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Is Michelle Obama the next Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush or Jacqueline Kennedy?



(Associated Press)

By Marlene Naanes

With former First Lady Hillary Clinton on the verge of being named the country's top diplomat, speculation turns to the incoming presidential spouse, Michelle Obama, and whether she too will follow suit in a high profile role.

It would seem natural for the 44-year-old Obama — a Harvard grad and a high-powered attorney — to be involved in her husband's policy discussions. However, Obama's self-proclaimed role as "mom-in-chief" and her willingness to leave behind her job as a top hospital executive during her husband's campaign, is leading some political experts to believe she will be a more traditional First Lady.

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“She will be concerned with the ceremonial activity, discreet political activity and a project,” said Myra Gutin, author of “The President’s Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century.” “She’s not going to be like Eleanor Roosevelt and she’s not going to be like Hillary Clinton.”

Still, other experts believe that after the first family is settled into the White House, it will only be a matter of time before Obama does what comes naturally to her and step into the limelight on important issues, just as Roosevelt did with civil rights and Clinton with healthcare. Experts note that while claiming not to be a wife with political ambitions, Obama fervently spent 20 months campaigning for her husband, speaking on the need to offer more support for military families and helping all parents struggling to support their children.

“With her achievement it will be hard for her not to be a strong First Lady,” said Dianne Bystrom, director of the Iowa State University Catt Center for Women and Politics. “I don’t see that she will resort to playing a behind-the-scenes role. I don’t think it is in her makeup and I don’t think its part of her marital role.”

She has high energy and the ability to multitask, said Debbie Walsh, director of Rutgers’ Center for American Women and Politics.

Many speculate that the country’s fascination with Obama’s sense of style may make her the next Jackie O, but experts said she unlikely sees herself as a fashionista and would not consciously play up that role.

However, as the country’s first black first lady, she will have a very significant place in the nation’s history.

“One of the most important roles she can play is really changing the way Americans view black women,” said Keli Goff, an author and political analyst. “Presenting a strong, attractive black woman who is not sexualized, who is actually going to become first lady is incredibly powerful. Who they are as a family is just as important as whatever issues they take on policy wise.”

Posted by Marlene Naanes on November 30, 2008 6:32 PM |