



American Conversation

COKIE ROBERTS

Ladies of Liberty: The Women Who Shaped Our Nation

May 7, 2008

Archivist of the United States Allen Weinstein welcomed Cokie Roberts to discuss her newest book, *Ladies of Liberty: The Women Who Shaped Our Nation*. Roberts tells the story of remarkable women and their achievements in moving the fledgling nation forward. She reveals the often surprising and compelling stories of determined and passionate women who faced the challenges of the times and laid the groundwork for a better society. The program took place in the William G. McGowan Theater of the National Archives Building. A book signing followed the program.

American Conversations is a series of informal conversations between the Archivist and people who've shaped the dialogue about the interpretation and use of American heritage.

ROBERTS: Good evening.

WEINSTEIN: Good evening.

AUDIENCE: Good evening.

WEINSTEIN: Can't hear you.

[Laughter]

I mess around with them for a while.

ROBERTS: Oh, all right. Ha ha ha!

WEINSTEIN: Who here doesn't know Cokie Roberts?

[Laughter]



WEINSTEIN: That's what I thought.

WEINSTEIN: Well, it doesn't matter. I'm still going to introduce you.

ROBERTS: You don't have to.

WEINSTEIN: We can get right to these great ladies. An award-winning journalist and author she's a contributing senior news analyst for National Public Radio an analyst for "This Week with George Stephanopoulos a political commentator for ABC News. Along with her husband Steve Roberts she writes a weekly column syndicated by United Media newspapers around the country and so she's a kind of one-person journalistic conglomerate.

[Laughter]

She's no stranger to the National Archives. She serves on the Board of Directors of the Foundation for the National Archives and I mean serves. She's participated in a variety of programs at the Archives for which we're very grateful. She's appeared on this stage before among other occasions, I'm happy to say a wonderful discussion we had, Cokie and I and her mother former Congresswoman Lindy Boggs had that I thought was thoroughly memorable. Now we'll get to work.

ROBERTS: Was a great evening.

WEINSTEIN: Your book is what on the "Times" list?

ROBERTS: Four.

WEINSTEIN: Fourth

[Laughter]

but who's counting?

[Laughter]

No. That's wonderful. What is the book?

WEINSTEIN: The book is this book, which will be available for purchase, autographed copies in the lobby after our discussion ends -- "Ladies of Liberty." Now, Cokie had



previously done a book, also a bestseller very important bestseller which came out several years ago called "Founding Mothers." Why this book?

ROBERTS: Well, because I didn't finish the story with "Founding Mothers." I wanted to write about the women of the founding era because I spend so much time with the men of the founding era, for better or worse. When you cover Congress and politics as long as I have you're constantly having to go back and read the debates on the right to bear arms or the place of religion in the public square whatever it is and so I felt like I knew them quite well but I did not know anything about the women. I mean, basically, first of all, you tend to learn about this period in elementary school and that was a long time ago, and, you know it's Martha Washington at Valley Forge and Betsy Ross and the flag and Dolley Madison and the portrait and that's about it, and so when I went back to try to find out about them, I discovered there was a reason I didn't know anything about them which is that very little had been written except for a couple of wonderful biographies of Abigail Adams and now since "Founding Mothers" some recent biographies of both Martha Washington and Dolley Madison but so I started to write a book that I thought would go from the period before the Revolution where women were, to my surprise explicitly called upon to be politically active despite the fact that they had no political rights to resist the British, and I thought it would end with the end of the period which is the election of John Quincy Adams. The voters were handy.

They said, "Next generation, end of period" and that work was getting to be way too big a book and I would've never made the deadline so I stopped that book with the election of John Adams which was the first contested election under the new Constitution and the loser accepted the results which was a big deal. I mean, we forget in this country how big a deal it is for people to say, "OK. The system matters, and we accept it," and, I mean, look right now in Zimbabwe, what's going on. The results are not being accepted by the losers and might not be in the Democratic primary but the --

[Laughter]

So, it meant the country would go on. The experiment would continue and so that was a perfectly good stopping place.

WEINSTEIN: We're going need an hour for you to deal with all the complaints that have come in in the last ten seconds.

ROBERTS: But so, this book is the rest of the story as Paul Harvey would say. It's from Adams to Adams, from the election the inauguration of John Adams in 1797 to the inauguration of John Quincy Adams in 1825.



WEINSTEIN: But, Cokie, it's also the backstory, isn't it in very many ways because "Founding Mothers" gives you the world of Washington Adams, Jefferson, the others but seen from the spouses' end of the table but very recognizable. The events are very recognizable. The perspectives are very recognizable in this. This is not recognizable.

Probably, part of the attraction to this book for a fellow historian like myself is, it takes the story of the founding mothers and a bunch of others, as well, all women. Everything, virtually every quote in this book is by a woman or about a woman. It's a stunning book that way, and what it does, then is to create, in effect, another world. It's the world of very creative, very intelligent very beautiful women, often, dealing with the society in which they have no prerogatives very few rights, if any, and no place.

ROBERTS: Well, I'm glad you feel that way about it and recognize it because that is right. It is their story, and they are wonderful storytellers and the joy is bringing them alive after 200 years and just letting them talk to you and they talk in wonderful ways. They talk about what's going on politically. They talk about what's going on in their families. They talk about what's going on in the world of fashion. They talk about our funny town Washington a great deal because, throughout the book it is this funny, little, miserable one-horse town and when everybody get here, they're just appalled. You know, "What is this place? You know, it is awful. "We were in Philadelphia. It was nice" and, in fact, the last winter in Philadelphia the last congressional session all the congressmen's wives arrived because they knew it was their last session in a sophisticated city and then they were distressed when George Washington died and they had to wear mourning because they had nice clothes to wear and they kept saying, "How long do we have to do this?" but then very few of them came to Washington because there was no place to come to and the effect of that was so interesting because it meant that the men were living in these boarding houses where -- Some of the wives actually did come to the boarding houses and we have some of their letters from them but mainly, it was the men and what happened by being in the boarding houses is that they were all like-minded in every boarding house so their partisanship was so exacerbated by the fact that they would go home to dinner and they would just sort of rev each other up about how -- You know, "Oh, wasn't he terrible today?" and, of course, it was much worse. I mean, you think it's bad now. You know, we're not actually shooting each other now and they were. I mean, all those duels were over politics and over political speech, and so it was very important to have the women come to town and make the men come out of those boarding houses and come together at their tables and have a glass of wine and behave.

WEINSTEIN: We need an instant poll here. How many of you are staying at the Cosmos Club boarding house?

[Laughter]



You ought to get by that boarding house. OK. These are an extraordinary group of people. The characters that emerge in this book in ways that you have never, never, I can assure you seen them before are people as divergent as Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, Sacagawea Sally Hemmings, and a cast of just an enormous number of women particularly women who take center stage very quickly -- Aaron Burr's daughter --

ROBERTS: Theodosia Burr. Right.

WEINSTEIN: Do you have a favorite?

No, you know, because it's the same -- People always ask me that about politicians today. You know, "Is there somebody you've interviewed "that you really like better than any other interview "you've ever done?" and no because they're all different and they all bring something different to the table. I'm sure the person we would've all liked to sit down to dinner with the most was Dolley Madison. She was such a people person, and she clearly from all the letters about her made anyone she was talking to feel like the most important person in the room. She reminds me a great deal of my mother and she was politically incredibly effective and what surprised me -- In "Founding Mothers," what surprised me was that the women were so politically involved and so ardently patriotic when they had no rights as far as I had known until I read the book "No Voice."

In this book, what surprised me was how the men recognized the women's political clout and acumen and so Dolley Madison when Madison ran the first time for President and was not very popular Jefferson had been popular because he was Jefferson. He had written the Declaration of Independence and then the Louisiana Purchase was wildly popular but by the end of his second term he was not paying very much attention.

He was spending more time at Monticello and he and Madison had convinced the Congress to pass an Embargo Act because Britain and France were at war and they were trying to stave off war and stop the interference with shipping so they stopped shipping, and everybody hated it. The farmers hated it because they couldn't export. The merchants hated it because they couldn't import. Of course the shippers hated it and so getting Madison elected was not going to be that easy and Dolley Madison just went on an all-out campaign and the campaign was filthy.

I mean, if you think things are bad now. She was accused of being overly sexed and unsexing Madison because he had no children. Jefferson -- This is all in the papers. Jefferson was said to have pimped her and her sisters in exchange for votes in Congress - - I mean, nasty, nasty, nasty stuff -- and she just sailed above it you know, in her turbans with feathers and had everybody in, entertained everybody made everybody pay attention



to the good things about James Madison and, of course, the people she was having in were electors and he won, and after that election, his opponent, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, wrote "I was beaten by Mr. and Mrs. Madison. Had I just run against Mr. Madison I might've stood a better chance" and the same thing happened in 1812 when Madison was even less popular because the war was so unpopular, Mr. Madison's war and there was a breakaway faction in the Republican Party, his party that nominated DeWitt Clinton of New York the Governor of New York.

The Federalists figured that was their best shot, too so they went with Clinton, as well and later in the century, James G. Blaine wrote "Mrs. Madison saved the administration of her husband. But for her, DeWitt Clinton would've been elected President in 1812" a fairly unequivocal statement, and with all that she had this tremendous political clout but with such charm and grace that Henry Clay said to her at one point, "Everybody loves Mrs. Madison" and she said, "That's because Mrs. Madison loves everybody."

WEINSTEIN: Did you cook any of the recipes?

ROBERTS: I cooked her cake on TV with Martha Stewart.

[Laughter and applause]

I followed my instructions which was the right thing to do, but it was a nice layer cake. The recipes are there because I think they are a point of connection, that women connect over recipes over the centuries. Some of them are really horrible.

WEINSTEIN: What did you cook with Martha Stewart again? -With Martha Stewart. What did you --

ROBERTS: We did the Dolley Madison -- It's the last one. You have it right thereat the bottom of that page. The top of the next page. There you go. Right. There you are.

WEINSTEIN: "This might be a good one"

ROBERTS: Oh, no. That was a note that wasn't supposed to be in there.

WEINSTEIN: "to do on a show.

[Laughter]

ROBERTS: My assistant put that in on a Post-It note.

WEINSTEIN: I swear this says, "Looks perfect for Martha Stewart." OK, but I'm trying to give you a recipe you don't have now so you got to be patient here. "Eight egg whites.



Doesn't say what to do with them, but just take eight egg whites, butter, sugar milk, corn starch, flour, vanilla. Beat the whites of eight eggs until stiff." I'm not going give you any more of this. You can get this yourself.

[Laughter]

ROBERTS: It's actually a pretty simple recipe. It's four layers, four little, small layers and then there's a caramel sauce, and it's quite tasty but some of these recipes are in there because the first cookbook ever published in America was in this period -- "The Book of American Cookery" written by An American Orphan, she called herself Amelia Simmons, published at the end of the eighteenth century and the reason it was interesting is because it had recipes that had American ingredients in them so it has Indian meal, and it's also the first time the word "cookie" was ever used, taken from the Dutch and so I have her recipe for cookies in there which you would just die from if you ever ate. I mean, they're really horrible, but there are other recipes like the layer cake and some Nellie Custis recipes that are quite yummy. There's some wine custards and all that.

WEINSTEIN: OK, and come back with the cookies sometime?

ROBERTS: OK.

WEINSTEIN: On a more serious note there is a quality about this book that reminds me a great deal of some of the books that have been written about the second generation of settlers in the American colonies.

There was a great historian -- he's dead now -- named Perry Miller at Harvard and he wrote varied books on Puritanism "Errand Into The Wilderness" and others and his point, basically, he was less interested in the way in which Puritans first settled Massachusetts Bay Colony, whatever but he was extremely interested in what happened to them when they hung around for a while. They'd been there for a generation and they were basically very internalized at that stage in the game.

They were absorbed in programs that they had developed within the American colonies. They weren't English any longer, in a pure sense of the word. They were a combination of, I suppose, second generations. They were a combination of absorbed and adapting

people adapting to their new environment. I'm second-generation. I don't know if you're second-generation. You're probably tenth-generation or something, right

ROBERTS: Something like that -- 1621, Jamestown.

WEINSTEIN: But Steve is second-generation and town is filled with second-generation people and basically, that's what's happening in your book. These are second-generation



folks many of whom are new to the American colony to the American nation and they're trying to make a go of something which is different than the folks who came at the height of the Revolution. There's been a revolution. It exists. There's a new country. It exists.

ROBERTS: Well, some of them are the same people, of course. Some of them are the people who wrote the Declaration and fought in the Revolution and, I mean, they all are

until the election of John Quincy Adams but they're having to make it work. They're having to make this experiment that they created with great thoughts and wonderful ideas actually function as a nation and as a nation that is growing and expanding and having all kinds of different peoples come in and particularly after the Louisiana Purchase because the Louisiana Purchase was really kind of the beginning of multiculturalism in the country. There were all these people in New Orleans speaking French, mainly, and some Spanish and certainly having no connection to these Protestant English people and so it's a country that's having to figure itself out and continually figure itself out which is where the women, again, played such an important role because what they understood as the country was, you know, going through this great sort of excitement and exuberance of expansion was that there were people being left behind and so they started creating the institutions that took care of those people.

So, they created widow societies and orphans' asylums and fuel societies and soup kitchens and, of course, there were women as educators trying to particularly educate girls and better their place in this society and there were groups like the Daughters of Africa in Philadelphia who were self-help societies for free blacks.

You know, there were just all kinds of organizations that women were creating to try to perfect the society.

WEINSTEIN: Cokie, I heard people when we while talking out there practicing to say "New Or'ans" because they think that's the fast way of sounding like a native. They don't know.

ROBERTS: Yeah. It's tough.

WEINSTEIN: They don't know, but I heard you so be careful out there.

[Laughter]

"Well-behaved women rarely make history." What do you think of that?

ROBERTS: That was not one of my women saying that but I have heard that quotation. I actually disagree with that. I think Dolley Madison, despite her critics in the press was very



well-behaved and did courageous, wonderful things over and over and has certainly made history not enough, but has made history so I think you can be well-behaved and still spirited.

WEINSTEIN: OK. Do you have a favorite story in the book?

ROBERTS: Well, yes. May I borrow the book from you?

WEINSTEIN: Of course.

ROBERTS: OK. So, here is the fabulous part about doing this kind of research. Many of these letters were unpublished and I work in the basement of the house my grandchildren's play room, because it's the only place I can make a big-enough mess and when I'm writing full time, I generally stop around 6:30 and come upstairs, have a glass of wine start cooking dinner, and I found this letter right around 6:00 at night and brought it upstairs to show it to Steve because I couldn't get over it.

It was the year of the Missouri Compromise, 1820 and Congress was in session much longer than it normally is. It stayed in session in that era until March, usually and because of hammering out the Compromise and having to do everything else they were here till June, which totally screwed up everything. They were running out of food. Nobody knew what to do about Washington with all these people in it until June. Finally, they go home and Louisa Catherine Adams John Quincy Adams' wife -- He's Secretary of State at this point and running for President. Everybody is running for President which sounded familiar and so after the Congress finally goes home she goes to a meeting of the orphans' asylum trustees.

After the War of 1812, Dolley Madison had worked with the women in Washington to establish an orphans' asylum because there had been many orphans left by the British invasion and so Louisa goes to this meeting of the orphan asylum trustees and is told that they're soon going to need more space because "Congress had left many females in such difficulties as to make it probable they would beg our assistance" and Louisa says, "What are you talking about?" and the answer comes back from the trustee "The session had

been very long. The fathers of the nation had left 40 cases to be provided for by the public and our institution was the most likely to be called upon to maintain this illicit progeny." There were 40 pregnant women left behind as Congress goes home to its wives and Louisa Adams is writing these letters to old John Adams, who's home in Quincy. Abigail had died by this time, and she's trying to amuse him and so she discovers this shocking fact. Then she says to him, "I recommended a petition to Congress' next session for that great and moral body to establish a foundling institution and should certainly move that the two additional dollars a day which they have given themselves as an increase in pay may be appropriated as a fund toward the support of the institution."



Look. It's just doesn't get any better than that and, I mean, I read this, and I went upstairs. I showed it to Steve, and I said "Does this say what I think it says?" He's like, "Oh, yeah. That says what you think it says." I mean, you have not read that in any of the guy books.

I mean, I was just -- There it is but, I mean, it was just a moment of coming upon reality that was too fabulous.

WEINSTEIN: OK.

ROBERTS: Ha ha ha!

WEINSTEIN: Anybody care to defend the guy books? I'm not going to get into this. This is good. One of the things you said fascinated me. "That particular letter Abigail Adams had sent points up both the similarities and differences between the women of this book and the ones I grew up with.

My mother and her cohorts had much in common with Louisa Adams and Dolley Madison and the rest."

ROBERTS: Well, because they, the political women that I grew up with in the 1940s and Fifties in Washington were very active, very powerful. They ran their husbands' campaigns. They ran their offices. They ran the political conventions. They ran the voter registration drives and, along with the African-American women here in town, they ran the social service agencies and I certainly did see that with these women, as well.

One of the things I was particularly referencing in that remark, though, is that Louisa Catherine Adams writes about how difficult it was to figure out where to live when John Quincy Adams was in the Senate and, of course, you see that all the time with congressional families today and it was true of our family, as well. They can't figure out where to live. There's no right place to live at home or here and she was suffering through that trying to figure it out, and the difference, of course was that when we were away from

our father it was for days at a time, occasionally weeks at a time but never months at a time or years at a time as it was for many of these women and the going back and forth from the District here was unpleasant. I mean, we were in a car, you know with too many people and a dog and unair-conditioned, bad roads but they were in stagecoaches and boats. A lot of the travel was by water and at one point, when Louisa and John Quincy Adams were coming down to go to the Senate their oldest child was two, and everybody had been seasick and she realized after she looked up that he was right at porthole level and had thrown all the keys to the trunks out of the window and his shoes and, you know, all those things that children do and, fortunately, we don't have what John Quincy had to say about that because he probably would not have been pleasant. He was not fun.



[Laughter]

WEINSTEIN: The favorite riddle of the 1824 election which -- you're absolutely correct -- was one of the dirtiest elections in American history the favorite riddle went something like this. Why is J.Q. Adams on shaky ground John Quincy Adams, one of the candidates? Another candidate was Henry Clay. Because he stands on slippery Clay and, "Ooh," you know?

ROBERTS: All right. To explain this the election of 1824, which ends this book is, again, recognizable, in some ways, to us because this election that we're living through now is the first election since 1952 that has not had a sitting President or Vice President on the ballot. The election of 1824 was the first election in American history that did not have a founder on the ballot someone who had written the Declaration fought in the Revolution, or crafted the Constitution and so it was a fiercely fought election that started, by the way, in 1818. Monroe, everyone sort of gave him the election in 1816 knowing he was the last of the founders and they called him the last of the cocked hats and everyone expected him to run again in 1820.

That tradition had been established by Washington and still, they started nominating people in 1818 for 1824 so if you think this has been a long time, then -- And by the time the election came the candidates were all here. They were all either in the Congress or in the Cabinet and Andrew Jackson won the popular vote but not the majority of the Electoral College. John Quincy Adams was second. William Crawford of Georgia was third and Henry Clay was fourth and so the election went to the House of Representatives with Clay falling off as bottom man because only three would go to the House. Clay throws his support to Adams -- and the riddle explains this -- in what many have called a corrupt bargain because Clay then became Secretary of State in the Adams administration and Secretary of State had, to that point been the stepping stone to the Presidency. However, the day that the House convened to actually vote for President nobody had the votes and everybody was frantically counting and nobody had the votes,

and so the expectation was that either Jackson would win or that Jackson and Adams would deadlock and, as Jefferson and Burr had for 36 ballots they would deadlock and that then both of their supporters would turn to Crawford as the compromise choice and this was Crawford's big hope and they get to the Congress, the House of Representatives and, unlike with the Jefferson-Burr election the galleries were full. People were allowed in so all the women wrote about what they saw and all the arm-twisting that was going on and all that, and, much to everyone's surprise Adams won on the first ballot but Clay's support wasn't enough to do that. He needed more than that, and the arm-twisting as I say, was fierce. The boarding house mates of Stephen Van Rensselaer of New York were ready to kill him because he had promised that he would go with Crawford as they were and he, on the first ballot, voted for Adams throwing the entire New York delegation to



Adams and Adams won on the first ballot amazing everyone. Van Rensselaer, certainly, when he got back to the boarding house, nobody would eat with him, all that -- they were very mature -- and they blamed it on his wife. They said his wife made him do it.

[Laughter]

He does everything she tells him to do. She was a Schuyler and a Van Rensselaer. She was of a very prominent family and she was a very feisty woman, but I actually think what happened on the floor of the House that day is that Adams was the safe choice. He was

recognizable in a way that Jackson was not and Louisa Catherine Adams had entertained those members of Congress endlessly for years and she referred to it as "my campaign." That's how she described it and she talked about "my vocation" which was to get her husband elected President of the United States. So, I think that, really, they went with him. Yes. Clay's support mattered but they needed more than that, and I think that the reason in the end, they went for him was because they were comfortable with him because they were comfortable going to that house and seeing a nicer John Quincy Adams than you saw out in public.

WEINSTEIN: But Mrs. Van Rensselaer was so irritated that he ate at Wendy's for about a month after that.

[Laughter]

ROBERTS: No. Mrs. Van Rensselaer was happy. He did what she said. It was the boarding house messmates that were furious.

WEINSTEIN: But we're witnessing something else here and we should, I think, point it out. How many of you have seen the movie "The Candidate" Robert Redford? Remember the line at the end of "The Candidate"? Redford has won the election. He's sitting on the

steps and shrugs his shoulders and says, "What do I do now?" This is a generation that is in the process of major change, major change.

ROBERTS: Everything that's happening is happening for the first time.

WEINSTEIN: And they don't know whether there will be a stronger Presidency or a weaker Presidency. They did know that the founders were iconographic.

ROBERTS: Well, the women weren't so sure about that. I mean, the notion of thinking about your husband as an icon, not so good. No. No. Ha ha ha!

WEINSTEIN: Next time you see her, talk to Martha Washington.



ROBERTS: Oh, sure.

WEINSTEIN: But, in any event potentially iconographic. OK. There were some women who were iconographic, too so we have --

ROBERTS: Not at the time.

WEINSTEIN: -Oh.

ROBERTS: Well, they were figuring it out as they went along and they were aware of that. That was particularly true of Martha Washington when she became First Lady, where she knew this was a brand-new job she was creating and trying to figure out what the rules were and she said, as have so many First Ladies since "They say I'm First Lady of the land but I think I'm chief state prisoner" but it was true, and, in fact even at the end of this period when they're all in the middle of this election that they're so completely absorbed with a diplomat died in Washington and, "What do we do now? We've never had a diplomat die here. "What are we supposed to do?" and they had a terrible time figuring it out. Were they supposed to have a state funeral? How were they supposed to handle it? And everything was like that. Everything that happened happened for the first time and so how they sort of dealt with it pretty much depended on who was sitting where and, again, the women were very, very key to making those decisions because, often, those were the kinds of decisions that women make better than men.

WEINSTEIN: But what happens next, then is that they begin turning to different organizations creating new organizations, creating new causes and trying to deal with all of these things on a nonpolitical basis outside the political arena where women might have a slightly better chance of having a voice, even at this stage in the game. It's not accidental, as our Marxist friends like to say that you get the development of so many of

these organizations -- of antislavery movements, the temperance movements you name it -- earlier in this century than I once thought. I used to think of these as 1840s and 1850s. Nonsense. They're floating around and they're floating around there because we have a situation in which this generation of figures -- not just women, but among them, many women -- don't have a defined, located place in the framework.

ROBERTS: Well, in some ways, that gave them more leeway to have power because the social and political were so intertwined that you couldn't really tell where one stopped and the other began and that gave them a sphere in which to operate but it's also true that those movements that you're talking about, those great social movements that defined the country, really all started in this period and you have someone like Lucretia Mott who, in 1821 went to Philadelphia as a Quaker preacher and, surprisingly, the Quakers allowed women to preach publicly and her religion led her to abolition and she went to abolitionist



meetings and she was shut out. She wasn't allowed to speak, or she wasn't allowed to vote and that led her directly to suffrage. Now, obviously, that was later in the century when she organized with Elizabeth Cady Stanton who she had met at an abolition meeting. They then met at Seneca Falls and wrote the Declaration of Rights later in the century, but the seeds of all of that start in this period. I mean, all of those great movements of abolition and suffrage and social reform all start in this republican period.

WEINSTEIN: What comes next?

ROBERTS: For me or for the women?

WEINSTEIN: -Yeah. For you.

ROBERTS: They're dead.

[Laughter]

WEINSTEIN: They're still dead.

ROBERTS: They're still dead. For me, I'm going to write children's books of both these books -- "Founding Mothers" and "Ladies of Liberty," and I'm looking forward to that but, you know, I just turned in this book on February -- I know exactly when. It was February 11. At 5:00, I hit the "send" button. I know this because it was my husband's sixty-fifth birthday and at 6:30, the family walked in the door for dinner -- fortunately, they didn't expect much --

[Laughter]

ROBERTS: -- but so I really have just done this. I mean, I've just given birth to triplets so I'm not planning to get pregnant anytime soon again.

WEINSTEIN: Can I quote you? All right. Well, let's take some questions. Who would like to start this? We have microphones at both ends. Yes, sir?

MAN: If you saw the HBO special on John Adams how well-depicted was Abigail in that? And the second question -- do you think Mrs. Van Rensselaer's influence on her husband had anything to do that her sister was married to Hamilton?

ROBERTS: The HBO series, I thought, was terrific and the main thing I thought was terrific about it was having people watch it and get interested and care about history and I have had a lot of people tell me that they watched it with their kids and their kids liked it and all that. I, frankly, was an enormous pain in the neck to watch it with because I spent



all the time saying, "No! Wrong! It didn't go like that. Why did they do that? No. And there was no TV reason to do that," and all of that so, you know, it did have things that -- I mean, we had the entire "Adams" series without the words "Remember the ladies" in the total series which I think is rather remarkable and there were a few other things that made me nuts but, by and large, I thought it was a good idea and I think Laura Linney is a wonderful actor and, you know, all that.

The Van Rensselaer question -- Peggy Van Rensselaer, Peggy Schuyler Van Rensselaer -- you're right -- was the sister of Eliza Schuyler Hamilton and Eliza Hamilton serves as the prototype of the political wife that we have seen way too much of in recent months who stands behind her husband wearing pearls, always wearing pearls as he confesses

to some horrible scandal and she was the first. You know, Alexander Hamilton had to admit publicly that he had had an affair because he was being blackmailed and it was charged that he was being blackmailed for dealing illegally in government securities when he was Secretary of the Treasury so he had to go public and say, "No. That's not true. I'm being blackmailed because I had an affair with the blackmailer's wife." He says, "I do not say this without a blush," he says and Eliza stood by her man and saved his political life because he was, you know, a brilliant, erratic illicit progeny of the West Indies and she was a Schuyler and a Van Rensselaer and she made his political career in the first place by marrying him and then saved his political career by standing by him through this, but her sister Peggy was far feistier than Eliza and far more willing to boss around her husband than Eliza was. Eliza spent the rest of her life after Adams was killed by Aaron Burr in the duel trying to burnish his image.

Why she cared, I don't know. I mean, if I were she, I would've killed him, anyway and, I mean, he writes this letter to her the night before the duel. He's leaving her with 7

children the oldest of whom is crazy because she had gone crazy when her brother was killed in a duel two years before and no money. The great architect of the nation's finances was broke and he writes her this letter saying, "I'm so sorry to do this to you, dear, but you would not hold me in any esteem if I didn't have this duel."

I think, you know, whatever esteem she had was there already, and, you know it would've been fine with her if he hadn't done that.

WEINSTEIN: Yes, sir?

MAN: A month ago I saw you wearing a different necklace when you got your medal as a living legend at the Library of Congress. Congratulations.

ROBERTS: The key word there is "living."



MAN: Yes. That was repeated by everybody. Question -- if you had a choice who would you have lunch or dinner with?

ROBERTS: Well, I think Dolley Madison just because she was fun. I mean, these are all interesting women and, as I say, we're not just talking about the political women. We are talking about the educators and the religious women and all of that and Sacagawea -- whose now, apparently Saca-guh-wea -- is in this book because the Lewis and Clark expedition was so important to the country at that point and everything I write about her is from their journals so it's so much fun to see how they start to appreciate her and then really appreciate her and then count on her you know, this teenage girl who's gone off with a brand-new baby to explore the West with them and so there are lots of different kinds of women in here, all of whom were meaningful at the time. So, they would've all

been interesting to meet and sit down with, but the charmer is Dolley Madison. I mean, she clearly made everybody she met feel like the most important person in the room. Yeah. OK.

WOMAN: I'm interested in your research and what was involved with it. How did you decide which letters to put in the book that sort of thing, and, in fact how did you decide which women to include?

ROBERTS: Is Annie Charnley still here? I don't see you, Annie, but Ann Charnley and I have worked now on four books together and we sort of start with are there any women out there you know, and then start trolling around for letters. Part of it is, you go to the men's letters and see if there are any women's letters there. You look in the footnotes of the books about the men and see if there are references to anything about the women

and after "Founding Mothers" came out the custodians of these letters in the historic societies and the libraries and the universities did understand that, you know, this was serious and I wasn't just kidding and they started being much more helpful about finding things and pulling them out but aside from the political women who you have to include, you know, the women who are the wives of the most prominent men -- And some of them, we don't have their letters. Thomas Jefferson burned all of his correspondence with Martha Jefferson and James Monroe probably burned all of this correspondence with Elizabeth Monroe but you have other people's letters about them that you can put together a picture of them but for the women whose letters I didn't have I pretty much didn't include them because I wanted to hear from the women.

I mean, Sacagawea is an exception because she was exceptional, but for the rest of them it really was almost self-selected by how much they left behind so that you could actually get to their stories.

WEINSTEIN: Yes, sir?



MAN: In the course of doing your research did you come across much on women in other countries? I'm thinking of Canada, which was still a British colony versus the U.S., which was independent how that affected the role of women there.

ROBERTS: No. I wasn't interested in other countries. I mean, I wasn't. I was interested in this period in this country for the reasons I said earlier, you know that I deal with these men all the time in the work that I do, and their ideas are still so central to everything that's going on here so I wanted to know what the women were up to in that period.

You know, you sort of get glimpses of other countries through the women who were traveling our American women who were traveling so, for instance, Louisa Catherine Adams' time in St. Petersburg, which is just unbelievable to read about because it was so

opulent and just constant parties and events including for the children. Little Charles Francis Adams at age two was, you know, having to go to costume balls in the middle of the night and drink vast quantities of champagne, and so, you know you get a picture from our American women when they are abroad, but I was not researching women abroad.

WOMAN: Being from New Orleans and that you were from New Orleans do you have any women from New Orleans or some French-influenced women?

ROBERTS: Yes. First of all, the Ursuline nuns play a big role in the book. They arrived in New Orleans in 1727 and established not only a school for the daughters of the French

settlers but also established a free school for Native Americans and free blacks which was highly unusual, and they are there throughout. You meet them again and again through the Louisiana Purchase and then the Battle of New Orleans but then Louise D'Avezac Livingston the wife of Edward Livingston who had been Mayor of New York and was one of the Livingston Livingstons he had a huge scandal on his watch as Mayor of New York, and so he quit moved to New Orleans to start life anew and when he got there, at a Creole ball he met this beautiful girl from what's now Haiti -- it was then Saint-Domingue -- and she was a refugee and she was this brilliant French girl and she plays quite a role in the book.

WOMAN: Thank you.

ROBERTS: In fact, later, after this book ends but I get it in because it's just too good a line he became Ambassador to France and John Randolph, who was just so crazy and never left -- I mean, he must've been here forever -- he says at one point, "Oh, it'd be perfect, Edward "for you to go to France because Louise is going to be the perfect ambassador's wife. She's so cultured and brilliant and she must be so sick of all these yahoos in Washington" and I didn't know "yahoo" was a word then.



[Laughter]

WOMAN: Hi there. I'm curious, what role did religion play in the politics of the time?

ROBERTS: Not a lot. You know, it's interesting because we've gone all around the mulberry bush on the founding fathers and religion and the part where I found it sort of interesting was when Abigail Adams died John Adams and Thomas Jefferson had renewed their correspondence before that and it had been in the public press that Abigail was quite sick and so when Adams wrote to Jefferson to tell him she had died, Jefferson had expected it and he wrote this very touching letter about but then when they started to console each other it was very, very much in religious terms and how they expected to see their loved ones again in the next life and how they were getting old enough now that that wouldn't be so long from now and that that was a comfort. I mean, it was interesting to me how these men of the Enlightenment consoled each other with religion at the death of Abigail.

In Washington, you see the beginnings of churches and there were religious services held in the Capitol from the very beginning but they were great social scenes, you know because there was nothing else to do so everybody went to the Capitol for everything. The women were there for all the debates and on the floor and all that and there's hysterical stories during some big debates when the women on the floor took up all the floor so more women went in the galleries and men are sending up snacks to them on

poles, you know but so they went to religious services in the Capitol and they were of all religions and sometimes even female preachers but they tended to be kind of going to show up and say hi and show your new dress but then, you know, various denominations started having churches here, and, again Louisa Catherine Adams is our best source on that. She talks a lot about different churches and going to them. She likes Saint John's best, but she talks about them so it is interesting.

WEINSTEIN: It was complicated when some of the men turned up in dresses but they worked it out.

[Laughter]

WEINSTEIN: Yes, ma'am?

WOMAN: You mentioned Elizabeth Kortright Monroe and I wondered if you formed any impression of her.

ROBERTS: But she's hard because we don't have her letters. You know, thanks to her husband, apparently we only have one extant letter of hers and it was long before she was



First Lady. She -- The one great, heroic thing we know about her -- and this is mainly from Monroe's own autobiography -- is that she went to get Madame de Lafayette out of prison during the French Revolution and it was brave, and she did it, and it worked but when she was First Lady, the women of Washington hated her and it was mainly because she wasn't Dolley Madison.

I mean, Dolley Madison had had everybody in. She entertained all the time. She went calling on everyone. She took care of everybody who was sick, all of that and Elizabeth Monroe was much more reserved and formal and she was sick a lot and so the women were up in arms about, you know, "She's not calling" and then her daughter was supposed to do it and everybody hated her daughter, who was quite haughty. She had gone to school in France with Hortense the daughter of Napoleon and, you know, of Josephine and, you know, there was no end to that and so the view of her from the women of Washington is not a very attractive view except that she was quite beautiful.

They all talk about how beautiful she was but they didn't like her much, but she was probably fine. You know, they just thought she should be Dolley.

WEINSTEIN: The next edition of this book will have the annotated version in it

[Laughter]

all of the punctuation marks. Yes, ma'am?

WOMAN: You said you were going to be writing a children's version of this book. How do you see the book changing? How will you be able to include the flavor and all of this new information that's so new to these people?

You can't. You can't come close. These are children's picture books. These are not children's chapter books. These books, "Founding Mothers" and "Ladies of Liberty" are completely accessible for middle school up but these are picture books so, of course, you can't include it all so I'm sort of waiting to see. I have no idea how to write a children's book and so I'm kind of waiting to get my marching orders. I'd like to talk to the illustrator and see what she thinks is the stuff that will be fun to draw pictures of and that would, I think, guide me a lot in terms of what information to include.

WEINSTEIN: Anybody in the audience like to work on a children's book?

[Laughter]

OK. Yes, sir?



MAN: Almost all these Presidents were plantation owners.

ROBERTS: Not Adams.

MAN: I beg your pardon?

ROBERTS: Not Adams.

MAN: Not Adams. Well, anyway, there were a lot of plantation owners.

ROBERTS: The Virginia Dynasty, yes.

MAN: Right, and I understand that a lot of these plantations had all these little light-skinned kids running around the plantation, so I'm wanting to know how these kids were taken care of and you've mentioned a couple things regarding the care of children -- you

know, Ursuline nuns, for instance. That was impressive but I'm wondering about these little kids. What happens to them as they grow up and so on? How do the wives of these husbands respond?

ROBERTS: Well, the ones that I treat with are Sally Hemmings and her children. The first stories about Jefferson and Sally Hemmings appeared in the press in 1802 and she was mentioned by name -- not Hemmings, but Sally -- and her son, Madison Hemmings, in the mid nineteenth century told a newspaper that his mother when she was in Paris with Jefferson and his children wanted to stay in Paris because she was free there and, according to her son Jefferson begged her to come back with him and promised her that he would free all of her children at age twenty-one, and, according to her son she was pregnant at the time she got on the ship to come back with Jefferson and his daughters and her brother to America. Her children were all freed at age twenty-one by Jefferson and her children looked so much like Thomas Jefferson that when visitors came to call -- and the source on this is Jefferson's grandson Thomas Jefferson Randolph -- when visitors came to call, they did a double take because the servant standing behind Thomas Jefferson's chair and Thomas Jefferson were identical, and they'd do this and Martha Jefferson Randolph, his daughter of course, was very unhappy about this and wished, according to her son wished that these children would be at a different plantation so that they would not be there where everyone could do this. Now, when the biographers came calling in the nineteenth century and asked about this what Jeff Randolph said was "Yes. They did look exactly like him but my aunt's sons, my cousins, the Carr boys were always living at Monticello and they were randy fellows and so they were the people who impregnated Sally Hemmings.



When the DNA evidence was done, finally, in 1998 we know two things for certain. We know that some Hemmings child, at least one was the product of a Jefferson man and we know that the Carr boys weren't they. They were ruled out so the very strong likelihood is that Thomas Jefferson fathered Sally Hemmings' Children and he did free them all at twenty-one. They were 7/8 white, so by Virginia law they would've been white, except that their mother was a slave and you were a slave if your mother was a slave. Jefferson never freed Sally Hemmings because to do so would've been to lose her because you had to leave Virginia within a year after you were freed as a slave.

So, it was Martha Jefferson Randolph who freed her, and when I found myself writing this sentence because we know, again, that Sally Hemmings was the half-sister of Jefferson's wife Martha Jefferson, and when I found myself writing this sentence that Martha Jefferson Randolph freed the woman who was her aunt and probably the mother of her half-sisters and brothers I had goose bumps. I mean, that's an incredible thing to have to say about America, but there it was and the answer to how these children were treated on plantations was variously different from plantation to plantation.

Mary Chesnut famously wrote at the time of the Civil War that every woman on every plantation could tell you who the father of the little slave children was except on her own plantation and, you know, that was pretty much the way it was.

WEINSTEIN: Well, I see that we've exhausted our questions for tonight.

ROBERTS: One more here.

MAN: Can I talk here? You observed in "Founding Mothers" that these women who achieved so much in a society where, essentially, women were clearly different. Bring that forward.

ROBERTS: If you couldn't hear, the gentleman says that I observed in "Founding Mothers" that these women who achieved so much did it basically by doing what women do -- you know, putting one foot in front of another and doing what they have to do whatever the circumstances are that are presented to them. Well, I think that's true in humankind or in womankind. I think that that is what we do and some of us do it better than others and some of us do it with more grace than others but these women in this period, when the country was so fragile and so exuberant and so complicated I think, did it fairly well. I mean, they were really impressive women and so much fun. I mean, wait till you get to meet them. They're really a lot of fun to know. They're just t -- I mean, I've been



reading their mail and, you know, they talk to us over a couple of hundred years and, you know, it's really a great treat to make their acquaintance.

WEINSTEIN: I want to take the privilege of the last question for tonight, if I may after which Cokie will be signing books out in the lobby, so you can get your book signed here. I don't know whether -- You may have noticed as you wandered the country that there's an election taking place and I wondered, would you care to say anything about it?

[Laughter]

ROBERTS: No. Ha ha ha!

WEINSTEIN: I thought that would be the case. Thank you very much.

ROBERTS: Ha ha ha! Thank you.

[Applause]

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