

Michelle Obama: The Obesity Concern and Military Recruitment

By Arnold August, November 2012

Michelle Obama and the Obama icon-makers created an image of the First Lady for the purposes of the 2008 elections, and then during her husband's first mandate. However, never has the creation of the First Lady's façade been as adroit and innovative as during the 2008–12 Obama presidency. Thus she played a very significant role in contributing to the 2012 re-election. In addition, she substantially enriches one of Barack Obama's and the oligarchies' main planks: the militarization of the U.S. and its wars of aggression.

By bringing in a new image in the form of the First Lady, the U.S. approach to democracy can be quite adept in using even the most unexpected pretexts to serve the interests of the financial oligarchies, whether by those doing the co-opting or the complicit co-opted.

Spouses of presidents have traditionally played an important role in U.S. politics, even though they are not elected. They typically take up "causes" and do "voluntary work" to support these causes, which often feed into a real, widespread concern, but co-opt the preoccupation toward a direction that assists the ruling elite. For example, Nancy Reagan was involved in President Reagan's War on Drugs by raising the motto that directed people to "Just Say No [to drugs]."^{1, 2} However, from the viewpoint of the African-American neighbourhoods, U.S. lawyer, professor and civil rights advocate Michelle Alexander documents evidence showing that "the drug war is the new Jim Crow." The studies on which she bases herself show that people "of all colors *use and sell* illegal drugs" (emphasis in the original). However, while "white youth are more likely to engage in drug crime than people of color," "black men have been admitted to prison on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times greater than those of white men."³ Alexander also deals with the relationship of U.S. foreign policy to the War on Drugs. She indicates that, while the War on Drugs was going on, the CIA later admitted that their trained military squads in Nicaragua (fighting against the revolutionary Sandinistas) were smuggling drugs into the U.S. These drugs "were making their way onto the streets of inner-city black neighborhoods."⁴ As for the War on Drugs and its effects on other countries in Latin America, this is dealt with in my book, in Chapter 3 concerning Bolivia.

In the period before the election of Obama and the arrival of Michelle Obama in the White House, there was (and still is) a

widespread and sincere concern in all sections of society regarding obesity. However, there was also an anxiety that was in reality an obsession among the *military* — that this problem, especially among the youth, is seriously affecting recruitment into the military. This is so because the obese cannot be admitted into the military, as they are not apt to serve and fight. A review of government and semi-government military sources and news reports on the military angst tells the story: “Ex-military leaders: Young adults ‘too fat to fight,’” “Too fat to fight: Obesity costs the military a bundle,” “Too fat to fight. Retired military leaders want junk food out of America’s schools,” “Unfit for service: The implications of rising obesity for U.S. military recruitment,” “Climbing obesity rates threaten national security by hampering military recruitment,” “Climbing obesity rates threaten U.S. National Security by hampering military recruitment.”^{5; 6; 7; 8; 9; 10}

Michelle Obama’s cause is obesity, and the dictum is “Let’s Move!” On the surface, coming from the “new faces” in the White House, it may seem altruistic; however, based on an investigation of the statements from the White House itself (and taking into account the self-avowed concern of the military), it is no more philanthropic or disinterested than Nancy Reagan’s contribution to President Reagan’s War on Drugs. During Mrs. Obama’s launching of *Let’s Move!* on February 9, 2011, she said that the “epidemic [of obesity] also impacts the nation’s security, as obesity is now one of the most common disqualifiers for military service.”¹¹ On December 13, 2010, the official signing into law by Barack Obama of the “Hunger-Free Kids Act” took place. Also present were his wife, some military people, elected officials and other dignitaries. One of them pointed out that being “overweight or obese is the No. 1 medical reason why young men and women are unable to join the military.”¹²

During the occasion of a White House bill-signing ceremony with regard to health and nutrition, Michelle Obama declared:

Military leaders ... tell us that when more than one in four young people are unqualified for military service because of their weight, they tell us that childhood obesity isn’t just a public health issue; they tell us that it is not just an economic threat — it is a national security threat as well.¹³

On January 27, 2011, at a military graduation ceremony at Fort Jackson, Mrs. Obama revealed how “military leaders across the country have been speaking out about how proper nutrition is vital

to the success of our armed forces.”¹⁴ On March 31, 2011, she declared at a nationwide cities conference:

Now, when you think about the issues that are keeping four-star generals up at night, childhood obesity is probably not one that comes to mind, right? But from the day we launched “Let’s Move” — and that’s our nationwide campaign to tackle this issue — high-ranking military leaders have been some of our strongest supporters. And that’s because right now, today, nearly 27% of 17- to 24-year-olds are too overweight to serve in our military. So military leaders realized way before many of us that obesity was affecting their core mission.¹⁵

There is another feature of Mrs. Obama’s program that uses the image of the first African-American family in the White House to recuperate concern among African-American families regarding the problem of obesity. According to a government-sponsored study,

Obesity disproportionately affects certain minority youth populations. [Government sources] found that African-American and Mexican-American adolescents ages 12–19 were more likely to be overweight, at 21% and 23% respectively, than non-Hispanic White adolescents (14%).¹⁶

The web article in this website entitled “Military Recruitment of Youth with a New Façade” deals with enlisting soldiers and other armed forces.

The U.S. establishment sees the African-American as a key target for the military. This also has a long history. For example, in preparation for World War II, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (F.D.R.) realized that illegal slavery in some states still existed and would be harmful to the war effort. Action was taken by the federal government to end this slavery in order to encourage the ex-slaves for military purposes; the goal was also to deprive fascist Japan and Germany of the opportunity to depict the U.S. as a slave society and build anti-U.S. prejudices among African-American soldiers fighting abroad.¹⁷ As part of the *Let’s Move!* program, Mrs. Obama also targeted Latino youth, who, along with African-American youth, are the section of society most affected by obesity.¹⁸

The decline of recruitment among African-Americans into the army has alarmed the military for several years now. According to U.S. Army figures, African-American enlistment has declined from 2003 on a yearly basis until 2009, from 26.2 percent in 2003 to 20.9 percent in 2009.^{19; 20} This concern is reflected in the think tanks, as in one example indicating “Army recruitment goals endangered as percent of African-American enlistees declines.”²¹ In 2007, newspapers reporting on the military’s anxiety, headlined that “Military recruitment sees decline among African-Americans” or that “Military sees big decline in black enlistees.”^{22; 23}

Side by side with this and other projects, as well as international visits, the image of Mrs. Obama is carefully nurtured and projected by the White House and the media. Michelle Obama is herself collaborating with the establishment media to further create a mystique around her. John King, of CNN, one of the main supporters of Obama, held an interview with Kate Betts, the *Time* magazine fashion journalist whose 2011 book is entitled *Everyday Icon: Michelle Obama and the Power of Style*. It is significant to pay attention to this interview’s content in light of the 2012 presidential elections campaign, in which Michelle Obama played a crucial role.

John King: Joining me now is fashion journalist Kate Betts, former editor in chief of *Harper’s Bazaar*. She is also the author of an upcoming book, *Everyday Icon: Michelle Obama and the Power of Style*.

[...]

Kate Betts: She [Michelle Obama] always surprises with her fashion choices.... She writes her own rules when it comes to fashion. From the very beginning, we saw that. I think that’s what keeps us riveted by her fashion and keeps us paying attention to her.... She’s young. She’s in great shape. She has incredible confidence. She has incredible body confidence.

King: You see her at the state dinner, you see her at these glamorous events. But then when you see her in public, sometimes she is fairly casual.

Betts: You know, I think that’s kind of what makes her an everyday icon. She’s somebody who is really assessable [*sic*].... She wants to put forth this message of very casual fashion.... I think she also wants to appeal to everyone.... I think style does matter. In her case she used it to get our

attention. When she has our attention *she can say what she wants. She can deliver whatever message she wants.*

King: Kate Betts, we appreciate you coming in to help us tonight.... Here's the book, *Everyday Icon*, right here.²⁴ (emphasis added)

One may recall the passage in Chapter 2 of my book quoting from Obama's Election Manager and Media Consultant David Axelrod when he said that it was necessary to build a Kennedy-style "mystique" around Obama. This aspect of U.S. politics, the changing of the aura from one presidential aspirant or sitting president to another (e.g., such as was done previously with J.F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan) has far-reaching consequences. It is important to consider its full political dimensions. In order to maintain and reinforce the status quo, who would suspect that a Nancy Reagan or a Michelle Obama would co-opt genuine concerns regarding drugs (Nancy Reagan) or obesity (Michelle Obama), the latter into crucial and timely recruitment support for the military in the context of the ever-increasing U.S. military adventures on the world scale? Likewise, who would have conjectured that Mrs. Obama would specifically target African-Americans for military recruitment because statistics indicate this section of society is the most affected by the scourge of obesity?

During the 2012 presidential elections campaign, the Obama online presidential campaign exhibited joint photos of the Obama couple asking for financial and other support to boost Obama's re-election.

¹ Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Library. n.d. "Just Say No 1982–1989." At http://www.reaganfoundation.org/details_t.aspx?p=RR1005NRL&h1=0&h2=0&sw=&lm=reagan&args_a=cms&args_b=10&argsb=N&tx=1203.

² National First Ladies' Library. n.d. "First Lady Biography: Nancy Reagan." At <http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=41>.

³ Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. NY: The New Press, p. 3–7.

⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵ Park, Madison. 2010. "Ex-military Leaders: Young Adults 'Too Fat to Fight.'" CNN Health (April 20). At <http://www.cnn.com/2010/HEALTH/04/20/military.fat.fight/index.html>.

⁶ Liebenson, Donald. 2010. "Too Fat to Fight: Obesity Costs the Military a Bundle." The Fiscal Times (June 23). At

<<http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/Articles/2010/06/23/Too-Fat-to-Fight-Obesity-is-Costing-the-Military-a-Hefty-Bundle.aspx>>.

- ⁷ Mission Readiness. 2010. “Too Fat to Fight. Retired Military Leaders Want Junk Food Out of America’s Schools.” (August 4). At <http://cdn.missionreadiness.org/MR_Too_Fat_to_Fight-1.pdf>.
- ⁸ National Bureau of Economic Research. 2010. “Unfit for Service: The Implications of Rising Obesity for U.S. Military Recruitment.” (September). At <<http://www.nber.org/papers/w16408>>.
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