

## No vacation from attacks on Michelle

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It's been a long time since Michelle Obama has been attacked like this.

The first lady's lavish Spanish vacation was the lead story in the Drudge Report for days. Political columnists and commentators lampooned her as a 21st-century Marie Antoinette, unwinding at a luxury resort while unemployment lingers near 10 percent and President Barack Obama's poll numbers fade. And headlines set off political sirens: Scandal! Tone deaf! Elitist!

The attacks from right-wing commentators — and a handful of left-leaning pundits — produced the first harsh critiques against the first lady since the heated days of the 2008 presidential campaign when she told an audience that America had finally improved: “For the first time in my adult life, I am proud of my country.”

The outrage from conservatives could foreshadow how Republicans might treat the first lady when she sets out to stump for Democrats during midterm elections. When Obama returns to the campaign trail, it could expose her to attacks by Republicans and jeopardize her new, more polished image as a modern woman balancing a career, children and marriage to the leader of the free world.

Yet at the same time, the GOP must walk a fine line in dealings with Obama, whose popularity rating is at 50 percent and whom many working women admire. It's a risky move, Republican strategists say, to resurrect the fist-bumping, militant caricature of Michelle Obama that at times overshadowed her husband's presidential race campaign.

“The Republican Party doesn't want to be seen as attacking a woman and an African-American woman at that,” said David Johnson, a GOP strategist. “You have to be very careful about taking any jabs, especially if she doesn't get real personal and attack Republican candidates.”

Johnson warned that if Obama takes some shots at candidates, the GOP might fire back.

“It's all on how they deploy her,” he said.

After taking up residence in the White House last year, Obama has reinvented herself as the country's chic mom-in-chief, a national style icon who's appeared on a dozen magazine covers — including Vogue, Glamour and this month's

issue of Ladies' Home Journal. She champions feel-good causes like fighting childhood obesity, care for military families and early childhood education, while at the same time keeping politics at a distance.

But as her poll ratings soared above 60 percent, and her husband's sank below 50 percent, the first lady's profile grew higher. She packed the house at the NAACP convention in Kansas City, Mo., headlined the DNC's Women's Leadership Forum in May and drew crowds of admirers wherever she appeared. This year, several Democratic candidates, including Joe Sestak, running for Arlen Specter's seat, said they want Michelle Obama's star power — and not her husband's.

White House aides say her schedule is being worked out, but Obama's appearances on the campaign trail will be "fairly traditional events," similar to the one she made at the DNC event, when she spoke about her husband's accomplishments and urged attendees to "get out there and get it done because we know that change ... doesn't happen overnight." At the time, she didn't directly attack Republicans, nor did she give a shout-out to any specific Democratic candidates.

The criticism the first lady encountered during her trip — and for days after she returned — is nothing new. For years, first ladies have had to defend their images, said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies Library. Jackie Kennedy returned from an Italian vacation to picketers. Lou Hoover was blasted for serving out-of-season foods during the Great Depression. President Ronald Reagan's critics attacked his wife, Nancy, for redecorating the White House with pricey china, consulting an astrologist and appearing to be the true power behind the presidency. The New Republic once put her on the cover with the headline "Queen Nancy."

"This is the problem: If you do something that seems to reek of being royal or regal or do something that seems too common or pedestrian, you're criticized," Anthony said.

Obama's Spanish holiday triggered a feeding frenzy among conservatives. The New York Daily News's Andrea Tantaros claimed "Michelle Obama is a modern-day Marie Antoinette on a glitzy Spanish vacation." Fox News's Greta Van Susteren suggested the first lady was "trying to torpedo" her husband with a "fancy foreign vacation." Rush Limbaugh ridiculed her as "Mooch-elle."

Even Joe Scarborough, the former GOP congressman-turned-MSNBC-television-host, said the controversy was "part of a bigger narrative ... about Michelle Obama."

John Feehery, a Republican strategist, told POLITICO the first lady brought it on herself.

"I do think that taking very expensive trips without [the president] is not particularly good judgment, especially when the country is kinda going broke," Feehery said. "That's fair fodder."

Missing from the fray? Elected officials, who hardly uttered a peep about the overseas jaunt as it lingered in the news cycle for days.

Doug Heye, a spokesman for the Republican National Committee, said his press shop intentionally steered clear of attacking Obama during the Spain trip because her husband is the bigger target — for the time being, at least.

"We decided in our communications that it just wasn't a road we were comfortable going down," Heye told POLITICO. "We never offered a comment or put out a tweet [because] the president himself is such a wealth of opportunity."

Still, Heye added, if Michelle Obama goes on the campaign trail and says something interesting, "we might have more to say."

White House aides were quick to point out that the first lady's relationship with the GOP isn't as strained as her husband's may seem. While on vacation, she made time to call Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell to thank him for his support on the Child Nutrition Act, part of her pet project fighting childhood obesity, which passed last week.

Still, when criticism of Obama began to emerge, some Democrats couldn't help thinking of her Democratic predecessor, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Demonizing a high-profile, independent-minded first lady is out of the "same right-wing playbook" used when Clinton's husband, President Bill Clinton, was in the White House, said Jim Kennedy, a longtime Clinton aide.

"The right wing tends to falsely portray Democratic first ladies as avaricious, power hungry or coldhearted," said Kennedy. "And it makes things difficult because sometimes the mainstream media picks up on their attacks."

Howard Wolfson, communications director for Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign, said the recent round of attacks on Obama by GOP pundits is anything but a coincidence, just a few months before the midterm elections.

"We saw this during the presidential campaign, and now you're seeing the same kinds of tactics as we approach another campaign season," Wolfson said.