

THE POLITICAL PILLORYING OF PANTSUITS

THE MEDIA'S GENDER BIAS IN THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

By Ann Farmer

Former presidential candidate Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton¹ (D-NY) and former vice presidential nominee Governor Sarah Palin (R-AK) may stand on opposite sides of the electorate, but they shared some common ground during the 2008 presidential race. Both experienced a fair amount of gender bias and sexism throughout the campaign. Their looks, laughs, handclaps, hairstyles, pantsuits, sex appeal, ambition, tenacity—you name it—became fodder for all corners of the media establishment. The criticisms leveled at them from correspondents, reporters, pundits, and bloggers ranged from the usual assortment of clichés and stereotypes of women politicians to disrespectful, personal, and misogynistic comments.

Carving Up Clinton

Media Matters for America, a non-profit media watchdog group, tracked many of the instances: It reported that Tucker Carlson, MSNBC's senior

campaign correspondent, remarked as early as March 2007 that he found Clinton's comportment emasculating. "[T]here's just something about her that feels castrating, overbearing, and scary," he said. In another broadcast he quipped, "When she comes on television, I involuntarily cross my legs."

Chris Matthews, the host of MSNBC's *Hardball*, called Clinton a "she-devil" and said she only got to where she is because of her husband's "messing around." Glenn Beck, from the syndicated radio show *The Glenn Beck Program*, called her a "stereotypical bitch." Air America's radio host Randi Rhodes called Clinton "a big f***ing whore." And Ken Rudin, an editor of National Public Radio, equated her with Glenn Close's stalker character in the movie *Fatal Attraction*.

On the milder side, when Clinton wasn't criticized for her voice sounding "scolding" (CNN) or "nagging" (Fox), she was ridiculed for "cackling" (*New York Times*) and "clapping like a seal" (MSNBC).

She was mocked and her motivation second-guessed for crying once during a campaign stop. Talk show banter routinely turned to analysis of her "rainbow coalition" of pantsuits. Because Clinton pretty much stuck to the same hairstyle throughout the campaign, listeners were given a reprieve from the barrage of comments her changing hairdos used to elicit when she was first lady.

Her cleavage, however, was considered fair game. In July 2007, Robin Givhan, *Washington Post* fashion writer, penned a story derived from a fleeting, shadowy bit of cleavage she spied on Clinton. "There wasn't an unseemly amount of cleavage showing, but there it was. Undeniable," Givhan wrote. "It was startling to see that small acknowledgment of sexuality and femininity peeking out of the conservative—aesthetically speaking—environment of Congress."

Other publications, such as the *Miami Herald* and the *New York Times*, scoffed at the story's lack of

newsworthiness. When Media Matters followed up to see what kind of coverage the story generated, it tracked a total of 23 minutes and 42 seconds on the subject of Clinton's cleavage by MSNBC during separate broadcast segments. And in a further exchange on NBC's *Meet the Press*, John Harwood, CNBC chief Washington correspondent, suggested that the glancing bit of cleavage was intentional, saying, "When you look at the calculation that goes into everything that Hillary Clinton does, for her to argue that she was not aware of what she was communicating by her dress is like Barry Bonds saying he thought he was rubbing down with flaxseed oil."

Clinton bashing wasn't limited to the news media. Online sale items included a Hillary Clinton nutcracker that featured her "stainless steel legs" designed to "crack the toughest nuts." Pro-Obama T-shirts surfaced with the slogan "Bro's before Ho's." During a campaign stop in Massachusetts, Clinton protesters paraded "Iron My Shirt" signs. An anti-Clinton group on Facebook titled "Hillary Clinton: Stop Running for President and Make Me a Sandwich" numbered in the thousands.

No One Is Left Unscathed

If Clinton was belittled as a harpie, Palin was derided as a bimbo. Within hours of the announcement that she was picked as Sen. John McCain's running mate, Palin was being coined a "former beauty queen." Radio host Rush Limbaugh declared her a "babe." And Donny Deutsch, host of CNBC's *Big Idea*, similarly praised her for being "sexy," saying, "I want her lying next to me in bed" as an analogy for why voters would vote for her. He added, "Hillary Clinton didn't figure it out. She didn't put a skirt on."

Meanwhile, commentators and others (including countless mommy bloggers) lashed out sharply against Palin's decision to run for vice president when she has an infant with Down syndrome. And this time, it was *her* hairdo—her "out-of-date beehive," as described by some—that became a running joke.

The wives of the party front runners also took some hits. When clips of Michelle Obama ran on Fox News, she was chryoned "Obama's baby mama," a slang street term that refers to a mother who is not married to her child's father. In describing her countenance, Fox News host Bill O'Reilly said Michelle Obama looked "like an angry woman." Cindy McCain, on the other hand, was regularly mocked as a "Stepford wife" for her cool, detached style.

Double Standards

Many would say, what's the big deal? That's politics. Men get ripped apart, too. And they do. But male politicians are not expected to curb their ambitions in order to stay home and take care of the kids. Their grooming habits and wardrobe faux pas also may get critiqued, such as when presidential hopeful Sen. John Edwards got outed for spending \$400 for a haircut. However, male candidates are not judged on their appearances anywhere near the extent that women candidates are. Just five weeks after Palin was introduced at the Republican convention, a Google search of the term "Sarah Palin hairstyle" turned up 197,000 Web page results.

And whereas voters demand a show of strength from presidential candidates, a forceful female candidate is still disparaged, even in 2008, for being authoritative and determined. "Brittle," "an iron lady," and "unfeminine," were just some of the adjectives used to describe Clinton. Although, had she appeared too soft, it's unlikely she would have come as far with her campaign as she did.

Barbara Pendleton, a Bradley University professor emeritus, talked about the double standards that Clinton faced during the primary campaign. Addressing a chapter of the National Organization for Women in March, Pendleton said of Clinton, "When she campaigns hard, she is often described as strategizing, calculating, or fake. But when men campaign hard, it is refusing to cede an inch."

Syndicated *Boston Globe* columnist Ellen Goodman wrote in February about how Clinton and Barack Obama played against type during the campaign. Goodman said that Obama, with the advantage of being a man, had more wiggle room in terms of embodying a gentler, more collaborative style. "Hillary was quite right that she needed to be seen as the experienced, competent, commander in chief," Goodman wrote. "Obama was quite right about the country's desire to reach across boundaries and beyond divisiveness."

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Pendleton also reminded her audience that sexism in America "hurts us all." And "women," in general, were pulled into the political fray when *New York Times* columnist Bill Kristol said on Fox News, "Look, the only people for Hillary Clinton are the Democratic establishment and white women. . . . White women are a problem, that's, you know—we all live with that." After other panelists expressed their disagreement with him, he backpedaled, saying, "I know, I shouldn't have said that."

The level of vehemence shown Clinton was an indicator of the extent to which her opponents viewed her as a genuine threat. During a McCain campaign stop in November 2007, a female supporter asked him, "How do we beat the bitch?" As seen on the clip posted on YouTube, McCain laughed and stumbled a bit before responding, "But that's an excellent question."

McCain was later criticized for not addressing the derogatory nature

of the remark. Some questioned whether there might not have been more outrage if it had been the “N” word used against a black candidate like Obama, rather than the “B” word as applied to Clinton.

Lis Wiehl, a legal analyst for Fox News and the author of *The 51% Minority—How Women Still Are Not Equal and What You Can Do About It*, debated that question on Fox News with radio personality Marc H. Rudov. She said, “I mean, can you imagine if they had used the N-word? Or the other B-word for a man who doesn’t know who his father is?”

After dancing around his answer, Rudov eventually replied with the pejorative that, “The woman [namely Hillary Clinton] is not called a B-word because she’s assertive and aggressive; she’s called a B-word because she acts like one.”

Sexism Unchecked

The gender bias was clearly worse in certain corners. The most egregious statements about Clinton and Palin were made by broadcasters and not by the leading political reporters or analysts for print media. According to Media Matters, cable television was a chief offender during the primary season. During the months of September, October, and November 2007, it conducted a study of the MSNBC show, *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, logging Matthews’ statements with regard to Clinton and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Both were the front-running candidates of each party at that time. The results showed that Matthews made 10 times as many negative remarks about Clinton as about Giuliani, and he made nearly three times as many positive remarks about Giuliani as about Clinton.

Some conservative commentators simply saw it as their responsibility to tear down Clinton in whatever way possible. After Clinton acceded the primary race to Obama, Sean Hannity of Fox News was told by Fox contributor Juan Williams that he had “demonized” Clinton during the

race. “That’s my job,” Hannity said. “I led the ‘Stop Hillary Express.’” He added, “By the way, now it’s the ‘Stop Obama Express.’”

Analysts believe “Clinton fatigue”—disenchantment with both Sen. Clinton and former President Clinton—and other factors also contributed to her demise. At the same time, deep-seated negativity seemed to undergird many of the anti-Hillary sentiments expressed by members of the media. In March, when Clinton

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was still receiving criticism for refusing to bow out of the race after Super Tuesday, *Washington Post* staff writer Libby Copeland wrote that “Hillary hate is something profound, something that may never be fully unraveled. It is her very name, so polarizing; it is Slick Willy and Vince Foster and Whitewater and that nickname ‘Shrillary’ and her supposed unending ambition and . . . something else, something ancient. It is Hillary Clinton stretched like taffy, the photos you see of her on right-wing Web sites with her eyes all big and crazy.”

In June, after Clinton ended her campaign, CBS news anchor Katie Couric slammed the media for its sexist coverage of her, saying, “Hillary Clinton received some of the most unfair, hostile coverage I’ve ever seen.” She followed that up with a special commentary on her nightly broadcast, in which she added, “One of the great lessons of [Hillary Clinton’s] campaign is the continued and accepted role of

sexism in American life, particularly in the media. . . . It isn’t just Hillary Clinton who needs to learn a lesson from this primary season—it’s all the people who crossed the line, and all the women and men who let them get away with it.”

Oftentimes, though, the comedy establishment took sharper aim at what was going on than the mainstream media. After the B-word incident during the McCain stop, comic Tina Fey turned it into a *Saturday Night Live* comedy sketch, declaring herself and her SNL sidekick, Amy Poehler, to be bitches too. “Yeah, deal with it,” Poehler said. “Know what?” Fey said. “Bitches get stuff done.”

In the same sketch, Fey ridiculed radio host Rush Limbaugh for saying that America doesn’t want to watch its president turn into an “old lady.” “Really,” Fey said, “they didn’t seem to mind when Ronald Reagan did that.” She also eschewed the notion that it would be a drag to vote for Clinton because it would, in effect, be a vote for co-presidents: Hillary and Bill Clinton. “That would be terrible,” Fey said. “Having two intelligent, qualified people working together to solve problems. Yuck. Why would you let Starsky talk to Hutch?”

The Palin Factor

In September, with the emergence of Palin into the race, issues of sexism were turned upside down and inside out. Largely because of her inexperience, particularly in international affairs, the media and feminists charged that she was chosen by McCain as a cynical and sexist marketing ploy to lure disaffected Hillary Clinton voters. Joe Conason of Salon.com wrote, “But if Palin’s résumé is limited, to put it politely, she possesses the only two qualities that McCain now seems to consider essential: She is a right-wing religious ideologue with female gender characteristics.”

“It won’t work,” said author and feminist organizer Gloria Steinem in an op-ed published in the *Los Angeles Times*. “[L]et’s be clear: The culprit is

John McCain. He may have chosen Palin out of change-envy, or a belief that women can't tell the difference between form and content."

Although the Republican Party platform stands hard for issues like abstinence before marriage, Republicans were quick to put a reverse sexist spin on the revelation that Palin's 17-year-old, unmarried daughter was pregnant. "If this doesn't resonate with every woman in America, I'll eat my hat," said Bill Noll, an Alaska delegate to the Republican Convention.

Kathleen Parker, a writer for the *National Review*, also pulled the gender card when she withdrew her support from Palin after deciding she wasn't ready to be vice president, by suggesting, "She can bow out for personal reasons, perhaps because she wants to spend more time with her newborn. No one would criticize a mother who puts her family first."

Standing Firm

Throughout their individual campaigns, both Clinton and Palin demonstrated that they don't flinch easily. Palin, in an interview with *Vogue* a year earlier, expressed her discomfort with the level of attention the media gave to her looks. "A reporter once asked me about it during the campaign," she said, referring to her campaign for governor, "and I assured him I was trying to be as frumpy as I could by wearing my hair on top of my head and these schoolmarm glasses."

But when NBC news correspondent David Shuster said in February 2008 that Chelsea Clinton's appearance on the campaign trail smacked of her being "pimped out," Hillary Clinton voiced her displeasure at the derogatory nature of the remark. "I am a mother first and a candidate second, and I found the remarks incredibly offensive," she said, while campaigning in Maine, explaining that she had sent a letter to NBC news executives about it. "I can take whatever comes my way; that's part of what I signed up for as a candidate, as an office holder. But I think that

there's been a troubling pattern of comments and behavior that has to be held accountable."

Various groups including the National Organization for Women, the Feminist Majority Foundation, the Women's Media Center, and others wrote letters and issued press releases about the gender bias and sexism they believed was apparent. And there were repercussions at times. NBC did temporarily suspend Shuster. Fox News eventually fired the producer responsible for the "baby mama" chyrons of Michelle Obama. Matthews issued an on-air apology at least once for some of his remarks about Clinton, saying his comments were "callous" and "dismissive." He blamed the speed of his show for things getting out of hand, saying, "I don't like saying things so carefully, so politically correctly, that no one thinks they even said anything."

At What Cost?

After Clinton's campaign began trailing Obama's, but before she withdrew, Marie Cocco, a syndicated political columnist for The Washington Post Writers Group, described the coverage of Clinton as "truly vitriolic, hateful and vulgar." She didn't go so far as to say that it was responsible for the extent of Clinton's slippage. But she did feel it was a "boulder on her back."

Others also felt that media gender bias cost Clinton something. One week after Clinton withdrew her historic bid for the presidency, Allida M. Black, the project director and editor of the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers at George Washington University and a founder of WomenCount PAC, was quoted in the *Times* as saying, "How do we deal with the media who many, many people feel compounded the missteps by the campaign and robbed her of any shot she might have had at the nomination?"

In an interview quoted in the *Times* that same month, Howard Dean, the chairman of the Democratic Party, called for a "national discussion" of what took place. "The

media took a very sexist approach to Senator Clinton's campaign," he was quoted as saying. "It's pretty appalling," continued Dean, as he explained that he believed the reason the issue "resonated" was because "Mrs. Clinton got treated the way a lot of women got treated their whole lives."

After the election, Marcia Kuntz, editor-in-chief at Media Matters for America, reflected on the media's biased treatment of both Clinton and Palin. "The presence of two prominent female candidates for national office in one year exposed an enduring and pervasive sexism, as well as a complete inability on the part of the media to deal with powerful women," she said. 🗨️

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Endnote

1. As this issue goes to press, Hillary Clinton resigned her Senate seat on January 21 immediately after being sworn in as secretary of state in President Barack Obama's new administration.

NOW's
Media Hall of Shame
"2008 ELECTION EDITION"

Check out the most outrageous moments of sexism from mainstream media's coverage of the 2008 elections at www.now.org/issues/media/hall_of_shame.