

First Ladies: Observations by Anita McBride and Alan Lowe (part two)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 7, 2026)

Carolyn Krause wrote this four-part series on the First Ladies, which is being presented in the Historically Speaking column before and after the July 4 celebration of the 250th birthday of the United States of America—the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

On Mar. 3, 2026, Alan Lowe hosted a panel discussion in Oak Ridge on some of the famous wives of American presidents. The women he hosted – one on stage with him and two on Zoom on a big screen – are authors of the 2024 book “Remember the First Ladies: The Legacies of America’s History-Making Women.” The three authors are Diana B. Carlin (on stage), Anita B. McBride and Nancy Kegan Smith (the latter two were on Zoom).

Lowe has been executive director of the American Science and Energy (AMSE) Museum in Oak Ridge since 2019. The panel discussion was hosted on the stage at AMSE, where Lowe announced that the First Ladies book can be purchased at the AMSE shop. It was the second of four presentations this year by Our American Roots, a series produced by the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club and Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning.

Lowe, who is also executive director of the Atomic History Campus at K-25 in Oak Ridge and CEO of the Oak Ridge Discovery Foundation, previously served at several presidential libraries around the nation. Since 2020 he has started three podcasts.

He became host and producer on the web of his live interviews mostly with authors by phone for the AMSE Science Cast (a segment of which can be heard on WUOT every Saturday at about 9:30 a.m.), the American POTUS (which is a podcast about the presidency) and the American FLOTUS (which is a podcast about the First Ladies of White House fame). You can hear these podcasts by visiting <https://AMSE.Cast.libsyn.com/>, <https://americanpotus.org> and <https://americanflotus.org>.

Lowe said that he started the American FLOTUS podcast two years ago at the suggestion of his friend Nancy Kegan Smith, who called him to announce the formation of the First Ladies Association for Research and Education, or FLARE. So far, the jointly produced podcast has 10 episodes.

Enjoy the quotes and comments by each of the women experts on history-making First Ladies, as well as founders of FLARE, during the panel discussion in Oak Ridge last March, which is Women’s History Month. This second article will feature, in response to Lowe’s questions and observations, the comments of Anita B. McBride; the third, of Nancy Kegan Smith, and the fourth, of all three authors and Lowe.

Alan Lowe, First Ladies panel moderator, asked Anita McBride to speak about “two of my favorite first ladies, who I know you knew so very well, Barbara Bush and Laura Bush. How did they take leadership roles in human rights here and around the globe, as did Eleanor Roosevelt previously and Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton later?”

McBride is executive-in-residence and founder of the First Ladies Initiatives at American University, founding member of FLARE and former assistant to the president and chief of staff to First Lady Laura Bush.

Barbara Bush was the wife of President George H.W. Bush (1989-1993), and Laura Bush, Barbara’s daughter-in-law, was wife of her son President George W. Bush (2001-2009).

Barbara was the wife of a congressman from Texas, where she had grown up. He grew up in a well-to-do family that lived in Rye, New York. After George Bush graduated from Yale University, the couple moved down to the Permian Basin in West Texas and settled in the boom- and-bust town of Midland, where oil drilling was a thriving business.

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Later in life, Barbara would drive with her children each summer from Texas to Maine, where the Bush family home was. Also, in the car was the young Bush family's Black nanny. In some southern states, because of the presence of the nanny, the family could not stay together overnight in a hotel during the trip. That's when Barbara thought hard about the injustice of racism and conveyed her concerns to her husband.

(McBride later commented that Lady Bird Johnson had the same experience as Barbara Bush did in driving north from Texas to Washington. In the car was Zephyr Wright, the family's Black cook. The Johnson family hid Zephyr in the white-only hotel room where they were staying.)

As a Republican congressman elected from the Houston area, George H.W. Bush supported the proposed Fair Housing Act of 1968, which became law and helped combat widespread housing discrimination against Black Americans. When he spoke about his support for the act during town halls in his district, his Texas voters were furious with him, McBride said. She added that Barbara "supported his decision 100%" and wrote in her memoir about George's courage in expressing his support for the act to his skeptical constituents.

When George Bush was running for the Republican nomination for president in 1980 against Ronald Reagan, Barbara pondered about her potential role as First Lady while jogging around Memorial Park in Houston, McBride said. "She settled on the issue of literacy because she felt if people were illiterate, then they were not going to have a successful life. They would not have access to education, a good job, and a prosperous and successful life."

George Bush did not win the nomination in 1980. Ronald Reagan was nominated, and he selected George Bush to be his vice president. They both served a two-year term starting in 1981. Reagan was succeeded by Bush in 1989.

As Second Lady in most of the 1980s, McBride said, "Barbara Bush hosted hundreds and hundreds of events on literacy. Then as First Lady, she established a literacy foundation that exists to this day.

"The foundation has been giving grants all over the country for literacy programs to improve literacy skills, not only for children but also for adults and families because that's where the cycle needs to be broken. When Barbara Bush died in 2018, she was sad that the literacy rate numbers had not improved much in all her years of efforts, but she left a legacy of not wanting to give up on that issue."

At a time when Americans were afraid to visit and touch people suffering from the deadly viral disease AIDS in the 1980s, Barbara served as a "good human rights example," McBride said. She visited an AIDS orphanage in Washington, D.C. and held Baby Donovan, who was orphaned by and afflicted with AIDS. He died not long after her visit. He was inconsolable at first as she held him but then calmed down as she comforted him.

"That was an act of courage," McBride said, noting that the image of Barbara holding the baby fatally ill with AIDS that was seen around the country and the world conveyed an important message without anyone saying a word.

Laura Bush, then Barbara's daughter-in-law, came into the first ladyship of the next century of American history. It was a different era dominated by the terrorist attack on Sept. 11, 2001, on New York City and Washington, D.C. That attack that killed thousands of Americans triggered the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001 to try to destroy the terrorist infrastructure of the group al-Qaeda, which carried out the airborne attacks and was being sheltered by the Taliban regime of Afghanistan.

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"Laura Bush became a global advocate for President Bush on so many issues around the world," McBride said. "She was a global advocate for literacy and education. She came to the role as a teacher and a voracious reader. She had been a teacher in minority schools where she observed the disparities." Laura also supported a better life for the girls and women of Afghanistan who had been denied for years. an education, healthcare and the right to hold jobs.

In response to a request by Lowe, McBride then talked about Michelle Obama, wife of President Barack Obama, the first Black president in American history. He served from 2009 to 2017. As First Lady, Michelle worked on civil rights and ways to fight obesity.

Starting with the fact that she was America's first Black woman to be First Lady, Michelle was "so revolutionary in regard to civil rights," McBride said. "When Senator Obama of Illinois was elected president in November 2008, this was a sea change for our country. There was a lot of pressure on her as the first African-American First Lady" to meet the expectations of different groups of people.

"Because she wanted her daughters to be settled first in the White House, she rolled out her first initiative, 'Let's Move About Childhood Obesity,' almost one year after arriving at the White House.

"She wanted to be a role model for young minority women and tell them what they could achieve and that education is important in their lives. She took that message around the world and established an initiative that is ongoing as a private foundation."

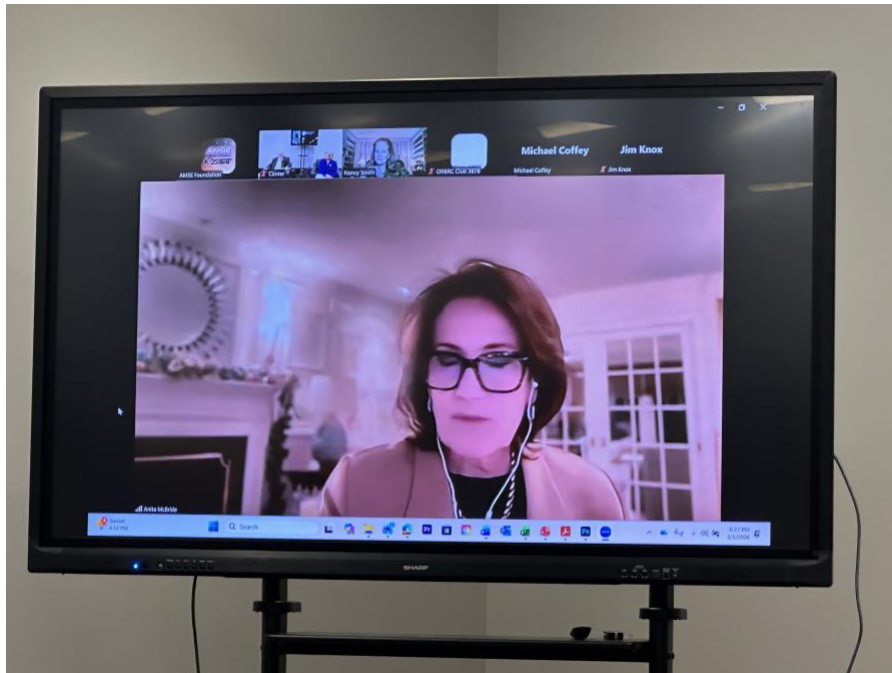
McBride said that during the 2016 Democratic National Convention where Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was the party's presidential nominee, Michelle gave a speech in which she talked about "waking up every day in a house that was built by slaves." Her talk led to research on the history of the construction of the White House and the names and backgrounds of laborers who built it, including immigrants and enslaved Black men.

"Michelle inspired an initiative called Slavery in the President's Neighborhood, launched by the White House Historical Association," McBride said. Historians have spent years documenting the staging of immigrant and slave labor in the president's own backyard, which is now Lafayette Park, in the process of building the White House.

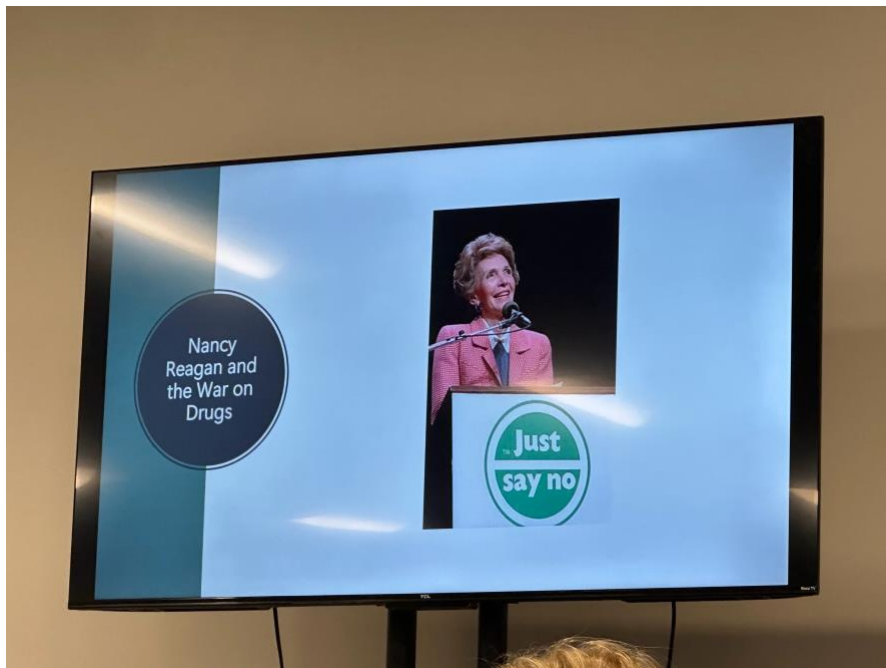
Next: Nancy Kegan Smith tells stories about several First Ladies.

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Anita McBride participated via Zoom (Courtesy of Ray Smith)



Nancy Reagan was one of the First Ladies that Anita discussed