

Laura Bush fills in the blanks

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Her staff jokingly called it a "legacy lunch." About two dozen historians, journalists, White House staffers, and Beltway insiders gathered in the yellow Oval Room to hear Laura Bush's take on Laura Bush.

The unusual three-hour session went little noticed and largely unreported at the time, coming just days before the November election. Several people who were there told POLITICO that Bush was candid, funny, confident, and open to every question. And there were many, as the consensus in the public and among scholars hadn't been so much unkind to Laura Bush as a little fuzzy – as in Laura Bush, we hardly know you.

Bush's staff made clear the lunch was designed to remedy just that – to provide details and historical context about her time in the White House. Attendees recall it as an attempt to shape the public perception of Bush now and in the future, by giving her an opportunity to lay out how she would most like to be remembered.

"When we sat down I have the recollection that Anita McBride said, 'You are the people who are going to be writing about the history of the administration and we want to share with you some of the things that she wanted to do and her accomplishments,'" said first ladies historian Myra Gutin, referring to Laura Bush's then-chief of staff. "No first lady has ever reached out to historians to talk about what she'd done. It was a first."

Her husband has said history will judge his actions. For Laura Bush, who maintained high favorable ratings throughout her husband's eight years, it isn't a matter of burnishing her image as much as filling in the blanks.

But part of Bush's attempts to shape her legacy also included an attempt to change the notion that she was somehow too quiet, too much of a stand-by-your-man first lady, attendees said. At the legacy luncheon, she talked about her travels – 77 countries in eight years, 67 in the second term – and her passion for global literacy and women's rights.

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McBride, her former chief of staff, also recently wrote an article for POLITICO, where she pushed back against the perception that Bush was a "quiet" first lady. McBride listed other moments that Bush discussed during the October luncheon – her appearance in the White House briefing room for a news conference on repression in Myanmar, and her work to spotlight the need for women's rights in Afghanistan, which included the first radio address delivered by a first lady.

"I think it's an unfair characterization that she was someone who was not effective or well-respected or a champion in her own right," McBride said. "She was perceived as a traditional first lady, yes, but she was also a voice for issues that weren't traditional."

McBride also said she feels "a responsibility to document that snapshot in history. . . We did feel an obligation and I continue to feel an obligation to write and talk about so that everyone has their rightful place in history," McBride said.

But by her own admission, Bush was slow to realize the power of her platform. It didn't help that by the last years of George W. Bush's presidency, her husband's approval ratings sank and the public seemed eager to turn the page.

It also doesn't help that Laura Bush's time in the White House is bookended by two prominent first ladies. She was preceded by Hillary Clinton, who had an office in the West Wing and took on health-care reform. And her successor is Michelle Obama – automatically an historic figure, heralded in the media as a mix of Oprah and Jacqueline Onassis.

In one recent ranking by historians, Clinton ranked fourth overall, while Laura Bush came in at 23rd out of 38 first ladies – a reflection, some say, of her image as a dutiful supporter to her husband through 9/11 and two wars, and less a historic figure in her own right.

McBride balked at the idea that Bush is overshadowed by Clinton and Obama, saying Bush "straddled the middle. She was seen as a traditional first lady, wife, mother, teacher, librarian, but she had an advanced degree," McBride said. "The fact that she was perceived as a traditional first lady allowed us to build a platform where she was able to make a difference, but wasn't seen as overbearing."

And some who were at the luncheon that day also said she revealed a strength that the public perhaps did not see.

"I was struck by how she was quite confident in a quiet way and she was quite knowledgeable on the issues. She was first lady on her terms. She didn't try to do what her mother-in-law had done. She had a low-key approach," said former Bill Clinton press secretary Dee Dee Myers, who attended the luncheon. "She has her own ideas. She just chooses to not be as public about it. She did find that the platform came with power to improve people's lives in ways that she may not have expected, and I think Laura Bush is probably underappreciated for what she tried to accomplish."

Since leaving the White House, both Laura and George W. Bush have stayed out of the headlines. Back in Texas, Laura Bush has a staff of two, a personal aide and a projects and policy director. She is working on the Bush Library, which will include a Laura Bush wing; giving speeches and writing her memoirs.

Every day, Bush sets aside time to work on the book due out in the fall of 2010. The memoirs, which reportedly fetched about \$2 million (and drew the inevitable comparisons to Hillary Clinton's \$8 million advance), won't be a chronology, but rather an account of the significant events that shaped her life, McBride said. She is drawing on scrapbooks, memos and schedules from her years in public service, and finding that the writing process isn't as daunting as she thought it would be.

"It will not be a book that settles scores. That is not Laura Bush's way. That is not her personality," McBride said.

People who attended the late October luncheon said they saw that personality in full force, and that Bush was by turns funny, open, warm, engaged, savvy and expressed a "certain amount of glee in getting out of there," according to one historian.

"I think the luncheon was a very clever thing to do, I would advise every outgoing first lady to do the same. It was very low key, very subtle. She wasn't bragging. It was very classy," said Betty Boyd Caroli, a first lady historian, who attended the luncheon and is writing on Laura Bush for the updated version of her book, *First Ladies*. "It does influence you. It's harder to write them off as ineffectual."

For all the commentary about Laura Bush among historians and the press, the public at large always did have a soft spot for her – while in office, her favorability ratings never dipped below 63 percent and when she left office they stood at 76 percent, rivaling Michelle Obama's.

At the luncheon, "she became very impassioned when she spoke about Afghanistan, and she really become engaged and almost lost herself when she was talking about much more serious issues," said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, a historian at the National First Ladies Library. "People sometimes think of her as traditional, but she sure didn't seem that way that day."