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First Ladies: Character to Caricature, Part One

Among the many times I had the chance to interview Hillary Clinton as First Lady, on and off the record, one remark she made still lingers with me: "Who I really am seems less important than what different groups want me to represent." It really echoed for me the week before the Obama election, as I sat in the White House Yellow Oval Room, a ray of the waning Indian summer sun slanted across the lap of the outgoing First Lady, who'd gathered a group of historians, journalists and preservationists around her. She was reflective, the house strangely still. To the historical imagination it was like a palace before a revolution -- in this case, a peaceful election as much a shift of the mind as in policy. The Obama election has give even the opposition a sense that the nation as a whole had learned to see a Hawaiian-born son of a white woman and an African man who came from Illinois not by any one of those labels, but as a unique individual human being. If history holds up, however, the irony is that most folks might not cut his own wife Michelle that slack.

To me, Laura Bush has always been articulate about her real beliefs, but then again, I actually followed her words and weighed her deeds carefully. It's my business. I do think her Cheshire Cat smile misled many in the media and public to caricature her as a "Crawford wife." She is a word person who chooses what she says carefully, a habit that made her quotably bland -- no matter how honest her sentiment. This day, she did not restrain her words. She spoke of a genuine regret as she reflected on her incumbency. It was not really until the second term was under way that it hit her -- a First Lady has the power to directly affect the real life of real people. It was an evolving realization but it seemed to emotional convince her when she read a letter from a woman whose life was saved while watching a public service commercial Mrs. Bush had made about the warning signs of a heart attack for women -- and realized she was having one right then, and got to a hospital before she died.

The public record, however, shows that Laura Bush's women's heart disease information campaign was a small part of her work. It has included her prompting increased public museum and library funding, a long-term and diversified advocacy for Afghanistan women, persistent international protest of Burma human rights violations and her aid to Burmese refugees, shaping Reading First which utilizes proven instruction methods to ensure proficiency by the fourth grade, holding regional conferences on training for state

and local efforts for at-risk youth, introducing the first breast cancer prevention effort in Saudi Arabia -- where screenings increased five-fold after her effort, mobilizing the private sector to match federal efforts combating malaria in Africa -- the list is extensive. All this, along with offering nuanced responses to issues ranging from stem cell research to gay marriage. In her first days as First Lady she joined Pat Nixon, Betty Ford, Rosalynn Carter, Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush and Hillary Clinton as the seventh consecutive First Lady to state that she was pro-choice.

Does anybody know this? I doubt it. By Inauguration Day 2001 the caricature of Laura Bush as a prim librarian had been solidified -- a result of both the Bush campaign's "anti-Hillary" strategy and the national media toeing the line. Even then, the fact that she read the complete works of Truman Capote serially in order to plunge the mind of the author - not a common trait among West Texas housewives -- was largely ignored by reporters covering her. Then, following September 11, it was the media -- not the White House -- which crowned her "comforter-in-chief," who was asked how to explain it all to frightened children. The same day Obama was elected, news broke that Laura Bush had gone public with her conflict with Vice President Cheney on a pending landmark ocean preservation act -- though understandably the main story was Obama's election. Still, after the post-election glow the holidays, there was a January 7 announcement that the President sided with her and enacted it. The enactment made the green news but as for the First Lady's role in it? Barely a blink in the blogs. It didn't fit the conventional narrative.

Lest you assume this was some liberal bias based on whom she was wed, consider the First Lady who tried to be President. Throughout the 2008 campaign, no comprehensive review analyzing Hillary Clinton's substantive achievements and policy influence as First Lady appeared. Perhaps it was spinners fearing renewed cries of "who elected her" but the media conducted no independent research and relied on its old narrative: she failed at health care reform, went "traditional" with international goodwill trips, was victimized by the Lewinsky scandal and ran for the Senate. So much good she did initiate -- both overtly and covertly -- was left unrecovered. Coverage would have also provided a glimpse into the real functioning of a First Lady's evolution during her tenure. Hillary's helping to craft the Adoption and Safe Families Act and bipartisan work with even Tom DeLay, prompted Congress to pass it in 1997 but also a bill protecting unadopted children "aging" out of the system without a safety net in 1998. This wasn't just the culmination of her pre-White House expertise and advocacy in child protection law, but evidence of how well she learned the ropes of First Ladyship; what she called a "focused issue" passed faster than a "broad agenda." Had "Hillcare" not "failed" earlier, the sweeping adoption changes might not have happened. "You see so much, you meet so many types of people. You can't help but grow," Nancy Reagan once told me.

Researching the lives and work of First Ladies -- and the substantive and consequential impact of it all - can be awfully frustrating at times like now. Scanning Michelle Obama's post-election coverage makes it seem that the importance of being First Lady is about sleeveless dresses and puppy breeds. It isn't. And even though she doesn't foxhunt and

winter in Palm Beach, there seems to be little point trying to clarify the media narrative that she's the second incarnation of *Jacqueline de modele*.

And yet -- considering the freshness that the new Administration brings, I'm hoping some of it may be applied to the perceptions, expectations and understanding of what a First Lady is and does, and how she impacts the Presidency -- and have Michelle Obama benefit from that. It's going to require depth from the media, assertiveness from the East Wing and a reality check from the public.

Ever since Laura Bush showed Michelle Obama the family quarters, the centennial of that tradition, I've had a steady avalanche of media inquiries on the subject. As historian of the National First Ladies Library and author of both biographies and overviews of the role, its been disheartening for me to realize how eagerly the media disregards history. The foreign press seemed the most inquisitive about this American phenomenon of investing so much fascination with the wives who happened to be married to the presidents, but the U.S. media was essentially seeking a quote to confirm the narrative about Mrs. Obama that was already solidifying. Reporters have tended to fall back on a false counterpoint as old as Abigail Adams and Dolley Madison: "traditionalist" or "activist" (sorry, make that Jackie Kennedy and Hillary Clinton -- the media considers anything before Eleanor Roosevelt irrelevant).

The reality is that even the most public traditionalist ends up a stealth activist (Nancy Reagan was the first to urge her husband's dialogue with the Soviets, Mamie Eisenhower isolated Ike from Joe McCarthy by barring the Senator from an annual Senate dinner at the time of his Red-baiting hearings, Nellie Taft -- remembered for starting the cherry blossom trees -- was the first to initiate policy, health and safety standards in the federal workplace). Conversely, the publicly acknowledged activist is often a covert traditionalist (Hillary Clinton redecorated the Blue Room, Eleanor Roosevelt served tea from a silver service, Rosalynn Carter sponsored a poetry festival).

In response to the inquiries, my instinct was to offer facts: Born in 1964, Michelle Obama is a "Baby Boomer" like Laura Bush and Hillary Clinton, the so-designated generation born between 1945 and 1964. She will be 45 when she becomes First Lady, the same age that Hillary Clinton was her when her tenure began. She's the third native Chicagoan, after Betty Ford and Hillary Clinton and fourth to earn a graduate degree, after Pat Nixon, Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush. She has two daughters -- like Laura Bush, Lady Bird Johnson, and Pat Nixon -- closer in age to Amy Carter and Chelsea Clinton than to the Kennedy children. She is the second lawyer -- Hillary was the first, and the second to continue working after her children were born -- yes, you guessed it, Hillary was the first. I got a lot of silence in reaction. One reporter finally said it -- she still saw Michelle as the "anti-Laura" or the "black Jackie" -- but not the "new Hillary."

Of course, she's none of these. She's Michelle Obama and her singularity is, in fact, what makes her more like Jackie....or Hillary, or even Lucretia: an individual who's given up any profession except that of wife, and is often then implored by the media, White House aides, and complete strangers with no idea of who she is as a real person, what she

"should" or "has to" say and do (and wear), despite being under no legal obligation to do anything. And what makes all the First Ladies like *all of us* is a larger reality that the new Administration signifies: none of us are merely the sum of any one or even a combination of all of our factual labels.

What does this mean for the 40th wife of a U.S. President to serve as First Lady? First off, for those who think her self-described priority as "mom-in-chief" is shorthand for "I won't do anything substantive" -- think again. Consider this reality: she's spent all her energy in the last year focused on campaigning without trying to think too far beyond Election Day and what she would accomplish. In less than three months, she's had to learn the configuration of rooms of her new home and figure out how she, her husband, daughters and mother will use them, what to put in storage, what to take, what to keep in their Chicago house, do national interviews, get through the holiday season, choose a new school for her daughters and help them transition into it. She's had to hire a permanent staff who have a sense of who she really is and how she functions yet also possess a level of professional experience to meet the sort of enormous global expectations put on First Ladies -- especially this one who generates so much interest and expectation -- answer mail, get new clothes and conjure and approve the symbolic events for the Inaugural, and decide which were important for her to attend.

That leaves little peace of mind to consider the inevitable pressures within the new Administration to support or aid this program or that legislation, what will be a healthy schedule for her own self, which new, eager best friends to trust and what fundamental qualities she will not permit to change within herself -- all the while self-conscious of the fact that there are people like yours truly who are recording, investigating and analyzing it. That's hardly enough time to breath, let alone roll out an agenda that will be recorded for history.

We do have basic clues. She's stated some general areas of concern. During the campaign, she found herself especially moved by the sacrifices made on military families who have a parent serving on active duty -- and troubled by how some of their most basic needs aren't met. That issue alone could lead to some potential funding increase which she may involve herself in behind the scenes while not seeking any direct public credit. It could certainly lead to her creating some sort of formal network of support organizations in the private sector.

Considering her own professional experiences in drumming up corporate underwriting and serving as a liaison between constituencies such as local area residents with the University of Chicago Medical Center, it could prove rewarding to Michelle personally -- beyond the desire to help the families in a serious and tangible way. In her realizing how to address the uninsured and under-insured whom often have to rely on big city emergency rooms to get basic health care, there's also the suggestion that, at the very least, she could be helpful in talking through practical aspects of health care reform.

Less tangible is how she will craft a concrete system for addressing the problems of women seeking to balance their work (public) and family (private) responsibilities -

another area of concern she's talked about. Some have suggested it might mean an expansion of the Family Leave Act, though perhaps it would mean an increase in tax credits for child care or other federal enhancements for families. That could be a minefield ripe for the opposition.

Apart from programs that could lead to some form of policy is the larger question of how she perceives her responsibility to the vast and complex constituency of the American people. Certainly Michelle has a palpable sense of working class life. Even as a child she had weekly chores requiring her to clean the bathroom and do the dishes, living with her parents and brother in a one-bedroom apartment, her personal living space being a cordoned-off part of the living room, another part set aside for her brother. Her father rose through the ranks from general janitorial work to a supervisory job in the city water works. There's already an early example of her empathy. As part of her work-study program at Princeton, she helped to create a tutoring program for the children of the manual laborers who worked there.

Although she hasn't shared any specific examples of direct bigotry she's faced, her sense of displacement as an African-American from the larger white Princeton student body is well-known. It would be obvious and natural for Michelle Obama to provide sponsorship for issues uniquely faced by African-American women and provide solidarity and support by accepting even honorary alliances with organizations dedicated to that constituency. There's even a strong and largely unknown legacy of First Ladies here. To name but three overt examples: Lady Bird Johnson faced protests and pickets in the Deep South as she heralded the Civil Rights Act of 1964 there, Eleanor Roosevelt publicly defied her husband in supporting anti-lynching laws and desegregation of the Armed Forces, Lou Hoover enraged racist legislatures and newspapers by inviting Chicago Congressional wife Jessie DePriest as her guest.

Of course, even were she not to undertake a specific project aimed towards African-Americans, Michelle Obama will have a powerful emotional impact on black Americans by having an impact on non-black Americans. Subtly, the novelty of her as a First Lady will become as routine as did seeing Jackie Kennedy in a veil go to Catholic mass or Ida McKinley lifted from a wheelchair and lean on others to walk -- labels of race, religion, disability and other "otherness" become secondary when the individuality of a person is permitted to flourish.

The internal is more important than the external and some of those personal qualities which have long guided her will be felt in Mrs. Obama's East Wing -- most especially her intense focus. Since childhood, she had a discipline to strive for academic excellence, earning her entrance into a gifted class in grammar school where she skipped second grade, and a magnet high school where she was student council treasurer, a National Honor Society member, and made honor roll every year. She proved wrong a high school counselor who said she wouldn't make it into Princeton, and a Princeton advisor who said she wouldn't make it into Harvard Law School. A point her mother has made: Michelle Obama will not remain silent if she feels strongly about an issue, and hasn't since she was a child.

This works in tandem with a faith in mental discipline which came from her parents, a belief that societal limitations were more perception than reality which need not impede her success in whatever direction she wished to pursue. It wasn't just talk. It was a philosophy made poignantly real every day as she watched her father, despite being slowly debilitated by multiple sclerosis, persist in his routine to prepare and get to work on time.

While the media has focused on her earning a minor in African-American studies, her major was sociology - an excellent study for a First Lady of a nation that has been diverse from its beginning. She also learned two refinements that, seemed almost routine for First Ladies in earlier decades -- speaking French and playing the piano -- matched with the most necessary one of modern times -- a skill for moving audiences. Michelle Obama is an easy, confident public speaker, a trait she apparently had at the family table but honed at Harvard Law.

In most of her speeches, she finds a thread that makes her accessible to the common man, some personal recollection which shows her to be less Lady Bountiful and more one of the people. When she spoke of knowing the burden of enormous debt, for example, the circumstances of how it accumulated (Ivy League college and law school) seemed less relevant than the convincing expression of the overwhelming anxiety it often created in her. Giving a sense of shared burden with the general public is central for a successful First Lady -- especially in harsh economic times. During the Great Depression, Lou Hoover served imported out-of-season foods; her successor, Eleanor Roosevelt, served lunches that cost two cents to make -- and circulated the recipes to newspapers. Perhaps one way the fixation on Michelle Obama's clothes might have an impact on people beyond the fashionistas is looking good without spending lots.

In agreeing to Obama's presidential run, she squarely accepted the reality that a lot of information about her private life would be sacrificed. She seems to have little trouble relating the mundane realities of her own life, but in a self-deprecatory way. Bess Truman knew this: in a rare public comment, she made her point when asked what makes an ideal First Lady, "Public speaking and a sense of humor." Some griped that Michelle Obama's campaign cracks about her husband's shortcomings dimmed his glow but it was the kind of teasing that signals a secure and open love; if renewed, that easy sort of humor could serve as a politically important venue for reminding the country that, however extraordinary, Obama is, after all, a human being -- especially as he begins coping with crisis after crisis, And it may help him. The times don't call for a President with delusional hubris.

To what degree she may draw on deeper, private experiences such as a parent living with a disability, for example, is unclear, but she's certainly been frank in disclosing the emotional impact of parenting and housekeeping with a largely absent spouse. While this may effectively illustrate an appealing humility, more importantly it may serve as hope, guidance or comfort to others similarly struggling. When Betty Ford publicly disclosed her own breast cancer, her candor immediately saved lives as hundreds of thousands of women immediately faced the fear they too might have it -- by finding out if they did.

Finding that balance point will unfold as her incumbency ensues, but Michelle Obama has already illustrated her empathy with working mothers by making frequent reference to her daughters. In fact, given the President's recent "open letter" to them in *Parade Magazine* as a message to all American children, the Obamas have shown a certain comfort level with the reality that their girls telegraph political messages. It's unlikely he'd have written it had *she'd* not agreed to it. It harkens an earlier time when LBJ had Luci campaign among college students, Nixon referred to his daughter Tricia in his "Checkers" speech, and Carter debated Reagan by mentioning that Amy discussed the nuclear threat with him.

Beyond the projects she might undertake, the policy she might champion or help craft, and the symbolism she and her children might represent, however, there is one vague and intangible venue which might prove to be where Michelle Obama has the greatest impact. It's the arena in which the public has always insisted on access to, and which First Ladies have always denied -- just how much power do they have over their husbands. Already, Michelle Obama has emphasized she's not a policy advisor to Barack. It was a question that made mighty Eleanor Roosevelt demur that she was merely one among many her husband used for his purposes. It brought a silent smile to Hillary Clinton's face. It led Martha Washington to burn her letters and, a century and a half later, Bess Truman to do the same. When Harry tried to stop her and "think of history," Mrs. Truman thrust the rest of the paper into the fireplace and quipped, "I am."