

Op-Ed Columnist

The Magic of Michelle

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Forgive me in advance for fawning, but Michelle Obama is the coolest first lady ever. She clinched it for me this week by jumping double Dutch on the South Lawn as part of a “healthy kids fair.”

The scene underscored my impression of the first lady as utterly unencumbered by convention. She seems to feel free — free enough to loosen up and laugh a little, free enough to let her inner child peek through the veil of parenthood, free enough to be herself.

I couldn't imagine recent first ladies jumping a puddle on the sidewalk, let alone two ropes swinging at the same time in opposite directions. So, on behalf of New York City, the so-called double Dutch capital of the world (so much so that this year it became a varsity sport in the city's schools), allow me to say: Well played.

I could pile on platitudes here about her professional accomplishments, or explore to what degree she is redefining the role of women, or predict how she will be viewed by historians in the pantheon of her predecessors. I could, but I won't. That's not my bailiwick.

But I will say that she seems particularly suited to these times. She provides a certain authenticity and clarity of self in a time of uncertainty, projecting a casual grace onto a world of amplified anxiety. She has become a powerful symbol of fearlessness, refinement, frugality and frivolity, managing to be both fun and serious simultaneously. She's genuinely human.

Mrs. Obama is redefining my concept of a first lady, and I like it. Apparently, I'm not alone.

In April, at the peak of her popularity, a New York Times/CBS News poll measured her favorability at 67 percent. The same poll found that a stratospheric 84 percent approved of how she was handling her role as first lady. That means that even half of those who didn't hold a favorable view of her as a person still liked what she was doing as first lady.

(It should be noted that polls by USA Today/Gallup and CNN/Opinion Research Corporation, both released this week, put the first lady's favorability ratings in the 60s and above those of her husband.)

It's hard to believe that this is the same woman who during the presidential campaign was repeatedly portrayed as the neo-radical albatross to a postracial candidate.

This is America. We respect fearlessness, regardless of what we feel about the person who embodies it. With Mrs. Obama, we have it both ways.

If George W. Bush was the president that Americans most wanted to have a beer with, then Michelle Obama is becoming the first lady we most want to have a laugh with. And that's cool.