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For Better or Worse, Politics Is Show Business

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In 2012, political spouses are a big money shot in the high-stakes show business that constitutes presidential politics. Bigger than vice presidential candidates, they're second only to the contenders in the electric thrill they generate in throngs of thousands. So there's no choice for Michelle Obama, nor for Ann Romney, but to play their best supporting spouse role on the national stage at party conventions. For better or worse, this is how things stand.

There's no choice for spouses anymore but to play their best supporting role on the national stage at party conventions.

Of course, political wives are not expected to be honest brokers; they are more like character witnesses. Remember the days when men were presumed to be strong and silent? Culturally, we still rely on wives to warm up the men in the room and to illuminate their other halves. In fact, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney are both cool characters who benefit from this old-fashioned art.

Tuesday night was showtime for Mrs. Obama: the speech to the party faithful. The Ivy Leaguer first lady departed from her meek 2008 script featuring her as sister, daughter, mother, wife. More polished in the public eye, she gave a barnstormer of a speech, celebrating the couple's humble origins, their shared work ethic and the American dream. Still no word on her own pursuits at Princeton, Harvard or in Chicago.

More than ever before, Mrs. Obama hit high historical notes, noting women were dragged to jail in the suffrage movement. She also scored a subtle political point or two, saying, "the truth matters," and referring to the president's recent conversion to gay marriage equality.

In a transparent effort to humanize the opaque Barack Obama, she launched into a love fest that seemed like a response to Mrs. Romney's saccharine words about loving her husband. She did not claim any new causes. Yet she declared that her main role remains "Mom-in-Chief." The line played well, but frankly, it's thin gruel as a historical legacy.

Laura Bush, when she accepted her George W. Bush's proposal and married into his political dynasty, made him promise she would never have to give a speech. Now that seems quaint. Mrs. Bush proves the arc for political spouses has changed over the years; she is now a polished speech giver and perhaps her husband's best political asset.

For the American electorate, versed in character, nuance and backstory, it's just not enough for wives to wave and look pretty anymore.

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