# The Public Diplomacy Impact of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy: 1961 – 1963

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#### Introduction

#### Context

In 1961 John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States. He inherited an international environment that regarded the U.S. with relatively low opinion, marred by its civil rights record and the Vietnam War, and framed by the ongoing tensions and intermittent crises of the Cold War. Kennedy swept into office pledging to rebuild international opinion of the United States. He was attuned and sensitive to international opinion perhaps more than any leader that came before him, well aware that in the context of the Cold War's ideological battles, image was king. As historian Carol Schwalbe observes, "at a time when the United States was trying to consolidate its influence over the free world and gain the support of diverse peoples in nonaligned nations," Public Diplomacy (PD) efforts – "the soft sell rather than the hard line" – were vital.<sup>i</sup>

Kennedy turned to the United States Information Agency (USIA) to hone America's image into a powerful Cold War tool. In his history of *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, Nicholas Cull notes:

There was much scope for the USIA to act, especially by working to "identify" the U.S. with the "revolution of rising expectations" across the globe. American propaganda needed to do more than just snipe at Communism; it needed to play a role in the global development of "free governments," to engage with accusations of racism, and to "come to terms with the spirit of nationalism" at work in the emerging nations of Africa and Asia.

The USIA had a number of important assets to achieve this end: the clear-eyed leadership of Edward R. Murrow as USIA Director, the natural charisma and popularity of Kennedy himself, and the rising dominance and dissemination of film and television around the world, which facilitated rapid and dramatic communication with foreign audiences as never before.

But the President had brought one more vital element to the White House: his wife, Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy, who would become the symbol at home and abroad of the youthful energy and cultured internationalism that the USIA strived to project in the early 1960s. Jacqueline Kennedy was young, attractive, well educated, highly cultured, and projected traditional, sophisticated femininity as wife, mother, and First Lady. Her often commented-upon natural charm served her well, and seemed to immediately resonate with the international audience. As Schwalbe notes, "millions of people were captivated by this beautiful young mother, who spoke several languages and adored art, music and history." The USIA quickly recognized the great promise of Mrs. Kennedy as

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a Public Diplomacy asset, and worked to turn her natural appeal into a powerful symbol of American ideals in a Cold War world.

# An Image-Savvy First Lady

Mrs. Kennedy was the first "televised" First Lady, facing intense media coverage and mass public attention, and she was well aware of how her image reflected on her husband's administration and on the United States as a whole. Acknowledging this, she worked to cultivate her image carefully. While paparazzi photographs of the First Lady dominated the press, Mrs. Kennedy introduced the position of official in-house photographer to provide official White House photographs for press and events, and also brought on a personal press secretary – the first for a presidential spouse - to manage her media affairs. Her savvy proved a tremendous boon to American Public Diplomacy, but perhaps her most important PD advantage was that of inherent legitimacy: she was an ideal personification of the youthful energy of the Kennedy administration. The USIA did not have to construct a new role for her in the American narrative abroad, instead it could build on traits that were very much a genuine part of her, flowing naturally into a positive narrative about the United States. Three elements in particular became the defining characteristics of Jacqueline Kennedy as unofficial ambassador and international asset in the early 1960s: her strategic cultivation of personal relationships, her projection and patronage of art and culture, and her openness and outreach to other cultures. Through these Jacqueline Kennedy acted as a proxy for the United States abroad, becoming a symbolic personification of America's foreign policy ideals. Though she was First Lady for just a few short years before her husband's assassination in 1963, she played a vital role in framing the values and legacy of the Kennedy administration abroad.

#### PERSONAL DIPLOMACY

Mrs. Kennedy was known for her style, intelligence, and sophistication, all of which proved valuable assets in developing personal relationships with key leaders that laid a subtle but important foundation for American foreign policy goals. She was well aware that in the tense Cold War global environment, her position as First Lady – in which she served as a face of the U.S. government and yet was removed from actual policymaking granted her a unique opportunity to reach out to foreign leaders in friendship, where her husband and other officials were often constrained to measured civility at best. She used this to her, and America's, advantage, forging relationships to subtly ease tensions and encourage communication and cooperation.

## **Cultivating Relationships**

When traveling, Mrs. Kennedy reportedly brought with her a briefcase containing "writing paper, information about places on the itinerary; and list after list, with brief profiles attached, of the important and interesting people [she] would meet," so that she could engage as fully as possible when meeting with them in person.<sup>iii</sup> She maintained communication with many foreign leaders and influencers, handwriting personal notes to strengthen connections and reinforce a sense of open communication. She also worked to maximize personal contact for both herself and her husband among key influencers. Author Molly Wertheimer highlights the impressive savvy demonstrated by the First Lady in facilitating and cultivating relationships in policy circles:

By redesigning the staging for state dinners, White House cultural entertainment, and informal parties, Mrs. Kennedy was able to widen the number of people who came into contact with the president, bring people together for behind-the-scenes politicking while enjoying highbrow cultural entertainment, and she solidified the inner circle of influence by hosting frequent private lunches and parties for both friends and key political figures whose company the president and first lady desired.<sup>iv</sup>

Such perception and careful curation of relationships was typical of Mrs. Kennedy's personal style of diplomacy, and would become defining characteristics of her international role throughout her husband's presidency.

# **Interpersonal Interventions**

Mrs. Kennedy had a knack for easing tensions, which frequently proved valuable to her husband's administration. On an official visit to Paris in 1963, for instance, Mrs. Kennedy charmed the French President, winning him over with her knowledge of French language and culture. De Gaulle, who, according to a Kennedy aide was otherwise "irritating, intransigent, insufferably vain, inconsistent and impossible to please," seemed taken with the First Lady, and was noted to have said admiringly that Mrs. Kennedy "knew more French history than most Frenchwomen." Her familiarity with the French language also allowed her to translate for her husband, which, as Wertheimer notes, was "a highly unusual position for a first lady, but which solidified Mrs. Kennedy's position as the pivot on which French-American relations were strengthened." President Kennedy famously quipped that with his wife as the center of attention during the trip, he was merely "the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris."

Perhaps the most powerful illustration of Mrs. Kennedy's use of personal diplomacy came in the aftermath of her husband's assassination. Despite the shock of the tragedy, Mrs. Kennedy maintained her poise and grace, responding, with the help of the USIA, to condolences from around the world, and hosting a receiving line in the White House for foreign leaders on the day of the funeral. She even played a central role in the planning of the funeral services, well aware that the funeral, and the way she herself was projected, would be vital to emphasizing a sense of shared loss and unity and combatting fears of global instability in the aftermath of the assassination. Nicholas Cull observes that Mrs. Kennedy was image-savvy to the last, carefully curating the mood and impact of the funeral despite the personal strain:

[She] introduced telling elements into the coverage of her husband's funeral. Jackie's presence at that event; her insistence on walking behind the coffin; the poignant scene she planned in which her infant son saluted his father's casket; her insistence on a racially integrated guard-of-honor to stress her husband's commitment to Civil Rights, all bear witness to her appreciation for the power of the visual over mere words...These scenes were, of course, captured by USIA cameras for international propaganda purposes.

While the USIA and US government were scrambling to project an image of unity and ordered transition, Mrs. Kennedy called on the personal relationship she had cultivated

with Khrushchev to make one more vital appeal for her husband's legacy and for the interests of the new Johnson administration. The Soviet leader was reportedly "quite fond" of Mrs. Kennedy, and she worked to contribute to a civil, if not entirely comfortable, relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union during her husband's term. After the assassination, Mrs. Kennedy wrote directly to Khrushchev, making a deeply personal entreaty for peace and stability during the transition:

Now, in one of the last nights I will spend in the White House, in one of the last letters I will write on this paper at the White House, I would like to write you my message...I send it only because I know how much my husband cared about peace, and how the relation between you and him was central to this care in his mind...You and he were adversaries, but you were allied in a determination that the world should not be blown up. You respected each other and could deal with each other. I know that President Johnson will make every effort to establish the same relationship with you...I know that President Johnson will continue the policy in which my husband so deeply believed—a policy of control and restraint and he will need your help. I send this letter because I know so deeply of the importance of the relationship which existed between you and my husband, and also because of your kindness, and that of Mrs. Khrushcheva in Vienna. I read that she had tears in her eyes when she left the American Embassy in Moscow, after signing the book of mourning. Please thank her for that. Sincerely, Jacqueline Kennedyix

It is difficult to assess the direct impact of Mrs. Kennedy's letter, but it can certainly be said that amid the many efforts on the part of the USIA to ease the world's sudden transition to new American leadership, Mrs. Kennedy's letter provided a far more personal appeal than any official statement possibly could.

#### ART AS DIPLOMACY

Mrs. Kennedy was a famously avid fan of art and high culture, and introduced a new focus on culture as a uniting force both domestically and internationally. She frequently hosted performances of opera, ballet, drama, and music at the White House, but two of her most ambitious and successful projects proved especially powerful PD tools, establishing Mrs. Kennedy as the leader in the "soft" art of cultural diplomacy: the restoration of the White House, and the exhibition of the Mona Lisa.

### An Invitation to the White House

Almost immediately following her husband's inauguration, Jacqueline Kennedy announced plans to make the White House a "showcase for great American art and artists." \* Her first major project was the refurbishment of the public rooms of the White House. The project would emphasize a sense of history, legacy, and culture, furnishing the rooms with millions of dollars worth of antique furniture, heirlooms, and artwork from around the world. \* The USIA leapt at the opportunity to share the redecorating process as a demonstration of America's sophistication, and, more importantly, to introduce the new First Lady to the world as the feminine, cultured face of Kennedy's

America. In 1962 the USIA produced *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy*, an hour-long documentary detailing Mrs. Kennedy's efforts and vision in the restoration of the White House to be distributed both domestically and internationally. She also filmed short introductions in French and Spanish for distribution in countries where these languages were spoken, adding a further shine of legitimacy and showing off her internationalism that would become so much of the PD narrative during Kennedy's term. The film was ultimately distributed to 106 countries around the world, many in the Cold War battleground of developing countries, as well as six behind the Iron Curtain. xii

The film became the one of the most widely watched documentaries of the time, reaching hundreds of millions of viewers and garnering positive reviews from around the world. xiii Mrs. Kennedy was clearly the star, attracting far more attention than the actual refurbishment project. The London Sunday Times reported that Mrs. Kennedy was "charming and so obviously absorbed in the scholarship of her subject...her profound knowledge and sympathy shone through," and judged her a "delightful person of unassuming dignity and naturalness, with a good, well-stocked mind, for whom one's respect is much increased." The Bombay Current similarly praised the First Lady's "youthful enthusiasm, intense interest in history and the arts, her natural charm, fluency and informality." A report from the USIS post in Caracas indicated perhaps the ultimate success, noting that the "film humanized [the] White House." Mrs. Kennedy had succeeded in providing an appealing and very personal projection of the United States far more sympathetically than more formal officials, her own husband included, possibly could.

### The Mona Lisa Exhibition

Continuing her efforts to "lift the image of America abroad and elevate the interest in the cultural arts at home," \*\* Mrs. Kennedy proved both her cultural influence and personal diplomatic dexterity when she secured the loan of the Mona Lisa from France in 1963. The French had a notoriously prickly relationship with the U.S., and President Kennedy had a less than warm relationship with French President Charles de Gaulle. Mrs. Kennedy, however, as previously noted, succeeded in charming the president, and also had tremendous personal rapport with French Culture Minister André Malraux, which she took advantage of to suggest an exhibition of French artwork in the U.S. with a particular request to share the prized Mona Lisa. Malraux complied and proposed the exchange to de Gaulle. The Renaissance masterpiece was soon on its way to the White House.

The exhibition proved a masterstroke of Public Diplomacy. The French benefited from the promotion of French culture and national pride, while the White House gained a powerful boost in the ongoing Cold War contests of ideology, symbolism, and image. In her book *Mona Lisa in Camelot: How Jacqueline Kennedy and Da Vinci's Masterpiece Charmed and Captivated a Nation*, author Margaret Davis notes the calculated use of the artwork:

The Kennedy administration would utilize the painting as a tool to shape, influence, and manipulate public opinion. The exhibition of France's revered cultural prize would be carefully engineered to amplify the

domestic and international popularity of America's engaging, articulate, and media-savvy president. xvi

Mrs. Kennedy was intimately involved in the coordination of the event, and official records include detailed notes from the First Lady contributing suggestions and instructions to White House aides and speechwriters regarding the exhibition. She viewed the loan as an opportunity to make the "ultimate cultural statement," a sentiment that was very much incorporated into the messaging of the exhibition. The unveiling of the Mona Lisa was attended by an elite audience of leaders from the political and art worlds, and was also televised for maximum impact. The event was carefully scripted, and began with the presentation of the artwork to President Kennedy by Malreaux, who concluded his speech by highlighting the diplomatic power of art, and including a special mention of Mrs. Kennedy:

Through you, Mr. President – and through Mrs. Kennedy, always present when art, the United States and my country are linked – through you the world's most powerful nation pays today the most brilliant homage a work of art has ever received. xviii

President Kennedy's speech was more pointed, taking direct aim at the Cold War symbolism of the exhibition. He began by emphasizing a strong alliance, noting that the Mona Lisa was "the second lady that the people of France have sent to the United States, and though she will not stay with us as long as the Statue of Liberty, our appreciation is equally great," before moving on to themes of democracy:

Our two revolutions helped define the meaning of democracy and freedom which are so much contested in the world today. Today, here in this Gallery, in front of this great painting, we are renewing our commitment to those ideals which have proved such a strong link through so many hazards...[We] come to pay homage to this great creation of the civilization which we share, the beliefs which we protect, and the aspirations towards which we together strive.xix

He closed with a quote that would be widely reported in coverage around the world: "Politics and art, the life of action and the life of thought, the world of events, and the world of imagination, are one." This speech, as Davis notes, "shrewdly transformed the Mona Lisa into a symbol of the Cold War, representing Western progress in contrast to the repression and stagnation of the Communist bloc... [The] Mona Lisa had instantly become America's claim to the guardianship of Western civilization." In this case, Mrs. Kennedy was not only a subject of PD efforts, she was very much the orchestrator: without her vision and efforts throughout, it is safe to say the exhibition never would have occurred, much less succeeded as it did.

## INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH

Jacqueline Kennedy had a truly international appeal, which the U.S. Public Diplomacy machine was quick to capitalize on. She spoke several foreign languages, and on a number of occasions made public statements in other languages to appeal directly to foreign-language audiences. She also made more international trips than any First Lady

before her: in 1961 she accompanied her husband on official visits to France, Austria, Britain, Greece, Venezuela, and Colombia. In 1962 she visited Afghanistan, Italy, Mexico, and – of particular importance as will soon be discussed– made solo visits to India and Pakistan. The following year she added Morocco, Italy, Turkey, and Greece to the list. On such trips, she often developed personal friendships with leaders, subtly furthering the foreign policy interests of her husband's administration.\*x It was her mass appeal to foreign populations, however, that the USIA targeted in one of their most successful PD efforts of the time: using Jacqueline Kennedy's semi-official trips to India as Pakistan to strengthen the U.S. appeal and relationship in the Asian countries.

## 'Invitation to India' and 'Invitation to Pakistan'

In March 1962 it was decided that Mrs. Kennedy would travel to India and Pakistan without her husband. Originally conceived as an unofficial visit, the USIA recognized the great PD potential, and quickly reworked the trip to maximize the impact of the visits. USIA film chief George S. Stevens, Jr. proposed sending a film crew with Mrs. Kennedy in order to produce documentaries about her visits: *Invitation to India* and *Invitation to Pakistan*. Stevens believed that the visual medium of film was a powerful vehicle for PD that "could communicate the new youth and spirit of the new frontier" and that "Jacqueline Kennedy would be a splendid vehicle for this – as would her trip to Asia, which could reflect America's outward-looking interest in other peoples."xxi As Stevens described it in a letter to USIA director Edward Murrow, the purpose of the documentaries would be to "show all of the nations of the world the seriousness with which our country takes the Indio-Asian people," and "demonstrate both the stature and dignity of America and, at the same time, provide eyewitness proof of the democratic spirit."xxii

Mrs. Kennedy visits first to India, then to Pakistan, were carefully structured to follow a curated narrative. The core theme, as Stevens detailed, was a sense of genuine two-way respect:

The key, as we see it, is that Mrs. Kennedy comes to learn [from the host country]: who its people are, what they hope for, their wants and needs, their culture and their accomplishments. By virtue of her warm personality and her intense curiosity, Mrs. Kennedy is ideal for such a film ... a wonderful purpose will be accomplished by her innate caring about the people of this smaller country. The fact that she is the First Lady is of basic importance, but we also hope to reveal the personal touch.xxiii

In advance of her trip, Mrs. Kennedy had studied the countries' histories, and her itineraries were designed to demonstrate her cultural respect and curiosity, and emphasize her visit as a symbol of America's connection to and unity with the developing world. She spent much of her time visiting sites of cultural and historical significance. In India she earned particular praise when she paid a visit to the grave of Mohandas Gandhi, laying a wreath on his shrine, while in Pakistan she declared the famed Shalimar Gardens "even lovelier than I'd dreamed," adding "I only wish my husband could be with me and that we had something this romantic to show President Ayub when he came to our country."xxiv Her interest was clearly genuine, and she was effusive in her praise of the

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people and cultures of both India and Pakistan. A speech she gave at Shalimar Gardens was typical of the narrative she personified, first praising her hosts then emphasizing common ties to the United States:

I'm profoundly impressed by the reverence which you in Pakistan have for your art and for your culture, and for the use that you make of it now. My own countrymen too, have a pride in their tradition, so I think that as I stand in these gardens, which were built long before my country was born, that's one more thing that binds us together and which always will. We'll always share an appreciation for the finer things.

As historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony later noted, "for a Caucasian woman to show such respect to a third world people was rare," xxv and crowds reacted favorably. Everywhere she went she was greeted with great fanfare and showered with gifts and attention. In India, she was greeted by 100,000 people lining the streets for miles; in Pakistan cheering crowds held signs reading "Long live Pak-American friendship." xxvi

Throughout the trips and subsequent films, the USIA made a special effort to emphasize Mrs. Kennedy's interaction with ordinary citizens. Stevens explained that "by catching the moment-to-moment attitude of the First Lady as she encounters the peoples [of Pakistan and India], we can demonstrate both the stature and dignity of America and, at the same time, provide eyewitness proof of our true democratic spirit."xxvii Special attention was paid to Mrs. Kennedy's visits to schools and hospitals, her interaction with children, and her reception of and by the ordinary people she met. Nicholas Cull notes that in *Invitation to India*, "through judicious cutting, the film suggests rather more contact with 'ordinary' India than had been possible," and that Mrs. Kennedy's many meetings with U.S. officials and ex-patriots were cut to a minimum. xxviii The same can be said of *Invitation to Pakistan*. Nevertheless, the films' narratives maintained a genuine focus on cultural respect. Scenes of Mrs. Kennedy's activities were intercut with beautiful shots of the land, views, and cultural sites of India and Pakistan, making them a showcase for national pride among local citizens. The narration of the film also guides a message of shared values and deep ties, pointing out "the similarities and long-standing friendship between the sister democracies" and noting that both America and the host country, are "a people of varied backgrounds and customs, of many faiths and races and beliefs."xxix

# **International Response**

The trips and documentaries were a tremendous success, raising Mrs. Kennedy to international stardom and marking a victory for U.S. Public Diplomacy. Press coverage was almost universally positive, and the visually lush films directed by Leo Seltzer became a hit, drawing massive crowds around the world. Initially intended for release only in India and Pakistan, demand for the films was so great that the USIA struggled to keep up with requests for prints. The films were ultimately distributed to 78 countries in 29 languages, with an edited version entitled *Jacqueline Kennedy's Asian Journey* distributed within the U.S. by popular demand.\*\*xxx

Responses were overwhelmingly enthusiastic. The Pakistan Times captured the response of an international audience completely taken with the films despite a wariness of propaganda<sup>xxxi</sup>:

Documentaries, particularly the ones with a 'PR' purpose, are only too numerous to be looked forward to with any irrepressible enthusiasm. But the Mrs. Kennedy film is something one feels like writing a word about...The director chose to make himself free of the dates and 'facts' of the trip. He rose above these and knit the photographic record into something of a fantasy. The effect was charming.

The New Delhi Statesman similarly praised the film, saying, "obviously deep research and a natural sympathy for all things Indian have gone into the writing...[This is] one of the finest documentaries on India itself made in many years." Such responses highlight the cleverness of the films, which boosted the appeal of the U.S. by flattering India and Pakistan with projections of the very best of their own cultures seen through Mrs. Kennedy's eyes. Carol Schwalbe details the strategic skill involved in the success of the films in her article "Jacqueline Kennedy and Cold War Propaganda":

For the literate as well as the nonliterate, the films were a powerful force in shaping world public opinion about the United States. Given the high illiteracy rates in developing nations, documentaries could reach more people than newspapers, magazines, or books. The 1962 documentaries distributed overseas capitalized on and enhanced Mrs. Kennedy's growing presence as a goodwill ambassador and a diplomatic weapon in the USIA's propaganda arsenal.\*\*xxxii

This last point is certainly evidenced in the response to Mrs. Kennedy by world leaders. Indian Prime Minister Nehru declared that "the charm of her personality" strengthened the "psychological pull" between the two nations, "which was more important than any alliance." President Kennedy himself perhaps hit the significance of the achievement best, when he told a friend that "Jackie took all the bitterness out of our relations with India. If I had gone there we would have talked about Kashmir and Goa, but Jackie did a helluva job." \*\*\*

### CONCLUSION

Though she was First Lady for only a few years, Jacqueline Kennedy's Public Diplomacy impact was remarkably significant. Her skilled, subtle work in support of the administration's foreign policy goals was - and is still - often overshadowed by the impact of her personal style. Much of the discussion, then and now, about Mrs. Kennedy has centered on her femininity and fashion, with her influential style and her role as wife and mother taking center stage. Indeed, some critics would argue that Mrs. Kennedy's personification of the attractive, devoted wife contributed to an outmoded image of superficial femininity. What these narratives, whether positive or critical, fail to take into account, however, is the tremendous skill and dexterity with which Mrs. Kennedy, with the help of the USIA, managed her image to the benefit of the pressing needs of America's reputation in the Cold War world. Her personal diplomacy, her emphasis on

the arts as a uniting force, and her genuine interest in respect for other cultures set the tone for America abroad. The USIA was quick to strategically maximize these assets, but at its heart, the international appeal of Mrs. Kennedy could not be manufactured, and it was this authenticity that ultimately fueled the Public Diplomacy impact and successes of her term as First Lady of the United States.

It is interesting to note as well that the very traits that buoyed her international appeal were originally seen as domestic liabilities. In a 1964 interview, Mrs. Kennedy herself remarked that it was only after *A Tour of the White House* aired that domestic opinion began to shift, and that she herself began to grow comfortable in her role as an asset to her husband's work and administration:

Suddenly, everything that'd been a liability before — your hair, that you spoke French, that you didn't just adore to campaign, and you didn't bake bread with flour up to your arms — you know, everybody thought I was a snob and hated politics. All of that changed."xxxv

This dynamic - the domestic successes of *A Tour to the White House* as well as *Invitation to India* and *Invitation to Pakistan* - all USIA Public Diplomacy efforts - also hints at perhaps a deeper success. In reaching out to international audiences and enthusiastically embracing other cultures, Jacqueline Kennedy arguably raised Public Diplomacy to its most generous form, encouraging a genuine two-way dialogue and relationship that not only strengthened America's appeal abroad, but elevated the United States itself to better embody its own ideals of freedom and democracy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>i</sup> Schwalbe, Carol B. "Jacqueline Kennedy and Cold War Propaganda." Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media Vol. 49, Iss. 1, 2005.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>v</sup> Davis, Margaret L. "The Two First Ladies." *Vanity Fair*. N.p., Nov. 2008. Web.

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