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There's Something About Michelle

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By the time Michelle Obama gave her husband the fist-bump heard around the world before his nomination speech, we already knew that this woman would be a different kind of First Lady -- one that would bring new dimension to that curiously antiquated term.

Since she burst on to the national consciousness, her trajectory remains in full ascent. She lit up the capitols of Europe in ways unmatched by any First Lady before her -- even Jackie Kennedy.

One on level, the reason for the reaction is obvious.

This is one tough, smart, attractive engaging woman who is more than up to meeting the high-stakes but loosely-defined demands of a position where the Goldilocks chorus will always find too much or too little -- seldom just right.

But it's more than that.

In ways that may be hard to describe, a nation and the world are responding to her self-described role as "mother-in-chief" -- a description that in less authentic hands might have all the resonance of Mitt Romney complimenting African-American kids on their "bling bling."

As the world financial structure shudders and sways, we have responded to the comfort of her calm, clear and unapologetic certainty about who she is. Perhaps she reminds us that there is no such thing as monsters (Madoff being a discussion for another time) and there is nothing hiding under the bed.

She is showing that the very qualities that make a great mother -- consistency, clarity, humor, wisdom, patience, connection, confidence and determination and the like -- also populate the job description of a great leader.

To paraphrase Patrick Henry: If this be motherhood, make the most of it

Some of that, as I've argued here before, is packaging. A woman who can hold her own in any board room seems to have mastered the talking points about the joys of running a home and raising kids.

But there is real substance inside the package.

In ways that have become so rare in any sphere of leadership these days, she allows us to see the real person, and makes us believe that what we see is the truth. Part of that truth is her recognition that, with a white house staff at her disposal and her live-in mother providing domestic bench-strength, she has a support network unimaginable to most women.

Another woman in another time might have encountered the kind of blow back from the arbiters of expectation that Hillary Clinton encountered when she said she had no intention of staying home and baking cookies. The concern this time, from some feminist quarters: Obama is wasting her Princeton and Harvard Law degrees, well, baking cookies.

As Geraldine Brooks wrote in an the October 2008 edition of *More* magazine, Michelle Obama's story is a "a depressingly retrograde narrative of stifling gender roles and frustrating tradeoffs."

Watching her move nimbly from the halls of state to the halls of grade schools as she charmed her way across Europe, I see nothing depressing, nothing stifling. Whatever tradeoffs she has made appear quite comfortable, as she is deftly balancing home and office -- no small trick when your office is in the White House and the world is grading your every syllable.

While two little girls run the White House grounds, this force of intellect, looks and personality will very happily employ those sculpted arms to carry a cookie tray. But at the same time, it is clear that the country's "mom-in-chief" can handle the responsibilities of motherhood while standing square in the klieg lights of her position.

She is an object lesson in the importance and power of mothers, a reminder that their work is empowering, comforting, instructive and joyous. We like that. And more than any time in recent memory, we need it.