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Is Motherhood a 'Real' Job? Teresa Heinz Kerry on Laura Bush

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The controversy emerged from a seemingly innocuous set of interviews in USA Today. With Election Day looming near on the horizon, the paper published a series of articles on the role of the first lady, and featuring a brief interview with both Laura Bush and Teresa Heinz Kerry. The newspaper's central story, written by Susan Page, reported that the American public "favors a traditional, non-working first lady." As the reporter summarized: "In this year's campaign, Laura Bush, a more traditional first lady than even her mother-in-law, is considered such political gold that she's featured in most of President Bush's TV ads. In contrast, the outspoken Mozambique-born Teresa Heinz Kerry—who would be a less familiar sort of presidential wife—is viewed as a mixed blessing for Sen. John Kerry."

That blessing became very mixed in Mrs. Heinz Kerry's interview.

When asked to respond to the public's preference for a non-working first lady, Teresa Heinz Kerry responded, "I'd love to see the wording in the poll, because I would have said, 'If you had a woman president, and the husband was a brilliant neurosurgeon, (should) he give up being a neurosurgeon?' No! And I think that what the American people really want is to make sure that the companion to the president—a woman now—supports him. And that's absolutely the No. 1 job for the country's sake, for his sake." Some readers were undoubtedly surprised to see "Mama T" as she is known on the campaign trail, refer to the presidential spouse as "the companion to the president." But that interesting choice of words was eclipsed by later sections of the interview.

When told that she would be just the second first lady to have been born abroad and the first to have had two foreign parents, she was asked if that should cause Americans any pause. She responded: "Well, Americans who pause probably don't know history very well, because we are all from somewhere. We are continually being from somewhere." Well, there's no arguing with that, whatever that means. Presumably, she meant to point out that we are largely a nation of immigrants. That part of the interview didn't get much attention either.

The controversial part came when the reporter asked: "You'd be different from Laura Bush?" Here is Teresa Heinz Kerry's answer in full: "Well, you know, I don't know Laura Bush. But she seems to be calm, and she has a sparkle in her eye, which is good. But I don't know that she's ever had a real job—I mean, since she's been grown up. So her experience and her validation comes from important things, but different things. And I'm older, and my validation of what I do and what I believe and my experience is a little bit bigger—because I'm older, and I've had different experiences. And it's not a criticism of her. It's just, you know, what life is about."

A media firestorm followed the publication of those comments, with reporters quick to counter that Laura Bush was a public school teacher and librarian for ten years. In a statement issued Wednesday, Mrs. Heinz Kerry said: "I had forgotten that Mrs. Bush had worked as a school teacher and librarian, and there couldn't be a more important job than teaching our children. As someone who has been both a full-time mom and full-time in work force, I know we all have valuable experiences that shape who we are. I appreciate and honor Mrs. Bush's service to the country as first lady and am sincerely sorry I had not remembered her important work in the past."

In a statement released Thursday afternoon, Mrs. Bush said that Mrs. Heinz Kerry didn't really need to apologize for her statement. "She apologized but she didn't even really need to apologize," Mrs. Bush responded. "I know how tough it is and actually I know those trick questions." Mrs. Bush's comments took the shape of gracious simplicity, but America's stay-at-home moms are not likely to be satisfied with Heinz Kerry's apology.

The real issue in this controversy is not whether Laura Bush ever had full time employment outside the home. That question is settled as a simple matter of fact. In the decade before marrying George W. Bush, Mrs. Bush worked as a teacher and librarian in the Texas public school system. Nevertheless, after marriage she shifted quickly into her role as full time wife and mother.

Teresa Heinz Kerry's worldview is revealed in the very construction of her comment about Mrs. Bush. When she dismissed Laura Bush's experience and "validation" because she's never had a "real job," she accidentally let slip a major factor in the way Teresa Heinz Kerry sees the world. As one of the world's wealthiest women, Teresa Heinz Kerry can shape whatever life she desires and can choose whatever life options she prefers. In her world, motherhood appears something like a hobby, while a "real job" is found only in the world outside the home.

Mrs. Heinz Kerry has indicated that she intends to be the first presidential wife to continue to hold a full-time job even if her husband is elected President of the United States. She intends to continue her work as head of the Heinz endowments and exercise her considerable clout in the philanthropic world.

Maria Teresa Thierstein Simoes-Ferreira Heinz Kerry was born in Mozambique in 1938. Her father was a prominent physician and the family lived in Mozambique during its era of colonization by Portugal. She met John Heinz, heir to the American ketchup fortune, when both were in Geneva for a period of study. After the two were wed, she settled in the United States, serving as an interpreter at the United Nations. John and Teresa Heinz appeared to have an extremely close and intimate marriage, and once John Heinz was elected to the United States Senate, Mrs. Heinz settled into a comfortable life as a Senate wife, philanthropist, and mother. All that changed on April 4, 1991 when Senator Heinz and six others were killed in the collision of his chartered airplane with a helicopter.

Shortly before Senator Heinz's death, Teresa Heinz had met John Kerry at an Earth Day observance in Washington, D.C. They were to meet again in Brazil in 1992 when both served as delegates to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. She had been widowed, he was divorced, both were interested in environmental causes, and they eventually formed a romantic relationship. As Judith Thurman of *The New Yorker* explains, "After a brief courtship, a short period of cohabitation, and the signing of a prenuptial agreement, the Kerrys were married in a civil ceremony on Nantucket in 1995."

John Kerry was understood by his schoolmates to be running for president from the time he was a boarding school student in Europe. Teresa Heinz and John Kerry formed not only a marriage, but a political partnership when they married, and the unconventional nature of their relationship has been apparent from the start. This came most clearly to the public's attention in 2002 when *The Washington Post* ran a major article by reporter Mark Leibovich in which Teresa Heinz (she did not yet refer to herself as Teresa Heinz Kerry) still referred to the late John Heinz as "my husband" and continued to wear the blue sapphire engagement ring that Heinz had given her. In the course of this interview—with Senator Kerry present—Mrs. Heinz continued to refer to the late Senator as her husband and made clear that Senator Kerry had made his peace with the shape of the relationship. When the reporter asked Senator Kerry about John Heinz's prominence in his marriage, Kerry responded, "I just feel, just sort of comfortable."

Teresa Heinz Kerry, like her husband, claims Catholic identity even as she rejects the church's teaching on contraception, homosexuality, and abortion. Her penchant for liberal causes is well known, and is thoroughly documented through the giving pattern of the Heinz charities. Her comments implying that motherhood is not a "real job" are consistent with the shape of her larger worldview.

According to the mentality of the cultural elites, motherhood is simply not a worthy occupation for a serious, gifted, intelligent, and educated woman. Mrs. Heinz Kerry may have apologized for getting her facts wrong as she spoke of Mrs. Bush, but even her apology implicitly affirmed the very point of offense.

The real issue here is the value of motherhood, and the dignity of women in the home. We have so perverted and corrupted our understanding of dignity, meaning, and purpose that we often miss the fact that motherhood is one of the highest callings on earth. What can be more important than the full-time nurture, care, and training of the next generation? What is really more important—a board meeting for a Fortune 500 corporation, or a conversation with a curious two year old?

The Christian worldview stands the world's confused set of priorities on its head. The home is the sphere of the most intimate and powerful influence, where lives are shaped, children are trained, lessons are learned, and character is formed. Motherhood is more than a "real job;" it is one of the most important callings on earth. Teresa Heinz Kerry is not really running for the role of first lady. Her husband is running for president in what may well be among the closest elections in American history. Voters should keep in mind that a man's choice of wife is one of the most revealing tests of character. The Kerrys are partners, not only in this political campaign, but in their shared worldview. The American people have been given a rare glimpse into that worldview quite by accident. Let's hope this knowledge is not wasted.

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