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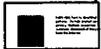
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January 6, 2012

Michelle Obama and the Evolution of a First Lady

By [JODI KANTOR](#)

Michelle Obama was privately fuming, not only at the president's team, but also at her husband.

In the days after the Democrats lost Edward Kennedy's Senate seat in January 2010, Barack Obama was even-keeled as usual in meetings, refusing to dwell on the failure or lash out at his staff. The first lady, however, could not fathom how the White House had allowed the crucial seat, needed to help pass the president's health care legislation and the rest of his agenda, to slip away, several current and former aides said.

To her, the loss was more evidence of what she had been saying for a long time: Mr. Obama's advisers were too insular and not strategic enough. She cherished the idea of her husband as a transformational figure, but thanks in part to the health care deals the administration had cut, many voters were beginning to view him as an ordinary politician.

The first lady never confronted the advisers directly — that was not her way — but they found out about her displeasure from the president. "She feels as if our rudder isn't set right," Mr. Obama confided, according to aides.

Rahm Emanuel, then chief of staff, repeated the first lady's criticisms to colleagues with indignation, according to three of them. Mr. Emanuel, in a brief interview, denied that he had grown frustrated with Mrs. Obama, but other advisers described a grim situation: a president whose agenda had hit the rocks, a first lady who disapproved of the turn the White House had taken, and a chief of staff who chafed against her influence.

The Michelle Obama of January 2012 is an expert motivator and charmer, a champion of safe causes like helping military families and ending childhood obesity, an increasingly canny political player eager to pour her popularity into her husband's re-election campaign. But interviews with more than 30 current and former aides, as well as some of the first couple's closest friends, conducted for "The Obamas," a new book, show that she has been an unrecognized force in her husband's administration and that her story has been one first of struggle, then turnaround and greater fulfillment.

Mrs. Obama is a supportive but often anxious spouse, suspicious of conventional political thinking, a groundbreaking figure who has acutely felt the pressures and possibilities of being the first African-American in her position and a first lady who has worked to make her role more meaningful.

Initially, she had considered postponing her move to the White House for months; after arriving, she bristled at its confinements and obligations — unable to walk her dog without risking being photographed, and monitored by her husband's aides for everything from how she decorated the family's private quarters to whether she took makeup artists on overseas trips.

New to the ways of Washington but impassioned about what her husband had been elected to do, she saw herself as a guardian of values. She was sometimes harder on her husband's team than he was, eventually urging him to replace them, and the tensions grew so severe that one top adviser erupted in a meeting in 2010, cursing the absent first lady. "She has very much got his back," said David Axelrod, Mr. Obama's longtime strategist, in an interview. "When she thinks things have been mishandled or when things are off the track," he continued, "she'll raise it, because she's hugely

invested in him and has a sense of how hard he's working, and wants to make sure everybody is doing their work properly."

Mrs. Obama's difficulties illuminate some of the president's central challenges in the White House, including how the Obamas' freshness to political life, a selling point in 2008, became a liability in office. Her worries about his staff point to a chief executive with little management experience who clung to an inner circle less united than it appeared. (Mr. Emanuel's relationship with the president grew so strained that the chief of staff secretly offered to resign in early 2010; Robert Gibbs, the White House press secretary, had a tense relationship with Mrs. Obama and with Valerie Jarrett, another adviser). She shared the president's ambivalence about political chores and the back-patting and schmoozing that can help get things done in Washington.

Like many of the president's supporters, Mrs. Obama was anxious about the gap between her vision of her husband's presidency and the reality of what he could deliver. Her strains with the advisers were part of a continuing debate over what sort of president Mr. Obama should be, with Mrs. Obama reinforcing his instincts for ambitious but unpopular initiatives like the overhaul of health care and immigration laws, casting herself as a foil to aides more intent on preserving congressional seats and poll numbers.

"She does think there are worse things than losing an election," Susan S. Sher, the first lady's former chief of staff, said shortly after the 2010 midterm elections. "Being true to yourself, for her, is definitely more important." Back then, Mrs. Obama sometimes talked about what would happen if her husband lost in 2012. "I know we'll be fine," she told Ms. Sher.

Deep Frustrations

As Michelle Obama realized over the summer and fall of 2008 that she was likely to become first lady, she asked a question that probably would have surprised outsiders: could she and her children delay moving to the White House? Perhaps it was better, she told aides and friends, to remain in Chicago until the end of the school year, giving her children more time to adjust, rather than coming right at the inauguration. Her notion, though short-lived, was telling: she didn't understand or care what sort of message it would send to a public enthralled by the new first family, and she had trepidations about life in the spotlight, let alone the prospect of residing in a monument-museum-office-military compound-terrorist target-home.

She ultimately decided to go to Washington immediately, not because of the obligations of office, but because of "wanting her family to be together," Ms. Jarrett said.

Even as Mrs. Obama dazzled Americans with her warmth, glamour and hospitality early in the presidency, she was also deeply frustrated and insecure about her place in the White House, said aides who spoke on the condition of anonymity, out of concern about discussing internal strife.

A Harvard-trained lawyer, she had given up her career for what initially seemed to her a shapeless post, and she tried to wriggle out of some ceremonial events that she saw as not having much purpose, including the annual luncheon for congressional spouses hosted by the first lady since 1912. She tried to limit her public exposure, saying she would work only two days a week; inside the White House, the difficulty of getting Mrs. Obama to agree to doing an event became a running joke.

The confinement of the White House was also a shock; suddenly she was cut off from her old life and rituals, and she hesitated even to take her daughters to school or some soccer games for fear of causing a fuss. The family had intended to return to Chicago frequently, but their first attempt was so complicated — their brick-front home was shrouded in black curtains to foil snipers, and because they couldn't just buy groceries anymore, Navy stewards fed them in their own home — they seldom returned. While the president found Camp David artificial and cut off, the first lady loved it because she could roam free of prying photographers.

The first couple declined to be interviewed.

"I don't think any of us contemplated how isolating this whole experience would be," Dr. Eric Whitaker, a close friend from Chicago, said in an interview. "I don't think this is a fun part about being the first family for any of them."

Mrs. Obama often found herself caught in an internal debate about how the Obamas should look and live, travel and entertain. As the first African-American first lady, she wanted everything to be flawless and sophisticated; she felt "everyone was waiting for a black woman to make a mistake," a former aide said.

But her husband's advisers — in particular, Mr. Gibbs — were worried that the White House might appear oblivious to public anger about joblessness, banker bailouts and bonuses. The result was constant, anxious give-and-take between the East and West Wings about vacations, décor, entertainment, even matters as small as whether to announce the hiring of a new florist.

"We all have watched what happens when people get caricatured," Mr. Gibbs said in an interview, explaining why he policed such personal matters. With a mistake like John Edwards' \$400 haircut in 2007, "there's no way to correct that." Other aides said there was a reason Mr. Gibbs became the main enforcer of the rules of political life: because Mr. Obama, all too aware that his wife never wanted that life, would not.

For all of the first lady's newness, she was quick to identify problems. From the start she worried that the White House was not presenting a clear, compelling story of the president's actions to the public, a former aide said. She also told her own advisers that she wanted a more central role in communicating the administration's message; the West Wing failed to consider how she fit in with her husband's broader narrative, she protested.

She particularly wanted to help sell the health care overhaul in spring 2009. "Figure out how to use me effectively," she told her aides, "this is my priority." But West Wing advisers, recalling the public resentment of Hillary Rodham Clinton's involvement in health care as first lady, mostly declined her offer.

Mr. Emanuel, who told colleagues that his battles as a staffer with Mrs. Clinton back then had taught him to steer clear of first ladies, mostly avoided Mrs. Obama. The tense relationship between the East and West Wings remained a muted matter, but the strains eventually became deep enough that the first lady's team held a retreat in the winter of 2010 to discuss the problem. Ms. Jarrett, a senior adviser to the president, served as an envoy and tried to smooth relations. But Ms. Jarrett's mix of roles — she had her own West Wing portfolio, she acted as Michelle Obama's advocate, and she was so close to the Obamas that she vacationed with them — created its own tensions.

That summer, in exchange for a key vote on an energy bill, Mr. Emanuel, without asking the first lady's permission, promised Allen Boyd, a Florida congressman, that she would appear at an event. Annoyed, she attended the event, but registered her broader disapproval by refusing to commit to campaigning for the midterms. She eventually withheld agreement for nearly a year, according to former East and West Wing advisers. Instead she focused on an agenda of her own.

Her reluctance to campaign left Mr. Emanuel incredulous, according to two aides: The elections were already looking like a potential bloodbath, and the White House was going to face them without the president's popular spouse?

Stuck on the Sidelines

Michelle Obama never wanted to be the kind of first lady who interfered with West Wing business, she told her aides. It was her husband's administration, not hers, she sometimes said. She had little appetite or expertise for policy detail, and she knew the history of first ladies — like Nancy Reagan and Mrs. Clinton — who had been deemed meddlers, unelected figures who wielded unearned power.

And yet as the administration hit obstacle after obstacle in 2010 — Scott Brown's victory in Massachusetts, a health care law that squeaked through Congress yet remained unpopular, the Gulf oil spill and the approach of the midterm elections — Mrs. Obama became increasingly concerned.

Later Mr. Emanuel would glide into the Chicago mayor's office, partly on the basis of his strong ties to Mr. Obama, but by a year into the administration, his relationship with the president had grown strained. While he relied heavily on Mr. Emanuel, especially in dealing with Congress, Mr. Obama told advisers that he had concerns about his chief of staff's overall management and planning skills, along with his outbursts toward staff members. Mr. Emanuel openly said that he thought the health care overhaul had been a bad idea, and after accounts of his views began to surface in the news media in early 2010, he went into the Oval Office and offered his resignation to Mr. Obama, according to several colleagues.

The chief of staff "understood that the stories were an embarrassment and felt like he owed it to him to offer his resignation," Mr. Axelrod said. The president declined to accept it, telling Mr. Emanuel that his punishment was to stay and push through the health care measure, according to Mr. Axelrod and others. Mr. Emanuel declined to comment on the matter.

But that spring, Mrs. Obama made it clear that she thought her husband needed a new team, according to her aides. When the president decided to deliver a lofty speech about overhauling immigration laws in June 2010, even though there was no legislation on the table and the effort could hurt vulnerable Democrats, Mr. Emanuel objected. Aides did not produce the speech he wanted and the president stayed up much of the night rewriting — but the address drew a flat reception. Mr. Obama was irritated, two advisers said, and told Ms. Jarrett to keep an eye on other top staff members to make sure that they delivered what he wanted.

Several West Wing aides said they had heard secondhand that Mrs. Obama was angry about the incident. Later, they said they wondered: was the president using his wife to convey what he felt?

In September 2010, after a summer of infighting throughout the West Wing, things finally exploded.

Early on Sept. 16, Robert Gibbs was scanning the news when a story stopped him short: according to a new French book, Michelle Obama had told Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, the French first lady, that living in the White House was "hell." It was a potential disaster — the equivalent of the \$400 haircut, Mr. Gibbs feared, coming just weeks before election day and on the heels of a vacation in Spain that had drawn accusations of lavish spending.

Mr. Gibbs asked her aides to find out if she had said anything even close (no, the answer came back), and then fought the story back for hours, having the book translated and convincing the Élysée Palace to issue a denial. By noon the potential crisis had been averted.

But at Mr. Emanuel's 7:30 a.m. staff meeting the next day, Ms. Jarrett announced that the first lady had concerns about the White House's response to the book, according to several people present. All eyes turned to Mr. Gibbs, who started to steam.

"Don't go there, Robert, don't do it," Mr. Emanuel warned.

"That's not right, I've been killing myself on this, where's this coming from?" Mr. Gibbs yelled, adding expletives. He interrogated Ms. Jarrett, whose calm only seemed to frustrate him more. The two went back and forth, Ms. Jarrett unruffled, Mr. Gibbs shaking with rage. Finally, several staff members said, Mr. Gibbs cursed the first lady — colleagues stared down at the table, shocked — and stormed out.

Mr. Gibbs later acknowledged the outburst but said he had misdirected his rage and accused Ms. Jarrett of making up the complaint. After the book incident, he "stopped taking her at all seriously as an adviser to the president," Mr. Gibbs said, adding, "Her viewpoint in advising the president is that she has to be up and the rest of the White House has to be down." Ms. Jarrett declined to discuss the incident; two East Wing aides said she had misspoken, and that Mrs. Obama had not made any criticism.

Colleagues defended both parties. Mr. Gibbs had devoted years to the Obama cause, some said. Ms. Jarrett was trustworthy, said others, including Peter M. Rouse, another senior adviser. The blowup proved not only the fractures in the once-unified Obama team, but just how complicated the nexus between the first couple and staff members in the White House had become.

Forging a New Role

By then, Michelle Obama's trajectory in the White House was changing. She was mastering and subtly redefining the role that had once seemed formless to her, and becoming more acclimated to her new life.

Sometimes her work seemed like an answer, in miniature, to what was going wrong with the presidency. If her husband's health care law was unpopular and at risk of being reversed, she would throw herself into her campaign on nutrition and exercise, which had similar end goals — improving health, lowering costs. If her husband wasn't connecting with audiences, she would win them over with vibrant speeches.

Her popularity, combined with her husband's eroding support, gave her more leverage than she had early in the administration. An Oval Office meeting a few weeks before the 2010 midterms captured her changing position.

The location was the president's domain, but the meeting was held to appease the first lady, who was finally agreeing to campaign for the midterm elections. One by one, members of the political team came before the Obamas, laying out arguments, details, statistics about how the first lady could help capture votes. In an interview the year before, the first couple had rejected the idea that they were using their marriage for political gain. (Most photos of them are "somebody else's images," the first lady had said.) Now they absorbed polling data that showed that Democratic voters loved seeing them together, according to several participants at the meeting.

"This is a great presentation," the president said with an I-never-get-this-treatment grin: aides were now doing things on his wife's terms, with planning and precision.

Still, Mrs. Obama agreed to only eight campaign stops, fewer than the political team had wanted. "She basically agreed to do nothing," one aide said.

Now that her husband faces a tough re-election fight, that tentativeness has vanished: She is all in, she has told aides. If Mrs. Obama has sometimes been an internal critic, she is also her husband's most determined advocate. Though she still avoids detailed policy or strategy discussions, she now has the role she sought in amplifying his message, speaking alongside him at Fort Bragg, N.C., about the end of the Iraq war, spotlighting her veteran hiring initiatives to push his stalled jobs bills, even sharing his weekly radio address. "To me, she seems more content than I've seen her throughout this process since he's been running for president, which is a very good thing," Mr. Axelrod said.

The worse things got for her husband in 2011, the more she rallied to his side, buoying him personally and politically. In August, after the debt ceiling negotiations in Washington reached their painful conclusion, Mrs. Obama gave a party for his 50th birthday, warning guests not to leave early and delivering a stemwinder of a toast in praise of her husband.

As the sun faded, the 150 guests — friends, celebrities, officials — sat on the South Lawn, listening to the first lady describe her version of Barack Obama: a tireless, upright leader who rose above Washington games, killed the world's most wanted terrorist and still managed to coach his daughter Sasha's basketball team. The president, looking embarrassed, tried to cut her off, several guests said, but she told him he had to sit and listen.

She also thanked him for putting up with how hard she had been on him. At that line, a few of the advisers glanced at each other in recognition.

This article was adapted from "The Obamas," by Jodi Kantor, which will be published Tuesday by Little, Brown & Company.