

Michelle Obama image makeover: First lady's approval ratings soar as she embraces traditional role -- with a modern twist

Michelle Obama adopts 'everymom' persona and sidesteps controversies

By Stacy St. Clair | Tribune reporter
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The story of Michelle Obama's first 100 days actually begins 10 months ago.

Barack Obama had clinched the Democratic nomination and was the presidential front-runner in June, but Americans still had reservations about his wife. Her approval rating hovered around 43 percent, a politically troubling number stemming from questions about her patriotism and relatively low profile before the campaign.

Even the fist bump she gave her husband rankled some, with one television commentator likening the celebratory knuckle knock to a terrorist gesture.

Then the great image rehabilitation began.

Mrs. Obama appeared in an affordable dress on "The View." She danced on "Ellen" and joined the Jonas Brothers in a skit. Her brother outed her as a "Brady Bunch" fan before she gave a convention speech about her middle-class upbringing on Chicago's South Shore.

Her new everymom persona slowly supplanted images of the unpatriotic Michelle who once famously said her husband's candidacy made her really proud of her country for the first time in her adult life. She was no longer the woman who wrote a provocative essay on her experiences as a black student at Princeton, but a busy mother who worried about work-life balance and getting the kids to soccer practice on time.

For the last 10 months, Mrs. Obama sidestepped controversy, and the public rewarded her for it. Her approval ratings have steadily increased, rising to 72 percent in a recent Gallup poll and now surpassing her husband's.

Within her first 100 days alone, Mrs. Obama's public popularity has jumped 4 percentage points as she embraced the traditional first lady's role and steered clear of political land mines.

Sweaters that she wears now sell out instantly online. London schoolgirls weep in her presence. And magazines like People, Us, Vogue and Essence offer her their cover.

"She's off to a great start," said Noelia Rodriguez, former press secretary for First Lady Laura Bush. "She has established an image of someone who is comfortable in her own skin."

The first lady's success, in part, stems from her willingness to follow a more established path as first lady. She maintains an office in the East Wing, instead of the West Wing as Hillary Clinton did. She has not sat in on Cabinet meetings like Rosalynn Carter or launched a major policy initiative.

Mrs. Obama indicated she would focus on issues facing military families during her husband's presidency, but she has made only one high-profile appearance on their behalf since the inauguration. During a trip to Ft. Bragg, N.C., in March, she publicly decried the fact that some

soldiers must support their families with food stamps, but she has not publicly championed any legislation or initiatives to improve those circumstances.

"I think she's holding back from a particular policy speech," said Holly Baggett, an associate professor of history at Missouri State University. "She hasn't thrust herself in front of the president, but she has had a presence."

Instead of shaping policy, Mrs. Obama has busied herself with things like visiting local schools, inviting the Cabinet members' spouses for lunch and planning the annual Easter Egg Roll. Where Clinton initially flinched at such conventional duties, Mrs. Obama acts as if reading "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie" to children is a natural career progression for an Ivy League-educated lawyer.

Her activities, however, rarely seem staid in part because of the fresh twist she gives them, historians say. The egg roll, for example, focused on healthy living, with yoga classes and food demonstrations in addition to the traditional roll. Mrs. Obama also planted a White House kitchen garden -- the first since the Roosevelt administration -- to stress the importance of good food choices during tough economic times.

"Americans are happiest with a first lady who's a half-generation behind," said Stacy Cordery, who teaches history at Monmouth College in Illinois and serves as bibliographer for the National First Ladies' Library in Ohio. "Michelle Obama has embraced the traditional role while giving it a modern take. It's brilliant."

In fact, the few times Mrs. Obama raised eyebrows occurred when she bucked tradition. The British press, for example, roundly criticized her for putting her arm around Queen Elizabeth II during a brief chat, breaking a centuries-old rule about never touching the monarch. She also has been rebuked for baring her well-toned arms in public, a fashion statement that some thought too risqué for the president's wife.

"I don't know that I would call those major mistakes," said Myra Gutin, communications professor at Rider University in Lawrenceville, N.J., and author of the book "The President's Partner: The First Lady in the 20th Century." "At the same time, I don't know if I can put my finger on a specific moment and say, 'That was special.'"

Experts expect Mrs. Obama to take on a more active role in the administration in coming months, as suggested by her recent visits to various Cabinet agencies and a January reception she hosted in honor of a fair-pay bill the president signed into law. The reception, which marked her first public appearance since the inauguration, may foreshadow a more politically active tenure.

"For someone who had gone to great lengths to say she would stay away from public policy, she surprised me a little with that reception," Gutin said.

At that same event, however, Mrs. Obama pointedly reminded journalists that she remained mommy-in-chief.

"Feel free to walk around and touch some stuff," she told reporters. "Just don't break anything -- that's what I tell my kids."

As much as anything, Mrs. Obama's soaring approval ratings seem to reflect the country's satisfaction with her performance as First Mom, experts said. She predicted her first 100 days would be spent helping her daughters adjust to their new environment, and she has seemingly kept her word.

The first lady's schedule often is arranged so she can greet daughters Malia and Sasha when they return home from school, and she had her mother move to Washington rather than hire a nanny. When she picked the White House chef -- a move always analyzed by foodies and

beltway insiders -- the first lady said she decided to keep Cristeta Comerford, the Bushes' executive chef, because she was a working mom who understood the importance of providing families with nutritious meals.

Though the European press treated Mrs. Obama like a rock star during her first overseas trip this month, she returned home early to be with the girls. She also opted to stay in Washington rather than accompany the president on recent visits to Mexico and Trinidad and Tobago.

"She has made the family her main focus," Rodriguez said. "It's a positive, wholesome example for the country. The images of a young family help carry the administration's message of being fresh and modern."

The White House lifestyle also appears to suit Mrs. Obama, who has openly discussed the strain that the president's early political ambitions placed on their marriage and how she often resented raising their daughters alone. The young family now eats dinner together most evenings, and dad is usually home to kiss the girls good night, a domestic routine the first lady enjoyed as a child.

As a result, Mrs. Obama seems far more relaxed in Washington than she did on the campaign trail.

"She does look like she's enjoying it," Cordery said. "I'm sure she has been. First ladies who don't look like they're enjoying what they do don't get good press for their husbands."

sstclair@tribune.com