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First lady Michelle Obama has hit the ground running, attempting to balance being “mom-in-chief” with an ambitious political agenda. All eyes will be on her as she sets a new standard for Black women in the 21st Century.

By Justin Remus



Michelle Obama is very much a product of Black America. Unlike her biracial, multi-cultural husband, whose mother was White and whose father was from Kenya, she is, like many African-Americans, a descendant of slaves. Her father, Fraser Robinson, worked as a pump operator in a boiler room all his life for the city of Chicago, but both of his children received Ivy League educations. Now his daughter has become one of the most famous women

in the world.

It's been an incredible journey, not just for Mrs. Obama, but for all African-American women. She will redefine what it means to be a strong Black female and also reopen the feminist debate on what it means to be a professional woman—a very successful one, at that—while balancing the responsibilities of being a dedicated mother and wife. She will have a huge impact as a role model, activist, and trendsetter—mostly with fashion and perhaps also interior design. She has been

on record as saying her top priority is to raise her daughters, but her new life in the White House will be infinitely more complicated than that.

Michelle Obama has never been one to let the world come to her. She is proactively taking advantage of the enormous opportunities and resources at her disposal to influence our communities, advance charitable causes, destroy stereotypes, and educate mainstream society about Black culture overall. In contrast to her predecessor, Laura Bush, Mrs.



sary career adjustments in order to accommodate his early political career, although she was not happy about it. Neither was she thrilled when her husband announced his intention to run for president. “I, like most people, have been very cynical and reluctant about politics,” she told NPR’s Michele Norris. “There was a part of me that said, ‘Do we want to put ourselves out for a system that I am not sure about?’”

She eventually adapted to her husband’s high ambitions, even if it did not come easy. Last year, she took a leave of absence from her high-profile job to play a more active role in his campaign, but she would often fly home to Chicago at night so she could spend time with their daughters. She insisted that her husband be there for their kids’ important school events and facilitated cyber get-togethers that the family conducted through their MacBooks. To any and all observers, the Obamas have a rock-solid marriage that provides a much-needed counterpoint to the dearth of stable Black marriages that are publicly known. They’re playful with each other when interviewed together. She teases him, sometimes mercilessly, and gets away with it. They flirt and enjoy each other’s company.

Not surprisingly, President Obama, who was raised by two strong women, his mother and grandmother, signed the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act as his very first bill—a gender pay equity law. In her first post-inauguration comments, Michelle said that Ms. Ledbetter “knew unfairness when she saw it and was willing to do something about it because it was the right thing to do, plain and simple.” Shortly thereafter, the president signed a bill expanding the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) by \$32 billion, which will offer insurance to an additional four million children. Even if Michelle had no direct influence on Mr. Obama’s signing these two bills so early in his presidency, she definitely has her husband’s ear and keeps him honest and grounded in a way his aides cannot.

Traditionally, this is what first ladies do: keep the president level-headed about his goals and obstacles, but also lift his spirits when necessary. Michelle Obama is fiercely intelligent and unafraid to be blunt with her husband. She will be an invaluable resource for him, even when operating behind the scenes in the cocoon that is the White House.

Of course, Ms. Obama, who has had a highly successful career in both the public and private sectors, is certainly not the stay-at-home mom type. She has assembled a diverse team of high-powered advisers who are veterans of Washington politics. Her policy director, Jocelyn Frye, is general counsel at the National Partnership for Women and Families. Ms. Frye has advocated for more stringent enforcement of antidiscrimination laws and has expressed her displeasure with bias against minorities in the workplace. This should give some clue as to Mrs.

Obama’s agenda, which will be more far-reaching than the goals stated on her White House website: “supporting military families, helping working women balance career and family, and encouraging national service.”

She wants women to earn as much as men for doing the same job and is a proponent for the reform and preservation of public education. She has also made it clear that the first family will set an example for all Americans by using “affordable brands and products” during the recession. The fact that Mrs. Obama has recruited savvy and talented hired guns to advance her causes is a testament to her seriousness of purpose and activist nature. Nevertheless, she still tries to maintain the personal touch by signing her e-mails to supporters as simply “Michelle.”

Paul Schmitz, a friend of Mrs. Obama’s who runs a nonprofit called Public Allies,

told *The New York Times*, “Her experience is unique for a first lady. She understands the needs of low-income communities. She understands the needs of women. She has balanced raising a family with a career. She’ll think deeply about how to use her own bully pulpit. And I think that’s the challenge. You are now the most prominent woman in America. What do you do?”

Mrs. Obama has consulted with Rosalynn Carter, Nancy Reagan, Hillary Clinton, and Laura Bush on how they navigated their tenures as first lady. Even though her budding celebrity gives her tremendous advantages in promoting social issues, she will be learning on the fly. She will likely be criticized as well for her choices. If she focuses too much on, say, urban affairs, such as improving public schools (which affects the Black community disproportionately), she may catch some heat for being too parochial, but

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Obama will be more visible and involved in advocating social issues she cares about, but she won’t be involved in the president’s policy-making or sit in on cabinet meetings like Rosalynn Carter used to. She says she doesn’t like the “process stuff.” (She did, however, go to bat for the

president when the White House was trying to pass the stimulus bill, urging Democrats to approve it quickly.)

She never really sought this intense spotlight—first ladies rarely do. In his book *The Audacity of Hope*, Mr. Obama describes how his wife made the neces-





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that is nothing new. During the primary campaign, Mrs. Obama received stinging criticism when she said, “For the first time in my adult lifetime, I am really proud of my country, and not just because Barack has done well, but because I think people are hungry for change.” Conservative pundits vilified her for that remark, and it seems clear that, no matter what Ms. Obama does in her new capacity, this trend will probably not abate.

She is not afraid to speak her mind, and although she has learned to restrain herself in public, she still is a live wire. She is also likeable, honest, loyal, and genuinely free of any radical leanings whatsoever. But some women, not all of whom were feminists, took issue when she went out of her way to tell *Ebony* that

her primary goal (if Mr. Obama won the election) was to be “Mom-in-Chief.” The impression was that Mrs. Obama was elevating the role of a traditional mother above modern-day working women and their careers.

Her comments did have an antiquated feel about them, but they may not have represented her truthfully. Although Mrs. Obama is the quintessential soccer mom and fiercely protective of her two daughters, Maliah and Sasha, she is driven and determined to change the public discourse on many topics. She understands her unique position and has been explicit on several important issues affecting most of us today. She has been quoted as saying that money spent on the war in Iraq would be better spent on universal health

care, better childcare, and improved education. Still, she faces the conundrum that so many women face: How do you balance work and family in an America where both spouses have full-time jobs? How do you excel in your career while making time to be there for your kids when they need you most?

It’s a complex dilemma. Mrs. Obama’s mother was at home for much of her upbringing, so it’s not surprising that she identifies and sympathizes with stay-at-home moms. Of course, her mother’s influence didn’t prevent her from swiftly climbing the career ladder right after graduating from law school. She has worked as a corporate lawyer, assistant to the mayor of Chicago, an executive for a nonprofit organization, as well as Vice





President for Community and External Affairs for the University of Chicago Hospitals. Even though she has had to make career sacrifices to support her husband, many women are anxiously waiting to see how she will handle the work/family challenge while living in the White House. Luckily, she will have some help with this difficult task. Her mom, Marian Robinson, has moved into the White House, and her presence should ease the first lady's juggling of work and family. Millions of American women will be looking to her as an example and hoping that she remains true to herself.

No matter what she does while her husband is in office, there's no doubt that she'll look good doing it. Michelle has become a leading influence on American

fashion, drawing numerous comparisons to the late Jacqueline Kennedy. Robin Givhan, fashion editor of *The Washington Post*, addressed this during her paper's online discussion of Mrs. Obama's fashion sense: "Mrs. Kennedy represented the last time that people felt personal style was on display in the White House, and I actually think Michelle Obama is one of those rare public women who believe that style does matter."

It's not really known if Michelle uses Jackie Kennedy as a source of inspiration in choosing her wardrobe, but it's clear that she is a serious career woman who is unafraid to make bold choices with her personal style. Many women will identify with her adventurous fashion streak, which can be quirky at times. Mrs. Obama

has worn flats with cocktail dresses and had a black cardigan wrapped around her Narciso Rodriguez dress on election night. Maria Pinto, a Chicago-based designer who has designed clothes for her since 2004, said, "Her style is thought out, but it's not contrived or deliberate. To my knowledge, she doesn't have a stylist."

Ms. Obama's spokeswoman, Katie McCormick Lelyveld, insists that fashion is not a high priority for her, but Michelle nonetheless has the most distinctive style of any first lady in years. The fashion industry, not to mention the public, are watching her every move. When it became well known that she likes to shop online at J. Crew, it caused the company's website to have "intermittent delays"

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from being overloaded with traffic, according to creative director Jenna Lyons. In these lean times, fashion executives are desperately hoping that Mrs. Obama will inspire more women to shop.

"She's got an independent streak in her, and she radiates strength and Americana," Evelyn Gorman, a clothing retailer from Houston, Texas, told *Time* Magazine. "It's been a long time since we've had that. She's going to set the tone on a global scale." Tracy Reece, a New York City designer, also told the newsweekly, "Michelle Obama isn't bogged down by old rules, nor should she be. She proves you can dress powerfully and not wear a bunch of pantsuits."

The rise of Michelle Obama has also led to a redefinition of what it means to be Black and beautiful. The standard of Black beauty has traditionally harbored a more European bent, emphasizing lighter skin and fine facial features, a la Halle Berry or Beyoncé. As Whoopi Goldberg told *Newsweek*, "In society and the Black community, the lighter you are and the more European your features, the more you are desired. The darker you are makes you less than ideal. Plain and simple. And that messes with your mind something awful."

Michelle Obama changes all of this. When she appeared on a recent cover of *Vogue*, Mrs. Obama represented a much different version of female beauty, one that many found refreshing. "When I see Michelle Obama on the cover of magazines and on TV shows, I think, 'Wow, look at her and her brown skin,'" Charisse Hollands, a 30-year-old mail carrier from Inglewood, Calif., told *Newsweek*. "And I don't mean any disrespect to my sisters who aren't dark brown, but gee, it's nice to see a brown girl get some attention and be called beautiful by the world. That just doesn't happen a lot, and our little girls need to see that—my little girl needs to see that."

Whether it's redefining basic definitions of female beauty, deftly balancing motherhood with social activism, or push-

ing new boundaries of fashion, Michelle Obama has already had a huge impact on the country and the world. That will only intensify during the next four years. An activist, working professional, fashion icon, wife, mother, and daughter, she will inspire women around the globe. With the country lumbering forward, awkwardly

trying to find its feet again after the stumbles of the Bush era, she will make her mark on American history. She'll provide a voice for the most disadvantaged among us, because she has the platform, the courage, and the no-nonsense personality to pull it off. Besides, she knows that if she doesn't do it, nobody else will.

