



# Pat Nixon: Embattled First Lady (Modern First Ladies)

*Mary C. Brennan*

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Pat Nixon may be the least understood of modern first ladies. Although public opinion polls rated her one of our nation's most admired women, few Americans really knew much about her.

This first scholarly biography of Thelma Ryan Nixon—the first biography in thirty-five years and the first to access her papers—goes further than any other book to show readers the real Pat Nixon. Lester David's *The Lonely Lady of San Clemente* painted her as a tragic figure while Julie Nixon Eisenhower's adoring *Pat Nixon: The Untold Story* fell short of offering an objective portrait. Now Mary Brennan moves beyond the oversimplified appraisals of this neglected first lady to provide a powerful study of a complex and fascinating presidential spouse.

Drawing on Mrs. Nixon's recently opened papers—as well as on recollections of both friends and adversaries—Brennan debunks the myth of "Plastic Pat" and fleshes out the real woman behind the stories and stereotypes. The Nixons had more in common with small-town Americans than with Washington society, and Brennan shows that part of Pat's difficulty in dealing with the political world was that she never quite left the "normal" Pat behind. Political and social upheaval during her husband's presidency further complicated her role as first lady, as she had to confront a shifting cultural terrain with the whole world watching.

Brennan emphasizes Pat's activism—the first presidential wife to serve as official government representative, as well as the most traveled—and examines her complicated relationship with her husband. Often seen as a "good soldier," Pat, in reality, engaged in constant warfare with her husband and his advisers as she tried to protect her own schedule from interference from the West Wing.

Blending empathy and objectivity, Brennan shows that Pat Nixon was a strong woman caught up in circumstances beyond her control who did as her ancestors had done: gritted her teeth and got the job done as best she could. This account of an embattled first lady opens a new window on the Nixon years and finally allows Pat Nixon to take center stage in her own life.

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