



words *matter*

By Caryn Sullivan

## TRADE LATITUDE FOR A PAYCHECK? BAD IDEA

St. Paul Pioneer Press  
January 23, 2009

All around the world, eyes focused on the Capitol steps Tuesday as our 43rd president relinquished power, authority and responsibility to our 44th. I was intrigued by what the historic moment meant for the wives who stood beside them. They belong to an elite group of women who, neither hired nor elected, are honored to serve at the highest level of our government with relative autonomy.

They have an enviable opportunity to use a unique platform to advance important causes. With the incessant dribble about their choice of pets, dresses, schools and homes, it is easy to overlook the fact that first ladies are positioned to make meaningful contributions in the United States and beyond — and do so.

Apparently, some women see the opportunity differently. Last month, the Washington Post featured an article by attorney Lauren Stiller Rikleen, executive director of the Bowditch Institute for Women's Success, in which she submitted, "Surely the person in one of the most visible roles on the planet deserves a job description, proper title and salary" to accompany what is essentially a job. Acknowledging that Michelle Obama's "impeccable credentials will not be diminished by her decision to discontinue her paid work outside the home," she concluded, "It is only fair that the role of first lady be formally recognized for the demanding position that it is. Then we can stop the false argument about whether Obama has 'opted out' of the workplace, knowing that she is about to begin the hardest job she will ever hold."

**Seriously?** Would a job description and paycheck allay Rikleen's concerns? Are they concerns held by the women who assume the position or by others who struggle with the concept of a professional woman serving in a traditional, supportive role while her husband earns the paycheck and accolades? For I see no compelling reason why Obama (or any first lady) would want to be constrained by a job description when she can set her own agenda and utilize her platform as she chooses.

With both staff and a budget to support her, it is difficult to imagine the first lady would prefer a job description to the freedom to decide if and when she will travel the world, help the needy, meet fascinating people of all walks of life as well as serve gourmet meals on precious dinnerware.

The absence of a job description or salary did not seem to bother the highly popular Laura Bush, who unobtrusively dedicated her time and talent to a variety of causes in the United States and abroad. She visited every state in our nation as well as more than 75 countries, to address significant issues such as literacy, education, heart disease, AIDS, breast cancer, malaria, Afghani women's rights and more. Rikleen may be correct that the first lady has not been fairly recognized for her contributions, for her work was largely overlooked by a press that was more focused on criticizing her husband than sharing news of her good deeds.

Peeling back the curtain, I suspect the real issue for some women is that Obama abandoned her post as a role model for working mothers to focus on her school-age daughters' life-changing move to Pennsylvania Avenue. In an ironic twist, by leaving her job, Obama has shifted from being a role model for "working mothers" to one for others who also elected to be "mom-in-chief."

Like many who have made the often-difficult choice, Obama may conclude that receiving a paycheck is just one of many ways for a woman to feel validated. Moreover, with most expenses paid by taxpayers — room, board, transportation, fitness, travel, retirement, health insurance and more — she may also conclude that a paycheck is unessential.

**Whether she chooses** to continue to support military families or help working women to better juggle career and family obligations, Obama now has a platform of her own on which to make a lasting impact. When the Obamas' tenure ends and they return to the Capitol steps for the next transfer of power, other opportunities surely will await her, as they have her predecessors. Laura Bush and Hillary Rodham Clinton negotiated lucrative book deals to recount their experiences in Washington. In addition, while Clinton's bid for the presidency failed, she landed another coveted role as secretary of state. So, to those who are wringing their hands over Michelle Obama's choice, I say, do not despair. She'll get her due.

Caryn Sullivan, of Mendota Heights, is a writer ([www.carynsullivanscribe.com](http://www.carynsullivanscribe.com)) whose columns appear frequently on these pages. Her e-mail address is [carynsullivan@comcast.net](mailto:carynsullivan@comcast.net).