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## First Lady Raising Her Profile Without Changing Her Image

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#)

CRAWFORD, Tex., Oct. 14 — This Saturday, a military jet with the code name “Bright Star” will take off from Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, bound for a diplomatic mission in the Middle East. It will carry an increasingly outspoken and quietly powerful White House emissary: [Laura Bush](#), the first lady of the United States.

The official purpose of the trip is to promote breast cancer awareness; nobody expects the president’s wife to engage in bare-knuckle negotiations over war and peace. Yet in the twilight of her husband’s presidency, the woman who once made [George W. Bush](#) promise she would never have to give a speech is stepping out in a new and unusually substantive way.

At the [United Nations General Assembly](#) in late September, Mrs. Bush was in the audience while her husband criticized the crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators by the military junta in Myanmar, formerly Burma. But three weeks earlier it had been the first lady, not the president, who picked up the phone to call the United Nations Secretary General, [Ban Ki-moon](#).

She is now the administration’s leading voice on the matter, denouncing the junta in official statements, Congressional testimony and, last week, an opinion piece in *The Wall Street Journal*.

“I think that this is sort of one of those myths,” she told reporters after the call to the secretary general, sounding surprised at the stir she created, “that I was baking cookies and then they fell off the cookie sheet and I called Ban Ki-moon.”

Her comment was reminiscent of another famous cookie remark, the one uttered by Mrs. Bush’s activist predecessor, [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), who once told reporters she was not one to stay home and bake cookies. Mrs. Bush is no Mrs. Clinton; she does not head up independent policy initiatives, has no interest in a West Wing office and would not be caught dead running for the Senate, much less the presidency. But at age 60, she has evolved in the job, and is hardly the traditional first lady Americans once expected.

“She’s always been what she is,” said Elsie Walker Kilborne, a cousin of President Bush who introduced Mrs. Bush to the plight of Myanmar’s opposition leader, [Daw Aung San Suu Kyi](#), who is under house arrest. “But she is coloring herself in bolder colors.”

The White House makes calculated use of Mrs. Bush; the Middle East trip is a good example. On the surface, it will stick to familiar, noncontroversial first lady terrain: women’s health. But it is hardly a coincidence that Mrs. Bush is being deployed to the region as a good-will ambassador just as her husband is trying to salvage his legacy there, with a conference next month on peace in the Middle East.

The trip is Mrs. Bush's 14th solo overseas excursion, the third so far this year. The itinerary, to be announced Monday by the White House, includes stops in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Kuwait, countries where her husband's critics say she has more credibility than he does. She will pay courtesy calls on at least two heads of state, the kings of Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

At home, she is inserting herself more forcefully into the issues she cares about. Most people know Mrs. Bush as a vocal supporter of her husband's signature education bill, [No Child Left Behind](#). What they do not know is that she has been waging a quiet lobbying campaign to persuade Congress to reauthorize the bill by inviting key lawmakers to the White House for coffee — with her, not the president.

The policy charm offensive has extended to the White House press corps. Last month, Mrs. Bush took the unusual step of inviting its female members to the White House residence for an off-the-record lunch, with a curator-led tour of the newly renovated Lincoln Bedroom. Admission carried a price: a policy briefing on [No Child Left Behind](#), led by Education Secretary Margaret Spellings and Mrs. Bush.

"It is a noticeable difference in her role," said Michael Green, an Asia expert who provided briefing papers for Mrs. Bush when he worked at the [National Security Council](#) under her husband. "She's becoming much more public, and more proscriptive. She's not just following; she's leading."

Still, her signature issues are limited and she is careful never to step too far out in front, lest she cross the line into Hillary Clinton turf. Feminists have criticized her for not being assertive enough. Her public persona remains that of supportive wife, the steadying influence who got her husband to quit drinking at age 40, the witty conversationalist with the practiced smile and perfect hair who once regaled official Washington with "Desperate Housewives" jokes at the White House correspondents' dinner.

She is the one who, with some gentle arm-twisting from Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#), persuaded her husband to don white tie for a dinner to honor the British queen. On the rare occasions when he slips into self-pity over Iraq, she is said to snap him out of it.

"I tell you," said Secretary Spellings, a close friend, "she can knock him upside the head pretty much on anything and get his attention."

Whether she does is hard to discern. By some accounts, Mrs. Bush has chafed at the confining nature of the first lady's role, and over the years snippets have emerged to suggest daylight between her and her husband on issues like abortion. But she is careful not to appear to be making policy.

"She did say that she has made known her opinions to the president on a handful of issues," said Robert Draper, who interviewed Mrs. Bush for his new biography of the president, "Dead Certain."

"But she would not enumerate or characterize which those issues were, no matter how much I pressured her," Mr. Draper said. "When I asked her about the lead-up to Iraq, she said the president never spoke to her about the issue."

Most first ladies pick a signature issue and stick with it. [Nancy Reagan](#) had "just say no" to drugs; Betty Ford spoke about her battle with breast cancer. Mrs. Bush, by contrast, has broadened her policy reach, from

literacy and historic preservation to AIDS in Africa and the plight of women in Afghanistan. (She made a heavily guarded trip there in 2005.)

An early turning point came in November 2001, when Karen P. Hughes, who ran Mr. Bush's communications shop at the time, suggested to the president that his wife join him in a radio address, to focus on the [Taliban's](#) oppression of women. "He looked at me," Ms. Hughes recalled, "and said, 'What do you need me for?'"

At home, Mrs. Bush's approval ratings have consistently been double that of her husband; during last year's midterm elections, Republicans who did not want to be seen with their unpopular president asked his wife to campaign for them instead. That same dynamic is at work overseas; Stephen J. Hadley, Mr. Bush's national security adviser, calls the first lady "a foreign policy asset to the president."

As with all her trips, the Middle East swing will be carefully coordinated with Mr. Hadley's office. "This is a pretty knit-up operation between the West Wing and the East Wing," he said.

Knit up or not, such journeys can be politically perilous, as Mrs. Bush has discovered. During her last Middle East trip, in 2005, she praised President [Hosni Mubarak](#) of Egypt for his "very bold step" toward democracy. Two days later, Mubarak supporters beat up their opposition in the Cairo streets.

"It really stirred up a hornet's nest," said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, who has written extensively about first ladies. But Mr. Anthony says he believes that, beyond the embarrassment it caused the White House, there is a deeper reason people reacted so strongly to it: "It didn't fit in with the Christmas cookie idea of Laura Bush."

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