

First Lady:

The “Second-hardest Job in America”

BY MEREDITH HOLMES, SWE CONTRIBUTOR

Shortly after the inauguration of Barack Obama, Michelle Obama admitted that being addressed as “first lady” felt “surreal.” The nation’s newest first lady, a Harvard Law School graduate who had just resigned her executive position at the University of Chicago Medical Center, is in a position to understand just how strange the office of first lady really is.

Paradoxical and ambiguous

The position carries with it great privilege — a mansion and staff of attendants, and brings the first lady into contact with some of the world’s richest and most powerful and talented people. On the other hand, it’s an unofficial position, with no salary, no formal job description, and no constitutional guidelines.

The duties change according to each first lady’s personality, the political climate, and the shifting roles of women in society. Each first lady puts her own stamp on the office, but tradition, the media, and expectations of the most diverse population on earth impose constraints on every move she makes, every word she speaks. One thing about the job is certain: It is so demanding and takes so much time and energy, that previous plans, avocations, and careers must be put on hold.

The first lady has almost no *legitimate* power. Historian, author, and first-lady expert Carl Anthony describes the first lady’s clout as “covert,” and her power as “derivative.” That is, she does not have power conferred by a recognized legal body, only the power derived from being the wife of the U.S. president. As women in ever-increasing numbers earn graduate and professional degrees, enter traditionally male fields, win athletic scholarships, and participate in politics, we are becoming uneasy about this old-fashioned route to power.

Although Michelle Obama will still have to walk a fine line, the nature of her responsibilities is a little clearer, thanks to Hillary Clinton. When the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons sued first lady Clinton for her leadership of the health-care reform task force, the U.S. Court of Appeals declared that her activities were within the boundaries of her “political and ceremonial role.” And, as Anthony points out, derivative power is still power. The first lady just needs to figure out how to use it, how to navigate the contradictions of her office, and recognize the opportunities for getting things done.

As women in ever-increasing numbers earn graduate and professional degrees; excel in traditionally male fields, such as science and engineering; win athletic scholarships; and participate in politics, defining the first lady’s role becomes ever more complex.

An accomplished sorority

First ladies have, in general, been well-educated, and many had successful careers before they came to the White House. Florence Harding turned her husband’s newspaper into an influential and profitable enterprise. Lou Hoover, the only first lady with a science background, was the first woman in the United States to earn a geology degree. She also won a mining industry award for a manual she translated for use in China. Lady Bird Johnson turned a small radio station she bought in 1942 into the Texas Broadcasting Corporation, a media empire that made the Johnsons very wealthy.

Recent first ladies have been highly credentialed: Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, and Michelle Obama all have advanced degrees. Now that women *can* become lawyers, physicians, senators, engineers, and astronauts, we expect them to be high-powered professionals *and* fashion icons, devoted wives, and brilliant hostesses. Dorothy Miller, Ph.D., director of the Flora Stone Mather Center for Women at Case Western Reserve University,



As a well-educated and accomplished professional woman, wife, and mom, new first lady Michelle Obama is navigating undefined territory and contradictory cultural expectations.

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theorizes that our ambivalence about the role of women is mirrored in what we expect from the first lady. "First ladies are judged by this confusion," she said.

The achievements of the first ladies have been, as the historian Robert P. Watson, Ph.D., puts it, "greatly underrated," by both the mass media and academe. So there is a lot we don't know about what the first ladies have done and what they really think. For instance, it might surprise a lot of people to know that seven consecutive first ladies, from Pat Nixon to Laura Bush, stated publicly that they were pro-choice. It isn't widely understood that the purpose of Lady Bird Johnson's "Lady Bird Special" train trip through the Deep South was to drum up support for LBJ's civil rights bill. And most people are unaware that during Bill Clinton's impeachment hearings in 1997, Hillary Clinton was busy working with then-U.S. Rep. Tom DeLay on sweeping legislation to reform adoption and foster care.

THE NFL

The camera's eye

One of the most powerful forces in the life of the first lady are the media. The growing speed, reach, and sophistication of mass communication are both a burden and an opportunity. It's a tug of war, as the first lady uses the media to project a public persona and to promote her projects, while the media shape what the public knows and doesn't know about the first lady. Despite the great strides women have made since the 19th century, the relationship of the media and the first lady continues to be problematic, prompting Barbara Bush to comment, "The first lady is going to be criticized no matter what she does. If she does too little. If she does too much. And I think you just have to be yourself and do the best you can."

Eleanor Roosevelt's newspaper column and radio broadcasts enabled her to reach millions, but that didn't stop political cartoonists from criticizing her activism and cruelly satirizing her appearance. Jackie Kennedy boosted the popularity of her husband's administration and displayed an extensive knowledge of history, art, and antiques with her televised tour of the White House in 1962. Nevertheless, a *New York Times* reporter focused on Jackie's breathy delivery, announcing, "It is now all right for a woman to be a bit brainy or cultured, as long as she tempers her intelligence with a 't' rific' girl-ish rhetoric."

Having grown up on a ranch in Texas, camping and riding as a girl, Lady Bird Johnson's connection with the natural world was deep and her understanding of the link between natural beauty and emotional well-being was ahead of its time. She and her press secretary, Liz

Carpenter, mounted the promotional effort for the Highway Beautification Act. Lady Bird understood the necessity of using the term "beautification" to appeal to a broad spectrum of people, but she disliked the word, saying it was "cosmetic, trivial ... and ... prissy" Despite the fact that Lady Bird and her staff were exceptionally media-savvy, the *Chicago Sun Times* ran a Bill Mauldin cartoon with the caption, "Impeach Lady Bird," and, like Eleanor Roosevelt, Lady Bird endured crass jokes about her appearance.

As first lady and later as a presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton dealt with antagonism from the media. Dianne Bystrom, Ph.D., former reporter and now director of Iowa State University's Carrie Chapman Catt Center for Women and Politics, has been analyzing media



coverage of women candidates since the 1980s. She found that in the 1996 presidential campaign, would-be first ladies Elizabeth Dole and Hillary Clinton, both high-powered lawyers, both of whom later made a bid for the presidency, were portrayed in the media, by an 8 to 1 margin, in terms of their clothing, personality, and appearance.

Dr. Bystrom observed of the 2008 contest between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama for the Democratic nomination, "The way she's getting covered now is very similar to the biased coverage we saw of women who were running in the 1980s and early '90s, with numerous references to her hair, her dress, her family, and her personality." Dr. Bystrom's research showed that Hillary Clinton received more positive and issue-related media coverage as senator of New York than she did as either first lady or as presidential candidate. "... Hillary Clinton is capable of getting positive news coverage," said Dr. Bystrom. "She gets

The Saxton-McKinley House, built in 1841, is part of the National First Ladies' Library in Canton, Ohio.

negative coverage when she violates our gendered expectations of how a first lady should act, and which gender should be president of the United States.”

The media operate by creating narratives, which inevitably get blurry and distorted, said Carl Anthony, author of the two-volume *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power* and *America's First Families*, as well as books about Florence Harding and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. “Here’s the media narrative about Hillary Clinton,” he said. “She pushed for health-care reform and failed. Then she baked cookies and survived the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Then she won a Senate seat, ran for president, and became secretary of state.” For Nancy Reagan the narrative was, she was “Queen Nancy” in the White House, but Ronald Reagan’s compassionate caregiver afterward. Laura Bush was typecast as “the timid librarian,” despite the fact that (admittedly late in George W. Bush’s second term) she successfully opposed pressure on the president from Vice President Dick Cheney not to approve the ocean protection plan. Of course, these oversimplifications leave out almost everything. “History is a reality check on the popular narrative promoted by the media,” Anthony said.

Arbitrary notions of what “makes good copy” can also trivialize or obscure the achievements of the first ladies, said Anthony. He cites Rosalynn Carter’s work as head of the

In addition to housing the extensive collections of the National First Ladies’ Library, the Education and Research Center provides a venue for author lectures and presentations.



Time for a Name Change

Between 1789, when George Washington was inaugurated, and the early 1800s, the young U.S. democracy struggled to throw off the trappings of royalty and to define national leadership in a new way. Washington refused to be named “King,” so if his wife, Martha, could not be called “Queen,” what should she be called? Martha Washington was known as Lady Washington; Abigail Adams was referred to as Mrs. President or Her Majesty; Dolley Madison was sometimes called Lady Presidentess; and Harriet Lane, stand-in first lady for President James Buchanan, was called the Democratic Queen. Most of these monikers fell into disuse with the rise of Jacksonian democracy and greater participation in politics by frontiersmen and men of humbler beginnings.

A suitable title, one that fit a growing democracy, was needed. The phrase “first lady” is said to have emerged (there are conflicting accounts) at an appropriately momentous occasion: the funeral of Dolley Madison in Washington, D.C., on July 16, 1849. Dolley Madison had been an extremely popular first lady and a revered public figure. In his eulogy, President Zachary Taylor said, “She will never be forgotten, because she was truly our first lady for half a century.” Although the title was used sporadically in following decades, it didn’t stick until the late 1870s. A play about Dolley Madison, “The First Lady of the Land,” produced in 1911 and revived in 1935, popularized the title.

Jackie Kennedy disliked being called first lady, saying the title “always reminded me of a saddle horse.” She asked the White House staff to call her Mrs. Kennedy. Rosalynn Carter didn’t like it either and asked to be called Rosalynn. No women of importance or influence in the United States except wives of presidents are known by the oddly anachronistic title “lady.” We will be forced to face this dilemma when we elect our first woman president. The historian Robert P. Watson, among others, suggests we call the husband or wife of the U.S. president the presidential spouse. Other titles under consideration are first spouse, presidential partner, and presidential mate.

Presidential Commission on Mental Health. Unfortunately, the same day the commission’s report was released, it was announced that President and Mrs. Carter would no longer be serving hard liquor in the White House. Although this decision was made only to cut household expenses (wine and beer continued to be served), and had nothing to do with the Carters’ religious beliefs, it was considered the “juicier” story, and coverage of the White House ban on booze eclipsed release of the mental health reform report.

Working within limitations

Of course, the first lady’s agenda is not entirely up to her; she must work within a basic structure. Much depends on the kind of partnership she has forged with the president. Barbara Bush was clear from the outset that she would play a supportive role, running the White House, overseeing her husband’s well-being, and advocating for literacy. Rosalynn Carter and Hillary Clinton,

both full political partners with their husbands, took the lead on health-care policy and advised on legislative and diplomatic matters. Hillary Clinton broke new ground by maintaining an office in the West Wing, and Rosalynn Carter sat in on cabinet meetings. Franklin D. Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt were also full political partners, privately allowing each other freedoms most Americans and the press were not ready to accept. Publicly, FDR dealt with attacks on his wife humorously, by saying, "I just can't control my wife." Pat Nixon, on the other hand, confined herself to the traditional role of hostess and helpmeet explicitly required by her husband, Richard Nixon.

The political climate and other circumstances beyond her control also define how each first lady fulfills her role. Betty Ford was thrust abruptly into the national spotlight when her husband was chosen to fill Vice President Spiro

Agnew's seat, and then into the White House, in the wake of Richard Nixon's resignation.

Landing on her feet, Betty Ford countered what many saw as the Nixon culture of secrecy with a new openness. She was famously candid about difficult personal issues and worked hard for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment of 1972. By contrast, although she was deeply frustrated by it, Eleanor Roosevelt was forced to accept the limitations of her role, when FDR refused to push for anti-lynching laws and to integrate the troops during World War II because he could not alienate his base of support in the Deep South.

Lou Hoover actively supported suffrage and physical education for women. Nobody could have predicted that in the face of a deepening economic depression, with a desperate public turning against her husband's administration, she would retreat into the role of perfect White

The National First Ladies' Library — A Unique Resource

<http://www.firstladies.org>

Teacher, champion of women's issues, and education advocate Mary Regula gave a lot of speeches in her capacity as wife of U.S. Congressman Ralph Regula (R-Ohio, 1973-2009). When she made public appearances, Mary Regula liked to talk about the first ladies, whom she considered important historical figures. And although she was an experienced researcher, she found information about first ladies to be scattered, difficult to access, and skimpy.

So in 1995, Mary Regula founded the National First Ladies' Library (NFL), the only historical research center of its kind in the United States. She first raised funds to create a 40,000-entry, online bibliography of materials on all the first ladies.

Initially, there was no physical location, but in short order, and with the full support of first lady Hillary Clinton, the NFL acquired and restored two buildings in downtown Canton, Ohio; hired a professional staff, including an archivist, a librarian, and a historian; and was designated a National Historic Site. In February of 1998, Hillary Clinton unveiled the NFL Web site in the East Room of the White House, and in June of the same year, Rosalynn Carter presided over the dedication of the NFL Saxton-McKinley house, the family home of first lady Ida McKinley.

One block away is the NFL Education and Research Center, which houses a 91-seat, Victorian-era theater, a rare book collection, and a re-creation of the first White House library, assembled by first lady Abigail Fillmore. Here, special exhibits are mounted, and programs for school children are presented. Laura Bush dedicated the building in

2003. The current exhibit, "Caring Hearts: The Health of a Nation," documents the health-related causes first ladies have supported.

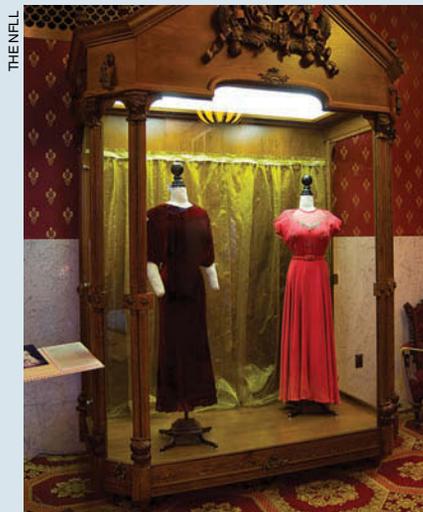
Books, films, photos, e-documents, and magazine and journal articles about first ladies have proliferated recently; the general public is hungry for information about first ladies, and first ladies have become a legitimate subject for academic historians to study. The NFL keeps up with these changes, by continually adding to its collection of both current and historic materials. In addition, the facility holds seminars, workshops, lectures, and conferences about first ladies and other notable women. Last June, as excitement about the U.S. presidential



election was building, and as scrutiny of media coverage of the candidates intensified, the NFL sponsored a conference about first ladies and would-be first ladies, titled, "From Front Porch to Webcast: The History and Impact of Spouses in Presidential Campaigns." Panelists included veteran political journalists; a first lady press secretary; experts on gender politics; and Connie Schultz, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* and author of the book, ... *and His Lovely Wife*, about campaigning in 2005 and 2006 with her husband, Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio).

"The NFL started out as a library, but it has become so much more," said Pat Krider, executive director, who has been involved with the NFL since its founding and director for 10 years. "Our mission is to educate the public — students, amateur history buffs, and scholars alike — to open people's eyes to the accomplishments of all the first ladies. We want people to understand that advocacy didn't start with Eleanor Roosevelt."

Krider points out that the NFL fills a need not met by any other single library or research center, adding that the presidential libraries don't necessarily include any information about first ladies. "I see a change in the awareness of the role of the first lady. People have greater expectations, now," she said. "They are asking, 'What will Michelle Obama do,' not what will she wear. They want to know what causes she will support, how much she will be involved in policy."



Gowns belonging to Lou Hoover and Eleanor Roosevelt are on display through the end of May at the NFL.

House hostess. Lucretia Garfield, independent and multilingual, was determined to make her position as first lady a full-time job, entertaining artists and writers and promoting education and culture. But her plans were never realized: Just months after he was inaugurated, President Garfield was assassinated.

Now that Michelle Obama is settling into the East Wing of the White House, the world is wondering what she will make of her new, unpaid job. Everyone is asking, how will she interpret this notoriously demanding, unscripted role? It's a sign of the times that we're asking, not assuming. But we also want to know how active she will be in presidential politics and how directly she will influence her husband on matters of state. And how will she meet the competing demands of so many roles: mother, career woman, gracious hostess, goodwill ambassador, tireless campaigner, and poised public speaker?

What's next here and now?

Michelle Obama has declared that she will be "Mom-in-Chief," and that her top priority will be protecting her daughters. She has appeared on the cover of *Vogue*, and she has spoken at the Department of Education. She held a reception for Lilly Ledbetter, the Alabama woman whose name is on the Fair Pay Act that Barack Obama signed into law on Jan. 29. She has kept her old friends and assembled a staff with impressive political experience and communication credentials. The first lady has indicated she will delegate some of the details of running the White House, and that she wants to help military families and women struggling with work/life balance.

Michelle Obama does not appear to have chosen any single direction, cause, or project.

It might be a good idea to follow the example of Doris Kearns Goodwin, Ph.D. As the 2008 election season drew to a close, rather than predict who would win, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author and historian listed what she considered 10 traits of great presidents. In her article, "The Secrets of the Great Presidents," published in the Aug. 17, 2008, issue of *Parade* magazine, Dr. Goodwin cited examples of Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt's executive abilities and grace under pressure, leaving it to readers to decide which current candidate demonstrated most of those traits.

Carl Anthony, who serves as historian of the National First Ladies' Library, has developed a similar list of the characteristics of a great first lady:

- She makes good use of time. She enters the White House with a sense of urgency, feeling that every day not making the most of her "bully pulpit" is a lost day.
- She puts together a reliable and thoroughly professional staff that understands and appreciates her and keeps her firmly in the loop with the West Wing and other government agencies and departments.
- She strikes a balance between queen and commoner. That is, she exudes propriety and never forgets that she is an important role model, but she treats ordinary people with respect. She is both accessible and above it all.
- She communicates sympathy authentically. She shows that she understands when people are in pain — both at home and abroad — and indicates a willingness to take up their burden. ■



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