

First lady has short time to define her public image

By Emily Goodin

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A first lady has about 100 days in the White House to define herself, and Michelle Obama has already used up more than half her allotted time.

The enduring historical images of presidents' wives are typically sealed in the public's mind during the first few months of a new administration.

So while the nation's gaze is mostly fixed on what the new chief executive can achieve during his short-lived honeymoon, the woman at his side has a lot at stake, too.

"They often become reduced to caricatures," said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian of the National First Ladies' Library. "Michelle Obama? Right now people are talking about her sleeveless dresses. She's being typecast, and she's got to be careful."

An ironic as well as potentially iconic New Yorker magazine cover this week depicted Obama as a Fashion Week model. Each of the three outfits she is seen wearing has long sleeves, defying the stereotype and also the blogosphere chatter.

The Washington Post on Saturday ran a cartoon depicting the first lady in the classic "Rosie the Riveter" pose, with her sleeve rolled up and arm muscles bulging.

There has been plenty of comment about the president working out and having a toned physique. But Obama is also being defined as a sort of biceps babe — a Jackie Kennedy who does push-ups.

Obama's predecessors had different challenges. Laura Bush was swiftly regarded as a quiet and perhaps prim librarian. Hillary Rodham Clinton, handed the task of overhauling healthcare, became defined as a policy wonk and aggressive politician in her own right.

First impressions of first ladies come with the projects they choose to champion and the way they promote them.

Anthony, the author of several books on the presidents' wives, says first ladies get pigeonholed into the early images they project.

Bush focused on literacy in her early years at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., which set her librarian image. Clinton headed a healthcare task force but became embroiled in controversy when she held its meetings behind closed doors and kept them shrouded in secrecy.

Obama, meanwhile, is rapidly becoming subject to a call to arms — as in how to get strong, toned biceps. It's an impression that can be hard to overcome.

Anthony notes that despite all of her other work, Nancy Reagan was never able to overcome the "Queen

Nancy” image that got stuck in people’s minds during her husband’s first few months in office.

“It’s hard to break that first sort of classification,” he said. “That’s why it’s important they define themselves before others define them.”

Michelle Obama, he said, is in danger of being typecast as a “well-dressed mom.” And while it’s not a bad image, it may be difficult to shake from the public’s mind.

Anita McBride, who was one of Bush’s chiefs of staff, said it is incumbent on the first lady to establish her own image.

“Mrs. Bush would be the first to tell you she was slow to define her platform,” McBride said.

But she noted it’s different for Obama. “She is very quickly out of the gate,” McBride said. She added: “I’m not surprised, given the number of consultations we had as a staff” during the transition period.

Liza Mundy, who wrote a biography of Obama titled Michelle, agrees that Obama is defining herself as a “working mom in chief,” but she thinks that image can be changed if Obama wants to set up her own policy shop. “I don’t think anyone has the illusion she’s only a fashion plate,” Mundy said.

Obama’s bare arms have become her trademark. Her official White House photo features her in a black Michael Kors sleeveless sheath with her arms looking strong and toned.

Several magazines and websites have offered tips on how to get “Michelle’s arms.”

Mundy thinks the first lady has cultivated some of that attention. “She’s got to be enjoying that a little bit,” Mundy said.

A spokeswoman for the first lady noted “Mrs. Obama’s outreach to federal agencies, community organizations and stops beyond D.C. really should speak for itself.”

Obama also has been embraced by the fashion industry. She’s been on the cover of Vogue and made Vanity Fair’s Best Dressed list.

Mundy traces Michelle Obama’s fashion image back to the campaign trail, noting it emerged after she made a comment that got her a lot of negative press.

In mid-February, Obama said at a campaign stop: “For the first time in my adult lifetime, I’m really proud of my country.”

That comment caused a firestorm on the Internet, particularly in the conservative blogosphere.

Observers noted Obama visibly stepped back from the campaign trail after the incident, and, a few months later, went on ABC’s “The View” wearing a black and white dress that became the talk of the fashion world.

From that moment, everything Obama wore was noticed.

Mundy says Obama had less time to prepare for life in the White House than other first ladies. “Just five years ago she was wife of an Illinois state legislator.” Most first ladies get “practice as governors’ wives,” Mundy added.

Plus, life is different for a first lady versus a president.

“A first lady can pick and choose what they get involved with,” McBride said. She noted that unlike a president, who has to deal with the myriad matters of the day, a first lady is free to pick the issues that interest her.

“Each person brings their own personality into it,” McBride said.

So Obama’s signature issue may become more than strong biceps.

“I know in history there are certain moments that seem to really capture the public’s attention,” Anthony said. “The fashion stuff shouldn’t go away. It’s about balance. She could pull forward a little bit, and I think she will.”