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Election 2008

## Is Michelle Obama an Asset or Liability?

by Karen Grigsby Bates

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Frederick M. Brown

Sen. Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle, arrive at the NAACP Image Awards in Los Angeles in March 2005. "Let me tell you something: 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," she once said. Getty Images



Do you see Michelle Obama as an asset or a liability to her husband's campaign? Do you think that America is a ready for an African-American first lady? Click here, pull down "Day to Day" and send us

Day to Day, March 6, 2008 · Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama's wife, Michelle Obama, has been lauded as "Barack's Rock," but she's also been deemed a potential liability to his campaign. She speaks her mind, even when her opinions may be controversial.

Karen Grigsby Bates joins a group of black women in the Leimert Park neighborhood of Los Angeles to see how the notion of a black first lady would play with them.

### Refreshingly Honest or Too Direct?

Marcy DeVeaux, an assistant professor at California State University, Northridge, admits she was put off at the beginning of the campaign when Obama discussed her husband's morning breath and snoring.

"We know too much. Those are things that need to be kept at home!" she says.

But Nanci Isaacs, who is married and has two young daughters, says Obama is just being real about the unglamorous parts of married life.

"I think it's kind of cute in a way, and keeps things on the level."

They all agree that Michelle Obama is a far different potential presidential spouse than what America is used to.

"Michelle is very powerful, a highly educated working mother. I think that like a lot of us working across the nation, she doesn't really have a lot of patience, or maybe a lot of time, for the flowery conversation that it seems like a lot of people need," says Kim Morris, mother of a 4-year-old.

### Her Looks: Regal or Intimidating?

In general, the women say they appreciate Obama's personality, even if her blunt manner, unusual height and — something that isn't often discussed outside the black community — hue can be daunting.

"Acting the same way she acts now, speaking the same way she speaks now, I think it would be easier to take for some people if she looked a different way," says writer and graduate student Sharon Johnson.

In a society that still tends to value light skin over dark and straight hair over kinky, Obama, with her deep brown skin and obviously straightened hair, attracts attention and maybe a little apprehension.

"I think it's a really powerful combination when you are obviously and decidedly African-American and intelligent and speaking on behalf of everyone — not just the ones who benefited from things you benefited from, but the ones who haven't. It's a scary conversation," Johnson says.

"I definitely think she'd be perceived differently if she were a lighter tone, but I also think she'd be perceived differently if she were smaller — a petite woman," says Isaacs.

### **What Does Barack Obama's Wife Reveal About Him?**

Morris says she loves that Obama didn't choose the kind of pale trophy wife many prominent black men do.

"You don't get the sense that he was threatened in any way, him personally or his ability to be elected ... and I think that speaks volumes about him and his passion and love for her as she is," she says.

### **How to Get By in Washington**

If the Obama campaign prevails and the Obamas become the first black first family, DeVaux says that Michelle Obama should prepare to do one important thing:

"She should take her support network — her mother, her aunties, all those women who made her who she is — take all of those women to Washington with her."

But first Obama would have to get to the White House, and November is a long way away.