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Michelle Obama not first lady to face scrutiny

Eleanor Roosevelt paved way for presidents' wives

By [Kate Thayer](#), Chicago Tribune reporter

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"The Obamas," a book on America's first family released last week, reported tensions between Michelle Obama and her husband's presidential staff and rekindled old questions on the role of a first lady.

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In a position with no paycheck and no clear description, it has fallen to each woman with that title to determine how to spend her time in the White House. Some have taken a more active approach than others, historians say. Of late, first ladies have publicly identified clear missions to pursue during their four (or more) years at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

The current first lady has come out against childhood obesity, for which she's danced The Dougie and The Running Man on TV, and performed jumping jacks on the White House lawn.

She is also scheduled to appear Monday on an episode of Nickelodeon's "iCarly" to promote another signature issue -- support of military families. Perhaps some of the most famous first lady causes include Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign against drugs, Lady Bird Johnson's quest for highway beautification and the promotion of reading and literacy by both Laura and Barbara Bush.

Some earlier first ladies also had philanthropic endeavors, like Mary Todd Lincoln volunteering in hospitals during the Civil War, Ellen Wilson speaking out about impoverished neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., and Jackie Kennedy launching a renovation of the White House. But the first to clearly identify her own agenda, historian Stacy Cordery says, was Eleanor Roosevelt.

She had several political causes, according to Cordery, a history professor at Monmouth College in western Illinois who has written about President Franklin Roosevelt's wife. Roosevelt fought for women's rights, the poor and racial equality -- for which she was criticized -- during her husband's long tenure, Cordery said. For instance, to support racial equality, Roosevelt resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution when the group would not allow a black opera singer to perform at one of its venues, Cordery said.

"She had opinions. Any time a first lady has been outspoken, she's been controversial," said Ruth Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

But, on the other side, Mandel said, if a first lady in these media-centric times chose to be "voiceless," she'd surely be criticized.

Further, Mandel said the notion of a first lady who would remain out of the spotlight and not voice her opinions is "unrealistic."

"I think it (would be) a diminishing of the reality of life these days," she said. "The first family is a reflection of society. To assume that (the first lady) doesn't have some kind of opinion or influence that (her husband) would like to take advantage of is unrealistic and, really, kind of offensive. "A limp, kind of a dishrag is not an appropriate partner for a 21st century president."

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