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A Tribute to the Ladies

The legendary Cokie Roberts dishes on Martha, Dolley and our country's Founding Mothers



March 25, 2014 | Brian E. Clark

BRISTOL, R.I. – Quiz any elementary school student on the key facts about women during the early days of American history, and they're certain to cite two highlights – Martha Washington spent a winter at Valley Forge, and Dolley Madison saved George Washington's portrait when the British invaded.

Both facts, of course, are true. But while they may prove helpful in Trivial Pursuit, they hardly attest to the enduring impact of either woman on the new nation.

"Martha spent every winter of the eight long years of the Revolutionary War at camp with the soldiers – and she *hated* it," said legendary ABC/NPR journalist Cokie Roberts, who chronicled these stories in her bestseller, *Founding Mothers*. "It was unpleasant, it was cold, there were no amenities (to put it mildly) and she was a prime target for hostage taking. But she went, every year, because George begged her to come – she and the other officers' wives were essential to troop morale."

Roberts shared the stories of Martha Washington and her fellow Founding Mothers – including Rhode Island's own Catharine Littlefield Greene – in a packed room at the Campus Recreation Center last night. The event was part of a President's Distinguished Speakers Series appearance arranged in partnership with Rhode Island Public Radio; Roberts followed up this morning by teaching a master class session with the University's journalism students.

As for Dolley? For 16 critical years of early American history – from 1801 to 1817, during the Jefferson and Madison administrations, when Roberts said “the war was over, but there was a country to raise” – she used her influence in the capital to push the legislators past partisan disdain.

“Dolley Madison saw that this partisanship – vituperation, really – was so dangerous that the country was in peril,” Roberts said. “She hosted regular gatherings of the men (called ‘squeezes’) where they had to be civil, they had to break bread together, and they had to keep talking to each other to keep the country going...

“At one point the Federalists tried to boycott her squeezes but discovered that they couldn’t, because all the political deals got made there and all the political information got exchanged there. They *had* to be there. That made all the difference in the world and got us through a very, very dangerous time as a young, fragile nation.”

It was stories like these that Roberts unearthed after two motivations lured her into scholarship on women of the era and propelled her toward *Founding Mothers*.

As a daily journalist covering politics for more than four decades, she frequently found herself referring to the words of the Founding Fathers – often to vet elected officials in Congress, who she said have a tendency to attribute entirely fabricated ideas to the Founding Fathers to advance their agendas – which piqued her curiosity about the women in their lives.

And having grown up the daughter of two members of the House of Representatives, she witnessed firsthand the influence of women – Lady Bird Johnson, Betty Ford, Pauline Gore – in Washington.

“I grew up with this incredible group of fabulous women who were unbelievably influential, and I figured that the women of our founding period has to be at least as influential,” she said. “I started to get very curious and I decided to learn about them, but with the exception of a couple of biographies of Abigail Adams, there was nothing... When I discovered that there was nothing written, I knew I had to write it.”

During a question-and-answer session with the audience, Roberts spoke about whether she’d ever considered running for public office, given her family history.

“I’ve always, frankly, felt quite guilty about it, to be completely honest,” she said. “I’m a huge admirer of people who put themselves out there and are willing to serve the public. Running for office is noble work.”

Having written the histories of the Founding Mothers only strengthened that viewpoint, Roberts said: “What people went through to make it possible to have this experiment called America, and the ability for all of us to participate, is really quite extraordinary.”