

Would Hillary Clinton really be the first female president?

A cornerstone of Hillary Clinton's campaign has been that she would be America's first female president, and it has been a theme her supporters consistently have trumpeted.

"When folks talk about a revolution," Sen. Debbie Stabenow [said](#) earlier this year. "The revolution is electing the first woman president of the United States."

This makes political sense for Team Clinton. Two years ago, a Gallup poll [showed](#) that Americans viewed this as her single greatest selling point in the 2016 election.

But would Clinton really be the first female president in U.S. history?

Technically, yes. But in practical terms, that distinction goes to Edith Wilson, who served as de facto commander-in-chief for much of Woodrow Wilson's second term.

Ms. Wilson took over as the government's primary executive after her husband suffered a second severe stroke in September 1919. (A third stroke would strike in October, leaving Wilson partially paralyzed.)

On her official biography, the [White House website](#) notes that Ms. Wilson was dubbed the "Secret President" and "the first woman to run the government" following the prominent role she took during her husband's presidency:

She selected matters for her husband's attention and let everything else go to the heads of departments or remain in abeyance. Her "stewardship," she called this. And in [My Memoir](#), published in 1939, she stated emphatically that her

husband's doctors had urged this course upon her.

The extent of Ms. Wilson's governing influence during this period has been subject to debate among historians, but the White House is downplaying Ms. Wilson's "stewardship."

In his seminal history [Modern Times](#), Paul Johnson chronicles the great lengths the government undertook to conceal the president's illness and the active role Ms. Wilson took for the remainder of Wilson's presidency:

The private secretary, Joseph Tumulty, conspired with Wilson himself and his wife Edith to make her the president, which she remained for 17 months. During this bizarre episode in American history, while rumours circulated that Wilson was stricken with tertiary syphilis, a raving prisoner in a barred room, Mrs. Wilson, who had spent only two years at school, wrote orders to cabinet ministers in her huge childish hand ('The President says...'), sacked and appointed them, and forged Wilson's signature on Bills.

The record is pretty clear that President Wilson could barely function during the final 17 months of his presidency, and only for brief periods of time. Edith Wilson played a significant role during this time, even sacking Secretary of State Robert Lansing (whom she "hated").

What do you think? Will Americans accept the idea that Edith Wilson was de facto president? Or will her role in history remain mostly a footnote because she was not elected?

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