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JOAN MONDALE SERENE IN SUPPORTING ROLE

By MAUREEN DOWD

She is the forgotten member of the Democratic quartet.

With the unusual attention focused on the party's historic campaign - a floodlight illuminating Walter F. Mondale, Geraldine A. Ferraro and John A. Zaccaro - Joan Mondale is often asked about eclipses.

Has Mrs. Ferraro eclipsed Mr. Mondale as the strongest member of the ticket?

Has Mrs. Ferraro eclipsed Mrs. Mondale as the leading female star of the ticket?

"The whole thing is certainly making Joan Mondale take a back seat," said Daryl Glenney, a Washington campaign consultant. "For the first time in our minds, the female can be the Vice- Presidential candidate, she doesn't have to be 'the wife' any more. That leaves the wife wondering what her role is."

Publicly, Mrs. Mondale, who won a reputation as one of the most influential of Vice President's wives through her work with the arts when her husband was in the Carter Administration, flicks away such speculations with a serene smile that indicates she is above political casting disputes.

Praise for Woman on Ticket

"Oh, I think Gerry's wonderful," she told reporters at a campaign stop at a New Haven day care center when the question of Mrs. Ferraro's possibly overshadowing presence arose. Mrs. Mondale, ringed by wriggling tots and clutching two pink roses, pointed out that she had encouraged her husband to choose a woman as his running mate.

"She brings a strength and vitality and toughness that complements my husband," she said, in a soft voice that lingers on certain syllables, leaving the impression of italics. "Fritz is crazy about her!"

Privately, because Mrs. Mondale has been asked the question so often, she wrinkles her nose, rolls her large brown eyes and says with a wisp of exasperation: "I don't know why they keep asking me about the role of the candidate's wife. They think: wife, BONG!"

"I don't want to be in the limelight," said Mrs. Mondale, an amiable and unpretentious woman with an elegant style and a girlish manner. "I am a traditional wife. I know that is a vanishing breed." Wife's Job Is Different

The nontraditional situation in which a woman is running with her husband has not changed her role, the Presidential nominee's wife says. "She is the candidate, and I know what it was like when Fritz was Vice President," Mrs. Mondale said. "He was always reading those big, black briefing books. And there is so much to learn."

"My job is a surrogate and an advocate. And as First Lady, there is a huge job in the White House. You need to make it a friendly place, and the food and the flower arrangements have to be wonderful!"

She has grown accustomed to swatting away questions of the etiquette involved in dealing with the first coed ticket, such as whether the two women, who attracted comment when both wore beige dresses the night of the Presidential nomination and red dresses at a Democratic breakfast the next day, plan to coordinate their outfits.

(They don't.)

She said that, as women have come into their own, the expectation for political wives to talk seriously about the issues has risen. About Recipes and Clothes

"I don't talk about recipes and I don't talk about clothes," she said. But a moment later she was talking about both.

She gave a reporter an autographed copy of her new "Mondale Family Cookbook," discussing the difficulty of properly cooking Minnesota wild rice.

Mrs. Mondale said she did not offer advice to Mrs. Ferraro. Asked what they had talked about at a Labor Day dinner, she replied: "Oh, what do women talk about? She liked my new red dress. I was so surprised that she could still think in feminine terms. That's what's so wonderful! She's not jaded and sour and crabby."

The candidate's wife slips from serious discussions of the issues into homey topics, perhaps indicative of her ease with her status. She shows no symptoms of stifled identity.

At a high school in Ridgely, N.J., she recently criticized President Reagan over military spending and asserted that her husband did not need the Rev. Jesse Jackson to be a broker for the black vote. 'A Very Important Moment'

Then, without skipping a beat, she said that she liked campaigning because "I would hate to be in my kitchen baking cookies. It is a very important moment in history."

Although some Democratic campaign consultants have suggested that Mrs. Mondale could play a valuable part in fleshing out and warming up her husband's public persona, that is not the approach she takes.

Her speeches are polished, impersonal discussions of the issues, echoing her husband's positions and phrases. She works in ladylike jabs at Mr. Reagan, criticizing his "bombing" joke and other gaffes.

Mrs. Mondale campaigns more independently than Nancy Reagan does and speaks out on women's rights. But Mrs. Reagan, by all accounts, has more influence over her husband's political decisions.

When asked whether she offered her husband advice, Mrs. Mondale grimaced. "He doesn't necessarily take advice on clothes or attitude," she said. Not a Polo-Shirt Man

She recounted how she tried to persuade him to loosen up before one campaign appearance by forsaking his ubiquitous dark suit for a bright polo shirt.

"He looked at me and said: 'A polo shirt? I am going to wear my suit and tie, and if it's hot, I'll take my jacket off.' "

She shrugged. "Who am I to want to change the way he dresses or combs his hair?"

She is asked what evolution brought a man of Mr. Mondale's generation to the point where he could become the first man to pick the first woman for a major party's Presidential ticket.

She said he had become more sensitive over the years, as he dealt with social issues such as battered wives and day care. And, she said warmly, he has always been liberated at home.

"He has always encouraged me to pursue my own interests," she said. "He never tried to say, 'Why are the beans burning?'"

Robert Squier, the Democratic campaign consultant, said Mrs. Mondale would be another valuable ace in seeking women's votes. Bolstering Each Other

Many of those who have come to Mrs. Mondale's campaign stops agreed.

"In a sense Geraldine Ferraro being on the ticket kind of helps Mrs. Mondale, each kind of bolsters the other

one as far as speaking up on women's issues," said Stina Santiestevan, a Detroit resident who heard Mrs. Mondale speak at a Labor Day rally there.

But comparisons are inevitable.

On a misty morning in Springfield, Mass., Mrs. Mondale went to a construction site of a high school where only a few people were on hand as she began trooping through the mud to look at exposed beams.

"Geraldine Ferraro would have attracted more people," said John Moriarty, the chairman of the school building committee.

But Mrs. Mondale was unfazed. She held her orange hard hat and listened raptly as Mr. Moriarty told her that the three-story building would have a 750-pupil capacity, was 42 percent finished after only 30 percent of the allotted time, had been 14 years in the making and encompassed 20 acres of land.

Afterward, in an interview with a television crew, she wove information gleaned from Mr. Moriarty into a plug for her husband's position on education.

"That," said Mr. Moriarty admiringly as she glided off to her motorcade, "is a very sharp girl."