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Melissa Ware

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Women in the White House

By Melissa Ware

With the potential candidacy of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, 2008 could mark the first time in history that a woman will receive her party's nomination for the presidency of the United States. In 216 years, a woman has never been nominated for the presidency, and has only once been nominated for the vice presidency, but the role of women has grown substantially in the White House. First Ladies since our founding mothers have influenced domestic and world affairs, but only since 1933, writes Hauenstein Center leadership fellow Melissa Ware, have women held cabinet-level positions. And only very recently -- during the administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush -- have a large number of women been appointed to the cabinet.

Frances Perkins (D) was the first woman to serve in the president's cabinet. She served as secretary of labor during President Franklin Roosevelt's administration, from 1933 to 1945, and is noted for her contributions towards drafting New Deal legislation. She remained in office for the duration of Roosevelt's terms and became a member of the Civil Service Commission under President Harry S Truman. ([Read full bio](#))

Oveta Hobby (R) served as secretary of health, education and welfare under President Eisenhower from 1953 to 1955. Her experience as a public servant ranged from a colonely in the Army Corps to the presidency of the Texas League of Women Voters. ([Read full bio](#))

Carla Anderson Hills (R) held two cabinet-level posts. She served as secretary of housing and urban development in the Ford Administration, from 1975 to 1977, and special trade representative under George H.W. Bush, from 1989 to 1993. Hills, a practicing attorney in Washington, DC, served as assistant attorney general prior to her appointment as secretary of housing and urban development. ([Read full bio](#))

Juanita Kreps (D) was the first of the four women appointed by President Jimmy Carter. She was secretary of commerce from 1977 to 1979. A former professor and vice president at Duke University, and a board member of the New York Stock Exchange, Juanita Kreps was the first woman economist to hold the position of secretary of commerce. ([Read full bio](#))

Patricia Harris (D) was secretary of housing and urban development from 1977 to 1979, and secretary of health and human services from 1979 to 1981. Harris was the first African-American woman to hold a cabinet-level position, was also the first woman appointed consecutively to two different cabinet posts. She also served as an ambassador to Luxembourg under President Lyndon Baines Johnson. ([Read full bio](#))

Shirley M. Hufstедler (D) served as secretary of education under Carter from 1979 to 1981, Hufstедler, an attorney and federal judge, was the first secretary of education. ([Read full bio](#))

Jeane Kirkpatrick, a Democrat who later switched parties, was appointed by Former President Ronald Reagan to serve as ambassador to the United Nations from 1981 to 1985. ([Read full bio](#))

Margaret M. Heckler (R), a former Congresswoman (1967-1983) was appointed secretary of health and human services by President Reagan. Heckler served in this capacity from 1983 to 1985, and was later appointed ambassador to Ireland. ([Read full bio](#))

Elizabeth Dole (R) served in four different administrations. Dole was a White House aide during the Johnson and Reagan administrations, served on the Federal Trade Commission under Nixon, and was appointed secretary of transportation by Reagan. She served in the Reagan cabinet from 1983 to 1987, leaving to assist her husband's presidential campaign. She was later appointed secretary of labor (1989-1991) under President George H. W. Bush. ([Read full bio](#))

Ann Dore McLaughlin (R) served in two sub-cabinet-level posts -- assistant secretary of the treasury for public affairs and undersecretary of the interior -- prior to her appointment as secretary of labor under Reagan (1987-1989). ([Read full bio](#))

Lynn Morley Martin (R) was the first woman elected to vice chair of the House Republican conference. Martin served in the House of Representatives from 1981-1991, and as President George H. W. Bush's secretary of labor from 1991 to 1993. ([Read full bio](#))

Barbara Franklin (R), secretary of commerce from 1992 to 1993, worked in various appointed positions under Nixon and Reagan before accepting her cabinet post under President Bush. ([Read full bio](#))

Madeline K. Albright (D) served as ambassador to the U.N. under President Bill Clinton from 1993 to 1997. Albright was the first woman to hold the post of secretary of state. She served from 1997 to 2001. ([Read full bio](#))

Hazel O'Leary (D), secretary of energy from 1993 to 1997, was also the senior energy policy advisor in the Ford and Carter administrations. ([Read full bio](#))

Alice Rivlin (D), director of office of management and budget from 1994 to 1996, during the Clinton administration, had previously served as its deputy director. Rivlin was assistant secretary for planning and evaluation at the department of health, education and welfare, prior to her appointment. ([Read full bio](#))

Laura D'Andrea Tyson (D) held two posts during the Clinton administration. She chaired the council of economic advisors from 1993 to 1995, and national economic council from 1995 to 1996. ([Read full bio](#))

Janet Yellen (D) served as an economist with the Federal Reserve's board of governors, before she was appointed to serve as a member of the board from 1994 to 1997. President Clinton nominated Yellen to chair the council of economic advisors in 1997 -- a post she held through 1999. ([Read full bio](#))

Carol Browner (D) administrated the Environmental Protection Agency from 1993 to 2001. ([Read full bio](#))

Janet Reno (D) served as attorney general from 1993 to 2001, during the Clinton administration. Reno was the first female attorney general. ([Read full bio](#))

Donna Shalala (D), secretary of health and human services during the Clinton administration, from 1993-2001, also served under Carter as assistant secretary of the department of housing and urban development for policy development. ([Read full bio](#))

Facts	
+	In the 216 years since George Washington appointed the first cabinet, 600 Americans have served in it -- only 30 were women.
+	19 of the 30 women were appointed by Bill Clinton or George W. Bush.
+	Democratic presidents have appointed 16 women, Republicans have appointed 14.
+	Only 8 presidents -- 5 Republicans and 3 Democrats -- have appointed women to the cabinet or to cabinet-level positions: FDR, Eisenhower, and Ford each appointed 1; Carter, Reagan, and Bush the 41st appointed 4; Bill Clinton appointed 13; and Bush the 43rd has appointed 6.
Women's Political Firsts	
+	1872 -- Victoria Woodhull ran for the presidency on the Equal Rights Party ticket, becoming the first woman to run for the U.S. presidency.
+	1887 -- Susana Salter was elected mayor of Argonia, Kansas. She was the first woman mayor.
+	1894 -- Three women, Clara Cressingham, Carrie Holly, and Frances Klock, were elected to the Colorado House of Representatives. They were the first woman state legislators.
+	1896 -- Martha Hughes Cannon of Utah became the first woman elected to state senate.
+	1917 -- Jeannette Rankin, R-MT, became the first woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.
+	1920 -- Women gained the right to vote, after the ratification of the 19th Amendment.
+	1920 -- The League of Women Voters was established.
+	1922 -- The first woman to serve in the U.S. Senate, Rebecca Felton, D-GA, only served two days after being appointed to fill a Senate seat temporarily.
+	1925 -- The nation's first woman governor, Nellie Tayloe Ross, D-WY, was elected to take the place of her late husband.
+	1931 -- Hattie Wyatt Caraway, D-AR, succeeded her late husband to the U.S. Senate, and later became the first woman elected to the Senate. She served two terms, 1931-1945.

Aida Alvarez (D) was the first woman of Hispanic descent to hold a cabinet position. Alvarez served as administrator of the small business administration from 1997 to 2001, during the Clinton presidency. ([Read full bio](#))

Charlene Barshefsky (D) served as U.S. trade representative from 1997-2001, during the Clinton administration. ([Read full bio](#))

Alexis Herman (D) served as secretary of labor from 1997 to 2000 under Clinton. Herman also served as an assistant to President Clinton and director of the women's bureau at the department of labor during the Carter presidency. ([Read full bio](#))

Janice LaChance (D) was director of the office of personnel management under Clinton from 1997 to 2000. ([Read full bio](#))

Christine Todd Whitman (R), former governor of New Jersey, was the first former governor to serve in the cabinet. Whitman was administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency from 2001-2003 under George W. Bush. ([Read full bio](#))

Ann Veneman (R) is President George W. Bush's secretary of agriculture. Veneman was also the highest ranking woman to have served in the USDA. ([Read full bio](#))

Elaine Chao (R), secretary of labor from 2001-present, is the first Asian-American woman to hold a cabinet level post. ([Read full bio](#))

Gale Norton (R), secretary of interior from 2001-present, also worked for the department of the interior under Reagan. Norton is the first woman to hold the post of secretary of interior. ([Read full bio](#))

Condoleezza Rice (R), served as national security advisor from 2001 to 2005, and is currently George W. Bush's secretary of state. ([Read full bio](#))

Margaret Spellings (R), the current secretary of education, formerly served as an assistant to President George W. Bush for domestic policy. ([Read full bio](#))

Sources consulted: The Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, Whitehouse.gov.

- + 1933 -- The first woman to be appointed to a major diplomatic post, Ruth Bryan Owen, a former Congresswoman, was named minister to Denmark. She served as minister under Franklin Roosevelt until 1936.
- + 1945 -- Frances Perkins became the first woman to hold a cabinet-level post. Perkins was appointed secretary of labor by FDR.
- + 1948 -- Margaret Chase Smith became the first woman to serve in both houses of Congress.
- + 1965 -- Patsy Takemoto became the first woman of color, and the first Asian-Pacific Islander, elected to the House of Representatives. She served from 1965-1977.
- + 1968 -- Shirley Chisholm, D-NY, became the first African-American woman elected to Congress. Chisholm served from 1968 to 1983.
- + 1977 -- Patricia Roberts Harris became the first black woman to hold a cabinet-level post. President Jimmy Carter appointed Harris secretary of housing and urban development from 1977-1979. She was also the first woman to hold consecutively, two different positions within a presidential cabinet. In 1979, Harris was appointed secretary of health and human services.
- + 1978 -- Nancy Kassebaum, R-KS, became the first woman elected to Congress without having to fulfill an unexpired term. All of the women prior to Kassebaum's Senate election either succeeded their husbands, or were appointed to serve for the duration of an unexpired term.
- + 1981 -- Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman Justice on the U.S. Supreme Court.
- + 1984 -- Geraldine Ferraro, D-NY, became the first woman to run on a major party ticket. Ferraro was chosen by Walter Mondale as his vice presidential running mate.
- + 1985 -- Madeline Kunin, D-VT, became first woman Democrat elected governor.
- + 1987 -- Kay Orr, R-NA, became the first Republican woman elected governor.
- + 1989 -- First woman of Cuban descent was elected to Congress. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-FL, was also the first Hispanic woman to serve in Congress.
- + 1992 -- Carol Mosley-Braun, D-IL, became the first African-American woman to be elected to the U.S. Senate.
- + 1993 -- Janet Reno was appointed attorney general by President Bill Clinton, and became the first woman attorney general. She served from 1993-2001.
- + 1997 -- Madeline Albright became the first woman to serve as U.S. secretary of state.
- + 2001 -- Nancy Pelosi, D-CA,

House Democratic whip, is the highest ranking woman in the history of U.S. Congress. In 2002, Pelosi was the first woman to head her party in Congress as House Democratic Leader.

Links to the First Ladies

First Ladies National Historic Site

Grolier: Background and History of the First Ladies

Infoplease: First Ladies Gallery
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National First Ladies Library

White House: First Ladies Gallery

White House: First Lady's Home Page
