

Michelle Obama and the Covert Influence of First Ladies

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"To what extent Mrs. Coolidge has influenced her husband's judgment only two persons many testify. One is too silent to say...and the other too smart!" -Editor William Allen White on the wife of taciturn President Calvin Coolidge

As memories of Inauguration Day 2009 begin to fade in and the new Administration ensues, speculation will only increase about how politically influential Michelle Obama will be as First Lady. She has stated unequivocally that she won't be a "senior advisor" but Barack Obama has far more frequently termed her his "rock." As time goes on, it's likely there'll be little difference. A First Lady testifying before Congress on policy related to her "project," or convening experts at a conference to offer recommendations for programs that address problems which concerns her, or taping public service announcements are usually the extent of what the media and public see and read about in making an assessment of how a spouse influences a president. That "show biz," as Barbara Bush used to call it, is entirely intended for public consumption, but it represents the tip of the iceberg.

To glimpse the depth and magnitude of how a marital relationship in the White House assumes enormous power, one has to sink below the surface and route around in the dark somewhat. It will require written evidence by husband or wife from some period in the marriage to be eventually released by an archive, or the memoirs, diary or interview disclosures of an aide or insider to go beyond mere speculation of the balance of that power.

Examples of this include Jackie Kennedy's 1956 drafting of JFK's endorsement of Stevenson for President, Edith Wilson's scribbled version of her paralyzed husband's instructions to Cabinet members, Chief of Staff Don Regan's book which unintentionally shows Nancy Reagan's wisdom on presidential appearances and statements and military aide Benjamin Montgomery's attesting that Ida McKinley successfully urged her husband to retain the Philippines after the Spanish-American War. Until that type of documentary proof turns up, it all remains a series of educated suppositions. Those suppositions will soon begin about Barack and Michelle Obama, but a fact-based review of how her personal strengths and professional experience might dovetail with him as President is a reliable start.

President Obama's political career has been confined to the collegial endeavors of the legislature. Predominant in Michelle Obama's resume are executive roles. She was an assistant commissioner of Planning and Development for the city of Chicago, and headed a transit authority advisory board. As the first head of the Chicago branch of Public Allies, the non-profit which enlists young people as community leaders, she built the organization from the ground up, hiring and managing staff, seeking candidates with widely diverse educational and practical experiences for the program, aggressively and successfully fundraising, planning budgets.

In her initial job at the University of Chicago, she worked in student services, forging alliances between university students and neighborhood residents and achieving her intentions of getting each group to volunteer in the other's arena. Michelle also served on a committee to help arbitrate sexual harassment cases. In her subsequent university position, she built the Medical Center's new community outreach division, assessing hospital services and how they could be more effectively distributed to the dependent local population, getting doctors to also work in local clinics and reviewing how the predominating health problems of area residents could be matched to new research sponsored by the medical center

Such executive sensibilities - and her well-documented certitude in her jobs, could come to bear on her husband's thinking process as he weighs options before making final decisions. In interviews with, and profiles of Mrs. Obama over the last year, there's ample suggestion it's already a role she's played at crucial moments in the campaign.

On the trail, she was called "the closer," because she made a convincing case to those undecided about Obama. She was also believed to give him advice on his most important speeches, imploring him to amp his emotions as a speaker. And there's no more evidence necessary that she never refrains from calling him out if she feels its justified than her famous tales of tartly reminding him to do his part around the house. "Her role is whatever she thinks she can make the biggest difference [in]," Obama predicted in December 2007 of his wife as First Lady, "Which isn't to say she won't be telling me what to do..."

As Senior White House Advisor David Axelrod recalled recently in a television interview, it was Michelle Obama who pointedly put to Barack a pithy and pivotal query before blessing his candidacy: "What do you think you can provide that the other candidates can't?"

That forthrightness, combined with her executive experience could prove particularly vital in the necessity of continually assessing key personnel; having effective advisors in the right place at the right time can be the crucial factor in crafting and passing policy. There's an especially long history of even those First Ladies not interested in policy who took a pro-active role when they heard or suspected a chink in the chain of command: Edith Wilson helped oust Secretary of State Robert Lansing by making her case for his insubordination; Florence Harding learned of Veterans' Bureau Director Charlie Forbes' malfeasance and pushed for his dismissal before the President did; Nancy Reagan was the single most important voice urging her husband to fire Chief of Staff Don Regan after his botched handling of the Iran-Contra scandal.

If First Ladies don't always get bad apples fired, most Presidents have depended on their assessments and observations. Lincoln took his wife's scalding reports on Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase and Secretary of State William Seward cautiously, yet encouraged her judgments, telling her, "I give you credit for sagacity." Jackie Kennedy's dim view of mad bomber Air Force General Curtis LeMay didn't result in his dismissal but further deepened JFK's mistrust of him.

It also doesn't mean Obama lacks judgment of his advisors, but a President does become absorbed in the stream of daily decisions - let alone the unexpected crises that arise. A First Lady hears more unvarnished talk, whether channeled to her own East Wing from the West Wing or directly from aides there hesitant to tell *him*. Much as Nancy Reagan had a West Wing liaison in her old and trusted friend Mike Deaver, Michelle Obama already has a long and deep personal bond with a woman who was first her boss at the Chicago mayor's office, Valerie Jarrett, now White House Senior Advisor. Jarrett was also on the board of the university and its medical center when her protégé went to work, successively, at both places. No doubt it would be Jarrett who'd keep the First Lady in the loop on how conflicting staff and advisors opinions might be proceeding at those times when the President is either travelling or too loaded with larger matters to raise them with his wife.

First Ladies also have more frequent and easier contact with the outside world. They can linger and listen longer to citizens on the rope line and have the little notes and pleas written to them scooped up by staff along the way. This is the "eyes and ears" role Eleanor Roosevelt perfected. Initially, it compensated for FDR's immobility due to polio, which prevented his going around New York State as governor to spot-inspect institutions that provided social services, and then around the nation when he was president to tour areas devastated by the Great Depression. It was Eleanor Roosevelt who began appearing unannounced in the most unlikely of places, striking up direct rapport with people to learn the depth of their problems and how well New Deal programs were meeting them.

One of the most damaging results of shoddy reporting and, in turn, public false alarm now seems likely to prevent Michelle Obama from doing what Rosalynn Carter did when she attended Cabinet meetings (she was

but one of two or so dozen aides and secretaries who sat quietly on the perimeter listening). Mrs. Carter did this only to learn directly about issues and problems, take her own notes and transmit it all directly to the American people when she went out among them. Michelle Obama has stated that she especially enjoyed campaigning because it brought her into direct contact with the people and a chance to speak with them without filters - and her wish to continue this direct dialogue.

While it's unlikely she'll show up in coal mines as Eleanor Roosevelt did, she'll surely make day trips around the country to various programs that address the issues she takes on, giving her that access to the citizenry who tend to share whatever problem is on their mind. Her continuing dialogue with everyday folks can serve another purpose beyond translating his actions as a spokesperson to them and a reporter to him - but she can convey the way they are reacting to and perceive his decisions. Eisenhower famously told some economists that before he signed onto some policy he wanted to run it by "my Mamie" because she understood how average citizens would see it. When Michelle Obama began hearing dire problems of military families, she decided she would find a way to address them herself. If she hears larger problems across a wider cross-section of the population, there's no reason to imagine her not raising them with Barack.

Or a Cabinet or senior staff member, for that matter - or a member of Congress or the Senate; another subtle but important aspect of a First Lady's more covert influence - an alliance, friendship or shared area of legislative concern with an influential presidential advisor or legislative leader. Often, if a First Lady is making a case for particular action with the President, she'll learn more about an issue from, and find a valuable mentor and ally in a federal expert.

There's no instance of a First Lady getting a President to approve some initiative just because she wanted it: she has to make as much an air-tight case for it as would any Cabinet member.

History, however, is rife with examples of their alliances with powerful federal figures. Eleanor Roosevelt teamed with Labor Secretary Frances Perkins to get more women into the Administration, Rosalynn Carter with HHS Secretary Joseph Califano to pass mental health legislation, Jackie Kennedy with Congressman Clint Anderson to get a preservation bill passed. Mary Lincoln found a partner in Senator Charles Sumner in their shared view that the President must come to see abolition less as a political and more as a human issue. Viewing it as her genuine duty to intercede for worthy individuals lost in the system, Florence Harding worked through personal contact with the Attorney General, Interior Secretary, War Secretary, Navy Secretary, and Director of Prohibition. Approving the Federal Prison Superintendent's plan for the first all-women's reformatory facility, she then developed a friendship with, and lobbied House Republican Leader Frank Mondell, leading to eventual passage.

Along these lines, it would seem logical that if Michelle Obama sees potential relief for working mothers in any legislation, she may form a working alliance with HHS Secretary Tom Daschle, in his capacity as director of the newly-created White House Office of Health Care Reform. Daschle was an Obama supporter as early as February of 2007 and remained a reliable adviser through Election Day. With her intentions to provide greater support for military families, the new First Lady may build a bridge to and gain insight from the Veterans Affairs Secretary, retired general Eric Shinseki, native Hawaiian like her husband and, as a Japanese-American, only the second Cabinet member of that minority group (or third if one counts the simultaneous Obama appointment of Energy Secretary Steven Chu).

In yet one other subtle way, the First Lady will likely influence the President's perspective. She's been adept at creating advisory boards and committees for the organizations she's headed, gathering disparate but collectively important voices. The President is already genius at this himself but as the cocoon will inevitably tightens around him, Michelle Obama might well continue to widen their private sector network - especially at times he may be consumed with crises. Eleanor Roosevelt was famous for bringing in differing voices to FDR, though it frequently exasperated him. Nancy Reagan's introducing her husband to former Democratic National Chairman Bob Strauss during Iran-Contra was a turning point in opening Reagan's thinking at the time.

All of this can be vaguely couched as the role of "sounding board." Betty Ford called it "pillow talk." Pat Nixon said it was being a "helpmeet." Nancy Reagan simply shrugged off questions of her power by saying she was just doing what any committed and concerned spouse would do - helping her partner. Yet while she's most identified in the public imagination with her drug-abuse awareness project, Nancy Reagan's impact was greater in the intangible realm of being a loving spouse.

Likewise, Michelle Obama may prove to have a greatest impact on the presidency. The benefit of this sort of influence is that, unless she or Obama disclose their behind-closed-doors conversations, the degree of it will always, by its nature, remain intangible, noticeable to perhaps only their closest intimates. Whether it's about replacing a sofa or a Secretary of Commerce, such conferring falls within what Hillary Clinton called a "zone of privacy," and can keep a First Lady above reproach, leaving no fingerprints, stirring no public controversy. Operating more covertly may be as much a reflection of her own brief work experience in the Chicago Mayor's office as it is a desire to avoid criticism - she has little patience for the grind and games of politics. "If politics were my passion," she told a *Chicago Tribune* reporter five years ago, "I'd find out how to do it and make it work."

Beyond their love and children, if it's not politics that binds the Obamas, there is a fluid mutual influence in their harkening a call to community service. It's already legendary how she first recognized Obama as different and gifted when she first witnessed his passion at a community meeting he asked her to join him in attending. But it was a similar impulse which drove her from Harvard back to her community and from a Chicago law firm to Public Allies.

If, as fellow actors, the Reagans were bound by that profession's training to help a fellow cast member if they lose focus while performing, and as law students the Clintons relished the intellectual process of arguing a case, and the Stanford geology students Herbert and Lou Hoover together translated an ancient mineralogy text, then community service is the core commitment which binds the Obamas. It was the impulse, which led them to jointly volunteer in Washington the day before the Inaugural on a "National Day of Service" instead of approving the traditional, official event honoring the new First Lady.

In all likelihood, the First Lady will continue the "Renew America Together" initiative, having listed her leadership of a national voluntary effort as one of her goals and emphasizing the January 19th call for volunteers wasn't just for that day but rather "an ongoing commitment to improving our communities and our country." It would be one of those rare First Lady projects that isn't just a component of the President's agenda but one of his personal and serious intentions as well.

The most powerful of all the delineated ways Michelle Obama can politically impact the Administration and influence the President, however, is the simple but mysterious alchemy of love and support. It seems almost trite to address it - after all, the whole concept of First Lady is derivative, based solely on the fact that these women happened to be married to men who are President.

The rest of that reality, however, is one rarely comprehended in full: most of these men would never have been elected President had they not been married to these particular women). Many know the tangible facts of how First Ladies helped make their husbands Presidents: Martha Washington provided enormous wealth that let George enter and remain in public service. Mary Todd's powerful Whig Party family connections gave social and political entrée to Abe. Taft never would have run for and won the presidency without the career management of his savvy and organized wife Nellie. But it is less the practical and more the emotional where the ultimate sacrifice is made, however much the riches might pour in.

Even though the majority of First Ladies before Hillary Clinton didn't have professional careers to give up so they could help their husbands pursue their ambitions, they sacrificed all claims to privacy and routine, often even better mental and physical health. All of them realized they might even sacrifice the idea of retiring with a husband. The only known remark attributed to Peggy Taylor, one of the most obscure First Ladies, was her

protesting the nomination of her husband: "It is a plot to deprive me of his society and shorten his life." She was, of course, overruled - but she was right: he did after just sixteen months.

Sure, getting to the White House means they make history, live in luxury and secure greater advantages for themselves and their family's future - but it can deaden any enjoyment of living in the moment. "I've given up everything I ever cared about," Pat Nixon poignantly observed of the toll her husband's political career took. Even more wrought were those First Ladies who survived the especially stressful periods by fleeing into spheres estranged from their husbands, whether it was a place or state of mind - Louisa Adams, Jane Pierce, Ellen Wilson, Bess Truman, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jackie Kennedy. At the National First Ladies Library in Canton, Ohio, among the collection of First Ladies' stylish gowns worn in their public moments of glory - far superior to the famous Smithsonian assortment - is a sad, little faded pair of wool slippers. They were knit by Ida McKinley, one among thousands of pairs she made for needy strangers who reached out to her for help. While her husband worked often late into the night down the hall, she sat for hours each day in her room, alone.

By now, the tens of thousands of still and moving images of Barack and Michelle Obama holding hands, touching foreheads, kissing, hugging, beaming at one another - along with the frequently quoted excerpts from his book about the strains that politics created in their marriage, evidence a solid union that has survived with open communication and commitment. They will need it.

Just after his ceremonial oath as Senator in 2005, as the press buzzed around him like a rock star, Michelle Obama raised a quizzical brow: shouldn't they wait and see what he does before lavishing so much attention on him? Beyond the value of keeping expectations realistic by reminding the people that he's only human, Michelle Obama's earlier habit of teasing his shortcomings in her speeches might also have helped him. Before taking the stage of the 2004 Democratic Convention, Obama turned to his wife and admitted he was nervous. She looked him dead in the eye, he later wrote, quipped "Just don't screw it up, Buddy!" and hugged him. There was no turning back. Unspoken, perhaps, but both knew it.

The conventional wisdom is that Obama is almost preternaturally calm, seemingly cool under all pressure. Perhaps - but he did confess, post-election, that his promise to Michelle that he would break his dependency on cigarette smoking forever hasn't gone well. It was all his wife has asked for, personally, when he sought her support in making the run for the presidency.

However different the personalities and circumstances, at a certain primal level, the same chords sound through all these presidential marriages and *most* share a certain truth: First Ladies have been the emotional concrete for the Presidents - even when promises to the wives are broken and it takes awhile for the depth of their strength and sacrifices to be appreciated by their husbands. Nixon wouldn't have won in 1968 had he not broken a pledge to his wife that he was done with politics, following his 1962 defeat in the California governor's race. It was not until after his wife's death that he fully disclosed his utter reliance on the woman who is today largely dismissed as inconsequential to politics:

"Just before going on T.V. for the fund broadcast in 1952, I turned to her and said, "I don't think I can do this one." She grasped my hand firmly and said, "Yes you can," and I did. In 1974, when I went into shock after an almost fatal operation, the first person I saw when I finally opened my eyes was Pat. She had been sitting by the bed for hours. I was profoundly depressed. I said, "I don't think I'm going to make it." As she had twenty-two years before, she took my hand and said, "yes you can," and I did. Had it not been for Pat, I would not have made it politically or physically.

In later years, Nixon was asked how he could have stood in the East Room and go on about his mother as a saint, express gratitude to his doggedly loyal aides and shower praise on the services of the domestic staff in the moments before he left the White House in disgrace, the only President to resign, and yet never once acknowledge - even with a glance, or turn or nod - his wife standing behind him. The depth to which he would

have to go emotionally to fairly credit her, to do her justice, Nixon suggested, was so overwhelming - live cameras and eyes of the world upon him - that he would have truly broken down right there.

Nineteen years later, in 1993, as she was buried, Richard Nixon finally did just that: he broke down, sobbing openly, a starkly haunting image of a man now truly alone.

Fifteen years later, in 2008, it was about six minutes into his election victory speech that Barack Obama acknowledged the "unyielding support of my best friend for the last sixteen years, the rock of our family and the love of my life." It is progress.

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