

Founding Mothers

by Cokie Roberts

About the Book

From Abigail Adams and Martha Washington to lesser-known figures like Catharine Littlefield Greene and Sally Livingston Jay, Roberts unfolds the stories of our Founding Mothers -- the women who tended home and hearth often under dire circumstances, ran farms and businesses, fought on the front lines of battle, wrote propaganda that called a nation to arms, acted as spies, and raised money for the troops. In many instances, their political and social sentiments proved more insightful than those of the men in the Continental Congress.

In *Founding Mothers*, Roberts gives voice to women who faced an uncertain future, believed in the revolutionary concept of a democratic society, and offered a steady hand to guide the fledgling nation. She weaves together anecdotes, diary excerpts, and correspondence; draws on military records, newspaper accounts, songs, and poetry; and intersperses her own insightful commentary throughout.

In a letter to her husband, Abigail Adams pondered whether future generations would care about the personal sacrifices they and others had made on behalf of the nation. "Posterity who are to reap the blessings," she wrote, "will scarcely be able to conceive the hardships and sufferings of their ancestors." More than two hundred years after she penned these words, *Founding Mothers* makes it clear that the nation we know today would not exist without the bravery, foresight, and steadfastness of Abigail Adams and her compatriots. These are the women who raised our nation.

Praise for the Book

"Roberts fills a gap in our coverage of the era... [She] has uncovered hundreds of personal anecdotes and woven them together in a single, suspenseful narrative with great skill."

—*Washington Post Book World*

"Entertaining mini-biographies and engaging vignettes."

—*New York Times*

Courtesy of HarperCollins

About the Author

Title: Cokie Roberts

Known As: Boggs, Mary Martha Corinne Morrison Claiborne; Roberts, Corinne Boggs; Roberts, Cokie

American Journalist (1943 -)

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Personal Information:

Born Mary Martha Corinne Morrison Claiborne Boggs, December 27, 1943, in New Orleans, LA; daughter of Hale (a U.S. Representative) and Corinne "Lindy" Claiborne (a U.S. representative) Boggs; married Steven Victor Roberts (a journalist), September 10, 1966; children: Lee Harriss, Rebecca Boggs. Education: Wellesley College, B.A., 1964. Religion: Roman Catholic. Memberships: Radio and TV Correspondents Association (member of executive committee, 1980-82, 1984-86, 1988-90, and 1992-94; president, 1981), Women's Forum, U.S. Capitol Historical Society. Addresses: Home: Bethesda, MD. Office: ABC News, 1717 DeSales St. NW, Washington, DC 20036; National Public Radio, 635 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001.

Career:

Journalist and news reader. WRC-TV, Washington, DC, assistant producer and television anchor of *Meeting of the Minds*, 1964-66; *Insider's Newsletter*, New York, NY, editor and correspondent, 1967; WNEW-TV, New York, NY, producer, 1968; KNBC-TV, Los Angeles, CA, producer, 1969-74; *CBS News*, Athens, Greece, reporter, 1974-77; National Public Radio, Washington, DC, congressional correspondent, beginning 1978, became news analyst, then contributing senior news analyst; WETA-TV (PBS), Washington, DC, anchor of *The Lawmakers*, 1981-84; *MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour*, Washington, DC, correspondent, 1984-88; *ABC News*, Washington, DC, chief congressional analyst, 1988--, then political commentator; *This Week* (formerly *This Week with David Brinkley*), commentator, 1992-2002. Gives lectures throughout the United States; member of board of directors, Manhattanville College (Purchase, NY), Congressional Fellows Program, Children's Inn at the National Institutes for Health, and the Dirksen Center on Congressional Leadership; has appeared on *Nightline*.

Awards:

Dirksen Award, Dirksen Center on Congressional Leadership, 1985; Weintal Award, Georgetown University, 1988; Exceptional Merit Media Award, National Women's Political

Caucus, 1989; Mother of the Year Award, National Mother's Day Committee, 1992, and American Cancer Society, 2000; holds numerous honorary degrees.

Works:

Writings:

Nonfiction

- *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, Morrow (New York, NY), 1998.
- (With husband, Steve Roberts) *From This Day Forward*, Morrow (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation*, Morrow (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Ladies of Liberty: The Women Who Shaped Our Nation*, Morrow (New York, NY), 2008.

Author of weekly syndicated column. Contributor of articles to periodicals, including *Life*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Commonweal*, *New Leader*, and *New York Times Magazine*.

“Sidelights”

Cokie Roberts is one of the most successful and well-known news correspondents in the United States. She first came to national attention as one of the voices of National Public Radio (NPR), where she began working in 1978. Roberts continues to contribute news analyses to NPR, but since 1988 she has also served as a correspondent for *ABC News* and has appeared as a correspondent, interviewer, or panelist on several news programs, including the *MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour* and *This Week*. In addition to writing a weekly syndicated column and contributing articles to periodicals such as *Commonweal*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *New York Times Magazine*, Roberts has penned a book on the subject of women's life roles, titled *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*.

Roberts was born into a political family. Her full name at birth was Mary Martha Corinne Morrison Claiborne Boggs, but her brother could not pronounce Corinne (the name her parents had decided upon for everyday use). His approximation, "Cokie," stuck. Roberts's father was U.S. Representative Hale Boggs of Louisiana. He served several terms as a Democrat, and when his plane was lost over Alaska in 1972 and he was killed, Roberts's mother, Lindy Boggs, served out his term and then won several more terms in her own right. Roberts's elder sister, Barbara Sigmund, also went into politics and served as the mayor of Princeton, New Jersey, before her death from cancer. Roberts's brother, Tom Boggs, works for a prestigious Washington, DC, lobbying firm.

Although Roberts obtained a degree in political science from Wellesley College, she never wanted to become a politician herself. She told an interviewer for *Broadcasting and Cable*: "It is true that I am deeply admiring of politicians--of my parents and sister. But I am a more private person than that." She explained further: "I want to go home at night and not have the interruption of constituents who demand your time and have the right to demand your time. I know how hard that work is and how it never ends. I want my day to end."

Yet Roberts did not specifically set out to be a newsperson, either. She was working for a television station in Washington, DC, when she married Steven Roberts, who was a journalist. (Because of her father, the wedding was attended by many prominent leaders in the Democratic Party, including then-U.S. president Lyndon B. Johnson.) Afterward, her husband's work took the couple to several different locations in the United States and around the world, so, as she told *Broadcasting and Cable*, remaining in journalism herself "was by far the easiest thing to do--go out and report the story and come back and write it--because that is portable. That is how [my career] evolved."

When Steven Roberts was required to travel to Athens, Greece, Cokie went with him and served as the CBS News radio correspondent from that corner of the world. Her reports on a Greek coup were considered sufficiently important to provide her with a nationwide television audience.

Shortly after she and her husband returned to the United States, Roberts began her stint with National Public Radio. NPR had more women in major broadcasting and managerial roles than many other radio or television news operations, partly because they could not at that time afford to pay the high salaries that male broadcasters demanded. Roberts--along with NPR colleagues Nina Totenberg and Linda Wertheimer--is thus considered a pioneer among women correspondents. She has covered political matters for most of her career; her family's wide circle of political acquaintance helped her to get more information than the average political correspondent, and the knowledge of politics she gained while growing up came constantly to her aid.

Roberts's work for NPR led to television assignments for Public Broadcasting System shows such as *The Lawmakers* and the *MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour*. Roberts began serving as a television correspondent for *ABC News* in 1988; this in turn led to her appointment as the first regular female panelist on ABC's political commentary program, *This Week*, which at the time was hosted by famed newsperson David Brinkley. Cast into the fray of punditry and surrounded by Brinkley, Sam Donaldson, and George Will, Roberts elicited positive response from the show's viewers. She told a *TV Guide* interviewer that "men come up to me on the street and say, 'We like your common sense on the Brinkley show.' But women say, 'We love the way you don't let them interrupt you, and that you hand it right back to them.'" Roberts concluded for *TV Guide*: "I get the feeling that the country is full of women who've never gotten a word in edgewise when men talk about politics."

Roberts is considered by many to occupy a political middle ground between the more liberal Donaldson and the more conservative Will. Yet, though Roberts spends an ever-increasing amount of time on television--even occasionally substituting for *Nightline* host Ted Koppel--she

still finds time to provide occasional reports and commentary for NPR. She has said that she likes the greater depth she is allowed to provide for a radio audience, and, as Laurie Freeman phrased it in her piece on Roberts for *Newsmakers*, "NPR has even installed a line into her home so she can broadcast in her pajamas if need be." Freeman also reported that on one occasion, the radio audience was treated to the howling of the correspondent's basset hound in the background.

Roberts's work for NPR, according to an article in *Entertainment Weekly*, is characterized by "the kind of questions regular, unelected, unofficial people ask--people who pay their taxes and get involved in the PTA and want to know what ... their elected representatives in Washington are doing--and how whatever ... they're doing will affect the lives of regular people."

In 1998, Roberts's first book-length work saw print. In *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, Roberts discusses her experiences and her relationships with other women while addressing the subject of the various roles women play during the course of their lives. The volume is divided into chapters with headings such as "Politician," "Consumer Advocate," "Aunt," "Reporter," "Civil Rights Activist," and "Mother/ Daughter." The first chapter is titled "Sister" and tells the story of Roberts's sister Barbara's struggle against cancer. It also provides readers with insight into the way Roberts sees women as a community of support for each other during times of crisis. The experience of her sister's death, Roberts writes in *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, "was so profound, and so profoundly weird, that it taught me a great deal about sisterhood, in all its meanings."

With the 2000 publication of *From This Day Forward*, Roberts continued in her style of personal narrative. Written with her husband, the book uses their personal life as a springboard for larger issues of marriage, faith, and family. The work is divided into sections dealing with marriage in early America, including the experiences of pioneers, slaves, and immigrants. Broken marriages and blended families are studied. On a more personal note, the Robertses describe hurdles they faced when announcing their own impending wedding. Some people predicted the marriage wouldn't last, based on the couple's different religions--he's Jewish, she's Catholic. More than thirty years later, Cokie and Steve have proved the skeptics wrong.

How did they manage? In a cover story for *Life*, the authors declared their interfaith bond as unusual, but not really unique. "All marriages, really, are 'mixed' marriages," they state. "No two people are the same, particularly a man and a woman." Asked about how two different religious perspectives work under one roof, the Robertses reply: "It seems to us the key to handling any difference is mutual respect. Don't try to change each other, or ignore disagreements, but understand and accept them."

From This Day Forward also relates the way the couple met in college. Quoting a favorite saying of Steve's twin brother, Marc, they write: "Choosing a mate is like being told to walk through a forest and pick up the biggest stick you can find. But you only get to pick up one stick and you never know where the forest will end. In our case it was even more complicated. [With different religions] the kind of stick each of us chose was also an issue--to ourselves and to our families. But in another sense we were following a familiar pattern, meeting and marrying

young." The passage goes on to highlight the similarities, not the differences, between the Roberts and Boggs families.

As "unequivocal and unabashed boosters of marriage," wrote Michele Orecklin in a *New York Times* review, the authors offer "sometimes divergent though never divisive" looks at the same events. While Orecklin termed the "he said, she said" style largely successful, she also found that "it does occasionally border on the written equivalent of overly scripted repartee." *From This Day Forward* proved a quick and decisive success: Just two months after its release, the book was in its fourth printing. The authors boosted their book's popularity with a media blitz that included National Public Radio, the television talk shows "Good Morning America," "Larry King Live," and "The View," and a cross-country tour.

In 2004 Roberts published *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation*. The book looks into the lives of several women who were either married to or the mothers of the founding fathers of America, including Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Deborah Read Franklin.

Mary E. Card, writing in *Army Lawyer*, criticized that "in many ways Ms. Roberts completely misses the mark on the women who made such a permanently lasting mark on our nation. Either intentionally or unintentionally Ms. Roberts does not strongly and forcefully advocate that these women were truly unique and were worthy of an identity aside from that of 'wife' and literal 'mother' and cook. This book will probably earn its rightful place in Revolutionary War history as a solid, albeit, cursory look at the women who helped build our nation." Card projected, however, that "this book will not earn a place among forward thinking and analytical feminist theory. Finally, it can certainly be inspirational for the women and men who are serving in the roles of both father and mother while their spouses are deployed. Essentially, the truly unique founding mothers of our nation were also the founding mothers of feminism and did so much more than simply 'make the men behave.'" Card conceded that "Roberts's work is not entirely without use however, and can be used to extrapolate lessons learned for one specific community, that of the military spouse."

Heather J. Fagan, also reviewing the book in *Army Lawyer*, suggested that "perhaps this book is the victim of false expectations. National publishers gave such laudatory reviews that readers may have higher expectations than the book warrants. Contrary to these reviews, the book has too many characters for its page length, lacks plot development, substitutes analysis with stream-of-consciousness commentary, and contains colloquialisms. It also deviates from its thesis and often focuses as much on the founding fathers as the founding mothers." Fagan concluded that "its conclusion ends with the same sort of running commentary that pervades the book and detracts from its thesis--'A salute from the Father of the Country to its Founding Mothers.' In the style of the author, 'Thank-you very much.' In the end, the book is still worth reading because it is a compilation of highly researched letters of the founding mothers--an area that previously received little attention and whose letters are inspiring in their own right."

A contributor writing in *Publishers Weekly* remarked that the author "presents a very readable, serviceable account of politics ... in early America." The same contributor pondered: "If only our standard history textbooks were written with such flair!" Katherine Mangu-Ward, reviewing the

book in the *Weekly Standard*, commented that Roberts's book probably will not "do much for her subjects' prominence in history books, but at least we now know that Martha made a mean crab soup." *Booklist* contributor Vanessa Bush claimed that "Roberts offers a much-needed look at the unheralded sacrifices and heroism of colonial women." Kathy Tewell, reviewing the book in *School Library Journal*, observed that readers would certainly take pleasure in "seeing how many of these individuals showed their mettle when they were still in their teens." In an article in *Library Journal*, Janice Dunham mentioned that "the well-researched text ... is not just a collection of the women's stories; it is a retelling of the American Revolution" as well as the origins of the United States.

Roberts followed up *Founding Mothers* with the similarly themed *Ladies of Liberty: The Women Who Shaped Our Nation* in 2008. The account examines the lives of key woman in American history, particularly during the first several decades of independence, including Martha Jefferson, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and Eliza Hamilton. Using private correspondence and diaries, the book also shows how these women thought of and communicated with their husbands and fathers and interpreted events in society at the time.

Roberts has won many prestigious awards in journalism, including the Exceptional Merit Media Award from the National Women's Political Caucus and the Weintal Award from Georgetown University. In addition, she has also managed to be actively involved in the lives of her two children, Lee Harriss and Rebecca Boggs Roberts. In 1992 Roberts was named Mother of the Year by the National Mother's Day Committee. Another Mother of the Year honor came in 2000, this time from the American Cancer Society.

Further readings:

Further readings about the author:

Books

- *Newsmakers 1993*, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1993.
- Roberts, Cokie, *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, Morrow (New York, NY), 1998.
- Roberts, Cokie, and Steve Roberts, *From This Day Forward*, Morrow (New York, NY), 2000.

Periodicals

- *American History*, August 1, 2008, Josie Glausiusz, review of *Ladies of Liberty: The Women Who Shaped Our Nation*, p. 65.
- *Army Lawyer*, November 1, 2004, Heather J. Fagan, review of *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation*, p. 33; May 1, 2005, Mary E. Card, review of *Founding Mothers*, p. 99.
- *Booklist*, April 15, 1998, Mary Carroll, review of *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, p. 1355; May 15, 1999, Whitney Scott, review of *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, p. 1714; March 15, 2004, Vanessa Bush, review of *Founding Mothers*, p. 1242.

- *Broadcasting and Cable*, April 5, 1993, author interview.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, June 26-July 9, 1992, author profile; May 22, 1998, Margot Mifflin, review of *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, p. 66.
- *Houston Chronicle*, May 7, 2009, Maggie Galehouse, "Celebrating the Work of Women."
- *Kirkus Reviews*, April 1, 1998, review of *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, p. 479.
- *Library Journal*, April 15, 1998, Francine Fialkoff, review of *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, p. 104; July 1, 2000, Nann Blaine Hilyard, review of *From This Day Forward*, p. 161; July 1, 2004, Janice Dunham, review of *Founding Mothers*, p. 99.
- *Life*, February 1, 2000, "Marriage: Reconcilable Differences," cover story.
- *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 1998, review of *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, p. 12.
- *National Catholic Reporter*, February 4, 2005, Jeannette Cooperman, "Cokie Credits the Sisters."
- *New York Times*, May 17, 1998, Karen Ray, review of *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, p. 41; March 26, 2000, review of *From This Day Forward*, p. 20.
- *Publishers Weekly*, March 30, 1998, review of *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, p. 55; March 29, 2004, review of *Founding Mothers*, p. 51.
- *Reference & Research Book News*, February 1, 2009, review of *Ladies of Liberty*.
- *School Library Journal*, April 1, 1998, review of *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, p. 199; August 1, 1998, Susan H. Woodcock, review of *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, p. 199; September 1, 2004, Kathy Tewell, review of *Founding Mothers*, p. 237.
- *Tribune Books* (Chicago, IL), April 29, 2007, Kristin Kloberdanz, review of *From This Day Forward*, p. 2.
- *USA Today*, May 6, 2004, review of *Founding Mothers*, p. 4D.
- *Washington Post Book World*, May 17, 1998, review of *We Are Our Mothers' Daughters*, p. 13; April 25, 2004, Joyce Appleby, review of *Founding Mothers*, p. 8.
- *Weekly Standard*, January 3, 2005, Katherine Mangu-Ward, review of *Founding Mothers*, p. 39.

Online

- *ABCNews.com*, <http://www.abcnews.com/> (October 4, 1998), author profile.
- *National Public Radio Web site*, <http://www.npr.org/> (May 19, 2009), author profile.*

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Discussion Questions

1. What inspired you to read **Founding Mothers**? Why do you suppose the contributions of women in the Revolutionary era have been largely overlooked by historians? Would the founding of the nation have occurred without these women?
2. Which woman would you say had the single greatest impact during the Revolution? How about during the first years of the new government?
3. Despite a lack of legal and social rights, including the right to own property and receive a formal education, how did the women presented in **Founding Mothers** assert their authority and exercise their intelligence?
4. How did life differ for women depending on where they lived—the North versus the South, the city versus rural areas? How else did geographical circumstances impact their lives?
5. Women often accompanied their husbands to army camps during the war, including Martha Washington, Kitty Greene, and Lucy Knox. Were you surprised they chose to do this? How did these three women in particular contribute to the often harsh life of a military camp and foster the war efforts?
6. By telling the stories of our **Founding Mothers**, this book also sheds light on the men of the time. Did you learn anything new about these men, including Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton, seeing them from the perspective of their female contemporaries?
7. How important was the "civilizing" role that women played in the years leading up to, during, and after the Revolution? Can you reference examples from the book that show how integral it was for the women to be able to step in and "calm down the men," or even to act as intermediaries, as Abigail Adams did in the dispute between her husband and James Madison?
8. Catharine Macaulay supported the American Revolution and was a vocal proponent of democratic governments in general. Why did Macaulay, an Englishwoman, take such an interest in the American cause? How did she contribute to it?
9. How did Martha Washington define the role of First Lady? Are her influences still evident today? Her political savvy was remarkable, but is there anything that can be learned from Martha Washington on a personal level?

10. Only a limited number of women could have accomplished what Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren did -- those who had access to the men shaping the future of the nation. What about the women who didn't have the advantage of providing direct counsel or publishing their discourses? How did they contribute to the Revolutionary War and the founding of the nation?
11. **Cokie Roberts** intersperses her thoughts and commentary throughout the book. Does this enhance the narrative? In what ways?

Courtesy of HarperCollins