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First Impression: Michelle Obama takes traditional approach



AP File Photo

First lady Michelle Obama has become an advocate for healthy eating and national service.

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By Lisa O'Donnell | Journal Reporter

Published: January 21, 2010

Kathy Smith, a professor of political science at Wake Forest University, said she sees a lot of similarities between Obama and Bush.

Just to clarify, Smith is talking about Michelle Obama and Laura Bush.

Although President Obama has spent some of this past year trying to distance himself from his predecessor, Michelle Obama is following in Laura Bush's path, Smith said.

Both women associated themselves with risk-free causes. Bush used her bully pulpit to promote literacy; Obama has become an advocate for healthy eating and national service.

"Those are very safe areas for first ladies to be involved in," Smith said. "They're not taking controversial political stands. Even though they are from different parties and have different values, they are more similar in how they are interpreting their role, which is to be a partner to the president."

Smith has studied first ladies as part of her broader research on presidents. Among her publications is a chapter on Rosalynn Carter in an encyclopedia of first ladies.

Paul Boller, a professor emeritus of history at Texas Christian University who has written about first ladies, agrees with Smith.

"So far, Michelle has not taken a major role in the presidency. She travels, and commentators like to examine her clothes, and that's always important," he said with a laugh.

Some people may be surprised that Obama is more of a traditional first lady given her party affiliation, Smith said.

The previous two Democratic first ladies, Carter and Hillary Clinton, were more

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involved in their husbands' administrations, which made them polarizing figures.

Clinton was famously handed the assignment of reshaping the nation's health-care system shortly after her husband took office; and Carter routinely sat in on cabinet meetings.

Before them, Eleanor Roosevelt played an active role in Franklin Roosevelt's administration. She was followed by another Democrat, Bess Truman, who spent much of her husband's presidency in Independence, Mo. Betty Ford, Boller said, became known as an outspoken first lady almost by accident. She didn't seek a platform to make her views known, but when she was asked about issues, she answered frankly.

"She talked about her illness and gave advice to women," he said. "I don't think she planned it to be like this in the beginning."

As to the question of whether political handlers have sculpted Michelle Obama into a traditional first lady to deflect criticism of her husband, Smith said she doesn't think so.

"I would say it is part of her makeup," she said. "I don't think Michelle Obama is that easy to handle. If you look back at her career, her interests have been in national service, city service. This was before her life as a first lady. There's a real line there."

Boller said he thinks that Obama will play a bigger role in her husband's administration in the coming year.

"I think there is something to her being like Laura Bush, but they are quite different persons," he said. "I have a feeling she may become more important in these next years."

Smith said that Obama's sense of style may win her a few fans, particularly among women. But people are more likely to identify with her when she talks about raising children.

"After a year, she's definitely been a positive asset to the Obama administration," Smith said.

Studying first ladies helps historians better understand presidents, Smith and Boller said. Often, a first lady's papers are released before a president's, giving scholars a jump on research.

Before the 20th century, people paid little attention to first ladies beyond what they wore to the inauguration, Boller said. As the status of women increased, more coverage was given to the first ladies and their views.

"Now we're interested, no doubt about it," Boller said. "And I gotta be honest, some of them are more interesting than their husband."

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