

First Lady Michelle Obama's rollout; first FLOTUS visit to Interior Dept. since Eleanor Roosevelt.

Chicago Sun Times

By: Lynn Sweet

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WASHINGTON--First Lady Michelle Obama is stepping up her "rollout tour," on Monday visiting the Interior Department, probably the first First Lady to stop by the agency since Eleanor Roosevelt.

This is the First Lady's third department visit, a low key way to introduce Obama to civil service Washington and let her make some low profile announcements. At Interior, Obama announced President Obama will appoint a policy advisor to his senior staff to work on Indian tribal issues.

"Let's get some good things done," Obama said.

Obama's visit was marked by traditional drumming tribal "Honor Song." She was given a bright lavender shawl, to "engulf her in the goodwill of all of us at the department."

Below is a transcript of Michelle Obama's remarks, followed by the continuation of the article above.

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the First Lady

For Immediate Release February 9, 2009

REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C.

2:25 P.M. EST

MRS. OBAMA: Well, I have to say I am completely humbled and moved by all of you, by the Black Bear Tribal Group. We have to give them another round of applause -- (applause) -- for that inspiring performance, for the beautiful shawl. Thank you, Nedra, thank you so much for the prayers. It means so much to me. It means so much to my family. And I want to thank you for that beautiful sign there in the back. It's a small sign. (Applause.) It's hard to read, but -- (laughter).

And I also want to acknowledge these wonderful workers, folks who have been in this department longer than I've been alive. (Laughter.) I mean, that is amazing. And they

don't look it. There's no way, by looking on this stage, that you can tell that people have devoted their careers, lifetimes, more than lifetimes -- I know there's some people in this audience who haven't been born half the time that they've been working here, and they are amazing and true representatives of what government work is all about. And it's one of the reasons why I'm here -- to say thank you, not just to the folks on this stage, but to all of you.

I want to thank Secretary Salazar, who has been a unique and wonderful friend. He is correct; he and his wife, Hope, were two of the first people we met when Barack joined the United States Senate. And they showed us a level of kindness that we will never forget, and we are proud for his contribution to this country. He brings the department a lifetime of experience protecting our natural resources, promoting clean energy, and standing up for rural communities. And we could not be more pleased -- could not be more pleased -- to have him as a part of this administration. You are lucky to have him as a leader. (Applause.)

So this is the third agency that I visited since we've arrived, and each of the agencies that I've seen have had a different flavor. It's been such a great way for me to get to know our new community and to meet you, our new co-workers and our new neighbors.

I know that this is an important time of reform and renewal here in this department. And as you begin the work -- the hard work -- of taking this department into a new era of excellence, I wanted to come by, again, to simply say thank you. Thank you for your service to this nation. It's a simple message, but it's one that we think is important to deliver.

The issues that you're working on, as you know, affect us all. They affect you, they affect your children, your grandchildren, your friends, your neighbors. And as public servants and stewards of some of America's greatest assets, from our parks and forests to mountains and rivers, you're charged with the sacred task of ensuring that America's resources are used responsibly and protected for future generations.

Some of the greatest adventures that we experience in life here in this nation -- like family vacations, and camping, and hiking, and fishing, if you're blessed to have access to those resources -- are possible because of the work that you do right here in this department.

And Barack and I and the girls, as you may have read, just had a little retreat away. We visited Camp David for the first time, and got to experience the beautiful -- the beauty of those grounds, and it was just wonderful to get a bit of a break and to spend some quality time as a family in nature.

You are also, in addition to helping make those experiences possible for our family, you are at the center of this administration's highest priorities: securing America's energy future -- Barack has talked about it time and time again; protecting its natural environment; and using the natural resources, again, as responsibly as we can.

These aren't only vital for the survival of our planet as we work to combat climate change, but also incredibly important to strengthen our economy and the well-being of our families. At a time when so many Americans are out of work, sound energy and environmental policies are going to help create thousands of jobs through the economic recovery and reinvestment plan that Barack is out there promoting today.

And for those of you focused on meeting the federal government's obligations to the Native Americans, understand that you have a wonderful partner in the White House right now. (Applause.)

Barack has pledged to honor the unique government-to-government relationship between tribes and the federal government. And he'll soon appoint a policy advisor to his senior White House staff to work with tribes and across the government on these issues such as sovereignty, health care, education -- all central to the well-being of Native American families and the prosperity of tribes all across this country. So there is a lot of work to do -- a lot of work. And we have great leaders in Secretary Salazar and in President Obama. I love to say that. (Applause.)

But what's important to remember that we will never forget -- never can forget is that great leaders are only as great as the people who hold them up. (Applause.) So that is why I'm here. (Laughter.) We're counting on you all. (Laughter and applause.) We're at the beginning of what will be a lot of work, a long journey, and we're going to need one another, not just here in Washington but we're going to need one another across this country.

So before we start that hard work, Barack and I want to thank those of you who have been here long before you ever heard of Barack Obama, working tirelessly to keep this country sound. Thank you for the work that you've done. Thank you for the work that you're going to do today and in the future. We are all neighbors in this effort. And together we can get a lot of things done.

So on behalf of my husband, my girls, thank you for the warm welcome that you've offered us to Washington. And let's get some good things done. Thank you so much. (Applause.)

END 2:33 P.M. EST

POOL REPORT

Washington Times

By: Christina Bellantoni

February 9, 2009

News: First FLOTUS visit to Interior since at least Eleanor Roosevelt but perhaps as far back as Nellie Taft in the early 1900s; Mrs. Obama announced POTUS would appoint a White House policy staffer dedicated to tribal issues. Details below.

Color: FLOTUS was celebrated with a traditional drumming tribal "Honor Song" and wrapped in a bright lavender shawl. She also said it was nice to get away to Camp David.

Tick-tock: FLOTUS Michelle Obama continued her "get-to-know-DC" tour of federal agencies today, stopping in at the Interior Department on 18th and C Streets Northwest. She has been to Department of Education and the office of Housing and Urban Development previously.

The 7-member Black Bear Singers drum band -- one Indian Affairs employee, someone from Museum of the American Indian and some area residents with other nongovernmental jobs -- offered pre-speech songs and also played the traditional honor song for Mrs. Obama.

The intertribal drum group, with members from all over the country, played a handful of songs with chanting and drum beats before Interior Secretary Ken Salazar arrived to introduce FLOTUS at around 2:10 p.m.

Salazar, formerly a Democratic U.S. Senator from Colorado, introduced FLOTUS as someone he met during freshman senator orientation in 2004, said he has seen that both she and POTUS have "the calm, coolness, confidence and resolve that will bring about the change America needs."

Salazar said of his new job: "We truly are the department of America, we truly with the help of Barack Obama and his great team will help change the world."

He said the department will help to make America energy independent and will help "empower" native American communities (and the Black Bear Singers gave him a drum beat as others applauded).

Nedra Darling, director of public affairs for Interior and a spokeswoman for the office of the assistant secretary for Indian Affairs, presented FLOTUS with the shawl, draping it over her shoulders.

She's a member of the prairie band of the Pottawatomie tribe from a reservation north of Topeka, Kansas.

Ms. Darling told reporters before the event the shawl and honor song were "to mark her achievements as an individual" and as first lady, and the idea was to "engulf her in the goodwill of all of us at the department."

"It seemed most appropriate in providing part of the ceremony today to honor almost one of the highest officials in town," she said.

"It's a hard place to live and work," Ms. Darling said of Washington. The song and shawl "will provide her strength and courage and duration through her tenure and beyond."

Mrs. Obama was applauded and turned around to model the lavender shawl, which had horses and other native designs made with appliqués.

The shawl was made by the Interior Department's museum curator Marianne Hannsom, of the Kiowa tribe in Oklahoma.

The song was made up of festive drum beats and chants. It's a traditional song of honor and has not been played for any officials visiting the department in Ms. Darling's 12 years here. She said POTUS Clinton visited in the late 1990s.

After the song, FLOTUS spoke for about 8 minutes.

On the stage behind the podium were several longtime Interior employees.

Mrs. Obama, 45, said the employees on the stage were an inspiration, and noted their years of service (see list below) were "longer than I've been alive."

She said she was "humbled and moved" by the song and shawl.

See official White House transcript for complete remarks. Here are some highlights:

"I wanted to come by to simply say thank you. It's a simple message but it's one that we think is important to deliver."

"The issues that you are working on as you know affect us all."

She said at recent "retreat" to Camp David over the weekend the first family enjoyed the time to "experience the beauty of those grounds" and it was "wonderful to get a bit of a break and to spend some quality time as a family in nature."

She said Interior is "at the center of this administration's highest priority -- securing America's energy future."

She said native Americans have "a wonderful partner in the White House right now" and then made some news saying, according to prepared remarks:

"He will soon appoint a policy adviser to his senior White House staff to work with tribes and across the government on these issues such as sovereignty, health care and education, all central to the well being of native American families and the prosperity of tribes."

An aide said the news is "part of the staffing process" and that we'd likely see the appointment "in the next few weeks."

FLOTUS got wild cheers when saying: "President Obama - I love to say that."

"Great leaders are only as great as the people who hold them up, so that is why I'm here," she said. "We're counting on you all."

She concluded at 2:33 p.m. with another note of thanks.

"Together we can get a lot of things done," she said. "Let's get some good things done."

Earlier, Ms. Darling said the department is hopeful about the Obama administration's relationship with "our first Americans" and dedicated to "the protection of Mother Earth."

Darling said the band proves "we don't lose our culture" and noted the group lives "here by this heartbeat of the drum"

Per FLOTUS press office, the Interior Department invited all employees on site to attend the speech, held in the 700-seat auditorium.

Word was that employees had been lined up for at least two hours to get seats inside the auditorium. There also was an overflow site of 170 people.

The event was telecast to the department's 67,000 employees nationwide. Interior also has 200,000 volunteers.

Grinning employees started to file in at about 1:10 p.m. in advance of the 2 p.m. visit. At least a dozen people tripped over the plastic covering over the TV cables and wires in the aisle. Finally someone was put in place to warn people to watch their step.

According to Carl Anthony, historian of the National First Ladies Library, FLOTUS Roosevelt was very likely to have visited. He said FLOTUS Taft nudged POTUS Taft to sign an executive order that created the first health and safety standards in the federal workplace.

Per Interior spokesman Matt Lee-Ashley, these longtime Interior employees were on the stage behind the podium. The number in parenthesis is how many years they have worked for Interior.

Michael Smith (48)

Gloria Mora (42)

Barbara Davis (46)

Davis' sister Thelma Harjo (44)

Carolyn McGuire (42)

Sylvia Jones (40)

Stanley Penn Jr. (42)

Robert Brown (32)

Richard Trinidad (30)

Ethel Smith (47)
Daisy West (39)
Carmen Santana (37)
Charles Pereira (36)
Darwina Neal (43)
Charles Riggins (32)
Laura Curlatt (36)

Finally, potentially of note, security for press at the check-in was lackluster.

Two other reporters said their equipment was not hand inspected. There were no x-ray machines and I did not see a dog. My personal experience was that I went through the mag and someone did not check my ID, search the pockets in my backpack or turn on my computer or video camera.