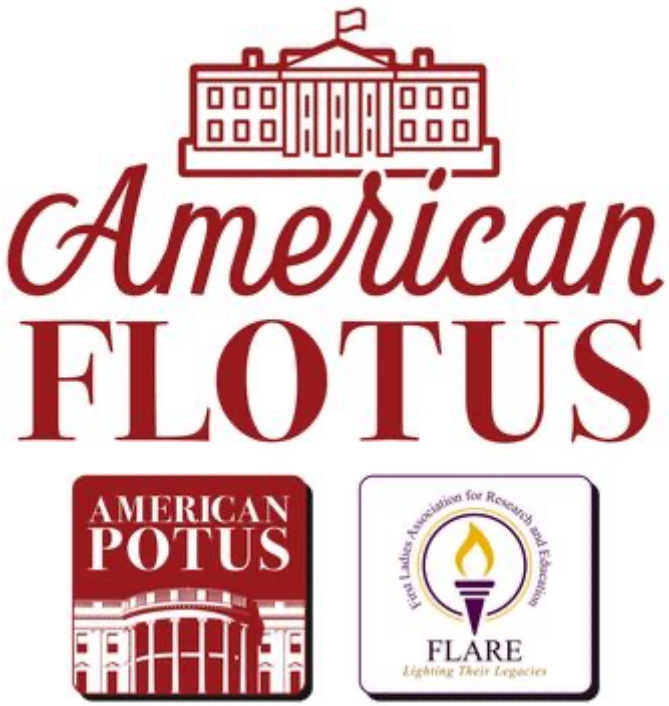

American FLOTUS with Jody Natalle: The Soft Diplomacy of Jacqueline Kennedy

Alan Lowe [00:00:00] Welcome to American FLOTUS, a podcast built from the partnership of the First Lady's Association for Research and Education and American POTUS. We're dedicated to advancing an understanding of the office of the First Lady. I'm your host, Alan Lowe, and I'm so pleased to be joined in this episode by Dr. Elizabeth, or Jody, Natalle. Jody serves as an associate professor emerita at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, where her research specialization has focused on areas like Gender, Communications, and a topic we like very much: the First Ladies. As an award-winning scholar and teacher, Jody is consulted and taught around the world and is widely published.

Now, today we'll discuss her fascinating book, *Jacqueline Kennedy and the Architecture of First Lady Diplomacy*. Jody, thanks so much for joining us on American FLOTUS.

Dr. Elizabeth "Jody" Natalle: Thank you for having me, Alan. It's a pleasure to be here.

Alan Lowe: I've said this in episodes of FLOTUS, I believe before and certainly on American POTUS, I grew up in a house where the Kennedys were "it". My family loved Jack and Jackie Kennedy, so any chance I get to learn more about them, which I certainly did from this book, I appreciate. Your central theme is so fascinating about Jackie Kennedy. A side to her, frankly, I didn't know that much about, and that' that she created a model of soft diplomacy for future first ladies.

So, let's start with the definition of what soft diplomacy is.

Dr. Elizabeth "Jody" Natalle: Soft diplomacy actually comes out of the political science lexicon. It wasn't until the 1990s that Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye, coined the first term "soft power", talking about it as a practice during the Cold War where nations were trying to entice other nations in the Cold War with democracy or communism in an ideological struggle to side with them, so it was a direct alternative to military coercion or economic programs. So, when we talk about soft diplomacy now, we think about it in a much broader way, as persuasive strategies that could be emanating from the government itself, institutions, or cultural practices.

Even today, social media sites and Hollywood films would be considered soft diplomacy because these are things that often symbolize the power of democracy, and importantly, the kinds of freedom and moral values that go with democracy in our case.

Alan Lowe: I see. It's so fascinating, this concept, and how Jackie Kennedy utilized it, expressed it, and grew it as First Lady. But let's think real quick about the First Ladies before her. And you mentioned this in the book: did any of those First Ladies play any significant role in foreign policy or diplomacy?

Jody Natalle: We can go all the way back to Dolley Madison to talk about soft diplomacy. She was the person who orchestrated social events, or what we might call state events, including her husband's wedding, inaugural dinner, et cetera. As ways in which she brought people together, that would be ambassadors, foreign ministers, people in the Washington circles of the government, and those who came from abroad. Then if we bump up into more modern times, we see Edith Wilson traveling with the president to France for the Treaty of Versailles, and of course, most people are aware of Eleanor Roosevelt's work as the eyes and ears of FDR during World War Two.

So, we do have a precedent for soft diplomacy.

Alan Lowe: So, what prepared Jackie when she became First Lady? What experiences in her background give her that foundation for those diplomatic abilities which she showed right away?

Jody Natalle: In the book, I argue that Jackie is really the most international of all of our first ladies, and that even includes the fact that our first lady-elect, Melania Trump, is foreign born. But Jackie came out of an interesting and rich combination of class privilege and connections to social networks, both at home and in Europe. She was well traveled, spending a year studying abroad in France when she was in college, and her degree was in French Literature. And importantly, not only was she a Francophile, but she spoke fluent French. Also, she was a studied speaker of Spanish, had some knowledge and skill in Italian, and she even had a few phrases up her sleeve in Polish. So, her combination of upbringing and access to privilege certainly put her in a position to have the kind of background needed to easily navigate circles of diplomacy.

Alan Lowe: And as she's navigating those circles as first lady, who among her staff, or the present staff, supported her in those efforts?

Jody Natalle: Jackie was very clever in the way in which she put her staff together and then synthesized the people who were working with JFK. So, from her own school experience, she brought in Letitia "Tish" Baldridge as the social secretary, whom of course, worked for both the president and the first lady during those times as protocol dictated. But Tish Baldridge had gone to school with Jackie, and she had worked previously in embassies, in Rome and Paris, and she had worked for Tiffany and Company.

Jackie's press secretary, who was the first official press secretary that any First Lady had, Pam Turnure, had worked in the Belgian embassy and was, again, a fluent speaker of French. Pierre Salinger, who was President Kennedy's press secretary, was a trained classical pianist who spoke French. McGeorge Bundy in National Security was a speaker of French. Then behind the scenes, Arthur Schlesinger, the Harvard historian, and people from the State Department, like Andrews Biddle Duke the chief of protocol and Don Barnes who was the Spanish interpreter from the State Department, all came together to help Mrs. Kennedy behind the scenes in both her preparation and her execution of many of her strategies and soft diplomacy.

Alan Lowe: Let's talk about some of the leaders Jackie met with over the years and starting with French president, Charles de Gaulle. How does she contribute to the President's goals with De Gaulle?

Jody Natalle: This is a really interesting question because de Gaulle probably epitomizes the problems that JFK had. Given his age, he was the youngest of the world leaders at the time and President de Gaulle was probably one of the older world leaders at the time, so there was this huge age gap between President Kennedy and people like Prime Minister McMillan and Charles de Gaulle. They often saw him as an upstart and a man who was willing to test ideas that were not necessarily tried and true. When the Bay of Pigs happened, this immediately set up red flags for people like Charles de Gaulle. Jackie's role as a Francophile and a person who could speak the language, while JFK could not speak any other language fluently other than English, was to smooth the way between the leaders and set the stage to create a warm communication climate for the very difficult political negotiations that these world leaders had to do at this tense time that we now call the Cold War. So, part of her job was to decrease that age gap and make that go away, so to speak, as she could.

Alan Lowe: And he showed how she did that so well with De Gaulle and with Macmillan in England, but she saw limited success with Khrushchev. So, what were the reasons for that? Was it just the tense nature of the relationship, or was there something else?

Jody Natalle: Well, the intensity of the relationship was probably the first thing to notice, as you point out, because the two major players in the Cold War were, of course, the Soviet Union and the United States. So, we've got these two figureheads representing, and I use capital letters to talk about Democracy and Communism in my book, as a way to emphasize the ideological war that was going on. But literally we had nuclear warheads positioned around the world here that could be pressed at really any moment in time, should things get out of hand. So, Khrushchev had the Russian style of negotiation that's well known: It's a kind of blustering, move it forward, call your bluff kind of approach. Where cultural differences were a major obstacle in the negotiations, there were also, for Jackie's part in this whole interpersonal situation, attitudes toward women. For many years, and still to this day, are a number of cultures around the world, China and Russia would probably be our biggest examples, where diplomacy is not conducted with women in mind.

It's a man's game and attitudes toward women were negative, so wives did not participate in state events or foreign travel. So, Jackie had to find a way to charm this man in the face of all these pressures that were present in the situation. It was very difficult and she had a very tough time with it.

Alan Lowe: I know you talk about a trip she took to India and Pakistan, which I didn't know anything about and was really fascinating, with her sister, Lee, in

1962. Can you tell us about that trip and how successful she was? What were her goals there first and how successful was she?

Jody Natalle: Well, the trip to India and Pakistan, I claim in the book, would really be the high point of her diplomatic manifestation of skills. I talked earlier about how, on trips to Canada and then to Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, France, Austria, Australia, Jackie was perfecting her ability to use interpersonal relationship development, her language skills, her use of fashion diplomacy, and cultural knowledge to demonstrate ways to create openings for the more difficult negotiations that went government to government.

By the time she got to India and Pakistan in 1962, you recall from history that at that time, India had only recently emerged as an independent country. The country had been under the thumb of the Brits and divided in a very messy war-like situation into India and Pakistan. There were nuclear capabilities, and China was breathing down their necks for influence. JFK had had a very difficult time trying to break through with Prime Minister Nehru, who was a tough nut and was not a person who was communicative by nature. He was the quiet type that used his strategy of silence in a way to impede communication. Jackie was invited by Nehru earlier, when Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi, had visited the United States, to come to India. Jackie's sister had also been at dinner at Hyannis Port, and they decided, "you know what, let's go", and they built it as a goodwill ambassadorial kind of trip. This is the first time that Jackie is actually serving, not in name but symbolically, as the surrogate for President Kennedy. She goes and her goal is really to stabilize the region and the relationships that JFK has with the Pakistani leader, Ayub Khan, and with Minister Nehru. This is what the trip was ostensibly all about, and she had a heck of a time, but she brought it off beautifully as she tried to navigate the two countries, the two prime ministers, the two ambassadors, and all the cultural activities that she was trying to give equal time to as she was being taken around India and Pakistan.

Alan Lowe: Really? What a challenge and what a success for her. And you mentioned some of the tools she used there and elsewhere. Things like her relationship with the press, fashion diplomacy, and so forth. Perhaps we turn first to fashion diplomacy. How do you define that and how did she utilize it?

Jody Natalle: I've been talking about fashion diplomacy long before we started seeing that term in the *New York Times*. Most people mistakenly have viewed Jacqueline Kennedy as a style icon because of the so-called 'Jackie look'. The clothes that she created as part of that look, part of her state wardrobe with her designer, Oleg Cassini, were splashed all over the fashion magazines.

Of course, *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* still refer to the Jackie look as part of the historical legacy that her clothes set up. Very astutely, what we want to say about fashion diplomacy is that it is not something that's simply on the surface and to be dismissed. Rather, it's a coded form of nonverbal communication that people, and in this case Jackie, used in lieu of public speaking or other forms of verbal communication to make symbolic statements about the notion of democracy and to honor. As well as the situation at hand regarding the countries involved in the state event, the travel, or whatever the diplomatic situation was.

So, one of the ways in which she and Cassini set up this coding speech had to do with the use of decoration on the outfits. For example, Cassini was very sure of himself about Jackie needing to project the military prowess of the United States because, in spite of the fact that we are a democracy of course, good democracies are undergirded by strong militaries. So, the use of Welts, double rows of buttons, and cockades were all part of the decoration of the suits and the gowns that she wore as part of her state wardrobe.

Alan Lowe: Well, it's so fascinating about every bit thought out and planned. What about her approach to the press, both domestic and foreign, as she's undertaking these diplomatic events?

Jody Natalle: Let's remember that the Kennedys are the first media couple when we start thinking about the totality of coverage of television and radio at this point in time. As the first television couple, they are under the glare of the lights and the television cameras now, in a way that prior presidents were not. So, the press became extremely important and part of the press development was to begin covering the first lady as noteworthy news. Although she was still being covered on the society pages, reporters, primarily women reporters, were actually being assigned to cover the White House. And of course, there were two small children in the White House who made great news stories, but Jackie was very protective of these children who were under the age of five at this point, and she wanted her privacy. So, Jackie had a lot of trouble with the domestic press as she made attempts to give maximum information in her polite way with minimal self-disclosure or exposure. This, of course, didn't always work out well, juxtaposed with Jackie's absolute delight in speaking in French, in particular, to the foreign press. She was not averse at all to doing interviews, both on radio and televised, in the French language for reporters from the French press, both here and when they were in Paris, and at other opportunities that she had to give press interviews to foreign reporters and press agents.

Alan Lowe: I really envy that ability she had to be so fluent. That's really, really amazing and I'm sure it is so effective. What about aside from the press?

Her engagement with the public? You talk about that in the book, how she engaged with the public during these trips abroad, how did she handle that and what were some common themes that you saw in her public statements?

Jody Natalle: Well, it's interesting, Alan, because in effect, Jackie never actually had one on one with public crowds in the way that first ladies often do today where there are orchestrated visits and or people are brought in that are filmed with first ladies today. Jackie never stepped over that line into the crowds in the way that we think about it today. Although there were times when she was caught up in a crowd, particularly in the India and Pakistan trip. To start with, I should mention the motorcades at the time. The limousine had a bubble top that is this clear bulletproof top, and the motorcade running from the airport into the center of the cities was often a long distance, 10 to 20 miles. At the time, everyone wanted to see President Kennedy and Jackie arrive. In South America and in Europe, the bubble top cars would be put into play, and Jackie would be in a car with the first lady or her host in her car, the president would be in another car, and people would line these roots with flags, waving, confetti and stuff, signs, and they would be cheering.

I'm talking by the time she got to Mexico in 1962, there were literally millions of people lining these motorcade routes. So that was one of the ways in which she engaged in the public. Another way in which she did engage the public was she orchestrated visits to museums, children's hospitals, and orphanages where there were often large crowds of people who were waiting to welcome her at these events. Sometimes she broke free and walked over to the rope line and would speak to people or have her picture taken. But for the most part, the crowds and the public itself would surround the Kennedys while the cameras were running, and then those images would be played on the evening news all over the world.

Alan Lowe: We know, in addition to those trips all around the world that she took, the President and First Lady utilized state dinners here at home to advance diplomatic goals, like all presidents. How did you see that playing out in the Kennedy Administration and how effective was the first lady at helping propel those dinners forward?

Jody Natalle: Let's talk about the White House before we talk about the dinners. Jackie's signature agenda was the restoration of the White House. It was not in perfect shape when they moved in and her background in design, art, and culture put her in an excellent position to do this restoration work. Part of her goal in bringing the White House up to museum quality standards was to set the White House up as the global symbol of democracy. The White House itself

becomes the site where these cultural state affairs were being staged. So, over this course of the three years, something like 66 heads of state visited the White House and over 43 state dinners were staged. This is incredible. The White House, as the site, then the Kennedys in their gorgeous evening clothes, then the symphony orchestras, and the guests of honor. All of these things coming together for an evening of what we would call soft diplomacy, symbolize the friendship between the countries and the idea of using art as a kind of symbolic moment of civil society. Again, symbolizing freedom and democracy became part of the way in which relationships were developed.

Another strategy that the Kennedys used that was so clever: they would have their guests of honor often come upstairs to the private quarters, either before or after dinner, and Jackie would do something interesting. She would display gifts that may have been given by the visiting dignitaries on a little table just as you entered into their private living room. The guests would see that their gifts were on display and they would immediately have something that all could talk about. Then, often the children would be brought in to meet the guests who were very interested in John and Caroline. Frequently, dolls would be brought as gifts to Caroline.

So you can see where these kinds of events, both private and behind the scenes upstairs and publicly downstairs with these rooms all decked out for a hundred guests at a time, would create these situations that absolutely put everyone at ease so that the next day when JFK would have to go into these difficult negotiations with these other world leaders, everybody was in basically quite a good mood from the night before.

Alan Lowe: Now, I want to make sure I heard this correctly. Did you say 43 state dinners?

Jody Natalle: 43.

Alan Lowe: Oh my gosh.

Jody Natalle: Yeah. We're talking 12 to 14 a year and, if you think about their schedule, Jackie Kennedy would be what I would call, peripatetic. She lived out of suitcases in some ways. Jackie was in the White House, mostly, Tuesdays through Friday at noon. They had the country house that they rented in the countryside in Virginia. Jackie and the children would often drive out on a Friday afternoon and the president would helicopter over on the weekend. Jackie and the kids would not return to the white house until Mondays because she had boarded her horses out in the Virginia countryside. They would relax

over the weekends to give Kennedy time to decompress from the work of the presidency during the week. The state dinners had to be orchestrated usually between a Tuesday and a Thursday night during the week time. Look at the amount of stress and workload that the White House staff and Jackie's staff had to keep up with during this time period, it was phenomenal.

Alan Lowe: I was just thinking that they must have been extraordinarily well staffed. That's the only way to make that work.

Jody Natalle: I think they were completely exhausted, which is one reason why Tish Baldridge left the position of social secretary just after the spring of 1963 when Jackie publicly stated that she was pregnant with Patrick. Nancy Tuckerman, Jackie's close friend again from boarding school days, came in as the second social secretary for the last part of the Kennedy administration.

Alan Lowe: I see. So, you paint a picture of Jackie Kennedy that, frankly, I was not that aware of before. I really appreciate you doing that, opening up this door on Jackie Kennedy. You also talk about First Ladies who have followed that model since then. How have you seen those first ladies after Jackie following or modifying her model of soft diplomacy?

Jody Natalle: I just finished writing a chapter on First Ladies in International Diplomacy for a new book that's coming out this month called *The Cambridge Companion to First Ladies*. In that chapter, I extend the work that I originally started here with this book that we're talking about today. I claim that the five strategies of interpersonal language, fashion, culture, and state continue to this day, but there are two things I want to talk about that are really significantly different from Jackie's day.

One is the notion of surrogacy. I told you that, on the 1962 trip to India and Pakistan, the word surrogacy was not used. It was kind of a subliminal thing that was happening. We begin by looking at Rosalynn Carter's trip to South America. President Carter literally proclaimed, in public, that Rosalynn would be taking his place as she toured countries in South America to put forth his foreign policy and his Human Rights Agenda as part of the framing for American foreign policy. This would be a really significant development in the power of first ladies to speak for their husbands. Since that time, we have seen other first ladies, particularly Hillary Clinton, use the notion of surrogacy as a way to step in for their husbands. Then the other issue that has become, what I would call a sixth strategy of soft diplomacy, would literally be issue-based diplomacy. At this moment in time, First Ladies, including Laura Bush's work with Afghanistan, Michelle Obama's work with international education for girls,

Hillary Clinton's work with human rights, these are all issues of diplomacy that have direct relationships with foreign policy coming out of the presidency and the state department themselves.

Alan Lowe: Really, really interesting and beyond the *Cambridge Companion*, which I can't wait to read. Are you working on anything else right now? What's next for you?

Jody Natalle: Well, I just finished writing a chapter on Melania Trump. This is for a book that Molly Wertheimer at Penn State is putting together on First Ladies and their autobiographies and memoirs. Mrs. Trump came late to the memoir game and the book was about ready to go to press, so we needed to add that chapter.

So, Molly and I have put our heads together for that, but I'm doing two things here in my time of retirement, which I'm enjoying very much because I can make my own calendar as I see fit.

One of the things I'm working on is a manuscript that I started some time ago on the way, in which first ladies use power as what I call co-rhetors, meaning co-persuaders. First ladies are not elected, so they don't have legitimate power per se. What they need to do is to work with other people who do have legitimate power, as they might want to put policy issues into play. I've devised a model of that, and I'm working on it. The other thing I'm doing right now, as I begin to age, is to mentor younger people, younger scholars. So, I make a lot of effort to contact younger scholars and talk to them. Through a lot of my work with FLARE, I will pull those scholars forward and get them to talk about their work and encourage their work.

Alan Lowe: That's terrific and FLARE is such a terrific organization. I'm really proud to be associated with them and I'm happy, Jody, that you made time in your calendar to talk with me today. Thank you so much for a terrific conversation.

Jody Natalle: Well, it's been my pleasure. Thank you, Alan.

Alan Lowe: And I want to thank all of you for listening. To keep up to date on all the episodes of American FLOTUS, please go to flare-net.org or Americanpotus.org or look for our episodes on your favorite podcast platform. We appreciate your support and join us again next time on American FLOTUS.