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Governor Ella T. Grasso will be
escorted by Felix A. Mirando.

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May 10, 1919- Governor of Connecticut
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The first woman ever to become an American governor on her own, and not as the wife of a predecessor, is Ella T. Grasso, a liberal old-style Democratic pro who won the Connecticut gubernatorial election in November 1974 and took office two months later. The "open door" policy of her administration as governor represents a continuation of the public availability for which she has been known throughout her long career in elective office, as a state representative, as Connecticut secretary of state, and as a United States Representative in the Ninety-second and Ninety-third Congresses.

Ella Grasso acquired her present last name through her marriage to Thomas Grasso, a school principal, now retired. An only child, Mrs. Grasso was born Ella Rosa Giovanna Oliva Tambussi in Windsor Locks, Connecticut on May 10, 1919. Her parents, Giacomo and Maria (Oliva) Tambussi, were Italian immigrants, both born near Tortona in the Piedmont. "My father was a baker," Mrs. Grasso recalls, "so we always had enough to eat. We were comfortable, because we had no major illnesses and he could work." She says her mother was "a great reader" and her father "pretended he could read and write." The Governor, proud of her working-class background, boasted to Fern Marja Eckman of the *New York Post* (July 27, 1974), "It took me years to learn that 'youse' is not the plural of 'you'."

Growing up in Windsor Locks, Ella was surrounded by immigrants from many countries, including relatives and friends who had known her parents in Italy. "Living in a community like this," she has said, "you don't have to worry about your roots. They're there. Solid." A bright child, she was inspired by her mother with a determination to go far academically. On the basis of her high grades at St. Mary's parochial school in Windsor Locks, she was admitted on scholarship to the elite Chaffee School in nearby Windsor for her college prep work. From Chaffee she went to Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, where she majored in sociology and economics and made Phi Beta Kappa in her junior year. She took her B.A. degree *magna cum laude* in 1940 and her M.A. in 1942. In graduate school she worked as a departmental assistant and a laboratory instructor in statistics.

During World War II Mrs. Grasso was state assistant director of research in Connecticut for the federal War Manpower Commission. Meanwhile her interest in politics was growing, through her association with the League of Women Voters, which she joined in 1943. "I am grateful to the League," she has said, "because through the training I received there, I developed a real understanding of issues. And more than that peace partisans were not pleased with her ambivalence on that issue, nor with her failure to rush back to Washington from Connecticut—where she spent as much time as possible keeping in touch with her constituency and its problems—for some of the antiwar votes, but they could not fault her vote for the limitation of Presidential war-making powers.

The Women's Lobby, which promotes feminist legislation, ranked her in the bottom third of its Congressional list, largely on the basis of her absence during a child-care vote and her quiet but unequivocal opposition to abortion. As a Catholic, she was bound to the view that "a fetus is a life that deserves the protection of society." As a public servant, however, she felt equally bound to the duty of respecting the legality of abortion as upheld by the Supreme Court.

... Hartford Times in the leading Connecticut Democrats placed Ella Grasso far ahead of the field and indicated that she could beat Governor Thomas J. Meskill by a wide margin. But many state party leaders were reluctant to give their blessing to her gubernatorial aspirations. At least one was reported to be worried "about how we [are] . . . going to go into the governor's office and swear at her." Announcing her candidacy anyway, in January 1974, she took her case to the people, trounced other Democratic hopefuls in a key primary, in the spring of 1974, and was nominated by acclamation at the Connecticut Democratic Convention, on July 20, 1974. The Republicans chose Representative Robert H. Steele to run against Mrs. Grasso after Governor Meskill withdrew from the race. Meskill's popularity had declined sharply during his administration for several reasons, including an increase in the sales tax to 6.5 percent, the highest in the country, as a means of whittling down the state's huge deficit without introducing an income tax.

Early in her campaign, noting the attention she was receiving in the national media as a woman candidate, Mrs. Grasso tried to disassociate her sex from her qualifications for governor. "The judgment will be made of me as an individual," she said on one occasion, "on the basis of what I have accomplished in my career in public life and on the basis of what I'll be saying to the voters." Pointing out that she was not a member of the women's liberation movement, she was careful to explain that she was not antipathetic to that movement. "It's done a great deal in a short time to provide equal opportunity for women, and I feel I've been a beneficiary. Whereas four years ago I might have had some difficulty in advancing a viable candidacy as a woman, it's a non-issue at this time. I give silent thanks for that." Her sex was exploited negatively by some of Steele's supporters, who flaunted a bumper sticker reading, "Connecticut can't afford a governor."

The campaign did not raise many issues. Mrs. Grasso, of course, had an implicit issue in the Meskill administration, with which Steele was linked if only by his party affiliation. She found another issue in overcharging by Connecticut's three major electric companies. After a private investigation commissioned by her revealed that the companies had overcharged a total of \$19,000,000 over a period of three years, she vowed to reform or replace the Public Utilities Commission, which she held responsible. For his part, Steele labeled Mrs. Grasso "Spenderella," an epithet suggesting that she would plunge the state back into debt by reversing the Meskill administration's policy of reducing allocations for welfare, public transportation, higher education, and the like.

At the polls on November 5, 1974 Ella Grasso defeated Steele, 631,362 votes to 431,142. She was sworn in as Connecticut's eighty-third chief executive on January 8, 1975. In her inaugural address she promised a government that would be more responsive to the people than its predecessors but that would keep within the fiscal limits demanded by the times, and she warned that Connecticut must prepare itself for austerity: "We share with the rest of the country an economic crisis with roots in international developments over which we have no control."

Outgoing Governor Meskill had boasted that his administration's frugality had not only wiped out the deficit inherited from the Democrats four years before but that it also made it possible for him to hand over a surplus to Governor Grasso. Mrs. Grasso disputed that boast on inauguration day, when she said, "Our state is in disarray. The financial condition of state government today is unsound. A balanced budget and an operating surplus do not exist." The budget she presented to

state revenues, she proposed a 1 percent rise in the sales tax, among other measures. Looking for ways to economize in state spending, she began with herself, rejecting a \$7,000 increase in her salary of \$35,000. Told that she could not legally reject the raise, she accepted it and then turned the money back to the state treasury.

On February 28, 1975 Governor Grasso announced a proposal for solving the situation in which utility rates climbed ever upward while the power companies never seemed to have enough money for escalating capital-improvement and operating costs. She would, she said, ask for legislation that would enable Connecticut to borrow money for use by the companies in construction programs and that would insure that one-third of the tax money paid by the companies would remain in the communities in which the construction was done. Also, she would form management audit teams to monitor closely the finances of the companies. In addition, on a wider scale, she said that she would seek to establish an office of consumer ombudsman. In keeping with her campaign promise of "open government," Governor Grasso asked the legislature for a "right to know" law that would open government meetings and records at all levels to the scrutiny of the citizens of Connecticut.

how to translate that into action. Positive action. I think that is why I went into government, because I realized early on that if I was concerned with problems, the best way of getting them solved was to be part of the decision-making process."

After a flirtation with the Republican party, Mrs. Grasso followed her true "inclination," as she has put it, into the Democratic party, where she became a protégée of state party chairman John Bailey. Following several years of yeoman service to the well-oiled party machine, writing campaign speeches and generally getting out the vote for other candidates, Mrs. Grasso became a candidate herself. Elected to two terms in the House of Representatives of the Connecticut General Assembly, in 1952 and 1954, she was the assistant house leader during her second term. Among the bills she introduced were measures to eliminate the antiquated county governmental structure in Connecticut, to reorganize the municipal court system into a district court system, and to set up a state office of mental retardation.

In 1958 Mrs. Grasso was elected Connecticut's Secretary of State, an important state office that has been filled exclusively by women since 1938. Twice reelected, with slate-leading pluralities, she served twelve years in the post, becoming in the process one of the best known politicians in the state. The performance of her constitutional functions, including commissioner of elections and many ceremonial roles, brought her wide exposure to the public and acquaintance with local politicians throughout the state. Beyond fulfilling her constitutional duties, she turned her office on the first floor of the State Capitol Building in Hartford into a "people's lobby," where ordinary citizens could come to air grievances or seek advice.

Throughout her years as secretary of state, Mrs. Grasso chaired the Democratic state platform committee. On the national level she was a Democratic committeewoman from 1956 to 1958; a member of the platform committee in 1960; and

co-chairman of the resolutions committees at the Democratic National conventions in Atlantic City, in 1964, and Chicago, in 1968. The overriding issue at the 1968 convention was the war in Vietnam, an issue that overflowed into the streets of Chicago, where police clashed violently with peace demonstrators. Mrs. Grasso was instrumental in pushing through a minority report opposing continued United States involvement in Vietnam, and she was among those who walked out of the convention in protest against the riot-provoking tactics of the police.

Mrs. Grasso was reluctant to run for Congress for fear of disrupting her family life, but she was a proven vote-getter and political friends persuaded her that 1970 was a good year in which to take that step. Thomas J. Meskill, a popular Republican, had won the 1966 and 1970 elections in Connecticut's Sixth District—in which Democratic voters outnumbered Republicans—because he was leaving the Congressional fray to run for governor (successfully, as it turned out). In place of Meskill, Mrs. Grasso faced Richard C. Kilbourn. Campaigning on the issues of inflation, unemployment, and accelerated withdrawal from Vietnam, she drew 51.1 percent of the vote and defeated Kilbourn, 96,969 to 92,906. In her reelection two years later she increased her margin of victory more than eleven times, receiving 47,507 more votes than her opponent.

In Congress, Representative Grasso served on the Education and Labor Committee and on the Veterans Affairs Committee. With unemployment in her district running markedly higher than the national average because of cutbacks in defense-oriented industries, she was among those in the forefront of the Congressional forces responsible for the Emergency Employment Act of 1971 as well as such economy-spurring measures as a merchant-ship construction appropriation and a higher appropriation for Amtrak. Other legislation and legislative proposals sponsored or supported by Representative Grasso included the Emergency Education Act of 1971; the Fair Labor Standards amendments of 1971, which increased the minimum wage to two dollars an hour and extended benefits to six million workers previously not covered by the minimum-wage law; the Higher Education Act of 1972; acts appropriating money for the medical battles against sickle-cell anemia and Cooley's anemia; and measures to increase educational and other benefits for veterans and Social Security, medical, and other benefits for the elderly.

Her voting record in Congress received an 80 percent rating from the liberal Americans for Democratic Action. The AFL-CIO, which supported her in her electoral campaigns, generally approved of her stands on matters of interest to labor, with the outstanding exception of her vote against the SST. That vote was a difficult one for her, because many of the millions of federal dollars for the development of the supersonic transport would have gone to the aircraft industry in Connecticut. A similar dilemma presented itself in the issue of defense spending cutbacks.

Risking, and sometimes incurring, the wrath of party bosses in Connecticut's big cities, Governor Grasso bypassed the customary patronage channels in filling the jobs in her government. She was especially cautious in filling the top positions, often going beyond the Democratic party and even outside Connecticut to find qualified persons. Women's groups were also angered at her failure to appoint job candidates they suggested to her. At the end of her eighth week in office, when many posts remained unfilled, she explained to a reporter that, after the experience of Watergate, people expected her to treat job-filling seriously. "People expect skills," she said. "Purely political appointments of persons with no credit other than party affiliation are no longer part of our modern politics."

Ella T. and Thomas A. Grasso were married on August 31, 1942. They have two children, James and Suzanne, both of whom are teachers who continue to live at home with their parents. Aside from the governor's mansion in Hartford, where the Grassos live part of the time, home is a big new Dutch Colonial house in Woodland Hollow, on the outskirts of Windsor Locks. To relax, the Governor often pulls weeds on the grounds of the Woodland Hollow home. Ella Grasso is a member of the American Association of University Women, the Connecticut Council of Catholic Women, the Order of the Sons of Italy, the Connecticut Association for Children with Perceptual Learning Disabilities, Kappa Delta Pi, Alpha Delta Kappa, and the Mount Holyoke Club of Hartford.

Governor Grasso, who speaks impeccable Italian fluently, has a voice that is, like her personality, vibrant. "Warm and open in private, far better looking than her libelous photographs . . . she talks with charm and verve," Fern Marja Eckman wrote in her *New York Post* profile. But the Governor has her dark moods. Her husband describes her as a "worry wart" as well as "a very pleasant woman," and the Governor concedes that she is "the greatest political worrier in history." On the job she is, according to those who have worked with her and reporters who have observed her, "demanding," "a perfectionist," and "not especially patient." "She fusses and fidgets and pays meticulous attention to detail," an anonymous reporter wrote in the *New York Times* (November 6, 1974), "even if in the heat of a political speech she appears sometimes to be shooting from the hip." Some of her colleagues in the Connecticut General Assembly remember how she used to overwhelm them with an intelligent argument in caucus and then leave the room to let the argument sink in while male chauvinists in the group grumbled about women in politics. "I don't give any quarter and I don't expect any as a woman," she has said. "I expect to be treated as a person, and I usually am."

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