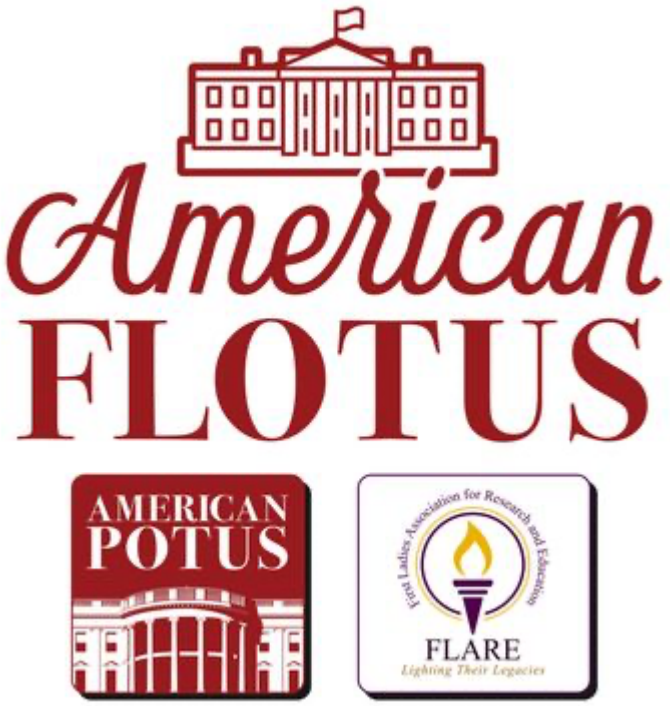

American FLOTUS - Edith Wilson and Pat Nixon with Rebecca Boggs Roberts and Heath Hardage Lee

Alan Lowe: Welcome to American FLOTUS, a podcast built from a partnership of the First Ladies Association for Research and Education and American POTUS. We're dedicated to advancing an understanding of the office of the First Lady and those amazing women who have occupied it. I'm your host, Alan Lowe, and I'm so pleased to be joined in this episode by two wonderful scholars.

Rebecca Boggs Roberts serves as the Deputy Director of Events at the Library of Congress. She has an impressive and intriguing resume, I might say, including work as a journalist, a forensic anthropologist, and a jazz singer, just to name a few. She's the author of several books, including *Suffragists in Washington, DC: The 1913 Parade and the Fight for the Vote*, *The Suffragist's Playbook: Your Guide to Changing the World*, co-written with Lucinda Robb. She's made a contribution to the terrific series, *Images of America*, hers on the historic Congressional Cemetery. And the book we will include in our discussion today, *Untold Power: The Fascinating Rise and Complex Legacy of First Lady Edith Wilson*.

Heath Hardage Lee is a historian, biographer, and curator. She's been widely published in venues like *Time* and *The Atlantic* and has written the books *Winnie Davis: Daughter of the Lost Cause*, *The League of Wives: The Untold Story of the Women Who Took on the U.S. Government to Bring Their Husbands Home from Vietnam*, and the book that will be part of our conversation today, *The Mysterious Mrs. Nixon: The Life and Times of Washington's Most Private First Lady*.

Rebecca and Heath, thanks so much for joining us on American FLOTUS.

Rebecca Boggs Roberts: Thanks for having us.

Heath Hardage Lee: Yes. Thanks.

Alan: I'm excited to have you here, and I loved both the books so very much. Enjoyed them. And I wanna start, though, before we go into the questions, I understand that you both were considering writing a biography of Edith Wilson at the very same time. Can you recount the story of how you, Rebecca, ended up writing that bio and how you, Heath, instead wrote about Pat Nixon?

Rebecca: So, in 2019, 2020, I started poking around about Edith Wilson. I was putting together a proposal for a new biography, and a couple of the folks that I reached out to asked me if I knew Heath Lee, and said she's also working on a biography, and we've been in touch with her already. And I did know Heath Lee because, when she published her book *League of Wives*, I was working at the Smithsonian, and I had arranged for Heath to speak there; and the women's history world is not that big, and we knew and admired each other. And I thought, well, goodness. If Heath's working on this biography, I'm certainly gonna back off, because we don't need two, and Heath is terrific, and Edith is in good hands.

But around that time, Heath must have been hearing the same thing, that I was poking around in Edith's life. And so, she called me up and, in an extraordinarily generous moment, said, “Listen, I can't get to Edith now, maybe not for years. I'm working on this other big project about Pat Nixon, and why don't you take all of my research notes and all of the interviews I've already done, and work on your book?” And it was particularly helpful with the folks in Wytheville, Edith's hometown, because they were a little bit gun-shy. There had been a couple of biographies that were not especially accurate or fair, and so they were really wary of talking to new people. And Heath, who had already won their trust, introduced me to them and said, you can trust Rebecca; Edith's in good hands. She can take it from here. And it was just so collegial and wonderful and helpful, and I just can't thank Heath enough for that start of this book.

Alan: I do think that shows an amazing generosity of spirit and collegiality. I don't know if I would have that type of generosity, but I hope I would. Well, I'm gonna say I would. How's that?

Heath: Well, you would because you would know that Rebecca was the right one to write the story. I strongly felt I was not the right one to write this story, but what Rebecca had is a deep knowledge of the women's suffrage movement. She is an expert on that. She is a native of DC with deep family ties to the area, and she knew Old DC well, as evidenced, also, by some of the articles she cited that she read. I mean, she was the match. She was the right match, and all our first ladies deserve to have the right match. So that was a no-brainer, and helpful to me because I don't think it's fair to do two first ladies at once. It just would have been too much, I think, for any biographer to do too well. So, I was very grateful to Rebecca for taking that on.

Alan: Well, I can say you both did amazing work with both subjects, so thank you for that. Let's turn to an approach I would love to take today with you in looking at the similarities and differences of these two first ladies. You know, our mutual friend, Nancy Kegan Smith, president of FLARE, we came up with this idea of comparing and contrasting Edith and Pat. And I wanna start with some similarities, and maybe what you can do, if you're game, is to tell me if you agree that these are similarities and differences, and perhaps why they are or not.

I realized in reading these biographies that both of these women had a great desire to be independent. I wonder if some of that came from the really challenging circumstances of their youth. Could you comment on that?

Heath: Well, I can start on Pat. She certainly had a very, very difficult youth. And I don't think many people, to this day—I hope they will now that they've read my book—know what a hard time she had. It was almost like a Cinderella story in some ways. Her parents both died by the time she was 17. She lost her mother at 13. She was working multiple jobs, first trying to get through high school, then putting her brothers through college and herself through college.

And this is all during the time of the Great Depression and right after. So, tremendous hardships as a young person and having to work for everything and growing up basically quite poor. So, she had no advantages. There was no silver spoon in her mouth. This was not like the Kennedys or different families like that. She was from a very poor background and was exceptional in that she sought out an education, not only a college degree, but a master's degree, unheard of at the time for women, but for anyone from her background to achieve that was remarkable. So, she really did literally pull herself up by her bootstraps.

Alan: What about Edith?

Rebecca: So, Edith was a couple of generations older and also very much of, you know, Virginia—first families of Virginia, very proud of their lineage; whereas, Pat was kind of a frontierswoman and had that Western independent frontier sensibility. Edith's family was of modest means, they hadn't been before the Civil War, but they had been planters. And when the enslavement system on which their economics relied was collapsed by the Civil War, they came down in the world economically. But Edith, I think her independence—and it's not really fair to psychoanalyze someone 150 years after their birth—but I think her independence can be explained innately, certainly, she was confident and and fierce, I think, just by personality, but she also had a grandmother who took special interest in her. And she was the sixth of nine kids, and the house was really crowded, and it wasn't very big.

But this grandmother, you know, looked at that raft of grandchildren and picked Edith out of the lineup and said, "You are special. You are smart." And that was just not a message a lot of girls were getting in 1872 in Wytheville, Virginia. And in fact, it wasn't the message Edith was getting from her other grandmother who also lived with them, who was very much part of that Victorian model that's called, you know, the Cult of True Womanhood, where women are supposed to be pure and submissive and pious and domestic. And so, Edith was, I think, by nature, fierce and independent, but she spent a whole lot of time pretending she wasn't.

And so, she swept her own power and smarts under the rug a lot and gave credit to the men in the room instead. And I think a lot of that can trace back to those two competing messages from her grandmothers, but it also was her or both grandmothers, but I think it also was the time and the place and the socioeconomic class.

Alan: I see. Well, let's skip forward to their marriages to Woodrow and to Richard. Those both, as you show, were close, loving relationships, and it appears they both brought out the romantic side of these two men who seem very formal to most of us. Would you agree with that? Let's start with Edith.

Rebecca: I love this as a parallel, because you look at Woodrow Wilson and Richard Nixon, and your first instinct is not Romeo. Right? For either one of them. Right? In Woodrow Wilson's case, he cultivated this air of intellectual superiority of, you know, moral righteousness. He's still our only president with a Ph.D. He's been described by his own biographers, you know, our most Presbyterian president. He was a stick in the mud. Right?

Well, let me tell you, Alan, his love letters are steamy. Like, who knew Woodrow Wilson had it in him? And I felt the same way reading Heath's book. Like, you know, Richard Nixon as the Casanova was not a casting I saw coming.

Heath: Who knew these guys were so hot-blooded and passionate? Rebecca and I have totally laughed about this kind of behind the scenes at our book talks. Both these guys are, ~~like,~~ smitten schoolboys around Edith and Pat. Rebecca can tell you more about Woodrow. I mean, steamy is a good, that's a good word.

Some of them you're like, oh my goodness. Richard Nixon, I would say, is a bit more buttoned up, but still very passionate. And the persistence is like, he sees Pat. They meet at a play, *The Dark Tower*, a community play they're both auditioning for. And the first night that Richard Nixon meets Pat, he says, "I am going to marry you," and she thinks he's totally nuts and tells her roommate that.

But he is so persistent. And one of his aides said, I loved this quote, "He went about winning Pat the same way he went about winning elections. So persistent, sequential, very focused." And he just goes at it until he wins her, and she sort of says, "I give up. Yes, I will marry you." And I think she falls in love with him, but more gradually. Whereas with him, it's love at first sight. Now Rebecca can tell you with Edith. Edith is, I think, Edith and Pat are kind of similar that way in that it takes them a little bit to get there.

Rebecca: No question. And I think Wilson's letters were gushy right from the moment they met in March of 1915, just laying it all out there about how beautiful she was and how he wanted to kiss her eyelids and on and on. And she would write back, you know, "Gosh, that's awfully nice, but, you know, can we talk about the secretary of state? Do you think William Jennings Bryan is gonna resign? And who do you think is gonna take his place?"

Heath: I like that. Oh, my. So awesome.

Alan: And kissing eyelids. That's interesting.

Rebecca: I know. I know. The second-hand embarrassment you get reading the letters 100 years later. I sat there, you know, blushing, doing my research.

Alan: You know, one thing though I like about that is, we say this all the time. When you really read about presidents and first ladies, when you look at the archives, the primary materials, one important lesson you learn is they're people. Right? They're human beings and subject to all the emotions and other things all of us are subject to. And sometimes, in a weird way, we forget that. They're kind of removed. They're in the White House. They're something other, but they're not. They're just people like us.

Heath: Well, and I think these sources help humanize subjects so much too. You know, like at the Nixon Library, only certain of these love letters had been available until I did this book. And the two Nixon daughters were kind enough to allow me to see more. And

all that does is humanize the person more, which in the case of Richard Nixon, he needs more humanization. And Pat, also, they need to seem more human to us. So, while we kind of laugh at these letters, Alan, I think your point [that] this is what is needed is full access to archives so you see the human side as well as the policy side of these people.

Alan: Yeah.

Rebecca: I think it's also the difference between writing about the woman versus the man. I think that the men were so invested in curating their image. They knew they were making history. They were President of the United States, and so they were very careful about what was actually published and how their image was perceived by the public because they didn't think that Heath and I would be reading their mail decades later. And the women are willing to have much more real conversations with each other, with the men, because they're not thinking through to this legacy in marble halls. They're just living life.

Alan: Yeah. We always called archives the raw material of history. That's where you really learn about the people and the events. So, you both have proven that in these terrific books.

Let's turn from love life and romance to partnerships. These two first ladies were true partners, political policy advisers, very close. Can you talk perhaps, and we'll start with Pat Nixon, of how they were very much there for their husbands, their presidential husbands in political and policy issues?

Heath: Yes. Well, Pat Nixon was always her husband's political partner from the start. From the first race in 1946 until the end, she campaigns with him. She is at everything, all the talks. She listens to every single one, and they are known really early on as the Pat and Dick team. And I talk about this in the book. She starts out being really his first and best political advisor, she knows him better than anyone, pushes him when he needs pushing.

For example, in 1952, the famous Checkers speech where they have the fund crisis and Richard Nixon is accused of having a secret slush fund for the campaign with Eisenhower. This is totally not true. Nixon takes the unprecedented step of going on television to defend himself and lays his finances out. And right before he goes on stage on television, he turns to Pat and says, “I can't do it.” And she says, “You must. You have to do this for our girls, for me. You must do it.” So, she pushes and gets him out there and I think often demands better of him than he himself thinks he can do. And then she goes all over the world with him. Eisenhower again notices her as a diplomat, a talented diplomat. ~~She does this.~~ Everywhere she goes, she lifts up women.

And then as I talk about in the book, the so-called “Germans” come in. So, we have Haldeman and Ehrlichman-Nixon’s closest advisors. I'm getting a little ahead ~~of our talk,~~ but this is when we see a split with Pat that we won't see with Edith.

With Pat after, really, 1968, she [is] slowly isolated and pushed out of this campaigning process. Now, not to mean that she doesn't campaign and go to everything with her husband, but she becomes less of an advisor that he listens to. And Richard Nixon turns more to his staff to—several of those on the staff that go on to do things that are not at all helpful to his presidency—as you see later in the book. So, there's a process over time there. But for the vast majority of that political partnership, their life together, she is his first and best advisor.

Alan: And Rebecca, let's talk about Edith Wilson prior to President Wilson's stroke in terms of that partnership once she becomes first lady.

Rebecca: Yeah. I think Pat Nixon is sort of the counterexample to Edith Wilson because it is much more common for a first lady to come up through the ranks with her husband, to learn politics at a smaller office, figure out strengths and weaknesses, figure out what campaigning is like, and then by the time they get to the White House, they've had training ground. And Edith had zero on-ramp. She married the president. His first wife, Ellen, was the one who came up through the ranks with him, and she died in 1914. So, when Edith married Wilson in 1915, it was overnight from a private citizen to the first lady of the land. Now she very much wanted people to think that she was just being Mrs. Woodrow Wilson. She didn't like the title “first lady,” she had Mrs. Woodrow Wilson printed on her cards. She wanted everyone to think everything she did was just standing by her man and maintained with a straight face until the end of her life that she was not political, which is nonsense, especially if you read those letters. And, you know, she was not afraid to give him political advice while they were still courting. You know, at one point, he sent her yet another gushy gushy letter and she wrote back saying, you know, your last letter to the Germans about the sinking of the Lusitania was not your best work, and I really think you should have me edit your stuff from now on.

And so, she started insinuating herself into his politics while they were still courting. And, little by little, she supplanted some of his closest advisors, especially Colonel House, got sort of on the outs once Edith came in. And by the time they were both in Paris negotiating the Treaty of Versailles, everyone had figured out she was the backdoor to him. He was so busy, he was answering to so many different priorities. He was round the clock with all of this treaty work, which is messy and complicated and very high stakes. And so, people learned they could go to her and she would bring things to him and be a broker.

But that was the end of 1918, beginning of 1919 when they had only been married for 4 years. So, she had no on-ramp, but she got there very, very quickly.

Alan: Yeah. Rebecca, let's stay with you and Edith for a moment because the next similarity I saw, and maybe it's not because these were so different, in terms of their nature, the conflicts that were going on while they were first lady. With Edith, World War I breaks out, with Pat, of course, Vietnam. So, were there similarities in how they handled being first lady during times of war? Or were they so different that there weren't similarities between those two?

Rebecca: Oh, I think there absolutely were similarities. First of all, can we stipulate that being first lady is a bonkers job in general? Right? There's-

Heath: Totally.

Rebecca: There's no job description. You have all of this scrutiny, but no actual responsibility in concrete terms. And in some ways, you're supposed to reflect the ideal American woman. And so-

Heath: And there's no money. There's no money.

Rebecca: There's no money. Right. Right. And you can't- no. That's crazy.

Heath: It's terrible.

Rebecca: And you can look at your predecessors for examples, but your administration is gonna be unique for all kinds of reasons. And I think that being a wartime first lady is its own level of bananas because you've got that much more pressure to do it right.

And Edith was very good at that public example, shared sacrifice part of wartime first lady. She did all the Meatless Mondays and Wheatless Wednesdays, and she volunteered at the Red Cross. She had sheep grazing the White House lawn, which, you know, in theory was to free up the landscape staff to do war work, but also it was very, very visible. Right? You walk by Pennsylvania Avenue and there's sheep on the White House lawn, and it reminds you that we're not in normal times and that everybody needs to be thinking about ways they can contribute to the war effort. And then she had the sheep's wool auctioned off to benefit the Red Cross. So, she was very good at that public example side of things that is really heightened during wartime. I think Pat Nixon was too. It was a very different war, it was a very different America, but I think Pat Nixon shared that sense of what to do when America is looking towards you to set the example.

Heath: Yeah. I appreciate what Rebecca says about all of that. You know, first lady, what a hard job it is. Mrs. Nixon said it is the hardest unpaid job in the world, and I think that is kind of [it] in a nutshell. And I also liked what Rebecca said about you also are reflecting, kind of, America's ideal woman, and you're sort of the mother of the nation. I

mean, no pressure on anybody to be all that to all things, to all people, in both parties, by the way. Once you're elected, you're supposed to sort of be a nonpartisan benevolent figure. So, there's a lot to untangle there.

But in terms of wartime, I agree. I think that it was so important. Both these ladies were dignified. They were fundraising. They were being an example to the nation and also the troops. When I interviewed H.R. McMaster for this book about Vietnam policy during the Nixon administration, and we talked specifically about first ladies and Pat Nixon and her role during Vietnam. And H.R. and I talked about her visiting Vietnam, being the first first lady to be in an active combat zone.

Now, Eleanor Roosevelt was the first first lady to go into a combat zone, but it was not an active combat zone. So Pat is the first first lady to go into an active war zone where there is fighting, and there's a lot of danger that she could possibly be injured or killed. But she does this as an example for the country, visits the soldiers, takes letters home for them. And the South Vietnamese, our allies, also say that was so important for us as your allies to see the first lady willing to essentially risk her life during wartime to be an example. So, I don't think you can overestimate the influence these women have as sort of a figurehead and an example of the behavior, the conduct that should happen, the dignity that a first lady should have during wartime.

Alan: And that dignity, that diplomatic role is kind of around my next question about the trips that both Edith and Pat took while first lady. Edith, an unprecedented trip with the president to Europe as he negotiates the Treaty of Versailles. But Pat traveled very extensively also with trips to Central and South America, Europe, and Asia. So, I saw similarities there. Are those similarities as I saw them, or are there differences? Let's start with you, Heath. We'll go with Pat first.

Heath: Sure. Well, Rebecca will tell us more about Edith, but Edith really was groundbreaking with her trip to France. That was unprecedented. So, Pat follows in that path. Pat becomes the first lady that travels more extensively than any first lady before her or up until Hillary Clinton. So, she is all over the place starting as second lady, spending 8 years traveling the world because President Eisenhower sees what a great diplomat she is and tells Richard Nixon, his VP, quote, “Take Pat with you all over the world because she is so good at a global embrace of other countries.” Now to us, that seems like commonplace that you would do that, but it was not at all then when Pat was doing it. And gosh, when Edith was doing it, nobody was doing it. And when Pat was doing it still, that wasn't really in people's minds as first lady.

You think about Mamie Eisenhower or Bess Truman, they don't do any of that. They also don't do a ton of campaigning either, but, you know, that's when the first lady really is more of a figurehead role. And by the time we get to Pat, she sets the tone in terms of, I really think, in terms of diplomacy, of global diplomacy. She's also a solo global

ambassador for her husband, the first first lady really to do this other than Eleanor Roosevelt, who does a lot of that too, and then it stops until we get well, of course, Edith does that somewhat in France, but she is with President Wilson. So in a solo capacity, there really isn't anybody until Pat Nixon takes that up who goes all over the world doing this all the time as second lady and as first lady. So, it's a very important, groundbreaking path that Pat takes.

Rebecca: Yeah. I totally agree with Heath. I think that if we now expect our first lady to have this international diplomatic role, she goes to world conferences. She goes to state funerals.

She is a representative of the American administration at globally important events. That would not be possible without Edith Wilson and Pat Nixon. Edith was the first. No first lady had gone abroad ever [to Europe]* as first lady when Edith Wilson decided to go to Paris with the president. It was controversial for the president to be abroad. It was unheard of for the first lady to be abroad. And when they went to Paris, Edith wasn't there in her own right in any way, and she never gave interviews, and she didn't make speeches or champion causes in the way that later first ladies would. But just by being there at the largest, most important news story all over the globe, there she is in photographs at Buckingham Palace, receiving keys to cities, you know, at the negotiating hall, not at the table, but certainly at the building.

And so suddenly, the first lady has an office, which hadn't really been known outside of DC, certainly not outside of the US, is elevated to this international stage just because Edith showed up. And that paved the way for someone like Pat Nixon, who then innovated further and showed up on her own for her own agenda, separate from her husband.

Alan: Yeah. I think you see some of the beginnings of that with Jackie Kennedy, right? I'm just getting ready to—on my next American FLOTUS interview—talk some about her trip to India and Pakistan and so forth. But that, I think that you see the beginnings there.

But Pat Nixon, when you add together with the Nixons, the vice presidential years and the presidential years, it's an amazing story. And it goes back to Edith. I'm also thinking back to the post-presidency of Ulysses and Julia Grant, and that around the world trip they took. That's another fabulous story.

But I love to make these diversions. Let's go to my next question. How's that? Okay. So, the last similarity, then we'll get to some differences, I do believe. But one more

*Ida McKinley made a brief solo trip into Mexico and Edith Roosevelt went to Panama with Theodore during the building of the canal.

similarity I saw is both Edith and Pat had to deal with two of the greatest crises in

presidential history. President Wilson's stroke, his incapacitation following that stroke, and, of course, the Watergate scandal. So, let's talk about how they stood by their president, their husband in those times of crisis and how they did that. And let's start with Edith and Woodrow.

Rebecca: I think that this is also an evolution and a really interesting point of similarity because when the chips were down, how did these women behave? And so, in October of 1919, when Wilson suffered a massive stroke, Edith lied about it. She circled the wagons. She, along with the president's doctor Cary Grayson and his chief of staff, Joe Tumulty, they just closed ranks, and they lied to the press, to the public, to the cabinet, to the Congress. They lied to the president himself. He never knew how sick he was. And the whole plan was to just kind of do his job for him until he was better enough to do it himself.

And the way Edith justified this in her memoir, and this has been this kind of characterization that has come down in history, is that maybe she was a little naive not thinking about the needs of the nation, but she was standing by her man in the best way she knew how. And maybe it wasn't the way you would have done it if you had gone strictly by the Constitution, but boy, could you understand her, you know, wifely heart trying to prop him up and do the right thing in his time of need. And if she was wrong, at least you could understand her motivation. I think on many levels, that's preposterous. Right? Like, we do have someone whose job it is to step in when the president is incapacitated. No one elected Edith to anything, but that was the narrative she was very invested in perpetuating. And she felt that in this moment of crisis, her priority was her husband ahead of the nation.

Alan: And let's turn to Pat in those difficult days of Watergate.

Heath: Sure. Well, first, I want to say what an outstanding job I thought Rebecca did of laying out Edith, Madam President, as some people called her, in a very nonjudgmental way. So, you understood, Rebecca was not taking sides. She was laying it out and showing you exactly what happened factually. And I do think in Edith's mind, I think Rebecca will agree with this, ~~you know,~~ she thought her husband would die if he could not continue being president. So, she was choosing to give him life over ending it over this.

And so, it was a decision of the heart, not the head. So, in Pat's case, Pat is very analytical and she, I think, she sees that—I mentioned earlier—the Germans, as the press called them. So, to identify them, that is John Ehrlichman, one of the president's closest aides, and Bob Haldeman, his chief of staff. And these guys and some of their West Wing

minions, shall we say, come together and, I think, enable some of the demons the president has, and then isolate him from his family, his old friends, his staff. And there is sort of a wall built up between the family, the old friends, and staff, and the president so that he kind of loses touch, I think, with what's going on with the Watergate scandal. The President doesn't even seem to know everything that's going on. And once he stops listening to Pat, it's a little bit the opposite with Edith in a way. Once he stops listening to Pat and her sound advice, analytical advice that he's always listened to over the years, this is when things go madly awry. This is when things fall apart. So, Pat always says she was not elected to make policy and so, thus stays away. But in this case, I think when her husband quits listening to her is when the house of cards falls apart.

And it's unfortunate that he didn't keep her as his closest advisor because she would always tell him the truth. And I think some of his advisors, John Dean's one that comes to mind also, did not tell him fully what was going on. And then we have Watergate and all that follows. But in my book, I'll say in detail, I truly believe Pat had no idea of the extent of Watergate or what was going on. Her girls, Julie and Tricia, had no idea. They had all been kept so far out of the loop. They were reading in the papers what everybody else was reading. That was as much as they knew up until about April of the end of that last year.

Alan: Yeah. Let's turn now to some basic differences I saw between these two first ladies. As much as I hate leaving the similarities, it's been a great conversation so far. But the difference is there was a change starting chronologically; we'll start with Edith. A change in the perception of the role of women in society from the time of Edith to the time of Pat. Can you comment on that and how they found themselves in different circumstances when they served as first ladies? Let's start with you, Rebecca.

Rebecca: Yeah. And I think even, even the time that Edith was first lady, 1915 to 1921, was such a momentous time in the status of American women. So much was changing. You know, suffrage happened. Temperance happened. World War I happened. Labor unions were rising. It was just a time of massive social change, and so the role of American women, the status of American women was changing almost in real time as she was first lady.

By 1921, women had just been recognized as voters and were only just testing their political power. And so Pat was a whole evolution beyond, in terms of women in politics. And Edith, I think, also, because she was born in the Reconstruction era in Virginia, was a little bit of a throwback. There were women who were more forceful, who were college educated, who were wage earners and independent in a way that Edith had not been raised to be.

And so, although interestingly, Edith was actually enormously independent, which is why her being anti-suffrage is so frustrating to me because, you know, she inherited a business

from her first husband. She ran this very high-end jewelry store here in Washington. She was wealthy and independent and because they were childless, she had a status that a lot of American women didn't in terms of control over her own money. She didn't need a chaperone because she was a widow. And, you know, she was the first woman in Washington to get a driver's license, and she traveled all the time and was very worldly and sophisticated and was kind of great at being that wealthy widow about town.

And I think one of the reasons she was hesitant to marry Wilson was she had a lot to give up. You know, that was a pretty great and hard to achieve status, where married women did have to, you know, turn over most of that authority to their husbands. Their—married women's property rights—had been reformed at that point, but it was still socially acceptable for the husband to take everything over. And so, she, I think, by nature was independent and enjoyed being a woman of means and control over her fortune. But once she became first lady, she immediately reverted to that submissive, it's all about him, I'm just Mrs. Woodrow Wilson. And she never used the platform of first lady in the way that even Ellen Wilson had to try to push a legislative agenda or connect with women reporters or to elevate unspoken voices in her administration.

Alan: And Heath, how did you see Pat Nixon either reflecting or not reflecting the change in status in women by the time she became first lady?

Heath: Sure. Well, to just, sort of jump on something Rebecca said too about Edith. Edith was like the new woman, like the Gibson girl pretending she wasn't, which is so interesting that she is the epitome of the new woman. And then she just gives it all up and reverts to that, which is disappointing for us that are Edith fans. I am an Edith fan too, but you think why? Why aren't you taking that on? But I think what Rebecca says is so interesting about the southernness too. I'm a Virginian myself, and, you know, that area she's in, Appalachia too, it's particularly not with it in terms of women's voting rights at that time, not now. And it takes them a lot longer to see the suffragist as anything but the radical fringe.

So, then you have to go to Pat Nixon. We were talking earlier in the podcast about the westernness. As Rebecca said, Pat is a, like, a frontier woman. Her son-in-law, David Eisenhower, I loved this quote from him. He said she's sort of like an Annie Oakley type. I can just see Mrs. Nixon, her buckskin, shooting with her guns. She is very western, DIY, hates the trappings, does not want the fancy people around, wants the everyday people around.

And in terms of women, she is kind of the opposite of Edith in that she is very progressive. The Republican party now would probably not recognize this person as being a real Republican because she is also the first GOP first lady who talks about abortion rights in public. And by the way, the *Washington Post* got this wrong about a month ago. They said it was Betty Ford who was first to talk about abortion publicly. It's

not. It's Pat Nixon who is the first on abortion rights. She is very progressive on women. She wants a woman for the Supreme Court, says it publicly, is very disappointed when it doesn't happen. She and her husband are actually very pro civil rights. She and President Nixon want a Black woman for the Supreme Court, which is something I unearthed in my research that had not been known before. And then, of course, she supported the ERA, that had been on the Republican platform, by the way, since 1940.

So, she is extremely progressive about women. And remember too, out West, women got their voting rights a number of years before their sisters on the East Coast and in the Eastern seaboard states. So, she's got a very progressive, western outlook on women and their role, and this is reflected in the way she deals with her role as first lady.

Alan: So fascinating. They both were first ladies during times of great social change. That's a really interesting comparison between the two. Another difference, though, and I saw this in the growth of the White House bureaucracy and the structure of the White House, is Edith Wilson was able to fully control access to the ailing president that could never, I think, have been duplicated in the more complex White House of today, certainly, or Pat Nixon's time. Do you agree with that? And how in the world let's maybe start with Edith. How did she manage that even then with less bureaucracy and less structure? How did she manage to control access so completely?

Rebecca: I totally agree. What Edith did in terms of controlling access to the president and hiding his infirmity could never ever have happened in the Nixon administration, and certainly not today. I think there are a couple of things. First of all, they, obviously, the whole press landscape was very different. There was no broadcast media. There wasn't even a, sort of, full-time White House press corps in the way there was just a few years later. And there certainly wasn't a 24-hour news cycle where people were pushing for updates all the time.

There was also just kind of a gentleman's agreement about the president's private life, and that did last beyond the Wilson administration. But once he got sick in October of 1919, there really kind of was a grace period where he was allowed to not be seen in public, and no one was really pushing for access immediately.

I will say that a key situation at the time was that the 25th Amendment didn't exist. And so, the mechanism by which the vice president would have stepped in, was very blurry. It's not clear what was meant by incapacity. It was not meant- it was not clear who would declare that the president was not able to fulfill his duties. It wasn't clear whether the vice president would become the actual president or the acting president. It's just really murky language, which is why the 25th Amendment was ultimately passed after Kennedy's assassination to clear up some of that nuance.

So, there were some statutory reasons why she was able to do it. There were some social reasons why she was able to do it. There were some media reasons why she was able to do it, and she did have the collaboration of his chief of staff and his doctor. And so had one of them fought her on it, it would have been a lot harder. And, also, his cabinet, who knew more than others because they were executive branch and he wasn't calling cabinet meetings, were invested in keeping his administration a success. And so, they were purposely turning a blind eye most of the time. There was one cabinet officer, Secretary of State Lansing, who did start asking the hard questions because he was frustrated with the Wilson administration and had been back in Paris and was in fact on the verge of resigning when Wilson had his stroke. But he was the only one.

And what was fascinating to me was even once the press did start asking questions by the spring of 1920, when the president has not been seen in public in months. This is not just not giving press conferences. This is not being seen in public. There started to be some articles about, you know, Mrs. Wilson is controlling access to the president, Mrs. Wilson is acting as executive, there's a petticoat government, and not all of those articles were critical. Many of them praised her. Mrs. Wilson is controlling the presidency and isn't that wonderful? What a fabulous wife he has. How lucky he is to have such a devoted spouse. And that just never in a million years would happen today.

Alan: Yeah. It seems like with Pat, the problem was almost the opposite. She was cut off from the president rather than the other way around. Would you agree with that?

Heath: Oh, yes. I mean, so different. She was, and she's always, criticized for being mysterious and which is thus the title of the book, which I see the whole book as sort of an excavation of that image, which is not true at all. But in this time period of Watergate, she was truly so isolated from what was going on by this labyrinthian system that Haldeman had implemented. I mean, Henry Kissinger would have trouble getting through to the president under Haldeman. There were multiple Byzantine ways you would have to get to him and Haldeman would call it or not. And he and Ehrlichman were like the Praetorian Guard-this is what people called them, like the mythological Cerberus, like a guard dog at the door.

So, I mean, there was no way. It was the opposite problem. Even legislative aides like senators, people who needed to see the president were not getting to see him. Now I am not an expert on Watergate and the scandal, but there was definitely such a system set up. So as for people who really did need to get in, couldn't get in, and the family could get in to see him, of course, for personal reasons, but there was no policy discussion at all. And Pat Nixon did not want be part of that, and there was no evidence she ever really knew much about what was going on until the very end.

Alan: Yeah. Well, I wanna step away for a moment now in the interest of time and go to a question that's not part of my similarities and differences framework, but instead

thinking about how Edith and Pat interacted with other first ladies, can you perhaps comment on how those interactions were, what they were like? And maybe we start with Edith.

Rebecca: When Warren Harding was elected in 1920 and the Wilsons had to leave the White House, they didn't have anywhere to live. Edith had been here in Washington, and she had sold her little townhouse in Dupont Circle. And Wilson never had a house. He was an academic, lived on campus at Princeton, and then in the New Jersey governor's mansion. So, they decided to stay here in Washington. They were the first first couple to do that. Since then, the Obamas have done it. And when they bought a house here in Washington, and Wilson only lived for 3 more years, Edith outlived him by 37 years. She lived till 1961, and here she was in town. And so, she had every incoming first lady to tea, regardless of party, to basically say, I know it's a crazy job. You've got a friend.

And it was not a, you know, come kiss the ring of the grand dame moment. It was just, I'm here if you need someone to talk through this ridiculous job with. And she had first ladies she liked better than others, and certainly she was always an incredibly loyal Democrat, and so she was a party creature in terms of who she really connected with. But she invited them all to the house on S Street to have a cup of tea with her.

Alan: Wow.

Heath: Yes, I love that about Edith. You know, that's so cool to know you've got somebody who understands it. That's such a unique position to be in. It's like she almost helps create this sort of sisterhood of first ladies, which is the way it should be.

So Pat, to go back, Pat had such a long career along with her husband in politics that, of course, she met a number of first ladies. Pat never had a bad word to say about anybody except for Bess Truman. And I know she—if Pat was around, she would say, "Please do not say that." She would hate this, but it was so interesting. There were letters between Pat and her best friend, Helene Drown, where she talks about, "Oh god, I don't want go to the Senate wives meeting, but I guess I'm going to have to just to show up for Bess." But if you go back, the reason is because of the Alger Hiss trial, and President Truman always denied Alger Hiss was a spy. Richard Nixon eventually proves, indeed, Alger Hiss is a spy. Truman will never admit this. So, there was a lot of enmity for a while between Truman and Nixon, thus, I think it's translated to the first ladies on a much milder plane. So, I found that amusing, and it humanizes Pat because she's so, such a nice, warm person. There is literally no one else I ran across she ever said a bad word about.

Rebecca: That was not true of Edith. Let me say. Yeah. She was not afraid to say a bad word about plenty of people.

Heath: I know. I always think about that pillow: "If you have nothing nice to say, come sit by me." I love that. Edith and Alice Roosevelt—they would, I'm sure, get on well. They sound like a lot of fun. But yes. So, there was Bess, and then there was Mamie Eisenhower. And Pat and Mamie also have somewhat of a fraught relationship at first because of the fund crisis and the Checkers speech. And President Eisenhower lets Richard Nixon dangle for quite a while and isn't sure if he's gonna take him on as the VP nominee or not until the fund crisis speech is a huge success. And then he's like, you're my boy. You're the VP. So Pat is furious because the Eisenhowers have just let him dangle and let them all put their entire lives on television for everybody to see it, which is very embarrassing. So, she and Mamie have a bit of a frosty relationship, but not for long.

Mamie is actually very friendly to her, invites her a lot to the White House, helps train her on more of the housekeeping of the White House because Mamie likes to sleep till noon and watch "As the World Turns." Mamie is not what we would call a working first lady, but she is very much of a military wife who is very good at household order and keeping order and looking nice and all that. So, she does, I think, train Pat in some of the more household management parts and is very warm to her.

And then, of course, David Eisenhower, her grandson, ends up marrying Julie Eisenhower, Pat's daughter. So, then the two women become very close. And when President Eisenhower dies, the Nixons always have Mamie to everything. So, they're very close after that. So, these are the two first lady relationships I look at the most. And then, by the way, Jackie Kennedy and Pat Nixon, they are put up against each other in the 1960 race. They are friendly with each other. The Nixons were invited to the Kennedys' wedding. And, surprising to many, Jack Kennedy and Richard Nixon were actually friends and stayed friends their entire lives, which is hard to even imagine in the climate we live in now. But despite losing the '60 election, they stay friends and Jackie and Pat [are] very friendly. And Pat also invites Jackie to the White House with no press to see the unveiling of the presidential portrait and her portrait, which I cannot imagine any first lady now doing that without the press knowing. But Pat, make sure it happens because Jackie asked her to, wants a private showing, and Pat makes it happen.

Alan: Yeah. Well, I hate for our conversation to end, but I do wanna end it, just, to make sure of one thing, that you're not both planning the same book right now. So, what are you working on right now? What's the next thing for both of you? Rebecca?

Heath: You go ahead, Rebecca.

Rebecca: I am delighted to tell you I'm actually working on a biography of a new first lady. I have a contract with Viking to write a biography of Rose Cleveland. Rose Cleveland was Grover Cleveland's sister, and she served as his first lady for, like, a minute before he married his 21-year-old ward, Frances Folsom. But actually, in Rose's case, being first lady is about the 10th most interesting thing about her. She was gay. Her

love letters survived. She was an entrepreneur. She was the new woman and proud of it. She published four books; she started an artist colony on an island off the coast of Maine. She was one of the first developers of Naples, Florida. She was a heroic nurse in World War I. Like, she just lived all of these extraordinary lives in the 1890s, 1910s. I am still at the beginning of the research side of this, so stay tuned, but I'm very excited about Rose Cleveland.

Alan: I'm excited about that. I will tell you just recently, I taught a course here in Oak Ridge where I live, Oak Ridge, Tennessee for the Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning. And I did it on the first ladies, and I included Rose. And I did a whole section because people don't know about her. And I said, someone needs to write a really good book on her, and you're doing it. So, I'm excited about this.

Rebecca: So cool.

Heath: I cannot wait to read this book. I'm gonna be first in line. I mean, Rebecca and I've talked just a little about it, but wow. Since last time we talked, there's even more. That's amazing. She sounds fascinating.

I am tentative, I'm not positive. I shouldn't even be really saying I'm doing this, but I think I might write about a man this time. I am, yeah. I don't think Rebecca's heard this yet. So, this is shocking, Alan, because I've always done women's history. That's been my whole career, and it has to be a really exceptional man for me to—no offense—but for me to be super-interested in doing it, I am thinking about doing Tom Wolfe, the writer, not Thomas Wolfe, but Tom Wolfe from Richmond, Virginia, my hometown. He wrote *Bonfire of the Vanities*, *The Right Stuff*, all of that. Not a literary biography, but his life and times, particularly the seventies. He coined the term the "'Me' Decade" and is an absolutely hilarious social commentator along the lines of, like, Dickens or Balzac, but for the 1970s. So I am hoping to do that if the family will agree. That's what I'm hoping to do. But next time I talk, I may be doing something else. Who knows?

Rebecca: See, see, Heath always writes about, well, other than Winnie Davis, writes about people who have living relatives and people who remember them who are still alive. I deal strictly with the dead. I'm not interested in having to negotiate living memory in any way.

Heath: That's right. All the biographers say better off dead.

Alan: I'm seeing a different side of both of you now. I am. I know.

Heath: This is the extra part that you put on the, you know, the secret minutes of the podcast.

Alan: Now let's really talk. So, thank you both, Heath and Rebecca. Really, just a terrific conversation. I enjoyed it so much and enjoyed both of the books. Just terrific. And I wanna thank everyone for listening. To keep up to date on all the episodes of American FLOTUS, just go to FLARE-net.org or to AmericanPOTUS.org, or look for episodes on your favorite podcast platform. We so appreciate your support.

I'll see you next time on American FLOTUS.