



"It enlarges you, makes you a more understanding person," Lady Bird (at her Austin wildflower center) once said of being First Lady.

# Rare Bird

Lady Bird Johnson brought loyalty and a staunch sense of mission to her trying roles as wife and First Lady

*The role of First Lady has never been simple. In addition to family duties, the President's wife would manage the White House staff, entertain heads of state, tour the world as a goodwill ambassador and, of course, do what she could to protect her husband from the vicissitudes*

*threatening his political livelihood. But the modern era has generally seen First Ladies pressed into ever greater service. Using their privileged presidential access and the increasing visibility given them by the media, they have become influential advocates for such issues as disease*



In 1964, Lady Bird and LBJ spent election day at the LBJ Ranch.

DEUTSCHE PRESIDENTIALPHOTOS



Lady Bird (ca. 1918) spent a lonely childhood after the death of her mother.

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Her father (with sons Tommy, left, and Antonio in '56) was Lady Bird's male ideal.

MEMORIE JAY

awareness, education, hunger and drug abuse.

As the nation prepares to elect a new President in November, PEOPLE will profile the five living former First Ladies, each of whom helped shape one of the most challenging assignments in politics. We begin with Lady Bird Johnson and will follow from time to time with profiles of Betty Ford, Rosalynn Carter, Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush.



LBJ was "a strong man—a driving engine," Lady Bird (honeymooning at Lake Xochimilco, Mexico, in 1934) has said. "But he also was a very tender, needful man."

There was a time when nothing would have suited Lady Bird Johnson better than the offer of a coveted seat on the University of Texas Board of Regents. A tireless crusader for various causes, she had found public service a tonic. But when she was wooed to accept the position in 1970, she had what she felt was a higher duty—caring for a husband ailing in both mind and body. His spirit broken by his inability to end the war in Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson had retreated from office in 1969, taking refuge at his ranch on the banks of the Pedernales River near Austin, where he would write his memoirs while fighting depression and a weakening heart.

So despite the urging of Gov. Preston Smith, Lady Bird declined the job. "Mother said, 'My husband isn't well and I want to be here for him,'" recalls daughter Luci Baines Johnson. "My father called the governor back and said, 'Bird would love to take the job.'" Luci says that her mother glared with "indignation, as if to say, 'I can speak for myself perfectly well and just did.' And he said, 'Bird, God forbid something should happen to

me. But here is something that could help you fill your life. I want to know I didn't deny you the opportunity to expand your heart and soul, when I no longer can.'" Only then did she give in.

Lady Bird likes to say that her husband, who died in 1973, "stretched" her, and almost surely he did. But judging from the scope of her life, she provided ample substance for stretching. Today, at 87, Johnson remains among our most respected First Ladies. She was, for instance, the first to campaign separately from her husband. Prior to the 1964 presidential election, Lady Bird—known to be able to charm just about anyone—visited southern cities so riven by racial turmoil that it was thought unwise for LBJ to travel there. Serving as his adviser and sounding board, she crusaded alongside her husband in the War on Poverty and was credited with selling the President on the idea of Head Start. In addition, she began her own campaign to clean up and beautify the environment, creating pockets of green space in urban areas. Lady Bird also made her own fortune—she bought a radio

station with an inherited \$41,000 in 1942 and, helped by TV licensing, parlayed it into the \$150 million LBJ Holding Co. Still, when asked to cite her greatest accomplishment, Lady Bird answers simply: "Anything I did to keep Lyndon in good health and a good frame of mind to work as hard as he did."

The Johnsons' relationship was rock-solid but not without complication. LBJ was a domineering, sometimes unfaithful man given to volcanic displays of temper and periodic descents into depression. Even so, Lady Bird, who was in this marriage to stay, seemed to know how to handle him. "Lady Bird was LBJ's North Star," says Democratic former Texas Rep. Jake Pickle. "Whenever he became too loud or unreasonable, she would just get up and leave. LBJ would say, 'Where's Bird?' Then he would drop what he was doing and go find her. He'd come back 30 minutes later, kind of meek and much more a gentleman."

CBS's Dan Rather got a taste of the Johnson one-two in 1955. Sent to the LBJ Ranch for a press conference, the young reporter phoned his boss to complain when LBJ failed to show up. "Next thing I knew," he says, "I felt this enormous presence behind me." It was LBJ, who grabbed the phone and said he didn't know who



After LBJ took over as President in 1963, Jackie Kennedy (right) left Lady Bird (in white) a note: "You will be happy here. Some of our happiest years were in the White House."

"this rude pissant" was, but he was "throwing his ass out."

Rather left in a hurry, planning to hitchhike back to Austin. But he didn't get far before a white Lincoln Continental pulled up beside him. "I sure wish you'd come back," said Lady Bird, rolling down the window. "He didn't mean anything by it, honey. He's had this heart attack and he's just touchy. Why don't you ride on back with us and kinda stay out of his way for a while." Rather was impressed. "I was Minus Nobody,"

he says. "Yet she went out of her way to patch up things between me and her husband."

Christened Claudia Alta Taylor, Lady Bird got her nickname from a childhood nursemaid who thought the baby was "as purty as a lady-bird." Born Dec. 22, 1912, in the tiny east Texas town of Karnack, she was the third child of country entrepreneur Thomas Jefferson "Boss" Taylor, a lusty self-made man who might have stepped out of a Faulkner novel. Onetime Johnson aide



In 1968, LBJ visited at home with Lady Bird, daughters Luci (left) and Lynda and Luci's son Lyn.

## ● first ladies



Horace Busby told Lady Bird's biographer Jan Jarboe Russell that "the key to understanding Lady Bird is to understand that in her mind her father was the role model for how all men are and should be. It explains why she put up with LBJ's womanizing and why she idealized him for being a public servant."

Her mother, Minnie, a delicate figure from a genteel Alabama family, died at age 50 after a fall. Just 5 at the time, Lady Bird was raised by Aunt Effie, Minnie's sister. Left alone a great deal—her teenage brothers, Tommy and Antonio, both now deceased, were away at boarding school—Lady Bird developed a lasting attachment to the natural world, wandering barefoot through the woods and meadows surrounding the family mansion, which had been built by slaves in 1843. She later spoke of comforting herself by imagining her mother in the swirling clouds.

As a child, Lady Bird was painfully shy. She ranked first in her high school class until she realized she would be required to make a graduation-day speech, a prospect that so unnerved her, she deliberately let her grades slip. Gaining confidence at the University of Texas, which she entered in 1930, "Lady Bird was highly respected," says Beth Jones, a journalism school classmate. "She

always dressed conservatively, older than she was, with sensible shoes." Beneath the plain exterior, though, she was ripe for adventure. Having earned a journalism degree and a teaching certificate in 1934, she had romantic ideas about teaching in Hawaii or Alaska, then becoming a big-city drama critic. "But all that never happened," she said later, "because I met Lyndon."

They met over drinks with mutual friends in Austin one evening in August 1934. Smitten, Lyndon—then 26 and a congressional aide in Washington, D.C.—asked her to breakfast. "He came on very strong, and my first instinct was to withdraw," she told Russell. But she eventually gave in and was awed by LBJ's bold career plans. That same day, Johnson proposed. She thought he was joking, but three months later they were married in a 15-minute church ceremony sealed with a \$2.50 ring LBJ bought at Sears, Roebuck. Thrifty Lady Bird didn't mind a bit.

In 1937, Johnson was elected to Congress after a campaign that Lady Bird funded with \$10,000 from her mother's estate. Four years later, fearful of losing his bid to become a U.S. senator, LBJ entered a hospital for depression for the first time. Remarkably, Lady Bird seemed to snap him out of it, appealing to his ambi-



In March 1967, Lady Bird took a busload of governors' wives to a tree-planting ceremony in Washington, D.C.

SHARON/PH

tious nature and telling him he had to get back to work—which he did, winning election in 1948 by 87 votes. In March 1944, Lady Bird, who had suffered three miscarriages, gave birth to a healthy daughter, Lynda. Luci followed in July 1947. By then, Lyndon had engaged in at least two extramarital affairs, but

they scarcely put a dent in Lady Bird's devotion. "Lyndon loved everybody, and more than half the world is women," she bravely explained to LIFE in 1995. "I do know that he wanted me the most." In 1948 she and another woman were driving to San Antonio to drum up votes for LBJ when their car ran into a ditch. Her friend went to the hospital, but Lady Bird borrowed fresh clothes and went on to the rally to make her speech. "You get your adrenaline up," she explained later, "and you get mad and you say, 'It's not gonna defeat me!'"

A disarmingly warm and politically knowledgeable campaigner, Lady Bird was credited by Bobby Kennedy with winning Texas for the Kennedy-Johnson ticket in 1960. But it was her graciousness three years later, following JFK's assassination, that intimates will never forget. Liz Carpenter, then her press secretary, remembers being badgered by the press about when Jackie Kennedy would move out of the White House. When Carpenter asked her boss, she saw the closest thing to anger that Lady Bird ever revealed to her. Says Carpenter: "She snapped at me, 'I would to

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"Mother is as sharp as a tack," says Lynda (right, in '96 with her and Luci at the wildflower center).

God I could serve Mrs. Kennedy's comfort. I can at least serve her convenience."

In some ways, Lyndon Johnson's Presidency began as one of the most successful in history, marked by the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the enormously ambitious War on Poverty. For her part, Lady Bird, under the banner of "beautification," fought the billboard lobby, supervised inner-city cleanups and planted miles of wildflowers along the nation's highways. "She made the environmental movement popular," says her daughter Lynda, wife of Virginia Sen. Charles Robb. "She walked it onto center stage."

Unfortunately center stage belonged inescapably to the Vietnam War, which defied LBJ's hopes and scuttled his Presidency. On March 31, 1968, bitter, discouraged and in declining health, Johnson announced that he would not seek reelection. As soon as he left office, LBJ began preparing his wife for widowhood, quizzing her on the location of important papers. He had a heart attack in April 1972 and another, fatal one on Jan. 22, 1973. He was 64.

Liz Carpenter recalls seeing Johnson at the LBJ Library in Austin during the week of the funeral. She was listening to her husband's recorded message, which greets visitors there. "I thought that hearing Lyndon's voice would bother me," a subdued Lady Bird told her. "But it's strangely comforting."

People close to her say that rather than retreating from life, Lady Bird has come into her own since her husband's death. Asked what she has been doing in recent years, she offers an update on her long "love affair with nature." She has been building hiking and biking trails in Austin, working to dress up highways with flowers and shrubs, and nurturing the 63-acre Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Research Center near Austin, which she endowed in 1982.

Suffering from severe arthritis, Lady Bird has also been rendered legally blind by macular degeneration and recently fainted at home as a result of cataract surgery and exhausting travel. But according to

daughter Luci, she is not frail and swims 32 laps each day in one of the two pools at the LBJ Ranch. "We call her Esther Williams," says Luci.

Lady Bird still rents a summer house on Martha's Vineyard and hosts a family reunion every few years. She has taken her seven grandchildren (she also has five great-grandkids) on special trips to New York and Alaska. "She could let her eyesight problems get her down," says Claudia Nugent, 23, one of Luci's five children. "Instead, it has made her see things in a different light—an optimistic light. I've

never heard her say a negative thing. If it's raining, she's like, 'Oh, this is so good for nature's growth!'"

One recent morning, beneath a blue Texas sky, Lady Bird celebrated that growth at her wildflower center. She listened to speeches, gave one herself, then greeted guests who lined up to shake her hand before finally, slowly, strolling off on the arm of a friend. Said a young center volunteer admiringly: "She's the closest thing we have to a Queen Mother."

- William Plummer
- Laurel Calkins and Anne Lang in Austin and Linda Killian in Washington, D.C.

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Lady Bird (with granddaughter Nicole Covert and great-grandson Johnson at their Austin home in 1996) describes her family as the "meat and potatoes of my life."