

What Melania's Absence Says About Trump's Campaign (Op-ed)



By *Lauren A. Wright, Ph.D.*

Where has Melania been?

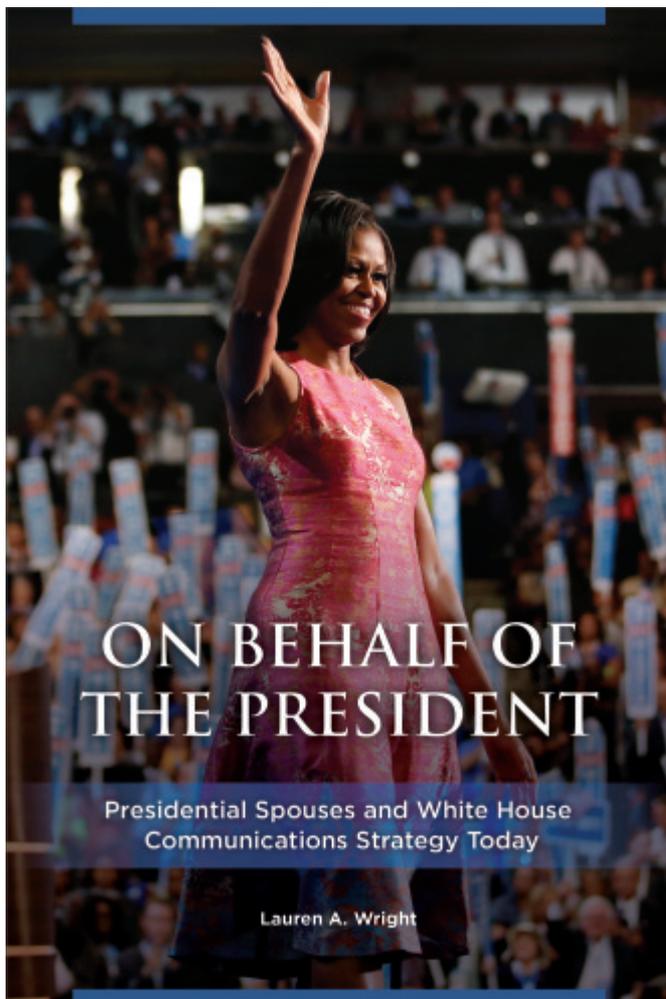
In the wake of her RNC plagiarism scandal and as reporters began to raise questions over the details of her emigration to the U.S., the would-be first lady has utterly vanished from the campaign trail.

There are a few possibilities to explain Mrs. Trump's glaring absence. One is that the campaign does not want to give reporters the chance to question her about her infamous RNC performance—where she was accused of [lifting lines](#) from First Lady Michelle Obama's 2008 convention speech—thereby re-injecting the embarrassing episode into the national discourse, or about her [debunked](#) college degree, another awkward moment for the campaign. It could also be that team Trump is hiding something about the specifics of Melania's journey to America, an [issue](#) that will not likely be resolved until her official immigration documentation is released. Given the [lack of transparency](#) exhibited by the Trump campaign, we may never know why Melania has disappeared.

But if history is any guide, Melania's absence does strongly indicate one thing: Trump's campaign, by modern standards, has

been poorly managed.

An uninvolved spouse is one of the most obvious yet overlooked markers of a disordered presidential campaign. In 2004, Howard Dean's wife, Judith Steinberg Dean, shunned the presidential campaign trail, raising [questions](#) among reporters and voters alike about whether she was supportive of her husband's candidacy and how the former governor would shore up apparent gaps in voters' perceptions of his personality, especially since he, too, eschewed opportunities to speak about his personal life. Meanwhile, Teresa Heinz Kerry, the wife of 2004 Democratic nominee John Kerry, maintained a fairly active campaign presence on behalf of her husband, but refused to be counseled or managed by staff. As a result, Mrs. Heinz's public appearances were often characterized by [controversial remarks](#), and her [DNC speech](#), like Mrs. Trump's, was noticeably devoid of any details about her relationship with her husband.



Melania Trump, like all political spouses, is potentially one of the most valuable political assets the campaign possesses. Spouses are ideally positioned to soften the image of presidential candidates and to promote their message to otherwise hostile audiences. And savvy campaigns intuitively understand what my book, [On Behalf of the President](#), demonstrates empirically: presidential and candidate spouses can be exceptional surrogates in the White House and on the campaign trail.

Well-run campaigns know that candidate spouses are often the most in-demand surrogates by state party organizations in GOTV efforts. They know that voters have an inherent fascination with candidate spouses, are more likely to tune in to their public appearances and speeches than those of professional politicians, and are more inclined to perceive those public remarks to be genuine rather than opportunistic.

My [research](#) also shows that Mrs. Trump could be a very effective messenger among political Independents, and that she has a measurably more positive effect on evaluations of Donald Trump than surrogates like Chris Christie. Most importantly, she can provide unique insight into Donald Trump's character and values.

In addition to the general strengths of candidate spouses, Melania Trump possesses a distinctive set of qualities that could have been exploited. If communicated proactively and transparently, Mrs. Trump's life story could have been a boon to the campaign, providing her a clear avenue to connect with voters who weren't born into wealth or status, or who may have emigrated to the United States themselves and learned English. She could have further defined her [stated](#) interest in helping women and children, seizing opportunities to engage women voters and families in particular, hone her message relating to them, and shape expectations regarding her planned contributions in the White House, as the Clinton campaign has been doing regarding Bill Clinton's role in revitalizing the [economy](#). As a [hands-on mom](#) and entrepreneur, Melania could have cultivated a down-to-earth persona that resonated with working parents. It's an exercise Jackie Kennedy mastered, permitting *Look* and *Life* magazines to [photograph her](#) reading to and putting her kids to bed without the help of maids or nurses. Melania Trump is also beautiful. Social science studies have long shown that voters are significantly biased toward physically attractive political actors, and that these preferences are especially evident in evaluations of [female](#)

politicians.

Instead of capitalizing on Melania's strengths, the Trump campaign discounted a potential star from the very beginning. In the relatively few high-profile appearances she made early on, Mrs. Trump showed promise. In network interviews during the primaries filled with pleasantries and softball questions—typical features of spousal interviews which few other surrogates enjoy—Mrs. Trump began to introduce herself to voters through comments that revealed her independent personality and uncensored relationship with Mr. Trump. “I give him my opinions. I am not a ‘yes’ person,” Mrs. Trump said in an interview with FOX, and later, “I have a thick skin. I’m strong. I’m standing on my own two feet.”

Three things should have become evident to the Trump campaign at this point. There was intense public interest in Mrs. Trump, she could draw millions of viewers while exercising near-full control over the narrative regarding her husband, and her public appearances should be carefully leveraged to garner positive coverage for the campaign. It is a combination of circumstances of which most politicians and political proxies can only dream.

Yet the Trump campaign failed to adequately support, prepare, or regulate Mrs. Trump heading into the RNC, her single most important public appearance of the election season. Plagiarized portions of her speech emerged as one of the defining gaffes of the summer, even more damaging, perhaps, than Hillary Clinton's famous ‘tea and cookies’ remark on the 1992 campaign trail, or Michelle Obama's ‘I’m proud of my country’ stumble in 2008. The fact that such an incident was allowed to transpire only further indicates how the Trump campaign has taken Melania for granted. Any modern professional campaign would have staffed the candidate's spouse sufficiently to prevent cribbed language from ever entering a speech draft, let alone the final product.

It is not clear whether the Trump campaign is keeping Melania off the trail to avoid more missteps, or whether Mrs. Trump alone has made the decision to remove herself from the spotlight. But by squandering six months of opportunities to dispatch her and botching the few instances where she was mobilized, the Trump campaign has once again revealed an unfocused organization, seemingly unwilling to strategically deploy their best resources when and where they are most sorely needed.

About the Author: Lauren Wright Ph.D. is a political scientist, a White House expert and board member of the White House Transition Project. She also is the author of the recently released [On Behalf of the President: Presidential Spouses and White House Communications Strategy Today](#), which identifies and explains the expanding responsibility entrusted to presidential spouses to communicate the president's message on the campaign trail and in the White House.

FOX & FRIENDS [Discussing Melania Trump's Speech \(begins at 00:12:48\)](#)

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