

In praise of Melania

I don't make a habit of dreaming about other men's wives, but I had a pip the other night. It seems that my sleep brain told me that Melania Trump was shortchanged during her time as America's First Lady and that she should have gotten the whole nation's respect and thanks for keeping 'The Donald' on the straight and narrow and for conducting herself with style, elegance, grace and sophistication. I should add that Melania wasn't the only character that wandered in and out of my somnolence. She was joined by Michelle Obama, Laura Bush, Hillary Clinton, Barbara Bush, Nancy Reagan, Roslyn Carter, Betty Ford, Ladybird Johnson, Jackie Kennedy, Mamie Eisenhower, Bess Truman and Eleanor Roosevelt. In short, it was une grande réunion of truly historic proportions. Something for the record books I should say.

Melania appeared before me as the Mistress of Ceremonies of a lunch at which she spoke to the group of former FLs as if she were the leader of this august body of truly remarkable women. She stood before the head table and gave the group what could only be described as a combination pep talk and a vote of thanks for everything they had done as members of this small gathering of smart, talented, humorous, tactful and self-aware women.

In my dream, she told the group of her early days, growing up in Slovenia - part of the former Yugoslavia. Historical background: she often participated in children's fashion shows (her mother was a pattern maker). Her father was a member of the League of Slovenian Communists and espoused atheism, but he had his daughters baptized Catholic. When Melania was older she lived in Ljubljana where she studied photography and architecture and design before dropping out. Her modeling career started when she was 16 and continued apace all her early adult life. She met Donald Trump in 1995 and came to the U.S. in 1996 and in 1998 she and Trump started dating. Seven years later they married.

Despite being a top fashion model, Melania was never featured on a magazine cover during her four years as First Lady (Michelle Obama was on 12 covers in eight years). The fashion press snubbed her largely because of their Left-wing political leanings and their opposition to her husband's policies. Her popularity reached its peak in May 2018 when she polled at 57% approval. When she and her husband left Washington it was 42%, according to Gallup. Hers was the lowest of any First Lady's approval. She, Bess Truman and Ladybird Johnson shared the dubious distinction of being the only three First Ladies that never made Gallup's 'Most Admired Woman List' - a poll Gallup started in the 1940s.

Melania was only the second foreign-born First Lady (Louisa Adams, John Quincy Adams' wife was the first having been born in England). She wasn't the only First Lady that spoke a foreign language either. The wife of John Q. Adams spoke Dutch; James Monroe's wife spoke French; Abraham Lincoln's wife also spoke French as did John Kennedy's. Herbert Hoover's wife even spoke Mandarin Chinese! Melania, however, beats them all with her ability to speak at least five languages (unlike the others, she didn't grow up speaking English but learned it later).

With a few exceptions, First Ladies have stood in the shadows of their President husbands. They have generally not been judged on their own merits but many have been treated as 'trailing spouses' (a term used by the State Department to describe non-working spouses of employees sent overseas). In my dream, Melania gets a huge round of applause from her living and dead FL colleagues (even from the arch Democrat ones I might add) for the way she conducted herself while her husband was President. As a select group, First Ladies have a particularly difficult role to assume. They must be seen to be supportive of their husbands and at the same time they must exude charm and grace under pressure. They must be willing to endure attacks on their families and on their person as well.

They must also strive to inspire young women by their example and show them that they can be both feminine and embody *traditional* masculine-like characteristics of resoluteness and

decisiveness. Theirs is often a thankless job and they seldom receive the praise that they deserve but see it routinely heaped on their President husbands while they stand 'outside the circle.' My dream didn't include much in the way of details. Such is the way of many dreams, but I did wake up feeling better that Melania finally got the accolades that were coming to her from her peers. She was and still is a class act, and one day will, hopefully, be appreciated for everything she did to hold her family together during four tumultuous years in 'the swamp' with the disrupter-in-chief.

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