

New first lady to face great expectations, opportunities

Powerhouse Michelle Obama faces criticism 'no matter what'

By Jocelyn Noveck

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Sure, there's plenty of pressure on Barack Obama. But imagine being his wife.

The moving trucks haven't even arrived, and already Michelle Obama's being touted as the next Jackie Kennedy, the woman who'll infuse Washington with a sense of style and vigor not seen since the days of Camelot.

Never mind that Obama has repeatedly indicated she'll focus first and foremost on getting her daughters settled. Expectations on all fronts are running high.

Will she be a fashion trendsetter? Redefine and revitalize the capital's social scene? Be a globe-trotting emissary for her spouse? Going beyond Kennedy, will she influence policy on family issues? Will she be an exemplary mom, hostess, ambassador, advocate and politician, combining it all without ruffling feathers or breaking a sweat?

Well, maybe. But if history is any guide, first ladies have long been victims of conflicting expectations and comparisons to those before them. So as she assumes one of the least defined but most scrutinized jobs in Washington, Obama might do well to take the advice of Rosalynn Carter:

"I was going to be criticized no matter what I did," Carter once said, "so I might as well be criticized for something I wanted to do."

One reason speculation is running rampant about Obama's plans and goals: She's said little about them, and her close friends, some of whom spoke openly to the media before the election, have spoken little since.

She did give a brief glimpse of her thinking in an interview with *60 Minutes*.

"The primary focus for the first year will be making sure that the kids make it through the transition," she said, sitting alongside her husband. "But there are many issues that I care deeply about." She cited two that she focused on during the campaign: Military families, and the work-family balance.

There's been speculation that Obama will be far more involved in policy than she's let on so far. But those who've been close to other first ladies say they well understand why she'd want to focus on her kids first.

"It's a huge responsibility," says Paul Costello, former press aide to Rosalynn Carter, whose daughter, Amy, was only 9 when she arrived at the White House. "These kids are now instant international celebrities. You have to protect them from that."

Still, Costello says, even between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 3 p.m., there are astounding opportunities.

Power and opportunity

"The first lady has enormous authority and power in this country to shed light on things she cares about," he says. "She's a megastar. She'll be able to choose and transform issues that she finds important."

Of course, that can lead to criticism, as it did for Carter, who famously became the first presidential spouse to sit in on Cabinet meetings. She figured it was the most efficient way of preparing herself to represent the administration.

"It was as if she'd dropped a bomb on the South Lawn," says Costello. "It was so odd, because the first lady is an ambassador for the president — she's his eyes, ears and nose."

Historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony says the public misperceived what Carter, who also maintained a weekly working lunch with her husband, was trying to do.

"She was just avoiding having to bother him later with questions," says Anthony, of the National First Ladies Library in Canton. "She was on the perimeter of the room, along with policy aides, secretaries and assistants."

If Carter was criticized for being too politically active, Nancy Reagan, her successor, was criticized for being too socially active (and spending money on new china). But they can at least take heart that criticism of first ladies goes back to the beginning of the Republic.

'Mrs. President' Abigail Adams, the nation's second presidential spouse, was derisively called "Mrs. President" by an anti-Federalist, Albert Gallatin, for her partisan support of her Federalist husband, John.

Dolley Madison, on the other hand, was admiringly called "Presidentress" by some for her role as a national symbol for all Americans, one who knew "how to strike the delicate balance between queen and commoner," Anthony says. But Elizabeth Monroe, who came next and was much less popular, suffered from the comparison.

The wealthy Julia Tyler was deemed overly regal or queenlike, but then her successor, Sarah Polk, was called "monstrously small" (meaning small-minded) by President Tyler himself, Anthony says.

Even Eleanor Roosevelt, known for traveling the world and speaking out on issues from poverty to civil rights to women's rights, was not immune from criticism. And Jackie Kennedy herself, revered for her style and flair, was initially seen as too young, was once called "too darned snappy" in the press, and even had her hair described as "a mop."

By the time Hillary Rodham Clinton came onto the scene, she was hardly the first to assume a strong political role. But Clinton, who'd been a successful attorney and children's advocate, went farther, establishing an office in the West Wing and accepting an assignment from her husband to overhaul the nation's health care system. When that failed, it harmed the standing of both Clintons.

In the background

Laura Bush took a much more quiet approach, and thus is widely seen as a more traditional first lady. But over the years she has in fact traveled overseas on her own, delivered some of her husband's Saturday radio addresses and championed causes like women's rights in Afghanistan and pro-democracy activists in Myanmar.

While Michelle Obama, with degrees from Princeton and Harvard Law, may arrive at the White House with a resume more like Clinton's, evidence suggests she may take a page from Laura Bush, approaching the political aspects of the job more gingerly. It might be a wise move not only for her image, but for her sanity.

First, says Costello, the former Rosalynn Carter aide, "the requirements are beyond belief, from visiting schools to launching Navy boats to traveling overseas." Even more so in two years, when midterm elections take place and Obama, as a first lady, will be expected to campaign vigorously for her party.

And on a purely social level, "there are innumerable events: receptions, lunches, a dozen or so Christmas parties. There will probably be state dinners to plan. There are big expectations that this couple will bring Washington alive again. They'll be expected to use the White House as a showcase for important social and cultural aspects of America."

Setting trends

As if that — and the new first lady's own agenda — weren't enough, she's expected, just like Jackie Kennedy, to look great while doing it all. And to set trends, too.

"I think readers have already shown what they want from Michelle Obama — they want her to bring style back to the White House," says Lesley Jane Seymour, editor of *More*, a magazine for women over 40. Its cover photo and interview with Obama made the October issue one of the year's best sellers.

"This is a different world," says Seymour. "People say Barack Obama is 'post-race,' and you could say Michelle Obama is 'post-first-lady.' She's great-looking and accomplished, and not afraid to dress like it." Seymour particularly liked the close-fitting, bright red dress Obama wore to meet the Bushes at the White House.

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