems incongruous. Even as she is lauded for her facility with foreign language, her “voracious” reading of serious tomes, and a knowledge of Greek linguistics, she is memorable for her purple slacks and her child-like wonder.

Stories about Mrs. Kennedy’s clothes, her style, her taste, and her hair began appearing in the mainstream press in early 1960. By mid-summer of that year, *The New York Times* published an article, written by Marylin Bender and accompanied by a half-dozen photographs of the glamorous Mrs. Kennedy, which solidified her reputation as a fashionable clothes horse.

“Jacqueline Kennedy is a pace-setter who has worn sausage-skin pants, streaked hair, chemise dresses and sleeveless tunics long before these became popular currency. At 30, she has the kind of tall, slender and rather muscular figure that seems to inspire creative American designers and the younger crop of Parisian couturiers.”

The “fantastically chic” candidate’s wife was “a shoo-in for the first lady of American fashion,” regardless of the outcome of the upcoming November election, the reporter gushed, noting that even the men felt compelled to report on Mrs. Kennedy’s wardrobe. “During the Wisconsin primary, her red coat – a Givenchy copy – was reported by male political correspondents who ordinarily disdain the woman’s angle of a story,” Bender wrote. Further investigative reporting would prove that that red coat wasn’t a copy, after all.

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By September the story had moved to the front page of *The New York Times*. An article headlined, “Mrs. Kennedy Defends Clothes; Is ‘Sure’ Mrs. Nixon Pays More,” began: “Mrs. John F. Kennedy, stung by reports that women resent her because she is ‘too chic’ and spends too much money on clothes, called her critics ‘dreadfully unfair’ yesterday.” The article, written by Nan Robertson, reads like an invitation to a dress duel, with Mrs. Kennedy oh-so-delicately removing her gloves and slapping Mrs. Nixon across the cheek. “I’m sure I spend less than Mrs. Nixon on clothes,” Jackie said. “She gets hers at Elizabeth Arden, and nothing there costs less than $200 or $300.”

The “fantastically chic” candidate’s wife, who was voted debutante of the year when she was presented to society in an upper-class ritual called “coming out” in Newport, R.I. and New York in 1948, expressed hurt and surprise at slurs on her avant-garde dressing habits. “They’re beginning to snipe at me about that as often as they attack Jack on Catholicism,” she said. As she was being interviewed for the article, Mrs. Kennedy was trying on several maternity dresses sent from a Fifth Avenue store. A woman reporter helped her to climb in and out of the maternity outfits, most of which buttoned awkwardly down the back from neck to hem. They cost $30 to $40 each. Mrs. Kennedy finally selected two, according to Robertson.

It was a deft, just-one-of-the-girls performance. But Mrs. Kennedy was not finished. The article continued: “Mrs. Kennedy was also nettled yesterday by snide remarks about her bouffant hairdo. Some wrathful letter-writers have described it as a “floor mop” and worse. “I’m surprised at them,” Mrs. Kennedy retorted. “I try to keep it

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20 Igor Cassini, who wrote under the nom de plume Cholly Knickerbocker in the Hearst newspaper chain in the 1940s and 1950s, designated Miss Bouvier “Deb of the Year.” Cassini, the gossip columnist, is credited with creating the term “jet set.” Igor Cassini was Oleg Cassini’s younger brother.
neat and well groomed,” and then asked the reporters present if they thought her hair style “offensive.”

By sweetly asking such a pointed question to a roomful of reporters, Mrs. Kennedy was attempting to manipulate the scribes, drawing them to her side by feigning - or feeling - hurt. And by allowing “a woman reporter” to help her in and out of awkwardly-buttoned dresses, an oddly intimate gesture for a woman, no less one who is six months pregnant, is reminiscent of a girl’s sleepover, a ritual of familiarity and friendship, feelings neither she nor the reporters may have felt.

The charge that she engaged in Paris spending-sprees rankled. “I’ve lived in Paris and I have a younger sister, Lee, who lives abroad,” Mrs. Kennedy said in the article. “So I go there when I can. But I never buy more than one suit or coat from Balenciaga and Givenchy.” She said her mother-in-law, who purchased her wardrobe from Paris high-fashion houses every summer “always brings back one outfit for each of the girls in our family.”

Her calculated use of the word “girl” to describe herself when she was a 30-year old woman is telling. Within 10 years time, that fraught word would bear the weight of the Women’s Liberation Movement on its slender letters. Then the use of “girl,” when describing a female older than 18, was redolent of sexism, of a perceived attempt to dismiss, even to denigrate, the woman in question. To keep her in her place. Jackie, though, was after something else by calling herself a “girl.” Using the idiom of the day, she wanted to make light of her predicament, to purposefully trivialize the thousand-dollar outfit, to make it seem that anyone concerned with these girlish trifles, was somehow out of line, silly even. And that anyone who questioned why girls would want
pretty frocks just didn’t get it. To minimize the issue by subtly turning it on its head: Only an unmanly man – or a jealous woman - would pick on a girl. And it’s not important really, is it? It’s just a girl thing.

She continued: “I hate a full closet. I’ve gotten ruthless about what looks best on me. I don’t have much chance to plod around the stores, but anybody in public life must be equipped with clothes in advance.”

Her use of the word “plod,” in an initial reading, is off-putting. But just below the surface of the word is her attempt to get the reader on her side. “Plodding” is burdensome, it’s annoying. Why would you make her trudge through department stores in search of that perfect outfit? What do you want from her? By enduring the rigors of public life, while pregnant, no less, isn’t she giving her all to her country? And the artful “I hate a full closet” implies she owns fewer clothes rather than more. She is drawing a politically pleasing picture: She is a busy woman who understands what must be done, what must be worn, and she is fulfilling her obligations. There is no fashionable frippery here. Her use of the word “equipped” suggests she sees her clothes as tools, as armor.

The article continued: “The hazel-eyed brunette said she did “a lot of shopping from magazines. Some clothes I have made by a little dressmaker in Washington,” she said. “She’s the only one who can fit into my crazy schedule.”

Little dressmaker? At a time in America when very few women visited a dressmaker for every day clothes, her turn of the phrase radiated a hint of noblesse oblige and tried to diminish the very fact that she paid a woman to sew her clothes.
The “little dressmaker” preferred to be called a dress designer and would, in 1962, write a sympathetic and amusing account of her years dressing Mrs. Kennedy back when she was Miss Bouvier. In “I Was Jacqueline Kennedy’s Dressmaker,” Mini Rhea – always Mrs. Rhea to the well-brought-up future First Lady – details Jackie’s fashion foibles, her attachment to the color pink (“shocking pink, bright pink, hot pink”) and her tilt toward a European sensibility that managed through the use of beautiful fabric and few jewels to convey both the elegance of French couture and a minimalist simplicity.21 “Jackie would indeed buy dresses off the racks and then let me, her little dressmaker, give them the couturier look. I would take out my muslin pattern of her exact figure and go ahead with the alterations, letting out a bit here, taking in a bit there, shortening, if necessary and, of course, adding my “magic dart” to improve the bustline.”22

Even as a young woman, the future First Lady apparently knew how to maximize her assets. But that attention to detail, that determination to present an original and chic silhouette to the world, began to backfire during the campaign.

On Sept. 16, The Washington Post/Times Herald headlined a front page story “First-Lady Candidates in Debate Over Who Spends More on Clothes.” “Two famously well-dressed women, one of whom will be the next First Lady, launched a national debate yesterday on the apparently political subject: Who spends more on clothes? Chic Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy fired the first shot, making couture a campaign issue, when she claimed Pat Nixon spends more on clothes than she herself does. Reached in Atlantic City where she was campaigning with her husband, well-groomed Pat Nixon replied, ‘I

21 Rhea, Mini. I was Jacqueline Kennedy’s Dressmaker (New York: Fleet Publishing Corp., 1962) p. 159
22 Rhea, I Was Jacqueline Kennedy’s Dressmaker, p. 153
have no comment on what Mrs. Kennedy wears or says.’ Then going on to describe her own wardrobe, she added pointedly, ‘I have always worn American clothes.’”

It was in this article that Jackie unleashed one of her more famous retorts. Criticized for spending some $30,000 a year on French fashions, she replied, “I couldn’t spend that much unless I wore sable underwear.”

Mrs. Kennedy’s reference to “sable underwear” upset her husband no end. “That’s the last thing Jackie’s going to say in this campaign,” he decreed, in a moment of pique.23

The Post reporters, Winzola McLendon and Marie Smith, after wondering at the oddity of the battle weapons (“This is probably the first time in history that two clothes-conscious women have publicly downgraded their wardrobes.”) then detailed Mrs. Nixon’s clothes: “Coatwise, Pat Nixon has come a long ways since her husband told a nationwide television audience about her “good Republican cloth coat,” during his first vice presidential campaign in 1952. She owns a fitted black Persian broadtail coat, a “desert gold mink” stole, and a white mink evening stole. All were made by New York furrier Leo Ritter who designed a Lutetia mink coat for Queen Elizabeth and has made two fur coats for First Lady Mamie Eisenhower. Known throughout the fashion industry as a hat lover, Mrs. Nixon has been known to buy as many as six hats at one time. She wears chapeaux by Mr. Arnold (his prices range from $39 to $79 – more for fur or fur-trimmed) and by Miss May, whose chic chapeaux are also in the $39 to $79 price range. A perfect size 10, Mrs. Nixon likes skirts that are wide enough to climb steps or enter

23 Spoto, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis: A Life, p. 154
official automobiles gracefully and that she can arrange over her knees on platforms. She likes jackets because they are adaptable to varied occasions and climates."

Turning to Jacqueline Kennedy, the reporters wrote: “A ‘town clothes’ type, Mrs. Kennedy loves suits with chunky jackets. She likes loose, rounded silhouettes and almost never wears black or even dark colors, preferring pale beige, pastels, and red. She, too, shops off the rack, a saleslady at one local store where she has shopped for many years, said yesterday. ‘She has bought many very inexpensive things – you know, in your class and in mine.’ She continued, ‘Mrs. Kennedy is a real normal girl (pricewise) as far as clothes are concerned.’ Over a period of years (the shop records show) Mrs. Kennedy has paid anywhere from $29.95 to $110 for a dress. Most of them have cost around $39.95 and only once in five years has the price of one item gone over $100. And, the records show that Mrs. Kennedy buys $5.95 slips. Mrs. Kennedy – who has been prevented from campaigning with her husband since she is expecting her second child this fall – also found herself in the peculiar position of defending her coiffure.

The reporters covering the campaign and the political advisers – on both sides – trying to gain an advantage must have wondered at this new political universe. The New York Times captured the fashion moment in an oft-quoted article, entitled First Ladies – in Fashion, Too? written by Martha Weinman in its Sunday Magazine on September 11, 1960.

“When Jacqueline Kennedy, then five days the wife of a Presidential nominee stepped aboard the family yacht in Hyannis Port, Mass., wearing an orange pullover sweater, shocking pink Capri pants and a bouffant hairdo that gamboled merrily in the
breeze, even those newsmen present who could not tell shocking pink from Windsor Rose knew they were witnessing something of possibly vast political consequence. Political pollsters may not know precisely what The Women’s Vote is, but they know it exists. They know it can be swayed by such imponderables as Tom Dewey’s mustache. What, then, is to keep it from being influenced by a pair of pink Capri pants?”

With the seemingly universal appeal of First Lady Mamie Eisenhower as a backdrop, Weinman dissected the contrasting styles of Mrs. Nixon and Mrs. Kennedy, both of whom fell short of the Eisenhower ideal. Mamie, had, in effect, come closer to the ideal than any First Lady in memory. “Look at the record: Hairdos are a sensitive point in Washington. Much bad humor has been focused on Mamie’s bangs, but the bangs have emerged triumphant and even helped to win her what is, by and large, an affectionate public. ‘I’ve always sympathized with her,’ a housewife said recently, when quizzed on this very point, ‘because I’ve never been able to do anything with my hair, either.’ In addition to the virtue of difficult hair, she looks average, as most women do; she loves clothes, as most women do; she dresses a bit more youthful than is warranted by Paris standards, as almost all American women do; and she has a guilt about unnecessary spending, as, again, most women have.”

Pat Nixon was disposed of in a few paragraphs. Her conservative outfits, most often in a “nice, soft shade of blue,” while always modest and appropriate, led one annoyed woman to suggest Mrs. Nixon was just too good to be true. Another “observer”
sniped, “I get the feeling that she has never in her life held anything up with safety pins, and it irritates me.”

Weinman then turned her attention to Jacqueline Kennedy. “(She) faces vastly different problems. She is a couturier’s dream. She wears clothes as well as any fashion model in the business (a possible handicap) and spends, together with her mother-in-law Mrs. Joseph P. Kennedy, some $30,000 a year in the Paris salons (a distinct handicap). Her devil-may-care chic is as troublesome to some women as Mrs. Nixon’s conservative perfection. Their reactions are typified by the comment of a Manhattan housewife, who recently said: ‘She looks too damn snappy. I just don’t like women who look that snappy, that’s all.’ Surprisingly, Mrs. Kennedy’s coiffure seems to arouse even greater ire than her clothes. A picture of her that appeared recently in The Times engendered several dozen wrathful comments, including one that reads ‘… we have better-looking floor mops than the bouffant coiffure you describe….’ The battle of the bouffant loomed larger as the opening of the presidential campaign grew nearer. Then – Flash: Jackie Kennedy cut her hair, explaining that it would stay neater in windy motorcades. Certainly, if Mrs. Kennedy could un-chic a bit, she would make an admirable fashion diplomat. She would bring new elegance to the Capitol scene, and, if New Frontiers are what is needed, she could open them on main streets everywhere. Moreover there is evidence that she has plenty of the spirit that wins ballgames. A friend recently told her, according to a Washington society reporter, ‘Jackie, you’re too much of an individualist. If you get into the White House you’ll have to make some concessions.’

‘Oh, I will!’ said Mrs. Kennedy. ‘I’ll wear hats.’”
An enterprising reporter did uncover one striking similarity between Mrs. Kennedy and Mrs. Eisenhower. In an article in *The Washington Post/Times Herald* on July 17, 1960, Winzola McLendon wrote: “Pink is pink, whether it’s Mamie or Jackie. So hang on to those pink dresses, ladies. If Sen. Kennedy wins the November race for the White House, pink will still be a high-fashion color. It’s the favorite of the senator’s beautiful young wife, Jacqueline, reports the trade paper, *Women’s Wear Daily*, in a Paris dispatch.”

More specifically, McLendon continued: “Jackie’s fashion preferences run to slim, sophisticated styles and she is definitely in the avant-garde. She particularly likes asymmetric effects and really smart clothes. Both Mrs. Joseph Kennedy and Jacqueline love fashion, wear clothes well and could set fashion trends. One Paris designer says, ‘She (Jackie) prefers simple clothes, always a little sporty, and insists upon being underdressed.’ Her favorite color is Gauguin pink, followed by black, turquoise, gray, and white. Jackie has a beautiful figure, can wear anything, is known as a couturier’s dream. She orders her Paris costumes mostly from sketches, like a mail order catalogue – at Cardin, Gres, Givenchy, Balenciaga, Chanel and Bugnard. Each house has a well-shaped Jacqueline Kennedy dummy. Her mother-in-law has privately complained to milliner Mme. Paulette that Jacqueline ‘doesn’t wear hats.’ In leisure moments, she is often seen in jodphurs and riding boots, bulky sweaters and neckerchiefs. She recently had everyone agog at the Hyannis Airport - near the Joseph Kennedys’ summer home – when she arrived in tight tapered cerise slacks topped by a bulky beige sweater.”
JFK was concerned enough about the impression his fashionable wife continued to make on the public to inquire about the mail volume. “Oh, Mary,” the senator said to Mrs. Kennedy’s secretary, “how is the mail running on Jackie’s hair?” “Heavy,” replied Mary Barelli Gallagher. Missives exhorting her to change her hairstyle to one more befitting the wife of a Presidential candidate were the least of it. Many letter-writers felt compelled to send Mrs. Kennedy a hair comb.24

Trying to refocus the campaign and stem the criticism, Jacqueline Kennedy issued a statement. “All the talk over what I wear and how I fix my hair has me amused, but it also puzzles me. What does my hairdo have to do with my husband’s ability to be President?” By now, it must have seemed to the Senator and his staff, buried as they were under an avalanche of petticoat press, that their worst fears about Mrs. Kennedy were being realized.25

But had those political advisers really misread the American people? Were they that far off the mark? Months before, back when the campaign was just beginning, they had suspected she would not play well with the American people and if the more recent articles were any indication, it certainly seemed she was not. And no amount of coy press releases would change that. The woman herself was worried, “depressed” even, by some of the coverage. Apparently unable to neutralize the issue, alter the fashionable reality or rise above it, the Kennedys faced the voters that autumn, well-dressed and wondering.

1960 America, in snapshot, as revealed by that year’s census figures, showed a nation growing – and changing. Nascent trends were just beginning to be captured by the

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numbers. Women outnumbered and outlived men. Young people under 18 and older people over 65 were the largest growing segments of the populace; outpacing those in the mid-years of life. Population was shifting to the warmer West and the sunnier South. People moved from farms to suburbs. African Americans were increasing at a rate faster than whites. Americans were living better than ever before: income up, home ownership up, car ownership up to 77 percent of all American families, a 17 percent increase from 1950. “What we are seeing, really,” said Census Director Richard M. Scammon, “is a picture of mobility and of people being able to go where they want to go, rather than going where the mines are or where the farming is good.” And where did people want to go in 1960? To the suburbs of southern California and Florida.

Median family income was $5,620, up from $3,319 ten years ago. The percentage of Americans earning less than $4,000 a year dropped from 63 percent to 32 percent, while those earning between $4,000 and $10,000 jumped from 33 percent of the 1950 population to 55 percent of the 1960 population. Those making $10,000 or more – the 1960s version of the Millionaire Next Door – increased from 3 percent of Americans to 12 percent.

Illiteracy was down and the number of Americans attending and graduating from college was up. By 1960, just over 8 million Americans claimed a college degree, up from 5.7 million in the preceding 10 years. More than 3 million students were in college then, an increase of more than a million students from 1950. High school graduation numbers were even more impressive. More than 51 million Americans had graduated

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25 In 1959 when asked by his friend, newspaper reporter Benjamin Bradlee if he “really thought” he could win the White House, JFK, as quoted in Jack: A Life Like No Other by Geoffrey Perret, replied, “Yes, if I don’t make a single mistake.”
high school by 1960, up from 37 million the decade before. Just about 10 million students were in high school in 1960, up from just under 7 million in 1950.

So what would this educated, moneyed and mobile nation decide in a contest between change and experience?

ELECTED

On Nov. 9, 1960, in one of the closest contests in modern American history, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was elected president. His Electoral College totals were impressive, 303 electors to 219, but his margin of victory in the popular vote was razor thin, just 120,000 votes; a victory he was to characterize a few months later in his usual wittily mordant way. Told a columnist had described campaign consultant Arthur Schlesinger as “coruscatingly brilliant,” Kennedy noted that “a hundred thousand votes the other way and we’d all be coruscatingly stupid.”

Neither the president-elect nor his wife was awake in their Hyannis Port summer home on Cape Cod when the election was called the following morning. According to the Nov. 16, 1960 issue of *Time* magazine, the sun was up on another day before the networks ended the suspense: “With impressive endurance, both network staffs (CBS and NBC) clung to the story through dawn and into daylight, remaining well made up and coherent, with (Walter) Cronkite growing ever more debonair as fatigue mounted all about him. CBS finally quit at 7 a.m., continuing spot coverage an hour later, while NBC stuck it out until 7:30. By then, (David) Brinkley grandly and unilaterally announced

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Kennedy’s election (NBC has just awarded him California”), and Dave Garroway, NBC’s regular morning glory, took over.”

Jacqueline Kennedy went to bed at 11 pm on Election Day, still uncertain of the outcome. “I knew the excitement was increasing,” she told The New York Times on Nov. 10. “I woke up at 4:00 when Jack came in to go to bed.” He told her then, she said, that his election was in doubt as the tide of late-reporting, western states seemed to be turning against the Democratic ticket.

When she awoke to the news - and the Secret Service agents guarding the perimeter of the ocean-side compound – Mrs. Kennedy, then just three weeks away from delivering her first son, took a solitary walk along the water’s edge while other members of her family engaged in a game of touch football. Whether she was pondering her looming labor or her imminent life in the fish bowl, she knew she was about to start living a public life on a grand stage where each gesture would be dissected, each murmur might be mocked, and each decision she made – whether it be the length of her hair or the color of her frock – would be fodder for comment. “I feel as though I had just turned into a piece of public property,” she said. “It’s really frightening to lose your anonymity at thirty-one.” But she had - and she determined to make the best of it. She vowed that all she did would reflect well on her husband. “I have every confidence my husband will be magnificent and give himself completely,” she told the Times. “I assume I won’t fail him in any way.”

In an article at the end of that November, U.S. News and World Report summed up the incoming First Lady as a woman who would bring “youth, beauty, and babies to the White House.” In that omniscient news magazine voice, the article continued: “To the
White House social life, Mrs. Kennedy will bring a background of wealth and high society – and a flair for fashion that made her clothes a subject of campaign controversy. She was one of the first to wear a “sack dress,” to dye streaks in her hair, to introduce the so-called bouffant style of hair-do. Campaign critics recalled her strolling Washington streets in “shocking pink” slacks – and also speculated about the cost of her Paris gowns.”

The Battle of the Garment District – or the Affair of the Sable Underwear – as Time magazine called it post-election in an article on Jan. 20, 1961, clearly had taken its toll. In the article, Jackie “vowed” to buy only American clothes in the future, and suggested she would “resort to muumuus if it will save Jack from embarrassment.” Conscious of the historical part she was about to play, she said, “I am determined that my husband’s Administration – this is a speech I find myself making in the middle of the night – won’t be plagued by fashion stories.”

Much to her (and her husband’s) annoyance, campaign Jackie had been the focus of fashion attention. That would have to change. The New Frontier could not teeter on high heels or be swaddled in French silk if it was to succeed. Determined to take her wardrobe and her style off the front pages of the nation’s newspapers, and to take control of her image, Mrs. Kennedy sought help. She had become a piece of public property, as she noted, but her image would be easier to shape and control from the White House than it was on the campaign trail. She no longer needed to ask for support in the form of votes for her husband, she could now unleash her inner fashionista. Her fashion sense, coupled with her understanding of history and politics, would turn her very being into a potent
advertisement for the New Frontier, for modernity, for the future. Hamish Bowles, then the editor-at-large of Vogue, would in a year, call her “the physical embodiment of the New Frontier.”

The reigning female silhouette at the time was fancy, obtrusive, exaggeratedly feminine, and required pounds of foundational garments to construct and to hold in place. The 1960s would be different. Mrs. Kennedy would develop “what later would be called minimalism – simple, undecorated shapes that looked to the future.” No wide crinoline skirts for her; no pink poodles cavorting along her hem. No tight bodices or sweetheart collars. Her gowns were narrow and straight-cut “whose fabric seemed to float over her figure.”

Because her husband had narrowly lost the women’s vote; the new First Lady needed to shore up her image in the heartland. Both the President-elect and Mrs. Kennedy were mindful of the fact that her wardrobe choices reverberated in the nation’s cash registers, as well. In unionized, manufacturing America, her stylish pocketbooks helped put money in the more utilitarian pocketbooks of many of her fellow Americans. David Dubinsky, then head of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union wanted reassurance the First Lady would not be patronizing foreign designers.

Enlisting the aid of Diana Vreeland, the doyenne of the fashion world and a former editor of Vogue, Mrs. Kennedy realized her problem was two-fold: not only did she have to confine herself to American–made fashions from now on, but she had to publicize that fact at every turn. Attempting to control her own image and refusing to

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27 Perry, Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier, p. 83
28 Perry, Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier, p. 83 Quoting Bernadine Morris, a fashion reporter for the New York Times and Women’s Wear Daily
29 Perry, Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier, p. 83
allow herself to be portrayed as a “let-them-eat-cake fiend who buys Paris clothes!”

would tax her creativity and her father-in-law’s wallet.

An article on Jan. 14, 1961 in The Washington Post/Times Herald, by reporter Elizabeth Ford got the word out by noting Mrs. Kennedy was not obsessed with foreign couturiers.

*Women’s Wear Daily*, a trade journal, had printed a letter of reprimand from Mrs. Kennedy’s social secretary Letitia Baldridge, criticizing the paper for muddling its coverage of the fashion battles. “Writing at the suggestion of her boss, whom she quotes as ‘distressed by the implications of extravagance, of over-emphasis of fashion in relation to her life, and of the misuse of her name by firms from whom she has not bought clothes,’ Miss Baldridge politely but firmly scores *Women’s Wear Daily* for printing pictures of dresses Mrs. Kennedy is supposed to have bought – but actually has never even tagged her eyes on."

The article, wittily entitled, “Jackie Asks Close-Out; Clothes Rumors Not Even Close to the Truth,” continues: But, in the letter, Miss Baldridge says (with her boss looking over her shoulder) that “she will buy what is necessary, without extravagance – and you will often see her photographed in the same outfit.”

Ford then tackles several rumors: did Mrs. Kennedy really order a Givenchy coat or furs from Maximilian or an overblouse from Henri Bendel or a dress from Bob Bradford, *American Queen: The Like of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis*, p.135

An observation born out in fact. Mrs. Kennedy was photographed at least five times pre-Dallas in her pink Chanel suit. On Nov. 14, 1961, she wore the suit, jacket unbuttoned, for a luncheon for General Park Chung Hee of South Korea. In March 1962, she wore the suit and the pillbox, when she visited her sister in London. On Sept. 25, 1962, she wore it sans underblouse, when she reviewed an architect’s plans for renovating LaFayette Square in Washington DC. And twice in October 1962, she was photographed wearing the suit; once for a visit from the Maharaja and Maharani of Jaipur, and again, on the 15th, holding her son aloft as they hid behind some White House shrubbery to view the martial activities heralding the arrival of Algerian President Ben Bella.
Bugnard? Finally, Ford writes: “Fashion may not be spinach at all – but some of the fashion rumors, in regard to Mrs. Kennedy, have apparently been lemons.”

Mrs. Kennedy came up with an ingenious solution to her material morass; she would hire a fashion designer to work with her. Such a set-up would unleash her fashion imagination, hide her price tags, and control her publicity.

Enter Oleg Cassini.

DESIGNING THE FIRST YEAR

Nine days after the Presidential election, Mrs. Kennedy wrote to designer Oleg Cassini, an American, yes, but an unusual choice, nonetheless. She had been in touch with him in the weeks leading up to the election, summarizing her fashion philosophy and picking his brain for his. His fashion aesthetic and his friendly relationship with the President’s father meant he could be trusted to be discreet, and, in a bonus, had dressed Hollywood actresses previously and was familiar with the peculiar fashion requirements of the public stage, united to make him Mrs. Kennedy’s ideal. It was a choice that initially raised quite a few eyebrows.

On March 15, 1961, in an article on page 35, The New York Times wondered at this apparently odd marriage: “Cassini’s appointment as a dress designer to the First Lady was greeted with cries of incredulity on Seventh Avenue. His critics and admirers were equally baffled by the choice. He is known as a creator of sexy clothes and one of his favorite targets, next to the chemise, is the hegemony of the Paris couture. Jacqueline
Kennedy, on the other hand, is a disciple of the French couture, a darling of the fashion press, a devotee of the chemise, and a woman with emphatically subtle and highbrow fashion taste. His White House client is a woman with a definite point of view. She indicates what direction she would like to take. He then submits ‘a total look,’ which includes dresses, coats, suits, and accessories. ‘I propose and she disposes,’ explained Cassini, who has no illusions about what designers Mrs. Kennedy would patronize if she were still a private person."

Cassini chose to think of Jacqueline Kennedy as an actress starring in a Washington production. The Paris-born Cassini, with his European flair and dramatic tastes melded with a modern approach to fashion, complemented Mrs. Kennedy’s style perfectly. “I talked to her like a movie star, and told her she needed a story, a scenario as First Lady,” he recalled. Together, they conspired to make Mrs. Kennedy “the most elegant woman in the world.”

“When I was designing for motion pictures, I always tried to make the silhouette similar to the person I worked for in my sketches,” he said. “So in broad outlines, I designed a concept. Jackie reminded me of an ancient Egyptian princess – very geometric, even hieroglyphic, with the sphinx-like quality of her eyes, her long neck, slim torso, broad shoulders, narrow hips, and regal carriage. I wanted to dress her cleanly, architecturally, in style. I would use the most sumptuous fabrics in the purest interpretations. I called it the ‘A-line.’ Of course, the designs also had to take into

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32 Perry, Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier, p. 64
consideration Jackie’s own preferences as well as her role as a public figure whose life was governed by strict protocol.”  

But Cassini, influenced by the sparkle of both old Europe and new Hollywood, understood the ramifications of fashion and was itching to burst past its usual limits. For him, designing clothes was an art, yes, but an art of consequence.

“We spoke of how fashion is a mirror of history; we discussed the message her clothes would send – simple, youthful, elegant – and how she would reinforce the image of her husband’s administration through her presence. ‘You have an opportunity here,’ I said, ‘for an American Versailles.’”

Mrs. Kennedy, according to “Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years,” a volume sold at the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston, “had a keen understanding of the semantics of dress and of the ways in which she could use her public image to help communicate the more abstract ideals that were important to her. In projecting a vision of dynamic modern elegance, she provided a potent counterpoint to the tenets of the Kennedy administration, with its youthful idealism, ardent internationalism, and striving for social change.” Mrs. Kennedy, too, used what she called her “state clothing” as a “shield” and a “vital element in her role-playing.” Her clothes “were informed with an understated modern elegance, characterized by clean lines, solid colors, and ease of movement.”


34 Cassini, *A Thousand Days of Magic Dressing Jacqueline Kennedy for the White House*, p. 20

The clothes themselves were deceptively simple, almost bland, and rarely patterned. The gowns are notable for their long expanses of blank yet substantial material and the day-dresses, some obviously seamed and buttoned, fitted but not tight as they lightly skim the body, exude a simplicity of form, similar to a child’s drawing. It is the wearer who animates these creations.

In a series of dash-filled hand-written notes to Cassini, Mrs. Kennedy detailed exactly the look she was hoping her attire would achieve. He recalled: “Her sense of style was very precise: she would make editorial comments on the sketches I sent her. She always knew exactly what she wanted.” In a nine-page letter written just a month after the election, as she was recuperating from the birth of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jr., Mrs. Kennedy explained her fashion needs, reminded Cassini of the gargantuan task ahead, and praised him for his circumspection.

“ARE YOU SURE YOU ARE UP TO IT, OLEG?” she wrote, the capitals accentuating her concern. “Please say yes – There is so much detail about one’s wardrobe once one is in the public eye. I simply cannot spend the time on it any more than I have this fall – I will never see my children or my husband or be able to do the million things I’ll have to do – I am counting on you to be a superb wardrobe mistress – every glove, shoe, hat, etc. – and all delivered on time. You are organized for that – being in New York – better than I – If you need to hire another secretary just for me do it and we’ll settle the financial end together.”

After she humored and cajoled Cassini into working with her, she stressed the importance of discretion, of not only controlling her fashion publicity, but minimizing and eliminating it altogether.

“PUBLICITY - One reason I am so happy to be working with you is that I have some control over my fashion publicity which has gotten so vulgarly out of hand – I don’t mind your saying now the dresses I have chosen from you – as I am so happy if it has done you any good – and proud to have you, a gentleman, doing clothes for the wife of the President. I will never become stuffy – but there is a dignity to the office which suddenly hits one . . . BUT – you realize I know that I am so much more of fashion interest than other First Ladies – I refuse to have Jack’s administration plagued by fashion stories of a sensational nature – and to be the Marie Antoinette or Josephine of the 1960s – so I will have to go over it with you before we release future things – because I don’t want to seem to be buying too much – You can make the stories available – but with my approval first – There just may be a few things we won’t tell them about! But if I look impeccable the next four years everyone will know it is you …”

And the importance of her singularity:

“COPIES - Just make sure no one has exactly the same dress I do – the same color or material – Imagine you will want to put some of my dresses in your collection – but I want all mine to be original and no fat little women hopping around in the same dress. You know better than I how to protect yourself against other manufacturers running up cheap copies –I really don’t care what happens later as long as when I wear it first, it is new and the only one in the room.”
For a woman who insisted publicly she spent little on clothes and cared not much for fashion, the detail in her private memo to Cassini is breathtaking. Clearly, she understood her fashionable presence was of public interest and she wanted to present herself “impeccably,” as she wrote, but what she wanted most of all was to control the publicity so as not to embarrass or anger her husband. Her fashion vision is on display in the memo as she discusses the accoutrements of high style – gloves, shoes, hats. And her understanding of the political ramifications – “I don’t want to seem to be buying too much” – is sharp. Her plan, concocted as she healed after the Caesarian birth of her son, was to fashion herself into a political asset. She would be a poised, perfectly-dressed reflection of the New Frontier. If she couldn’t muscle the “other woman” of politics out of her husband’s life, perhaps she could strengthen her marriage by becoming the kind of asset her husband valued, one with political cache.

Mrs. Kennedy’s collaboration with Cassini allowed both to employ a color shorthand, albeit one understood best by art history connoisseurs with a sophisticated, European sensibility. “When we spoke of a palette of color, we would speak in terms of Italian masters and 18th Century France. A mention of ‘Veronese green’ or ‘Nattier blue’ was immediately understood.”

President Kennedy needed to be convinced that his wife’s more avant-garde choices were good politics. For the first State Dinner of the new Administration honoring President Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia, Cassini designed a one-shouldered gown in pale yellow with a satin bow at the waist and embroidered detail at the hem and the shoulder drape. Jackie sent the designer to obtain Presidential permission to bare her shoulder.

37 Cassini, A Thousand Days of Magic Dressing Jacqueline Kennedy for the White House, p. 31
Cassini told JFK, “From the dawn of antiquity, the queen or high priestess has always set the style. That is her role in society, to be a little advanced and thus admired by her people. The President laughed and, shaking his head, caved in. “Okay, Oleg, you win.” 38

If the president, the elected leader of the American republic, had any reaction to his wife being compared to a “queen,” it is lost to history.

The cost of the couture was – and is - a well-kept secret. As Cassini recounted:

“I sent the bills to Joe Kennedy, as he instructed. ‘Don’t bother the kids with the bills, just send them to me. I’ll take care of it,’ he said. With great foresight, he wanted to wipe out any possibility that the First Lady’s new wardrobe might be used against them politically.”39

Her wardrobe expenses bubbled up every so often in the political – and familial - conversation, however. “All the shopping took a toll on the president’s budget: ‘She’s breaking my ass’ was his frequent complaint. In the second quarter of 1961, when, admittedly, her clothing needs were high, records indicate that she spent more than $15,000 on clothes in three months, with a $4,000 bill to Givenchy alone. JFK would put his foot down, and for a while there would be economies, itemizing powder puffs from Julius Garfinckel at $1.13 each. But things would soon be back to normal, with Jackie’s non-Cassini clothing expenditures for 1961 totaling $40,000.”40

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38 Mulvaney, Jackie The Clothes of Camelot, p. 32
39 Cassini, A Thousand Days of Magic Dressing Jacqueline Kennedy for the White House, p.49
40 Mulvaney, Jackie The Clothes of Camelot, p. 109
Stories appeared in the press about her $8,000 Somali leopard coat and the $3,900 worth of hats she bought from Bergdorf Goodman. But Cassini spent a lifetime heeding Jackie’s advice, first concocted when she was living in the White House. It was her idea that he repeat one phrase over and over should any pesky reporter try to price the couture. “I’m so sorry, but with respect to Mrs. K’s privacy, I’d rather not discuss her. I know you understand,” she suggested, adding, slyly, “Then they’ll think you are so chivalrous.”

VIVE JACQUELINE!

International Jackie-mania began in the Great White North during the new president’s first state visit to Canada five months into his term, in May 1961. The reaction to Mrs. Kennedy in Ottawa, stunning in itself, was merely a prelude to what would happen in Europe later on in the summer.

*Life* Magazine put Mrs. Kennedy on its May 26, 1961 cover. The First Lady, smiling and radiant, wore a red suit, created to compliment and reflect the uniform color of the scarlet-coated Royal Canadian Mounted Police. “Jackie got raves on the streets and high praise in Parliament,” according to the weekly, in an article entitled “Kennedys Hit The Road: A Visit With Neighbors.” Canadian Senate Speaker Mark Drouin said: ‘Before your election, Mr. President, many Canadians searched the civil registers to see if (your wife) was a Canadian. They found she was not but we all took heart from the fact she is of French ancestry . . . Her charm, beauty, vivacity and grace of mind have captured our hearts.’”

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41 Mulvaney, *Jackie The Clothes of Camelot*, p. 109

But still the focus remained on her wardrobe as her luncheon attire - a two-piece ribbed silk ottoman dress in beige, designed with a sleeveless overblouse and a slightly flared skirt with a deep pleat on either side and a matching silk ottoman double-breasted coat with low pockets and three-quarter length sleeves and a beige beret – was duly chronicled.

Later in the article an event that evening in the US Embassy was recounted, but not without mention of the First Lady’s outfit: “Mrs. Kennedy wore a long, pink ribbed silk organza evening dress. The gown was sleeveless and had a bateau neckline. The flared skirt had three tiers of deep ruffles at the bottom and she wore a matching stole.”

The Canadian trip may have marked a subtle change in the kind of publicity Jacqueline Kennedy generated. It was there that she had established herself as a compelling symbol of both her country and her husband’s presidency.42 Not that her wardrobe was never again an issue of public discussion; it was. But the critical tone softened somewhat as her political and patriotic value dawned on the reporters covering her. A three-page article the month before, in the April 3, 1961 issue of Newsweek was the high-water mark of snarkiness. Chronicling her first trip to Manhattan after moving into the White House, the newsmagazine spoke in detail of the outfits she wore. For a City Center ballet performance, “The First Lady was not dressed to the nines for the

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42 Perry, Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier, p. 85
occasion; she wore a simple blue-gray brocade theatre suit. The jacket had a cowl neck and the skirt was day-length. Her only jewelry was glittering earrings.”

One of Mrs. Kennedy’s visitors at the Carlyle Hotel was Oleg Cassini. “Because of a White House frown on publicity about her clothes, there was no official word on what Cassini was showing her, but she had already approved most of the designs in sketch form. The selection ranged from summer dresses and sportswear to woolen dresses and suits needed to finish out the season in Washington. Her Easter outfit was to be summery and gay (she plans to spend Easter in Palm Beach) and reflected what experts noted was a new emphasis on color. It was presumed that a print dress she wore recently at a Latin American reception was a sign of Mrs. Kennedy’s experimenting in styles and colors not as understated as those she has favored in the past.”

Reporters trailing her, however, allowed themselves to be quoted criticizing the First Lady, and referred to her, unflatteringly, as an arrogant “dame.”

Because they were not given an advance copy of her schedule, several grumbled complaints along the lines of “Who does this dame think she is?” The press pack, which trailed her to the airport were treated only to her smile as they watched her climb aboard the plane, with a copy of Vogue in her hand. Once at home in Washington, the “dame” spoke, saying, “I didn’t buy too much. The weather was awful.”

But Canada cast the “dame” in a different light. “Canada really was the beginning of her popularity and I think he (her husband) really looked at her with new eyes on this occasion. She took far too many suitcases and hair dryers and whatnot and he was
impatient . . . with all this extra stuff along, but then he realized it was all a very important part of her image of impeccable grooming and beauty and style and he was very proud of her and of the lavish descriptions of her personal appearance. So his criticism of all those suitcases and the confusion of the hair being washed was greatly reduced after that.”

The Canadian trip, chronicled in a cover story in Life Magazine upon the First Couple’s return, fascinates for another reason. Not only is Cover Girl Jackie dazzling in her bright red wool twill suit, her colorful tribute to the bright red regalia of the RCMPs. But she is shimmering in scarlet solo; her husband didn’t make the cover.

The president, himself, after the Canadian trip, began referring to his wife as his “number one ambassador of good-will.”

“Jacqueline Kennedy,” declared the Evening Standard, “has given the American people from this day on one thing they had always lacked – majesty.” That comment, on the “majesty” of Mrs. Kennedy, would be oft-quoted in another context, under very different circumstances, just a couple of years later.

As the “Jackie Look” swept the country and permeated the culture, magazines both serious and less-so, documented the phenomenon. Life Magazine deconstructed the look in an article on the newsstands during Inauguration week in 1961.

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43 Mulvaney, Jackie The Clothes of Camelot, p. 57 Quoting Letisha Baldridge
44 It was not the first time, nor would it be the last, when Mrs. Kennedy chose her wardrobe to create a specific impression or to complement a particular setting. In one of the more lavish state dinners staged by the Kennedys, honoring the Pakistani president and held on the lawn at Mount Vernon, the First Lady wore a “full-length sleeveless gown with lateral rows of white lace over white organza.” Her directions to Cassini were that the dress “should have a romantic antebellum look, in keeping with the pillared elegance and historical setting of Mount Vernon,” according to Perry.
45 Martin, A Hero For Our Time: An Intimate Story of the Kennedy Years, p. 510
46 Martin, A Hero For Our Time: An Intimate Story of the Kennedys, p. 354
“The spectacle of the First Lady and her husband being carried about the street at inauguration time was a sign that something was stirring in fashion. These figures were, of course, mannequins. But Jackie Kennedy, even in fashion sculpture, is a remarkably recognizable version of Jackie in the flesh. Her look and style are setting a national pace. College girls copy it casually, suburban matrons faithfully. Millinery shops are being fortified with the largest collections of pillboxes in history. Fashion ads twinkle more mischievously with Jackie’s unmistakable wide eyes. Her bouffant hairdo is becoming a by-word in beauty salons. All in all, the shy, beautiful First Lady’s fashion followers are building up quite a bandwagon. Jackie’s smoothly simple look in clothes is achieved by an almost deliberate plainness. It is an elegant and expensive style from pillbox to pumps and it can be inexpensively copied.”

The magazine then showcased four pages of Jackie look-alikes and detailed where they purchased their clothes. Two college students posed in Jackie-like attire; looks they’d achieved for a combined total of $68.68. The faux alligator handbag sold for $5 at Orbach’s and the pumps for $4.99. A double-strand of “pearls” was just 79 cents. A sleeveless and collarless dress was had for $17.95 at Bloomingdales. A Jackie mannequin at the higher-end John Fredericks Shop in New York City was shown with a pillbox balanced precariously on its bouffant hair. The store offered pillboxes for $35 to $70.

*U.S. News and World Report* in a brief article in its July 3, 1961 issue noted the Jackie hairdo had gone global. “The “Jacqueline Kennedy look” now is having an impact on hair styles, as well as dresses, of women on two continents. Mrs. Kennedy usually wears her hair in casual, loose waves. She chose this hairdo for her first official portrait. The style has been widely copied. On occasion, however, in Europe and in Washington,
Mrs. Kennedy has appeared in other hair styles. The White House said the official portrait was being issued because of hundreds of requests for photos."

Her hairdo. Her outfits. Her look swept America’s multi-billion fashion industry. Of twenty-three fashion shows mounted during New York City’s Fashion week in January 1961, all but five mentioned the First Lady-to-be. One New York hairdresser only did “Jacqueline” hairdos all day long. Businessmen wrote to the First Lady begging her to save their corner of the industry by parading a mink coat, a lace-trimmed dress, or a new hat.47

And on February 23, 1962, Time Magazine tried to document the Kennedy publicity hydra. “On the cover of the February Ladies Home Journal was a likeness of Jackie Kennedy in wedding gown and veil; it was actually a photograph of Mary Lynn Merrill (nee Caldwell) a Charlotte, N.C. bride” and Jackie look-alike. The real First Lady made the cover of Photoplay magazine that month with daughter Caroline at her side. The story inside compared Caroline to Shirley Temple.

In October 1961, fed up with the all-pervasive Jackie Look, Adeline Daley published a witty essay in Coronet48 entitled “I don’t want to look like Jackie!” “I am accepting all offers – including Confederate money – for my Jackie Kennedy wardrobe of sleeveless ‘avant-garde’ dresses and pillbox hats. I’ll even throw in a necklace or three of pearls. I have had it. I just don’t want to look like Jackie Kennedy. The competition is becoming far too keen. In fact it’s even become a nightmare. The other night, for

47 Troy, Affairs of State The Rise and Rejection of the Presidential Couple Since World War II pp. 109-110
instance, I dreamed I was wandering through a museum and saw a painting of the ‘Mona Lisa.’ But she was wearing her hair bouffant with a fetching lock draped over her forehead and she was smiling broadly. She looked just like Jackie Kennedy. Then I passed ‘Whistler’s Mother.’ She was seated in her rocking-chair all right. But her knees were showing! She looked just like Jackie Kennedy. And that famous Grant Wood painting of the ‘American Gothic’ couple? The farm-wife was wearing an Oleg Cassini calico apron and of course, she looked just like Jackie Kennedy.”

Perhaps Jackie had invaded Daley’s dreams; ‘she’ certainly had invaded popular culture and dominated Madison Avenue. As women copied Jackie, advertisers copied Jackie.

“Next morning when I went shopping, the girl at the bakery who asked if I wanted the cracked-wheat bread sliced also looked just like Jackie Kennedy. Running into ‘Jackie Kennedy’ everywhere I went that day – the bank, supermarket, drugstore, cleaners – made me feel I was going around in circles. The right circles, you might say, but I wanted out. At this point I started to yearn for the comfort and ease of the “Bess Truman look.” I suddenly realized what President Kennedy meant when he said ‘life in the Sixties is going to be a struggle.’ He probably had in mind the 387 rollers I’ve had to use every night putting up my hair to achieve the Jackie hairdo.”

By noting the real effort required to create and maintain Jackie’s signature bouffant hairdo, Daley pokes holes in the illusion of “devil-may-care chic.” The style may be chic. It may be tousled. But it is certainly not effortless. “Flipping through magazine advertisements, I marveled at how busy ‘Jackie Kennedy’ is. ‘She’ is a super-

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48 Coronet Magazine was a general-interest magazine published by Esquire Magazine. It published 299
saleswoman, whether selling accident insurance as she lies prone on the highway, painting the living room with fast-drying latex, flying the polar route to Europe, opening refrigerators or pushing a power lawn mower. No wonder she also is pictured taking a headache tablet at the end of the day. They say that half the students attending college look just like the former Jacqueline Bouvier. The other half are men. Without being involved in partisan politics, it is true that Mamie Eisenhower’s bangs never did catch on. And as relaxing as the ‘Bess Truman look’ was, it never made much headway. In all fairness, however, it must be noted that most American women already had the ‘Bess Truman look.’”

By comparing the First Lady’s hairstyle to her two predecessors, Daley archly deconstructs the effort it takes to maintain the “Jackie Kennedy look.” Neither Mrs. Eisenhower nor Mrs. Truman required much in the way of beauty-parlor time, Daley suggests. But copying Mrs. Kennedy’s look required an attention to detail Daley, at least, is loathe to pursue.

By the end of her essay, Daley seems to realize the futility of her protest. “‘Jackie’ is everywhere and that’s that. It isn’t going to be easy to stop trying to look like Jackie. If I tell the clerk at the hat counter I’m not interested in a pillbox hat, she will probably treat me with contempt. I’ll have to avoid Woolworth’s for a few months, for I never can resist buying those strands of pearls that are another Jackie trademark. I’ll face my stiffest battle in the beauty salon, I know, when I try to insist on my pre-election permanent. I can see myself, still blowing the forelock out of my eye, protesting, ‘BUT I DON’T WANT TO LOOK LIKE JACKIE KENNEDY!’”

issues from 1936 to 1971.
PARIS

The trip to France elevated the First Lady into the pantheon of shining global stars. It sealed her image as a charming, couture-clad phenomenon. Newspaper reporters abroad and in the United States tried to capture the sparkling excitement and ineffable glamour that swirled around the First Lady as she overshadowed the President during the couple’s Continental travels. It was on this trip that the president famously introduced himself as his wife’s escort. An article in the June 3, 1961 issue of the New York Times quoted the president: “I do not think it altogether inappropriate to introduce myself to this audience. I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris, and I have enjoyed it.”

And continued: “This was how President Kennedy presented himself today to the 400 journalists at a press luncheon. The remark was humorous and appreciated as such but it reflected the extraordinary impression that the President’s wife had made on Paris.”

On the following day, the Times concluded an article about the French reaction to the Kennedys in France with: “The mass circulation France-Soir spoke of “Jackie” and “the likeable young man accompanying her.” The paper said that “Jackie had enormous success as if every Parisian had fallen in love with her.”

Paris was primed to fall in love with her if an article in Vogue magazine a few months before the trip is any indication. “Young, beautiful, rich – what democracy in the world would have forgiven her all of that? Even Hollywood would never have dared give the role of first lady to the superb brunette who has captured every heart. She has the look of a star and the silhouette of a mannequin. Yes, but Americans are more
courageous than movie producers. It is really only in America whose wonderful people are innocent of envy that an elegant and beautiful woman of thirty-one could overcome the usual obstacles encountered in politics, jealousy, and the bourgeois gossip of ‘what will people say.’"

_Time Magazine_, summing up the visit to France in its June 9, 1961 issue, quoted the president and noted: “President Kennedy was not exaggerating; in the eyes of the world, his talks with Charles deGaulle might take on historic significance, but to the people of Paris their deliberations were secondary. From the moment of her smiling arrival at Orly Airport, the radiant young First Lady was the Kennedy who really mattered. As the presidential motorcade made its way through the jammed, flag-drapped streets, great crowds of people pressed close to her limousine for a glimpse. A 101-gun salute shook the city and was all but drowned out by the rousing cry, ‘_Vive Jacqueline!_’ Jackie’s conquest of Paris was no haphazard campaign. No summit conference was more carefully planned than the First Lady’s return to the city she had come to love as a student at the Sorbonne. In two truckloads of presidential luggage was a blinding array of gowns and jewels – and in making her plans, Jackie was keenly conscious of the fact that no tiny sag or hemline or stray strand of hair would escape the notice of the style-conscious people of Paris. With each new gown and each new edition of the press, reporters reached for new superlatives, and the front page pictures grew bigger.”

On her final evening in Paris, Mrs. Kennedy “abandoned” her all-American
wardrobe “and appeared at Versailles in yet another awesome hairdo and a bell-skirted
gown – the supreme creation of French Designer Hubert de Givenchy. The Parisian press
was ecstatic. “APOTHEOSIS AT VERSAILLES!” said France-Soir, correctly.

“Charmante! Ravissante!” chorused reporters.

Time, with hyperbole and unwitting sexism, concluded: “Merely by being herself,
Jacqueline Kennedy had sailed across thresholds that would have tripped most women.
But, armed with her femininity and bold fashion instinct, she did not miss a step. Paris
and Vienna had a new goddess. The U.S. had a queen, and not from Hollywood. And
Jackie proved once more that, in any language, there is nothing like a dame – especially
Jackie.”

Not only did the American First Lady dine and shine at Versailles in French haute
couture, she more than doubled the sparkle of her bodice by donning a diamond tiara.
The tiara as fashion statement evokes grand opulence, certainly, but more interestingly, it
conjures royalty. It is a “touch that would have been entirely inappropriate on the head of
any other woman who was not a legitimate European royal.” And yet, not only was
Jackie not a royal, she was the wife of an American president.

The glorification of Mrs. Kennedy reached dizzying heights those few days in
Paris. She was toying with the fire of royalist pretensions, though. Oleg Cassini’s goal
was to dress her like a queen and hers was to look like one and preside, in grandeur, over
an American Court of Culture and Art. Her fellow Americans didn’t seem to mind. A
month after the First Couple returned from Europe, Look Magazine, bowing to the

2000), p. 286
obvious, christened the Kennedys “the new U.S. Royal Family.” Her pre-inaugural concerns about comparisons to Marie Antoinette were washed away in all that adulation.

Reporters at the Women’s Press Club Show later that year had some fun at the First Lady’s expense. Two reporters, Gwen Gibson of the New York Daily News and Sidney Schwartz of the Boston Globe joined forces to write an amusing, yet pointed, song entitled, “That’s Me – Jackie.” Songstress was Helen Thomas, then of United Press International. The teasing lyrics poked fun at the First Lady’s well-crafted public persona and took aim at an Achilles’ heel or two:

If I want to fly away,
Without taking JFK –
That’s me, Jackie.

If I’m fond of French champagne,
If I’d rather not campaign –
That’s me, Jackie.

If I want to give a ball
For just me and Charles deGaulle,
I have absolutely all the gall
I need.

If I like to water-ski
And I want my private sea,
Don’t look askance:
With half the chance,
You’d be like me – Jackie.

Si je suis tres debonaire
Or wear sable underwear,
That’s me – Jackie.

If I like to live in style
On my own Aegean isle,
That’s me – Jackie.

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50 Spoto, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis: A Life, p. 292
If I use Mount Vernon’s lawn
For amusing Ayub Khan
And we choose to dance till dawn,
Then c’est la vie.

If I rewrite history,
Name the White House “Chez Jackie,”
Am I to blame?
You’d do the same,
If you were me – Jackie. 51

Anthropologist Margaret Mead, in an article in Redbook in February 1962, attempted to synopsize and explain the First Lady’s star-quality and success. “Mrs. Kennedy’s success in Europe last spring touched off a shower of phrases as bright as fireworks on a summer night. President deGaulle called her la gracieuse Mme. Kennedy; in a lighter mood a Parisian newspaper exclaimed, How sweet she is and how pretty! Echoing the acclaim of Paris and Vienna and London, Americans described her as a star, a porcelain princess, a long-stemmed American beauty, the First Lady of the Western World. Her success abroad brought into high relief the new style she is setting in the White House and made people wonder just how much the role of the President’s wife would change through the young Mrs. Kennedy.”

Americans, Mead wrote, cherished the First Lady because, in spite of her stunning success in the public realm, her pleasures result from a more intimate version of success – that which is achieved through the private realm.

Contrasting Mrs. Kennedy with Eleanor Roosevelt and falling head-long into a sexist paradox, Mead wrote: “Women’s lives divide naturally into two parts. With Mrs. Roosevelt leading the way in carrying the cares of the world on her patient shoulders,

51 Spoto, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis: A Life, pp. 290-291
Mrs. Kennedy is free for the present to grace the more intimate sphere of home and husband and children. This is one reason, I think, that Americans take such pleasure in her youth, her beauty, her vivacity and warmth, her spirited interest in the arts of living that gives women loveliness and makes it easier for men to love them.”

Mrs. Kennedy, Mead posits, stars within the sphere set aside for women. She is loved by Americans - and loveable to men – because, unlike Mrs. Roosevelt, she is not an intellectual challenge. Men are not threatened by her success. Her triumphs fall within a recognizable feminine realm. Her power is derivative; it flows from her husband’s position and not only is she unlikely to challenge that, she appears to thrive in his protective shadow. She is a charming, glimmering trifle, almost frothy. Soft, where Mrs. Roosevelt is hard. Mrs. Kennedy’s allure flows from her appearance and is enhanced by her rigorously studied decorum. This First Lady is first a wife. In Mead’s hypothesis, Mrs. Roosevelt will pester you with politics, Mrs. Kennedy will plump your pillows.

It is a superficial reading of Mrs. Kennedy’s charms and it underestimates the power of charm. But it is one the woman herself would have embraced. It is of a piece with the aura she projected. She seemed to glide from one photo opportunity to another, unconcerned. Complete within her glamour. Transcendent. Regal? Each outfit may have implied calculation, but casually pretended to be off-the-cuff. Mead, however, misreads the work required to project ethereal. If every outfit was designed and created to project modern perfection, if every button and seam played its part and if every color caught the eye with dash and zing and purpose, it is because this woman turned her

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wardrobe and its presentation into a fine art and career. And she did it for *one thousand* days. The amount of work that took requires a monumental self-control. Even as she protested (“I don’t want to be a fashion symbol. I just want to be appropriately dressed. Clothes are a nuisance to me.”\(^{53}\)) she did everything required to maintain fashion perfection.

It wasn’t just Jackie’s personification as feminine ideal that drew her admirers, Mead added. Presaging the youth quake that would rock the foundations of American society in a few years, she wrote: “It is slowly dawning on the American public that Jacqueline Kennedy has a special kind of presence – a combination of qualities that Americans have long admired in young stage and screen stars but have seldom hoped to find in the wives of famous men. Not the least of these qualities, of course, is her youth. For in our country it is the young who express the new ideas and take the leading roles on stage, and their elders who are the spectators. Inevitably, Mrs. Kennedy will be attacked as much as she is praised. The very quality that sent crowds in three European capitals thronging to anticipate her every move – that is, her capacity to dramatize her position – lends itself also to accusations of artificiality and an overconscious attention to clothes and appearance. Ironically, the praise and blame are sometimes almost simultaneous, as when Mme. Spanier, a director of the fashion house of Balmain, speaking on the CBS program “Eyewitness to History,” declared that ‘Jackie (has) what the whole world (loves) more than anything else . . star quality and chic,’ and only a moment later complained, ‘We felt it was lacking in dignity for the First Lady of a great country, for the wife of a head of state, to change her hairdo every day.’”

\(^{53}\) Koestenbaum, *Jackie Under My Skin Interpreting an Icon*, p. 114
Even *The Nation*, the leftist political magazine, felt compelled to weigh in on the Jackie phenomenon. That it came off peevish only reinforced the notion that the First Lady was a force to be reckoned with.

The editors began the piece in the June 17, 1961 issue, noting that recent American presidents (including JFK) had been “casting about for a new image that would project America in all her splendor before the races of mankind. And now, as failure and success alike often come in unexpected forms, an image of sorts has been achieved. The President had little to do with it. It was simply that he has a beautiful wife.”

Criticizing the 2,000-strong traveling press contingent for focusing on matters of questionable import (while noting that international conferences actually produce little real news) the piece, entitled “The Cassini Image,” continued: “…they could write about Mrs. Kennedy and her gowns. Both the wearer and the gowns were ravishing, radiant, glamorous, out of this world. And the tiaras. And the hair-dos. And the admiration of men and women alike for the Presidential beauty queen in Paris, in Vienna, in London—all those capitals of old-world gallantry and sophistication—there had never been anything like it. Jacqueline launched no ships with her face, but she produced the image.”

Note the following almost-requisite dig at frailty-thy-name-is-woman coupled with the credible compliment: “Did she enjoy it? Probably, at times; she is human, and female. But this young woman seems to have some solid qualities of character, and very likely she is glad that she must play this role for at most eight years and not, like Queen Elizabeth, another image-maker of no mean stature, for life.”
And then, pointing out a smaller truth while simultaneously missing the larger, monumental point when suggesting there was anything at all fleeting about Jackie-style: “For political purposes, however, this sort of image is transitory. Mrs. Kennedy may be the most dazzling creation of God and the dressmaker and the hairdresser, and Mrs. Khrushchev unabashedly a grandmother, but their respective husbands must reckon on intercontinental missiles and bombers and nuclear tests and the other facts of an intractable world.”

Yes, but as the “radiant Barbie Doll met the dour babushka,” Max Lerner, an American journalist and editor of The Nation from 1936 to 1938, called Mrs. Kennedy an American “secret weapon” and living proof “that life can be gracious” only amid freedom. In the 1940s Franklin Roosevelt refuted Communism ideology with the Sears catalogue; in the 1950s Richard Nixon used the American kitchen; now, in June 1961, President Kennedy offered his wife.

As the editors at The Nation struggled to keep geopolitics on the front burner of the European trip coverage, Russell Baker, in an article in The New York Times on June 5, 1961 captured the joie de vivre inspired by it. “The success of her visit,” he wrote, “was symbolized in a cartoon by Vicky in today’s London Evening Standard. It depicted the Statute of Liberty with Mrs. Kennedy’s face. One hand held the torch of freedom, the other clutched a copy of Vogue.”

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54 Troy, Affairs of State The Rise and Rejection of the Presidential Couple Since World War II, p. 91
Jacqueline Kennedy’s impact on global style (and her aversion to discussing it) was well-established by the time of her trip to India and Pakistan in March 1962 that fashion stories routinely ran in the three dominant news magazines of the day: *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*. It was on the Indian trip that Mrs. Kennedy, fearing her changes of clothes and their obvious expense would turn her trip into a traveling fashion show, joked to her press secretary, “If you say anything, tell them it’s secondhand and that I bought everything at the Ritz Thrift Shop.”

In a letter to Cassini before her trip began, she wrote, “It turns out India is so hot, one has to change clothes about 3 times a day. I am not going to fuss with clothes anymore for there – but I thought if you had any washable cotton dresses in your new collection – suitable for public appearance – a couple of them would be great. Just send me the regular size 10.”

*Time* Magazine, in its March 16, 1962 issue, jumped on the what-will-she-wear bandwagon by recounting the adventures of the *New York Herald Tribune’s* “petite, saucy” fashion editor Eugenia Sheppard. Sheppard wrote tongue-in-cheek of her attempts to finagle the details of the wardrobe that Mrs. Kennedy had put-together for her Asian trip. “The day,” Sheppard wrote, “started out black with the bald announcement that Mrs. Kennedy’s trip was ‘purely political’ and that she wanted the fashion angle played down. Fashion hasn’t had such a slap in the face in years. Second to politics? It was enough to make any fashion editor see red.”

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55 Troy, *Affairs of State The Rise and Rejection of the Presidential Couple Since World War II*, p. 91
56 Mulvaney, *Jackie The Clothes of Camelot*, p. 76
57 Mulvaney, *Jackie The Clothes of Camelot*, p. 74
The piece went on to chronicle Sheppard’s unsuccessful attempts - in a playful, spy-story spoof style - to get various designers to talk about the services they had offered the First Lady. Services allegedly including constructing hand-sewn embroidered ball gowns with flowers scattered across the skirt and closing factories for a week to concentrate on creating her wardrobe. “Actually,” the article concluded, “it’s not so much what Mrs. Kennedy is buying as the thinking behind it that makes the news. She stands for the simple, easy sportwear type of fashions against the contrived kind. She stands for the Givenchy look and all its interpretations over here, as against the fussier French fashions. She stands for colors, and for forgetting all the nonsense about definite seasons. She is the most potent force in international fashion today.”

The trip, sans husband, started out as a ten-day private visit but was upgraded to a 27-day semi-official goodwill visit to both India and Pakistan, according to the March 5, 1962 issue of Newsweek. “No one at the White House is saying how many bags Mrs. Kennedy is packing (‘That’s like asking a woman her age,’ says (social secretary) Miss (Letitia) Baldridge, in an attempt to swat away an annoying question with a point of feminine privilege.) But with a variety of winter, spring, and summer clothes for the climates she will encounter, with an assortment of gifts, and with twelve formal gowns for dinners and receptions, Mrs. Kennedy is almost certain to exceed the baggage allowance of 66 pounds for overseas flights. The extra baggage fee will be added to her round-trip fare, estimated at $2,400, which she is paying out of her own pocket. The question of whether the First Lady will also pack a wig – to maintain her appearance
where hairdressers may be scarce – was raised by Washington Post society reporter Winzola McLendon. ‘I’m amazed. I know nothing about it,’ snapped Miss Baldridge.”

Two weeks later, on March 19, 1962, as the visit was underway, *Newsweek* regaled its readers with tales of Mrs. Kennedy’s success on the sub-continent. “In the bazaars, in ancient Mogul palaces and among the crowds on the dusty streets, the famous visitor was known mainly as ‘the American memsahib.’ Some referred to her as ‘the Queen of America,’ or ‘the American maharanee.’ One toothless old woman, who walked 16 miles into New Delhi for a chance to see her, announced firmly: ‘She is Surga, the Goddess of Power.’ ‘I have promised her crowds several times larger than the largest so far attracted by her husband,’ joked U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith. And all signs did indicate that in India – and later in Pakistan – vast multitudes would turn out to welcome Mrs. Kennedy with all the pomp that Asia could muster.”

The article concluded with the by now *de rigueur* fashion reference: “Here, and in fact wherever she goes, Mrs. Kennedy’s wardrobe will come under close scrutiny. It includes several gowns from her designer, Oleg Cassini. It also reportedly includes the latest fashion fad, a wig to slip over her own hair when her busy schedule leaves no time to have it set.”

“For the trip to India, I wanted Jackie to stand out, and we both felt that the visual impact of color was important,” Cassini recalled. “She and I had discussed Moghul miniatures – marvelous pinks, apricot, green, and importantly, white. These colors would
make an impact, and they were in keeping with the climate and the wonderful vivid beauty of the country.”58

Color, climate, and pizzazz were considered for an outfit Mrs. Kennedy wore on the boat as it slowly cruised Lake Pichola to the maharana of Udaipur’s white palace. Cassini used an apricot silk ziberline, a fabric sturdier than silk for the set, a sleeveless sheath with a bow at the waist, and matching coat. “The fabric was rigid enough to keep its composure in the heat of India, and its dazzling color (appropriate to the intended setting) and sheen were calculated to ensure that she would be instantly identifiable to the crowds on the distant shore . . .”59

Even John Kenneth Galbraith, the United States Ambassador to India and her erudite escort for much of the trip, recognized her attention to stylistic detail. In recalling her visit to a Benares silk market, he noted, “with her excellent sense of theatre (she) had put on a lavender dress which could be picked out at any range up to five miles.”60

“Enormous care was put into these traveling wardrobes. Trunk after trunk, each carefully packed with costumes and accessories, accompanied her on each trip. Press reports focused so much on her clothes that her wardrobe sometimes undermined the real purpose of the trips. An appropriate wardrobe was something she considered necessary but nothing she wanted to dwell on. After the trip to France, the White House stopped answering sartorial questions altogether. Because of the heat, and the need to change frequently, the India/Pakistan wardrobe was enormous. Brilliantly designed in vivid Indian colors – hot, bright pinks and blues and greens, as well as serene whites and

58 Cassini, A Thousand Days of Magic Dressing Jacqueline Kennedy for the White House, p. 118
59 Bowles, Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years Selections from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, p. 143
ivories – it was ecstatically received and endlessly reported on. She had become a global ambassador of style.”

The focus on all-things-Jackie scaled new heights or perhaps, plumbed new depths, when Keyes Beech, filed this story from New Delhi for the Chicago Daily News:

“This reporter is now able to lift the veil of secrecy from Jacqueline Kennedy’s feet. I can state with absolute authority that she wears a 10–A size shoes, not 10 double-A as previously reported. I know this because I did a sneaky thing. I looked inside Jackie’s shoes when she visited the Mahatma Gandhi memorial yesterday afternoon. She had to take off her shoes and put on sandals when she entered the memorial enclosure, which is considered sacred ground. These shoes were made by ‘Mario and Eugenia of Florence.’ Having no tape measure, I was unable to measure the exact length of the heels. However, my rough estimate would be two inches.”

Time Magazine, not to be outdone by Newsweek, in its coverage of the First Lady’s trip, published three photographs of Jackie in its March 23, 1962 issue, including one of her laughingly feeding a baby elephant while security guards steadied the animal. An article entitled “Queen of America,” began, “‘Mrs. Kennedy, Zindabad’ – long live Mrs. Kennedy. That was the cry that welled up in thousands of Indian throats last week as Jacqueline Kennedy paraded across India in triumph, more than making up by her charm, good looks and splendidly attired figure for her three postponements and at least 47 separate schedule changes.”

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60 Bowles, Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years Selections from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, p. 33
61 Mulvaney, Jackie The Clothes of Camelot, p. 55
And later, in conclusion, “A spokesman had sternly announced that ‘Mrs. Kennedy does not regard this trip as a fashion show.’ But the 70-odd correspondents with her paid no heed. Whether she wore a Cassini evening dress or a Tassell gown – all duly recorded by reporters – Jackie shone even among the colorful saris of the Indian women around her.

“So clothes-conscious were the newsmen that they even asked U.S. Ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith who had designed his suit.”

In spite of the persistent attention to diplomatic detail the trip required, in spite of the extraordinary challenge of appearing fresh and polite and poised in color-coordinated outfits amidst the astonishing heat of India and Pakistan, and in spite of the international acclaim afforded her, Mrs. Kennedy was determined to describe herself as second banana. “I just pray I was all right and that the trip did some good,” she said on the flight home to a reporter for the Saturday Evening Post. 62 “I’m glad I went, but I’d never take a trip like this again without Jack. There were moments like that time in Lahore at the governor’s house, when I sat at the window and looked at the fantastic lighted trees reflected in moonlight pools, and wondered what I was doing so far away alone, without Jack or the children to see them. Jack’s always so proud of me when I do something like this, but I can’t stand being out in front. I know it sounds trite, but what I really want is to be behind him and to be a good wife and mother.” 63

The Kennedy presidency spanned those brief years in the early 1960s when women were moving from accoutrements to agents. Mrs. Kennedy’s public balancing act

62 Perry, Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier, p. 91
63 Perry, Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier, p. 91
seemed to require her to speak of herself only in relation to her husband. Her accomplishments reflected well on him, she hoped, and were therefore important to her only as he applauded them. And yet, even after she spoke longingly and lovingly of her traditional family values and her desire to return to her family, she spent one more week away from Washington, away from her family, in London visiting her sister and “recuperating from her travels.”

During her foreign travels, she “used clothing as a theatrical device, dressing in subtle complement to her host nation. When she visited Versailles the Parisian couturier Givenchy was given due credit as the author of her fresh but regal ensemble. For a trip to Mexico Oleg Cassini created a collection of outfits for her in appropriate ‘sun colors.’ And for the tour of India and Pakistan, Jacqueline Kennedy assembled a wardrobe from various fashion houses with the panache of a costume designer. Its vivid palette was that of Mughal miniatures, and the reflective fabrics conferred an additional brilliance. With such close attention to detail and sensitivity to sartorial effect, it was perhaps inevitable that concerted attempts to discourage reporters from focusing on her fashions were conspicuously unsuccessful.”

And it was perhaps inevitable that a copy-cat industry would arise. “London’s fashion industry today worked at top pressure to meet a ‘just like Jackie’ Kennedy sales boom that has swept Britain since America’s First Lady arrived here Sunday. Milliners and dress designers were unashamedly cashing in on the appeal of the little-girl smile and the model-girl figure of the President’s wife. Milliners in London’s fashion center said

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64 Perry, Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier, p. 91
they were working their staffs day and night to fill orders for jaunty pillbox hats – ‘just like Jackie’s.’ Britain’s millinery institute said today it has been able to meet the demand largely because the hat is not too difficult to manufacture. Similar optimistic forecasts came from London’s clothing manufacturers. They said they were well geared to supply the demand for chic, slim-fitting suits with cropped jackets that Mrs. Kennedy often wears.”66

How many of Mrs. Kennedy’s outfits were true expressions of her personality, rather than theatrical acts of will?67 Perhaps rather than express herself through her wardrobe, she allowed her official wardrobe to erase the edges of her personality while spotlighting her astute fashion (and political) sense. She had been paying careful attention to the details of style at least since those visits to her “little dressmaker.” She knew how to use clothes to flatter her body. Cassini’s desire to dress her as an actress starring in a production dovetailed nicely with her desire to frame her public image. To shield herself from the intense scrutiny that comes with the position and to project a dignified - yet modern - public face, she retreated behind exquisite tailoring.

Each time she wore slacks to Mass or wore a skirt sans hosiery, she was criticized. In McCall’s magazine, Clare Boothe Luce dressed down the First Lady for patronizing French designers: “Just as the personal activities of the president can never be disassociated from his role as America’s First Citizen, so, too, the personal activities of

65 Bowles, Jacqueline Kennedy: the White House Years Selections from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, p. 115
66 New York Times, June 7, 1961, p. 34
the president’s wife cannot be disassociated from her role as First Lady,” Luce lectured. Mrs. Kennedy’s task as First Lady “is to form and lead American taste.” Jackie’s press secretary, Pam Turnure, responded that Mrs. Kennedy’s “official” wardrobe was almost exclusively American, while her unofficial wardrobe “is a personal matter.”

Enduring daily and close examination of her every fashion choice, Mrs. Kennedy developed an attitude toward her press. If, as noted in Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years, “It was news when (she) abandoned her characteristic triple strand of artificial pearls in favor of Chanel’s long ropes,” the First Lady tried to brush aside the attention and stay “gracefully above the fray.” As Cecil Beaton noted, “Jackie has been criticized for wearing Paris dresses, but she just laughed and seemed to have no fear of criticism. She enjoys so many aspects of the job, and takes for granted the more onerous onslaughts of the press.” If Beaton’s comment was true and not merely another sly attempt to divert the dialogue far away from the First Lady’s fashionable choices, it describes a woman comfortable, finally, with her public role.

Eager to cash in on Mrs. Kennedy’s popularity, both CBS and NBC scheduled half-hour documentaries on her global impact upon her return to the United States. “The basis of both programs,” according to a New York Times article on June 12, 1961, “of course, was Mrs. Kennedy’s personal popularity abroad, as evidenced in the effusive press coverage and large crowds that attended her visits to Paris, Vienna, and London with the president. The now familiar scenes of Mrs. Kennedy at official functions, striking in her youthful composure and lovely gowns, were shown again.”

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67 Koestenbaum, Jackie Under My Skin Interpreting an Icon, p. 114
68 Troy, Affairs of State The Rise and Rejection of the Presidential Couple Since World War II, p. 112
69 Bowles, Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years Selections from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, p. 30
CBS took the angle, the *Times* reported, that Mrs. Kennedy, “had emerged as the world’s newest ‘sex symbol,’ a thought tactlessly underscored by the program’s concluding question, ‘Whatever became of Brigitte Bardot?’”

Edwin Newman anchored NBC’s coverage of the issue, doing a much better job than his colleagues at CBS, according to the *Times*. “(Newman) handled more maturely the question of Mrs. Kennedy’s status as a symbol. To some extent, Mr. Newman said, Mrs. Kennedy did represent the American way of life. In certain foreign quarters, he noted, the United States is regarded as ‘a woman’s country’ and also as ‘a young people’s country,’ conditions that the First Lady meets. “Included in the NBC program were interviews with the inevitable ‘man in the street.’ Asked his opinion of Mrs. Kennedy, one Londoner replied that she was ‘my kind of woman.’ One lesson of the television program was to underscore the handicap of Mrs. Kennedy’s position; the coverage of her activities cannot be guaranteed to equal her own dignity. But, in a larger sense, as Mr. Newman indicated, there is a tendency to report the Cold War in terms of personalities, and the young First Lady inevitably has become part of the world’s most discussed cast.”

Bit by bit during her husband’s administration, Jacqueline Kennedy turned the notion of “Americanism” upside down. This was purposeful. Moving away from any provincial notions of what “America” was, she coaxed the nation into the future. “With Mrs. Kennedy’s visual self-presentation you certainly had the sense of a new era dawning, a new decade and all that it promised, from space travel to the twist.”70 By daring to be herself and through a mindful manipulation of her wardrobe, Jacqueline

70 Keough, Patricia Clark. *Jackie Style*. p 43. Quoting Hamish Bowles
Kennedy became, not only a clear political asset to her husband, but an international sensation of startling proportions.

“During Mrs. Kennedy’s 1961 visit to England, the London Times put Jean Shrimpton (a top fashion model) in a dark wig to illustrate the phenomenon of the ‘Jackie look,’ and milliners worked overtime to make pillbox hats. The Russian magazine Mody featured advertisements for clothes with the ‘Jackie look,’ and the Polish magazine Swait affirmed that ‘Jackie has entered the group of a few women in the world who, today, as in times past, set the style and tone of their epoch . . the face and silhouette of Jackie are known to people all over the civilized world.’”

Jackie’s image - and she was “Jackie” in the popular imagination and in the American press unbound by the formal, stuffy second-reference rules of the New York Times - seeped into the popular culture.

NBC News devoted a special to The World of Jacqueline Kennedy. Comedian Jimmy Durante, in a subtle dig at the First Lady’s travels, popularized the tag line, “Good night Mrs. Kennedy, wherever you are.” The newly-crowned Miss America wistfully told audiences, “If only I looked like Jackie.”

“Jackie even had the dubious distinction of being the first First Lady to be a subject in a television cartoon series. In one of their episodes, Hanna-Barbera’s “Flintstone” housewives Wilma Flintstone and Betty Rubble went shopping, stopping in

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71 Bowles, Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years Selections from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, p. 19
amazement at a slim mannequin in pillbox and bouffant. Wilma shrieked to Betty, ‘It’s the Jackie Kennelrock Look!’”

Nudging aside, for a moment, the cultural hegemony of the Fifties Blonde Goddesses – Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield - the First Lady ushered in a period of popularity for the “brainy brunette” with “television characters like Laura Petrie (portrayed by Mary Tyler Moore) on the Dick Van Dyke Show, who wore Capri pants and flat shoes and had a flip-curl bouffant. The 1962 season opening Jack Benny Show featured yet another Jackie look-alike, spoofing the real woman.”

Even Mattel’s Barbie doll, the ultimate blonde bombshell, went brunette in 1962. The Bubble-Cut Barbie sported a bouffant hairdo, a synthetic version of the First Lady’s cut and color.

In the early to mid-1960s, Mattel used Jackie Kennedy, who seemed to the company to be a “risk-free role model. At first, all she (Barbie) copied were Jackie’s clothes, beginning in 1962 with ‘Red Flare,’ a knock-off of the First Lady’s Inauguration outfit. Soon Jackie had an influence on Barbie’s class pretensions” as mimicking the First Lady moved the doll’s dresses from sock hops and the senior prom into the tonier fashion world of debutante balls and benefit performances.

Mrs. Kennedy herself was upset with what she perceived as the “commercializing” of the Presidency but even a letter from Presidential Counselor Ted

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73 Anthony, First Ladies Vol. 2 The Saga of the President’s Wives and Their Power, 1961-1990, p. 77
74 Anthony, First Ladies Vol. 2 The Saga of the President’s Wives and Their Power, 1961-1990, p. 78
76 Anthony, First Ladies Vol. 2 The Saga of the President’s Wives and Their Power, 1961-1990, p. 79
Sorenson to the Better Business Bureau couldn’t undo the First Amendment rights of actors and advertisers. “House of Lords whiskey used a Jackie look-alike, smoking cigarettes in their ads, while a Florida marine shop did the same to sell waterskis. A Jackie voice parody sold The Rambler American station wagon on TV commercials. Ray-Ban sunglasses made no attempt to veil its ad. There ‘she’ was, in riding habit, on a horse, with vast oversized sunglasses.”

By the end of that star-crossed presidency, she had been feted in world capitals; waved to and smiled at crowds dazzled by her very being; relished (or endured) peons to her beauty, style, and posture; had her outfits copied on Seventh Avenue; her style emulated and parodied in popular culture.78

“Jacqueline Kennedy is selling eyeglasses on Madison Avenue,” the New York Times trumpeted in a May 14, 1962 article, accompanied by an Andy Warhol sketch of a pair of wrap-around sunglasses. “Although the First Lady may be unaware of it, her name and face are starting a new fashion fad – curved sun spectacles.”

Last week, a hand-lettered sign in the window of Aitchison & Co., opticians at 655 Madison Avenue, proclaimed: The fabulous ‘Jackie’ sunglasses.’ The sign was nestled among several pairs of horn-rimmed sunglasses with curved lenses that wrap the eyes from the bridge of the nose to the temples. Farther down the avenue at number 508,

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77 Anthony, First Ladies Vol. 2 The Saga of the President’s Wives and Their Power, 1961-1990, p. 79
78 “The First Family,” a parody album of 17 skits recorded by Vaughn Meader and others was released in 1962 and became the fastest-selling pre-Beatles record in history, selling 1.2 million copies in its first two weeks and 7.5 million in all, as reported by the Associated Press. It won the Grammy Award for Album of the Year in 1963. The skits, “innocent, even corny” by today’s standards, according to The New York Times obituary of Meader on Oct. 30, 2004, sated a public need for all-things Kennedy.
a cardboard sign in the window of Purdy had four newspaper clippings of photographs in which Mrs. Kennedy was wearing the sunglasses that this optician calls the Panoram Sport Glass. In another corner of the window was a photograph of the president (glassless), Mrs. Kennedy (with sunglasses) and several children riding in a golf cart. Other opticians, like E. B. Meyrowitz and Clairmont-Nichols, have also experimented with similar signs and pictures. The experiments have been successful. The link between Mrs. Kennedy and the sunglasses ‘causes action,’ according to a spokesman for Clairmont-Nichols. ‘It’s the hottest style today,’ he said. ‘It’s the style.’”

Not only was the glamorous First Lady “selling” chic curved sunglasses on Madison Avenue and elsewhere, she also may have had an hand in the steadily increasing numbers of American high school students, during those years, who took up the study of French. According to figures compiled by The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, French language study surged in the 1960s, before declining and leveling off in the 1970s. Although French never outpaced Spanish as the foreign language of choice in US high schools, it did enjoy a mini-boom in the 1960s, topping 10 percent of student enrollments in 1962 and staying there and growing until 1968 when the numbers dipped under 10 percent. Spanish held steady at 13 percent during those years, according to the figures.

Summing up Mrs. Kennedy after a year in the White House, Newsweek offered a lengthy, rave review.
Noting her impact on fashion was “spectacular – the greatest single influence in history, says Hollywood designer Edith Head flatly,” Newsweek lauded her ability to bring to “every activity a quality of almost regal grace, competence, serenity – and sangfroid.”

The woman clever enough as a teenager to know she wanted a life larger than the one offered by tradition had found her calling. “Think of this time we’re living through,” she told Newsweek, referring to herself and her husband. “Both of us young, with health, and two wonderful children – and to live through all this.”

“By living through ‘all this’ with supreme style – in the fierce white light which beats down upon the White House – this Vassar-educated, Sorbonne-polished, high-styled product of East Coast society has made her own indelible contribution to current American history.”

“But, as with a great actress, few people can know what study may go into the performance. An aura of remoteness plays around the public figure. ‘That smile on her face is just there,’ a friend said recently. ‘I’ve leaned over and spoken to her in public and she just keeps on smiling. She gets sort of dazed when the flashbulbs go off.”

Newsweek concluded: “What she was lacking was any identification with this whole deal,” one (friend) said recently. “Finally, there’s something that’s hers and that she’s good at.” On the recent Latin American trip, Jackie’s triumph equaled that of her march through Europe last spring. In three capitals – San Juan, Caracas, and Bogota – she chatted in Spanish with officials and their wives. When the Kennedys appeared on a

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79 She topped the International Best Dressed list for four years running, beginning in 1960, she was inducted into the fashion Hall of Fame in 1965 and cited as a “symbol of fashion leadership to the average woman everywhere.”
palace balcony in San Juan, the cries of “Jackie!” dominated the bedlam. She conquered
the Venezuelans with a brief speech in Spanish. “She stole the show,” said Presidential
press secretary Pierre Salinger. “Yes sir, she stole the show.” “She has an instinct, which
I don’t think any other woman has, of immediately disarming people,” Ludwig
Bemelmans said. “She’s the Cleopatra of the Potomac. Even de Gaulle put on his glasses
to look at her, and he is so vain that he doesn’t know who is in front of him until his aide
tells him.” “I think she feels she’s doing something important now,” (sister-in-law) Jean
Smith said last week. “In the beginning it was an adjustment. I think the fact that she
went to Europe and created a bigger stir almost than the President was a surprise. I think
that’s when she really began enjoying it. Until you experience it, you don’t realize that –
you think you’re the President’s wife, so what?”

Good Housekeeping magazine undertook a national survey in spring 1963 to
uncover American attitudes toward the First Lady. Published in the June issue, the survey
was a representative sample of some 2,000 women from every state in the continental
United States.

Several “surprises” emerged, according to the editors. While the majority of the
panelists did not think Mrs. Kennedy “beautiful” and nearly unanimously “disdain(ed)
the notion that a First Lady should set styles in clothes or coiffures,” the panel rated Mrs.
Kennedy as an “outstanding” First Lady, second-by-a-nose in accomplishment only to
Eleanor Roosevelt among presidential wives of the preceding 40 years.

While insisting they look beyond hairdos and hats when “judging the worth of
public personages,” substantial percentages of the survey participants specifically
mentioned Mrs. Kennedy’s clothes, glamour, and voice as characteristics they were troubled by. Fifteen percent said the one thing about the First Lady they least liked was her hairdo; while five percent cited her “undignified behavior.”

But the poll-takers protested they’d prefer to evaluate the First Lady on “criteria more profound than beauty and clothing. It is possible,’ the editors concede, “that the whole range of public-relations experts, from editors to publishers to radio and television executives and other image-makers, are somewhat less intelligent in their judgment of public tastes than they like to believe.”

Noting that 85 percent of the respondents insisted they did not “imitate” Mrs. Kennedy’s dresses and hair styles, the editors added a coy aside - “at least not consciously.”

And while the vast majority of those polled said they did not copy Mrs. Kennedy, she had arrived long ago publicly at a place where comparisons to her predecessors no longer diminished her, as they had during the campaign. Now “Mamie Eisenhower was caricatured as a frumpy grandmother . . . and Bess Truman became ‘American Gothic to the core, stubbornly wearing her orchids upside down, curling her grey hair tight the way she’d always done it in Missouri,’ columnist Dorothy Kilgallen said.”

Even Madame Marie-Madeleine Malreaux, the chic and stylish wife of the French Minister of Culture, suffered in comparison to the dazzling First Lady at the unveiling of the Mona Lisa at the National Gallery in Washington, DC on Jan. 8, 1963.81 “Madame Malreaux had selected a floor-length black velvet-and-taffeta dress with a tailored bodice

80 Troy, Affairs of State The Rise and Rejection of the Presidential Couple Since World War II, p. 110
and full skirt, presumably designed by Chanel. She wore black satin gloves to the elbow and three long ropes of pearls. Paris may have been the paragon of fashion, but the typically stylish Madame Malreaux looked positively matronly dressed in all black standing next to the lilac-hued, youthful First Lady. The First Couple looked tanned and rested following their holiday in sun-swept Florida, whereas the Malreaux by contrast looked pale and exhausted.”

DALLAS

So much so had her style saturated the culture – and her persona come to be viewed as a political positive – that the president himself joked about it on the last day of his life. In Fort Worth, Texas, on the morning of Nov. 22, 1963, JFK ventured outside their hotel to wave at a gaggle of several hundred supporters. He answered their calls of “Where’s Jackie?” a greeting he was by then long used to, by deadpanning, “Mrs. Kennedy is organizing herself. It takes longer. But of course she looks better than we do after she does it.”

Back inside the hotel, later that morning, the Chamber of Commerce breakfast was just getting underway and the president and vice president were seated on the dais when Mrs. Kennedy walked into the room. When she appeared in a raspberry pink Chanel suit, the crowd of 2,000 broke into mad applause. JFK quipped, “Two years ago I introduced myself as the man who had accompanied Mrs. Kennedy to Paris. I am getting

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81 Her concerted efforts, grounded in charm, letter-writing, and her fluency in the French language, literature and culture convinced French President Charles DeGaulle to allow the fragile Renaissance treasure to sail the ocean for a unique American viewing.
82 Vanity Fair, November 2008, p. 236
somewhat that same sensation as I travel around Texas. No one cares what Lyndon and I wear.”

By late 1963, the GOP was gearing up for the 1964 campaign – an article in the Oct. 28, 1963 issue of Newsweek had noted that Mrs. Kennedy’s recent trip to Greece and especially her budding friendship with shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis were drawing critical attention. While the White House refused to discuss Mrs. Kennedy’s trip – except to point out she “needed a change of scene” after the premature birth and death of her third child in August – Onassis’ lavish generosity raised eyebrows. His sumptuously decorated yacht, complete with a dance band, a mosaic-floored swimming pool, “banks of red roses and gladioli” and oodles of “gourmet goodies,” combined with his shady legal past caused some to wonder if the wife of the president had crossed a line of propriety. According to Newsweek: “For thirty-three months as First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy has lived a politically sheltered life, untouched by anything harsher than breathy caricature from nightclub mimes. At the Western Republican Conference in Eugene, Oregon last week, Colorado’s GOP National Committeeman Jean Tool . . . ticked off ten commandments for victory in 1964. ‘Bobby, Teddy and Peetah (Lawford) are fair game. Jackie and the kids are off limits. Criticism . . . will only arouse sympathy and votes for them.’ But the tablets had barely been handed down when Mrs. Kennedy’s immunity suddenly ran out.”

After cataloguing the Onassis-related complaints, the article continued: “The flurry seemed to have died down when Mrs. Kennedy flew home from Paris Thursday

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83 Anthony, First Ladies Vol. 2 The Saga of the President’s Wives and Their Power, 1961-1990, p. 97
with hugs, kisses, and gifts (among then a dozen Dior neckties for her husband.) Caroline bounded up the ramp first with a welcome-home present – a clay bird’s nest she had made in her first-grade class – and John-John got to ride all the way home on Mrs. Kennedy’s lap. The First Lady looked as pretty, stylish, familial, and immune as ever – and who wanted to talk politics at a time like that?”

Who, indeed? Just when the First Lady’s glamour or globe-trotting threatened to damage her marriage or submerge her husband’s presidency in a sea of negative press, her children, adorable tykes both, made a rare Kennedy-sanctioned public appearance. Motherhood, coupled with submissive wifeliness, trumps all, or at least shushes the critics for the time-being. Her decision to accompany her husband on his upcoming Southern swing, an about-face from her pre-Mediterranean cruise refusal, was an attempt to repair her reputation and her relationship with her husband.  

As the trip to Texas was JFK’s opening salvo in the 1964 presidential campaign, the president had a two-fold mission in Dallas. The politician-in-chief hoped to shore up his sagging political support in an electoral-vote-rich state in the all-important South and bring a couple of warring Democrats (a Senator and the Governor) back into the harmonious fold. JFK’s strategists thought Texas among the states crucial to his re-election in 1964. An article published three weeks before the trip in U.S. News and World Report questioned whether Kennedy, given his views and policies on civil rights, could

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84 Troy, Affairs of State The Rise and Rejection of the Presidential Couple Since World War II, p. 129
carry any Southern state in 1964. Not a single Southern state was “safe” for the president, according to the magazine’s extensive research and reporting.\textsuperscript{85}

Well-aware of the attention the presence of his wife – by now his ace draw\textsuperscript{86} - would create in Texas and concerned for her comfort on this, her first political trip since the 1960 campaign (and her first domestic trip since the death of their infant son, Patrick) JFK took an interest in her wardrobe for the trip, approving “every item” she was to wear, unknowingly orchestrating her most indelible fashion moment.

“The morning they were leaving (Washington), the President received reports that Texas weather was unusually warm for November. He worried about her being uncomfortable. The helicopter was waiting on the White House South Lawn to ferry them to Air Force One at Andrews Field. Mrs. Kennedy was standing before a mirror putting on her hat when the President called from his office. “Provie,” he said, (to Providencia Parades, Mrs. Kennedy’s maid) “I hear it is very hot in Texas. Are you sure Mrs. Kennedy has enough cotton clothes?” Provie reassured him.”\textsuperscript{87}

Once in the Lone Star State, in Houston, a tumultuous crowd greeted them. When JFK asked his aide Dave Powers how the crowd compared with the one on his last visit to Houston, the latter told him: “Well, Mr. President, about as many turned out to see you as the last time. But there seem to be a hundred thousand more shouting, ‘Jackie! Jackie!’”\textsuperscript{88}

CONCLUSION

\textsuperscript{86} Perret, Jack: A Life Like No Other, p. 395 
\textsuperscript{87} Thayer, Mary Van Rennsselaer. Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 48
Would the clothes – and her style – have snowballed into an even greater negative the second time around? JFK and his political advisers thought not; they had come to the conclusion – with ample proof - that she was a not-so-secret weapon for their side.

She (and Oleg Cassini) created a look that evokes a time in mid-century America as immediately as a Warhol print, as a Beatle’s tune, as wafting marijuana smoke. Her look informs fashion to this day. Marc Jacobs and Michael Kors, among many other designers, have built successful careers on the seamed sheaths, the bracelet-length sleeves, the over-sized buttons she made wearable and popular. J. Crew offers a “Jackie” cardigan in its catalogues and stores and has for years.

By staying true to her sense of style, by “blending her informed (and well-researched) tastes in fashion with the gravitas of her role,” she “helped change the world’s view of America” as she wove a glamorous, studied sophistication into the fabric of American life. By valuing fashion as an art form and harnessing its political impact, she became a key component in her husband’s re-election strategy.

“There was nobody to touch Jackie using style as a political tool,” (Arthur) Schlesinger noted. “The things people had once held against her – the unconventional beauty, the un-American elegance, the taste for French clothes and French food – were suddenly no longer liabilities but assets.”

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89 Bowles, Jacqueline Kennedy The White House Years Selections from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, p. 18
90 Bowles, Jacqueline Kennedy The White House Years Selections from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, p. 18
91 Vanity Fair, November 2008, p. 237
“She represented all at once not a negation of her country but a possible fulfillment of it, a suggestion that America was not to be trapped forever in the bourgeois ideal . . . but instead could achieve a dream of civilization and beauty.”

Although her clothes were couture and therefore priced way out of the reach of most Americans, then and now, she was performing in those years in front of the largest, and ever-expanding, middle class in all of history. In 1950, 36 percent of the population earned enough to qualify as middle class or higher; by 1960, the figure was 59 percent. Americans were gearing up to spend, were warming up to the idea of disposable income, and were looking for a way to capture the American Dream in their suburban enclaves for their own families. In the 22 years from 1950 to 1972, real income, post-inflation, would double. Americans were ready to spend, and the Kennedys showed them the way.

She “succeeded in converting a nation to an appreciation of her refined and sophisticated Francophile tastes. While these had always been valued in the context of her social world, they had once proved politically hazardous for the wife of the Democratic presidential candidate.”

In an interview in 1964, shortly after President Kennedy’s assassination, Jackie seemed to reinforce the notion of her foreignness, while insisting it never upset her husband. “Because I’ll tell you one wonderful thing about him,” she said. “I was really – I was never any different once I was in the White House than I was before, but the press made you different. Suddenly, everything that’d been a liability before – your hair, that you spoke French, that you didn’t just adore to campaign, and you didn’t bake bread with

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92 *Vanity Fair*, November 2008, p. 237
93 Troy, *Affairs of State The Rise and Rejection of the Presidential Couple Since World War II*, p.119
94 Troy, *Affairs of State The Rise and Rejection of the Presidential Couple Since World War II*, p. 119
flour up to your arms – you know, everyone thought I was a snob and hated politics.
Well, Jack never made me feel that I was a liability to him, but I was.”96 Just six months after it was all over, she clearly summed up the dynamics that indeed made her the less-than-ideal political wife, those traits that worried her husband’s political advisors, and, despite her protestations to the contrary, that did concern her husband. Her grief over her loss compelled her to re-imagine her past and to apotheosize her husband.

“And when we got into the White House all the things I’d always done suddenly became wonderful because anything the First Lady does that’s different, everyone seizes on – and I was so happy for Jack, especially now that it was only three years together that he could be proud of me then. Because it made him so happy – it made me so happy. So those were our happiest years.”97

But those six seconds in Dallas sealed her fate. Because she ended up drenched in her husband’s blood, on her hands and knees, crawling across the trunk of the presidential limousine, reaching for pieces of his skull and brain, she is seared in our collective memory as half of the glamorous but doomed First Couple. Both are trapped in the past, unknowingly, innocently moving toward a spectacular end. And it is that consequential end that bathes those one-thousand days in an ephemeral magic. Surely, both she and her wardrobe resonate in a way neither would have without that bloody end.98 That suit – its fabric, color, and cut - is engraved on our national psyche because she wore it that day in

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95 Bowles, Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years Selections from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, p. 27
96 Kennedy, Historic Conversations on Life with John F. Kennedy, p. 141
97 Kennedy, Historic Conversations on Life with John F. Kennedy, p. 141
98 Fraser, Kennedy. The Fashionable Mind Reflections on Fashion 1970 – 1982, (Boston: David R. Godine Publisher, 1985), p. 223 “The pillbox hats and little white gloves worn by Mrs. Kennedy as First Lady would have been considerably less riveting if she had not played a central role in a dramatic administration that lives indelibly in the public imagination.”
Dallas - a piece of fabric that evokes the day, the death, a younger, sunnier country now lost to the mists of time; it is a visual synecdoche. The Kennedy Administration remains, in the popular imagination, linked to the mythic Camelot: one brief, shining moment of grandeur and glamour. It is a lovely fantasy always just beyond our reach.

While she never again sought publicity for herself, rarely again ever looked straight on at a camera lens, she was lionized by a sycophantic press and by most Americans. She continued to fascinate – even after she married Aristotle Onassis in 1969. Jackie vacationing in Capri launched another enduring style tsunami: tight, white slacks, black short-sleeved tee shirt, a scarf covering her hair and big sunglasses covering her eyes. That look inspired the Human Sexual Response’s 1980 song “Jackie Onassis,” with the memorable lyrics, “I want to be Jackie Onassis. I want to wear a pair of dark sunglasses.”

On Nov. 30, 1963, Lady Bird Johnson, then First Lady, tape-recorded her memories of the motorcade that brought President Kennedy into the path of the assassin’s bullets and the aftermath, at Parkland Memorial Hospital, for the Warren Commission. She recalled trying to comfort Mrs. Kennedy in the hospital as the president lay dead a few feet away. “Mrs. Kennedy’s dress was stained with blood,” Mrs. Johnson recalled.

Mulvaney, Jackie The Clothes of Camelot, p. xii “A glimpse of the color, the nub of the fabric, and the box cut of the jacket instantaneously reminds us of one of the defining events of twentieth-century American history.”

It was Jacqueline Kennedy who, in her first interview after her husband’s murder, first linked the Kennedy Administration to the mythic Knights of the Round Table. In a conversation with journalist Theodore White, published in Life Magazine’s Dec. 6, 1963 issue – after close editing by the former First Lady – she pitched the comparison. Intending to evoke the magic, bravery, idealism, and brevity of Camelot, rather than the treachery and adultery, she selected a metaphor that many of her husband’s advisers said would have made him wince. Arthur Schlesinger called it “myth turned into cliché” and suggested Jackie thought, eventually, the association was “overdone.”

“Her right glove was caked – that immaculate woman – it was caked with blood, her husband’s blood. She always wore gloves like she was used to them. I never could. Somehow that was one of the most poignant sights – exquisitely dressed and caked in blood.”

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102 References to Jacqueline Kennedy in popular songs did not begin or end with Human Sexual Response, of course. Their lyrics, however, are amongst the most PG-rated in a survey of about 30 songs with lyrics referencing the former First Lady, written by artists ranging from The Spice Girls to Marilyn Manson.

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