

# US first lady: an unscripted and powerful role

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WASHINGTON (AFP) — Unpaid, with no official duties, the wife of the US president can exert enormous influence, since she has both the ear of the president and a powerful bully pulpit all her own.

With Barack Obama's victory in the US election Tuesday, Michelle Obama is set to become the first African-American first lady in US history, in a year that also saw former first lady Hillary Clinton shatter barriers with her formidable run for the White House.

Since Martha Washington reluctantly debuted the role in 1789 -- despite a marked preference for private life -- a varied parade of American women has passed through the role, transforming it along the way in its many guises: national hostess, White House manager, behind-the-scenes policy advisor, public advocate of favorite causes.

The vivacious Dolley Madison, wife of the fourth president James Madison (1809-1817), presided the first inaugural ball in Washington, entering on the arm of the new president "dressed in a buff-colored velvet-gown, wearing pearls and large plumes in a turban," according to the National First Ladies' Library.

The celebrated hostess and fashion-setter was later seen as a national heroine because she refused to leave the White House until a portrait of George Washington was taken to safety when British troops burned Washington during the War of 1812.

Mary Lincoln (1861-1865) lived one of the most tragic chapters in the history of the role, seeing her 11-year-old son Willie die of disease in the White House and her husband shot dead while the two attended the theater just days after the end of the Civil War. Mary Lincoln later slipped into madness and died, impoverished, in 1882.

The gifted and ambitious Hellen Taft (1909 - 1913) was the first first lady to advocate women's right to vote, not established in the United States until 1920.

She also made dramatic symbolic changes at the White House, replacing its corps of all-white male ushers -- who greeted visitors -- with African-Americans, and changing presidential transportation from horse-drawn carriages to automobiles, according to the National First Ladies' Libraries.

When a stroke left Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) partly paralyzed in 1919, his wife of four years, Edith Wilson, "took over many routine duties and details of government," her official White House biography says.

Eleanor Roosevelt (1935-1945) eschewed the duties of running the White House and became one of the most active first ladies ever, travelling all over the United States and the world speaking on the issues of the day, notably civil rights.

After Franklin D. Roosevelt's death she maintained a high profile, and was appointed by President Harry Truman US delegate to the UN General Assembly from 1945 to 1952. She helped draft the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and was dubbed "First Lady of the World" by Truman.

The young Jacqueline Kennedy (1961-1963) charmed with her glamor and beauty, attracting a glare of public attention to the role that has never faded.

But it was her courage and grace after John Kennedy's assassination that most engraved her image on the world and, fourteen years after her death, she remains among the most popular first ladies ever.

Among first ladies still living, Betty Ford (1974-1977) further transformed the role through her public battles with alcoholism and breast cancer and her outspoken advocacy of women's rights.

Her candor inspired thousands, demonstrating the influence a first lady can yield on social issues, and she went on to win a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1991, among other accolades, for "selfless, strong, and refreshing leadership on a number of issues."

In 2001, Hillary Clinton became the first and to date only former first lady to hold elected office when she became a US senator representing the state of New York.

And she subsequently became the first American woman to mount a viable run for president, leading a fierce and ultimately losing battle for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination.

While first lady (1993-2001), she also took a pioneering role in fashioning national policy, leading an ultimately doomed effort to reform the US health care system.

Outgoing First Lady and self-professed book worm Laura Bush initially used her position to encourage child literacy.

But -- over eight years in the White House, during which her popularity waxed while her husband's waned -- she went on to exert influence in causes including the fight against heart disease in women and the promotion of girls' education in Afghanistan.

She travelled widely on her own, to Asia, the Middle East and Africa, advocating women's rights to education and health care.