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First family turns to prime time

By **AMIE PARNES**¹ | 7/31/11 10:22 PM EDT

Once, if you wanted to glimpse the president or first lady on prime-time television, you had to tune in for the State of the Union.

Not anymore.

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Coming this fall to a TV near you: Michelle Obama will guest star on ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition." It will be her second cameo on an evening show since her 2009 debut on "Iron Chef America" and follows a Mother's Day special on the Hallmark Channel, a spot on "Sesame Street" and a taped appearance on the Kids Choice Awards. This fall, she will also appear on an upcoming episode of Nickelodeon's "iCarly" and the network's Worldwide Day of Play.

President Barack Obama also has guest-starred on family-friendly prime-time programming. In December, he made a cameo on Discovery Channel's "Mythbusters," and in February, he appeared on tape at the Academy Awards to share his favorite song from a film — "As Time Goes By" from "Casablanca."

And the shows aren't just featuring the Obamas. Last year, Vice President Joe Biden's wife, Jill Biden, made a guest appearance in "Army Wives," a scripted drama series on Lifetime, playing herself.

The White House is targeting a new

demographic: the must-see TV crowd. While former President George W. Bush made a mainstream television appearance on NBC's "Deal or No Deal" in 2008, top Obama administration officials have embraced prime-time television as a way to humanize their images while delivering messages about favorite initiatives such as healthful eating.

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“It’s a way for the White House to get out of the 24-hour news cycle and into something softer and more comfortable,” said Elayne Rapping, a professor of American Studies at SUNY Buffalo. “It’s definitely part of the administration’s strategy to make them seem homey and just like you and me.”

White House deputy press secretary Jamie Smith said the president and first lady “are always looking for creative and even unconventional ways to communicate with the American people to convey their deep and abiding commitment to strengthening our economy, building healthy communities where all children have the opportunity to thrive and supporting our troops and their families.”

For the “Extreme Makeover” show, the White House approached the program producers, a White House aide said. The two-hour special, which was taped in July and airs in October, features the first lady working on a greenhouse and children’s playhouse as part of a community resource center for homeless female veterans in North Carolina.

Sources familiar with the reality show taping said the first lady speaks about her Joining Forces initiative, a campaign aimed at recognizing military families’ struggles with issues such as child care, education and employment while their loved ones are deployed overseas. The first lady also will relay a similar message on “iCarly” in the coming months, White House aides said.

Jill Biden last fall urged communities to help military families during her “Army Wives” cameo.

“The important thing is to realize you’re not

alone,” Biden told a group of fictional military wives. “And when you need help, say something.”

White House aides said the appearances tried a nontraditional approach to increase public involvement in the issue. “We’re always looking for ways to make Americans more aware of the service and sacrifice of

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our military families,” said Biden’s communications director Courtney O’Donnell. “It’s about trying to reach as many people as we can to encourage them to get involved.”

The president, himself, hasn’t completely escaped criticism for appearing on non-news shows.

“I don’t want my president to be a TV star,” Bill Maher, the comedian and HBO talk show host, said on his program in 2009 after Obama appeared on the “Colbert Report” and a promotion for “The Tonight Show With Conan O’Brien.” “You don’t have to be on television every minute of every day — you’re the president, not a rerun of ‘Law & Order.’”

But Obama doesn’t seem to mind. The president — who watches everything from ESPN to “Entourage” — isn’t afraid of using entertainment TV.

When he appeared on “Mythbusters,” he noted that he and his girls are fans of the show. And he used the platform to send a message: Young people should revel in math and science.

As Obama said to the show’s cast: “You guys make it fun and exciting and interesting, and occasionally you blow things up.”

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