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Mary Todd Lincoln: Influence and impact on the Civil War in the White House

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Mary Todd Lincoln: Influence and Impact on the Civil War in the White House

An Honors College Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

by Selena Marie St. Andre

April 2018

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Introduction

Mary Todd Lincoln served as First Lady of the United States during one of the most tumultuous periods in American history. Her husband, Abraham Lincoln, led the Union to unity with the Confederate States and is remembered today as the Great Emancipator. His wife, however, is chiefly remembered as going insane after his death, if she is remembered at all. Most people today do not think twice about the impact that Mary had while in the White House in the same way they recognize the accomplishments of other early First Ladies, such as Martha Washington or Dolly Madison. Mrs. Lincoln, in fact, had a profound influence on the Civil War during her time in the White House.

Politically and socially ambitious, Mary used influences and lessons from her childhood to get involved in politics in a way that many nineteenth century women did not. Apart from advancing her own political beliefs, she used her connections to influence Lincoln's career and helped shape his presidency. She also renovated the White House, attempting to solidify it as a symbol of national strength and unity. Finally, she participated in charitable organizations throughout Washington, D.C. and visited the hospitals of wounded soldiers in the capital. Through all of this, the press, public, and government criticized her faults, labeling her as overly ambitious, extravagant, and cold. She had to navigate the public and private spheres of her life as she served beside Lincoln during the war. Her influence on Lincoln's presidency goes largely unnoticed today, but Mary Lincoln was an active and involved First Lady, despite her many faults. Lincoln's administration would not have been the same without her by his side through the good and bad.¹

¹ While this thesis will primarily focus on Mary's time as First Lady, much of her personality and decisions were the result of her experiences from her childhood. While there is some examination of her childhood, it is primarily used

as a background tool to better understand the arguments presented in each chapter. In addition, there are numerous aspects of Mary's life as First Lady that have not been discussed in this project. For more complete and general studies of Mary see: Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner, *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972) for a study of Mary's life in chronological order paired directly with her own letters and Jean H. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), which is considered the major reference on Mary's life to date. For an extensive, although not exhaustive, listing of primary and secondary sources that discuss Mary and includes short comments on each source see Jason Emerson, "Mary Lincoln: An Annotated Bibliography," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 103, no. 2 (Summer, 2010): 180-235, accessed August 18, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25701283>.

Ambition

Mary Lincoln, despite the stereotype of nineteenth century women, led a rather ambitious life.² From her early childhood Mary was exposed to ambitious role models in Lexington, Kentucky. This influence ended up shaping her life as a teenager and well into adulthood. The people around her knew she was ambitious and desired to get involved in politics. Elizabeth Edwards, one of Mary's sisters, described the young Mary Todd as "an extremely ambitious woman" in an account to William Herndon in 1887.³ The drive Edwards observed shows Mary desired her life to be more meaningful than that of a typical nineteenth century woman.

As a teenager, Mary's ambition was most noticeable in her desire to continue her education past the normal years an upper-class girl would usually receive. Exposure to a greater amount of education than normal meant Mary was regarded by those around her as extremely well read, which in turn gave her an edge in society. As a young woman, Mary found herself drawn to men who had the potential for a significant future. Her eventual husband, Abraham Lincoln, had this potential as a lawyer with a subtler public ambition than Mary, but ambition none the less. Together, Mary and Abraham created a political career for the future president. Mary advised and encouraged his career while attempting to exert direct influence on elections by utilizing her extensive social circle, convincing them to vote for Lincoln. This influence continued through Lincoln's reelection campaign in 1864. Mary helped push him to campaign

² This stereotype is of a woman that prefers to lead a quiet life at home. Women during the nineteenth century were still seen as Republican Mothers - their priority in life, and only form of political action, was to be raising the next generation of American men. Later in the century, Republican Motherhood would transform into Republican Teaching as women began to dominate the teaching industry. For further information about the role and perceptions of women throughout American history see: Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997). For a discussion about womanhood during the early to mid-1800s see: Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, Part 1 (Summer 1966), 151-174.

³ William H. Herndon, *The Hidden Lincoln: From the Life and Papers of William H. Herndon*, Emanuel Hertz, ed. (New York: The Viking Press, 1938), 374.

for the presidency, so much so that Abraham's first reaction to the news of his victory was to run home and tell her, "Mary, Mary *we* are elected!"⁴ Her influence on Lincoln in the White House led to public criticism and created enemies within the administration.⁵

Before arriving at the White House as First Lady, Mary channeled her ambition into the activities most accepted for nineteenth century upper-class women – social events and receptions.⁶ This public version of Mary was often praised for her excellent skills as a hostess, yet she was heavily criticized for her extravagance in the White House when it came to social events and obligations. These criticisms eventually tarnished Mary's legacy as the public remembered her as one of the most unpopular First Ladies.⁷

Mary's ambitious spirit created a potential liability for Lincoln's presidency, since she often overstepped the boundaries in her role as the First Lady. This transgression of the role led to the disapproval of many in the government, including Lincoln at times. Despite the liability that she could be, Lincoln valued her input during his career. Although her actions and influence often led to criticism and disapproval, Mary's intentions were often good. Oftentimes, her ambition took on a life of its own that led to consequences she had no intention to create.⁸

Through her education she learned to control her ambition while Lincoln's entrance onto the political world stage taught her to use this ambition to her advantage. Socially, Mary used the

⁴ Frank J. Williams, "Mary Todd Lincoln 'On the Wing Of Expectation': Wife, Mother and Political Partner," *Lincoln Herald* 102, no. 4 (Dec. 2000): 173.

⁵ Jean H. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 162.

⁶ The traditional role of women was understood to be a private role as compared to men. Higher class women were generally expected to open their homes to others through parties and receptions. This showed that the woman of the house could rule her family's private sphere while her husband sought dominance in the public sphere. Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 67-70.

⁷ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, xiv, 196-197; Kenneth J. Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, Richard W. Etulain, Sara Vaughn Gabbard, and Sylvia Frank Rodrigue, eds. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 53-54.

⁸ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 134-136.

formalities of the nineteenth century to influence political gain and support for Lincoln throughout his career. The enemies and scandals that came from her ambition never fazed Mary enough to convince her to draw back her determination and influence in any significant way, allowing her to ultimately have a more powerful position in the White House than she is remembered for.⁹

Mary's drive began long before she met Lincoln and would not have grown so wildly if not for her family life as a child. As a young girl, Mary's education helped to fuel her ambition. As a child, Mary stood out from the rest of her siblings in terms of the path she chose for her life. Whereas the average girl in Lexington, including all of Mary's sisters, only attended four or five years of school before retiring to perfect her social and home-making skills in preparation for marriage, Mary attended school for ten years. Her initial desire to further her education may have been inherited from her father, whose family consisted of philosophers, astronomers, and celebrated scholars. Mary's father was a forward-thinking upper-class man. He strongly believed daughters should receive a substantial education just as sons did because, although women could not lead armies or serve in the government, they would raise and inspire the next generation of leaders. This was the atmosphere of Mary's upbringing.¹⁰

⁹ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 134-136, 180.

¹⁰ Mary's father seems to have believed in the idea of Republican Motherhood. As more women were receiving increased education, the education was often viewed as necessary to make sure that women as mothers would be able to pass on more wisdom to their sons. In 1795, a commencement speaker commented on increasing female education saying that "women have the power to mold men's taste, manners, and conduct... and inspire men to noble deeds... [and] shape men's behavior 'conductive to the glory of the country.'" [1] This belief evolved into the nineteenth century and became even more important in rationalizing women's education, even though by the 1820s there were many more reasons to believe in female education. One rationalization stated that advanced education for women was important because "whatever concerns the culture of the female mind, extends ultimately to the formation of all minds..." [2] Although Mary's father may simply have been generally concerned about his daughter getting the best education, it is likely that the ideal of Republican Motherhood impacted his decisions concerning the advancement of her education beyond the years that he sisters received. [1] Margaret A. Nash, *Women's Education in the United States, 1780-1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 23; [2] Nash, *Women's Education*, 57; Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 34-37.

In 1827, Mary began her many years of schooling at Shelby Female Academy, better known in Lexington as Ward's after its director. When she started at Ward's, Mary began a journey undertaken by only a few thousand women before her. Her education at Ward's consisted of lessons in reading, writing, grammar, history, geography, religion, the sciences, and French. Also included were typical staples of a feminine education such as painting and sewing. Although the lessons were diverse and extensive, Ward's did not teach a deep understanding of necessary subjects. As a result, Mary's brothers still studied more math and languages than she did and her schooling was mainly considered by the patriarchy and societal standards to be of a higher value for her future as a wife and mother. In addition, Ward's treated school festivities similarly to the May Day celebration, where beauty was more important than knowledge.¹¹ While in school, a popular way to learn material in the nineteenth century was recitation of facts and texts. This technique of recitation attributed to Mary spending hours pouring over her assigned books while her siblings simply endured their required years of education. While her siblings had trouble in school or choose not to continue, Mary enjoyed and thrived in her academics.¹² Although it is not known exactly what her father and stepmother thought of her success in school, her father at least encouraged her studies financially and through accessibility, as the personal Todd family library contained substantial amounts of books and her father consistently paid an extra eight dollars in tuition to Ward's for Mary to continue her French lessons.¹³

¹¹ Included in these events was Andrew Jackson's visit to Lexington in 1828.

¹² Mary may have committed herself to her academics in order to gain useful political skills in addition to self-improvement, which experienced a strong movement during Mary's school years. During this time, journals, literature, educators, and family members openly encouraged women to pursue advanced education as a means of important self-improvement. Many women continued in school because of this very reason. Since Mary poured herself into her studies, it could be argued that she was a member of this movement as she desired to learn about different subjects and use her education in her public and private life. Nash, *Women's Education*, 62-63.

¹³ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 37-40.

In 1832, Mary enrolled in Madame Mentelle's boarding school instead of retiring from school to focus on her marriage eligibility. Mentelle's taught "every branch of good education, French if wanted" and the "most particular care is taken of morals, temper, and health."¹⁴ In addition, Mentelle's offered extensive out-of-class activities such as dances and French plays. Mentelle's had a profound effect on Mary's life. From the director, Charlotte Mentelle, Mary saw an example of female individualism and aristocratic snobbishness but she also learned to act – a talent she would keep handy throughout her entire life. Although her education was still grounded in the stereotypical lessons that a female with a pre-destined future would receive, Mary's desire to further educate herself and read beyond what was expected of her, is evidence that she took her education extremely seriously, just as her father's family had before her. This well-rounded education would serve her well during her search for a husband, her time as a political wife, and beyond her professional responsibilities. While expanding and sharpening her education at Mentelle's, the boarding school became Mary's true home in Lexington because of her distaste for her stepmother.¹⁵

Pouring herself into academics also came from a desire to spend as little time as possible at home with her stepmother, Elizabeth "Betsey" Todd. Heartbroken after the death of her mother in 1825, Mary resented her stepmother. They disagreed about almost everything and Mary often felt attacked and unwanted by Betsey. Attending school continually allowed Mary to spend as little time as possible in a home crowded with up to thirteen people, most of them Mary's half siblings. In addition, Betsey was at home more than Mary's father and thought it was important for a girl to be well versed in the education of a housewife rather than as an academic.

¹⁴ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 43.

¹⁵ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 40-46.

The encouragement that Mary received about her academic desires from her busy father was perhaps one of the main influences that led to her ambitious nature. While she did not see her father as much as her stepmother, his well-established career had an enormous impact on her desires for the future.¹⁶

As a good deal of educated young men in the nineteenth century did, Mary's father, Robert Smith Todd, studied law, although he never practiced due to the outbreak of the War of 1812. As economic depression set in after the war, Robert switched career paths, deciding instead to follow in his own father's footsteps by seeking public office. He quickly moved from a clerk in the Kentucky House of Delegates to an assemblyman and senator in the Kentucky capital of Frankfort. His positions as a bank president, landowner, and important Whig politician allowed him to amass a wealth that gave Mary and her siblings the comforts of a high-class lifestyle. With her father occupying a significant political office, Mary became exposed to politics very early in her life. Although her father's career may have sparked her interest in politics, it may have also resulted from the visits of three presidents to Lexington. Whatever the originating spark, Mary quickly became better versed in politics than most other women in Lexington. A passionate Whig, Mary used politics to her advantage by further increasing her knowledge and social standing. Growing up around the political ambitions of the men in and around Lexington, including her father and well-known politician Henry Clay, it is no surprise Mary became intellectually fascinated by democratic institutions. This ambition would eventually manifest itself in her personal life and in her life goals through her union with Abraham Lincoln.¹⁷

¹⁶ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 28-30, 37-41. See Hackenswith, C.W., "Family Background and Education of Mary Todd," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 69, no. 3 (July 1971), 187-196, accessed March 10, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23377291> for more details about Mary's early education and relationship with her father and step-mother.

¹⁷ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 13-15, 32, 59-60.

Long before Mary met Abraham, she was already envisioning a politically active future. Surrounded by powerful men her whole life, Mary spoke openly about her desire to marry an equally influential man; "...[she] often contended that she was destined to be the wife of some future President, said it in my presence in Springfield and said it in earnest."¹⁸ This recollection from Mary's sister, Elizabeth Edwards, demonstrated just how serious Mary was in her pursuit of a worthy husband. Could she have known Lincoln would become president one day? Of course not. Still, that did not deter her from her belief he would rise to that highest office. It is worth noting that the above quote was printed in William Herndon's book on Lincoln after his death. Herndon and Lincoln were law partners in Springfield but Herndon and Mary never got along. Apart from the above quote from Mary's sister, Herndon spends the majority of his book criticizing Mary whenever he can, even referring to her as "tyrannical" at one point.¹⁹ Although this bias, makes it difficult to trust his opinions, Herndon did interview many of Mary's family members for his book that provides insight into her and Lincoln's early relationship.

While in Springfield, Mary was faced with a romantic choice between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. Both men pursued Mary romantically and both were politically active within Illinois. Douglas, a Democratic senator that famously triumphed over Lincoln in the 1858 Senate election and the designer of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, had all the qualities of a future president. Similar to Lincoln, Douglas was a local hero in Illinois as a county prosecutor. As an incumbent in the Senate, Douglas was an easy choice for the 1858 election. His experience and reputation in government alone should have made the election straightforward; however,

¹⁸ Herndon, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 374.

¹⁹ Herndon, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 105. See Douglass L. Wilson, "William H. Herndon and Mary Todd Lincoln," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 1-26, accessed April 20, 2018, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.2629860.0022.203> for an in-depth look at the Herndon's tense relationship with Mary.

Lincoln's ability at public speaking played an enormous part in the elections, leading to some of the most famous debates in U.S. Senate election history. In the early 1840s, Douglas would become Lincoln's biggest rival for Mary's affection, and in 1860, for the presidency running as the Northern Democratic candidate. Douglas may have continued to be Lincoln's toughest rival throughout his presidency if only Douglas had lived past 1861. When he died in June 1861 of typhoid fever, Lincoln had the White House "draped in mourning and the President sincerely mourned the death of [the] Senator... he had proved himself a noble, magnanimous man, pledging his influence and fidelity to a rival who had, in love and politics, supplanted him."²⁰ While this event can be regarded as a kind gesture to an old challenger, it can also be viewed as ironic. Mary had the choice between life with Lincoln or Douglas, with Douglas the clear favorite to win the White House. In the end, both men eventually made it the White House, Lincoln as its incumbent and Douglas as its mourning décor.²¹

Despite Douglas' extensive experience in government, Mary saw something in Abraham that led her to choose him, explaining that she would marry "[He] who has the best prospects of being President."²² In fact, Abraham and Mary's relationship may have never survived if they both were not political ambitious. Complete opposites in many ways, their relationship should not have been possible. Mary came from a southern upper class, slaveholding family; whereas, Abraham grew up in a mostly northern poor family. Their personalities clashed as well. Mary was "quick, lively, gay, frivolous, it may be, and social, and loved glitter, show, and pomp and

²⁰ Elizabeth Todd Grimsley, "Six Months in the White House," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 19, no. 3/4 (Oct. 1926 – Jan. 1927): 60-61, accessed May 11, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40187553>.

²¹ "1858–1860: The Lincoln-Douglas Elections," in *Women, Work, and Worship in Lincoln's Country: The Dumville Family Letters*, Anne M. Heinz and John P. Heinz, eds. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 79-80, accessed December 19, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt18j8wjb.10>.

²² Herndon, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 374.

power”²³ as well as vocal, impatient, and somewhat unconcerned about the implications of her actions and words on social leaders when it really mattered. In contrast, Abraham was reserved, patient, and cared more about historical opinion than the social status quo around him. Overall, Abraham was much simpler in his mannerisms than Mary was and this difference between their personalities was a source of both strength and tension in their relationship. According to a relative, “Mrs. Lincoln came from the best of stock, and was raised like a lady. Her husband was her opposite, in origins, in education, in breeding, in everything.”²⁴ This stark contrast ended up eventually bringing them together after a brief falling out in 1841.²⁵

The event that brought them together just before their marriage ended up being an outlet of surprising and significant political expression for both Lincoln and Mary. In response to the collapse of the State Bank of Illinois in February 1842, the two joined forces, along with others, under the guidance of Simeon Francis to publish letters reprimanding James Shields in the *Sangamo Journal*. Shields, the Illinois state auditor, refused to accept bank notes from the failed bank as payment for taxes. Along with other Whigs, Lincoln and Mary wrote letters for the *Journal*. Known as the “Rebecca Letters” after the pseudonym used on many of the letters, many of the letters directly attacked Shields and his personal life. Eventually, Shields demanded to know the authors of the letters. Lincoln took the sole blame, despite not writing all the letters, and was subsequently challenged to a duel by Shields, which he accepted. Although the duel never actually happened, the incident had a profound effect on Lincoln and Mary. By being so involved in writing the Rebecca Letters, the two had to work closely together. Mary was given a political voice without the public knowing who was contributing to the letters, an action that no

²³ Herndon, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 374.

²⁴ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 61.

²⁵ Williams, ‘On the Wing Of Expectation,’: 171.

doubt was an enormous satisfaction to her political ambition. She was also able to truly begin her influence on Abraham's political career as the letters and potential duel had a significant impact on his political thought for the rest of his career. Most importantly for their distant relationship, Abraham demonstrated his commitment to Mary by choosing to defend her honor in his duel against Shields. By witnessing Mary's involvement in writing the letters, Abraham saw just how powerful Mary's intellect could be. In addition, Lincoln's decision to accept complete blame for the affair demonstrated to Mary that Lincoln was a man of outstanding character and substance, further proving to her that he not only had a bright future ahead but also had a strong grounding in his core values. Consequently, the Shields Affair significantly affected both of their political beliefs and brought them back together. Just a few months later, in November, Mary and Abraham were married in the Edwards' house in Springfield. Thus, the long journey to the White House and the beginning of Mary's political influence on Lincoln's career officially began.²⁶

A mere twenty years after their wedding, Lincoln would occupy the highest office in the land and Mrs. Lincoln would serve the United States as First Lady during a grueling war. In between their marriage and presidential tenure, the couple experienced various victories and defeats in Lincoln's political career. Throughout it all, Mary was by his side, supporting, encouraging, and advocating his goals. Her political goals arose from her desire to fulfill Lincoln's political potential. Her actions, whether successful or not, were intended to help her husband's career, presenting Lincoln in the best light possible to his supporters and rivals. The decades between their marriage and stay in the White House proved to be eye-opening for them

²⁶ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 44-45.

both as they learned how best to support one another and how to contend with public social demands.²⁷

Throughout their marriage, Mary's main concern was for Abraham and their children. When Lincoln ran for any office prior to the presidency, Mary supported him as best she could. In this way, she became his political partner early on. Despite being limited by nineteenth century gender roles, Mary utilized her considerable resources to secure her husband's ambitions. In other words, her political ambition only increased when paired with Lincoln's lofty ambitions. Throughout his career, Mary used her upper-class influence along with her political knowledge to help gain an edge for her husband. For example, in 1849 after Zachary Taylor was inaugurated president, Lincoln expected a government job in the administration after putting in extensive effort to get Taylor elected. The federal job that he sought was the General Land Commissioner of Illinois.²⁸ To do this, he asked friends to write to Taylor about his extensive qualifications for the position. Mary joined in on this letter writing campaign by reaching out to her own social circle to request that they also write letters to Taylor. Mary's support of Lincoln's political campaign is evident as most mid-1800s wives would never have asked their friends to write to the sitting president about a political matter in which they were not educated and traditionally had no business in understanding. Instead, Mary was eager to see her husband fill an influential government position. In the end, Lincoln did not receive the position, but he was offered the governorship of Oregon as a consolation, a position that he declined. This campaign

²⁷ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 73.

²⁸ This position entailed almost anything to do with land surveys and railroad approvals as well as setting land boundaries in Illinois.

gave Mary practice for a future filled with requesting political favors from friends and allies so that Lincoln could eventually guide the country through the war.²⁹

Another example of Mary's unending support for Lincoln is evident in her decision to move herself and their children to Washington, D.C., as Lincoln served his single term in the United States House of Representatives from 1847 to 1849. Living in a crowded boardinghouse with other members of the House, Mary was an abnormality. The Globe Tavern in D.C. presented a stark contrast to the spacious Lincoln house in Springfield. In addition, most wives did not move with their husbands, as Mary discovered when she found out that she was the only Congressional wife living in the Globe Tavern. Mary's decision was especially remarkable considering the couple had two children under four years old.³⁰ Her decision to move into a complex shared by mostly men and live in a tiny apartment with two small children while Lincoln was often away at work suggests Mary's simultaneous desires of supporting her husband's career and of fulfilling her own political ambition. As the capital, Washington, D.C., was the ultimate place to be for the politically ambitious. Mary would have seen the opportunity to move to D.C. with Lincoln as an opportunity to gain political influence, especially considering her belief that Lincoln was destined for an influential career in politics. Living in Washington, D.C., also gave Mary a front row seat to witness how the government worked. Being around the most important government officials, she could observe the strengths and weaknesses of her husband and his colleagues, as well as the connections between them and the culture that ran Washington politics. Her excitement at the prospect of Lincoln's advancing career and the

²⁹ Jean H. Baker, "Mary and Abraham: A Marriage," in *Best American History Essays on Lincoln*, Organization of American Historians, ed. Sean Wilentz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2009), 121.

³⁰ Robert Lincoln, the couple's oldest child was born in August of 1843 and Edward "Eddie" Lincoln was born in March of 1846. By the start of Abraham's term in the House in March of 1847, Robert would have been three years old and Eddie would have just turned one.

opportunity to begin establishing important social connections within the Washington political circle led her to move her young family into the center of American politics.³¹

Despite all of this, the living pressures eventually led Mary to move with the children back to Lexington and her family in the spring of 1848 while Lincoln finished out his term. The strain the constricted living situation caused on their marriage, on Lincoln's mental health, and on Mary's social desires had become too much. However, living apart soon became too hard as well and Mary moved back to Washington to be with her husband in the summer of 1848 after exchanging affectionate letters with one another. Abraham expressed his conflicting desire to be with Mary when he wrote to her: "In this troublesome world, we are never quite satisfied. When you were here, I thought you hindered me some in attending to business; but now, having nothing but business – no variety – it has grown exceedingly tasteless to me."³² This expression to Mary illuminates just how important Mary was in Abraham's personal and political life. Although he did not realize her vast assistance until she was not present, Abraham's life was more colorful with Mary in it. Although she might cause trouble for him and had demanding expectations, Lincoln did his job best when she was around. In reply, Mary affectionately wrote to him: "But perhaps, dear husband... cannot do without his wife next winter and must needs take her with him again... How much, I wish instead of writing, *we* were together this evening, I feel very sad away from you... Do not fear the children have forgotten you... Even E[ddy's] eyes brighten at the mention of your name."³³ These letters together give further insight into the political partnership the two shared, even though Lincoln denied that politics and their marriage had any interaction. Their partnership was stronger when they were together. One reason for this

³¹ Baker, "Mary and Abraham: A Marriage," 121.

³² Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 70.

³³ Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner, *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 38.

comes from Mary's willingness to speak her mind around politicians, as she was raised to be vocal in her political thought. Although Mary knew this outspokenness was not normal, even going so far as to refer to it as a "rather... unladylike profession," she could not help herself even though her actions often complicated Lincoln's-public life.³⁴ Mary's outspoken nature meant that she often offered Lincoln her opinions on political matters, opinions that Lincoln valued.³⁵

Beyond his career, Lincoln listened to Mary's advice in many areas of his life, including the public's perceptions of his social skills. When they married, the Lincolns' social life changed drastically. Whereas Mary grew up in an upper-class family, Abraham came from the lower class. This uneven balance of social standing often resulted in Mary attempting to adjust Lincoln's social manners to improve his public appearance so that he might secure his political desires more easily. In marriage, the Lincolns were part of the emerging middle-class. Mary, having fallen in social rank, worked to improve Lincoln's mannerisms to reflect her intentions to elevate his social standing. Even one of Mary's eventual rivals, William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner in Springfield, noted Mary's discomfort: "Such want of social polish on the part of her husband of course gave Mrs. Lincoln great offence."³⁶ Although Abraham understood and valued middle-class standards, he failed at mastering them, though not from Mary's lack of instruction; his personality was simply too engrained in his humble log cabin origins, which ultimately helped him politically.

One example of Lincoln's failures with middle-class social standards came from an incident after he became president. To Mary's disgust, she caught him feeding a cat with a gold fork at a dinner party. In response to Mary's disapproval, Lincoln argued that if the fork had

³⁴ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 73.

³⁵ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 69-73; Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, 35-40.

³⁶ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 63.

been good enough for former president James Buchanan, then it must be good enough for the cat. This humorous defense was his preferred response to his awkward social manners and to Mary's consistent disapproval of such actions. This social tension persisted during their entire marriage, manifesting most evidently during their years in the White House when Mary believed that they must present a higher standard of social grace. Although Lincoln's less than acceptable social manners did not cost him the presidency, Mary's continual efforts to improve her husband's demeanor led to tensions within their marriage and no doubt ultimately had an impact on his political career as all of Mary's coaching would have been reflected when it was politically important. Without Mary's encouragement and advice throughout his career and in his social abilities, Lincoln may have entered the presidency an altered man and led the country differently without his wife.³⁷

A little over a decade after their first arrival in Washington, D.C., and after nearly twenty years of putting her entire soul, enthusiasm, and ambition into advancing Lincoln's political career, the deeply divided election of 1860 came. Representing the new Republican Party and competing against old rival Stephen Douglass, Lincoln secured the presidency on November 6. Mary, perhaps more anxious about the election than Lincoln, was ecstatic upon learning the result. Her childhood dream to be married to the President of the United States finally fulfilled, her political ambition took on a new, exciting challenge. His election to the presidency made her proud to know that despite all the trials Lincoln's career had faced, the American people finally saw what she saw in him – a humble man of character who cared deeply about the American people and the American political system. Despite this moment of fulfillment, Mary's hardships were just beginning as she now occupied the highest position a woman in the United States could

³⁷ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 60-65.

occupy and would be judged by the most public audience of all – the American people and press. Internally, Lincoln’s political rivals and friends alike criticized her for unladylike positions and influence in the White House. Her joy at a victorious election, desire to improve the outdated traditions of the presidency, and effort to fit the position of being the president’s wife would soon be clouded by a grueling war, a combative administration, and a public difficult to please.³⁸

From the beginning of their marriage, Mary personally believed her best skill was judging the character of others. She often used this skill to judge the people that surrounded Lincoln because he was her priority. By evaluating his allies and potential appointees to government or military positions, she believed that she was acting in his best interest. Elizabeth Keckley, Mary’s seamstress who would eventually become one of her closest friends, claimed to be a direct witness to Mary’s thoughts on the people around Lincoln.³⁹ In her memoir, Keckley distinctly remembered Mary arguing with Abraham about his appointees and generals, particularly about how they were executing the jobs that Lincoln chose them for. Although she probably had an opinion on his appointees before they were confirmed, Mary was more concerned with how they performed their duties and the impact they each had on how the American people viewed Lincoln and his administration. In particular, Mary did not like nor trust Secretary of Treasury Salmon Chase, Secretary of State William Seward, Vice President Andrew Johnson, General George McClellan, or General Ulysses S. Grant. Mary either viewed these men as rivals to her husband or men that would not prove a victory for the Union.⁴⁰

³⁸ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 162, 180-181.

³⁹ Keckley was a former slave who opened her own dressmaking shop, eventually finding herself in the center of mid-nineteenth century politics, first as the personal seamstress for Jefferson Davis’s wife Varina and then as Mary’s personal seamstress. The friendship that developed between them would have a huge influence on Mary’s life.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 127, accessed August 6, 2017, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9780807869642_keckley.

Constantly looking out for Lincoln's best interest, Mary was notorious for her suspicions of the powerful men around Lincoln. Most particularly, Mary distrusted Secretary Seward. She had good reason to believe he was a strong rival to Lincoln's presidency. During the election of 1860, Seward was considered an early favorite to secure the nomination of the Republican Party. However, when the Chicago convention took place, Seward lost the nomination to Lincoln. Instead of letting bitterness cloud his career, Seward decided to accept the nomination and began campaigning tirelessly for Lincoln in 1860.⁴¹ In the end, Seward did more than any other man to secure Lincoln the presidency, earning him a spot in the cabinet as Secretary of State.

Throughout the war, Lincoln and Seward disagreed about many important decisions.⁴² Still, Seward and Lincoln shared important political beliefs and a passion to keep the Union intact. Spending more time together than with almost anyone else, Seward and Lincoln developed a strong friendship. Despite this turn of events, Mary still openly distrusted Seward. She saw him as a challenger to Lincoln's position and regretted that many Americans believed Seward to be the real powerhouse in Washington. Her dislike of him only grew as he and Lincoln became friends, resulting in her envy evolving into displays of excessive rudeness to the

⁴¹ Some of the reasons that Seward failed to secure the nomination of the Republican Party stemmed from his long record in government. Seward was considered to hold controversial views on issues and associate with corrupt politicians, although Seward himself was not considered to be corrupt. Also, Pennsylvania was an important state in the election and the delegation had made a deal to support Lincoln with the promise that Pennsylvania Senator Simon Cameron would get a cabinet position, which he later did as Secretary of War until 1862. Seward's tireless campaigning saw him visit fifteen different states to deliver speeches and encourage votes for Lincoln. His placement as Secretary of State came as Lincoln's acknowledgement of his talent and loyalty. Walter Stahr, "Seward and Lincoln: A Second Look," in *Exploring Lincoln: Great Historians Reappraise Our Greatest President*, Harold Holzer, Craig L. Symonds, and Frank J. Williams, eds. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 50-52, accessed December 19, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130h9k8>.

⁴² Even though he eventually learned to yield to Lincoln's authority and leadership, Seward and Lincoln were both ambitious and opinionated. They disagreed on much, especially early in Lincoln's presidency. One significant disagreement was on the topic of emancipation for slaves in the South. Whereas Lincoln believed a proclamation would be most effective, Seward believed that advancing the armies, freeing the slaves in the process, and winning the war would be most beneficial, going so far as to say, "proclamations are *paper* without the support of armies." Stahr, "Seward and Lincoln," 57.

rest of the Seward family, including refusing to attend pre-arranged meetings with his wife and children.⁴³

Although Mary's distrust may have been misplaced in Seward's case, it certainly was not in respect to Secretary Chase. Throughout his time on Lincoln's cabinet from 1861 to 1864, Chase garnered a reputation for his political ambitions. Whereas Seward decided to serve Lincoln as best he could, Chase used his time on the cabinet to materialize his own desires to succeed Lincoln as president. This effort to build up political support was evident throughout his family, as his daughter Kate hosted social events that rivaled Mary's and were instrumental in gaining support for her father.⁴⁴ Mary could not stand to witness a member of her husband's cabinet betray him so openly and wished that Lincoln would remove Chase from the cabinet, believing him to be "a selfish politician instead of a true patriot."⁴⁵

In contrast, her opposition towards Generals McClellan and Grant stemmed from her desires to see a victorious North. Well regarded today as a general that spoke more than he acted, Mary said of McClellan, "...he talks so much and does little. If I had the power I would soon take off his head, and put some energetic man in his place.... If he would only do something, and not promise so much, I might learn to have a little faith in him."⁴⁶ In regards to Grant, Mrs. Lincoln stated, "He is a butcher and is not fit to be the head of an army... he generally manages to claim a victory, but such a victory! He loses two men to the enemy's one. He has no management, no regard for life... I could fight an army as well myself."⁴⁷ Mary's thoughts about

⁴³ Trudy Krisher, *Fanny Seward: A Life* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 51-70, accessed December 22, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1j2n7pd>; Stahr, "Seward and Lincoln," 49-57

⁴⁴ Michael Green, *Freedom, Union, and Power: Lincoln and His Party in the Civil War* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 118, accessed December 19, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x070z.9>.

⁴⁵ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 128.

⁴⁶ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 132-133.

⁴⁷ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 133-134.

both generals exemplifies her beliefs there were better men that could lead the war effort. She often urged Lincoln to follow her advice, arguing it was what she would do if she oversaw the nation. Although some of her criticism was well placed, there was an equal amount that perhaps only stemmed from jealousy and a desire to protect her husband from those she deemed unworthy of his station and acquaintance.

Clearly not afraid to speak her opinions to Lincoln, Mary was willing to point out others' faults, including what she believed to be her husband's unwillingness to see the faults in the people around him: "Father, you are too honest for this world! You should have been born a saint. You will generally find it a safe rule to distrust a disappointed, ambitious politician."⁴⁸ To Mary's consistent attacks on his colleagues, Lincoln replied, "If I listened to you, I should soon be without a Cabinet."⁴⁹ Despite his protests, Mary believed Abraham valued her opinion concerning the men she distrusted. She told William Herndon after Lincoln's death, "My husband placed great Confidence in my knowledge in human nature; he had not much knowledge of men."⁵⁰ Emboldened by his death, Mary may have used this claim as a basis to elevate the influence she had on his decisions, as Lincoln certainly understood men well enough to keep the Union from falling apart. Mary used this skill to her advantage by attempting to limit those near her husband that only desired to use their relationship for their own political gain. Limiting other's political ambition led to enemies but the overall positive influence that she believed her skill provided to Lincoln during his administration more than made up for the enemies that she made while in office.

⁴⁸ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 131.

⁴⁹ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 131.

⁵⁰ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 73.

Mary also used this skill of reading the motivations of others in attempts to influence who received and did not receive positions within the administration. Her reach within her own inner circle and acquaintances was vast as she often sought to procure appointments outside of the direct administration, often those concerned with state or local governments. One example of her attempt to influence appointments comes from a letter she wrote to Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner in 1865 stating, "... I trust you will not deem me intrusive by suggesting your quiet perseverance & that of your influential friends in urging the claim of Mr. J[ohn] Jay, who is so worthy of being recognized by the Government." She then involved Lincoln in her efforts to influence the senator, most likely using his position to strengthen her argument for Jay, "I am sure the President, feels most *kindly* towards him & listens patiently, when I speak to him, on the subject. I really believe you will have very little trouble, in succeeding, in obtaining some position of eminence for him."⁵¹ Although Jay did not receive a government position until 1869, Mary's letter highlights her desire to place the people that she supported in worthy positions. She may have done this for two reasons: to reward those who showed loyalty and respect to her and Lincoln or to place influential and respectable people around Lincoln and the people that surrounded him. Her ability to judge character proved to be a skill that she utilized whenever she thought it might benefit her or protect her husband.

Although Lincoln was her main concern, Mary could hardly forget her own political desires. Mary's personality gravitated towards an ambitious nature and was only amplified when she entered the White House. Often, her political ambition and social ambition intermixed and Mary used her social duties as a way in which to advance her political desires. One of Mary's first politically charged acts as First Lady involved upstaging newly appointed Secretary of State

⁵¹ Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, 204-05.

William Seward. Not even a week into Abraham's tenure, Seward recommended that he host the first official reception of the administration. Mary would hear nothing of this. According to Elizabeth Todd Grimsley, Mary's favorite cousin that stayed with the Lincolns' at the White House during their first six months, "To this Mrs. Lincoln objected, urging that the first official entertainment should be given by the President."⁵² In addition, she challenged Seward's position by telling him, "It is said that you [Seward] are the power behind the throne. I'll show you that Mr. L is President yet."⁵³ By quickly judging Seward's character, Mrs. Lincoln could promptly make sure Seward understood his place in her husband's administration and she could more closely monitor his future intentions. The reception, in fact, was hosted by the President and was said to be a memorable evening, most significantly because it was "the last in which north and south would mingle for many years."⁵⁴

Another significant change Mary made concerned the larger receptions the administration was obligated to host, namely state dinners. In accordance with earlier administrations, these dinners would have mainly been planned by Lincoln's personal secretaries, John G. Nicolay and John Hay. However, as an experienced hostess, Mary had her own ideas about how she wanted to run the dinners. She ran her idea by Keckley, who in her memoir remembered Mary mentioning the idea of doing away with state dinners mainly because they were not economical. Instead, Mary suggested a better idea would be to host a series of three large receptions to avoid the outrageous cost of multiple dinners. Keckley also remembered hearing Mary run her idea by Lincoln, who vehemently disagreed with the idea of receptions because they were too simple for

⁵² Grimsley, "Six Months," 49.

⁵³ Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, 135.

⁵⁴ Grimsley, "Six Months," 50.

the Executive Office and broke with established tradition.⁵⁵ Their conversation went something like:

But you forget, father,⁵⁶ these are war times, and the old customs can be done away with for the once. The idea is economical, you must admit.

Yes, mother, but we must think of something besides economy.

I do think of something else. Public receptions are more democratic than stupid state dinner – are more in keeping with the spirit of the institutions of our country, as you would say if called upon to make a stump speech. There are a great many strangers in the city, foreigners and others, whom we can entertain at our receptions, but whom we cannot invite to our dinners.

I believe you are right, mother... I think that we shall have to decide on the receptions.⁵⁷

So with Lincoln's blessing, receptions were to replace state dinners, much to the dismay of Nicolay and Hay who had little to do with planning the receptions, leading Nicolay to state, "La Reine has determined to abrogate dinners."⁵⁸ When it came to the actual receptions, they were regarded as a hit by many, including Nicolay himself who wrote to his fiancé in 1862 that the affair was "very respectable if not a brilliant success,"⁵⁹ although the tone of his letter altogether is hardly supportive. Besides displaying she had great power on the White House social calendar, this conversation with Lincoln exemplifies a few other things.⁶⁰ It gives an example of Mary speaking her mind and presenting her opinions with valid arguments despite

⁵⁵ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 96-98.

⁵⁶ Mary and Abraham often referred to one another as "father" and "mother."

⁵⁷ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 97.

⁵⁸ John G. Nicolay, *With Lincoln in the White House: Letters, Memoranda, and Other Writings of John G. Nicolay, 1860-1865*, Michael Burlingame, ed. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 67.

⁵⁹ Nicolay, *With Lincoln in the White House*, 68.

⁶⁰ To be fair, this conversation may have occurred very differently. It is important to note that Keckley wrote her memoir after Lincoln's death. While her memoir serves as an invaluable insight to life in the White House during the war, Keckley also wrote it with a heavy bias. At the time, Mary was experiencing criticism from the government and the public for continuing her political involvement and attempting to get money from the government to live on. As public opinion of Mary continued to fall, Keckley wrote the memoir to cast Mary in a positive light and thus may have exaggerated the conversations that Mary and Abraham had. Unfortunately, Keckley's attempt to influence public opinion in support of Mary backfired as Mary felt betrayed by her friend revealing intimate details of her time in the White House, leading Mary to end their friendship.

knowing that Lincoln might well reject her ideas. The fact that he listens to her opinion indicates Mary had political power within the administration because she had Lincoln's ear and he was willing to hear her out before making a judgement. In the nineteenth century, most wives would not have argued with their husband's decisions and the conversation would have ended quickly. Mary's ability to communicate her opinions without fear of her husband ignoring her shows Mary was not an ordinary nineteenth century wife and had no desire to follow the typical behavior of a passive wife. The fact that she could speak up on topics concerning Lincoln's business and career implications shows just how important her opinion must have been to Lincoln. This placed Mary in an extremely powerful place within the inner circle of the administration and within the White House.⁶¹

Her political and social ambitions were again exemplified in 1864 at a White House reception. Three years into Lincoln's presidency, Mary could no longer stand to be fully cast in Lincoln's shadow or viewed as inferior to what the position of the First Lady represented. Before 1864, it was custom for the President to choose a lady other than his wife to escort him during the promenade of receptions while the First Lady was free to choose another gentleman to escort her. In this tradition, the First Lady essentially gives up her position of honor. Mary saw that the practice was "an absurd one, and I mean to abolish it. The dignity that I owe to my position as Mrs. President, demands that I should not hesitate any longer to act."⁶² And, abolish the tradition, she did. After 1864, the President either led receptions with the First Lady or walked alone or with another gentleman. While this change might not seem fundamentally significant in retrospect, Mary's realization that the practice demoted her position as First Lady is noteworthy.

⁶¹ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 64-65.

⁶² Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 144-145.

By changing who led receptions with the President, Mary bestowed equal social and perhaps political consideration upon herself and future First Ladies.⁶³

The power Mary had within the administration led her ambition to be seen as a liability to Lincoln's presidency, creating internal and external tensions with the government and public. The power and influence Mary had over Lincoln eventually created hostile feelings towards her within the White House. Secretaries Nicolay and Hay would become two of her greatest adversaries in the administration. By changing White House traditions, Mary essentially undermined all authority Nicolay and Hay had, especially since Nicolay oversaw all social functions. By talking Lincoln into her plans, Mary also undermined their standing in the White House. To combat this, Nicolay and Hay spent Lincoln's tenure believing they had a duty to look out for the President's best interests, including attempting to limit Mary's political influence on her husband. Their rivalry with Mrs. Lincoln was no secret as they referred to her throughout the war as "La Reine", "the hellcat", "Her Majesty", and "the enemy."⁶⁴ There was hardly ever a time when they considered her intentions to be honorable and genuine. A simple invitation to dinner with her and Lincoln ignited this reaction from Nicolay: "... as etiquette does not permit any one on any excuse to decline an invitation to dine with the President, I shall have to make the reconnaissance, and thereby more fully learn the tactics of the enemy."⁶⁵ This characterization of Mary's motivations shows how Nicolay resented Mary's influence and power over Lincoln as he believed that her intentions would almost surely be in opposition of his own desires and the President's best interests.

⁶³ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 96-98, 144-146.

⁶⁴ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 95-6; Nicolay, *With Lincoln in the White House*, 125.

⁶⁵ Nicolay, *With Lincoln in the White House*, 94.

Nicolay and Hay's intense dislike and overall disrespect for Mary would not be the only time she experienced this reaction. Throughout the presidency, Mary's outspoken and unladylike political education created many more male enemies – most of whom eventually supported Lincoln, but who could never bring themselves to support his wife. Despite her high-profile role, the public, especially the press, was often quick to criticize Mary's ambition and actions. Quite early in the administration, newspapers recognized Mary's ambition as abnormal according to nineteenth century gender roles.⁶⁶ However, the recognition of this ambition saw both negative and positive press, even within the same remarks. One newspaper remarked:

We have for the first time in the history of Presidents, a President's wife who seems to be ambitious of having a finger in the government pie. Her friends compare Mrs. Lincoln to Queen Elizabeth, in her statesmanlike tastes and capabilities. She is by no means a simple, domestic woman, but was evidently intended by nature to mix somewhat in politics. That she does so is undeniable... She is said to be much in conversation with cabinet members, and has before now held correspondence with them on political topics. Some go as far as to suggest that the President is indebted to her for some of his ideas and projects... In foreign countries her turn for politics would not subject her to adverse *criticism*, but the American people are so unused to these things that it is not easy for them to like it.⁶⁷

Although the comments were originally published by the Washington correspondent of the Springfield *Republican*, there were two separate newspapers that reprinted the comments along with their own commentary. From these newspapers, the New Hampshire *Statesman* and the New York *Herald*, we can see that the public was

⁶⁶ Since the 1820s, women were meant to represent great values. They were viewed as representing cooperation, piety, morality, and domesticity whereas men were understood to be the competitive, reasonable, political, and dominant gender. This whole idea began to change during the 1850s with Women's Movements and news ideas coming from influential women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Catharine Beecher. Beecher argued that women could use the home as a force for national unity and their domesticity could be used as an indirect political influence on the nation's values. Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 69, 93-96.

⁶⁷ "The President's Wife," *New Hampshire Statesman*, October 19, 1861, Issue 2107, accessed October 13, 2017, file:///C:/Users/Selena/Documents/'17-'18/Thesis/Primary/Newspapers/1861%20Political%20Ambition.Pdf; "The Lady of the White House in the Newspapers," *New York Herald*, October 21, 1861, 4, accessed October 13, 2017, file:///C:/Users/Selena/Documents/'17-'18/Thesis/Primary/Newspapers/1861%20Reply%20to%20Ambition.Pdf.

divided by her display of ambition. The New Hampshire *Statesman* provides little judgement about the comments beyond stating they were good natured and the power of her ambition may hold sway above what is written in the Constitution, leading the reader to believe that the newspaper either agreed with the comments or wanted their readers to form their own opinions about the First Lady. In contrast, the New York *Herald* offers a strongly opinionated editorial about the comments:

Mrs. Lincoln, we repeat, is a woman of remarkable ability and goodness of heart.... The venom which peeps out through the complimentary gloss of the paragraph above quoted is only to be accounted for by the fact that the schemes of the rapid faction, whose organs have no better term to apply to her husband than that of 'the slave hound of Illinois,' have been in some way disturbed or thwarted by the perspicacity of this highly gifted lady.⁶⁸

In other words, the New York *Herald* intensely disagreed with those that might regard Mary's political ambition as unjustifiable, socially unacceptable, or downright scandalous. While the above comments clearly speak to the recognizable factors of Mary's ambition, many newspapers hinted at her ambition when they discussed her extravagant spending and parties, views which will be discussed in a further chapter.

Born into an ambitious and respected family, Mary grew to be the most ambitious of her family. Through politics and social events, she worked her way forward to become an influential First Lady during the Civil War. Given an excellent education as a young girl, Mary used this education to keep up with notable politicians of the mid-1800s. After marrying Abraham, her ambition evolved into a deep political drive that supported his political career and ambitions. While Lincoln called the shots during his presidency and in the war, Mary could be found right next to him, supporting, advising, and influencing

⁶⁸ "The Lady of the White House in the Newspapers," October 21, 1861.

him. His willingness to listen to her, even when it concerned the people around him, clearly demonstrates that Lincoln was more than a doting husband. Mary was vital to Lincoln's success as president. Together in the White House, President Lincoln and Mrs. Lincoln were political partners. Together they took steps to outmaneuver their political rivals, to change White House traditions, and to chart the path to victory in the Civil War. To criticize Mary's ambition is to criticize Lincoln's judgement. Although their relationship was far from perfect and many around them viewed Mary as too ambitious and thus significantly inferior to other women, Abraham choose to spend his life with her and knew that she made him a better politician and a better man.

Extravagance

The title and prestige of being the First Lady of the United States has always come with perks to whomever held the title. Despite the respect and advantages of the office, the American public has generally not taken well to witnessing First Ladies that spend enormous amounts of money during their time in the White House. Mary Lincoln was no exception. Raised in a southern, relatively wealthy family, Mary had certain ideas about the basics that she and her family needed to live a comfortable life. When Lincoln was elected into the White House, these understandings of basic needs evolved into what the family would need to present a respectable and dignified administration to the American people and foreign leaders. Most visibly, Mary believed the White House needed a reboot in order to better symbolize the great democratic spirit of the United States. She also considered the title of First Lady to be a symbolic position to all Americans that stood as a model of American virtue and Mary sought to serve as a lady of high fashion and respectability. Of course, none of this could be accomplished without money. As a result of the amount of money Mary spent on her visions, many in the public viewed her as overly extravagant. From the clothes she purchased to remodeling the White House, Mary's spending was a hot topic with the public. The press constantly printed editorials of her extravagance, focusing most heavily on the parties that Mary organized.

On February 5, 1862, as Mary Lincoln hosted her first formal reception of the year. The *Boston Daily Advertiser* offered this description of the event:

Mrs. Lincoln was dressed in white stain, with heavy flounce of black honiton lace, a wreath of natural flowers formed her head-dress, and a simple diamond brooch was the only ornament that adorned her person. At her right stood the President, dressed in becoming plain costume, and just behind, their eldest son Robert and Vice President Hamlin and lady... For one hour the throng moved in a

current, and when the rooms were full, the Marine Band, stationed in their usual position, began playing operatic airs of the finest description at 11.⁶⁹

As the first ball ever given in the White House, it served as an introduction of Mary as First Lady and highlighted recent White House renovations. The description offered above paints a picture of a dreamy, elegant affair. Not everyone in Washington, or even throughout the Union, viewed the party in the same way as portray by the *Boston Daily Advertiser*. Originally proposed to Lincoln as an event that would save money in light of the war, the party cost the Lincolns \$1000,⁷⁰ as no detail was spared for the luxurious affair.⁷¹

Highly anticipated by all of Washington, the guest list extended to nearly 500 invitations. Although the invitations were not selective in the way state dinners usually were, Mary did not believe in inviting the whole city as happened with traditional levees – she had to keep up a certain standard with whom she invited to the White House. John Nicolay described Washington’s anticipation best in a letter to his fiancé: “Half the city is jubilant in being invited while the uninvited half are furious at being left out.”⁷² Mary intended for the ball to be lavish, extravagant, and most of all, unforgettable. Guests enjoyed mingling with the President and First Lady and among government and military officials such as Generals George McClellan and Joseph Hooker, senators and governors from the border and northern states, and foreign ministers such as the British Ambassador Lord Richard Lyons while anxiously awaiting dinner and dancing. Once the dining room opened around midnight, guests viewed the elegant buffet spread. Turkey, duck, ham, terrapin, pheasant, and confectionary items - complete with a sugared

⁶⁹ “Mrs. Lincoln’s Ball,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, February 07, 1862, Issue 33, accessed October 13, 2017, file:///C:/Users/Selena/Documents/17-'18/Thesis/Primary/Newspapers/1862%20Party.Pdf.

⁷⁰ \$1000 from 1862 is equivalent to around \$24,000 in 2018.

⁷¹ Jean H. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 206-207.

⁷² John Nicolay to Theresa Bates, February 2, 1862, Nicolay Papers, Huntington Library, **quoted in** Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 206.

helmet to signify the ongoing war – along with a pagoda, temple of liberty, and cornucopia covered with sugared fruits and frosted sugar were all laid before the guests of the ball. To top it all off, glasses of beer and champagne stood alongside a cake designed to look like Fort Pickens on Santa Rosa Island in Florida.⁷³ Mrs. Lincoln’s guests stood in awe and admiration at the elaborate display. The dinner tables, described as bending under the weight of the luxuries atop them, were catered by Maillard’s from New York City, one the most famous and expensive caterers at the time. The *Boston Daily Advertiser* described the set-up as “one of the finest displays of gastronomic art ever seen in this country.”⁷⁴ While the guests were disappointed to find that Mary did not intend for there to be any formal dancing throughout the night, the affair ran well into the morning, as dinner was served until three and many guests did not leave the White House until after dawn. In the days following, the *Washington Star* described Mary’s party as “the most superb affair of its kind ever seen here.”⁷⁵ Even John Nicolay, who loathed Mrs. Lincoln, praised her social triumph.⁷⁶

In addition to the vast displays of food, guests got a firsthand look at the many changes within the White House. Despite the cost these changes were no doubt intended to showcase the strength and stability of her husband’s administration and war strategy. Mary was also given the opportunity to showcase her personal style when it came to hosting parties, setting fashion, and selecting décor. Her efforts to dress the White House in impressive and opulent fashions that

⁷³ Fort Pickens, after experiencing its only ever combat during the war in 1861 and 1862, was one of the few southern forts to remain in Union control throughout the war. “Gulf Islands: Fort Pickens,” National Park Service, accessed February 9, 2018, https://www.nps.gov/guis/learn/historyculture/upload/032516_Fort-PickensSelfGuiding.pdf.

⁷⁴ “Mrs. Lincoln’s Ball,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, February 07, 1862.

⁷⁵ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 206-207; *Washington Star*, February 4, 5, 6, and 7, 1862, quoted in Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 207.

⁷⁶ John G. Nicolay, *With Lincoln in the White House: Letters, Memoranda, and Other Writings of John G. Nicolay, 1860-1865*, Michael Burlingame, ed. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 68.

were meant to extend the might and respectability of the federal government were significant. Mary painted a picture of strength through the appearance of the house and the elegance of the First Family to all that observed them during the war. Her 1862 party highlighted her efforts during the Lincoln's first year in office; however, not everyone was as thrilled about the party as Mary hoped. With its enormous guest list, the party displayed every aspect of Mary's highly criticized extravagance.

Despite the good intentions that Mary had in showing off the White House and her hostess abilities to Washington, much of the nation reacted to news of the ball negatively. One of the first reactions came from commentators like Ohio Senator Benjamin Wade, who questioned the ethics of having a party in the middle of the war. Upon receiving his invitation, Wade expressed, "Are the President and Mrs. Lincoln aware there is a Civil War? If they are not, Mr. and Mrs. Wade are and for that reason decline to participate in feasting and dancing."⁷⁷ Wade expressed the views of many newspapers around the country as reports emerged of the grandeur of the party. While many newspapers were extremely critical of Mary's ball, *The Wisconsin State Register*, reprinting from the *Cincinnati Gazette*, was particularly judgmental in their commentary on the party:

Six hundred thousand...of the youth of America are now enduring the monotonous hardships of the camp, or wasting by disease... to save their country from national destruction. Throughout the North...families are living in continual apprehension of intelligence of a husband, son, father or brother killed.... All over the country associations of women are laboring to provide comforts to mitigate the hardships of the soldiers. In this hour of our national distress, the account of a splendid ball at the White House jars upon the sensibilities of the country.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington, 1860-1865* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 295.

⁷⁸ "Mrs. Lincoln's Grand Fete," *The Wisconsin State Register*, February 15, 1862, Issue 48, accessed October 13, 2017, file:///C:/Users/Selena/Documents/'17-'18/Thesis/Primary/Newspapers/1862%20Party%204.Pdf.

The *Wisconsin State Register* used this opening to play on the logical emotions of their readers. When presented from the viewpoint of how the youth in America was dying and suffering on the battlefield and in military camps, it is obvious that parties of any kind would be in bad taste. The *Register* presented two sides – the side of the concerned populace and the side of seemingly unconcerned leadership. The article does not actually mention Mrs. Lincoln. Instead, it focused its critique on the White House in general, comparing the “splendid ball” with the country’s “national distress.” By only stating that the White House was responsible for the ball, the *Register* commented on Lincoln’s leadership and lack of concern for the American people, whereas many other newspapers made sure to specifically point out the ball was Mary’s project. It is particularly interesting that the *Register* failed to mention Mary since Wisconsin was a northern state and could have quite easily used Mary’s southern heritage against her. The *Register* believed the party was inappropriate during wartime:

Aside from the sufferings and anxieties of the people, there are considerations of national danger which make Presidential festivities inappropriate. Our very existence as a nation is threatened by the intervention of foreign powers. Our distraction and our military inaction have lost us the respect of other nations. Our Government has already been compelled to submit to the insolence of one of them; and the foreign diplomatists resident at Washington, look upon our nation as irretrievably broken, and are awaiting advice that Governments have begun to administer upon it. At such a time, foreign powers must look upon our White House Ball as sporting upon the brink of ruin.⁷⁹

The newspaper criticized the party by pointing out specific reasons why it would be viewed as a national disgrace and highly insensitive. By focusing almost exclusively on the implications that the war had on how foreign nations viewed the United States, the *Register* noted the further impact that the party had on outside views of the divided nation. By describing the federal government as “sporting on the brink on ruin,” the *Register* attempted to tie the White House to a

⁷⁹ “Mrs. Lincoln’s Grand Fete,” *The Wisconsin State Register*.

purposeful plot to destroy America's reputation, making it the laughing stock of the world when the war inevitably destroys the American experiment of democracy. By discussing the ball and relating it to the distress of the war, *The Wisconsin State Register* essentially turned Mary's symbolic intention for the party on its head. Instead of it signifying strength, stability, and unity to the Union, to these critics, it instead came off as an insensitive display of luxury.⁸⁰

Other newspapers highlighted this same reasoning, going so far as to attack Mrs. Lincoln's character at the same time. The *Newark Advocate* offered such an attack but started with a description of the "President's house" rather than of Mrs. Lincoln herself:

Now, when tens of thousands of homes all over the country are made desolate – thousands of them forever – by the war – when thousands of brave men who have turned out to sacrifice their lives if required for the cause of the country, are prostrated by disease and languishing in hospitals, and hundreds of thousands are enduring the hardships and privations of the camp and marching to front the perils of the field...it is deplorably wrong to have the President's house converted into a house of feasting and dancing.⁸¹

Similar to *The Wisconsin State Register*, the *Newark Advocate* began its article by highlighting the deplorable conditions the war has caused on the American people, particularly to the families. Rather than immediately blame Mary, it simply stated the idea of throwing a party at the White House during a time of national crisis was irresponsible and disrespectful to the families whose sons and fathers were fighting in the war. After establishing this basis and framing the context of its argument, the newspaper directly attacked Mary:

The event in the fashionable world last week is indeed generally regarded with disgust and indignation. It is unfortunate that Mrs. Lincoln has so poor an understanding of the true dignity of her position.... It is not becoming her to be assuming the airs of a fine lady and attempting to shine as the bright particular star of "the Republican court," as shameless and designing flatterers call the White House circle. Even if the times were propitious, neither her

⁸⁰ "Mrs. Lincoln's Grand Fete," *The Wisconsin State Register*.

⁸¹ "Mrs. Lincoln," *Newark Advocate*, February 21, 1862, issue 30, accessed October 13, 2017, file:///C:/Users/Selena/Documents/'17-'18/Thesis/Primary/Newspapers/1862%20Party%20Critical.Pdf.

accomplishments or years entitle her to be a leader of 'fashion.' She would be far better employed in promoting the comfort of the sick soldiers, as she might do in taking the lead in the charities that her sex know so well how to design and bestow, and which are engaging the hearts and hands of the real gentle women of America, than driving out in her fine carriage and presiding at ostentatious carousals.... The enemies of the country mock at her and honest people mourn over her sad exhibitions of heartlessness and folly. It is painful, but we think it well, to say these things.⁸²

In this section, the *Newark Advocate* directly attacked Mary, not only for her party, but also for her attempts to revive the White House's public image. It claimed Mary had no understanding of her position and suggested she should use her visibility to partake in "the charities that her sex know so well" rather than using it to throw parties the nation has no need for.⁸³ The article also claimed Mary attempted to use the ball to become a leader in "fashion" and neither the ball nor prosperous times could transform her into a model of class, elegance, or righteousness. According to the article, the American public should think of her displays of wealth and privilege as heartless since she chose to display little of the values that other respectable women across the nation lived out. Unlike *The Wisconsin State Register*, the *Newark Advocate* decided the blame rested solely on Mrs. Lincoln. Other than mentioning the White House just once, the article makes it extremely clear that the newspaper strongly believed Mary was the only one to blame and completely disregards that it was attended by and would have needed approval from the President. With this bias in mind, the newspaper failed to consider the difference in perception that Mary had from the station that she was raised in and brought to the White House. In her

⁸² The *Newark Advocate* consistently supported Democratic principles throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1861 election, the newspaper supported the Southern Democratic candidate, John C. Breckenridge and in the 1864 election it supported General George B. McClellan over Lincoln. Edwin M.P. Brister, *Centennial History of the City of Newark and Licking County, Ohio: Volume 1* (Licking County: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1909), 309; "Mrs. Lincoln," *Newark Advocate*.

⁸³ This claim stems from the "Age of Association" between 1820 and 1845 that saw women increasingly create voluntary associations and charities. Once the Civil War began, women in the north and south quickly formed twenty thousand aid societies to help supply soldiers with money and provisions. The *Newark Advocate* believed that Mary should naturally want to take the lead in establishing charities as the First Lady. Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 67, 115.

view, the nation needed such events and displays of prosperity to fully exemplify how strong and resolute the Union was in its fight to unify the North and South.⁸⁴

The perception of her grand ball was in high contrast to the social events held prior to entering the White House and the during remainder of 1861. At one reception less than a month from Lincoln's inauguration, Mary held a reception at Astor House in New York City which the press praised her for, saying, "... all who had the pleasure of seeing her last evening and witnessing her frank, easy and lady-like manner, agree that she would fill with ease and dignity the high position to which she will shortly be called."⁸⁵ This same acceptance of Mary's social events continued throughout 1861. Beginning with the inaugural festivities, which included an afternoon reception and an evening ball, social events hosted by President Lincoln and Mrs. Lincoln were highly anticipated and enjoyed by many that attended them. Four days after the inauguration, the Lincolns' hosted their first "levee", or evening reception. These levees were traditional to each administration. Mrs. Lincoln decided to hold levees twice a week, on Tuesday evenings from 8:30pm to 11:00pm and Saturday afternoons from 1:00pm to 3:00pm. These levees welcomed the public into the White House to meet with the President and First Lady, and the number in attendance was only restricted to the number of people that could fit in the White House, which sometimes reached upwards of 4,000 people. Mrs. Lincoln was dedicated to serving as an excellent hostess in the White House, understanding that the more citizens and government officials she and Lincoln could influence, the better the prospects were for a successful presidency. Mary was dedicated enough that even when levees had to be canceled, she

⁸⁴ "Mrs. Lincoln," *Newark Advocate*.

⁸⁵ "Reception of Ladies by Mrs. Lincoln," *The New York Herald*, February 21, 1861, accessed October 13, 2017, http://find.galegroup.com/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=viva_jmu&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=GT3003697909&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0.

more than made up for the inconvenience by holding receptions daily for two hours for a full week according to one example printed in *The New York Herald*. Even through the war years, Mary continued these levees as a sign that she would not allow divisions within the country to undo decades of Washington tradition; ultimately, Mary meant to convey the sense that the war would not change customs of the Union government. Her strong social skills, regardless of acceptance, were thanks in part to her upbringing and time as a hostess in Springfield.⁸⁶

With a wealthy, upper-class upbringing dominated by style and luxury, Mary Lincoln's inclination to spruce up the White House came naturally to her when Lincoln was elected to the presidency. In Springfield, Mrs. Lincoln was full of natural social ambition and had developed a reputation for being an outstanding and seasoned hostess. As the First Lady, Mary had an enormous influence on the administration's social calendar and she used this influence to show off the improvements she made to the Executive Mansion. While parties and receptions at the White House put all her improvements on display, Mary had to put in considerable effort to get the results that she wanted for the mansion. She began by attempting to redecorate and refurbish the White House so that it would stand as a powerful symbol representing the Union and the power of democracy to everyone in the United States (including the Confederate States) and to all foreign nations. By reestablishing the President's House as the People's House, Mary hoped that it would be viewed as an everlasting symbol of the power that the American people, the government, and the Office of the President held. Although highly criticized as being selfish and indulgent due to the money she spent on the White House during wartime, Mary believed her

⁸⁶ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 92-94; Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 198-199; "Mrs. Lincoln's Levee," *The New York Herald*, March 10, 1861, accessed October 15, 2017, file:///C:/Users/Selena/Documents/'17-'18/Thesis/Primary/Newspapers/MTP%20NP%201861%20Early%20Levees.Pdf.

efforts would help establish the United States as a world power and provide stability during an uncertain conflict.⁸⁷

Entering the White House in March 1861, the Lincolns walked into a home that was long overdue for repairs. Mary's cousin, Elizabeth Grimsley observed that on March 5, the day following Lincoln's inauguration, the house came off to visitors as rather disgraceful. While the Red, Blue, and East rooms were elegantly designed, "the family apartments were in a deplorably shabby condition as to the furniture, (which looked as if it had been brought in by the first President)."⁸⁸ Beyond just the general state of the furniture's quality, Elizabeth went on to give detailed descriptions of some of the furniture in the family suite. Of the pieces she described, the bedstead in the north room of the family suite is of particular interest: "A mahogany French bedstead, split from top to bottom, was the best piece of furniture in it, and all looked as if it had survived many Presidents and worn out the patience of many servants trying to keep it in reputable order."⁸⁹ Grimsley's reflection on the state of the furniture helps to explain why Mary was eager to redecorate as she would hardly have wanted to live in and show off a home that showed its age so poorly. As one of the best-known houses in the United States, Mary saw the importance that it played in the lives of citizens, domestic and foreign officials, tourists, and the U.S. military. During their four years in the White House, the Lincolns could never enjoy it as a normal family home. It had to serve as Lincoln's presidential office, a military headquarters, a home open to the public and even a funeral chapel throughout the war.⁹⁰ Once the White House

⁸⁷ Jean H. Baker, "Mary Todd Lincoln: Civil War First Lady," *White House Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 76-78.

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Todd Grimsley, "Six Months in the White House," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 19, no. 3/4 (Oct. 1926 – Jan. 1927): 47, accessed May 11, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40187553>.

⁸⁹ Grimsley, "Six Months," 59.

⁹⁰ During the war, the White House hosted the body of Colonel Ephraim Elmer Ellsworth, the first officer killed in the war, as well as the body of Willie Lincoln, Mary and Abraham's beloved son in 1862. Lincoln also had the White House draped in black after the death of his old political rival, Stephen Douglas. Harold Holzer, "Abraham

officially became her home, Mrs. Lincoln sought to restore its magnificent power while molding it into a home that she could be proud to hold receptions in and show off to the world.

Mary's desire to restore the White House into an appropriate location for her husband to lead the Union through the Civil War stemmed from the neglect of the previous occupants. Since William Henry Harrison's presidency in 1841, each president had received a \$20,000⁹¹ appropriation from Congress, to be spent over the course of four years or one term as president, to refurbish the White House along with a stipend for annual repairs. Before Mary, few First Ladies used this appropriation to its full advantage. There are multiple reasons to explain the unwillingness to use all the funds. The overarching reason is the lack of concern the previous First Ladies paid to the structural and decorative elements of the White House. Specifically, some presidents lacked a wife and had to rely on other family members to fill the position as First Lady. President John Tyler (1841-1845) was a widower throughout most of his time in office, leaving his daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, to take on most of the social responsibilities. James Buchanan, president from 1857 to 1861, was a bachelor president and left the care of the White House to his niece, Harriet. Some presidents' wives experienced debilitating events before they entered the White House. Mrs. Jane Pierce experienced the death of all three of her children before Franklin Pierce was inaugurated in 1853, with the final death occurring in January 1853, killing her eleven-year-old son. Mrs. Margaret Taylor left most of the duties of the First Lady to her daughter, as she was partially disabled and remained in seclusion in the White House during her husband's short presidency. Mrs. Abigail Fillmore chose to leave most of the routine duties to her daughter, Abby, as the result of an injured ankle that never fully healed, thus preventing

Lincoln's White House," The White House Historical Association, accessed August 6, 2017, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/abraham-lincolns-white-house>, 6.

⁹¹ \$20,000 in 1861 is equivalent to \$561,169.71 today.

her from standing for long periods of time. These events prevented multiple women from ever really filling the role to its fullest extent. While each First Lady redecorated to some extent to suit her style and some, like Abigail Fillmore with her library, installed new additions to the White House, they were less concerned with caring for day-to-day repairs and updates unless it served the First Family's purpose. In contrast, Mary fully intended to update the White House through the annual appropriation, although Congress certainly did not expect her to exceed her allowance, like she did several times, in her effort to transform the house into a home that displayed strength, prosperity, and unity.⁹²

Through its multitude of roles, Mary believed the White House's most important function was in demonstrating the government's domestic and foreign strengths. As *the* symbol of the United States, the White House's upkeep was of utmost importance. With the threat of war looming, Mary realized the power and authority the building signified throughout the nation and to foreign countries. She believed the elegance of the house would have a significant impact on the war. She hoped that she could establish the White House as a representation of democracy, national legitimacy, and the power of the United States government amid perceived southern rebels for citizens throughout the Union. As a symbol, the house represented a united nation and a president that sought to enact policies to keep the Union together. For foreign countries, the White House also represented democracy and the power that the American experiment could

⁹² Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 182; Olive Tardiff, "Jane Appleton Pierce," in *They Paved the Way: A History of N.H. Women* (Bowie: Heritage Books, 1980), accessed February 9, 2018, <http://www.hampton.lib.nh.us/hampton/biog/janepierce.htm>; "Abigail Powers Fillmore," The White House Historical Association, accessed February 9, 2018, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/abigail-powers-fillmore>; "Margaret Taylor," The White House Historical Association, accessed February 9, 2018, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/margaret-taylor>; "Jane Pierce," The White House Historical Association, accessed February 9, 2018, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/jane-pierce>; "Harriet Lane," The White House Historical Association, accessed February 9, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/first-ladies/harriet-lane/>.

have. In particular, the opinions of Britain and France were extremely important in determining how these nation's policies would impact the war. As the home of the president, the White House was where foreign ministers would be greeted by the President and First Lady, thus it must paint a picture of strength and stability during the war.

To visiting dignitaries, the smallest things could be considered offensive, such as when Prince Napoleon visited the White House in August 1861. Finding no one at the main entrance to welcome him, Napoleon was described as stating, "Heaven forbid that I complain of the simplicity of habits and mores of anyone, even the chief of a great Nation! I cannot, however, prevent myself from noticing that it is illogical to live in a great palace and not have a doorman. The princely appearance of the White House implies a staff, modest perhaps, but still a staff..."⁹³ While not necessarily criticizing the interior design of the White House, Napoleon's visit to the White House is the perfect example of Mary's belief that the house, all aspects of it, played an extremely important role in how the United States was viewed around the world.⁹⁴

To restore the White House to its rightful glory, Mary dove into an extensive project of replacing significantly outdated items as well as adding improvements in technology, including the installation of the Potomac River as the main water source for the White House, which was started under President James Buchanan but saw the majority of the money billed on behalf of Lincoln's new Commissioner of Public Buildings, Benjamin Brown French. Perhaps of some benefit to Mary, there were important additions added to the mansion before the Lincolns' moved in. These included the addition of gas lighting, as opposed to candle lights throughout the

⁹³ Camille Ferri Pisani, *Prince Napoleon in America, 1861: Letters from, His Aide-de-Camp* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), 94-95.

⁹⁴ Harold Holzer, "Abraham Lincoln's White House"; Baker, "Mary Todd Lincoln: Civil War First Lady," 76-78; Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 77.

building, a basement furnace to keep the building warm instead of the inefficient and unsafe fireplaces, a new layer of white paint on the exterior, and a new greenhouse known as the White House Conservatory, which became one of Mary's favorite additions. Had Mary made these additions the house during the war years, government officials and the public would have been outraged.⁹⁵

Even though she did not add anything of a major scale to the White House, Mary, quite unsurprisingly, overspent the entire \$20,000 Congressional appropriation before Lincoln had been in office a full year as she began refurbishing what she considered to be a national disgrace. Some of her most expensive purchases included a \$2,500 carpet for the East Room, a seven-hundred-piece set of cut glass tableware, \$6,800 for French wallpaper, \$6,000 on silverware, china, and chandeliers, and \$7,500 on carpeting and wallpaper from Philadelphia. In addition to individual items, the Congressional Expenditure Reports from 1861 to 1865 are detailed enough to show just how much Mary was spending on her visionary goals for the White House. During the fiscal year of 1861-1862, Lincoln's salary as President was \$20,833.33, whereas White House expenditures that year totaled \$41,700.30. The majority of this deficit came from refurbishing, alternating, and repairing the White House, totaling \$29,859.14 out of the grand total. While the report does not list the exact purchases, it is obvious Mary overstepped her budget. While Lincoln's salary was the lowest for his first fiscal year as President, his highest salary was never more than the amount spent on repairs during that first year. For the following years, the amount spent on the White House decreased. In fiscal year 1862-1863 the amount

⁹⁵ Treasury Department, *An Account of Receipts and Expenditures of the U.S., 1861-1862* (Washington, D.C.: Treasury Department, Register's Office, 1863), accessed October 19, 2017, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GOVPUB-T-e1c05bb945051ecdab5b69570d5154ea/pdf/GOVPUB-T-e1c05bb945051ecdab5b69570d5154ea.pdf>, 97; Kenneth J. Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, Richard W. Etulain, Sara Vaughn Gabbard, and Sylvia Frank Rodrigue, eds. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 84.

spent on just repairs and alterations totaled \$8,613. In fiscal year 1863-1864 that amount totaled \$18,000. Finally, in fiscal year 1864-1865 the total was \$14,000.⁹⁶ Since the fiscal year of 1861-1862 ended up being the most that was spent on the White House during Lincoln's presidency, it is evident that Mary did not wish to waste any time in updating the mansion and preparing it to serve as the symbol of the nation.⁹⁷

While many of these items were necessary to craft her vision of a glorious White House social scene, they appeared to many overly elaborate considering that an expensive war was consuming most of the government's budget. When Lincoln learned that Mary had overspent the appropriation in December 1861, he swore to the public buildings commissioner that he would never approve bills to pay for the overspent appropriation. Instead, in an example of the Honest Abe legacy he is known for, he insisted that the White House "was furnished well enough when they [the Lincolns] came, better than any house they had ever lived in – and rather than put his name on such a bill he would pay it out of his own pocket," further explaining that, "it would stink in the land to have it said that an appropriation for \$20,000 for furnishing the house had been overrun by the President when the poor freezing soldiers could not have blankets."⁹⁸ By putting the troops first in the eyes of the government, Lincoln showed that he was nowhere near

⁹⁶ These repair totals do not include basic necessities such as fuel and water. Fiscal years 1863-1865 include the rebuilding of a stable on the grounds and alterations and repairs to the Soldier's Home, the Lincoln's summer residence.

⁹⁷ Holzer, "Abraham Lincoln's White House," 3; Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 96-98; Treasury Department, *An Account of Receipts and Expenditures of the U.S., 1861-1862*, 19, 86-87; Treasury Department, *An Account of Receipts and Expenditures of the U.S., 1862-1863* (Washington, D.C.: Treasury Department, Register's Office, 1864), accessed October 19, 2017, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GOVPUB-T-e24eb4afbd00c2fc0daf66624b55d9ef/pdf/GOVPUB-T-e24eb4afbd00c2fc0daf66624b55d9ef.pdf>, 86-87; Treasury Department, *An Account of Receipts and Expenditures of the U.S., 1863-1864* (Washington, D.C.: Treasury Department, Register's Office, 1865), accessed October 19, 2017, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GOVPUB-T-01219d07c04325a037277abe09198c09/pdf/GOVPUB-T-01219d07c04325a037277abe09198c09.pdf>, 19, 86-87; Treasury Department, *An Account of Receipts and Expenditures of the U.S., 1864-1865* (Washington, D.C.: Treasury Department, Register's Office, 1866), accessed October 19, 2017, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GOVPUB-T-49c776f6d38a2b88898a3f71d6f20d6d/pdf/GOVPUB-T-49c776f6d38a2b88898a3f71d6f20d6d.pdf>, 86-87

⁹⁸ Benjamin Brown French, *Witness to a Young Republic: A Yankees Journal, 1828-1870*, 382, quoted in Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 98.

as invested in redecorating the White House as Mary. In comparison to Mary, Lincoln's only request for improvement in the house was an addition of a partition between the public and private spaces of the house, allowing Lincoln to move between his office and the family parlor without constantly being confronted by visitors.⁹⁹ Much of the criticism aimed at Mary would be based on arguments that the money she spent might have gone to the war effort. However, considering the war's costs, any extra money from the appropriation would have done very little to truly improve the lives of soldiers. Despite promising to pay for the overspending out of pocket, Congress quietly paid the overdraft of funds the following year.¹⁰⁰

Instead of drawing back her spending, Mary continued to go over the appropriated amount and entered into informal arrangements with government officials in order to hide her mounting debt from her husband. While many of her purchases could be deemed necessary to craft her vision for the White House, many of them were overpriced. On a trip to New York in early 1861, she purchased wallpaper from Paris for \$6,800 and \$2,000 worth of rugs and curtains from New York's greatest merchant, Alexander Stewart. In the fall of 1861 she returned to New York to fill and replace the china and glassware in the mansion. From E.V. Haughwout's shop she bought a 190-piece china set for \$3,195. Mary loved the set so much that she purchased a duplicate Limoges set for more than \$1,000 and had the United States seal replaced with her initials, ML. Mary was not alone when she purchased these items. During her first trip William Wood accompanied her. During her second trip John Watt, the White House gardener, escorted her. Mary was also never alone in attempting to conceal her spending from Lincoln. Watt was one accomplice of Mary's, as he could temporarily hide her expenditures by shifting them into

⁹⁹ In fact, apart from the addition of the partition, purchases for Lincoln's office and the offices of his secretaries totaled \$44.50. Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 98.

¹⁰⁰ Holzer, "Abraham Lincoln's White House," 3-4; Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 96-98.

other accounts. The new Commissioner of Public Buildings was also a significant enabler of Mary's efforts. Benjamin Brown French agreed to continue the accounting practices of Watt and to intercede with Lincoln on matters related to the redecorating funds. Watt and French, along with Congress, did little to discourage Mary's excessive spending when they took part in actions that supported it. This allowed Mary to continually establish and develop unrealistic negotiating habits with vendors.¹⁰¹

Mary experienced similar criticism and hardships concerning her own personal shopping, mostly for the latest fashions. As First Lady, Mary believed the clothes she wore were of the utmost importance since she would be visible to the American people at all times. Furthermore, Mary understood an additional pressure to dress in elegant clothing since the Lincolns hailed from the West and westerners were often viewed as inferior in society. To make sure her fashion was always up-to-date, Mary sought the high-class fashions of New York City. In order to save a little money, Mary accepted gifts whenever she could, although many of these "gifts" were not actually free. Mary quickly figured out that she was poorly educated on what merchandise was a donation or a purchase, as later observed by Mary's cousin Elizabeth Grimsley when she stated in her White House narrative, "Unfortunately, too many presents, were sent marked 'personal gifts', and were accepted, but Mr. Lincoln was not in this respect 'worldly wise' and Mrs. Lincoln could not anticipate the storm of censure which fell upon her."¹⁰² Grimsley, in hindsight was recalling how many items the Lincolns received that Mary honestly believed to be free of charge; yet, she came to find out that was not the case when she began receiving bills for all of these "gifts."¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 96-98.

¹⁰² Grimsley, "Six Months in the White House," 59.

¹⁰³ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 192-194.

In one example of this oversight, the New York merchant Alexander Stewart offered Mary an imported shawl in the fall of 1861, selling it as a necessity to keep her shoulders warm from drafts in the White House. Possibly believing Stewart wanted to gain influence with Lincoln, Mary accepted the shawl happily, seemingly understanding that the shawl was a donation in exchange for a good word from the First Lady. However, four months afterwards she received a bill from Stewart. From then on, Mary's relationship with vendors changed dramatically. She renegotiated bills, exchanged favors for withdrawals of outstanding bills, and held off unpaid bills in numerous ways. Soon her debts began to pile up with unpaid bills and protracted, informal negotiations. Mary supposedly confided to her dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckley, that she owed almost \$27,000 to creditors,¹⁰⁴ a massive debt that Lincoln apparently knew nothing about and would hopefully never discover as long as he was successfully reelected in 1864. Mary lived in fear that Lincoln would not be reelected and would find out about the debt that she had kept hidden from him. She dreaded his reaction to her debt and thus used her position as First Lady to encourage others to reelect her husband. Although she wanted to see her husband reelected anyways, his victory would also allow Mary more time to pay off her concealed debt.¹⁰⁵

Mary's expensive fashion tastes mirrored powerful foreign female leaders such as England's Queen Victoria and France's Empress Eugénie since Mary enjoyed costly dresses as well as costly jewelry, with pearls being a personal favorite. After Prince Albert died in December 1861 and Queen Victoria began dressing in all black, Mary as well as the American

¹⁰⁴ Lincoln's annual salary from Congress was \$25,000 before taxes. With a debt of \$27,000, Mary could not rely on Lincoln being able to pay it off and would need to think of other ways to pay for her overspending.

¹⁰⁵ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 192-194; Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 149-150, accessed August 6, 2017, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9780807869642_keckley.

public followed Eugénie's style closely. In response to Eugénie's leadership in fashion, Mary soon owned sixteen new dresses by 1862 thanks to her seamstress Elizabeth Keckley and may have rivaled the Empress in the number of bonnets she owned. The dress she wore to her 1862 White House ball was inspired by Empress Eugénie, being a flowy, white silk gown complete with bare shoulders and a plunging back.¹⁰⁶

Her troubles with overspending resulted in frightening threats to Mrs. Lincoln in the form of legal action. One threat came from Alexander Stewart when he threatened to sue her for the money she owed him. Among Mary's harmful habits, she believed buying more items from vendors would result in those vendors continuing to give her a pass on her overdue payments. Mary indicated this approach in an 1864 letter to Stewart:

... I write to thank you for your patience and soliciting as an especial favor to me, (having always been a punctual customer & always hoping to be so, a delay of the Settlement of my account with you, until the 1st of June – when I promise, that without fail, *then*, the whole account shall be settled. I deeply regret, that I am so unusually situated & trust hereafter, to settle as I purchase. I desire to order, a black India Camel's Hairs shawl....

With this letter, Mary believed Stewart would forgive her delay of payment if only she orders another piece of clothing, already contradicting what she wrote in the letter about being hopeful that she could purchase something and pay for it at the same time. While the pressure for Mrs. Lincoln to serve as a respectable model for American women was high, she used her status as First Lady in a way the average American woman could not. In addition, her personal spending was viewed as money that could have been better used on the war effort.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 192-193; Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 99.

¹⁰⁷ Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner, *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 174-175.

Despite spending an incredible amount on updating the White House, Mary became an expert in figuring out ways to pay off her overspending. Throughout their time in the mansion, the Lincolns lived on \$6,600 a year, an amount comparable to their spending in Springfield. In addition, they managed to save \$70,000 of Lincoln's over \$100,000 salary during his term. To decrease her deficit spending, Mary sold old White House furniture and revised the staffing. She dismissed the White House steward and ran the house instead with a small group of free blacks. Mary could then reallocate money from Congress dedicated to the staff to be used for her overspending.¹⁰⁸ In desperation, Mary even instructed the gardener to sell stable manure. Although her attempts at being economical in daily living were successful, Mary quite simply had an addiction to shopping and attempting to increase her status as the First Lady through material items.¹⁰⁹

Despite Mary frequently overindulging in her shopping, the addiction seemed to haunt her. As the successful White House Ball was occurring in early February 1862, the Lincolns' son, Willie, laid upstairs in the White House residence battling disease.¹¹⁰ At just eleven years old, Willie was a joy to both Abraham and Mary. He was born ten months after the death of the Lincolns' second child, Eddie, and provided a comfort to the family during that difficult time. In February 1862, both of the youngest surviving Lincoln children, Willie and Tad, came down with a terrible sickness. It was Willie that suffered the worst and died on February 20, 1862, sending his parents into inconsolable grief. For three months Mary secluded herself from the

¹⁰⁸ Typically, Congress paid for the steward, doorkeepers, watchmen, gardener, and laborers while the First Family hired their own cooks and domestic servants and paid for all official entertaining. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 190.

¹⁰⁹ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 190-192.

¹¹⁰ Willie presumably contracted typhoid fever from the water supply to the White House. The mansion got its water from the Potomac River where hundreds of troops and their horses were stationed during the war. It is likely the water became contaminated from the activity around the river and eventually reached the White House. Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 90-91,99.

public. Her grief worried Lincoln so much he requested that her sister, Elizabeth Edwards, come to live with them at the White House for a few months so that Lincoln could focus on the war. When she reemerged from her seclusion, Mary expressed her thoughts about Willie's death to her friend Julia Sprigg:

Our home is very beautiful, the grounds around us are enchanting, the world still smiles & pays homage, yet the charm is dispelled – everything appears a mockery, the idolized one, is not with us, he has fulfilled his mission and we are left desolate. When I think over his short but happy childhood, how much comfort, he always was to me, and how fearfully, I always found my hopes concentrating on so good a boy as he was – when I can bring myself to realize that he has indeed passed away, my question to myself is, 'can life be endured?'¹¹¹

Mary's grief was plain in this honest letter. During this time, Mary shared in the sadness and loss felt all over the country by mothers that also lost their children in battle. As an indirect casualty of the war, Willie's death struck a chord in Mary that completely changed her personality during the rest of her years in the White House.¹¹²

After Willie's death. Mary's relationship with shopping and extravagant receptions changed dramatically. She blamed herself for his death, believing that God took Willie from her because she was too extravagant and ambitious. This guilt plagued her for the rest of her life. When Mary returned to the public eye months after Willie's death, she returned to a more traditional role of First Lady. Instead of continuing with her open receptions, she allowed State Dinners organized by Lincoln's secretaries, Nicolay and Hay, to return and accepted hosting smaller, exclusive gatherings. She even went so far as to have the rest of Washington, D.C., suffer Willie's loss with her when she ordered the cancelation of the weekly Marine Ball concerts in Lafayette Park, across from the White House. After Willie's death, Mary found the

¹¹¹ Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, 128.

¹¹² Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters* 121-124.

enjoyments of her past to bring up horrible thoughts about God's punishment towards her. She even canceled all White House public receptions for mourning. In March of 1862, The *Daily Cleveland Herald* predicted that receptions would cease for the remainder of the Congressional session and perhaps for many months since Willie's death "sorely afflicted [the President and First Lady] in mind and body" and they were correct.¹¹³ *Frank Leslie's Newspaper* announced on December 27, 1862, over 10 months after Willie's death, that no public receptions would be held at the White House throughout the winter as the result of Willie's death. In fact, Mary's first public reception did not occur until February 1863, almost a full year after the loss, as recorded by guests at the reception. Unlike her termination of receptions, Mary never really ceased in her habit of overspending. Instead, she channeled her money into grief clothing and continued to update the White House. Although she decreased her buying significantly, Willie's death never made her stop spending completely. Since she believed God took Willie to punish her, she may have considered his death to be her fault when his sickness severely worsened on the night of the ball. Mary's dressmaker remembered her visiting Willie's bed several times throughout the night, convinced she should have canceled the ball to spend each second with Willie instead of entertaining. Although she loved elegant items, scholars have concluded that Mary may have lived the remainder of her life believing her devotion to the extravagant caused her to lose her favorite child.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ "Sickness at the White House," *Daily Cleveland Herald*, March 24, 1862, Issue 69, accessed April 22, 2018, http://find.galegroup.com/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=viva_jmu&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=GT3005138910&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0.

¹¹⁴ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 102; Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 216-217; "Epitome of the Week," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, December 27, 1862, Issue 378, accessed April 22, 2018, http://find.galegroup.com/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=viva_jmu&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=GT3012567358&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0; "A Visit to the President," *Plain Dealer*, February 3, 1863, Issue 29, accessed April 22, 2018, http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbld=I67S55OQMTUyNDQ1MzMzMyOC44NTg5OT

Although Mary's extravagance was highly publicized and criticized by many in the government and throughout the Union, she was not the only one overseeing repairs and alterations on a symbolic building. During Lincoln's first full year in office, and throughout the entire war, Congress undertook alterations, repairs, and additions to the United States Capitol building. Whereas Mary spent \$41,700.30 during the 1861-1862 fiscal year, the modifications to the Capitol totaled \$78,522.49 during the same year. The extension of the building and an addition of a new dome made up the majority of the total.¹¹⁵ Started in 1855, the Capitol's renovation was described as a patriotic addition to the United States at the beginning of 1861. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* wrote "...when the happy event is accomplished, the Federal Capital will boast of one of the most imposing and magnificent public buildings in the world."¹¹⁶ This sentiment, although most likely not shared in the entire nation, described the importance of the Capitol and its appearance in regards to the government's representation to other nations. The Capitol was completed in 1866, almost a year after the end of the war and Lincoln's death, and was viewed as the crowning glory of the Union. One writer stated in *The Daily Miners' Register*:

To look on the Capitol is enough to make one want to live a hundred years.... To me the Capitol is Washington, and Washington only the Capitol...The soldier, giving up all to perish in her name, has watched for her from afar and has looked upon her first, with a shout of joy. When the slow river bore him back, wounded from battle, he has strained his eye to catch a glimpse of his Capitol, and looking up, has been content to know that he was dying for her sake.¹¹⁷

E6MT0xMzoxMzQuMTI2Ljc3LjI4&p_action=doc&d_viewref=search&s_lastnonissuequeryname=export&p_queryname=export&p_docnum=1&p_docref=v2:122AFBBA107AC9E4@EANX-125E78D76A6677CB@2401540-12589612910FD141@0; Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 100-103.

¹¹⁵ Treasury Department, *Receipts and Expenditures of the U.S., 1861-1862*, 25.

¹¹⁶ "The Ground Plan and a Section of the Capitol of Washington," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, January 19, 1861, Issue 269, accessed March 16, 2018, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

¹¹⁷ Mary Clemmer Ames, "The Capitol," *The Daily Miners' Register*, October 24, 1866, issue 79, accessed March 16, 2018,

http://find.galegroup.com/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=viva_jmu&tabID=T

This editorial compared the completion of the Capitol to the soldier's reason for fighting, suggesting that the Capitol represents all of America's values, dreams, and goals for the future. This same description was what Mary hoped the American people would see in the White House and was the main reason she poured so much money into restoring it to a glorious symbol of the United States. While the Capitol cost the government much more than the White House many Americans looked towards the Capitol as an enduring symbol of freedom, unity, and democracy; whereas, as many Americans also viewed the White House's transformation as disrespectful and shameful during the war. This difference in viewpoint resulted in Mary receiving the brunt of the public's dissatisfaction with extravagance during the war years. Regarded as unimportant and a waste of valuable resources, the public never warmed up to Mary's vision to create the White House into an American symbol that would astonish the world.¹¹⁸

Mrs. Lincoln was full of natural social ambition and developed a reputation for being an outstanding and seasoned hostess prior to Lincoln's election to the presidency. As the First Lady, Mary had an enormous influence on the administration's social calendar and appearance to the outside world. The receptions and parties the Lincolns hosted influenced their power within Washington's political climate. Although the public and government officials praised many of these gatherings, they were equally criticized as being overly extravagant during wartime. Some believed Mary was overstepping the requirements of her role as First Lady, attempting to become an American equivalent of royalty, while others simply believed any extra money in the government should go towards supporting the soldiers. Apart from the unending critics of her

003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=GT3014762295&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0.

¹¹⁸ "Capitol Dome," *Architect of the Capitol*, accessed March 16, 2018, <https://www.aoc.gov/capitol-buildings/capitol-dome>.

spending on the White House and on social events, the extravagance began to take a personal toll on Mary. Drowning in hiding debt and grieving at the loss of a beloved child, Mary eventually began to believe her spending habits came with an element of punishment. Despite this belief, Mary strongly trusted her plan to breathe new life in the People's House would eventually be well received. Her work on the White House helped to update the building and create an outward representation of a government and administration that stood united in freedom and progress, allowing Lincoln to focus his time on the details of the war while Mary crafted the bigger picture of the Union's strength and stability.

Good Works

Throughout the entirety of Lincoln's presidency, Mrs. Lincoln faced harsh critics concerned about her apparent lack of commitment to winning the war. The press often opted to cling to stories of her financial excesses and ill understanding of her duty as the President's wife instead of reporting the good she did in the Washington community and within the White House itself. Perhaps, if Mary Lincoln had been more vocal and expressive about the charitable and patriotic works she undertook throughout the war, the press would have been more forgiving of her extravagance and ambition. Although, the press was certainly aware of her charitable works and published stories about them during the war, articles of her extravagance and ambition spread far and wide throughout the Union. Newspapers were far quicker to reprint a harmful story about Mrs. Lincoln than to reprint the stories of her visits to hospitals and donations to charities in Washington, D.C. Mary herself also did not make her charitable acts a big deal in comparison to her outspokenness for receptions and her opinions on Lincoln's administration.

Largely ignored by the press at the time, Mary contributed quietly but significantly to the war effort. As First Lady she often made time to visit and help care for wounded soldiers in many of the hospitals around the District of Columbia as well as attended events with Lincoln to review the troops. She also garnered support for the relief of newly freed slaves from the Confederate States, commonly referred to as contraband,¹¹⁹ through charitable donations and a sympathetic view of the African American's plight. Perhaps her most significant and beneficial

¹¹⁹ The term contraband was first used to describe fleeing slaves by General Benjamin Butler in 1861 at Fort Monroe in Hampton, VA. General Butler classified three fugitive slaves as "contraband of war" so that the slaves would not be sent back to the Confederacy. This action by General Butler led to the Union government instituting a policy in August 1861 that declared all fugitive slaves to be "contraband of war" if they had been used as laborers to aid the Confederacy in anyway. This policy also effectively made them free people and allowed them to live in the Union. "Living Contraband – Former Slaves in the Nation's Capital during the Civil War," National Park Service, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/living-contraband-former-slaves-in-the-nation-s-capital-during-the-civil-war.htm>.

contribution to the nation during the war occurred privately through her continual efforts to support her husband's health and safety as well as her constant desire to see her children and husband happy. In her own time and in historical accounts, most of Mary's good works have been overshadowed by the expense accounts she ran up and by the insanity that cemented her legacy to the public as a frivolous First Lady that fell in President Lincoln's remarkable shadow. However, Mary's work throughout the administration brought strength, stability, and respect to the White House and her husband. While she may not be remembered as one of the greatest First Ladies, Mary certainly attempted to express her patriotic values and her concern for those impacted by the war through charitable and taxing work.

As the war broke out, Washington, D.C., became a center of military and political activity. Troops lined the city streets as the capital became one of the most important cities in the Union. As an important military target for the Confederacy, Washington became home to thousands of soldiers.¹²⁰ Other than these men, Washington primarily became a home to many wounded soldiers from major battles in the Eastern Theatre of the war. Eventually makeshift hospitals sprang up all around the city to care for the wounded. Around 56,000 soldiers were treated in the capital during the first year of the war, but that number grew drastically as the years passed with upwards of 180,000 soldiers treated in D.C. The peak occupancy in Washington's hospitals at any one time was 18,267 soldiers on July 9, 1864.¹²¹ As ventilation

¹²⁰ Washington D.C. bordered the Confederate state of Virginia and Maryland, the Union state filled with southern sympathizers. D.C. was also just one hundred miles from the Confederate Capital, Richmond, VA. To protect the Capital, Lincoln allocated anywhere between 15,000 to 50,000 men to remain around the city. Kenneth J. Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, Richard W. Etulain, Sara Vaughn Gabbard, and Sylvia Frank Rodrigue, eds. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 78-79.

¹²¹ Kenneth J. Winkle, *Lincoln's Citadel: The Civil War in Washington, D.C.* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 214-15, 458 n8.

became a major concern for the hospitals, open-air pavilions¹²² were adopted to accommodate more men and to provide the sick with better living conditions. By 1864, journalist Noah Brooks observed, “There are twenty-one hospitals in this city and the vicinity and every one of them is full of the wounded and the dying.”¹²³ Along with hospitals established within buildings and private homes, Brooks was possibly also referring to the pavilion style hospitals in his count of twenty-one. This number alone expresses the great number of wounded troops there would have had to be for such a large number of hospitals to be needed in a city of just about 43,000 acres.¹²⁴

Mrs. Lincoln, like many Union supporters, believed in the soldiers fighting to preserve the nation and worried about their health and happiness. Mary often visited the formal hospitals and makeshift medical camps around the city to spend time with and care for the wounded and dying men. In addition to bringing the soldiers fresh flowers from the White House Conservatory, Mary delighted in spending serious time with the wounded. On her visits to the hospitals, particularly to Harewood and Campbell, two military hospitals on the route from the White House to the Soldier’s Home, Mary could be observed consoling the soldiers, reading to them, taking down letters for them to send home, and attending musical performances and other events. In addition, she sent surplus food from the Lincolns’ kitchen to area hospitals and held fundraisers to help support the hospitals through monetary means. Throughout the war, Mary continually visited the soldiers, including on December 23, 1863, when she raised \$1000 for the wounded and served Christmas dinner to soldiers in local hospitals. By going the extra length to fundraise for and serve dinner to the wounded, as well as spend a good amount of her time with

¹²² Invented in the Crimean War in the 1850s, these pavilions were quick, inexpensive wood-framed buildings that could be built anywhere they were needed. They were more sanitary and more useful than masonry buildings, making them useful for the war. Winkle, *Lincoln’s Citadel*, 214-215.

¹²³ “The War Effort: Campbell General Hospital,” *Mr. Lincoln’s White House*, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://www.mrlincolnwhitehouse.org/washington/the-war-effort/war-effort-campbell-general-hospital/>.

¹²⁴ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 78-79.

them in the hospitals, it shows that Mary may have genuinely cared about the well-being of these men and did not view them as just another number in the countless casualties of war.¹²⁵

As a mother with a draft-eligible son, Mary might have pictured her own son in the faces of the men she visited, and this may have been one reason why she felt a strong connection to the soldiers in the hospitals. Mary thought about the injured men even when she herself was sick, writing in 1864 to Mary Jane Welles¹²⁶:

I was quite unable during several hours yesterday to leave my bed, owing to an intense headache & although it has left me, yet I am feeling so weak this morning that I fear, that I shall be prevented from visiting the Hospitals today.¹²⁷

When she could visit, she wholeheartedly gave her energy to the cause. She went so far as to personally write to the mother of a wounded soldier. In August 1864, during a visit to Campbell Hospital she spent time with one soldier, James Agen, and subsequently wrote the following letter to his mother:

My dear Mrs. Agen –

I am sitting by the side of your soldier boy. He has been quite sick, but is getting well. He tells me to say to you that he is all right. With respect for the mother of the young soldier.

Mrs. Abraham Lincoln¹²⁸

According to James, he was not aware that it was Mrs. Lincoln visiting him at Campbell Hospital. He later claimed the same woman visited him twice. The first time she brought him flowers and the second time she wrote to his mother. He only discovered his visitor was the First Lady after he returned home and his mother showed the letter. This is one of the few letters

¹²⁵ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 85, 110; Jean H. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 186.

¹²⁶ Wife of Gideon Welles, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy.

¹²⁷ Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner, *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 176.

¹²⁸ Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, 179.

known to have survived from Mrs. Lincoln's hospital visits. Even as the First Lady, Mary had no obligation to write any letters to any mothers of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers that died during the war. Still, this one letter is telling about Mary's personal concern for the families impacted during the conflict. By writing to this mother, Mary expressed her thankfulness for the soldier, his recovery, and the family, particularly the mother, who had to continue living life not knowing if her son would ever return. In addition, the claim that James never knew Mary was his visitor suggests she did not want to make her visits a public spectacle. Considering the critical press's critical views of her, press that she frequently read, Mary could have easily made each of her visits to area hospitals an intriguing story. Instead, she showed a genuine concern to offer meaningful aid to the soldiers during her time at the hospitals and so chose not to publicly advertise her stays.¹²⁹

Despite not seeking press attention for her visits, some newspapers published letters from members of the public that wrote to praise Mary's contribution to the soldiers' morale. In 1862, the volunteer surgeon in charge at the Ascension General Hospital, J.C. Dorr, wrote to the editors of the *Daily National Intelligencer* stating:

Allow me to express through your columns my thanks for a liberal donation of sundry articles by Mrs. President Lincoln to the sick and wounded in this hospital. The articles themselves are most acceptable and useful, but the pleasure afforded the men is great increased by the heartiness with which Mrs. Lincoln has entered into this good work, and they have been often cheered by her presence, as well as by that of the President himself.¹³⁰

By noting Mary's physical gift was beneficial to the hospital, but her company meant the most to the soldiers and was the gift that helped their recovery the most, Dorr is commenting on Mrs.

¹²⁹ Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, 176, 179; Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 111.

¹³⁰ "Ascension General Hospital," *Daily National Intelligencer*, September 18, 1862, Issue 15,629, accessed October 13, 2017, file:///C:/Users/Selena/Documents/17-'18/Thesis/Primary/Newspapers/1862%20Hospitals.Pdf.

Lincoln's character outside of her official role as First Lady. Instead of simply sending items and then seeing to social and political engagements around Washington, she devoted time to just be at the hospitals with the men, impacting the entire staff and patient morale. Others agreed with Dorr's observations about Mary, especially one reader who went by Delphine, who submitted a poem to the same newspaper in 1863 as a tribute to Mary's work with the wounded. One stanza of the poem reads:

When Freedom's flag is waving
O'er all the land and sea,
Her Memory will be cherished-
"The friend of Liberty."
Heav'n bless this noble woman,
On holy mission sent,
To bind with love the Union-
GOD BLESS OUR PRESIDENT.¹³¹

While certainly not everyone felt as strongly in favor of Mary's actions as Delphine, the poem presents a publicly revered version of Mrs. Lincoln while comparing her and her impactfulness to a holy entity on a mission to encourage the healing of the nation's brave fighters. While she may not have been the selfless, virtuous saint that some in the Union were looking for, she nevertheless made her mark throughout the hospitals in D.C. and was described by one newspaper as the most "indefatigable"¹³² of all the ladies that volunteered their time.¹³³

¹³¹ "Bring Flowers to the Wounded," *Daily National Intelligencer*, January 20, 1863, Issue 15,732, accessed October 13, 2017, file:///C:/Users/Selena/Documents/'17-18/Thesis/Primary/Newspapers/1863%20Flowers%20to%20Wounded.Pdf.

¹³² Quoted in Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 111.

¹³³ *Daily National Intelligencer*, September 18, 1862; *Daily National Intelligencer*, January 20, 1863; Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 111.

Apart from volunteering her time at local hospitals, Mary was also a significant supporter of the Contraband Relief Association. The association sought to bring together both whites and African Americans to ease the burden of newly freed southern slaves, otherwise known as contraband, in their transition from the bonds of slavery to freedom in the northern states. Part of this support was most likely fueled by the fact that Mary's seamstress Elizabeth Keckley was a founder of and the president of the association beginning in 1862. In her book, Keckley states that both President Lincoln and Mrs. Lincoln supported the cause through donations. Keckley describes a trip to New York in September 1862 with Mary in which Mrs. Lincoln gave Keckley a \$200 donation to help get the association started. She further describes the many influential people that contributed to the association throughout the trip with Mary, including influential African American leader and former slave Frederick Douglass. She continued by stating, "Mrs. Lincoln made frequent contributions, as also did the President."¹³⁴ Mrs. Lincoln's association with Elizabeth Keckley would eventually become significantly important to Lincoln's administration and overall perception within the African American community. Financial contributions and general support of this civil rights organization had a profound impact on both Lincolns even though Mary is the most associated with Elizabeth Keckley's legacy.¹³⁵

There is further evidence of Mary's contribution of financial support to the organization. In November 1862, the *N.Y. Herald*, reprinted in the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, reported Mrs. Lincoln gave \$200 "for the relief of the sufferings contrabands in and around Washington."¹³⁶ Although this gift was reported to be directly from Mary, she requested Lincoln's help in

¹³⁴ Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 116, accessed August 6, 2017, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9780807869642_keckley.

¹³⁵ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 114-116.

¹³⁶ *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, November 14, 1862, Issue 272, accessed October 13, 2017, <file:///C:/Users/Selena/Documents/17-18/Thesis/Primary/Newspapers/1862%20Colored%20Relief%20Money.Pdf>.

securing the \$200. One of the letters that remain between the President and First Lady focused specifically on this donation. While in New York with Keckley, Mary wrote to Lincoln:

She [Keckley] has been very unsuccessful – She says the immense number of Contrabands in W[ashington] – are sufferings intensely... many dying of want – Out of the \$1000 fund deposited with you by Gen. (Michael?) Corcoran, I have given her the privilege of investing \$200 her(e) in bed covering... I am sure, you will not object to being used in this way – The cause of humanity requires it... The soldiers are well supplied with comfort. Please send check for \$200 out of the fund....¹³⁷

This personal letter is intriguing because Mary compares the contrabands with the soldiers. Knowing that Mary was extremely concerned about the soldiers' wellbeing is what makes it interesting. Mary writes about how the soldiers live in comfort, yet Abraham Lincoln cited the lack of comfort the soldiers experienced as his reasoning for refusing to let Congress pay for Mary's over spent appropriation on renovating the White House. Just the fact that Mary compared the soldiers with the contraband in Washington D.C. shows her concern for and commitment to the contraband community. In addition, she may have been better equipped to convince Lincoln to donate to the association since she establishes in the letter that the contraband were desperate for further assistance than that which they've already received. Her desire to move around money from Lincoln's other investments is evidence of the lengths that Mary would go to in order to ensure the contraband community received basic necessities and comforts. Then, in honor of the first anniversary of the association's foundation in 1863, *The Liberator* reported May donated fifteen boxes of clothing along with \$10 worth of groceries. Mary's donations and support of the Contraband Relief Association no doubt encouraged others

¹³⁷ Turner and Turner, *Life and Letters*, 140-141.

to make similar donations and had an enormous impact on the success of the organization throughout the war.¹³⁸

Still, Mary's time and effort donating to and supporting the causes that she cared about during the war were not enough to leave her with a positive legacy after Lincoln's administration. Perhaps this was because the attention of the press increasingly focused on Mary's mistakes and excesses in the White House rather than the work she did to better the community. Certainly, aware of the contribution Mary's efforts were having throughout the city, the press around the nation, particularly in the Union, instead decided to reprint the articles about her misuse of White House funds or the apparent lack of patriotism she had as she hosted grand parties in the middle of the war.

Mary's connection with Keckley also led to new opportunities for her husband. Although Mary grew up in a slaveholding household, her relationships with the slaves held by her family did not lead her to embrace slavery but rather shaped her later views on the abolitionist movement. During the war, Jane Gray Swisshelm¹³⁹ expressed her belief that Mary had become "more radically opposed to slavery"¹⁴⁰ than President Lincoln. Still, Lincoln's ideas about abolitionism and about the African American community evolved throughout the war. As his views evolved, Mary's relationship with Keckley became key to encouraging and allowing Lincoln to meet a wide range of influential African American leaders, such as Sojourner Truth and Fredrick Douglass. Although these meetings may have still happened without Keckley's

¹³⁸ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 114-116; *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, November 14, 1862; "Association for the Relief of Destitute Contrabands," *The Liberator*, September 25, 1863, Issue 39, accessed October 13, 2017, file:///C:/Users/Selena/Documents/'17-'18/Thesis/Primary/Newspapers/1862%20Colored%20Relief.Pdf.

¹³⁹ Swisshelm was an American journalist, abolitionist, and women's rights advocate in the nineteenth century.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 110.

influence, her heritage and understanding of the community had a significant impact on encouraging those meetings and evolution in thought.¹⁴¹

Mary's most influential work perhaps happened in private, only revealed in later recollections of Mary's and Lincoln's lives. Above everything, caring for her family was Mary's most important and valued job. She understood the health and well-being of her husband and children determined the course of her life, but also directly influenced her husband's effectiveness as commander-in-chief. She knew if the President's stress overtook his health, then he would be an ineffective leader to the nation. More importantly, if the war crippled Lincoln's health, he and Mary would not be able to continue with life after the White House as they had enjoyed prior to the election. Although Mary strongly supported the soldiers and the contraband community, her family remained her first priority. This genuine unease may have simply always been a part of her personality, or its intensity may have evolved through the many deaths she witnessed within her immediate family before entering the White House. From her parents, siblings, and half-siblings, to her own son, Eddie, in 1850, Mary experienced considerable personal loss early in her life. These experiences would have played a huge role in the protective nature that characterized Mary's relationship with Lincoln and her children while in the White House.¹⁴²

As a war-time president, Lincoln experienced an unfathomable amount of stress during his years in office. Mary would have witnessed this stress every day. Early in the Lincoln presidency, Mary's cousin wrote about the idea Mary came up with to ensure that Lincoln could take his mind off the war for a short time. In May 1861, Mary began to insist that Lincoln join

¹⁴¹ Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 110.

¹⁴² Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 19-28.

her for daily afternoon drives in their carriage. She convinced him to agree by vehemently stating that it was her right to have her husband join her rides. Mary's plan was to guarantee Lincoln got fresh air every day instead of remaining in stuffy buildings discussing war strategy. Apart from getting him fresh air, those rides meant Mary and Abraham could spend a small amount of time with each other every day. In addition, these daily outings may have had an originally unintended impact on the public in Washington, which may have been pleased to see the President and First Lady out enjoying their daily ritual. Indeed, their rides passed by many locals, including Walt Whitman, who lived in D.C. at the time, and recorded his observations: "Earlier in the summer I occasionally saw the President and his wife... out in a barouche, on a pleasure ride through the city."¹⁴³ Despite Mary's idea to institute these rides to protect Lincoln's overall health, Lincoln seemed to only participate in the rides when Mary was in Washington, writing to her while she was away, "have not rode out much yet but at least got new tires on the carriage wheels & perhaps, shall ride out soon."¹⁴⁴ Although Lincoln may have only indulged Mary's wish when she was present, these carriage rides continued right up to Lincoln's last afternoon before his assassination at Ford's Theatre.¹⁴⁵

Still, the *Daily National Republican* reported in 1864 during a public levee that they had "not seen the President looking in better health than last night."¹⁴⁶ The stresses of his presidential responsibilities were heavy and visibly noticeable to the public. For the press to notice a significant improvement in his visible health was hugely significant since the report would have pleased American citizens and increased their confidence in Lincoln's continuing ability to

¹⁴³ Quoted in Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 105.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 105.

¹⁴⁵ Elizabeth Todd Grimsley, "Six Months in the White House," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 19, no. 3/4 (Oct. 1926 – Jan. 1927): 55, accessed May 11, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40187553>; Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 105, 114.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 104-105.

effectively direct the war effort. This report would have also confirmed the impact that Mary's diligent care had. After Willie's death in 1862, Mary invested everything she had into the health of her remaining family members – Abraham and her sons, Tad and Robert.

While the carriage rides provided Lincoln with much needed fresh air and perspective, Mary also intended for Lincoln to be as happy as possible in his stressful job. To accomplish this, she focused on the small things. For example, to keep Lincoln in good humor, she enlisted the help of friends and guests. Elizabeth Grimsley told one of these stories. Often woken for business at five o'clock to go to the Cabinet Room, Mary regularly sent his coffee to him before his break around nine or ten o'clock. During this break Lincoln would eat breakfast and Mary often arranged to have a well-known friend join them and would summon Lincoln to join the meal. In Grimsley's account, Mr. Samuel Galloway of Ohio joined them.¹⁴⁷ Grimsley gave this account of Lincoln's change in mood upon arriving:

Mr. Lincoln would come in looking so sad and harassed, seat himself, with a bare nod of recognition, saying 'Mother, I do not think I ought to have come.' Mr. Galloway would go on with some pleasant anecdote (often purposely begun, with Mr. Lincoln's entrance), for he was also an inveterate joker.

Presently Mr. Lincoln's whole mouth would relax, his eye brighten, and his whole face lighten... and we would be launched into a sea of laughter – he himself falling in with his oft quotes expression 'And this reminds me.'¹⁴⁸

By inviting friends to meals at the White House and to just generally converse with Lincoln, Mary understood Lincoln needed a sense of normalcy throughout his days to sustain his resolve.

While she could have insisted Lincoln spend all his free time with her and their children, Mary

¹⁴⁷ Galloway served as a U.S. House Representative from Ohio from 1855-1857 and was appointed as the judge advocate of Camp Chase in Columbus, OH by Lincoln during the Civil War. Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "Galloway, Samuel, (1811-1872)," accessed April 9, 2018, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=G000027>.

¹⁴⁸ Grimsley, "Six Months," 55.

knew his friends and colleagues could often cheer his spirits in ways she would not be able to do. This small insight Mary had into Lincoln's private personality contributed to his sanity and mental well-being throughout his presidency.

In addition to her concern over the health of her family, Mary was equally apprehensive about safety. Even before he was sworn-in as President, Lincoln received numerous threats to his life. In late 1860, before South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union, Mary received anonymous letters decorated with skulls and crossbones warning Lincoln would be murdered if he attempted to take office. Other items sent to the Lincolns included a sketch of Lincoln with a noose around his neck with chained feet and a tarred and feathered body as well as a doll with blackface. There was also a credible assassination threat to his journey from Springfield to Washington for his inauguration, resulting in the Lincolns taking a special night train for part of his journey. Even on inauguration day, Mary was advised to stay home due to several threats of assassination or kidnapping of Lincoln, but she and her husband refused to be deterred. Even so, Mary quickly found herself in constant fear of potential assassins and the untimely death of her husband.¹⁴⁹

To attempt to deter any would-be-assassins, Mary insisted Lincoln have protection around him when in public, in addition to the guards General Winfield Scott¹⁵⁰ placed in and around the White House. Mary was concerned about how exposed Lincoln was on his rides to and from the Soldiers' Home, which increasingly became a more likely target of assassins. In September 1862, Mary would no longer allow Lincoln to continue his daily rides unescorted. The *North American and United States Gazette* reported her concern for his safety resulted in her

¹⁴⁹ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 164-167.

¹⁵⁰ General Scott served as the Commanding General of the U.S. Army at the beginning of the Civil War before he was replaced with General George McClellan.

procuring “a Presidential guard of two soldiers with loaded blunderbusses....”¹⁵¹ Lincoln’s generals were not satisfied with this arrangement and instead assigned the 11th New York Cavalry to his personal protection. Walt Whitman, again observing the President, wrote, “He always has a company of twenty-five or thirty cavalry with sabres drawn and held upright over their shoulders. They say this guard was against his personal wish, but he let his counselors have their way.”¹⁵² Whitman was correct in believing the cavalry was not his desire as Lincoln complained to Henry Halleck, his general-in-chief, saying, “he was more afraid of being shot by the accidental discharge of one of their carbines or revolvers, than of any attempt on his life.”¹⁵³ Despite not wanting a cavalry force around him, Lincoln ultimately allowed it as long as it pleased his wife and his generals. This one precaution, that Mary insisted on taking, may have prevented an early assassination attempt during the war, but at the very least, it helped to ease Mary’s worry about his safety outside of the White House.¹⁵⁴

Finally, Mary’s concern and worry did not just apply to Lincoln. Her children were just as important to Mary. She and Lincoln were notorious for allowing their younger children to convert the White House into their personal playground. Tad and Willie were mischievous and enjoyed playing games, particularly those with a military theme, and played pranks throughout the mansion. Some of their exploits turned violent, such as the time when they somehow acquired six loaded muskets from the Taft family¹⁵⁵ home and shot one of them out of the

¹⁵¹ Blunderbusses were short-barreled guns meant to be used at a short range. *North American and United States Gazette*, September 25, 1862, Issue 26,280, accessed October 13, 2017, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

¹⁵² Quoted in Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 113.

¹⁵³ Quoted in Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 113.

¹⁵⁴ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 164, 166, 178; Grimsley, “Six Months,” 51;

¹⁵⁵ The Tafts’ became family friends when the Lincolns came to Washington. Judge Horatio Taft, the head of the Patent Office had two sons around Tad and Willie’s age and an older daughter. All the children often spent time together in the White House and around D.C. before Willie’s death when Mary could not handle their presence and the reminders it brought her of her dead son. Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 89

bathroom window, narrowly missing the maid in the neighboring house. After Willie died, the Lincolns almost always tolerated Tad's adventures, except for games that went against the government such as when he waved a Confederate flag on the grounds of the White House during a troop review. Apart from his mother and father, most in the White House had little patience for the boy's antics. Some believed the presidential parents had become blind to their faults and labeled them as tiny devils. Despite this criticism, Mary allowed her children to simply be children during the war. The boys' adventures and misguided exploits likely brightened Lincoln's day many times and allowed him a small amount of time to relax. Mary did not just give her children free-rein for no reason; she did it to keep Lincoln happy so that there would always be some joy within the White House.¹⁵⁶

Mary's main concern about the safety of her children chiefly played out in her unwillingness to allow Robert to enlist in the army. As thousands of men were giving their lives on the battlefield, Robert was off at university. His parents would not give in to his requests to enlist. Lincoln had the terrible job of dealing with the weight that came from making the daily decisions to move young men onto bloody battlefields and may have felt guilty about not wanting to send his own son into combat. Mary, on the other hand, would hear no talk of Robert getting anywhere near the dangers of the war. In response to any mention of it, Mary would say, "We have lost one son, and his loss is as much as I can bear, without being called upon to make another sacrifice... I cannot bear to have Robert exposed to danger. His services are not required in the field, and the sacrifice would be a needless one."¹⁵⁷ Mary strongly believed that her oldest child did not need to be exposed the fighting as other sons had to do. Her

¹⁵⁶ William H. Herndon, *The Hidden Lincoln: From the Life and Papers of William H. Herndon*, Emanuel Hertz, ed. (New York: The Viking Press, 1938), 128; Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, 89-91.

¹⁵⁷ Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 121-122.

firm refusal to allow Robert to enlist came from her instinct to safeguard her remaining family. However, she would disguise this concern for safety with other reasons, telling one senator that Robert had not enlisted in the army because “I have insisted that he should stay in college a little longer as I think an educated man can serve his country with more intelligent purpose than an ignoramus.”¹⁵⁸ Although remaining in college might have been another reason for him to stay out of the war, Mary’s main concern was his possible death. If he had died in the army, Mary may have blamed herself, just as she did with Willie’s death. While she harbored deep sadness for the mothers who sent their sons to die in the war, Mary was determined to not join their ranks. Despite all of this, Robert eventually joined the army near the close of the war. He served on General Grant’s staff, meaning his chance of seeing close combat was slim.¹⁵⁹

As the First Lady, there were certain expectations set in place about Mrs. Lincoln and her role as a wartime First Lady. As the country’s women created associations and charities to assist with the war, many viewed Mary as not doing her part to support the soldiers and the war effort. On the contrary, Mary was active in many aspects of the war. The work that she strived to accomplish through hospital visits, support of the Contraband Relief Association, and caring deeply about her family were her attempts to contribute to the Union’s mission of uniting the country. While there are newspaper accounts of some of her efforts and accomplishments, many of her significant and beneficial actions occurred privately. It was not until after the war concluded that the public discovered the contributions that Mrs. Lincoln made through the interviews her family took part in and through the memoirs that the people around her and Lincoln released in the decades following the war. Many of these contributions, however, were

¹⁵⁸ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 225.

¹⁵⁹ Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, 225.

not satisfactory enough to the public. As a result, Mary's legacy is often portrayed as a First Lady that went insane instead of a First Lady that genuinely cared about the soldiers and the families that were impacted by the war. Mary's tireless work eased burdens on Lincoln so that he could fully focus on his goal of bringing the country back together. Although these contributions are largely unnoticed today, they made a quiet yet powerful impression on the lives of the American people and on the administration.

Conclusion

Mrs. Lincoln's life was filled with tragic and wonderful moments. Growing up in Lexington, Kentucky, she had the education many young girls could not afford. Yet, she also had to cope with the loss of her mother and brother while living with a stepmother she loathed. Mary's father supported her education and desire to be included in political conversations. This support encouraged her powerful and, often unpopular, ambitious nature. Ambition played a significant role throughout Mary's life as a young girl, courting young lady, and influential First Lady. Her understanding and desire to directly interact with the political world helped to make her a great partner for Lincoln. He trusted her and allowed Mary to advise him throughout his political career. As partners, they contributed to an administration that saved the Union.

Growing up in a wealthy and respected family meant Mary was accustomed to extravagant items. When the Lincolns entered the White House, Mary was determined to leave her mark on the mansion by restoring it to the glory of the Union as a representation of unity, strength, and stability. To accomplish this, Mary believed she was obligated to purchase new, expensive items and entertain guests in a manner in agreement with their new positions. The effort that she put into the White House refurbishing, although impressive to those that went in the building, was judged by the public to be overly extravagant during a costly war in which Mary's overspent accounts could have gone to help the soldiers in the field. Despite the public response, Mary continued in her quest, only stopping when she lost her beloved child Willie shortly after a large White House ball in 1862. Mary believed her extravagant nature had caused her son to be taken from her. Yet, she continued overspending and fell into a debt that she kept hidden from President Lincoln. Despite all of this, Mary's update to the White House was a

much-needed renovation and created a representation of American values that supported the Union's quest for victory.

Mary's most significant influence on the White House during the Civil War was her support for Lincoln and the administration. Through the work she embarked on, she helped ease Lincoln's demanding schedule so he could commit his full, healthy attention to unifying the nation. Mary ensured Lincoln could do his job without being consistently bothered by social events, death threats, or living in an unsatisfactory home. From the very beginning Mary was vital in Lincoln's political career and the evolution of his values and understanding of the world around him. As a president that lacked that sort of worship modern Americans pay him, Lincoln had many uphill battles with the government and the public in his attempt to guide the war. Mary commented on many of his decisions and decided to expose herself to criticism in the process. Although Mary was not the President and could not make final decisions, she still faced significant criticism from government officials and the press. While some of this criticism was directed at Mary's actions, other critics made general attacks on her influence within the White House. Instead of publicly disagreeing with the President, the press saw Mary as an easy target since she made it easy for them to condemn her. Other than using Mary as a stand-in for their criticism of Lincoln, the press may have also targeted her for the influence of a woman in the White House. During the nineteenth century, Mrs. Lincoln, as a woman, had no place to be involved in politics. As a wife, she had no right to freely and openly express her opinions and ideas, except through her husband. Yet, she did both. Her personality demanded she express her own opinions when needed. Despite public ridicule, Mary quietly got involved in organizations that allowed her to have a direct impact on the war just as other women all over the country were doing through their associations. In addition, Mary used her political ambition and education to

influence Lincoln's career since she could not have one of her own. In contrast, she kept quiet about her visits to local hospitals because that was something she did on her own that she believed only impacted herself.

Despite her good intentions for her actions and decisions throughout the war, Mary ultimately became a liability for the administration through her overspending, unladylike political ambitions, and southern heritage that meant she never fully gained the trust of the American people. Mary was a complex woman whose decisions and actions played an impactful role in the White House. Without Mary as First Lady, Lincoln's presidency would have been tremendously different without her support, advice, and perspective. Mary may not be remembered as the most beloved First Lady unlike her husband who has garnered respect as the most beloved President, but she was an influential part in his life, administration, and efforts to save the Union.

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