

A Woman of Power: Rosalynn Carter and the Mental Health Scene

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The rhetorical choices of powerful women, specifically first ladies, are often overlooked. In this article, I examine former first lady Rosalynn Carter's writings, which advocate for mental health care reform. These include one of her books and several newspaper articles. I look at how she was influenced by the societal expectations of a first lady, and how she appealed to those expectations while developing her persona on the rhetorical platform. I examine how her personal life affected her rhetorical choices, and how that led to building a stronger logical, ethical, and more intimate argument.

Lack of proper care will have devastating financial consequences: Time is lost from work and other productive activities; medical conditions are complicated; family members, including children, are impacted not only financially but emotionally; there is cost to taxpayers when people become so disabled that expensive long-term care is the only option; and, finally, lives are lost through suicide.

Rosalynn Carter, "How We Make Mental Illness Worse"

Martha Washington, Sarah Polk, Jackie Kennedy, Rosalynn Carter, Hillary Clinton. All of these women hold something in common—all of them are former first ladies, married to the president of the United States. They each hold a special place in the White House and are presumed to help the president make important decisions. The quote above shows that many first ladies, including Rosalynn Carter, had the experience, knowledge, and power to not only influence policy, but also to shape the public views of policy. Researchers such as Molly Wertheimer, Shawn Parry-Giles, and Diane Blair present part of a growing body of rhetorical scholarship on first ladies and their persuasive skills, and I seek to contribute to this work by focusing on how first ladies, specifically Rosalynn Carter, have advanced mental health care policies in the second half of the twentieth century.

Mental health policy in the United States was a particularly great area of focus for presidential first ladies, including Eleanor Roosevelt and Betty Ford, especially from the early twentieth century forward, due to its particular focus on the young and the needy. Rosalynn had a particular impact on mental health policy and health care funding during her husband Jimmy Carter's four years in office. Not only did she help pass the first major reform in mental health care since 1963 in the form of the Mental Health Systems Act, but she also served as honorary chair of the President's Commission on Mental Health and assisted President Carter in many of his political pursuits. Rosalynn went on to form The Carter Center and developed a mental health program in 1991 (Short, Shogan, and Owings 71). These authors write, "Mrs. Carter has chaired the World Federation for Mental Health's (WFMH) International Committee of Women Leader for Mental Health since its establishment in 1992" (71).

Rosalynn's success in these endeavors is due in part to her position as wife of the most powerful man in the United States and her strategic use of the existing stereotype of the nation's first

lady. In “The Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady: Politics, Gender Ideology, and Women’s Voice, 1789-2002,” Shawn Parry-Giles and Diane M. Blair note that “To gain an understanding of the rhetorical and political limitations and empowerments of the national first lady post, the discourse of these influential women must be contextualized within the gender ideology of their time” (566). Taking my cue from Parry-Giles and Blair, I will first chart the history of the rhetorical first lady and how Carter occupied that space in the 1970s. I will then turn to her use of logos, ethos, and pathos in advocating for mental health policy, as these are the best examples of her capacity to create careful, effective arguments.

The Beginnings of the Rhetorical First Lady

Understanding how Rosalynn was successful begins with understanding how other first ladies built the platform for her to stand upon. Parry-Giles and Blair write that during the first years of the nation’s presidency, the first lady received a special privilege that other women could not touch: the ability to interact in the public sphere. During the late 1700s, women were still confined to the private sphere—caring for the home and children within the confines of the home—but “the clear demarcation between the male/public sphere and the female/private sphere was disrupted even further for presidential wives; their space was uniquely political and more public than other women’s lives” (Parry-Giles and Blair 568). This allowed first ladies to practice things that most women could not, including hosting dinner parties with political undertones and interacting with the male politicians in a setting they created (568). First ladies also developed important skills during these interactions, including knowing “When to speak, what to say, [and] when to remain silent” (Wertheimer 1). This was all an important part of helping to build the rhetorical stage for first ladies to occupy. Rosalynn, as demonstrated by the quote at the beginning of this essay, took full advantage of this rhetorical stage.

In the early twentieth century, the role of the presidential first lady began to expand more obviously into the public sphere, focusing on benevolent volunteering (Parry-Giles and Blair 571). First ladies “mimicked and transformed the traditions set by their predecessors, especially in the areas of benevolent volunteering and social politicking, perpetuating and altering the ideology of republican motherhood in the process” (574). Short, Shogan, and Owings write that “The role of the first lady reflects the status and concerns of women in the United States” (65). Since many women were still more active in the home world than in the public world, first ladies championed causes that were directly connected to the American woman’s concerns. Twentieth and twenty-first century first ladies often worked on “such commitments as volunteerism, moral citizenship, beautification, health, and education” (Parry-Giles and Blair 574). All of these things were seen as more feminine spheres, not necessarily connected to the male political sphere. Actions to improve the lives of children were also issues that first ladies addressed, further developing the image of “republican motherhood.” Regardless of the first lady or the issue, “republican motherhood” has an almost instant appeal to the emotions—something Rosalynn knew. Blair and Parry-Giles explain that Rosalynn’s “commitment to progressive social reform led to her active involvement in a number of projects and causes, including serving as the honorary chair for the President’s Commission on Mental Health” (Blair and Parry-Giles 345). This only strengthens her position as a rhetor because she continued to uphold the first lady standard through advocating for mental health care reform—something that focused on moral citizenship and health, in removing the stigma and improving care—an important move demonstrating her own ethics as well.

One main reason first ladies were so successful in these spheres was because “actions [such as volunteerism, moral citizenship, beautification, health, and education] were often viewed as falling outside the parameters of governmental activity, yet still within the scope of authority for the nation’s twentieth-century republican mothers” (Parry-Giles and Blair 574). The first lady, like

those before her, remained incredibly dedicated to issues of family and character welfare, since those things exemplified the assumption that “being a good citizen meant being a good mother,” which further translated into, “being a good first lady meant hailing, modeling, and promoting publicly the civic values that *good* mothers historically instilled” (576). Parry-Giles and Blair continue to explain that the role of the first lady as republican mother was often publicized through public discourse, which often regarded volunteer activities and care for the nation’s children (577). According to Short, Shogan, and Owings since the early 1900s, first ladies have focused on improving the quality of life for children by increasing availability of mental health services to children and improving the quality of that care, and Rosalynn only took this a step further (65).

This expectation to live up to the ideal image of the perfect mother is something that all first ladies have both struggled with and welcomed. Wertheimer writes that “all first ladies become symbols of American womanhood and as such they are expected to conform to the public’s image of ‘the ideal woman’ of their times” (3). While this was a struggle, it also empowered first ladies to go beyond the bounds of the stereotypical first lady, becoming active in women’s rights and creating a role model for women across the United States. The role of the republican mother was a huge influence to many first ladies, regardless of whether or not they took their concerns out of the private sphere. As I will demonstrate, Rosalynn championed such issues with great effectiveness in her writing while maintaining the power and status of the first lady.

The Rhetoric of the First Lady

Rosalynn focused on utilizing three important aspects of rhetoric. According to Aristotle, “Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself” (Aristotle). These three kinds are ethos, pathos, and logos, respectively. Though Aristotle applies these rhetorical strategies to public speaking, they are easily transferrable to the written word by Rosalynn. Rosalynn focused mainly on using ethos and pathos in her writing. She depended on two notions: that “[people] believe good men more fully and more readily than others,” and that “persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions” (Aristotle). Though she incorporated some logical approaches in her mental health care reform advocacy, she made good use of the traits that people would expect to come from the republican mother first lady, such as character and emotional appeal.

Rosalynn’s confidence and experience easily shaped her rhetorical strategizing. She had been able to practice her public speaking and political skills while Jimmy was the governor of Georgia. Rosalynn used this experience to support many of her arguments. Just following Jimmy’s inauguration at the White House, Rosalynn began to advocate for mental health. She, as the honorary chairperson of President Carter’s Commission on Mental Health, “held public hearings, issued position papers, and eventually made 117 recommendations, including 8 ‘major’ ones,” which only strengthened her credentials as a speaker (Blair and Parry-Giles 350). She went on to become the second first lady to testify before Congress in support of her Mental Health Systems Act, no doubt, relying on her experience and confidence as a speaker (Parry-Giles and Blair, “The Rise” 579). This confidence is also a display of her personal sense of ethos. Because she was so confident in her own abilities and demonstrated that through her active engagement in advocacy, she could ask for her audience’s trust and investment in her and her cause.

In a *New York Times* article entitled “Removing the Mental-Illness Stigma,” Rosalynn shares an anecdotal story of her struggles with the stigma of mental illness:

I remember vividly when my cousin came home once to visit his family. I suppose I remember the occasion with such clarity because he chased me down the

road— and I have never been more terrified. I do not know why I had to get away. It hurts me now to consider that my cousin probably needed nothing more than friendship and recognition from another child. Yet he was ‘different,’ and when he ran toward me, my compulsion was to flee. (“Removing”)

This personal story, published in a widely read newspaper, is an appeal to emotion and ethics. She not only admits that she has been mistaken before, providing her audience an opportunity to connect with her, but also provides a personal experience. This honesty about her past prejudices against people with mental health would have not only incited emotional responses, but also would have built her credibility as a speaker; Rosalynn chooses specifically to include this self-incriminating story, thus enhancing her integrity. This personal experience demonstrates that mental illness is everywhere and affects everyone, even the first lady, and is a subtle call to action. The fact that this article was in the *New York Times* ensures that her message had the opportunity to spread across the country, whether by reading it in the *Times* or a reprint in local papers. At the beginning of another article she wrote called “How We Make Mental Illness Worse,” she admits that she has struggled with the stigma surrounding mental illness. She writes, “I and so many others have been fighting myths and misconceptions about mental illness for decades” (“How We Make”). Here, Rosalynn appeals to both emotions and ethics. She admits once more that she has been wrong in the past, providing her audience a picture of an individual devoted to a cause in part due to her own mistakes. Her honesty provides her readers an opportunity to connect and believe the new information she has to offer, especially since she has openly admitted her wrongdoings more than once. While a logical approach may be initially appealing, the usage of ethos and pathos is much more personal. A story is much more engaging than statistics, especially on an emotional level. She assumes, through making these statements, that people will take her honesty as a call to action, and spur them into supporting her and her cause.

Rosalynn collaborated extensively in order to build her own credibility and arguments. She worked with Susan K. Golant, an author of over thirty other books, and Kathryn E. Cade, the chair on the board of trustees of the Judge Baker Children’s Center in Boston, Massachusetts, to produce *Within Our Reach*, a book detailing the problems with the stigma surrounding mental illness and how to fix it. This work as a collaborative rhetorician shows that Rosalynn appreciated the input of other scholars and fellow authors and utilized others’ opinions to support her own. By acknowledging the help of others, she is appealing to logic. Without their help, she would not have finished writing *Within Our Reach*; thus, an entire opportunity for advocacy would have been lost.

One of the most important rhetorical moves Rosalynn made in gaining support for her mental health policies was partnering with her husband, the president. This is different than partnering with other scholars, as she did with Golant and Cade. Having Jimmy’s support meant that the nation would be invested in her cause as well. Rosalynn worked closely with Jimmy, who brought her causes to light while she championed it. This sharing of credit reinforces her credibility in another way—she’s clearly not active in this for personal gain, but to serve those with mental illness.

Rosalynn gives credit to a woman she met on the campaign trail for helping her to get her start in mental health advocacy— another rhetorical performance that helps to both emphasize her connection to the public and help display her actions as a collaborative rhetor. She writes in the final report for the Twenty-Third Annual Rosalynn Carter Symposium on Mental Health Policy in November 2007, “I would like to briefly acknowledge those efforts by my friend Beverly Long, who recruited me to her cause in 1971 when Jimmy became governor” (“The Time Is Now”). By involving someone from the public, not someone from the elevated scholarly or political world, Rosalynn shows that she is not above the ordinary citizen, and that the ordinary citizen can make just as big a difference as she can. Again, Rosalynn shows that she appreciates the efforts of oth-

ers—in fact, she admits that her friend Beverly Long is who inspired her to work in the mental health field. Without this acknowledgement, it would be unclear where Rosalynn would have gotten her inspiration to work in such a tough field, since she and much of her family had no problems with mental illness. Giving credit to a friend for spurring her to action also enhances her credibility as a rhetor through her use of collaborative rhetoric. The idea that she works with others in a productive manner makes her character stand out—the ethos of Rosalynn is emphasized, and people are more willing to work with someone who shares credit and is not driven by ego.

Again, collaboration is an important rhetorical strategy, and Rosalynn makes heavy use of the logical appeal it brings. By including more voices in her work and allowing more opinions to help shape her arguments, she makes her argument more scientific. In science, many tests and sets of data are required to support an idea, and Rosalynn takes this concept and applies it to her advocacy to make her argument more fact-based. Rosalynn shows that the relationships she has built have helped her with the problems she has faced, including those in getting started, gaining support, and writing to inform the public of the situation.

Consistently in her work, Rosalynn addresses health and well-being for children and those in need, specifically, the mentally ill, and focuses many of her efforts on those topics. This strategy of assigning a priority to topics is a rhetoric in itself. In *Within Our Reach*, she devotes an entire chapter to mental illness in children, which demonstrates the importance of the matter. By devoting such time to specifically address children in the mental health field, Rosalynn embodies the “perfect” mother and the picture of republican motherhood I discussed above—a method to draw the support of other mothers and parents, as well as appealing to the general public. She brings her concerns for children and the mentally ill as a mother, not just another advocate. Children are people that capture hearts, and Rosalynn knew this; therefore, she addressed the troubles plaguing them, showing her concern for the nation’s most vulnerable population. She displays her willingness to serve without concern for personal gain—a rather selfless, motherly trait.

When specifically addressing children in *Within Our Reach*, particularly in the third chapter called “Our Children: Falling Through the Cracks,” Rosalynn weaves together both fact and emotion, demonstrating credibility in both areas. She constantly uses statistical information regarding children, narrowing her focus—“Today in this country about one-fifth of our children and adolescents have emotional or behavioral problems” (41). This appeal to logos is partnered with heavy use of ethos and pathos. The very language she uses in the chapter title is meant not only to draw attention to the problem at hand but to appeal to the emotions of the public, namely women, by making the problem seem devastating through the potential loss of the nation’s youth. The language she uses throughout the chapter is also very powerful and very capable of drawing forth emotional response. Rosalynn describes the lack of access to care as a “crisis,” and states that “Ensuring that all children have access to effective treatment is absolutely essential” (*Within Our Reach* 54). She also uses several call-to-action strategies, appealing to the ethos and pathos of her audience. A chapter subheading, “Not a Moment to Waste,” makes the problem seem urgent, therefore important. This emphasizes not only the seriousness of the situation, but also her own credibility, as she again focuses on serving others.

Rosalynn also includes personal stories from those who suffer mental illness in her articles and in her book. While she does write about adults and mental illness, including many narratives throughout her numerous works, her focus on children and their struggles reveals more about her rhetorical choices. In *Within Our Reach*, Rosalynn writes, “Alex and Alicia [Raeburn]’s father, Paul, shared his children’s stories with me when he came to The Carter Center as a journalism fellow” (40). Paul shares that both his children, at different points in their lives, were in and out of the hospital and had several misdiagnoses and misguided treatments before they were diagnosed

with bipolar disorder at the ages of eleven and twelve. This particular example is especially effective because it does address a child's experience in addition to the adult experiences present throughout much of the book. This is an important rhetorical move because it is a more powerful appeal to ethos. While adult stories are useful, the story of a child suffering is more likely to gain the attention of women and mothers, which constitutes a huge portion of Rosalynn's audience. This ensured that the message was not only effective by pulling at emotions, but also reached a wide range of people. Again, Rosalynn embraces the stereotype of the first lady as republican mother, reaching out to women and children. Parry-Giles and Blair point out that "some first ladies, whether consciously or not, made choices to champion safer subjects like children and other social welfare matters, which silenced potential critics" (586). By avoiding the political criticism that would have been associated with acting outside her "realm," Rosalynn was able to effectively focus her efforts on mental health advocacy, since she didn't have to be concerned about the criticisms she would receive if she were focusing on implementing new policies (as Jimmy was the one who put the Mental Health Care Act into policy).

Although others have not looked at the role that religion plays in the rhetoric of first ladies, it is important, especially in Rosalynn's case, to examine its use as a rhetorical tool in developing her pathos. Rosalynn was raised in a highly religious household. Her parents and grandparents each believed in a different offshoot of Christianity, but the same basic ideals were engrained in each one—faith, hope, and love. Rosalynn displays much of this in her advocacy and in her writing. By using the ethical ideals she would have gained in her early church-going life, she utilizes those ideals to connect with her audience and offer credibility through a common factor: God. While it also had the ability to backfire, as it would not have drawn appreciation from other religious groups, it spoke to a huge portion of the American public, something that a careful first lady would need to in order to appeal to a broad audience and gain support for significant change. Parry-Giles and Blair write, "we also cannot deny the role of ideology in restricting women's political activity . . . the predominance of these more tradition-bound ideologies often work to limit first ladies' rhetorical activities to social welfare causes, especially those involving children and women" (586). Religion was, as Parry-Giles and Blair point out, an important part of the first lady's life, as well as the lives of women and mothers across the nation. Rosalynn builds her own credibility as a speaker by explaining to her audience that she follows a specific set of ethical rules, emphasizing her ethos.

Rosalynn specifically chooses to include a narrative that references religion in her book. She tells the story of Larry Fricks, a man who made a successful recovery from being hospitalized with bipolar disorder. She explains how he was hospitalized due to the misconception that his mania was actually God telling him what to do. She then writes, "After his third hospitalization, he made a new pact with God" (*Within Our Reach* 151). Her decision to include his story, as opposed to someone else's story, helps to emphasize the importance of God and church in her life, and build her credibility through being a good, God-fearing, upstanding citizen, just like other women and mothers—thus appealing to the emotions of her readers.

Rosalynn's use of first person in her advocacy is also an incredibly important rhetorical move as speakers can more easily connect if they are present in their work or concern. Throughout her writings, she utilizes a specific pattern for her transition from first person singular, "I", to first person plural, "we." Ken Hyland writes, "Presenting a discursive self is central to the writing process, and we cannot avoid projecting an impression of ourselves and how we stand in relation to our arguments" (200). By involving herself, she shows a commitment to her cause—a move that boosts her pathos and earns her support. In narrative, she often uses first person singular. For example, in "How We Make Mental Illness Worse," she starts by stating a personal experience, using the first person singular. She writes, "I and so many others have been fighting myths and misconceptions

about mental illness for decades.” This use of the first person is an appeal to pathos. Rosalynn openly admits that she is a human being, that she makes mistakes like the rest of the population and is not a completely separate entity from the people just because of her status as first lady.

Halfway through the article, she changes over to first person plural, therefore involving the audience. Rosalynn writes, “We are at a crossroads...we must ensure that mental health is integrated into any overall health-care package” (“How We Make”). She makes a call to action for every party. She does not use the accusatory “you” or the self-deprecating “my” in the call to action; instead, she addresses problems as “our” problems, that “we” must do something. Hyland points out that “[using ‘we’ in discourse] identifies the reader as someone who shares similar interests or ways of seeing to the writer” (200). Rosalynn again boosts her pathos by sharing her point of view with the audience and encouraging them to share those same views. Including herself in both the problem and the solution to the mental health care reform movement is a strong connection to the public (which could also imply a collaboration with that same public)—again, emphasizing her heavy use of collaborative rhetoric. The method in which she changes from first person singular to first person plural is also an appeal to logos. She starts by pointing out there is a problem and gives some personal examples. She presents evidence of the problem, namely through statistics, then uses the pathos and ethos she developed at the beginning of the piece to spur action. This format is in most of her work, including her book and the articles examined in this paper, giving her credibility for maintaining a consistent method of presentation.

Rosalynn makes the problem of the lack of mental illness health care and the stigma surrounding the label the nation’s problem—something that every upstanding, God-fearing citizen should be concerned with. Particularly evident in “Removing the Mental-Illness Stigma,” she places blame on the nation as a whole. She writes, “As a nation, we are still running away from persons who have had or still have mental and emotional disorders.” She calls the nation to action with one simple statement: “A national mental-health care commitment must not be for ‘them’—but for all of us” (“Removing”). In *Within Our Reach*, she dedicates an entire portion of chapter two, “The Scope of the Problem,” to all people. “This Is Everyone’s Issue,” Rosalynn titled the section. “This is a problem that hurts every family in our country” (*Within Our Reach* 17). Directly speaking to the masses helps Rosalynn assign responsibility for making changes in removing the stigma surrounding mental illness to each individual person. Again, Rosalynn brings the collaborative nature of a mother into her argument. By seeking help from the nation, she ensures that she will be able to do her job as an advocate for the mentally ill, while having the support she needs to be effective. Thus, while she begins with the credibility of a first lady, she uses that to challenge others to support her.

One final method Rosalynn uses to gain support for mental health care change is outlining the consequences of what will happen if *no* changes occur, which makes an appeal to logos. Looking back to the opening quote from “Removing the Mental Illness Stigma,” she explains how the mentally ill, who suffer from a stereotypical image of a “crazy person,” will continue to be discriminated against and will not receive the care and facilities that they need. In “How We Make Mental Illness Worse,” she gives long-term consequences:

[L]ack of proper care will have devastating financial consequences: Time is lost from work and other productive activities; medical conditions are complicated; family members, including children, are impacted not only financially but emotionally; there is cost to taxpayers when people become so disabled that expensive long-term care is the only option; and, finally, lives are lost through suicide.

The detailed list implies that Rosalynn has either studied, in-depth, the trends that occur in mentally-ill individuals who go without treatment, or that she is making an incredible educated assumption. It also implies that Rosalynn is making a well-searched, logical prediction, which will appeal

to the logic of her audiences. This move to logic can only be made after embracing the first lady role and appealing to emotion. Because she has built such a strong pathos, the audience is more willing to invest their time in understanding what Rosalynn wants to do; after all, she has convinced them that her cause is worth pursuing. The emotional pull to her cause is only enhanced by the logos she presents. Now, the previously unfounded argument for change is backed up with a very scientific-sounding, cause-and-effect situation.

Conclusion

Rosalynn Carter was an effective rhetor, as well as a successful policymaker. Though President Ronald Regan repealed the Mental Health Care Act shortly after Jimmy Carter left office, Rosalynn Carter's influence is still very evident in today's healthcare world. She continues to be an active advocate for mental health reform. She has published several books in addition to *Within Our Reach*, including *Helping Yourself Help Others: A Book for Caregivers*, and *Helping Someone With Mental Illness*, as well as her autobiography and a book co-authored by Jimmy Carter—creating even more collaborative rhetoric. She also continues to work with The Carter Center for Mental Health. She carved a path not only for mental health advocacy, but also for women rhetors and first ladies following her. An argument must appeal to logos, ethos, and pathos—an argument lacking one of the three will not be nearly as strong and will miss out on an opportunity to gain a wider audience. Rosalynn's work provides us an example of careful and effective balance of those elements.

A close examination of several of Rosalynn's works helps to provide some new insight as to the way she writes and speaks—especially as a mother to those with mental illness, her own children, and the nation itself—this examination also highlights the opportunities to consider the rhetorical situation of any first lady further. Her work alone provides opportunities; with several other books, there are connections between each of them, as well as to the dozens of other interviews she's been a part of and articles she has written for countless outlets. First ladies are in a unique position to command public attention and detailed readings of their works pay rich rewards. Rosalynn's work provides a richer understanding of the first ladies' rhetorical world and helps us to admire the things that allowed her to create a place for women to operate in the political sphere when they aren't in central political roles. While Rosalynn was dealing with issues that are, perhaps, beyond the scope of the ordinary person, her strategies are not. Her utilization of logos, ethos, and pathos can easily be applied to other situations, and her collaborations with others help to strengthen her arguments. Rosalynn did not base her arguments on a religious belief, but her faith helped to build her credibility and expand her audience. Overall, Rosalynn proved that building a strong character through logos, ethos, and pathos helped to sway an audience and further her cause.

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