

A NEW BEGINNING – January 21, 2009

Opening Day

The Twenty-fifth Session of the Legislature will begin on Wednesday, January 21, 2009. Opening Day is marked by a public ceremony followed by festivities welcoming residents the public to participate in the lawmaking process. This year I plan to introduce several corrections bills to enhance the ability of the Department of Public Safety to monitor non-violent offenders in more cost-effective ways to protect community safety while reducing the budget, as well as to increase rehabilitative and re-integration efforts so that when prisoners have completed their sentences they are better able to live a productive life on the outside. The economy, sustainability, and energy are likely to rise to the top of priorities this Session. I will also be introducing legislation to help our economy through bills that promote small business; double the fuel efficiency of new cars sold in the future, and reduce the energy use of new appliances to help our consumers keep their utility costs down.

The Next First Lady

Should the First Lady be allowed to hold an outside job to maintain family income or should she be paid for performing her functions as hostess of the White House? That's the thought-provoking question I saw recently on CNN.

The question arises because Michele Obama will be another First Lady to have had her own career prior to occupying the White House. The first, of course, was Hillary Rodham, better known as Hillary Clinton.

A native Chicagoan, Hillary Rodham is a prominent attorney in her own right, being twice named as one of 100 most influential lawyers in America before her husband became a household name. She had been a director of Wal-Mart and several other corporations. Her concern for child welfare expressed itself in tireless effort given to the many organizations she served. That top lawyer Hillary Rodham became traditional First Lady Hillary Clinton on the steps of the White House caused small controversy, because her independent status was something new in politics. She, of course, gave up her career and performed all of the social duties that customarily fall to the wife of the president. As the primary salary earner of her family throughout most of the Clinton's marriage, though, she also gave up her income for eight years.

Fellow Chicagoan Michele Obama, like Hillary Clinton, is the primary breadwinner of her family. While the Clintons graduated from Yale Law School, the Obamas went to law school at Harvard. The Obamas, as the Clintons did before them, will be entering the White House in their 40s. If Michele gives up her post as a health care executive, the Obama family will be giving up the comfortable income she earned.

Rosalynn Carter did the accounting for the family peanut business and gave it up when Jimmy Carter became Governor of Georgia. Nancy Reagan was an actress under the name Nancy Davis (her real name is Anne Robbins). Laura Bush was a teacher and librarian. Pat Nixon and Barbara Bush were traditional political spouses.

The First Lady's social duties are tremendous and customarily done without financial remuneration. She assists the President in receiving foreign dignitaries, industry and government leaders, and other visitors, as well as hosting and attending numerous events. As informal diplomats, they represent the U.S. abroad. Pat Nixon visited roughly 80 countries, and was the first to enter a combat zone. Hillary Clinton's many travels and meetings with heads of state gave her the comfort and familiarity that will serve her well as our next Secretary of State. All of these engagements create a demanding schedule for the First Lady.

When not attending to hostess responsibilities, the First Lady traditionally devoted time to charitable causes, using her high profile to focus attention on issues most important to her. Hillary Clinton put forth a proposed health care plan for the nation. Both Laura Bush and Barbara Bush advocated for literacy. Pat Nixon promoted volunteerism and other causes, and acquired more than 600 pieces of historic art and furnishings for the White House, more than any other administration. Betty Ford – in clear contrast to later Second Lady Marilyn Quayle – was an outspoken advocate of women's rights. Ford supported the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, lobbied state legislatures to ratify it, and took on opponents of the amendment. To the great dismay of the Republican Party, Ford was an activist for the legalization of abortion. Ford's active political role in securing these women's rights prompted TIME magazine to call her the country's "Fighting First Lady" and name her Woman of the Year.

Women who marry politicians are aware of the extra demands, compromises required, and sacrifice of a private, "normal" life required of the spouse of a public official. The role of First Lady is demanding, no doubt, but as a country, we have up to now expected these duties to be performed without a paycheck. Yes, the President is paid an annual salary for being the leader of the free world, but even for the presidency, we have customarily viewed politics as a career based on commitment to public service, where the privilege of setting and directing policy, not money, is the primary reward.

Being the First Lady is a distinguishing honor shared by only 43 other women in our nation's history. First Ladies have the privileges of being in the midst of history in the making, and through advising her husband, of having some influence over the course of events and policy affecting our country and the world around us. Her ability to advocate for causes and to meet world and domestic leaders, as well as the many opportunities opened up to her, her husband and family, have all been customarily considered to be the quid pro quo for the social responsibilities that she performs.

Is the great privilege of enjoying the unique experience of being the official occupant of the White House and all that comes with it, sufficient compensation for the duties of the First Lady, or must there be also a paycheck as well? The question CNN posed about the First Lady is food for thought.

Just by way of comparison, we can look at other countries. German Chancellor Angela Merkel's husband continued to work as a chemistry professor. Bernadette Chirac, wife of former French President Jacques Chirac, was an elected official in their home district. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's wife Laureen Teskey was a graphic artist and owned her own business before her husband became leader of the Conservative Party. They met at a political assembly. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's wife Sarah Macauley owned her own public relations firm when they met at a political event. After they married (he was then Chancellor of the Exchequer), she changed her name but continued to work until she became pregnant with their first child. She has played a traditional background role since then.

Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's wife Therese Rein is the first Australian PM's wife to continue to have a job after her husband became PM. Rein in 1988 founded an international employment services agency that by 2005 employed 1300 people in 66 offices in Australia, Britain, France and Germany. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's wife Cherie Booth was and is still the only spouse to continue her career after her husband became leader of the country. Like Hillary Clinton, she is a prominent attorney in her own right, her specialty being human rights. She founded the law firm Matrix. Like Bernadette Chirac, Booth shares her husband's interest in politics and once ran for office herself around the same time her husband was first elected.

Jill Biden is an instructor at Delaware Technical and Community College. Traditionally, vice presidential wives have also given up their careers when their husbands were sworn in to office. Lynne Cheney, a possible 2000 Republican Vice Presidential candidate (she lost out to her husband who was the head of the nominating committee for President Bush and selected himself as Bush's running mate) gave up her \$120,000 a year post as a director for Lockheed Corporation. Happy Rockefeller stopped working for Gov. Rockefeller (who became Vice President) shortly before she married him.

Here she is, introducing the late Princess Margaret to a gay cabinet minister and his partner. "Have you met Chris Smith, our Culture Secretary, Ma'am?" I asked. She peered at him. 'And this is his partner,' I continued. 'Partner for what?' I took a breath. 'Sex, Ma'am.'"

One well-known story goes like this. The CEO of a corporation sued by the State of Arkansas shopped Arkansas's most respected lawyers to defend his company, and came across the name "Hillary Rodham." He couldn't tell whether the attorney was a male or female and called. He discussed his case then asked if she'd have any conflicts representing his business. She told him, "Well, I am married to the Governor...."