



Carl Sferrazza Anthony

Historian of the National First Ladies Library

Posted April 29, 2009 | 10:39 AM (EST)

The First Lady's First 100 Days

If, as the West Wing correctly contends, the first 100 days of a new Administration is not an accurate gauge by which to judge a new president's abilities and success, it is a grossly unfair way to assess a First Lady. That said, only the most rigid of traditionalists or activists could assess Michelle Obama with anything less than an "A" grade as the new First Lady.

Everything about Michelle Obama stems from her authenticity. Anyone thrust into global celebrity status has to figure out how much of who they really are as a private person they are willing to put out there as a public persona. The less distance there is between person and persona, the less internal conflict. That relaxes an individual and gives them a confidence not to be confused with arrogance or egotism. Lifestyle editors with lipstick and hair dye to market can fixate all they want on Michelle Obama's sweaters or necklaces, but the trademark that genuinely defines her is so simple as to have seemingly evaporated from public life: she doesn't perceive herself as any less important or any more important than anyone else.

No one day of the first one-hundred better illustrated this than April 1, when she met the Queen of England in the morning and a London school of largely immigrant, working-class girl students in the afternoon. At the first event, Michelle reciprocated a universal sign of warmth. As the Queen spontaneously slipped her arm behind the First Lady's back to pat her, the latter did the same to the former. How absurd our cartoon celebrity world has become that it took such a small, unconscious gesture to stun the world back into remembering that despite the labels they wear (and I don't mean clothes), these two people are first and foremost human beings who eat, sleep and respond.

The morning at Buckingham Palace, however, can't be fully appreciated without considering her afternoon speech at an Islington, England girl's school with 90 percent of the student body from ethnic minorities. It may not have been the first time she strove to impress on kids from backgrounds devoid of privilege how they can, in fact, alter their fate by focusing on their education, specifically, and develop themselves, generally, but it was the way she said it that had full force. Looking into the faces of the students, she recognized the emotional impact her visit was having on them -- while, simultaneously, it

so affected her that her voice quavered and cracked. It may have been the moment when she had proof of just how much influence she can flex. Her remarks, in part:

All of you are jewels, you are precious and you touch my heart. And it is important for the world to know that there are wonderful girls like you all over the world...It doesn't matter whether you come from a consulate state or a country estate, we need strong, smart confident young women to stand up and take the reins. I want you to know we have very much in common. For nothing in my life's path would have predicted that I'd be standing here as the first African-American First Lady of the United States of America. I wasn't raised with wealth or resources or any social standing to speak of....You too can control your own destiny. Please remember that. If you want to know the reason why I'm standing here, it's because of education....The men in my life taught me some important things as well. They taught me about what a respectful relationship should look like between men and women, they taught me about what a strong marriage feels like. What she did at these events globally, she'd already been doing for weeks domestically -- providing a palpable sense of accessibility to the public. Michelle Obama appears to understand what working-class people who strive towards the meritocracy encounter along the way simply because she's one of them. Shared values and burdensome experiences connect the public to its leaders and it has provoked the groundswell of support for Michelle Obama. It matters less that the huge debt she lived with for years was a result of Ivy League college and law school educations, and more that she knows what those sleepless nights of fear worrying how to pay it off are like. There's an analogous example of how, during the Depression, Eleanor Roosevelt served meals that cost only two cents per guest and publicly disseminating the recipes, and during World War II instituted the same food rations for the First Family that every family adhered to. The fact that she came from wealth and privilege seemed moot. Besides being "of the people" Michelle Obama has hit the right balance point in not only fulfilling traditional obligations like accepting the annual congressional wives luncheon invitation (which she attends tomorrow) or presiding over ceremonies like the 131-year old Easter Egg Roll, conveying not only gusto but as much regality as democracy allows.

The most immediate way of striking a balance between "Queen and commoner" is turning the palace where she lives over to the people who own it. Pat Nixon, for example, opened the grounds to the public twice a year, ordered the holiday-decorated mansion open at night for those who worked during the day, and instituted the first public tours for those who were disabled, deaf, blind, and did not speak English. Michelle Obama has sought to build a bridge between the White House and the various urban communities that comprise the District of Columbia. Several times in the last one-hundred days she's sought out local public school groups to come to the White House, inviting cooking classes into the kitchen as the first large dinner hosted by the Administration was being prepared, grammar school kids in for an African-American History Month presentation, and another to help her launch the vegetable garden on the South Lawn.

In her first days as First Lady, Michelle Obama stated her intentions of raising attention to and grappling with solutions for problems facing military families, a balance between work and family obligations of women, and encouraging public service. However, her

efforts to inspire and encourage a sense of commitment to educational excellence in the Washington public schools may also prove to be the kernel of another project. Lady Bird Johnson focused her initial "beautification" efforts in Washington, D.C. with urban renewal, landscaping, summer jobs programs and renovating schoolyards and city park projects; it served as a pilot for which different cities later adapted aspects that addressed their unique deficiencies. Similarly, Michelle Obama's inspiring and leading local schoolchildren towards a new perception of the value of education may somehow encourage similar efforts under her sponsorship in places like Detroit, Miami, Los Angeles and Boston.

The unusual level of political experience among Mrs. Obama's East Wing staff also suggests that other facts may also be hard at work these last one-hundred days and many more to come. Before a First Lady can wisely announce a specific agenda or goal, her staff needs to explore the best ways of achieving it -- whether as a part of forthcoming proposed administration legislation, or through a private foundation established under the First Lady's sponsorship. There may also be an ad-hoc network already in existence throughout the country with the same objectives that might be pulled together to work in tandem with her. The worst thing Michelle Obama could do would be to prematurely announce under media pressure some specific goal without a realistic blueprint for achieving it. Given her cautious, rational approach to resolving issues, that seems unlikely.

It may not be unreasonable, however, to find Michelle Obama taking on more issues soon enough. Perhaps just after Labor Day, when her children are in school after summer vacation and some time has passed to begin assessing the impact of the President's stimulus package, it is likely we may see the First Lady adopt some aspects of his domestic agenda that especially speak to her and perhaps serve as a spokesperson or advocate, maybe even testifying before Congress as have Laura Bush, Hillary Clinton, Rosalynn Carter, Eleanor Roosevelt and, as former First Ladies, Betty Ford and Nancy Reagan. It may also prove that she will draw on some of her varied professional experiences (remember, she eagerly left a law career for one in community service) to help shepherd some component of an administration domestic agenda. Consider her effectiveness as a University of Chicago Hospital official in getting its doctors and other medical professionals to staff local clinics which served those un-insured and under-insured local residents who'd come to rely on the hospital's emergency room for basic medical care. In some measure, large or small, symbolic or substantive, she could help foster part of the health care reform solutions.

That Michelle Obama has already earned the status of a global role model within her first one-hundred days as First Lady may not only be her greatest achievement to date but is all the more astounding when you more closely examine how little time she really has had to prepare for her position.

A president has at least a year before his Inauguration to parse and inform his views, propose policy he'll promise to enact, even assemble a basic brain trust of advisors to take to the White House. He's ready -- and expected to be -- on day one as chief executive.

Were Michelle Obama or Cindy McCain, during the 2008 campaign, to have expended time articulating what issues they'd address as First Lady instead of advancing their spouses' candidacies, they'd be labeled as presumptuously arrogant. In truth, few do focus on what they'd do -- the first goal is getting the husband elected. But if a presidential transition involves getting the personnel and policy pieces in place to be up and running on January 21, a First Lady's transition is just about catching up so they can both make the move.

For First Ladies it means quitting their jobs and handing their professional responsibilities over to a successor (before the modern working-wives Obama and Clinton there was teacher Eleanor Roosevelt and newspaper manager Florence Harding) or turning family finance and real estate management over to a blind trust (which, interestingly, has often been the responsibility not of presidents but their wives, examples including Mamie Eisenhower, Lady Bird Johnson, and Rosalynn Carter).

There's the closing up of their household, selling or renting a house, or if using it as a getaway -- what to take to Washington, what to leave and what to put in storage, and what White House rooms and areas they will use to eat, sleep, cook, relax, study and entertain. In rare instances like that of Michelle Obama (Carter and Clinton being the most recent other examples), as the mother of pre-teenage children, there is the immediate need to find a new school for them and ensure their emotional security throughout such a radical move.

Then there's are the public and media expectations -- print and broadcast interviews with the president-elect and on their own, approving official Inaugural events, committing to which ones they'd attend and what designer and what clothes they'll wear to all of these. Perhaps more important than anything is going through the process of assembling a professional staff consisting of a chief of staff, and heads of press, scheduling, projects, correspondence divisions. In between all of this are the holidays -- Thanksgiving just three weeks after election day and New Year's just three weeks before the Inauguration.

Michelle Obama not only dealt with all of this with crisp efficiency (certainly her mother helped enormously behind-the-scenes) but flowed smoothly into the First Lady position. She ranks among the very few who strode without stumbling into the impossible maze of expectations and responsibilities that a First Lady faces on January 21. Eleanor Roosevelt did this, not only as an emergency mode response to those citizens destroyed by the Great Depression but with a pro-activism prompted by her fearful first-hand recollection of the role's imposition on her aunt Edith Roosevelt, wife of her uncle Teddy. Jackie Kennedy knew what to expect and launched her historic restoration project as a result of an interest in the White House starting in childhood and her brief career as a columnist, much of her coverage focused on then-incumbent First Lady Mamie Eisenhower. Barbara Bush -- who maintained enormously-high approval ratings throughout her tenure that were

greater than her husband's -- had eight long years as Second Lady to observe the media attacks on First Lady Nancy Reagan while simultaneously fine-tuning her own agenda to counteract adult illiteracy. She was up and running on day one.

In Michelle Obama one discerns what can only be characterized as an acute conscientiousness in her embracing of the First Lady mantle, an effort requiring as much mental and emotional organization as it is a practical one. Sure, a First Lady doesn't have a president's level of responsibility, but he fought hard to inherit his stress. A First Lady's role is derivative and yet she gets hit with the full cultural head trip about just what the idealized American woman should symbolize. Somehow, it hasn't daunted Mrs. Obama in these first one-hundred days.

The vital element that permeates all of a First Lady's roles (diplomat, parent, spouse, political advocate, hostess, role model) Michelle Obama inherently grasps -- just how potent a symbol the First Lady really is and the power she has to change thinking. Understanding that -- especially right away -- is all the more impressive for a spouse who spent almost no previous time in the Washington culture. Several factors seem to account for this.

One, a review of Mrs. Obama's biography shows a pattern of her investing tremendous intellectual focus on any task before her and ignoring the conventional odds in her path -- getting into a magnet high school, Princeton, law school, changing careers from law to public service.

Two, she's sought out some advice. We know she's consulted with Hillary Clinton. She let it slip at one point that she was reading some of her predecessors' biographies. A week before the 2008 election, Laura Bush admitted to reporters that her great regret was not realizing as soon as possible just how much influence a First Lady can have. She likely shared this with Michelle Obama or, at the least, the latter read about it.

Finally, throughout the 2008 campaign, Michelle Obama was infused by the media and the public with greater symbolic significance than most presidential candidates' spouses owing to her status as history's first potential first African-American First Lady. She implicitly recognized that she was a role model to people of all ages and races, but most especially to young girls of color. She still is, but with the status of First Lady of the United States, her constituency, so to speak, has expanded beyond those who share her racial and gender demographic.

Conscious of the intense media focus on her every word and deed, Michelle Obama has assiduously avoided being drawn into any politically contentious issues. She and her staff seem to recognize that were she to start advocating for even a modestly-funded federal program, the level of media attention to it would likely be proportionately compared to the president's stimulus and bailout packages, raising it a distorted level of equal importance. Instead, it seems she'll steer clear of anything directly related to policy until after all of the President's major pieces of legislation have passed and are in place.

Thus, her public activities can be classified as traditional and domestic. Yet even these carry significant symbolism. Consider two. First Families are traditionally appropriated federal funds to refurbish their private living quarters. At a time when many American families have lost their homes, spending their taxes to redo the grand, old rooms would show insensitivity worthy of a king and queen. Instead, Michelle Obama decided that not only would she refuse public funds but also private contributions (the latter had the potential of raising conflict-of-interest issues and potentially defy the President's intended ethics code for his staff). They'd pay for it themselves. Creating a White House vegetable garden with the effort of local schoolchildren was feature news yet naturally touched on several contemporary public issues: alarming obesity rates in American children can be counter-acted with a routine of physical exercise and healthier eating; if enacted by large numbers of people, growing one's own vegetables or buying those that are "locally-grown" can begin a significant shift in reducing trucking costs and environmental impact. Michelle Obama isn't implying that by her planting carrots she can keep Antarctica from melting, but there is no denying that she has captured the attention of the world -- for all the right reasons.