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Then first lady Michelle Obama and U.S. President Barack Obama bow their heads while attending the National Prayer Breakfast Feb. 6, 2014, in Washington. (CNS/Kevin Lamarque, Reuters)



by Colman McCarthy

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As an occasional and empathetic bedside visitor to wounded Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans in U.S. military hospitals, Michelle Obama writes in her generally well-received memoir, *Becoming*, that what she saw and who she met "left me humbled. As long as I've been alive, I'd never encountered the kind of fortitude and loyalty that I've found in those rooms."

As the wife of former Commander-in-Chief Barack Obama, and as one who confesses that "war, for me, had always been terrifying," nothing in the former first lady's prose suggests that she ever uttered a peep to her husband about his war-making avidity. How avid? The [Los Angeles Times reported](#) on Jan. 13, 2017, that "U.S. military forces have been at war for all eight years of Obama's tenure, the first two-term president with that distinction. He launched airstrikes or military raids in at least seven countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan."

Days later, [The Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#), a British nonprofit, stated that "Obama embraced the U.S. drone programme, overseeing more strikes in his first year than [George W.] Bush carried out in his entire presidency." The strikes, mostly by drones, totaled 563, compared with Bush's 57. The massive number of slaughtered, wounded or displaced civilians under Obama's reign, and of course all gloriously done in the name of national security and spreading democracy and freedom, can only be horrifically guessed.

Obama wasn't long in office when he won the Nobel Peace Prize, an award that years later prompted head scratching and doubts among the Swedish prize-givers. The [BBC reported in September 2015](#) that the former Nobel secretary Geir Lundestad admitted that the committee "didn't achieve what it had hoped for" in awarding the peace prize to Obama and "even many of Obama's supporters believed that the prize was a mistake."

Michelle Obama, unable or unwilling to see connections between the suffering she saw in the hospitals and her husband's lethal militarism that helped induce the veterans' maiming and misery, writes, "He and I were sounding boards for each other professionally and always had been. But I also knew that he now spent his days surrounded by expert advisors. He had access to all manner of top secret information and as far as I was concerned, and especially on matters of national security, he needed no input from me."

If Michelle Obama had had a moment or two of speaking, as they say, truth to power, and dared deliver a few syllables of "input" on restraining her husband's hawkish ways, would it have made a difference? Would he have heeded her counsel? Would the wards of military hospitals be less packed?

**[Related: Michelle Obama is a role model, though maybe not a feminist one](#)**

We can wonder. It's not in the memoir, but in September 2013 when he ordered the bombing of Syria, Obama [told NBC News](#), "And if you ask somebody, if you ask Michelle 'Do we want to be involved in another war?' the answer is no."

In addition to her hospital treks, Michelle Obama took to the nation's classrooms, there to rally children and teachers for "healthy, high quality food in public schools." She went elsewhere as well, to Congress where she met with legislative success in the 2010 passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. "As much as I was generally happy to stay out of politics and policy making," she writes, "this has been my big fight — the issue for which I was willing to hurl myself into the ring. I'd spent hours making calls to senators and representatives, trying to convince them that our children deserved better than what they were getting. I'd talk about it endlessly with Barack, his advisors, anyone who would listen. The new law added more fruit and vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy to roughly forty-three million meals served daily."

Well done, well said. Once more, though, I'm left to wonder: why didn't Michelle Obama, who tilled her own vegetable garden a few paces south of her husband's Rose Garden, go further and become an advocate for the nutritional, ethical, humane and environmental pluses of a vegetarian or vegan diet? Obama surely is aware of the cholesterol and obesity negatives of including meat, eggs and milk in your diet and the cardiovascular and pulmonary positives of excluding them. Why not some dietary straight talk while bracing for being mocked as a PETA zealot and

the sure-to-come braying and howling from the hustlers and advertisers of artery-clogging food.

When the time came for The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act to be signed by President Obama, he and Michelle went to the District of Columbia's Harriet Tubman Elementary School, there to be surrounded by children from low-income neighborhoods. Throughout their time in the White House, the Obamas' hearts were in the public schools, but not their two daughters. For high school, the Obama children could have attended the acclaimed School Without Walls. At 2130 G Street, NW, it is the closest school to the White House, five blocks west. Instead the girls went five miles north to the exclusively private Sidwell Friends, a Quaker school currently with a hefty tab of \$42,372, not counting book fees.

I was a volunteer teacher at Walls for some 25 years and came to admire the faculty for its commitment to quality education that was easily the equal of Sidwell Friends.

Of her two visits to probe how her girls might fit in, Michelle writes that she liked the "feel of the place," one that "was all about community, built on the idea that no one individual should be prized over another, which seemed to me like a healthy counterbalance to the big fuss that now surrounded their father."

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True, the luxuries found at Sidwell — tennis courts, kempt and manicured baseball and football fields, a track, a well-stocked cafeteria, lockers, a large parking lot, an auditorium — are not to found at Walls. But grit and scrappiness are there, along with a touch of Quaker-like austerity. Walls is also straight blocks away from the high-priced Watergate apartment complex. Political might in one direction, financial might in the other, and in between an aging brick structure designed in 1882 during the Chester A. Arthur administration. No modern president has ever visited Walls, not that students care a wit. Instead of big shots, they are into long shots, which is what many of the students from low-income families know they are. I saw many who beat the odds.

As did Michelle Obama. *Becoming*, which is having a deserved long run at the top of the best-seller lists, is graced with poignant stories of her childhood on the South Side of Chicago, a working-class African-American student at Princeton University,

her toils as a corporate lawyer, bonding in marriage with Barack and taking on the duties of being the wife of a president that "lifted me up and shrank me down, sometimes all at once."

Soon enough, no doubt, we'll be getting Barack Obama's account of his White House years and the lifting and shrinking he endured. Saints be pleased if his prose matches his wife's.

[Colman McCarthy is a former Washington Post columnist. His forthcoming book is *Opening Minds, Stirring Hearts*.]

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