

First Ladies: Observations by Alan Lowe and Nancy Smith (part three)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 14, 2026)

Carolyn Krause wrote this four-part series on the First Ladies, which is being presented in the Historically Speaking column related to the July 4 celebration of the 250th birthday of the United States of America—the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

On Mar. 3, 2026, Alan Lowe hosted a panel discussion in Oak Ridge on some of the famous wives of American presidents. The women he hosted – one on stage with him and two on Zoom on a big screen – are authors of the 2024 book “Remember the First Ladies: The Legacies of America’s History-Making Women.” The three authors are Diana B. Carlin (on stage), Anita B. McBride and Nancy Kegan Smith (the latter two were on Zoom).

Lowe has been executive director of the American Science and Energy (AMSE) Museum in Oak Ridge since 2019. The panel discussion was hosted on the stage at AMSE, where Lowe announced that the First Ladies book can be purchased at the AMSE shop. It was the second of four presentations this year by Our American Roots, a series produced by the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club and Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning.

Lowe, who is also executive director of the Atomic History Campus at K-25 in Oak Ridge and CEO of the Oak Ridge Discovery Foundation, previously served at several presidential libraries around the nation. Since 2020 he has started three podcasts.

He became host and producer on the web of his live interviews mostly with authors by phone for the AMSE Science Cast (a segment of which can be heard on WUOT every Saturday at about 9:30 a.m.), the American POTUS (which is a podcast about the presidency) and the American FLOTUS (which is a podcast about the First Ladies of White House fame). You can hear these podcasts by visiting <https://AMSE.Cast.libsyn.com/>, <https://americanpotus.org> and <https://americanflotus.org>.

Lowe said that he started the American FLOTUS podcast two years ago at the suggestion of his friend Nancy Kegan Smith, who called him to announce the formation of the First Ladies Association for Research and Education, or FLARE. So far, the jointly produced podcast has 10 (?) episodes.

Enjoy the quotes and comments by each of the women experts on history-making First Ladies, as well as founders of FLARE, during the panel discussion in Oak Ridge last March, which is Women’s History Month. This third article will feature, in response to Lowe’s questions and observations, the comments of Nancy Kegan Smith, and the fourth and last article will present more stories about First Ladies by all three authors and Lowe.

Alan Lowe, First Ladies panel moderator, gave Nancy Kegan Smith a two-minute assignment: he asked her to take on the difficult task of quickly summarizing the immense societal impact of Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945). He led the country through the Great Depression and most of World War II before dying in office in 1945.

But first he introduced Smith as the retired director of the Presidential Materials Division at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. She started her career as an archivist at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library Museum in Austin, Texas,” Lowe said. “Then she moved to Washington, where she became director of the Presidential Materials Division, which oversees issues of presidential and First Lady records and gifts.

“She’s a founding member of FLARE. She was its second president and currently serves there as immediate past president. Nancy was on the committee that hired me for my first job ever at the National Archives.”

First Ladies: Observations by Alan Lowe and Nancy Smith (part three)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 14, 2026)

Speaking on the big screen on Zoom, Smith said that no first ladies have had as much of an impact on civil rights, racial equality and other areas as Eleanor Roosevelt did. "She consistently fought racial discrimination. She was much more liberal on this issue than her husband, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

"In 1936, she addressed the annual NAACP and the National Urban League conventions after joining both organizations. She advocated for anti-lynching legislation, supported multiple anti-segregation campaigns and lobbied against the poll tax. She always talked about the injustice of racism and said one of the main destroyers of freedom is our attitude toward the colored race."

Smith said that Eleanor's most famous action probably was to give Marian Anderson, the wonderful Black opera singer, an opportunity to perform before a huge crowd in Washington, D.C. In February 1939, the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow Anderson to sing at Constitutional Hall.

"Marian was denied because she was Black," Smith asserted. "Eleanor went behind the scenes and talked with the Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes. It was arranged for Marian Anderson to do a concert in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

"Her impressive performance was one of the greatest early events in U.S. civil rights history," Smith said. "Some 75,000 people attended. You can see it on YouTube. It will really make you cry. And Eleanor resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution.

"The Ku Klux Klan placed a \$25,000 bounty on her head. And when she left the First Ladyship, she continued to fight for civil rights."

Smith added that Eleanor spoke up on behalf of both European Jews and Japanese-Americans during World War II when they were being unjustly incarcerated in concentration camps.

After FDR died, President Harry Truman appointed her a U.S. delegate to the United Nations, for which she chaired the UN Commission on Human Rights, established in 1946. According to Smith, she played a leading role in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on Dec. 10, 1948. (According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the declaration remains one of the most influential human rights documents in the world.)

In less than two minutes, Smith convincingly argued that Eleanor Roosevelt is probably the best example of a First Lady "who had both a domestic and global impact on civil rights and human rights." Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, wife of President Bill Clinton (1993-2001), and Lady Bird Johnson, wife of President Lyndon Johnson (1963-1969), were also active in advancing civil and human rights.

(My husband, Herb Krause, met Eleanor Roosevelt in 1959 during her visit to Collingswood High School in New Jersey, where he was a student. Herb said she spent considerable time listening to the students. Also, she told them she learned from her visit to the Soviet Union that, unlike in the U.S., many women worked as physicians and in other professional jobs, and many secondary school students took advanced courses in mathematics and science.)

Lowe asked Smith to speak about Lady Bird Johnson's achievements because "I know you are a great admirer of her legacy in many arenas." He also weighed in with what he knew about her because he had a chance to interview her while working at the Johnson Library. "She was a very strong believer in civil rights, even though she grew up in rural East Texas," he said.

The first question addressed was, why was she called Lady Bird? It was rumored that her Black nanny gave her the name. An oral history interview with Lady Bird revealed the truth: she played with two Black girlfriends who gave her the nickname, which stuck because she liked it.

First Ladies: Observations by Alan Lowe and Nancy Smith (part three)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 14, 2026)

"She always felt racism and segregation of the South was wrong," Smith said. "Her biggest and best-known achievement in civil rights was the Whistle Stop Tour Oct. 6-9 in 1964. A lot of people think that Lyndon Johnson asked her to do it, but she told me it was her idea."

The train left from Alexandria, Virginia, and ended up in New Orleans, Louisiana. Mrs. Johnson, her press secretary, Liz Carpenter, and her social secretary Beth Abell, planned the trip, which covered nine southern states in four days.

According to Smith, Lady Bird had the idea to stop at small towns "where other Democrats don't go" to speak to Southerners "about the importance of the landmark legislation that had been passed in 1964, the Civil Rights Act, outlawing discrimination in public accommodations, mandating desegregation of public facilities and education and ending unequal application of voter registration.

"She really felt the South needed to hear this. The trip was made under extremely dangerous conditions. They were afraid for Lyndon Johnson to go to the South, because they thought it was so dangerous. Mrs. Johnson demonstrated a great deal of courage.

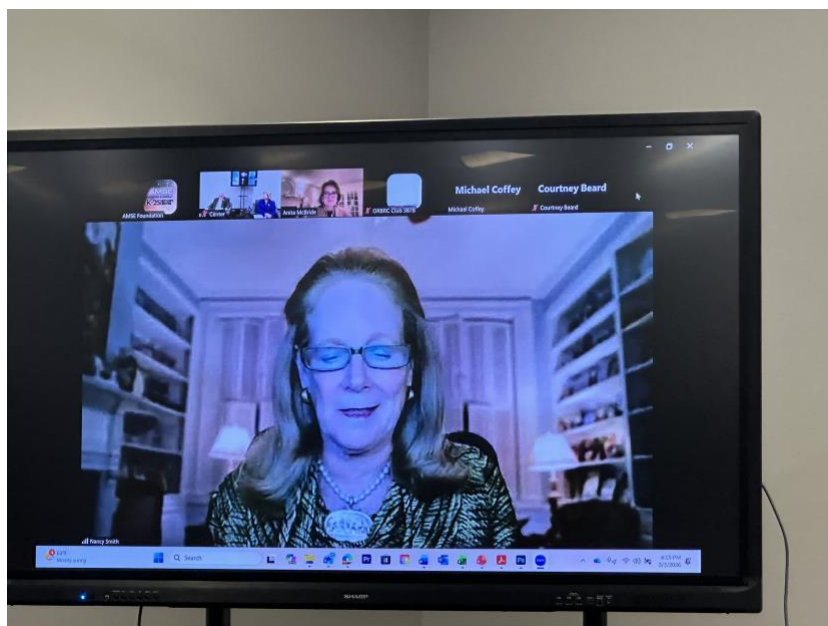
"They ran a train 15 minutes before her train arrived, because they had received bomb threats. She was often booed at stops. But she maintained a very calm demeanor, which was very traditional of Mrs. Johnson. And she made her points.

"Her successful trip was credited with helping garner Southern support for LBJ, who did win three Southern states in 1964, when many people thought that he would lose all Southern states. It was estimated that with the help of TV coverage, over a half a million people heard her message. She really elevated the dialogue and encouraged the support and implementation of civil rights in the South."

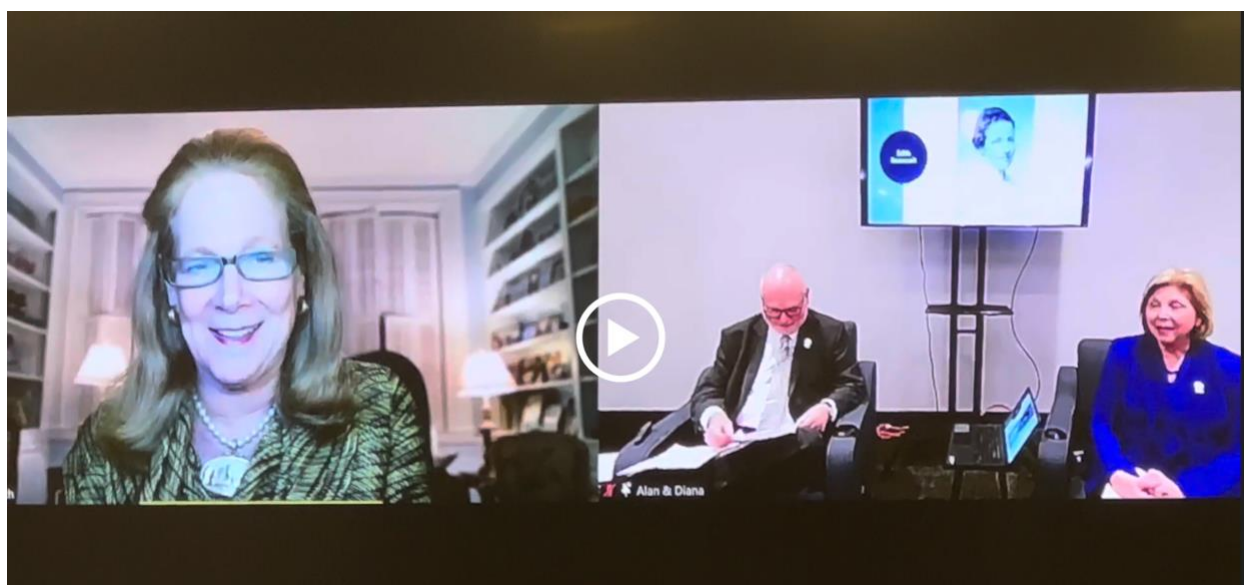
Next: All three authors comment on First Ladies who have had impacts on healthcare, the environment, international issues and other areas.

First Ladies: Observations by Alan Lowe and Nancy Smith (part three)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 14, 2026)



Nancy Kegan Smith participated in the panel discussion via Zoom (Courtesy of Ray Smith)



Zoom was used effectively during the presentation of the panel discussion with some humorous exchanges adding to the program (Courtesy of Ray Smith)