

What's a first lady to do? Role not specified, highly scrutinized

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By Charles Krupa, AP

Two first ladies and two presidents: Laura and George W. Bush, left, in 1999, would soon occupy the White House, as did Barbara and George H.W. Bush. Barbara and Laura Bush are among the 53 women who have been first lady.

By Maria Puente, USA TODAY

For some people, who will be the next FLOTUS is less intriguing than whether or how the next First Lady of the United States will change a position that has no definition, no pay and no official power — but plenty of pressure.

She could stick to the ceremonial role: hosting state dinners, presiding over the Christmas decorating, welcoming the kiddies for the Easter Egg Roll, hiring the chef.

Or she could push the envelope a little further by exerting a policy role in public, traveling the world like a head of state, getting presidential staffers hired or fired, denouncing dictators from the White House briefing room.

In short, will she be more like Bess or Eleanor? Eleanor Roosevelt, the first first lady to hold news conferences, write daily newspaper and monthly magazine columns and host a weekly radio show? Or Bess Truman, who never gave an interview as first lady and once said her job was to "sit quietly on the podium next to her husband and make sure her hat was on straight"?

"Eleanor Roosevelt was the most active first lady of all time; Bess Truman (her successor) was the least active of the 20th century," says Myra Gutin, an historian of first ladies and a communications professor at Rider University in Lawrenceville, N.J. "We've not had a ceremonial first lady since Bess Truman. The position has continually evolved but not necessarily in a chronological development."

Why does it matter? Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies Library in Canton, Ohio, says the role says as much about America as it does about those who inhabited it.

"It opens a window on so many fascinating dialogues about our highly contradictory, highly individualist, unique American culture and the many contradictions we have about women and men," he says.

FIRST INKLINGS OF THE TITLE

Where did the title first lady come from?

It first appears in the mid-19th century, nearly 100 years after the nation's founding, but wasn't used regularly until the beginning of the 20th century, according to historians.

There is evidence that the first first lady, Martha Washington, and her two immediate successors, Abigail Adams and Dolley Madison, were often referred to as Lady Washington, Lady Adams and Lady Madison, partly in imitation of title-cluttered Britain, from which colonial American culture derived, and partly because mere "Mrs." seemed inadequate in commanding respect for the new nation on the international stage.

At Dolley Madison's funeral in 1849, President Zachary Taylor eulogized her as "our first lady," says Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies Library in Canton, Ohio.

A decade later, Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper* used the title in print for the first time to refer to bachelor President James Buchanan's niece Harriet Lane, who acted as his social hostess and was called "first lady of the White House," for lack of anything else to call her.

"It did not come into general use until 1911, in a play about Dolley Madison called *First Lady of the Land*," says first-lady historian Myra Gutin, professor of communications at Rider University in Lawrenceville, N.J.

Now two new women are contending for the East Wing, Republican Cindy McCain, 54, an heiress/philanthropist from Phoenix, and Democrat Michelle Obama, 44, a Chicago lawyer.

If neither turns out to be a so-called traditional first lady, will Americans care? As the presidential election draws closer, what do we expect from FLOTUS (as the White House refers to her) in the 21st century?

"Americans don't exactly know what they want from a first lady," Gutin says. "When Hillary Clinton was first lady, she had an office in the West Wing, which made a lot of people unhappy. But there are people who are unhappy with Laura Bush for not taking advantage of the White House podium. You're damned if you do, damned if you don't."

Plus, the public does not know what to expect from either Michelle Obama or Cindy McCain. Neither is well known nationally, and neither has spent much time in Washington. Obama would be the first black first lady, while McCain would be one of the wealthiest.

Gutin thinks either woman will have a tough adjustment to the fishbowl existence of the White House, especially the more low-key McCain, who has split her time between humanitarian work abroad and the family beer distributorship she inherited. "There seems to be a reserve about her," Gutin says. "That kind of scrutiny is tough for anyone but for someone reticent, it can really be a challenge."

Michelle Obama, Gutin says, might have an easier time adjusting because of the Hillary Clinton precedent. Obama "is a very capable, articulate, bright woman and most likely is going to be an activist first lady," Gutin says. "And she will be the first one to confront the issue of how to deal with very young children in the White House since JFK."

Daughters Malia and Sasha are 9 and 6, respectively.

It's not as if a first lady can consult the Constitution for guidance. The role is not mentioned in our founding documents.

Still, because there's no job description, a first lady is free to make the role anything she wants. History shows that the 53 women (wives, daughters, daughters-in-law, nieces, sisters) who have served in the post have taken widely varied paths defined by their times, personalities, health and state of their marriages.

Commoner and queen

We always have been fascinated by first ladies, even though we haven't always called them that. The title wasn't used until the mid-19th century and wasn't in regular use until the beginning of the 20th century, historians say. Many early first ladies were far more interested in politics and policy than hosting teas but were encouraged by custom to keep their opinions on the down-low.

Anthony says they were influenced in part by the British model and tried to balance a public image as both a commoner and a queen. Being the White House's hostess was considered so crucial, it was unthinkable for a president to entertain without one — thus the scores of female relatives who substituted at public events if a president's wife was unwilling, unwell, out of town or in her grave.

Dolley Madison was so successful at the balancing act, she was held up as the ideal role model for at least the first century of the presidency, he says.

"What (the first lady) wore, how she looked, how much money she spent, what her family life was like, how she entertained, what food she served, how she relaxed — these all became matters of interest to the country," Anthony writes on the First Ladies Library website. "This role of being in charge of the White House as hostess, manager, decorator, caretaker is now considered the 'traditional' role, and it is still part of what first ladies do."

But it wasn't the only thing, even as far back as Martha Washington.

We tend to think of first-lady projects as a modern development, given more attention by the press and public since Jacqueline Kennedy took up historic preservation and Lady Bird Johnson campaigned for highway beautification. But virtually every first lady has been associated with some public cause.

Even Laura Bush, generally considered a low-key first lady, has not been entirely traditional. She made literacy her project, and this year she became the administration's leading critic of the military junta ruling Myanmar, speaking in May to denounce the junta's ineptitude in responding to a cyclone.

Now first ladies are expected to play a role, says Patricia Krider, director of the First Ladies Library, which opened in 1998 in the home of former first lady Ida McKinley.

"If she wants to be a stay-in-the-background first lady, she probably has a harder time," Krider says. "If she wants to play a strong role, she has an easier time because that path has been forged for her already."

Even so, Anthony says Americans seem reluctant to let go of the idea of first lady as national nurturer. To wit: cookies. Ever since 1992, when Hillary Clinton seemed to dismiss baking cookies as a useful way to spend her time, the public and press have elevated recipes as a lighthearted way to judge a potential first lady and her housewifely qualities.

Few of the women who lived in the White House spent any time in the kitchen. That's why they hire chefs. So why do we pursue this issue?

"It's the mythological figure of the first lady, a summation of all of them or all the things we've liked or like to think we remember liking about them, and it's somehow quite sacred," Anthony says. "They take on relic-like status. (Then) we lock these women in a china closet."

Much we don't know

Over the years, the public has routinely failed to pay attention to what first ladies really do, such as Bush's efforts to provide mosquito netting to help prevent malaria in West Africa or Rosalynn Carter's efforts to alleviate the Cambodian refugee crisis in 1979.

"They'll still be judged by the quality of their clothing or what they served at dinner, which has its place in cultural history but isn't the end-all of history," Anthony says.

Modern first ladies tend to get most of the kudos for being the "first" to do new things, but what we don't remember — or never knew — fills volumes.

Clinton was the first first lady to earn a law degree, to win political office on her own and to run for president, but she wasn't the first to have a job and career before the White House.

Abigail Fillmore, wife of Millard, earned a salary as a schoolteacher in the mid-19th century, and Ida McKinley worked as a bank teller and manager in the late 19th century.

And then there is Eleanor Roosevelt. "Eleanor is the yardstick, always, and it's all the more extraordinary because of her times and her upbringing," Gutin says. "Hillary did the modernization (of the role) for the 1990s, but Eleanor was doing it in the 1930s, at a time when a lady appeared in print only three times — at birth, at marriage and at death."

Most Americans got used to Eleanor Roosevelt's activism (she was first lady for 12 years, after all), in part because she was *sui generis* — unique for her era, says historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. "She wasn't threatening to men, because she was so far ahead of her times. But Hillary symbolized a movement that people were still uneasy about, of women having careers and power."

Eight years after she left the White House (and 75 years after Eleanor), the uneasiness is diminishing. "There's a lot more freedom," Goodwin says. "The kind of people most likely to be married to politicians in the 21st century are more likely to have had careers of their own and are more likely to want to use (the role) to accomplish something. "