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"The bitch," "the ditz," and the male heroes: Representations of feminism and postfeminism in campaign 2008

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“The Bitch,” “The Ditz,” and the Male Heroes: Representations of Feminism and
Postfeminism in Campaign 2008

by

Dana Schowalter

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Communication
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To all the women who strive to be strong and independent,
and especially to Helen Marie Schowalter, who encouraged me to do so.

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Dana Schowalter

ABSTRACT

This study is a textual analysis of the mainstream media coverage of the 2008 U.S. Presidential election, surveying more than 1,000 news stories featuring Clinton, Palin, Obama, Biden and McCain published between January 1, 2007 and November 11, 2008. The central findings of this study are twofold: first, mainstream news sources continue to use stereotypical and sexist news frames that describe women in ways that are at odds with the criteria we set for being a good president; and second, feminism is characterized in ways that divorce the ideas of the movement from the activism necessary to overcome existing injustices.

Chapter 2 discusses how the news frames and double binds—in place for more than 100 years in media coverage and constructions of women—are still being used to describe women candidates today. These frames highlight sexist concerns about how women candidates will balance their public and private lives and deflect the multiple, competing roles women are capable of enacting. Chapter 3 analyses news articles that relate the terms “feminism” and “feminist” to comments about Clinton and Palin to determine the ways in which the movement is being defined by mainstream media. The chapter argues that this coverage offered a limited vision of feminism that ignored race,

class, and issues presented in the third wave. It also divorces the feminist movement from the activist work that has and will continue to make change possible in our country by equating feminism with postfeminist ideas. Chapter 4 highlights the associations made between the male candidates and the women's movement. The coverage of the male candidates in the campaign posits a vision of women's experiences that are defined through the media by male candidates. These definitions highlight women as caregivers and separate the issues important to women from the feminist activism necessary to work toward changing the situation women in the United States face.

Finally, the conclusion offers suggestions for how to intervene in the 135-year cycle that perpetuates limited and damaging views of women candidates and of the feminist movement. Through these types of interventions, feminist-minded men and women can continue to work toward more positive and fair representations of women candidates and that changes in representations of women candidates will lead to the election of the first woman president of the United States.

Chapter 1

Introduction

On August 19, 2008, Marie and Richard Lawrence Poe reintroduced their SlapHillary.org Web site, touting it as “good, clean fun for the whole family—and educational too!” They go on to say, “Young folks will get a first-hand lesson in civics, by taking part in America’s grand tradition of political satire” (Poe, 2008). The site’s “fun” and “educational” interface allows users to slap an animated image of Hillary Rodham Clinton’s face with a click of the mouse. The original version was launched during Clinton’s 2000 Senate race and received over five million hits in its first five days online (Poe 2000). When Clinton’s supporters threatened to create a site that allowed users to kick her opponent, Rick Lazio, Poe was quick to point out that these types of sites only succeed when launched against people who scare the public. He stated, “Kicking Rick Lazio incurs no risk, violates no taboos. People simply do not fear Rick Lazio. It is the undercurrent of fear that lends spice to the SlapHillary experience” (Poe, 2000). Apparently the lesson the site hopes to teach users is to react with violence and fear when women attempt to attain power by running for public office.

But perhaps what is most notable about SlapHillary.org is that it is not an anomaly. Instead, it is part of an established tradition of using public acts of

condemnation against women who threaten the patriarchal order. Sometimes these acts are blatant—asking online gamers to slap a virtual face or calling strong women “bitches”—but other times these attempts to keep women out of the public sphere are not so obvious. This study focuses on the latter, more subtle references as to why women are unfit for the public sphere, and, more specifically, on mainstream news articles that portray the women in the 2008 presidential election as unnatural and unfit for such a post. The central thesis of this study is two-pronged: first, mainstream news sources continue to use stereotypical and sexist news frames that describe women in ways that are at odds with the criteria we set for being a good president; second, mainstream media associate feminism with ideas that divorce the movement from the activism necessary to overcome existing injustices. These frames have changed only slightly in the 135 years that women have been seeking the presidency. Without intervention, this coverage will likely continue to be a problem for women candidates in the years to come.

Among the major problems with the representations of feminism and of women candidates are the limiting frames through which we view both. LexisNexis lists over 1,000 articles in major US newspapers between January 1, 2007 (the week before several of the winning candidates entered the race) and the week following the 2008 presidential election, that discuss both feminism and one of the four presidential candidates on the major party tickets.¹ Though the movement and its advocates are regularly mentioned in the press, reporters rarely explicitly offer their readers a working definition of either. The term *feminism* has evaded a monolithic definition in both popular sources and academic

¹ Retrieved December 30, 2008 from http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/us/lnacademic/results/listview/listview.do?unclassified=false&selRCNodeID=20&docsInCategory=943&treeMax=true&nodeDisplayName=Newspapers&sort=RELEVANCE&risb=21_T5459411747&cisb=22_T5459411752&expandable=true&fromClickNode=true

scholarship since its inception, so looking at the context in which feminism has been mentioned in the 2008 campaign coverage can shed light on the ways in which the American public is being asked to define and view the feminist movement in our current political moment.

Because feminism remains a term with negative connotations for many Americans, analyzing news coverage of feminism and feminists can also help media scholars intervene by positing a more inclusive, positive portrayal of the movement. While feminism is difficult to define considering the length of time the movement has spanned and the broad range of ideas that fall under the term, we can and should strive to offer definitions that challenge people to reconsider their negative perceptions of feminism. This study has been particularly informed by one such definition, one posited by Janelle Reinelt, who states that “feminism is a political commitment to three things: to women’s issues, to a way of life, to an intellectual critique.” As a political commitment, feminism requires more than just an acknowledgement that inequalities based on gender are still a problem in our society; we need continued activism to continue breaking down the barriers that prevent women from fully participating in the public sphere. In an effort to create a definition that can be adapted over time and across cultures, Reinelt suggests that what constitutes women’s issues and a proper way of life will change considerably across time and regions, but the issues important to the full participation of women in public life will always be central to feminist activism. Of particular interest to this study is the premise that feminism must include an intellectual critique. As a white, middle-class woman who is privileged enough to attend graduate school to study issues of feminism, media, and politics, I have spent my time looking at (the largely negative)

media representations of women in leadership positions. For me, and for many feminists, the movement is more than just an idea to which we ascribe in our academic or private lives; it is a lens through which we view the world that cannot be taken on or off. It is a political commitment, or something that we continue to work toward through activism in the public sphere and through criticism that starts conversations on a personal and public level about the role women can and should play in our society.

It is my contention that women can and should serve as President of the United States. Electing a woman president will not signal an end to the discrimination women continue to endure when they attempt to exert power and influence in the public sphere, as these problems will likely continue to plague women in public and private settings for years to come. It will not be a sign that the work of feminism is over because all women are equal, as the first woman elected to the presidency will likely come from a much more privileged position than the majority of women in the U.S. Instead, electing a woman president will be a significant achievement because it will signal a more equal playing field, one in which a woman has just as much of a chance for success as her male counterparts. This does not necessarily mean that the path to that success will be the same, but that it is even a possibility will signal a huge shift in the face of presidential politics in the United States. Having a woman serve as president will also serve as a prominent role model for the leaders of tomorrow. During her concession speech, Clinton thanked the mothers and fathers who brought their daughters to her campaign events to show them that they could be anything they wanted to be. The irony that Clinton professed that little girls could be president while delivering her concession speech does not fall on deaf ears, but the idea that we can imagine a woman in such a post only after

women are brave enough to fight the system to make it there is an important message and an idea for which we must continue to fight. The idea is not that we must vote for women on account of their gender. Instead, we must continue to have brave women traverse the public sphere to fight for a media system that discusses and questions women and men in the same ways.

In addition to influencing the way we view women in the United States, these perspectives also help to illuminate what role, if any, feminism is to play in our future. Because the majority of Americans have not taken college courses in feminist theory, these “media texts warrant close attention for the stories they tell us—particularly those stories that concern historically and politically significant social movements, such as feminism” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 34). A number of scholars look to feminist and postfeminist theories to address the ways we learn about these movements in TV and film. Applying these theories to news narratives about women running for political office will shed light on the ways antifeminism, postfeminism and male feminisms are advanced, and sometimes troubled, in popular news sources. Holding a feminist lens to mainstream newspaper coverage of the 2008 campaign helps to illuminate the ways feminism and politics are intertwined and to find the pulse of feminism in our current society.

These examples of news coverage of female politicians are significant because they help us understand how women are positioned within the patriarchal power structures of government representation. The persistence of stereotypical news coverage of these women has consequences for both the candidates and the society at large. The consistently negative coverage of women candidates discourages women from seeking higher elected offices and suggests that a woman’s natural place is in the home (Falk,

2008, p. 75). In order to combat these consequences, we need continued feminist criticism to draw attention to the messages inherent in problematic representations of women vying for positions of power. Additionally, the associations between woman candidates and references to the feminist movement, both explicit and implied, are important in determining what roles feminism can play in our future.

In addition to commenting directly and indirectly on feminism, the discourse surrounding the presidential race also problematizes some of the long held assumptions about women running for political office. Despite efforts to peg her as such, Clinton is *not* the first qualified woman candidate to have run for president. She is just one in a long list of qualified women candidates who have been running for president since the 1872 election,² and had she been successful in her quest, she would have joined over 50 women who have served as the president or prime minister of other countries. Taken together, the mainstream news accounts of Clinton and Palin's campaign form what Kenneth Burke refers to as a "terministic screen" that directs our "attention into some channels rather than others" (Burke, 1966, p. 45). As this study will show, the media tend to direct our attention to women candidates' gender by pointing to physical appearance or home lives, and they only rarely discuss policy positions or more serious issues such as the role that sexism plays in covering female candidates. Articles also leave out the larger context of prominent women running for office by ignoring the role that feminism has played in enabling women's participation in electoral politics and the role that race and

² Political science researchers Robert P Watson and Ann Gordon (2003) and media studies scholar Erika Falk (2008) note the following prominent women candidates for the presidency: Victoria Woodhull (1872), Belva Lockwood (1884), Margaret Chase Smith (1964), Shirley Chisholm (1972), Patricia Schroeder (1987), Elizabeth Dole (2000), Carol Moseley Braun (2004), and Hillary Rodham Clinton (2008). While several other women have declared their candidacy for one of the two major political parties, and many others have secured the nomination for smaller political parties, these candidates are regularly cited as being the most experienced and viable candidates on the market.

class play in shaping our worldviews.

That class has been largely ignored is not surprising given the current corporate media system that values certain demographics over others. Mainstream news sources link feminism with consumerism by suggesting that feminism is not intrinsically valuable, but instead, that it is a means to a financially comfortable lifestyle that allows women to purchase high-status commodities (Vavrus, 2002, p. 23). Media scholar Mary Vavrus argues that this is a major tenet of “postfeminist ideology: that white, heterosexual, and middle-class women’s issues can be generalized to all women, including those whose identities include none of these traits” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 23). She states in the conclusion of her award-winning book on the proliferation of postfeminism in political coverage of women candidates that the wide reach of these ideas across media make it anti-democratic because

a small minority of relatively privileged women are those anointed by news workers to represent the political needs and goals of women as a whole. The life complexities of and great variations among women simply do not appear in mainstream reports of women in politics or of women living everyday lives. The ideal female subject in the news tends to be the apolitical soccer-mom consumer or the relatively well-heeled, well-financed postfeminist candidate. This ideal subject arises out of the media oligopoly’s political economy and also serves to validate it: She is not especially threatening to the practices of corporate executives. (Vavrus, 2002, p. 184)

While it is not surprising that the media have and continue to serve the interests of the

consumers they are trying to attract, the proliferation of information about white, middle-class women has also meant a lack of information about the majority of women in the United States who do not fall into those categories. Because traditional women's work is consistently undervalued and because women comprise a disproportionate number of the United States' working poor, drawing attention to the life experiences of these women, instead of hiding them in the sea of generalizations about white, middle-class women, is important for political and social justice.

More surprising is the lack of information about race, women of color feminisms, and womanism. None of the mainstream news articles I surveyed included a discussion of womanism, despite the historic role race played in the 2008 election and despite the fact that over 1,000 articles mentioned one of the prominent candidates along with the term "feminism." Instead, as I will show in Chapter 3, race and gender are pegged as competing loyalties women of color must choose between. When they choose to value their race by voting for Obama, the media suggest that they are abandoning the ties they have to their gender, and when they choose to value their gender by voting for Clinton, they are accused of disloyalty to their racial group. Only one article acknowledged the multiple intersections of race and gender that women of color experience, and interestingly, the article only mentioned this idea when quoting Patricia Hill Collins as she criticized the press for seeing "race and gender in unidimensional terms" (Vedantam, 2008, p. A2). While there were some discussions of racial minorities, there were no discussions about whiteness as a racial category. The lack of a meaningful discussion of whiteness reinforces the idea that being white is the norm and the base from which all other racial and ethnic groups will be measured.

The media also ignore the fact that women have served as heads of state in other nations and as leaders of several Fortune 500 companies within the United States, and instead, they still publish questions about whether women (and especially women with young children) can handle the pressure of a job as demanding as the presidency. These terministic screens are, and have been, systemic issues that have influenced discussions of women candidates since the late 1800s when women first entered the political arena (Falk, 2008). Because these screens deflect information about women in leadership roles, they have significantly decreased the viability of women in influential positions such as the presidency.

While several news sources would argue that their coverage reflects an inherent truth about the events and opinions in the world, Burke (1966) states that “even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (p. 45). So while news coverage does, to some extent, reflect reality by including quotations and ideas from average citizens and politicians, it would be virtually impossible for news organizations to represent all possible reactions to any given question. As such, reporters and editors select certain ideas to include in their publications while deflecting other possibilities. Still, the articles can be critiqued for the picture of society they do paint, regardless of whether that image accurately reflects society as a whole. Burke states that regardless of whether the media select quotations or news frames deliberately or spontaneously, the resulting messages are prescriptive, and thus they contain implicit messages about the types of work women “*shalt* or ... *shalt not* do” (p. 44). These messages are especially problematic for women presidential candidates as they struggle

to meet the competing and contradictory demands of traditional womanhood and national politics.

To reach these conclusions, I surveyed nearly 1,000 news stories featuring Clinton, Palin, Obama, Biden, and McCain, paying special attention to ways men and women candidates were represented in relation to news frames that limit our understanding of how successful women can be in the public sphere. I selected articles from “hard news” sections of the top five circulating national newspapers, and not articles appearing on the editorial pages such as letters to the editor or columns from the editorial staff. While editorial articles contain a sampling of opinions from constituents throughout the United States, their articles are meant to be provocative and argue from the position of a particular worldview.

Though hard news articles are not without these types of statements, they often contain sexist and provocative comments in the form of direct quotations from average citizens, and as such, sexism in hard news articles is often more subtle (Falk, 2008, p. 34). As Falk explains:

It is not really possible to separate the citizens’ voices from the media voice because the reporters and editors selected and framed the quotations that were printed. The reader does not know if many people were interviewed to get one incendiary sexist comment to print or if all people expressed the same basic sentiment.... [The direct quotations from citizens] represent only the citizen voices that the media choose to disseminate. (Falk, 2008, p. 34)

Even though the most “objective” of news sources find it difficult to deny the role that reporters’ personal biases play in the creation of news articles (Vavrus, 2002, p. 3), articles from the news sections of these newspapers are expected to contain a plethora of voices and opinions and are thus deemed to be more truthful and realistic.

Due to limitations on time and space, news organizations publish only a fraction of the information available on any given subject. As Vavrus (2002) claims, “News coverage thus may be perceived as a reflection of reality, when it should more accurately be considered a partial, selective, and ideological narrative” (p. 31). But Falk (2008) argues that this limited media narrative, however fraught with challenges to the idea of objectivity, is still influential in shaping public opinion. Because few differences occur between the quantity and quality of coverage of the 2008 campaign across the top circulating papers, millions of readers are subjected to similar messages each time they pick up the morning paper. When that message includes regular commentary about the relation between women and political office, the “widespread experiences” that readers share are “important, powerful, and influential” for voters’ perceptions of women candidates (Falk, 2008, p. 28).

Overview

The following chapters include a review of the literature surrounding feminist theory, media studies, and women political candidates. Using textual analysis, this study criticizes mainstream news articles for the limiting frames they use to define and describe women presidential candidates in ways that are different from those used to describe the men in the campaign. Chapter 2 discusses how the news frames Vavrus conceptualized in

her analysis of the 1992 Year of the Woman coverage and Jamieson's double binds affecting women vying for top offices are still being used to describe women candidates today. These frames highlight sexist concerns about how women candidates will balance their public and private lives and deflect the multiple, competing roles women are capable of enacting.

Chapter 3 analyses news articles that relate the terms "feminism" and "feminist" to comments about Clinton and Palin to determine the ways in which the movement is being defined by mainstream media. The chapter argues that this coverage offered a limited vision of feminism that ignored race, class, and issues presented in the third wave. It also divorces the feminist movement from the activist work that has and will continue to make change possible in our country by equating feminism with postfeminist ideas.

While Chapter 3 focuses on the women candidates, Chapter 4 highlights the associations made between the male candidates and the women's movement. Because the male candidates did not define themselves as feminists, but instead as supporters of a narrowly defined set of "women's issues," the coverage of the male candidates in the campaign posits a vision of women's experiences that are defined through the media by male candidates. These definitions highlight women as caregivers and separate the issues important to women from the feminist activism necessary to work toward changing the situation women in the United States face.

Finally, the conclusion offers suggestions for how to intervene in the 135-year cycle that perpetuates limited and damaging views of women candidates and of the feminist movement. Through these types of interventions, it is my hope that feminist-minded men and women can continue to work toward more positive and fair

representations of women candidates and that changes in representations of women candidates will lead to the election of the first woman president of the United States.

Chapter 2

Motherhood, Makeovers, and Misogyny: Troubling Depictions of Women Candidates

*When a woman gives her love, as most women do, generously—
it is accepted.
When a woman shares her thoughts,
as some women do, graciously—
it is allowed.
When a woman fights for power,
as all women would like to,
quietly or loudly,
it is questioned.*

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton recited the poem from which this excerpt was taken in front of some of the world's most influential women as part of her remarks at the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. The poem, written years earlier by a young woman from New Dehli, India, reflected the sentiment of women across the globe who encountered resistance when they attempted to break down traditional gender stereotypes. As a successful lawyer, nontraditional First Lady, and a woman committed to working on behalf of women's rights, Clinton was no stranger to this type of criticism. But perhaps the most vocal criticism of her power and influence began in January of 2007 when she announced she was entering the presidential race.

The demands of traditional womanhood³ make running for political office especially contentious for women, who often struggle to meet the competing and contradictory demands of domesticity and national politics. As candidates, women are expected to play a prominent role in the public sphere by giving speeches, discussing policy issues, and engaging in debates with their opponents, but “good” women are encouraged to enact supportive and nurturing roles. Because there were very few lapses in this type of overtly sexist and misogynistic coverage during the last 135 years, American women have learned early and often about the uphill battle they will face if they attempt to break the highest glass ceiling. Looking at the ways Clinton and Palin were described and defined by mainstream media in the 2008 presidential election can help to shed light on the ways people view women’s progress and participation in the nation’s highest offices.

In 1993, Betty Friedan commented on the need for this type of analysis when she stated that “coverage of Hillary Clinton is a massive Rorschach test of the evolution of women in our society” (Jamieson, 1995, p. 22). If the same can be said of Palin and Clinton in 2008, then the continuously problematic news coverage of women politicians suggests that the U.S. needs continued feminist action if women are to be taken seriously as competent contenders in the political arena. This chapter argues that these news accounts form a terministic screen through which sexist concerns about how women candidates will manage the expectations of traditional womanhood are selected and reflected, while coverage of women as credible and competent leaders capable of

³ “Traditional womanhood,” especially as explicated by theorists in this chapter, is very much a white, heterosexual, upper class-bound concept. For the ways that African American women have always been excluded from this concept of womanhood, see bell hooks (1999) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000).

balancing multiple, competing roles are deflected, creating a no-win situation for women attempting to break the highest political glass ceiling.

Surveying over 250 articles from the news sections of the top five circulating national papers, this chapter pays special attention to the ways the candidates were described or framed in relation to their similarities and differences from male candidates, as well as to descriptions of how the women balanced their personal and professional lives. I selected articles from “hard news” sections of the top five circulating national newspapers, and I excluded articles appearing on the editorial pages such as letters to the editor or columns from the editorial staff. Using examples published between January 1, 2007 (the week before several Democratic candidates officially entered the race) and going through the week following the November 4, 2008 election date, this chapter will analyze three issues: first, the ways Mary Vavrus’ 1992 Year of the Woman news frames pigeon-holed women as fundamentally different from their male counterparts; second, consistent with Vavrus’ expectations, how news organizations continued to discuss Clinton and Palin within these limiting frames throughout the 2008 election. Third, this analysis will show how Jamison’s concept of the double bind as it relates to women in leadership roles has only rarely been expanded to the both-and complexity of women’s lived experiences, a move Jamieson called for in *Beyond the Double Bind*. Instead, multiple mainstream news articles directly and indirectly questioned whether Clinton and Palin could be “good” wives and mothers while in office and pushed the femininity/competence bind that questions the relationship between intelligence and physical attractiveness.

Resistance and Persistence

What is most frightening about coverage of female political candidates is the persistence of sexism over time. Despite the growing number of women seeking office, and proving that they are capable of leadership, women are consistently questioned when they attempt to cross the political stage. In her analysis of woman talk in white patriarchy, Dale Spender states that women speaking their minds—in public and in private—are viewed as dangerous because they threaten to unravel the constructed nature of male dominance in our society. She writes:

The extent and complexity of male control of woman talk helps to reveal the powerful role that talk plays in the construction and maintenance of the social order. One obvious means of preventing the talk of women is by intimidation. The threat to the patriarchal order which is posed by woman talk is countered by a threat to women who are presumptuous enough to attempt to talk. There are numerous social injunctions against women talk and there is method—not madness—behind the apparent contradiction that women, who demonstrably do not talk as much as men, are consistently rebuked for talking too much. (Spender, 1980, p. 106)

Historically, women who attempted to assert themselves in the public realm have been silenced by a plethora of public criticisms. Several instances of the public condemnation of women who refuse to retreat into the home have been documented; among the most notorious examples of such punishments include the stocks, branks, and ducking stools⁴

⁴ These forms of punishment were largely used in Western Europe and the United States among white patriarchies. Stocks consisted of a wooden board that restricted the movement of the woman's limbs, thus rendering her unable to defend herself from physical attacks administered by onlookers. Branks were often

used in the 16th and 17th centuries to silence women who talked too much or failed to live up to their responsibilities in the home (Dobash et al, 1986, p. 19-20).

The gender policing that silences women like Clinton is not new, but what is new and frightening is the way the Internet and mainstream news sources are being used to bring the public condemnation into the privacy of our own homes. As such, the role of gender police is decentralized as the responsibility of keeping women in their place—silent and in the home—moves from those attending public condemnations in the form of stocks and branks to the privacy of our homes. With this move, we all become responsible for keeping women down.

The perpetuation of this condemnation is suggestive of the problematic ways in which women political candidates are described in mainstream media. In addition to blatantly violent and degrading commentary, news media that attempt to introduce us to women candidates tend to do so using a plethora of stereotypical representations that create competing and contradictory ideas about what it means to be a woman campaigning for office in the United States. Because this problematic coverage has persisted relatively unchanged and unchallenged over time, it has come to serve as a prescriptive message about the types of power women can legitimately attain in our society. These texts are “already commenting on feminism” because they are informed by “one of the main goals of feminism: to improve the conditions of women’s lives by revealing and then subverting the reproduction of patriarchal power” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 6).

used to literally silence women by placing a metal helmet equipped with a sharp mouthpiece over their head and shoulders that delivered painful lacerations in the mouth each time the woman attempted to move her tongue. Women were tied to “ducking stools” as punishment for speaking too much and dunked repeatedly in a body of water to “cool her immoderate heat” (Dobash et al, 1986).

The Year of the Woman: The Sequel

Sexist and demeaning coverage is evident in even the most successful political campaigns. In 1992, Barbara Boxer, Carol Moseley Braun, Dianne Feinstein, and Patty Murray won seats in the U.S. Senate, bringing the total number of women in the chamber to a mere five. Additionally, 24 non-incumbent women were sworn into the House of Representatives, much to the dismay of Republican Henry Hyde, who commented that Congress was starting to look “like a mall” (Palmer and Simon, 2008, p. 26). Despite the relatively modest gains of women political candidates that year, the press labeled 1992 “The Year of the Woman” and praised the four new women senators for making huge strides for gender equality in the United States.

In her analysis of the 1992 campaign coverage, Mary Vavrus (2002) suggests that these women were plagued by three common news frames, which she labels “‘Washington outsiders,’ ‘status quo challengers,’ and ‘women as change agents’” (p. 84). Women were constructed as Washington outsiders when attention was paid to the fact that women have historically been denied access to the political arena. This coverage suggested that an increase in the number of women politicians would lead to an increase in representations of women’s marginalized voices (pp. 87-90). When pegged as status quo challengers, women were best suited to fix government corruption because they would break down the “old boys” networks and force a serious consideration of the domestic issues common to all women (pp. 90-94). Lastly, the Year of the Woman discourse suggested that biological differences between men and women make them fundamentally different from each other; because women represent a break from the “established order” of patriarchy, they are better candidates (Vavrus, 2002, pp. 94-96).

These frames make no distinction between sex and gender, and they posit that real and inevitable differences exist between men and women that lead to different types of knowledge and styles of leadership. While Vavrus named these categories as they specifically related to the 1992 election season, she anticipated that they would be useful in future elections with prominent female candidates.

According to the *Washington Post*, the Year of the Woman had a second coming in 2008 when both Clinton and Palin sought the White House (Romano, 2008a, p. A01). The way the news media latched on to these overly simplistic depictions of women in power suggests that not much has changed in the media representation of women politicians between 1992 and 2008. While I argue that Clinton succeeded in challenging some of these rigid notions of women candidates, her breakthroughs were thwarted by Palin's self-proclaimed status as an outsider who would bring change to Washington.

Framing Hillary Clinton

Because no woman has ever served as president in the U.S., Clinton could technically be considered a "Washington outsider" in that she represents the large percentage of the population who had been denied representation in the highest office. Newspapers often included quotations from Clinton, her advisors, and her supporters about what her campaign meant to other women. After spending a Sunday morning with Clinton, one woman commented that she was "struck by how many women came up to her saying: 'I'm so proud of you. You couldn't possibly know what it means to see someone like you running'" (Toner, 2007, p. A1). But when Clinton entered the race, she defied the idea that women must be Washington outsiders by claiming that her 30 years of experience fighting for equal opportunities as a lawyer, first lady, and Senator made

her qualified to lead the country (“Senator Clinton’s Statement,” 2008). Several early articles from each paper reminded the public of Clinton’s experience. One New York Times (*NYT*) news analyst acknowledged that Clinton “is the most battle-tested, has the biggest fund-raising network and can walk into the job with a unique set of skills and perspectives gleaned from eight years in the White House as first lady” (Healy, 2007). These types of articles made it difficult to peg Clinton as an outsider, despite attempts to discredit these accolades as “real experience” later in the campaign. Her opponents chipped away at her resume, claiming that her time as a successful lawyer and First Lady did not amount to the right *kind* of experience that was necessary to lead the country. When asked her opinion about Clinton’s qualifications, author and newspaper columnist Lionel Shriver (2008) commented:

Does being married to a president qualify you for the job yourself?

Without a doubt, Hillary would have a better idea than most of just what the job entails. But patience through dreary state dinners, renovation of the Blue Room, and even what-will-we-do-about-Monica pillow talk is a far cry from crafting government policy. (p. 50)

It is not likely that even the right kind of experience would not have helped Clinton in 2008. Next to her younger and more inexperienced rival, Barack Obama, Clinton had a difficult time persuading potential voters that she was a Washington outsider and a new voice in presidential politics.

Likewise, Clinton could not really be pegged as a “change agent,” or break from the patriarchal establishment. Several articles discussed the “baggage” that Clinton would bring to the White House, and others stressed the inevitably destructive dynasty that

would come from electing another Clinton to the Oval Office. As one such article states, “Since the 1988 election—that is before the Cold War ended—two families have controlled the White House. If Mrs. Clinton wins in 2008 and becomes the first female president of the United States, that troubling diarchy would stretch close to a quarter-century” (Cohen, 2007).

Perhaps the best case can be made for viewing Clinton as a “status quo challenger” attempting to break down the boys clubs of patriarchal presidential politics. She opened her campaign with a series of conversations with potential voters about their views on a variety of issues (“Transcript: Clinton’s Announcement,” 2007). She frequently employed gender-linked phrases such as “If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen... I'm very much at home in the kitchen” (Toner, 2007, p. A1) and “You know, it did take a Clinton to clean after the first Bush, and I think it might take another one to clean up after the second Bush” (Stanley, 2008a, p. A19). She even devoted an entire week to talking to, with, and about women’s issues (Healy, 2007b). But while “status quo challengers” break down the boys clubs of politics by focusing on women’s issues and a domestic agenda, Clinton was better known for stressing her toughness. This sentiment can be summed in an article published near the end of Clinton’s first year on the campaign trail. It states, “Acutely aware of gender stereotypes, Clinton has taken pains to highlight her strength and credibility as a potential commander in chief — and, some polls suggest, strikes some voters as excessively calculating” (Toner, 2007, p. A1). Another added, “Mrs. Clinton has made more direct appeals to mothers and daughters and ‘making history,’ but has for the most part predicated her candidacy on the masculine

virtues of toughness, resolve and her extensive experience in the (male-dominated) realm of politics and government” (Leibovich, 2008a, p. A1).

Framing Sarah Palin

While Clinton’s years as First Lady and time in the Senate made it difficult to describe her as a catalyst for change, Palin’s identity on the campaign trail as an unknown governor from a faraway state fit the Year of the Woman rhetoric to a T. Because Palin was relatively unknown before McCain selected her as his running mate, the media’s coverage of Palin’s candidacy was quick to point out that she was a Washington outsider. Few had heard of her and even fewer knew what types of experiences she would bring to the White House. A lengthy article in the *NYT* described Palin’s personal and professional background in the moments after she was selected as the Republican vice-presidential candidate. Interestingly, the article was titled, “An Outsider Who Charms” (Yardley, 2008, A1). While the McCain/Palin camp diligently discussed her status as a Washington outsider as a positive attribute in the quest for change in America, media coverage suggested that this lack of knowledge led to anxiety about her ability to help McCain win the White House. An article in the *NYT* contextualized this sentiment by quoting a female constituent. “‘So I was very disappointed’ to learn of Mr. McCain’s choice, Ms. Pace said Friday, hours after the selection of Ms. Palin was announced. ‘No one in my office has any idea about her, and they only comment I’m hearing, which is not good, is that ‘she’s a woman and that’s why she was picked’” (Calmes, 2008). The *Washington Post* included 13 articles about Palin’s selection in the first two days after the announcement, and all of them mentioned her status as an outsider or a reformer. The majority of the articles expressed a mixed reaction to this lack of insider knowledge, such

as story about an Alaskan politician and Republican who said Palin was so unprepared for the job that she thought the announcement on local media was a joke (Vick, 2008, A6). Despite the many references to her lack of experience, the articles suggested that the majority of leaders in the Republican party were “euphoric” and as happy as they would be if their favorite football team had just won the Super Bowl (Kumar, Aizenman, & Wagner, 2008, p. C1).

Within days of her selection, Palin started to discuss the way her position as an outsider would lead to change, and she offered her experience as a status quo challenger to add to her point. In her speech at the Republican National Convention (RNC), she stated that as a mayor and governor in Alaska, she regularly crossed party lines to reform government. She also suggested that she would be unlike the rest of the politicians in Washington who pander to the media when she quipped, “Here’s a little news flash for all those reporters and commentators: I’m not going to Washington to seek their good opinion; I’m going to Washington to serve the people of this country” (Transcript: Palin’s Speech, 2008, p. 1). In other words, Palin informed the public that she did not care about winning a popularity contest among Washington elites, but instead she would seek to reform corrupt politics regardless of how it effected her reputation among members of the government and media status quo.

Though Palin’s selection as the first woman on the GOP ticket was groundbreaking, she stressed her identity as a “reformer of government” and “maverick,” and thus a change agent, first and foremost in the beginning of the campaign. When asked about McCain’s choice of Palin as his running mate, the chairman of the California Republican Party said, “He’s chosen a Washington outsider who will be an ally for him

in shaking up the way things are done... This is someone with solid conservative credentials but solid credentials as a reformer” (Baker, 2008). When Palin’s gender was mentioned in association with her role as a reformer, it was dismissed as unimportant and unrelated to her capability of carrying out reform of government. As a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal (WSJ)* wrote, “Republicans are calculating that she also reinforces the McCain image as a maverick reformer who is willing to shake up the status quo. That, much more than her appeal to the party base or her appeal to women, is the standard by which the pick will be judged” (Seib, 2008). While the criteria by which she and McCain have been labeled reformers and mavericks are rarely explicated, the references to their status as such are regularly included in media coverage and in speeches by both politicians. However, Palin’s inability to name any specific examples of McCain acting as a nonconformist during his 21 years in the Senate suggests that the label may be less than substantive. Still, the Republican presidential ticket became a “team of mavericks,” with the lipstick-toting pit bull leading the charge.

Painting Palin as an average citizen stepping into Washington to save the day helped to alleviate the problem of proving her credentials throughout the campaign. Palin, who self-identifies as an average hockey mom and middle-class working mother, uses this “Sarah Six-pack” mentality to position herself in the media as the “cure for what ails the democratic system” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 91). As referenced by her scant political resume, Palin is a maverick in that she is an average citizen uncorrupted by the influence of Washington. Winning two terms as mayor of a town with fewer than 7,000 residents and serving less than two years as governor of the one of the least populated states in the U.S., Palin spent more time reciting lines such as, “Oh man, it’s so obvious I’m a

Washington outsider, and someone just not used to the way you guys operate” (Stanley, 2008b, p. A18) than touting policy expertise. A former opponent commented that her campaign for vice president was much like her governor’s race in that “she wouldn’t have articulated one coherent policy and people would just be fawning all over her” (Yardley, 2008b, p. 1).

In the anti-establishment mentality that surrounded the 1992 election season, Vavrus (2002) suggests that “the people best suited to provide the antidote to diseased Washington politics⁵ were *women*, not men” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 91). While both Clinton and Palin attempted to paint themselves agents of change, neither was elected in the 2008 presidential race. The fact that neither Clinton’s long resume nor Palin’s outsider status was deemed appropriate suggests the rarity of presenting women candidates in a both-and world where women can be experienced enough to lead *and* speak to those who live outside the elite circles of Washington. A front page article in the *Washington Post (WP)* stated, “It’s clear that gender was not a disqualifying factor for either Clinton or Palin. Voters who turned against them did so for other reasons, just as they do with male candidates” (Romano, 2008a, p. A1). Romano seems to be saying that gender is not a determining factor in voter’s perceptions of candidates. What is dangerously naive about this statement is that it assumes that women candidates are covered in the same ways that men are covered, removing press bias as a potential source of difference. However, competing and contradictory expectations for women candidates and sexist media

⁵ Vavrus (2002) suggests that female politicians flocked to politics in 1992 in response to the sexism prevalent in Anita Hill’s sexual harassment testimony during Clarence Thomas’s confirmation hearings. In 2008, reformers like Palin needed to eradicate wasteful government spending and help solve the economic crisis.

coverage combine to create an environment in which it is difficult for women politicians to succeed.

An “Either-Or” World: Political Women’s Double-Binds

In *Women for President*, Erika Falk details the types of sexist coverage that dominated the campaigns of eight prominent women presidential candidates in the United States. Starting with Victoria Woodhull’s campaign for the presidency in 1872, Falk identifies several trends that differentiate coverage of women candidates from the coverage of their male opponents. She found that women receive fewer front page articles, fewer mentions of their policy positions, and are granted less credibility as serious contenders than men. In return, women receive more commentary on their physical appearance, clothing, and family lives, and they are portrayed as unnatural when speaking in the public sphere, unviable in general elections, and intellectually incapable of managing both a family and a career (Falk, 2008). Falk also found that this type of coverage persisted when Clinton announced her candidacy in January of 2007, even though she was the first woman to enter the presidential race as a frontrunner (Falk, 2008, p. 1). Because women seeking elected office must speak regularly in the public sphere to be taken seriously as a candidate, Falk’s suggestion that women are viewed negatively when they venture outside this sphere creates a no-win situation. If women enter the public sphere, they give up their credibility as traditional wives and mothers, but if they stay in the home, they give up their credibility as politicians. Similarly, if women who run for political office cannot properly manage a home and women who manage the home cannot properly run a country, then women who want to have both a career in politics and a family are in for quite a struggle. This catch-22 is what Gregory Bateson

has infamously referred to as the double bind; here, either choice in a dualism carries with it negative consequences (Bateson, 2000, p. 271-278).

Kathleen Hall Jamieson applied this concept to women in positions of power. In her eloquent explanation of these types of double binds, she suggests that the media construct an “either-or” world around women candidates that prevents them from fully engaging in electoral politics. When women do attempt to break the remaining glass ceilings, they are criticized at every turn for breaking the competing and contradictory expectations facing women and politicians. Among these expectations are that women can be either career-oriented or mothers, intelligent or beautiful, articulate or submissive, but never both. Because the media constantly comment on the actions of political candidates and include positive and negative reactions from experts and average citizens, the media consistently suggest which types of roles resonate with constituents. When commenting on the no-win situations facing women in positions of power, the coverage suggests that they must choose between happiness in politics and happiness in the home.

In one of her most poignant examples of how this plays out in politics, Jamieson discusses coverage of Clinton during her campaign for and early tenure as First Lady. She commented that Clinton “became a surrogate on whom we projected our attitudes about attributes once thought incompatible, that women either exercised their minds or had children but not both, that women who were smart were unwomanly and sexually unfulfilled, that articulate women were dangerous” (p. 23). Jamieson shows how the coverage of Clinton fits into the discourse of the double bind, but also suggests that society is becoming more accepting of the fluidity from which women can take on roles in the national spotlight. Though she suggested that the “either-or” world facing women

like Clinton would give way to a “both-and” arena that recognized the multiplicity of roles women could play,⁶ the 2008 presidential election suggests otherwise. As Clinton and Palin attempted to show that they could live in a world that allowed women to be wives, mothers, and feminine while also being tough politicians, countless news articles appeared that questioned the legitimacy of their claims. To be taken seriously by the media and constituents, both Clinton and Palin still had to make choices.

Taking Heat In and Out of the Kitchen: Hillary Clinton

Clinton’s problems with the double bind started long before she announced her run for the Democratic presidential nomination. While Bill Clinton was running for governor of Arkansas and for the presidency, he had to answer questions about his wife’s position as one of the 100 most influential lawyers in America. In one such example, former GOP Chairperson Richard N. Bond was paraphrased as suggesting that Clinton was “an overly ambitious careerist out to destroy the American family” (Lightman and Spivack, 1992, p. A1). These criticisms continued into the 1990s when Clinton was criticized for being overly ambitious, “self-righteous,” and “Nazi-ish,” especially after taking an office in the West Wing (Maraniss, 1995, p. A1). A 1995 interview printed in the *Chicago Tribune* suggests that she was aware of the unfair nature of this name-calling. The article stated:

Clinton said two criticisms—that she sought too great a role in policy decisions and then latched onto family issues to soften her image—are a result of “the inevitable balancing of all the responsibilities” that women

⁶ Jamieson wrote the book in response to Susan Faludi’s bestselling book, *Backlash*, stating that Faludi was overly pessimistic in asserting that “progress is inevitably followed by backlash, a few steps forward, a few steps back” (Jamieson, 1995, p. vii). Instead, Jamieson claims, each act of defying gender expectations leads to positive changes for women.

face. "I've come to accept the fact that it's an inevitable double bind," she said. "That no matter what I do, or really anyone who's been in this position with very few exceptions, you're bound to be criticized if you don't fit some category, a stereotype that people wish to impose on you."

(Associated Press, 1995, p. 12)

Coverage of her "cookies and tea" comment was relentless, starting moments after she defended her choice to continue with her career when Bill was governor and continuing through the 2008 election (Jamieson, 1995). This coverage sparked a cultural conversation in which she was criticized for her active role, so she changed her image to be "perceived as Bill Clinton's wife, the mother of Chelsea, who yes, has a career, but she understands her own value as a woman, including that of being a mother and a wife" (Jamieson, 1995, p. 30). Then she was criticized for being a chameleon that changed whenever she needed to be more popular.

The coverage of her role as a wife, mother, and proud first lady conflicted with expectations that she be a tough politician once she decided to run for office on her own. This is an example of what Jamieson refers to as the "womb/brain" double bind. She states:

Since you cannot exercise both your brain and your uterus, you must choose one over the other. Select childbearing and sacrifice the satisfactions of the intellect. Favor the brain and forego the pleasures of motherhood. Here was a classic no-choice choice: choose marriage and motherhood and society approved. Choose the life of the mind and be

punished by man *and* God.... The reason that the womb/brain is a double bind is because either choice carries penalties. (Jamieson, 1995, p. 55-68)

The womb/brain bind stemmed from faulty science that “proved” that the female body could only support the functioning of either the brain or the uterus, and if a woman attempted both, she risked her sanity and the health of the fetus (Jamieson, 1995). While this research has since been disregarded, the idea that women must select either the home or the boardroom suggests that the underlying concerns about the types of power women can appropriately yield are still being enforced today. Even in the absence of children, the woman must still be concerned about tending to the needs of her husband. Woman political candidates and women in leadership positions know the reality of this bind all too well. When trying to be both a good mother and a good leader, these women are regularly confronted with the idea that they cannot have both at the same time. And more generally, women who decide to enter the public sphere are criticized for being too ambitious and for neglecting their more natural role in the home.

Clinton is among the most well known women attempting to shatter the stereotypes of this bind, but being well known does not necessarily mean being well liked. In her attempt to shatter the glass ceiling, Clinton announced her candidacy with a speech that simultaneously showcased her masculine and feminine qualities. While sitting on a sofa and encouraging potential voters to engage in a conversation about her vision for a better America, she reminded voters that she had over 30 years of experience fighting for equal opportunities for all Americans and that she had the toughness and qualifications to lead (“Senator Clinton’s Statement,” 2008). She entered as the clear frontrunner with a double-digit lead over her opponents; she was viewed as a strong,

intelligent and capable leader, but soon after her announcement, articles appeared that questioned her likeability and electability (Cohen & Balz, 2007, p. A01; Balz, 2007, p. A07). One such article quoted Ruth Sherman, a political communications specialist who had watched Clinton's announcement video. Sherman stated, "People consider her to be capable and smart, even those who hate her, but have taken issue over the years with her hardness and lack of warmth. If she can keep it up and persuade people it is authentic, they will have a hard time remembering the Hillary they loved to hate" (Healy, 2007, p. A1). One potential voter suggested that Clinton "just has to become real" to win his vote (Balz, 2007, p. A07). On several occasions, she attempted to soften her image and showcase her feminine side by focusing on women's issues and bringing her mother and daughter to campaign appearances, but these efforts did little to change the culture of "Hillary Bashing"⁷ that followed her from Bill Clinton's days in office.

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1998) attributes the negative attitudes toward Hillary Clinton to a systemic issue of disliking women who venture outside of the traditionally feminine role of wife and mother. This hatred continued throughout Clinton's quest for the presidency, as evidence by the long list of offensive comments stated or reprinted by members of the media. CNN's Tucker Carlson stated that "When she comes on television, I involuntarily cross my legs" and Rush Limbaugh called her "the woman with the testicle lockbox" (Pollitt, 2008, p. 18). One company even manufactured a Hillary Nutcracker that crushed nuts between the thighs of one of Clinton's pantsuits. In an article from the waning days of the Democratic primary, Kathleen Parker suggested that

⁷ "Hillary Bashing" was coined while Bill Clinton was campaigning for the presidency in 1992 and referred to the large number of people who found comfort in issuing hateful comments about Hillary Rodham Clinton (Campbell, 1998).

the reason Clinton was unsuccessful was because she was too “tough” and “gritty” (Parker, 2008, p. 15A). She was also pegged as calculating, robotic, angry, castrating, shrill, strident, and, of course, too ambitious (Pollitt, 2008, p. 18).

Perhaps the most notorious example of punishing women candidates for venturing outside home was the relentless coverage of Clinton’s “iron my shirt” hecklers. Standing in the front row at a Clinton rally and holding a yellow sign that read “Iron My Shirt,” two men began to heckle Clinton. She responded by saying, “Ah, the remnants of sexism, alive and well,” and continued her speech. Security removed the men from the audience, and several reporters followed them to find out “what had motivated them to make such a spectacle” (Kornblut, 2008, p. B01). The top circulating papers never actually reported their reasoning, but a *New York Daily News* article quoted one of the men as stating, “I just don’t think a woman should be President” (Brazinet, 2008). The incident drew attention to the countless number of Americans who still believe a woman’s place is in the home and who find the idea of a woman competing for the presidency a major taboo. This sentiment was echoed by the millions of Americans who visited SlapHillary.org to punish Clinton for her transgressions of women’s voice and women’s place.

Commenting on the binds that women like Clinton face, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, the founding editor of *Ms.* and a cofounder of the National Women’s Political Caucus penned that Clinton must find a way to project “strength and power” while maintaining an image as a good wife and mother (who presumably would not seek either strength or power). She states:

One of Hillary’s fundamental challenges in this campaign, therefore, is to reconcile the image of the ideal wife with the paradigm of ‘leader of the

free world.’ Her transformation from consort to candidate requires a constant, delicate fine-tuning of both roles lest she violate one in pursuit of the other and be punished for it. (Pogrebin, 2008, p. 105)

In the end, polls showed that Clinton was unable to convince voters that she was both “likeable enough” and tough enough. A news article describing Clinton’s fall from her position as the frontrunner suggested that it is nearly impossible for women to walk this line but still criticized her for not finding the middle ground. It stated:

The test is unfair, many say, because men are not subjected to it as harshly and because it is nearly impossible not to err on one side. Still, some say Mrs. Clinton went overboard on toughness... And yet Mrs. Clinton may not have passed the commander in chief test. In New York Times/CBS News polls conducted this winter, voters rated Mr. Obama's potential in that area more highly than they did Mrs. Clinton's, though neither served in the military or has much experience directly handling international crises. Perhaps participants had many reasons for preferring Mr. Obama, but they followed the long-standing pattern of finding women less plausible military commanders than men. (Kantor, 2008, p. A1).

Thus despite her attempts to showcase both her masculine and feminine qualities, she was not viewed as the most credible on issues of national security, nor was she praised for her more feminine attributes.

Using her Womb and her Brains: Sarah Palin

In the 1980s, as Clinton was first struggling to project herself as both a wife and a prominent lawyer, “Congresswoman Pat Schroeder was asked how she could be both a

member of Congress and a mother at the same time” (Jamieson, 1995, p. 61). And decades later during the Republican National Convention when Sarah Palin told constituents that she was a mother of five and a soon-to-be grandmother, reporters and members of the public began to ask how she would reconcile her duties in the home with those of being a “heartbeat away from the presidency.” The *USA Today* quoted one woman as saying, ‘When you're campaigning for vice president, you're on 24/7. Who's watching the baby? And what kind of nurturing is going on in that 17-year-old's life if she's pregnant?’ Her voice rose in frustration. ‘But you can't talk about it, because it's politically incorrect,’ she said” (Abcarian, 2008, p. A13). Several Republicans, including Phyllis Schlafly and Cindy McCain, defended Palin, and asked reporters if the same question would arise for a male candidate with young children. One of McCain’s strategists stated, “I can’t imagine that question being asked of a man. I think it’s offensive, and I think a lot of women will find it offensive” (p. A13). Liberal feminists and Republican leaders contacted reporters and issued statements that asked whether the same question would ever be asked of a feminist woman or a man with young children (Romano, 2008a, p. A1; Romano, 2008b, p. A21).

Still, Palin’s public persona was carefully crafted to showcase her role as proud mother who could manage the state in ways that men could not. According to one article, “Republicans hope to portray her as a down-to-earth reformer and mother of five, who chose to sell off the Alaska governor’s jet and instead drive her family around the state” (Eilperin & Kornblut, 2008, p. A01). What is missing from this statement is talk about the role she would play shaping public policy or taking on issues of national security. She was never pegged as someone who would take on the roles more typical of politicians,

but instead, she would focus on a more supportive role and voice her opinion when necessary to maintain her maverick appeal.

For several voters quoted in national news sources, the proud mother-turned politician guise made her trustworthy and “like us” (Leibovich, 2008b, p. A1). One woman commented that she was “not that into politics. I’m just voting for Trig Van Palin’s mom” (Severson, 2008, p. A22) while another thought it was great that Palin was not afraid to showcase motherhood by “lugging an overstuffed bag of books, papers and baby supplies onto her plane and bottle feeding her infant son, Trig” (Leibovich, 2008b, p. A1). Though Palin was upfront about motherhood during the presidential race, she was not as forthcoming during her time as governor. She withheld information about her most recent pregnancy so she would not be criticized for neglecting her work. At seven months, she finally confessed to being pregnant, and was quick to add that it would not compromise her ability lead the state. She reminded her constituents that “she had returned to work the day after giving birth to Piper,” and issued a warning to people who suggested she could not be both a governor and mother. She said, “To any critics who say a woman can’t think and work and carry a baby at the same time, I’d just like to escort that Neanderthal back to the cave” (Kantor, Zernike & Einhorn, 2008, p. A1). Palin’s need to prove herself capable of being both a mother and politician by returning to the office right away is in itself evidence that these types of binds do exist for women in leadership positions.

But her proud mother mentality did not come without its own political consequences. While Palin was praised for putting her family first in some circles, she was gravely criticized in others for her lack of seriousness, experience, and intelligence.

Her interview with Katie Couric was perhaps the most notorious and damaging example of her lack of knowledge of national and international politics. During the televised portions of the interview, Palin was unable to name any court cases she disagreed with or any newspapers she regularly reads, and even her supporters said she looked “like a nervous college student cramming for a big oral exam” (Kurtz, 2008, p. A7). Her long, rambling talking points and inability to answer questions led to what the media referred to as the “Tina Fey problem: Ms. Fey’s impersonation of Ms. Palin has proved so dead-on—and popular—that it has further undermined Ms. Palin’s plausibility” (Stanley, 2008c, p. C1). Instead of countering this criticism by stressing Palin’s experience and intelligence, Republicans continued to send her on more superfluous media programs aimed at entertainment, not education.

On the same weekend that former Secretary of State Colin Powell criticized McCain’s judgment for picking such an inexperienced running mate, Palin appeared on *Saturday Night Live* to address the “Tina Fey problem.” But instead of trying to paint herself as a serious candidate, she joked about her “Caribou Barbie” nickname and bounced along to a rap song that featured Eskimo back-up dancers and a moose-hunting excursion. Reporter Alessandra Stanley (2008) quipped, “Usually elected officials like John McCain, Hillary Rodham Clinton or Barack Obama go on the show to disarm voters by showing their lighter side. Ms. Palin has already shown her lighter side to the public. The one thing nobody has accused her of is being too stiff and sober-minded” (p. C1). What people did question was her ability to run the country, and while taking her children on campaign bus trips and flights made her “real,” it did not make her a credible leader.

In fact, she rarely even attempted to showcase her knowledge of policy issues, instead favoring appearances where she would not have to answer questions from reporters.

While the womb/brain double bind suggests that “a brilliant woman must have sacrificed her sexuality,” Palin’s public persona flips that mantra to state that a woman who flaunts her sexuality must be unintelligent (Jamieson, 1995, p. 57). Palin’s inability to answer basic questions in national interviews or to know that Africa is a continent is alarming considering the important governmental role for which she was campaigning, but allowing her to only go on shows like *SNL* and give emotionally charged rallies suggested that being intelligent and being a good wife and mother never intersect.

Femininity/Masculinity: Caribou Barbie and the Nutcracker

According to Jamieson, being feminine and being intelligent do not go together either. In the femininity/competence bind, women are held accountable to the feminine standards of their gender in terms of personal style and the way they carry themselves in public spaces. At the same time, however, feminine characteristics such as being compassionate and soft-spoken are not taken seriously in the public sphere, especially in traditionally masculine realms like politics. So while women candidates are expected to maintain a feminine appearance, that appearance triggers a negative response from potential voters, who then view them as less competent leaders (Jamieson, 1995). Unfortunately for women vying for positions of power, commentary about physical appearance is the norm in mainstream news coverage, making it difficult to escape judgments of femininity while on the campaign trail. Though Falk (2008) found that the number of references to physical descriptors of candidates was declining as more women incumbents were running for re-election and for higher offices, she notes that there has

been a remarkable consistency in types of references made about the clothing, mannerisms, and appearance of women candidates. These types of articles are still popular in the 2008 campaign, as referenced by the countless comments about Clinton's pantsuits and haircuts and about Palin's red stilettos and \$150,000 wardrobe. Judging from mainstream news coverage, Clinton and Palin represented opposite ends of the femininity spectrum, but neither escaped the types of criticism Jamieson describes.

To keep up her white, upper-middle class, feminine persona, the Republican National Committee took Palin on a shopping spree, buying her \$150,000 worth of form-fitting skirt suits and stylish high heels. She also had a personal stylist fix her hair and makeup each day, which ensured that she always looked great on camera. But not all of the photos were focused on her hair and makeup. One photographer for the *Washington Post* took a picture of the red heels, but what was particularly disturbing about the picture was the way the image painted Palin's femininity and sexuality. The picture showcased Palin's legs from the thigh down in the foreground, and the front row of the crowd was visible through the gap between her calves. News of the "hot" vice presidential candidate spread quickly. Palin's physical attractiveness made her extremely popular among conservative men and women, who often wore buttons or held signs at her rallies that read, "Proud to be voting for a hot chick" and "Marry me, Sarah" (Leibovich, 2008b, p. A1). Men outnumbered women at some of her rallies by a margin of two-to-one, and they made their presence known by "ogling" her and yelling things like, "You tell 'em, baby!" (p. A1). While several men at one particular rally commented that electing Palin would be a major step forward for women, others admitted to showing up just to see how attractive she was in person—"I came here to look at her," one man said (p. A1). These

men were not taking her seriously as a candidate; they were taking her seriously as a beauty queen who was on stage to be looked at.

What was striking about the articles that mentioned her physical attractiveness or the excessively positive attention she received from men at her rallies was the sense that none of the reporters or potential voters cared about her intelligence, experience, or ability to lead. Her persona seemed to be so entirely wound up in her appearance that no one bothered to check the content. But her stylish clothing and perfectly pinned hair could not mask her poor performance in several national interviews, such as the notorious Couric segments. She then resorted to her ultra-feminine speaking style. Perhaps the most poignant example of this style came when Palin could not provide Couric with an example from McCain's record as a maverick. She winked, wrinkled her nose, and said, "I'll try to find you some and I'll bring 'em to ya" in her folksy Alaskan accent. The tendency for Palin to shrink back to this less threatening style when in a tough situation was parodied on *SNL* in a skit that was transcribed in several mainstream print news sources. In the skit, Amy Poehler (playing Katie Couric) commented, "Forgive me, Ms. Palin, but it seems to me that when cornered you become increasingly adorable" (Copeland, 2008, p. C1).

Palin's spunky style carried over into her campaign appearances, where being somber was never in the game plan. A communications consultant called her style "very story-timey" and "singsongy" and said she was especially gifted at using her intonation to convey emotions (Copeland, 2008, p. C1). While conveying emotion made her credible as a woman, it did so at the expense of conveying facts or policies that would have made her credible as a candidate. Other articles attributed her effectiveness as a public speaker

to her background as a former beauty queen turned television reporter, but not her experience in front of the camera as governor, adding that her excessively feminine appearance and attitude allow her “to conceal this very much more ruthless and nakedly political character” (Copeland, 2008, p. C1). Her excessively feminine style also shielded her from harsh attacks on her policies and positions because attempts to do so were perceived as bullying the homecoming queen.

While Palin’s folksy feminine style made her “real” and “like us,” it also hurt her ratings in the polls. After just over a month in the national spotlight, her favorability rating dropped substantially, and leaders in both major political parties began to question her readiness to lead the country should anything happen to McCain. Commenting on the divisiveness between Palin supporters and haters, one reporter commented, “If Palin’s cuteness is disarming to her supporters, it is troubling to those who worry that she lacks intellectual heft” (Copeland, 2008, p. C1). Perhaps to those holding her to the standards of womanhood, she passed with flying colors, while those vetting her for a potential vice presidential role were tougher critics. What is important in this coverage is that femininity and competence are never enmeshed; they never seem to fit together. By conveying emotion, Palin was viewed as incapable of conveying tough political information. By contrast, Clinton was skilled at discussing public policy, but she was viewed as incapable of properly conveying emotion.

The press’s obsession with Palin’s feminine physical appearance is matched only by coverage of Clinton’s masculine pantsuits. This coverage dominated so many of the news frames that in her speech at the Democratic National Convention, Clinton referred to her campaign aids as “the sisterhood of the traveling pantsuits” (Transcript: Clinton at

the DNC, 2008). Palin's red stilettos and Clinton's pantsuits came to represent polar opposites on the femininity scale, with Clinton labeled as the most masculine candidate in the running even among her male counterparts (Parker, 2008, p. A15).

Citing a study showing that college students describe attributes of a good president in all masculine and no feminine terms, Falk (2008) suggests that female candidates adopt a more masculine persona in campaign ads and appearances (p. 54). Clinton did just this throughout her campaign. She was sure to appear tough, reminding potential voters that she would support military action if necessary and assuring them that she would be willing to take phone calls in the wee hours of the morning in the name of national security. When asked about the historic nature of her candidacy, she brushed aside references to her gender in favor of discussing her qualifications and policy positions.

But the move backfired. Clinton was viewed as methodical and unlikable, and people thought she was trying to become just like a man. Again, Clinton was accused of being a chameleon by enacting feminine and masculine performances whenever it was in her best interest politically. The proliferation of dialogue about who the *real* Hillary Clinton is seems to suggest that the media operate under the presumption that there is an essence to her personality that we have yet to understand. Roseann M. Mandziuk (2008) states, "The insistence that there is a 'true' Hillary Rodham Clinton to be figured out stems from and simultaneously maintains the cultural illusion that there is one central definition that should govern women's public and private selves" (p. 313). The idea that women candidates must have a single identity marker in all situations shows the difficulty of being a "good" woman and a serious contender in the political arena.

Such was the case in coverage of Clinton's emotions. Several news articles criticized her for being emotionless, commented on her dry eyes at the end of a friend's funeral, and suggested this was indicative of her inability to get in touch with voter's feelings (Leibovich, 2007, p. A1; Aspan, 2008). With all the discussion of her cold, emotionless ways, the massive amount of coverage of her "emotional moment" before the New Hampshire primary comes as no surprise. People thought she was either so emotionally void that the tears were a calculated act to trick voters into feeling sorry for her, or they figured that the emotional moment was a sign that her status as a woman means she would be too emotional to handle the job of commander in chief. In the first scenario, Clinton was criticized for not meeting the stereotypically emotional character of a "good" woman, and in the second, she was criticized for not meeting the criteria required of a good leader. In contrast to Clinton, Biden's emotional moment during the vice presidential debate was praised as genuine and showed that he was in touch with the concerns of voters. Jamieson (1995) maintains that the femininity/competence double bind "draws energy from the tendency to think in dichotomies characterized as masculine or feminine, and then set in a hierarchical relation to one another with the masculine thought superior and the feminine inferior" (p. 121). She suggests that traditionally masculine characteristics are valued over those that are thought to be traditionally feminine. However, Clinton was not able to properly display masculinity but Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Biden was able to properly express femininity, suggesting that Jamieson's statement is only true when someone with male genitals personifies the feminine.

The femininity/competence bind was one neither Clinton nor Palin could win. Quoting Linguist Robin Lakoff, Jamieson (1995) argues that if a woman refuses to talk like a lady, she is ridiculed and subjected to criticism as unfeminine; if she does learn, she is ridiculed as unable to think clearly, unable to take part in a serious discussion: in some sense, as less than fully human. These two choices which a woman has—to be less than a woman or less than a person—are highly painful. (p. 121)

What About Both?

This chapter showed how news accounts highlighted sexist concerns about women's abilities to manage their public and private lives while deflecting commentary about women as credible and competent leaders capable of balancing multiple, competing roles. While the media was willing to frame Clinton outside the binds of the traditional news frames of "Washington outsiders," "status quo challengers," and "change agents" (Vavrus, 2002, p. 84), they were quick to readopt the labels when Palin ran for office. Additionally, both women were heavily criticized when they suggested through their words and actions that women can embody both traditionally feminine and masculine characteristics. Clinton was criticized for venturing too far into the masculine arena of national politics while Palin was criticized for bringing her family on the campaign trail. Clinton was viewed as unattractive, calculating, and manly, while Palin was dismissed as a beauty queen without the know-how to get this done. The problematic coverage of women candidates highlighted in this chapter suggests that the mainstream media continues to struggle when covering women who challenge our ideas of gender binaries.

Jamieson conceived of these double binds not to show their persistence through time, but to discuss the ways in which women in positions of power are constantly working to challenge them and render them null and void. Instead of placing women in positions of power on an “either-or” stage, Jamieson was optimistic that we were on our way to a more inclusive space that accepted the fluidity of gender roles and capabilities. In fact, her work stemmed from the frustration she felt after reading the pessimistic assessment throughout Susan Faludi’s best-selling book *Backlash*, which suggests that every time women make progress in the U.S., a backlash movement pushes them back. While Faludi’s dismal picture of the future of the women’s movement is perhaps overly pessimistic, Jamieson’s is overly optimistic in suggesting that we will move past deeply engrained stereotypes in the near future. We need a theory that will strive toward the middle ground, one that acknowledges the wins and losses that come with fighting for meaningful change for women while refusing to let the losses hinder us from continuing to fight for progress.

And there has been progress. But while we continue to make inroads on issues such as combining work and family life and exposing the social constructions of gender in other arenas, politics seems to be lagging behind. Still, if the construction of political women in mainstream news is any indication of where we stand with feminism, the current situation is not entirely negative. Clinton was unable to break the glass ceiling or tear down the walls of the double binds that constricted her during the campaign. However, the cultural conversation surrounding the fear of having a woman in the White House and the glaringly sexist coverage that followed brought the need for continued feminist action into the forefront. After Clinton’s campaign ended, several news

organizations suggested they had a lot to learn about covering women political candidates. While Palin's coverage was also problematic in terms of the Year of the Woman discourse and the double binds, the media did not seem as amused at the overtly misogynistic references as they did under Clinton. In fact, as I will argue in the next chapter, the sexist questions about whether Palin could be a good mother, grandmother, and vice president largely fell by the wayside after she insisted that it was a moot point.

To be successful, future women candidates need to continue fighting against these news binds. The problem is not that Sarah Palin and Hillary Rodham Clinton failed to find the happy medium between two incompatible expectations. The problem is that no woman running for the presidency or vice presidency ever has. No woman has ever had the right kind of experience, the right level of emotionality, or the right type of intelligence. No woman has ever been "the woman" voters claim to be waiting for when the tell reporters that this one is not "the one." But this does not mean that it cannot be done. Continued feminist activism and women willing to traverse the national political stage are necessary to break down these barriers.

Chapter 3

Constructing Feminism

When Hillary Rodham Clinton suspended her campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination on June 7, 2008, she addressed her role as a woman candidate and acknowledged the struggles women still face on account of their gender. She stated:

I am a woman and, like millions of women, I know there are still barriers and biases out there, often unconscious, and I want to build an America that respects and embraces the potential of every last one of us....

Although we weren't able to shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it's got about 18 million cracks in it, and the light is shining through like never before, filling us all with the hope and the sure knowledge that the path will be a little easier next time. ("Transcript:

Hillary Clinton endorses Barack Obama," 2008, p.3).

Little did Clinton or her supporters realize, the next time would come just two-and-a-half months later when Republican presidential nominee John McCain announced Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate.

In her first public speech during a midday press conference in Ohio, Palin invoked Clinton's words when she said, "Hillary left 18 million cracks in the highest, hardest glass ceiling in America, but it turns out the women of America aren't finished yet, and

we can shatter that glass ceiling once and for all” (Cooper and Bumiller, 2008, p. A1). While she acknowledged during this speech that women still had not achieved equality in terms of the presidency, she seemed to reject the need for continued feminist activism in America. Palin praised her parents during her address at the Republican National Convention for teaching her that “every woman can walk through every door of opportunity” (“Transcript: Palin’s Speech at the RNC,” 2008, p. 1).

Clinton and Palin were quickly framed in mainstream media as representing opposite ends of the political spectrum, especially when it came to issues of women’s rights. Clinton fought for equal pay for women, abortion rights, and the extension of human rights to all women, while Palin was adamantly pro-life (even in the case of rape or incest) and thought that equal pay legislation would lead to too much unnecessary litigation. Hundreds of news articles suggested that these positions were the defining features of the terms *feminism* and *feminist*, even though they represent only a small fraction of the issues that concern feminists in the United States. Because the vast majority of Americans have not learned about the definition of these terms through college courses in women’s studies departments, the media continue to serve as the most readily available source of information on the movement (Huddy, 1997, p. 183). Thus, the media have become an important tool in teaching the public about major social movements, such as feminism. While they do not explicitly define feminism in their news analysis, examining the links made between women who are labeled as feminists and their ideas, policies, and professional affiliations can help feminist media scholars better understand the ways these ideas are being presented to the public. In doing so, we can

make better suggestions for how to intervene in this damaging cycle of media representations to foster a more inclusive view of both feminism and women candidates.

This chapter argues that the 2008 presidential election coverage offered a limited vision of the feminist movement that ignored the dynamic feminisms of the second and third wave, and instead, gave rise to a cultural conversation that solidified and perpetuated elements of postfeminism that divorces the systemic disadvantages women face from the activism necessary to overcome them. Surveying over 250 articles from the news sections of the top five circulating national newspapers, this chapter pays special attention to the ways the Clinton and Palin were framed in relation to the feminist movement, to women's roles in the public realm, and to the ways the candidates did and did not adhere to traditionally feminine values. I selected articles from "hard news" sections of the top five circulating national newspapers, and I excluded articles appearing on the editorial pages such as letters to the editors or columns from the editorial staff. I also included segments from Palin's three national network news interviews with Katie Couric, Brian Williams, and Charles Gibson, all widely viewed segments during which Palin commented directly on her status as a feminist. Using examples published between January 1, 2007 (the week before several Democratic candidates officially entered the race) and going through the week following the November 4, 2008 election date, this chapter will analyze two issues: first, that consistent with the ways the feminist movement has been covered throughout history, the news media offered an overly simplistic definition of feminism throughout the 2008 election; and second, despite the fact that the media upheld the tenets of postfeminism throughout their coverage of

Clinton and Palin, the work/family dichotomy was challenged as Palin persistently reminded the public about her success as a working mother.

Feminism and Feminists in the Media

Ignoring the competing and often contradictory viewpoints that feminists have about a wide array of personal and political issues, mainstream media tended to associate the terms with a limited range of topics that centered around the reproductive rights debates that dominated second wave feminism and the equality struggles started in the first wave. As such, an ambiguous definition of feminism was brought to the forefront of U.S. politics. From the beginning of Clinton's campaign for the Democratic nomination through Palin's defeat on the Republican ticket, the media constructed the candidates' intersection with the feminist movement in overly simplistic and essentialist ways. Research suggests that this is typical of print news articles that discuss feminism. Leonie Huddy (1997) has shown that

the terms feminist and feminism will often be presented simplistically and in association with support for a single issue. Only rarely will the terms feminist and feminism be presented in connection to a broader ideology or a larger set of issues. This suggests that at any given time, the media will provide a limited view of feminists' goals and issue agendas. (p. 186, emphasis in original)

Because the media regularly fail to address the criteria they use for defining what counts as feminism and what does not, it is important to pay attention to the context in which these terms are used to determine *how* they are constructing what feminism is and what it is not. Feminist media scholar Michael L. Ferguson (2007) warns of the dangers in

accepting the media's assessment of whether political rhetoric is feminist or not because there are no clear cut boundaries about how the label is applied. She states:

When we simply accept that this rhetoric is feminist, we stop asking critical questions: *how* is it feminist? How does it frame women's issues? How does it shape which issues appear salient and which do not? How does it constrain and limit possible discursive responses? (Ferguson, 2007, p. 193, emphasis in original)

When we search for answers to these questions, we begin to understand the limited view of the women's movement that is perpetuated through the news media. Because mainstream news articles tend to select certain quotations for inclusion at the expense of others, reporters make salient certain viewpoints without acknowledging whether they are representative of the popular opinion or if they had been selected for inclusion because they were particularly provocative. Thus, news coverage "may be perceived as a reflection of reality, when it should more accurately be considered a partial, selective, and ideological narrative" (Vavrus, 2002, p. 31).

Though the terms "feminism" and "feminist" were widely used in coverage of the 2008 election, the associations made between the terms, the candidates, and related social issues painted a limited picture of the movement. While the media seemed to define feminism in terms of a fight for equal rights, fair pay, and access to abortion, the movement encompasses a much larger and more diverse group of men and women than have been quoted in mainstream articles. Most notably, mainstream media tend to leave race, class, male feminism, and third wave feminism out of the cultural conversation surrounding women candidates.

While mainstream media consistently made reference to Obama's African heritage, they failed to mention the race of the white candidates. When race was mentioned in articles surrounding Clinton and Palin, it was often in relation to their supporters. For instance, an article in the *USA Today* commented that the Democratic presidential nomination process could be a major breakthrough for women *or* for African Americans, which suggests that most African Americans would be voting for Obama based on race and that women would vote for Clinton based on gender (Vedantam, 2008, p. A2). Only occasionally did news articles acknowledge that some women are also African Americans, and these articles tended to frame the voting decision these women faced as siding with either their race or their gender. One article suggests that this is a dangerous dichotomy for African American women because "Clinton supporters are accused of being race traitors and Obama supporters are accused of being traitors to their sex" (Vedantam, 2008, p. A2). The article also includes an interview with Patricia Hill Collins, who is introduced as a sociologist and not as a prominent scholar on black feminism, and states that

the error being made by many Clinton and Obama supporters is to see race and gender in unidimensional terms: "Obama represents race and Clinton represents gender—this is a flawed model... Why does Obama not represent gender? He has a race and a gender. Hillary has a race and a gender." (Vedantam, 2008, p. A2)

Though the article does very little to unpack this idea, the implicit message is that we view white males as the norm in the political arena and draw attention to those falling outside that privileged position as in need of explanation. Still, articles focusing on the

intersectionalities and competing social pressures facing women of color were few and far between, and the media tended to ignore the ways that race, including whiteness, factor into our understandings of feminism and other forms of oppression. As such, the mainstream news sources analyzed in this chapter failed to acknowledge the ways women of color experience and respond to discrimination in both the public and private spheres.

The coverage also painted a picture of feminism that leaves out the experiences of working class and poor women. Vavrus states that this is in part due to the media's emphasis on postfeminism, which ignores structural barriers to gender equality, such as class. Speaking about Clinton's Senate run in 2002, she wrote:

As a system of representation, postfeminism renders invisible structural obstacles to success and stands in contrast to the material inequities that characterize the lives of many women in the United States today, such as the nearly 15 percent living in poverty, or those who must work two or more jobs to get by, a number that has increased from about 1.3 million workers in 1978 to almost 4 million in 1998.... Media signifying practices around electoral politics help up Hillary Rodham Clinton as being representative of women everywhere and symbolically displaced the majority of women *and* men whose lives do not resemble Hillary's in any way, yet whose needs call out for legislative intervention. (Vavrus, 2002, p. 162-163)

Despite the economic downturn being a major issue in the 2008 presidential election, the ways class informs the worldviews of women and men did not play a major role in election coverage. By not taking class into account and instead assuming that Palin and

Clinton represented “every woman,” the media continued to marginalize the experiences of those falling outside the white middle class. In doing so, they fail to address the feminist issues and standpoints of a large percentage of feminists experiencing gender oppression in the United States.

Perhaps part of the reason the media continues to ignore the ways race and class inform feminist thought is tied to the media’s failure to recognize feminism’s third wave, which is characterized by an understanding and acceptance of multiple and competing ideas about the movement. Feminist scholars Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake describe third wave feminists as being:

hard at work on a feminism that strategically combines elements of these feminisms, along with black feminism, women-of-color feminism, working-class feminism, pro-sex feminism, and so on. A third wave goal that comes directly out of learning from these histories and working among these traditions is the development of modes of thinking that can come to terms with the multiple, interpenetrating axes of identity, and the creation of a coalition politics based on these understandings.... Even as different strains of feminism and activism sometimes directly contradict each other, they are all part of our third wave lives, our thinking, and our praxes: we are products of all the contradictory definitions of and differences within feminism, beasts of such a hybrid kind that perhaps we need a different name altogether. (Heywood & Drake, 1997, p. 3)

Third wave feminists acknowledge that there are multiple, competing paths to recognizing and working against oppression and that there is no easy “sisterhood” that

will encapsulate the range of differences women experience. However, the media seem to have trouble with this idea and have been professing the death of feminism as an organized movement for decades.

Clinton: Feminist Extraordinaire

By the start of the 2008 democratic primary race, Clinton had been labeled a feminist in the mainstream press for over two decades (Broder, 1987, p. C3). In 1995, she was praised for giving four speeches at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. In perhaps the most well-known of the speeches, she declared that “human rights are women’s rights—and women’s rights are human rights,” and she went on to suggest that we need to fight for women’s rights on a global level to assure equal participation for women in public and political arenas (Clinton, 1995, p. 6). But when she engaged in nontraditional practices like keeping her own name and trading cookies and teas for an office in the West Wing, the term lacked positive connotations. The news media largely criticized her for offending housewives after her remarks about refusing to stay home and stand by her man were taken out of context by several national news sources (Jamieson, 1995). Additionally, several reporters tried to assess whether America was ready for a feminist first lady, and several articles suggested that she enjoyed her highest approval rating when she engaged in more feminine activities (Troy, 2006). In a book about the negative publicity Clinton endured during her tenure as First Lady, Gil Troy wrote:

As long as she was the president’s generically influential wife...she remained popular. But once she plunged into the public partisan arena in a substantive manner, and especially because that transition coincided with

another season of scandal, Hillary Clinton ran into her position's traditional limitations. Noting polls showing that 67 percent surveyed said "she's a warm person" but 62 percent said "she should not be involved in policy making," one *USA Today* headline summed it up: "HILLARY POPULAR AS FIRST LADY, NOT POLICY MAKER." (Troy, 2006, p. 119)

Despite the many references to Clinton's status as a feminist, the media rarely explicated the criteria that made her a feminist or the types of feminism that she embodied. But feminist scholars have pointed out that Clinton championed a number of feminist issues during her time in the public spotlight, mostly in line with the equity feminisms of the first wave and Carol Gilligan's cultural difference feminism from the second wave. Starting with Clinton's career as a prominent lawyer working on behalf of women and children and going through her campaign for the presidency, she often included commentary about women's lack of access to basic rights. In her 1995 speech at the United Nations Fourth Conference on Women, Clinton demanded equal rights for women in both public and private life and called for feminist activism in the areas of access to the political arena, extending basic healthcare to women and children, and in securing basic rights for women in the home. During her time in the Senate, she fought for equal pay for equal work, asking Congress to pass the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act that would expand the amount of time for women to sue employers for pay discrimination.⁸ And as Secretary of State, Clinton has delivered several speeches

⁸ The bill did not pass until January 29, 2009, when Barack Obama signed it into law as his first major initiative as president.

stating that women everywhere still lack full equality with their male counterparts. In one such speech she told a group of women academics in Beijing that:

In no society are women treated equally yet. I believe strongly that if women are not full participants in society, the society does not advance the way that it could. And if women are denied their rights, it affects children, families and the entire social structure. (Hymowitz, 2009)

In line with first wave feminist concerns of equal access, Clinton consistently acknowledges the inequalities that exist for women as they attempt to become more active in public life, and she continues to call for activism to ensure equality for women in the future.

She has also espoused a number of the tenets of cultural difference feminism. Cultural difference feminism, according to scholars like Carol Gilligan (1982), suggests that men and women are socialized differently, creating different cultural norms for men's and women's behavior. Among the differences is women's development of an ethic of care when making moral decisions, while men are encouraged to arrive at conclusions to moral issues objectively, or with regard to what is fair regardless of personal relationships (Gilligan, 1982). Feminist media scholar Mary Vavrus states that:

Gilligan's theory seems to provide a foundation for Hillary's construction in news accounts.... The trajectory this coverage has taken endows Hillary with multiple capabilities and complexities, but all within the realm of attributes usually assigned to women in order to police their behavior in the public sphere. (Vavrus, 2002, p. 151-152)

Part of the reason Vavrus (2002) ties Clinton's campaign to cultural difference feminism is because of the way Clinton constructs her campaign around what are typically called "women's issues," or issues that are based on an ethic of care for children and families (p. 151).

Though her credentials as a feminist were rarely explicated, Clinton's status as a feminist waivered only once in her many years in the spotlight. When her husband admitted to an affair with Monica Lewinsky, Clinton stood by him and angered feminists and antifeminists alike. Perhaps the most outspoken critic was *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, "who asserted that Hillary Clinton's failure to dump her husband after his philandering rendered her 'unmasked as a counterfeit feminist'" (Levy, 2008, p. 88). If she were a real feminist, they said, she would have left him.

Against the backdrop of the hot and cold public approval rating, Clinton seemed reluctant to adopt a women-centered approach to her presidential campaign. When she announced her candidacy, she only briefly alluded to her gender and participation in the fight for equality ("Senator Clinton's Statement," 2008). After polls suggested that voters wanted to see her softer side, Clinton began to talk more about her role as a women candidate. In a debate, she cited the women's movement and her mother as her inspirations (Kornblut, 2007, p. A01). She declared a women's week during which she only spoke to and about women (Healy, 2007b), and she quipped, "I'm your girl" during a debate in Chicago (Argetsinger & Roberts, 2007, p. C03). As in previous years, the media seemed to have trouble presenting a woman political candidate that exhibited both masculine and feminine characteristics.⁹

⁹ For a more detailed description of this process, see Chapter 2.

Clinton often attributed overly harsh coverage to the fact that she was beating all of her male counterparts, not to overt acts of sexism by politicians and pundits (Pindell, 2007). But then she started to fall behind, and within a year of announcing her candidacy to the tune of a double-digit lead, news polls listed Obama as the most electable candidate (Page, 2008, p. A1). When she finally spoke against the consistently sexist, demeaning, and often violent rhetoric spouted by mainstream and non-mainstream sources, she was criticized for playing the “victim” card (Kantor, 2008, p. A1). By painting herself as a victim of sexism and misogyny, Clinton was sharply criticized by a number of conservative postfeminists, including women like Christina Hoff Sommers, who suggest that when women call attention to existing oppression, they are merely trying to paint themselves as victims (Hammer, 2002).

Many young women quoted in mainstream news articles suggested that the concerns Clinton had about the role of sexism in her campaign and the sexism that women of Clinton’s generation lived through did not resonate with their experiences. One such article featured a NOW member and self-proclaimed feminist who was disappointed that her daughter chose to support Obama over Clinton:

Signer, a lifelong advocate of women’s rights, has a 23-year-old daughter who “fell in love with Obama. She just doesn’t relate to the fact that the opportunities she’s had are because of people like Hillary,” Signer said.

“She’s young, and she doesn’t have our sense of urgency.” (Saslow, 2008, p. A1)

These young women do not seem to understand that their experiences of equality were made possible by first and second wave feminist activism, which yielded positive results

for women in terms of reproductive rights and voting rights, to name a few (Saslow, 2008, p. A1). Perhaps in light of the fact that few young people are aware of the struggles women had to overcome and have yet to overcome in the fight for true gender equity, Clinton's most strident connections to feminism came during her concession speech on June 7, 2008. After encouraging her supporters to shift their allegiance help elect Barack Obama, she began to reflect on the significance of her journey. She stated:

I ran as a daughter who benefited from opportunities my mother never dreamed of. I ran as a mother who worries about my daughter's future and a mother who wants to leave all children brighter tomorrows. To build that future I see, we must make sure that women and men alike understand the struggles of their grandmothers and their mothers, and that women enjoy equal opportunities, equal pay, and equal respect. ("Transcript: Hillary Clinton endorses Barack Obama," 2008, p. 3).

While Clinton hoped that the post-Title IX women of the younger generation would realize that feminist activism ensured their path was easier than it was in previous decades, her call to action was quickly replaced by Palin's assertion that gender equity was already a reality for women like her.

Feminism? You Betcha!

Because Palin's goal, as defined by McCain's aids, was to attract Clinton's supporters, she needed to align herself with a number of women's issues and feminist organizations. News articles, especially those that attempted to introduce the then relatively unknown politician to the public, often included statements that questioned Palin's identification as a feminist. Under the guise "Woman in the News," the *New York*

Times reported that Palin joined the group Feminists For Life in 2006, two years before being added to the Republican ticket (Yardley, 2008a, A1). While her voluntary affiliation with this group years before the election suggests that she does self-identify as a feminist, the article goes on to quote an Alaskan strategic research and planning consultant as saying, “I don't think a Hillary person would ever move to her, based on the issues... I don't think before today I would have ever heard someone call her a feminist.” This quotation is suggestive of the idea that her policy positions disqualify her from being labeled a feminist.

By denying that gender inequities still exist in the U.S., Palin repeatedly rejected a number of tenets of first, second, and third wave feminism. Palin consistently rejected the need for continued feminist activism because she claimed that she did not experience such discrimination during her lifetime. Palin, who suggested that she was not the victim of gender discrimination because laws and statutes like Title IX already ensured gender equity in schools and the workplace (Caplan, 2008), used her time in the national spotlight to suggest that women today already have every opportunity that men have to succeed (“Transcript: Palin’s Speech at the RNC,” 2008, p. 1). Her interview with Katie Couric at the end of September also touched on this issue. When Couric asked Palin to define feminism, Palin responded that a feminist is “Someone who believes in equal rights. Someone who would not stand for oppression against women.” But because she believes that women have already achieved equality, her comments suggest that she rejects the lingering first wave idea that women still need to fight for equal access in the public sphere.

In her speeches and interviews, Palin repeatedly stated that she never felt that she had been discriminated against in her home or in the workplace on account of her gender.¹⁰ By suggesting that inequality does not exist because she has never personally been discriminated against, Palin's view of feminism ignores the experiences of those who do not share her privileged position as a member of the white middle-class. Palin is not alone in suggesting that her life experiences can be generalized to apply to all women. Feminist women of color have widely published such critiques of the feminist movement claiming, and rightly so, that white feminists tended to focus on the types of discrimination they see in their lives while ignoring the ways that their lifestyles and privileged positions continue to oppress women of color and working-class women (hooks, 1999; Hill Collins, 2000). By failing to recognize the lived experiences of discrimination common among women, especially women working in the public sphere and women who self-identify along a range of competing minoritarian intersectionalities, Palin seems to reject these experiences as being of equal value as her own.

After asking Palin about her definition of feminism, Couric questioned Palin about her anti-abortion stance (Palin does not believe in abortion even in the case of rape or incest), her views on the contraception (she is against the morning-after-pill and teaching contraception in public schools), and her failure to support the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act because it would lead to too much litigation (Caplan, 2008). These three criteria, each airing during Couric's interview segment on Palin's views of "social issues," worked to undermine Palin's commitment to "equal rights" and ridding the country of "oppression against women."

¹⁰ However, Palin did refuse to give interviews for several weeks of her campaign because she said the media treated her differently on account of her gender.

In pairing Palin's ideas about feminism with her pro-life stance on abortion, the media limit the movement to an overly narrow range of issues. In dismissing a pluralistic idea of feminism, the news media fail to address decades-old attempts by feminists to be more inclusive of different and often contradictory viewpoints. Acknowledging this growing difference, a Palin supporter and commentator for the *USA Today* suggested that "Even if Sarah Palin ultimately fails to prove herself worthy of second-in-command, her enthusiastic reception has proved that there are other kinds of women in the USA -- lots of them -- who have a different idea about what's best for womankind" (Parker, 2008). Another woman quoted in the *New York Times* stated, "There is a spectrum within the pro-life movement, and Sarah is proof that you can be pro-life and pro-woman" (Severson, 2008). While these statements provide evidence that the diversity of feminism does exist, such articles tend to be few and far between. Even when these types of articles do acknowledge that some pro-life women also consider themselves to be feminists, they still fall victim to the tendency to define feminism in terms of the reproductive rights arguments made popular during the second wave.

The *New York Times* article goes on to point out that feminists who align themselves with Palin receive limited recognition: "They feel they have been looked down on by Clinton feminists and ignored by the power structure in the Republican Party" (Severson, 2008). Researcher Leonie Huddy found that this lack of attention and acknowledgement is also characteristic of the media coverage of feminism. She states, "*The media have tended to minimize the diversity among feminists by reserving the label feminist for a few prominent women 'superstars' but rarely using it for the many other individuals who call themselves feminist, including ordinary women and men*" (Huddy,

1997, p. 186, emphasis in original). While the 18 million Clinton supporters are defined as feminists regardless of whether they would apply the label to themselves, Palin supporters must fight for the label because they do not fit easily into the media ideas of what feminists think and do.

The way Palin's feminist views play out on the campaign trail is not without contradiction. Palin explained to Katie Couric that she opposed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act then making its way through Congress on the grounds that it would result in too many women suing their employers for gender-based pay discrimination. While limiting the ability of women to fight for fair pay is problematic for many feminists in its own right, a campaign speech referenced in the *New York Times* contradicts this statement even further. In the speech, Palin criticizes Obama for failing to pay his female Senate staff members as well as the male staff (Rother, 2008). While acknowledging that pay discrimination continues to be a problem for women in the United States, she denies them the ability to take action against their employers if they discover the pay differentiation after the current six-month deadline. Instead of offering women a legal option through which they could fight against pay discrimination, Palin turns the politics of equal pay into a personal choice to support McCain so as to avoid unnecessary litigation. This "personalization of social and political issues" (Dubrofsky, 2002, p. 268) is suggestive of the postfeminist discourse found throughout coverage of Palin's vice presidential bid.

(Post)Feminist Superwomen

Unlike scholars who define postfeminism as it relates to the third wave and to the postmodern/poststructuralist turn in academia (Brooks, 1997, p. 4), I use it here in its

more popular connotation as a backlash against the historical, organized, public workings of feminism that encouraged women to enter the workforce and to politicize their struggles. Projansky explains this type of postfeminism as

the depiction of the present as the end point of a linear feminism that promotes “equal rights,” “choice,” and individualism for white, middle-class heterosexual women. Having achieved (or even almost achieved) this version of equality, in which women can choose “to have it (work, family [hetero]sexual expression) all” or choose not to have it all, the contemporary era follows a feminist era and inherits the benefits, failures, and pitfalls of that feminism, whether or not particular writers interpret the postfeminist era as having profited or suffered from the feminism that preceded it. (2001, p. 87)

Empowerment through personal choice, a (re)privileging of femininity, and a rebalancing of the career/family dichotomy are prevalent throughout the media discourse surrounding Clinton and Palin in the 2008 campaign. These news constructions often fit neatly into the canon of postfeminist literature, but most interesting are the ways in which the coverage of Palin moves past these restrictive criteria to posit a candidate that makes a mess of the traditional tenets of postfeminism.

Palin’s many attempts to define feminism often divorced the movement from its historical struggles and goal of political activism. In the Couric interview, she followed her overly simplistic definition of feminism as “equal rights” with a statement about her identity as a feminist. She stated:

I believe that women certainly today have every opportunity that a man has to succeed, and to try to do it all, anyway. And I'm very, very thankful that I've been

brought up in a family where gender hasn't been an issue. You know, I've been expected to do everything growing up that the boys were doing. We were out chopping wood and you're out hunting and fishing and filling our freezer with good wild Alaskan game to feed our family. So it kinda started with that. (Caplan, 2008)

In this response, Palin suggests that the work of feminism is over, as woman today can already succeed in areas traditionally reserved for men. While she acknowledges that women may have some difficulty balancing a full-time career and role as a wife and mother when she states that women can “try to do it all, anyway,” she suggests that the reasons why women might have difficulty “doing it all” are due to individual families’ choices, not systemic problems. As is characteristic in postfeminist discourses, Palin’s response suggests that “Successes *and* failures are attributed to individual women rather than to a complex formula of individual work, group efforts, and structural influences” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 23). She praises her family for helping her avoid this struggle by demanding as much of her as they did her brothers. What is left out of the story are the ways in which Palin was expected to do all this and more, such her need to be successful in beauty pageants in order to finance her college education. While she was expected to do everything the boys in her family were doing, they were not expected to do everything the girls were doing. Thus, the masculine continues to be the standard by which all is measured. Her response also leaves out the struggles women have faced throughout history in their quest to be seen as equal to men. She seems to equate gender blindness to equality, which effectively silences difference and cultural feminisms as well as the historical struggles women faced in their quest for equality.

Coverage of Clinton from throughout her time in the spotlight also ignored the cultural roots of feminist activism. Unlike Palin, Clinton was never asked about the ways in which she understood her role as a feminist or her relation to the feminist movement, nor was she ever asked to explicitly define feminism. Instead, the criteria by which Clinton was labeled a feminist were more implicit and related to choices she made throughout her life, choices such as keeping her name when she married and holding a policy position in the West Wing instead of having tea parties (Vavrus, 2002). While there was no question among mainstream news sources that Clinton was indeed a feminist, there was also no commentary about how her politics and policy positions were influenced by the feminist movement and how feminist activism made possible her policy advising role in President Clinton's administration and her subsequent campaigns for the Senate and White House. By ignoring the ways in which Clinton's experiences have shaped her stances on political issues, especially gender politics, the media divorce the long, rich history of the movement from the ways in which its successes have shaped the world views of political candidates like Clinton and Palin. As such, Clinton and Palin are seen as proof that the feminist movement has done its job, and thus continued feminist activism is no longer necessary. Instead, news coverage of these candidates suggests that feminist activism has been replaced by a series of individual choices that women can make about their own futures.

When Palin was asked about her views on a number of social issues, including her stance on abortion and the morning after pill, she replied by stating what she, personally, would do in each situation (Caplan, 2008). In regards to whether women should be allowed to have an abortion in the case of rape or incest, Palin stated, "Personally, I

would counsel the person to choose life, despite horrific, horrific circumstances that this person would find themselves in.” In response to the legality of the morning after pill, she responded, “Personally, I would not choose to participate in that kind of contraception” (Caplan, 2008). Palin’s personal statements about how she would act in such situations overlooks the influence that public policies have on these issues, including limiting access to abortions and withholding funding from schools that refuse abstinence-only sex education.

Palin’s commentary on women’s issues also ignores the institutional barriers that prevent women from breaking into traditionally male arenas such as the White House. When Palin suggested that Obama might be sorry that he did not pick Clinton as his running mate, a *NYT* article reported that the Obama camp issued a statement to remind the public about Palin’s treatment of Clinton before she entered the national scene. In the press release, a spokesperson for Obama cited a *Newsweek* interview during which Palin criticized Clinton for “whining” about sexism and encouraged her to stop drawing attention to herself as a victim of sexist media coverage. Palin suggested that Clinton accept the fact that women in politics are always treated unfairly by the media, and instead of politicizing this fact, she recommended that Clinton work harder to prove herself.¹¹ Again, Palin denies women the agency to discuss their oppression in the public sphere and to rise up together to fight for change. Instead, for Palin and for postfeminists, change comes in the form of personal choices that empower women on an individual basis, not as a collective group (Helford, 2000, p. 292).

Choosing the Feminine Persona

¹¹ The interview can be viewed in full at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9Y8FKAsxmK>

In addition to personalizing the political, popular postfeminism suggests that women are empowered through their ability to choose their path in life. Feminist women who take on more masculine characteristics are often portrayed as bitter and unhappy; however, women who choose traditionally feminine roles lead happy and fulfilling lives (Probyn, 1993; Projansky, 2001; Dow, 1996). As paraphrased in Dubrofsky, “Choice is important for postfeminists (Coppock et al., 1995, p. 4). Implicit in this is the sense that women can now reclaim their femininity, that they no longer need to reject it (as they see feminists doing)” (2002, p. 269). Indeed, the reclamation of femininity is coupled with “a revision of feminism that encourages women’s private, consumer lifestyles rather than cultivating desire for public life and political activism” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 2). Projansky expands on this sentiment when she states that these tenets ensure “a place for femininity in postfeminism. Advertising, in particular, contributes to this version of postfeminism, celebrating women’s ‘equality’ and their access to ‘choice’ (feminism), while marketing commodities that call for and support constant body maintenance” (2002, p. 80).

One of the problems Clinton continues to face is the issue of her appearance. She was initially criticized for not caring enough about her physical appearance because of her frumpy outfits and oversized glasses, but her masculine demeanor and polished pantsuits became a key issue when she was running for national office. A LexisNexis search reveals 448 references to Clinton’s pantsuits in English-language newspapers in 2007 and 2008. While the majority of these articles give a quick mention of pantsuits in reference to what Clinton wore that day, others went into more detail, offering an analysis of her “no nonsense” style (Kantor, 2008, p. A1; Hoyt, 2008). As one stated:

Mrs. Clinton...has forgone the persona that the *National Review*

contributor Myrna Blyth recently characterized as Hairband Hillary, the first lady whose unsteady self-image led to frequent coiffure changes and endearing wardrobe missteps. The old Hillary Rodham Clinton has been replaced by a candidate who would never be caught dead in one of Nancy Pelosi's flaming "Dynasty" suits, clothes that send up power woman flares. Mrs. Clinton's bid for an aura of Oval Office assurance is orchestrated around a wardrobe of the androgynous beige pantsuits beloved of policy wonks. (Trebay, 2007, p. ST1)

Clinton's "androgynous" wardrobe seemed to go hand-in-hand with her masculine persona. The fear surrounding Clinton was that she was just like the men from whom she claimed difference, that she had taken feminism "too far" (Walters, 1995, p. 120). While Clinton was criticized as being "the manliest of Democrats" for drinking beer and taking a shot of whiskey with men in a small town pub (Parker, 2008, p. A15), Palin's skill at "picking off rabbits out the back door and sniping and ptarmigan, an Alaskan game bird, on cross-country skis" did not harm her feminine image (Jenkins, 2008, p. A1). In fact, it made her seem more realistic and personable (Leibovich, 2008b, p. A1).

Indeed, Palin's choice of a feminine appearance is painstakingly constructed in various news outlets, and it is often constructed in terms of consumer lifestyles. Palin's credentials as a former beauty queen, reported in a *Wall Street Journal* article by stating that she gained "local acclaim for being named Miss Wasilla in 1984. She then was named Miss Congeniality and first runner-up in the Miss Alaska contest the same year" (Meckler, et al., 2008, A1), were followed by her political experience as mayor of

Wasilla, Alaska. Discussing Palin's rise from an unknown college student to the vice presidential candidate, a *New York Times* article stresses that her college roommate only remembers that she always took care to do her hair and makeup (Davey, 2008b). Her librarian-style glasses also became a hot button issue in the financial section of several major newspapers. The *USA Today* reported that her \$375 frames were in high demand but cautioned that the shape of Palin's lenses were custom-designed for her face, causing many retailers to settle for "similar-looking brands" (Horovitz, 2008, 1B). Nowhere was femininity linked to consumerism more than in the stories of Palin's \$150,000 wardrobe, which consisted almost entirely of slim-fitting A-line skirts and stiletto heels.

During her primary debate with democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Biden and in her major network interviews, Palin often resorted to excessive femininity when going on the offensive or when backed into a corner. When pressed to name criteria that allowed McCain to be labeled as a maverick, Palin winked and quipped that she would "get back to" Couric with concrete examples. During the debate, Palin winked and smiled throughout the 90-minute session as she criticized Biden and Obama for their track records on a number of issues. Always appearing in skirts, Palin's presence on the national stage is visually marked by her display of femininity, right down to her designer red stilettos and her flawless hair and make-up. In their study on representations of women in the postfeminist age, several media researchers commented that "women can wear make-up and dress in stilettos, short skirts, shoulder-padded jackets or silk business suits because these are feminine and promoted acceptable images of appearance which emphasize femininity" (Coppock, et al., 1995, p. 181). These feminine characteristics add to a more womanly, and thus less threatening version of power. Instead of attacking men

the way feminists are frequently accused of doing, Palin suggests through her winks and smiles that her aim is to be as unthreatening as possible. Palin's carefully crafted, purchased, and polished (white) femininity gave her credibility in a man's world.

This postfeminist definition of the successful woman maintains that women can "try to have it all" as long as they do so without disrupting the patriarchal structure. The flaw of postfeminism "is that this 'liberation' remains within male-defined parameters. Women can succeed, but only on men's terms in a man's world" (Coppock, et al., 1995, p. 272). Women can achieve success by adhering to traditional gender roles such as feminine dress and mannerisms. This insistence on excessive femininity as criteria for success separates women from the agency to challenge these often-contradictory messages. Instead of fighting the system, women are encouraged to enter the public sphere only when they have mastered their feminine performances.

Palin's "choice" to adhere to feminine qualities did not go unnoticed or unrewarded. One female voter and Palin supporter stated, "I love the 'Sarah Barracuda' name. If a woman has worked at any corporate level, you have to be tough, but you can do it in a feminine way" (Kaufman and Williamson, 2008, A5). Another praised her decision to lovingly discuss her family as the most important aspect of her life by declaring, "I'm not that into politics... I'm just going to vote for Trig Van Palin's mom" (Severson, 2008). Her popularity, especially among non-college educated women and men, hints that these behaviors helped the American public to be more accepting of females in positions of power.

Breaking the Work/Family Dichotomy?

While Palin easily fits into these aspects of postfeminism, the career/family dichotomy present in such texts does not come full circle in the campaign discourse. Postfeminism suggests that women are free to choose career or family, but it also insinuates that choosing family is the best option because it prevents women from becoming too masculine, and therefore unhappy and unfulfilled in the public sphere (Projansky, 1993, p. 76). Dow (1996) also comments on this dichotomy:

Postfeminism's idealization of motherhood and its refusal of sexual politics means that postfeminist questioning of women's "choices" usually emphasizes women's anxieties about the impact of work on motherhood, that is, the ways in which postfeminist women may be failing their families because of their pursuit of fulfillment in the public sphere. (p. 170)

Inherent in this discourse is a demand that women must choose between a career and a family in order to be fulfilled and happy in life. Or, as Jamieson describes it, woman can have a career and a family at the same time, "but only at the cost of cheating one or the other" (Jamieson, 1995, p. 54).

Though Clinton was criticized early in her career for her inability to balance her career with the job of wife and mother, this was not an issue in coverage of her 2008 campaign, probably because she no longer had a young child in the White House. In contrast, the media were at no loss for examples of areas in which Palin's family life struggled because of her decision to enter race for the White House. Besides the controversy surrounding Palin's pregnant 17-year-old daughter, Palin was criticized for the age at which she conceived her fifth child, who was born with Down's Syndrome, and

for exploiting his status as a special needs child for political gain. Additionally, she kept her pregnancy with Trig under wraps because she “didn’t want Alaskans to fear [she] would not be able to fulfill [her] duties” (Kantor, et al., 2008). She traveled to Texas to deliver a keynote address on energy even though “her amniotic fluid was leaking, and three days after giving birth to Trig, she was back in the office carrying out her duties as governor” (Kantor, et al., 2008). These examples suggest that the pressure to perform in the masculine sphere of politics often draws her away from her role as a mother.

Additionally, an article suggested that dragging her husband into the political spotlight after being elected governor caused him to be “embarrassed” (Zernike and Severson, 2008). Palin’s election as governor also caused problems with her mother-in-law, who ran as her mayoral replacement. Palin opted not to support her, instead favoring another candidate who is still serving as mayor today. The *NYT* suggested that this was going to cause a great deal of strife at the Thanksgiving dinner table (Davey, 2008a). Finally, after the presidential election, she was criticized by McCain’s aids for yelling at her staff members until they cried, which hints that she may be unhappy “trying to do it all.”

However, she easily dismisses the suggestion that she cannot do it all. In her interview with Charles Gibson, Palin responded to questions about her ability to raise five children and fulfill the role of vice president by stating, “I’m part of that generation, where that question is kind of irrelevant, because it’s accepted. Of course, you can be the vice president and you can raise a family. I’m the governor and I’m raising a family. I’ve been a mayor and have raised a family” (Seelye, 2008). News accounts suggest that she completes both tasks easily, sometimes simultaneously. In fact, “In her two years as

governor of Alaska, and especially in the four months since her son was born with Downs syndrome, Sarah Palin has been portrayed as the very model of a working mother: She answers her BlackBerry while pumping breast milk for her infant; keeps a playpen by her desk; and manages a state while cooking caribou hot dogs for her family” (Simon, 2008, p. A4). She was reportedly praised by *Focus on the Family* host James Dobson, who broke from his usual stance that mothers should stay home with their children to support Palin’s candidacy (Simon, 2008, p. A4). Her ability to keep track of her children while on the campaign trail and allegations of sexism quickly silenced questions about whether Palin can be successful as a working mother in the White House. As such, she was never forced in the presidential election (or at any point in her career, for that matter), to choose between work and family. She is presented in the media as fulfilled in her role as *both* a wife and a politician. While the media provides several examples of areas in which her family life is problematic, the aforementioned examples of voters praising her role as a mother suggest, she is championed for her ability to traverse both career and family.

Messing With Our Templates

In her book, Projansky commented that “though women’s equality is important, it is unfortunate that women have to become just like men to be professionally successful” (Projansky, 2001, p. 76). The irony is that Clinton’s masculine professional appearance was associated with lower approval ratings than when she adopted a more feminine style, and Palin was popular among conservatives when she adhered to patriarchal definitions of women vying for positions of power, especially in the way she engaged in excessive femininity when going on the offensive against her male colleagues. However, the inability to classify Palin in terms of traditional binaries such as feminine/feminist and

mother/career suggests that she helps us break apart these binaries to show women can embody multiple, seemingly contradictory positions at once. Palin's ability to traverse the career/family binary in postfeminist discourse suggests that feminist scholars need to explore ways in which news coverage of female politicians does not fit neatly into this framework. Indeed, Palin's personal life is ripe with examples of the way she breaks down these barriers. As commentator Kathleen Parker remarked, "To put it plainly, Palin is seriously messing with our templates. We know what political women in the USA are supposed to look like -- and she's not it" (Parker, 2008, p. A15).

Still, Sarah Palin's insistence and/or need to engage in excessively feminine mannerisms problematizes the way in which her path was "a little easier" than Hillary Clinton's. Palin was praised for upholding traditional gender roles such as motherhood and femininity, which made her less threatening to the patriarchal order than Clinton, who was unapologetic about her intelligence and her insistence that she can lead the country. And while Clinton was framed as a feminist who saw the continued need for women to fight together against oppression, Palin engaged in more simplistic and postfeminist definitions. While Palin messes the necessity of choice, she nonetheless adheres to several major tenets of postfeminism and, as such, can be seen as a postfeminist icon.

If we are going to move past the narrow definitions of womanhood and of feminism discussed in this chapter, the media needs to acknowledge the multiple and competing roles that women in our society embody. First, women can exhibit some masculine and feminine traits without being schizophrenic or overly calculating. Second, feminism represents such a broad range of ideas and experiences that it cannot continue

to be pigeonholed as just about equal rights or just about being pro-choice. We should embrace the diversity of the movement and use it to attack injustices from a variety of angles. Despite the media's resistance to this concept, feminism will be most successful when women and men value their differences while still working toward the common goal of ending the oppressions that exist at the intersections of race, class, and gender. Contrary to the popular idea that women must come together in one organized movement to make inroads against inequalities, feminism should and must continue to attack oppressive conditions on a plethora of fronts and platforms: in schools and the workplace, in working class and wealthy neighborhoods, in developing and developed nations, in the home and in the political arena, anywhere and everywhere that oppression exists. There is not one easy answer, but many competing and contradictory answers that women and men can and should continue to use to fight for a more just society.

Chapter 4

Women Without Feminism

On January 29, 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act into law, marking the end of Ledbetter's 10-year struggle against her former employer for decades of paying her less than her male coworkers for exactly the same work. After signing the bill, Obama's first major initiative after taking office, he delivered a speech in which he praised Ledbetter for her willingness to fight for equal pay for future generations of women. He also praised his grandmother for teaching him about the daily struggles of working women, and he dedicated the bill to children, most notably his two daughters, who will benefit from a more equal system. While his speech was appropriate for the occasion and inspiring to men and women who continue to fight for feminist causes, the fact that men are openly speaking for women's issues and actively supporting the women's movement is at once both reassuring and troubling.

In the post-George W. Bush era, women feminists have reason to be concerned about men co-opting feminist rhetoric in the name of antifeminist policies. Several feminist organizations published a "Global Women's Issues Scorecard on the Bush Administration" that measured how well Bush was addressing feminist issues in the U.S. and abroad. They awarded high ratings to Bush's rhetorical praising of women's issues but gave Ds and Fs to the administration's efforts to follow through on that rhetoric.

While Bush was quick to use profeminist language in his 2004 campaign, his policies include limiting reproductive rights, encouraging women to be subservient to men in traditional marriages, and limiting women's access to the democratic process internationally (Ferguson, 2007, p. 192).

Additionally, several leading feminist scholars have commented on the problem of women abandoning the feminist movement or prefacing their feminist statements with the phrase, "I'm not a feminist, but..."¹² which suggests the negative connotations many Americans associate with the term. With popular support dwindling and hundreds of declarations of the death of feminism published in the last few decades alone, it is important that women and men work together to fight against repressive patriarchal practices and sexist agendas. The role men should play in the movement, however, remains a contentious issue. At stake for women feminists is the fear that women's definitions of their experiences and circumstances will take a backseat to issues men define as important. Tania Modleski (1991) foreshadowed this sentiment when she wrote, "Although feminism is no longer in its minority it still seems to need a male authority figure to speak on its behalf and certify its legitimacy as well as its sanity" (p. 3). As in the case of Lilly Ledbetter, it took men in Congress and the man in the White House to finally legitimate the voice of a woman who had been discriminated against for the entirety of her 20 years as an employee of Goodyear and in her 10 years fighting (and ultimately losing) in our nation's judicial system.

In the 2008 election, this male authority took the form of double standards that deemed men genuine and in touch with voters when they spoke about women's issues,

¹² For a detailed description of the rise of this phenomenon, see Susan J. Douglass's *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media* (1994).

while women candidates were calculating, incompetent, and playing the gender card when they did the same. Though these double standards ensured that the men could claim ownership of “women’s issues” and co-opt knowledge of women’s lived experiences, the candidates stopped short of self-identifying as feminists.¹³ In adopting the “I’m not a feminist, but...” mantra, the candidates posited a vision of women’s lived experience divorced from the feminist political action that made those experiences possible. This chapter argues that coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign perpetuated a women-centered ideology defined by men’s interpretations of women’s experiences and divorced from the political ideology of the feminist movement that seeks meaningful and sometimes radical changes for women in our society.

Surveying over 250 articles from the 2008 presidential election, this chapter pays special attention to the ways the male and female candidates described and defined issues important to women. Articles were selected from “hard news” sections of the top five circulating national newspapers, and not articles appearing on the editorial pages such as letters to the editor or columns from the editorial staff. Using examples published between January 1, 2007 (the week before several Democratic candidates officially entered the race) and going through the week following the November 4, 2008 election date, this chapter will discuss the double standards that privileged male interpretations of women’s experiences and forums, while criticizing women candidates for doing the same. It will also discuss the ways the candidates defined “women’s issues” in ways that essentialized women as a monolithic group with similar concerns for society. This

¹³ The only candidate to self-identify as a feminist was Barack Obama, who claimed the label when being introduced to the editor of *Ms.* The incident was not widely publicized until the editor used the story to justify her selection of an illustration of Obama wearing a “This is what a feminist looks like” t-shirt for the cover of the special inauguration issue.

chapter will show how men claimed knowledge of women's issues through experiences without mentioning feminism as a way of knowing and without acknowledging the privilege that comes with being male.

Battling Backlash

On October 30, 2007, the seven remaining contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination met in Pennsylvania for a televised debate during which the six male candidates were accused of "ganging" up on Clinton, each taking turns pressing her on her "character, electability and apparent unwillingness to answer tough questions" (Fouhy, 2007). Though Clinton told reporters that she did not think the rough treatment was the result of being the only woman on the stage (she stated, "I don't think they're piling on because I'm a woman. I think they're piling on because I'm winning"), she also suggested that the debate was evidence of the "all boys club" of presidential politics (ibid). The campaign frontrunners and several feminist writers chimed in, telling reporters their stance on the perceived sexism in the campaign. During an interview on the *Today Show*, Obama said, "We spent, I think, the first 15 minutes of the debate hitting me on various foreign policy issues and I didn't come out and say look I'm being hit on because I look different from the rest of the folks on the stage" (ibid). The media outlets I surveyed never questioned the non-sequitor in Obama's statement: that because he did not sense racism meant that Clinton did not experience sexism. Edwards issued a statement from feminist writer and supporter Kate Michelman, stating that Clinton was "trying to have it both ways. At one minute the strong woman ready to lead, the next, she's the woman under attack, disingenuously playing the victim card. It's not presidential" (Smith and Kuhn, 2007). The fact that a strong woman might also be under

attack from the media was never brought forward as a response to Michelman's claim. In the week following the election, each of the top five circulating newspapers published articles that claimed Clinton was playing the gender card, trying to capitalize on her gender to win voters.

Early in the campaign, Clinton was criticized in the national press for being unlikable, especially among women who thought she was out of touch with the issues that mattered most to them. As one article stated:

"I just don't totally trust her," said the 57-year-old homemaker from the Cleveland suburb of Seven Hills. Though Mrs. Dunbar voted for Bill Clinton in the 1990s, she would back Mr. Giuliani over Mrs. Clinton next November because at a time of steep foreign-policy challenges, "I just don't believe the international world is ready for a woman president." The survey, conducted among an unusually large sample of 1,509 adults with an error margin of 2.5 percentage points, shows a divergence in assessments of Mrs. Clinton's personal qualities. While a 51% majority gives her high marks for being "knowledgeable and experienced enough to handle the presidency," pluralities rate Mrs. Clinton negatively on honesty, likability and sharing their positions on the issues. (Harwood, 2007, p. A6)

In response to these criticisms, Clinton hosted a series of campaign events for and about women, including interviews and rallies billed as conversations, to try to soften her image. These stops, which included a morning on *The View*, rallies with her mother and daughter, and campaign stops at "girl power" events, were met with mixed results

(Murray & Kornblut, 2007, p. A1). The *Washington Post* noted that Clinton's increasing number of campaign appearances devoted to women was due in part to her growing popularity among women of all ages (Murray & Kornblut, 2007, p. A1). However, the article goes on to quote women who do not support Clinton's bid for the White House, stating:

Without question, gender is helping Clinton with some female voters...
But many other Iowa women, while also viewing the Senator's presidential bid as historic and inspiring, do not consider the gender factor to be reason enough to vote for her. "It would be wonderful to have a woman in the White House. It's been way too long," said Ferol Menzel, vice president for academic affairs and Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa. But perhaps Clinton is not the right woman, Menzel added. "We certainly know there's an animosity toward the Clintons that will probably be a factor," she said. "Which is a shame because she's a bright woman and could do the job. But I really want a Democrat to be elected." (ibid)

She also met with a group of 14 women and 2 men during the infamous coffee shop visit before the New Hampshire primary in which her eyes welled with tears while discussing the difficulties of being on the campaign trail. Of the moment, one potential voter stated, "She seemed a lot more real at that moment...It just made me decide to vote for her" (Page, 2008b). Another woman said, "I loved it! I loved it! ... I think it was genuine. It wasn't issue-based. It hit a nerve and it was real" (Nicholas, 2008). But not everyone was so gracious. A news reporter asked several of the people at the coffee shop whether they believed the tears were really genuine, likely attempting to elicit a

confirmation of this idea. An article about the incident stated:

The woman who asked the question, Mrs. Pernold, said after the event that she was moved by Mrs. Clinton's response. A television reporter asked her if she thought the tears might be manufactured, given that Mrs. Clinton is in a tough fight against Senator Barack Obama for the nomination, and many people find Mr. Obama more personally accessible. "I don't think she could make it up," Mrs. Pernold said. "Could you do that? I think she really cares about us." (Healy & Santora, 2008)

In a widely cited op-ed article,¹⁴ columnist Maureen Dowd shared the reporters opinion that the tears were manufactured to help Clinton look more likable. Her column stated:

When I walked into the office Monday, people were clustering around a computer to watch what they thought they would never see: Hillary Clinton with the unmistakable look of tears in her eyes. A woman gazing at the screen was grimacing, saying it was bad. Three guys watched it over and over, drawn to the "humanized" Hillary. One reporter who covers security issues cringed. "We are at war," he said. "Is this how she'll talk to Kim Jong-il?" Another reporter joked: "That crying really seemed genuine. I'll bet she spent hours thinking about it beforehand." He added dryly: "Crying doesn't usually work in campaigns. Only in relationships." (Dowd, 2008)

In addition to suggesting that Clinton's tears were part of a calculated move to appeal to

¹⁴ While I have abstained from using op-ed pieces throughout this study, I chose to include this particular example because it was widely circulated in the online edition, making the list of the most emailed articles from the day's paper, and because it was a particularly vivid example of the opinions members of the news media hold about women candidates who part from cultural expectations.

women voters, articles also questioned whether the tears were indicative of weakness, showing that Clinton was not emotionally strong enough to run for president. Each of the top circulating papers cited former presidential candidate Ed Muskie, whose popularity plummeted after reporters claimed that a tear trickled down his face during a contentious campaign appearance in 1972. And the *New York Times* also published a quotation from John Edwards, who used the occasion to question Clinton's emotional state and tout his own readiness to handle difficult situations. He stated:

I don't really have anything to say about that...I think what we need in a commander in chief is strength and resolve, and presidential campaigns are tough business, but being president of the United States is also very tough business. And the president of the United States is faced with very, very difficult challenges every single day and difficult judgments every single day. What I know is that I'm prepared for that. (Seeyle, 2008b)

When Clinton held campaign events for women or mentioned the historic first that would come with her nomination for the presidency, Clinton was accused of playing the gender card. While some articles painted this in a positive light, such as an *LA Times* article titled, "Clinton happy to play the gender card" that details the way that women voters are rallying around her, the majority of articles were not so generous. One article criticized Clinton's decision to highlight the impact her gender made on debate questions and media coverage by stating:

Raising the issue of her sex so early in the campaign is risky for Clinton—especially since her opponents' attacks haven't been explicitly gender-based and Clinton herself has emphasized her own toughness, repeatedly

saying she wants no special consideration as a female contender for the nation's highest office. Clinton's remarks were part of a multimedia damage-control blitz that included attempts to target moderator Tim Russert as having been too harsh on her. (Thrush, 2007, p. A22)

Despite the fact that debate moderators included superfluous questions about Clinton's jewelry preferences and more pressing questions not asked of the other candidates in the field, none of her opponents acknowledged the differences in coverage between her campaign and his own.

It was not just Clinton who experienced backlash on the campaign trail. Several news articles detailing the negative attention women voters faced appeared in national news sources. In one such incident, a woman with a "Hillary" bumper sticker was stopped at a red light when a man shouted to her "You can be for Hillary all you want, but there is no way that thing is going to become president" (Kaufman & Hymowitz, 2008). Another woman was approached by a stranger while wearing a sticker that read "Hillary—I'm Ready." The man said to her, "Ah, come on. A woman's place is in the kitchen" (Saslow, 2008, p. A1). Both women reported being too stunned to respond at the time, but they have since publicized the incidents in an attempt to convince others to be more aware of the sexism that still exists in the United States.

As Clinton battled backlash, Obama swept women voters off their collective feet. According to several mainstream news sources, women flocked to Obama in droves in part because they felt "no obligation to vote for a historic first for their gender. According to one feminist and Clinton supporter, many young women don't 'relate to the fact that the opportunities [they've] had are because of people like Hillary'" (Saslow, 2008, p.

A1). A *Wall Street Journal* article listed several reasons why young women choose Obama over Clinton:

Some young women who support Sen. Obama—sometimes to the chagrin of their pro-Hillary mothers—say they too are troubled by the gender gap in the workplace. But many say they don't feel comfortable being called “feminists,” and that they look to different role models than Sen. Clinton.

“It isn't easy being a woman in academia,” says Amanda Moniz, a 36-year-old Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of Michigan. “I want a woman candidate who is strong, but also feminine, and who doesn't feel she has to be tougher than men to succeed,” she says. “Although Hillary has achieved a lot on her own, she wouldn't be where she was if not for her husband—and that isn't an inspiring lesson.”

Alexa Steinberg, 25, a graduate student at the University of New Hampshire, says she recognizes “that women only make 78 cents for every male dollar, and there are still hurdles for women that I'll face.” She says she thinks it's only a matter of time before she'll be supporting a female candidate for U.S. president—but it won't be Sen. Clinton. “Politically and personally, she's trying to take on the male persona, and isn't a woman in the way I want a woman candidate to be,” she says.

Ms. Steinberg, who supports Sen. Obama, says she's far more drawn to Michele Obama as a role model. “Michele has a career and even earns more than Barack, and she can knock him for not picking up his socks or

doing the laundry,” she explains. “But she has a sense of humor, too. She has a blend of many things, a balance that I can see and appreciate.”

One possible explanation for these types of responses that acknowledge existing inequalities while rejecting feminist activism is the lack of information about modern feminisms in mainstream press. As discussed in chapter three, the media tend to define feminism as a monolithic movement associated with a limited range of issues like abortion and equal pay, while ignoring the plethora of competing and sometimes contradictory ideas that are part of the movement today. Instead of embracing different opinions, the media are more likely to attribute these differences to a catfight, pegging Clinton’s supporters as fundamentally different from those who despise her. As is the case in the above example, there does not seem to be a middle ground.

Articles such as the one quoted above allow women (and men) to voice uncontested opinions about the types of power women can yield most appropriately. Because of this, women candidates must confront the statements of backlash that are perpetuated in the mainstream media through the use of sound bites. This article, which includes commentary on Clinton’s likability and electability, is typical of the types of articles Falk (2008) found in her analysis of similar coverage of women candidates published over the last 135 years. Falk’s (2008) study reveals that the news media have never treated women’s campaigns as viable or given them the attention they give to male candidates, and as such, voters have never had the opportunity to vote for a women frontrunner in a presidential primary. While Clinton’s candidacy paved a wider path for future women presidential candidates, her public scrutiny and subsequent loss suggest that sexism and media bias will continue to be a problem for the women of tomorrow.

Women's Issues Through Media's Eyes

While Clinton was accused of playing the gender card and pandering to women voters when she attended women's forums, the male candidates attending women's forums were praised as likable, in touch with women's issues, and genuine. Research by political science scholars Barbara Palmer and Dennis Simon suggests that it is common for men to reformulate their campaign strategies when they run against women. In fact, trade magazines encourage them to adopt more feminine styles to lure women voters. Citing an article titled "How to Defeat Women and Blacks" published in *Campaigns and Elections*, a popular trade magazine, researchers Palmer and Simon (2008) write that these magazines advise "men to 'steal their opponents rainbow' by quickly and specifically raising women's issues or compassion issues in order to 'beat your opponent to her strongest issue'" (pp. 147-148). The many ways in which this advice was added to campaign strategies in 2008 shows the "need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it" (Modleski, 1991, p. 7). For example, when McCain was running against a sea of male voters in the Republican primary, his campaign Web site did not have a section devoted to women voters or issues stereotypically defined as women's issues. When it became clear that Clinton's supporters would comprise an important constituency, however, his site was quickly updated.

The issues the media deem "women's issues" fall along a range of mostly domestic interests that are characterized more as social issues than issues of national security or foreign policy. When Obama, Biden, and McCain, and even Clinton and

Palin, spoke to audiences comprised of mostly women or when attempting to reach women voters, the speeches centered around issues such as health care, equal pay, abortion, the concerns of working mothers, child care, building stable family lives, and long-term care giving. Once Clinton officially exited the race, both Obama and McCain went on the offensive, trying to use their positions on these issues to woo Clinton's supporters. With Palin's nomination on the Republican ticket, the Obama campaign heightened their focus on women's issues, eliciting Clinton's help as she traveled the country in support of Obama and women's rights.

At a campaign stop in Ohio, Obama touted his past and his policy positions affecting women. The article, titled "Obama focuses on women's issues in Ohio," mentions that Obama was "introduced by a young, single mother working for minimum wage and paying her way through school. When he took the microphone, he told his mother's story—a young, single woman, sometimes on food stamps, struggling through school" (Henderson, 2008). The article seemed to suggest that women's issues referred to concerns of working-class women as they struggled to make ends meet while still caring for their children. Another article about women flocking to the Obama campaign suggested that he was a better candidate for women than McCain. The article paraphrased Debbie Wasserman Schultz, an elected official from Florida, who said that "McCain opposes funding for universal pre-kindergarten, favors a ban on abortion and was against a bill easing the way for women to file lawsuits to get equal pay for equal work. 'He is wrong on the issues that matter to women most,' she said" (Lawrence, 2008, p. A4). If these issues are the issues that matter to all women, then the article states that women primarily care about education for their children, abortion rights, and equal pay. Biden's

campaign stops billed as targeting women included his stance on issues such as equal pay, health care reform, social security reform, and domestic violence (Twarowski, 2008, p. A3).

None of the articles discussed the economy (aside from discussing fair pay or having enough money to care for a family), foreign policy, or national security, which implies that these are not issues that are important to women voters. Only one article debating the ethical implications for Palin's decision to bring her young children on the campaign trail included a quote from a woman who was upset about the way women's issues were being narrowly defined. She stated:

“We would never dream that a male candidate would have to reflect the fears and worries of all men...So now it's Sarah Palin. Before that, it was Hillary Clinton. What will she do for women? How will she represent women?” She says the term “women's issues” is misleading: “It is as if we don't care about war and peace. Or we don't care about education. Or we don't care about the environment.” (Brown, 2008, p. C1)

Though women certainly care about a range of issues, including war and the environment, campaigns have traditionally limited the discussion of “women's issues” to those affecting women in caregiving roles.

The majority of articles about candidates appealing to women mentioned Obama and Biden more favorably than McCain and Palin on women's issues, with one stating that “historically, women vote on the issues, not by the gender of the candidate, and since 1980 they've trended Democratic for that reason” (Noveck, 2008). The media consistently cited statistics about women voters favoring democratic candidates, as they

usually do through polls during a major election season. One article painted this difference by stating:

As Senator John McCain was acidly questioning Senator Barack Obama's judgment on matters of war and peace on Monday at a veterans' convention in Orlando, Fla., Mr. Obama was speaking soothingly to a couple of dozen women in a public library in Albuquerque. The theme of the Obama round table was workplace discrimination against women and the family strains on working women.... A few moments later, he referred to his young daughters and said he hoped that by the time they were grown, discrimination against women in the workplace would have ended. (Broder, 2008)

Additionally, the Feminist Majority Political Action Committee created a chart comparing the Democratic and Republican presidential tickets on a range of issues, taking information from voting records, policy positions, and public statements. On each of the issues, the chart shows how Obama and Biden will continue to support issues important to women's public and private lives, while McCain and Palin support policies that will limit justice for women. A study by Kathleen Dolan (2005), a researcher on women political candidates, suggests that the issues pegged as women's issues are not that different from the issues men define as important. Instead, her study supports the idea that the candidate's political party plays a greater role in determining the amount of time they will devote to stereotypically women's issues, as Democrats include these issues as part of their platform much more often than Republicans (Dolan, 2005).

Regardless of political party, "women's issues" as defined in the 2008 presidential

campaign essentialize women voters as a monolithic group devoted to caring for others, which leaves out the range of issues women find important and the ways these concerns affect men in the United States. While women still perform the majority of the long-term care and child care, addressing the role men need to play in the home and the ways that child care and caring for elderly parents affects males would be an important step in acknowledging existing inequalities. These inequalities ensure that women who work outside the home will have a second shift of household duties waiting for them at the end of the day. Studies published by the National Center on Caregiving state that between 59 and 75 percent of all caregivers are women, totaling an estimated from \$148 billion to \$188 billion of informal, unpaid care each year, and that even when men and women share the responsibilities, women spend 50 percent more time than men performing such activities (“Who Are the Caregivers,” 2002). While caregiving remains a concern for many women, it should and does also concern men.

Equal pay also played a major role in campaign events aimed at women. While this has been a contentious issue in past elections as well, candidates often mentioned the issue in relation to the Ledbetter court case and the equal pay bills making their way through Congress. McCain and Palin opposed the Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act and all other versions of the bill making their way through the House and Senate on the grounds that the new legislation would lead to too much litigation. Instead of legislation, women just needed “more education and training.” As such, they rarely mentioned equal pay at their campaign rallies. On the other side of the spectrum, Obama and Biden regularly signaled their support for equal pay, often with the underlying assumption that passing new legislation would lead to the end of pay discrimination. While the new

legislation does make it easier for women to right injustices, it is important to remember that legislation does not necessarily lead to a more just society. We must continue to fight for social justice for women to ensure that pay discrimination does not happen in the first place. Also, it is important to recognize the affects pay discrimination has on families, including dual-income families. When a woman makes less than her male counterparts for doing the exact same work, it affects the entire family, not just the working woman. Obama hinted at the ways pay discrimination affects men and women during his campaign, praising “equal pay for women during an event in Albuquerque. He cited his mother's experience as a single, working mom trying to raise him and his sister as his driving force” (Jackson, 2008). Finally, the candidates attempted to target women voters by focusing on health care and abortion. By relegating these issues to women, the candidates assume that the responsibility for personal health and the health of others does and should fall on women’s shoulders.

Focusing on these issues when in the presence of women, and not on issues like foreign policy and national security, continues the stereotypes that women are incapable of leading our nation because they lack the experience and competence necessary to be Commander-in-Chief. In her analysis of the differences in news coverage of women and men’s campaigns for the presidency, Erika Falk (2008) points to the glaring difference in the amount and type of coverage of concerns stereotypically labeled “women’s issues.” Her research shows that reporters tend to write about women’s issues in relation to women candidates four times more than they do for male candidates. In over half the elections she analyzed, men candidates were never mentioned in relation to women’s issues. She writes:

The press's proclivity to skip [major policy] issues in its coverage of women candidates is troublesome and may originate in the belief that women are not serious contenders and therefore their stances on issues are not important. More worrisome is the self-fulfilling nature of this pattern. If issues are less frequently covered in the press about women candidates, the candidates may appear as less than serious to the electorate. (Falk, 2008, p. 121).

Because the public takes foreign policy, economic, and national security issues more seriously than those issues pegged as "women's issues," the excessive focus on the latter in relation to women candidates can have serious effects on the public perceptions of viability and electability, two areas that have traditionally posed problems for women candidates.

Feminine Leadership, Masculine Body

Since both Democrats and the Republicans were competing for Clinton's supporters, a group largely assumed to be women, both camps regularly included "women's issues" as part of their campaign appearances. As such, media coverage also included coverage analyzing whether the candidates were successful in appealing to women voters. To reach this important constituency, Obama appeared on shows with a predominantly female viewership and stressed his feminine leadership style. The *New York Times* summed up the change by saying:

In the intensifying battle for the votes of Democratic women, Senator Barack Obama's campaign is trying to turn years of feminist thinking on its head and argue that the best candidate for women may, in fact, be a

man. The pitch for Mr. Obama, in a new video, speeches and talking points aimed at women, presents him as deeply sensitized to the needs and aspirations of women, raised by a single mother, "a man comfortable with strong women in his life," as his wife, Michelle Obama, puts it, and a man committed to the issues they care about. (Toner, 2008, p. A1)

In contrast to Clinton, who was sharply criticized for "playing the gender card" and being "out of touch" when she discussed women's issues, Obama was praised by young women for understanding the issues that mattered most to them.

In fact, several articles suggested that women were flocking to the Obama camp because they could not identify with the struggles of women in Clinton's generation (Blumenthal, 2008, p. A22; Toner, 2008, p. A1). For these women, Obama offered a different brand of feminism, one that was less about overcoming sexism than it was about traditionally feminine values like caring for all. As one article put it:

The Obama campaign is, in some ways, subtly marketing its candidate as a postfeminist man, a generation beyond the gender conflicts of the boomers. In the video released this week, Representative Jan Schakowsky, Democrat of Illinois, says that Mr. Obama understands issues of concern to women "in his gut," not as "a kind of pandering." The writer Alice Walker describes Mr. Obama as "someone who honors the feminine values of caring for all." Obama strategists also highlight his leadership style—his promise of consensus-building and moving beyond the politics of polarization and fear—as especially appealing to women. "His message is about listening, bringing people together, the skills women appreciate,"

said Betsy Myers, the campaign's chief operating officer. (Toner, 2008, p. A1)

The problem with this appeal lies in the postfeminist nature of the campaign. Obama seems to be supporting a definition of women's interests that peg women as feminine, not necessarily feminist, as they care for everyone and hope that everyone will just get along. He does not support a women-centered, activist approach to fighting for a more just world, but instead plays up his sensitivity to "issues of concern to women" and "the skills women appreciate."

When Obama appeared on *The View*, a morning talk show with a large female audience, journalists took note of his demeanor, stating that he

used body language to bridge the gender gap.... The candidate who is sometimes attacked by feminists as a golden youth passing over them on his way to the old boys' club reminded the co-hosts that he was "surrounded by women" at home.... When interrupted on television, many politicians start talking louder and faster to mow down their opponent's point. Mr. Obama has a more winning way of encouraging others to speak up. "Go ahead," he told Ms. Hasselbeck when she cut him off. "No, no, please," he urged. She did not hold out very long. (Stanley, 2008e, A13)

In articles such as these, coverage of Obama and his supporters tended to essentialize women voters as a monolithic group swayed by feminine leadership styles. Women, the aforementioned articles suggest, have an inherent desire to care for others and come together to work on complex problems. They appreciate people willing to listen and create an atmosphere of togetherness. They want men to allow them to speak in public

forums. The media suggest that women come to Obama because his feminine leadership style closely matches their own, making him seem in touch with women voters and women's issues. By taking on a feminine leadership role in these situations, Obama is able to show women voters that their concerns are his concerns, too. He then uses this feminine style as a starting point from which to lobby for "women's issues," or those issues centered on women's desire to better care for others, those such as national healthcare and better programs for working mothers. While these issues have been and continue to be concerns for feminist leaning women, calling them "women's issues" both separates men from the responsibility to bring about meaningful change and serves as a barrier to viewing women as decisive, competent, and capable of leading on issues such as national security. His warm reception as a supporter of women's rights suggests that Elaine Showalter's proclamation that "feminist ideas are much less threatening when they come from a man" is still alive and well today (Showalter, 1987, p. 123).

The irony of the way men and women flocked to Obama's feminine leadership style is that "the list of attributes that were more desirable in women were decidedly not associated with leadership: compassionate, childlike, yielding, soft-spoken, gullible, and shy" (Falk, 2008, p. 53). In fact, studies show that when students are asked "to describe the qualities of a good president, ... 61 percent of the descriptions for a good president were categorized as masculine; none of the students described a good president as feminine" (Falk, 2008, p. 54). This suggests that not only are ideas about women's place in the public sphere less threatening when spoken by men, but men are also praised for adhering to a traditionally feminine style whereas women are viewed as incompetent for doing the same.

Whereas Obama was able to capitalize on opportunities to speak to and for women's issues, Clinton felt the wrath of the press when she embodied both masculine and feminine leadership traits. While Obama was described as “graceful as a ballet dancer” and “the one who really wants to chat—even with American’s long-standing enemies,” Clinton was criticized for “trying to be all things to all people—an amorphous, tough-talking, beer-swilling, truck-stumping Mighty Hermaphrodite—rather than who she really is” (Parker, 2008b, p. A15). Several scholars have commented on our fear of those who transcend traditional gender roles and defy our deeply held sex categories. In her analysis of internet cartoons and jokes that question Clinton’s sex category, Elizabeth Bell states that Clinton is repeatedly painted as a “gender outlaw” who challenges our ideas of how gender is supposed to work. Bell notes that Clinton experienced a rise in popularity in situations where her femininity was emphasized and a decline in approval when she exhibited stereotypically masculine traits. Of this Bell writes:

Texts that paint Hillary as model wife, mother, an icon of contemporary femininity draw from a vast storehouse of cultural constructions of “woman,” drawn always in familial, political, social, and sexual relations to men. Hillary’s “inappropriateness” comes precisely at those moments when she is drawn without reference to men—as lesbian, dominatrix, or ice queen—or when she appropriates the “big secret” that is phallic power. These pleasures script her outside the phallogentric order that reduces all to the masculine. Hillary, in these multiple constructions of feminine and masculine on the Internet, is representative of larger cultural fears and

desires—that of the feminine unanchored from its binary and hierarchical pairing with the masculine.

Similarly, Clinton’s image as a “Mighty Hermaphrodite” in mainstream press accounts highlights the ways gender is policed in mainstream media accounts as women attempt to break existing barriers, such as the glass ceiling, that prevent them from fully participating in society. As Clinton attempted to occupy the highest office in the United States, one historically held by white men and defined in masculine terms, this reference to her status as a “gender outlaw” and hermaphrodite was a way to paint her as dangerous and unnatural.

Masculine Leadership, Women Sidekicks

While Obama was busy winning the hard-fought Democratic nomination, McCain was traveling the country drumming up support for the general election. When at one of his campaign appearances, a woman asked how they (meaning Republicans) could “beat the bitch” (Clinton), McCain laughed uncomfortably before adopting a more serious tone to tell the woman that hers was “an excellent question” (Santora, 2007, p. A18). Clinton’s campaign did not formally respond to the situation, but Obama used the event to highlight his sensitivity to such issues, stating that candidates should “police that kind of behavior and speak out against it” (Toner, 2007, A1). As McCain struggled to be seen as young and in touch in the shadow of Obama’s celebrity-like status, he scrambled to find a running mate that would strengthen his appeal to women and to young voters. He selected Sarah Palin, a 44-year-old first-term governor and mother of five, as his running mate and immediately felt the ramifications of this appeal to women. Her approval rating

among white women with young children at home reached 80 percent (Merida, 2008, p. C1).

Throughout her time on the campaign trail, Palin adopted a pro-woman voice similar to the one George W. Bush used during his “W is for Women” campaign in 2004. To appeal to women in his re-election bid, Bush suggested that marriage between a male and a female is the best environment for children, and while in office, he backed up that belief by supporting a number of initiatives aimed at encouraging a nuclear family model. Palin also encouraged that model through her unwavering pro-life stance, her opposition to gay marriage, and perhaps most notably, her public persona as a proud wife and mother who was running for the vice presidency so she could help to shake up Washington. The media constructed her as an average American woman with a great personality that appealed to conservative voters and to women who did not feel welcome under the umbrella of more liberal feminist organizations like the National Organization for Women.¹⁵

Though she rarely acknowledged a need for continued feminist activism, which suggests that having female genitalia does not necessarily lead to a feminist consciousness, she did spend her time on the campaign trail arguing that McCain was a better feminist than Obama because McCain was willing to select a woman as his running mate (Rohter, 2008). Palin also suggested that Democrats failed women by not selecting another women for the vice president post in 24 years (never mind that the Republican Party had never selected a woman vice presidential candidate before 2008) and accused the democrats of taking advantage of women’s loyalty. She stated, “Our opponents think

¹⁵ See chapters 2 and 3 for a more detailed analysis of how Palin was framed as a “Washington outsider” and a break from liberal feminisms.

they have the women's vote all locked up, which is a little presumptuous since only our side has a woman on the ticket... When it came time for choosing a vice president, somehow [Obama] couldn't bring himself to choose a woman who got 18 million votes in the primaries" (Rohter, 2008). This sentiment was echoed by many women quoted in national news sources who were angry with the Democratic Party for their sexist treatment of Clinton and Obama's selection of Biden instead of Clinton. One woman commented that Palin's speech at the Republican National Convention, in which she invoked the words of Clinton when she said that women could still break the highest glass ceiling if they voted for McCain, was a "wink and a nod to the Hillary supporters. It was 'Hey, if the Democrats are too stupid to break that glass ceiling, we will do it for them'" (Eilperin & Kornblut, 2008, p. A1).

On his own, McCain was not portrayed in mainstream news accounts as being particularly in touch with women voters. At a small campaign appearance of seven women, McCain's voice was no match against the chants of Obama supporters standing just outside the room (Bumiller, 2008, p. A23). Though mainstream newspapers rarely credited McCain with directly appealing to women on his own, his selection of Palin and Palin's presence at various campaign events was billed as signaling McCain's commitment to issues important to women. As one article stated:

McCain can hardly wipe the grin off his face. He gambled and won—Big Time. His biggest score has been among white women, who have abandoned the Obama camp and hauled their teepees over to the McCain reservation. Before the Republican convention, white women were leaning 50% for Obama to 42% for McCain, according to ABC News/Washington

Post polling. Post-convention, the numbers have shifted to 53% for McCain and just 41% for Obama among white women. (Parker, 2008, p. A12)

Thus, the addition of Palin on the GOP ticket allowed McCain to appeal to women voters in a way he had not previously done. During the primary race, he did not even have a section on his campaign Web site devoted to women or women's issues, but polls such as the ABC News/Washington Post poll quoted above suggest that the addition of Palin added credibility to his adoption of women's issues on the campaign trail. But not everyone saw McCain's gamble in a favorable light. Nearly every article that discussed Palin's appeal to women voters included commentary from women, both women who were affiliated in some way with politics and women who were members of the general public, that reflected a more negative assessment of McCain's selection of Palin. The move was described as "condescending" to Clinton's supporters (Moore & Page, 2008, p. A5), a "big mistake" (Chozick, 2008, p. A11), and "fake" (Fiore & Wallsten, 2008, p. A1).

While McCain attempted to appeal to Clinton's supporters via his selection of Palin to the second highest office in the United States, he sent his wife on a number of campaign appearances where she supported a more traditional role for women. Cindy McCain made it perfectly clear on a number of occasions that she would be a "traditional first lady" and that her chief role in the campaign is as "the candidate's wife" (Lawrence, 2008, p. A9). Despite heading a multi-million dollar company and being an active member of several non-profit organizations, Cindy McCain appealed to conservative

voters by playing up her role as a wife and mother who has no ambition to play a policy role in her husband's administration (Lawrence, 2008, p. A9).

Similarly, Obama's appeal to women voters was beefed up by sending Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton to rallies and other events aimed at luring women voters back to the democratic ticket. Michelle Obama, who was initially criticized for holding strong opinions about policy issues and for delivering sarcastic remarks about her husband, delivered softer and more emotionally charged messages about her husband's commitment to issues important to women (Healy, 2008c, p. A23). At one such event, Michelle Obama

explained her husband's plans for women and families, like equal pay laws, universal health care and student financial aid. Her empathic side was also on display: She sat with five women in plush chairs on a stage in Richmond—"So here we are, on 'The View,'" Mrs. Obama said—and at one point passed a Kleenex to Mary Henley, a 78-year-old widow who works part-time and may declare bankruptcy. (Healy, 2008c, p. A23)

In her appearances, Michelle Obama regularly touted the importance of women voters and was often quick to point to her family values as being instrumental in shaping her positions. At her prime-time speech at the Democratic National Convention, Michelle Obama's speech was described as "dynamic" and "mesmerizing" (Merida, 2008b, p. A19). Of the speech, a *Washington Post* article stated:

When it was finally her turn to address the convention delegates and a national televised audience, she described herself as a sister, a mom, a wife and a daughter, someone who loves her country and has tried to give

back to it. One day, she told the crowd, her children's children and future generations will tell the story of “how this time we listened to our hopes, instead of our fears. How this time, we decided to stop doubting and to start dreaming.” (Merida, 2008b, p. A19)

In this speech, as well as during several of her campaign appearances, Michelle Obama embraced the campaign’s definitions of “women’s issues”—issues such as equal pay and education—and often spoke about the importance of children and family in shaping future public policy. Her popularity, like Clinton’s, has risen drastically since she stopped talking about her career and sarcastically mentioning her husband’s flaws and started talking about her life as a wife, mother, and supporter of “women’s issues.”

Palin’s popularity as McCain’s surrogate on women’s issues also meant an increased role for Hillary Clinton, who inherited the job of ensuring the 18 million people who voted for her in the primaries would now vote for Barack Obama. As one article describing the new plan stated, “Senator Barack Obama will increasingly lean on prominent Democratic women to undercut Gov. Sarah Palin and Senator John McCain, dispatching Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton to Florida on Monday and bolstering his plan to deploy female surrogates to battleground states, Obama advisers said Thursday.” It went on to say that “a rapid response team is being created in Chicago to dispatch female surrogates around the country” (Healy and Zeleny, 2008, p. A25). Another commented that

To secure working-class women, the campaign sees Mrs. Clinton as its best surrogate, and has sent her to Florida, Nevada and Ohio, states she won in the primaries. In recent days, female aides and surrogates to Mr.

Obama have also begun arguing in television appearances that Mr. McCain has a history of insensitivity toward women—recalling a joke he made about Chelsea Clinton’s appearance when she was a teenager, or his going along at a South Carolina event last year when a woman used a coarse term to refer to Mrs. Clinton. (Zernike, 2008, p. A22)

What is particularly telling about McCain and Obama using “female surrogates” to appeal to women voters is that both assumed women would be more swayed by seeing campaign messages delivered by another woman than if the message were delivered by a man. Research would suggest that the opposite would be true: several important feminist writings have alluded to the fact that women are encouraged to engage in catfights with each other, and thus they are less likely to be supportive of other powerful women (Hammer, 2002; Douglas, 1995). Interestingly, the most prominent women to speak on behalf of McCain and Obama were women who used such occasions to stress their feminine sides. Palin, Michelle Obama, and Oprah spoke more about how their roles as wives, mothers, and daughters influenced their political opinions than they did about the policy positions or the positions of the candidates about whom they spoke. These topics they left to the candidates.

Knowing What It’s Like

Though McCain, Obama, and Biden continued to attend women’s forums and make direct appeals to women voters throughout their campaigns, they largely credited the prominent women speaking on behalf of their campaigns with teaching them about what it is like to be a woman in the United States. Biden, who was praised for being sensitive to women’s issues and who was the author of the Violence Against Women Act,

included sessions on how to deal with women candidates as part of his vice presidential debate prep (Bacon, 2008, p. A4). Apparently, the sessions paid off. Of Biden's emotional speech during the vice presidential debate on being a widower and single father, commentator Linda Lowen said:

It was an intensely heartfelt moment and highlighted a father's love more powerfully than all the "hockey mom" aphorisms Palin has been known to spout. I wasn't the only one moved by this. Leah McElrath Renna observed: "Joe Biden did more for the equality of the sexes with this honest display of paternal emotion during the vice presidential debate than Sarah Palin's presence on the executive ticket has or will ever do."

(Lowen, 2008)

While Palin is admittedly not the voice of the liberal feminist movement, she did make huge strides for women by suggesting that women can be both good mothers and work in demanding political jobs.¹⁶ In fact, questions about her ability to traverse both the public and private sphere largely fell off the radar by the end of her two months in the national spotlight. What is particularly problematic in this instance is the way in which Biden is praised for doing what women are expected to do every day, that is, care for their children and maintain a full-time job. Had a woman candidate lost her husband, I doubt that she would be praised for loving and caring for her children in the same way that potential voters were quoted as praising Biden. In an era commonly characterized as postfeminist, news media still hold men and women to different standards and expectations.

¹⁶ Please see chapter 3 for a more detailed analysis.

Additionally, Obama consistently made reference to how the strong women in his life taught him what it is like to grow up as a woman in the United States. He regularly made comments such as, “I know what it’s like to be raised by a single mom who’s trying to work and go to school and raise two kids at the same time, and doesn’t have any support from the father. These are issues I’m passionate about” (Toner, 2007, p. A1). He also credits his wife and mother with teaching him about the daily struggles of women in the workplace. A *New York Times* article described his mother as being “not particularly concerned about what society would say about working women, single women, women marrying outside their culture, women who were fearless and who dreamed big,” and these characteristics gave Obama a “comfort with strong women” (Scott, 2008).

Michelle Obama also spoke highly of her husband’s commitment to women, crediting him with “getting it” during a campaign stop in Akron, Ohio. The article describing the event stated:

“He doesn’t get it in some theoretical, disconnected, philosophical way,” she said, responding to critics who consider Barack Obama too cool and detached. “He gets it because he’s lived it. You see, there’s something that happens to folks when they grow up regular.” The “regular” Obama of her narrative is the child born to a white teenage mother and an absent black father, then raised in part by a strong grandmother, who imparted a measure of her own mettle. (Slevin, 2008, p. C1)

In repeated news accounts, Obama’s “comfort” is credited as one of the main reasons he is able to understand the concerns of working women, which include a host of domestic

issues such as healthcare, child care, and the need for equal pay. However, Obama's understanding of women does not stop there.

In Obama's case, being around strong women seems to "rub off" on him, providing him with the knowledge of what it is like to be a woman in the United States. The aforementioned articles suggest that the strong women have imparted knowledge about the struggles working women face and the issues that matter most in their lives, but mainstream news articles also suggest that this knowledge is a one-way street, flowing only from strong women to the men in their lives and not from strong men to the women in their lives. When Hillary Clinton claimed knowledge of the daily life of the President of the United States because she held a policy position in her husband's administration and served as a sounding board before he made any major decisions, the press was quick to publish news articles discrediting her time as First Lady as being a valuable asset to her knowledge of politics. In one of the more direct challenges to her experience, the Obama camp widely circulated a memo questioning whether the time she spent as first lady was as educational as she had previously claimed. The memo concluded:

There is no reason to believe, however, that she was a key player in foreign policy at any time during the Clinton Administration. She did not sit in on National Security Council meetings. She did not have a security clearance. She did not attend meetings in the Situation Room. She did not manage any part of the national security bureaucracy, nor did she have her own national security staff. She did not do any heavy-lifting with foreign governments, whether they were friendly or not. She never managed a foreign policy crisis, and there is no evidence to suggest that she

participated in the decision-making that occurred in connection with any such crisis. As far as the record shows, Senator Clinton never answered the phone either to make a decision on any pressing national security issue—not at 3 AM or at any other time of day. (Koppelman, 2008)

Over 400 news sources worldwide included quotations from this memo in their coverage.

While Clinton may never have done any of the tasks listed above, both Bill and Hillary Clinton acknowledged that he consulted with her on nearly every major decision he made. Additionally, the memo's language goes beyond an attempt to discredit her experience, and instead calls into question whether being present can really provide knowledge of and expertise in foreign policy and/or (inter)national crises. This memo suggests that this is not the case, though other literature put out by the Obama campaign and published in mainstream news media suggests that Obama was able to learn the intricacies of how it feels to be discriminated against based on gender, to be passed up for promotions, and to live with constant double standards. He seems to know how it feels to be criticized for being a strong, knowledgeable, and capable woman in a world that still both subtly and blatantly tells women the postfeminist mantra that while they are free to choose whatever path they would like in life, they will be happiest if they remain in the home.

Commenting on the way the Obama campaign assumes knowledge of women's lived experiences, a writer for *Campaigns and Elections*, the trade magazine that encouraged men to adopt feminine leadership styles when running against women, wrote an article about five false assumptions candidates and the media make about women voters. The article specifically mentions the *New York Times* piece quoted above that

states that “Obama’s campaign is trying to turn years of feminist thinking on its head and argue that the best candidate for women may, in fact, be a man” (Toner, 2008), and then proceeds to question the attention this type of statement would garner if it were about race. It asks readers to “ponder how likely we are to read that Clinton is trying to turn years of anything on its head by arguing that the best candidate for people of color is, in fact, white” (Henneberger, 2008). The answer: we are not at all likely to read such a comment. While we allow that men can learn about women’s issues, we do not make the same allotment for issues of race nor do we suggest that women can learn about foreign policy issues by playing the role of a policy aid in her husband’s administration. Men become more legitimate contenders when they are around strong women, but being around strong men seems to perpetuate women who can best serve their country by remaining in the home in a supportive spousal role.

In this way, “I know what it’s like” is especially problematic when the “I” is a man because the men are claiming knowledge of women’s experiences without acknowledging their male privilege. In her response to Peggy McIntosh’s article about the ways white people are privileged, B. Deutsch created a list of the ways men are privileged in patriarchal societies to both acknowledge the injustices that exist based on gender and to start a conversation aimed at fighting against them. Several of the statements listed are applicable to ways Obama, Biden, and McCain claim knowledge of women’s issues. But most notably and consistent with the ways the men in the 2008 presidential campaign make claims to knowledge of women’s lived experiences, Deutsch’s list concludes with the statement, “I have the privilege of being unaware of

male privilege.” Along with the privilege of being unaware comes the privilege never having your claim to knowledge about women’s lives challenged in public forums.¹⁷

Women Without Feminism

While the men in the campaign regularly claimed to understand what it is like to be a woman in the United States, they did not mention feminism or feminist activism as a means of knowing, as an avenue for change, or as a movement that made their unique positions in the 2008 election possible. Obama was the only candidate to openly declare himself a feminist, but he did so when speaking to the editor of *Ms.* magazine, and he was far enough out of range of the news media that the comment was not published until after the election when the editor was asked to justify placing an artistic rendition of Obama wearing a “this is what a feminist looks like” shirt on the cover of the special inauguration issue. Instead of touting feminism in his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, Obama mentioned women’s issues when he said:

When I hear a woman talk about the difficulties of starting her own business or making her way in the world, I think about my grandmother, who worked her way up from the secretarial pool to middle management, despite years of being passed over for promotions because she was a woman. She’s the one who taught me about hard work. She’s the one who put off buying a new car or a new dress for herself so that I could have a

¹⁷ bell hooks also comments on this phenomena in the classroom: “Certainly many white male students have brought to my classroom an insistence on the authority of experience, one that enables them to feel that anything they have to say is worth hearing, that indeed their ideas and experience should be the central focus of classroom discussion. The politics of race and gender within white supremacist patriarchy grants them this ‘authority’ without having to name their desire for it” (hooks, 1994, p. 81).

better life. She poured everything she had into me. (Transcript: Obama, 2008)

In this speech and in several others in which he described his grandmother's influence on his ability to understand the situation of women in this country, Obama gives credit to the sacrifices he made for her—sacrifices made possible because she held a job outside the home to help her family financially. Though Obama's first book suggests that Dunham was embarrassed and resentful about the fact that she had to work outside the home, it was the feminist movement that made her story, and consequently his, possible.

The women's issues touted in the 2008 election encouraged a view of women as caregivers either working in the home or working multiple jobs trying to make it. Even intelligent, capable women like Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton have abandoned policy positions in exchange for cookie recipes and more positive press coverage. What remains absent from this picture, as has been analyzed in previous chapters, are depictions of women as capable, competent business women, women in leadership positions, and women who continue to fight the cultural pressure aimed at keeping them silent and in the home. Also absent is a more robust discussion about what feminism is and how it is applicable to the lived experiences of women and men who are involved in the political process. By ignoring a real explanation of feminism, the men in the campaign avoided the backlash that comes with the dreaded "f-word" that is feminism. Their silence also divorces the issues that are important to women from the activism necessary to ensure that women can live in a more just society; their silence likewise pigeonholes women as "life experts" in a narrow range of issues.

Unfortunately for women like Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton who continue to experience backlash when they attempt to showcase their strength, determination, and intelligence in the public sphere, double standards still exist for women and men. But fortunately for future generations of women who will attempt to do the same, the media has already begun to acknowledge the ways their sexist coverage has impacted the way we think about political women. Additional interventions, including those discussed in the next chapter, have the potential to continue working toward change and acknowledgement of the multiple, competing roles men and women can fulfill in our society.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: Stopping the Cycle

The picture painted in these pages is not particularly bright or uplifting. Women have been battling sexist campaign coverage since 1872 when Victoria Woodhull became the first woman to run for president in the United States. If the 2008 election is any indication, women will continue to contend with unfair treatment in the press for years to come. News binds and double binds confine our understanding of women's campaigns and identities. Mainstream news sources struggle to understand that women can exhibit both masculine and feminine qualities, hold jobs outside the home and still be good wives and mothers, and be traditionally underrepresented in politics but still knowledgeable about important issues. Feminism continues to be defined in connection with a narrow range of ideas and issues, meaning that race, class, and third wave ideas are rarely acknowledged in press coverage. Instead, the media perpetuates the tenets of postfeminism, which suggests that while women now have the "choice" to do and be anything they want, they will be happiest in more traditional roles. While we struggle to see women as dynamic and genuine, we are more likely to view men favorably when they exhibit both masculine and feminine characteristics. We value men's interpretations of women's lived experiences and allow men to claim to know what it is like to be a woman

in our society without also making them acknowledge the privileged positions from which they speak.

In fact, it is at times rather dark and depressing to think that women struggle with the same types of sexist coverage today as they did 135 years ago. Reflecting on the lack of change, Erika Falk begins the conclusion of her book on media bias in women presidential campaigns by stating:

With the radical changes that have taken place for women in politics and journalism over the last 130 years, it is significant that the press portrayals of women candidates have not changed more. Although I found some differences in the press over time, the strongest trends did not show regular progress. Instead they suggested that women candidates from 1872 to 2004 were treated differently from their male counterparts, with women often getting the short end of the stick. The lack of progress in press coverage seems surprising until one considers that even in 2004 there was a dearth of women governors, senators, and members of the House. The glass ceiling was firmly in place in corporate America, and women continued to do most of the child rearing and made less money for comparable work than men. These facts remind us that many of the cultural forces at play in 1870 continue to exert some influence today. In the press, men and women candidates for president are not treated equivalently, because in society men and women are not treated comparably. (Falk, 2008, p. 151-152)

Despite this, Falk finds several reasons to be optimistic about opportunities for change, and she, like many feminist writers, offers suggestions for women candidates to help them counter the negative coverage they will likely receive. While not all of these suggestions led to more positive coverage for women like Clinton and Palin, there are still several ways that feminist media scholars and women political candidates can work together to continue to fight for better and more accurate coverage of women's campaigns.

First, *women and men must continue to draw attention to sexist media coverage.*

The 2008 campaign was perhaps the most contentious election in recent memory, in part because of the issues surrounding sexist coverage of women candidates that surfaced when Clinton and Palin entered the national spotlight. Men and women from all sides of the political spectrum became vocal about the unfair treatment these women received in the press, which drew attention to the need for increased activism to counteract the negative perceptions of women vying for positions of power. During the week following Clinton's concession speech, several news sources acknowledged their contributions to inappropriate questioning and coverage of female politicians. On June 11, 2008, Katie Couric aired a segment discussing the proliferation of sexist coverage that likely hurt Clinton's chances of making it to the Oval Office, during which she said:

Like her or not, one of the great lessons of that 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, its all the people who crossed the line, and all the women and men who let them get away with it. (Couric, 2008)

Not letting the media “get away with it” is an important first step in bringing about change.

By continuing to acknowledge unfair coverage of women, we can break the phenomenon of stories disappearing from the radar as quickly as they appear. Since the election, the media have largely moved on from the issues of women political candidate coverage and sexism. A constant reminder of the ways unfair coverage pervades local and national media will ensure that this issue will not go away in the minds of voters. By continuously acknowledging the double standards women face, feminists can continue to help members of the public understand why there is a need for continued activism and what areas of our lives remain unequal and unjust.

Not only must we acknowledge individual acts of sexism that make their way into mainstream press accounts of women’s campaigns, but we must acknowledge the ways that the arguments we use to keep women like Clinton and Palin from attaining power are the same ones we have been using against women candidates for over 135 years. When framed on an individual level, it is easy to think that problems such as being too opinionated, unelectable, or not knowledgeable about foreign policy are problems that only certain women candidates face. When we acknowledge these as long-standing arguments that have been part of mainstream coverage of every woman who has ever run for president, we are forced to recognize the way institutions such as the media contribute to an understanding of women as incapable of leading the country.

In addition to speaking out about sexist coverage, feminists must also *acknowledge instances in which women political candidates overcome negative and sexist treatment* to provide models for future candidates. For example, Palin routinely

told reporters that she, like other women of her generation, has no difficulty balancing her roles as a wife and mother with that of a demanding political career. During her televised interview with Charles Gibson, she stated, “I’m part of that generation, where that question is kind of irrelevant, because it’s accepted. Of course, you can be the vice president and you can raise a family. I’m the governor and I’m raising a family. I’ve been a mayor and have raised a family” (Seelye, 2008). While she suggests here and in other interviews that there are no longer institutionalized pressures making it difficult for women to balance work and family (including in her own life where she felt the need to hide her pregnancy to avoid public criticism), her insistence that women can manage career responsibilities while raising children helped to mitigate the concerns about her doing so while in office. Feminists and Republicans who wanted Palin to be elected joined in the cause, and the mainstream media largely stopped questioning whether Palin could be a successful vice president and mother.

While we must acknowledge the ways women like Palin succeed in quieting fears of women candidates, we must also be sure to highlight the ways that these conversations perpetuate the double-burden that women who work in the public sphere continue to face. By insisting that she could be a good wife and mother while working as vice president, Palin upheld the idea that she would still be the primary caregiver in her household. Here, childcare remains women’s work, and women must continue to pull double and triple shifts as they manage work and family responsibilities. While Palin certainly did not completely end the concerns the public has about whether women can and should balance work and family, nor did she mitigate feminist concerns about the ways the burden of caregiving is always already women’s work, we need to continue to draw attention to the

steps we are taking in the direction of progress. Though women candidates must prove they can be good wives and mothers before they enter the political arena, they are still able to use that position to show how they can work with their partners to manage work and family lives. While we must continue to work toward a situation in which women are judged by the same criteria as their male counterparts, including in the arena of family life, women who can provide an example of how men and women can work together to both lead the country and raise a family is an important step in viewing women as fit for the presidency. Women like Palin who ease the public concern about mixing motherhood, caregiving, and leadership positions make the path easier for future women who attempt to break those barriers. Though this is likely to be a long journey, we must be sure to keep conversations about systemic barriers to women's full participation in the public sphere *and* women's progress alive if we are going to foster meaningful dialogue and change. This discussion should include information about successful programs in other countries that make it possible for men and women to share the responsibilities of childcare such as paternity leave and increasing access to quality day care centers for working parents.

When women have run for elected offices, public fears about women being too emotional or not tough enough to handle issues of national security generally come to the forefront. Highlighting the strategies that have helped women candidates overcome these fears can lead to more successful campaigns for women in a variety of public positions. Since several political science researchers have pointed out that most presidential candidates first serve as the governor or senator in their home states before entering the

national arena, providing easier paths for women to enter these offices will make it easier for the public to view women in national offices such as the presidency.

Another strategy that would help women in leadership positions overcome the fears the public have about the power they yield is to *downplay the novelty of women being in power*. Erika Falk (2008) suggests that this would be a particularly helpful strategy for women running for the presidency when she states:

Though campaign organizers may find it tempting to sell the candidate as “making history,” voters are less likely to view women as risky when women presidents are shown to be a normal phenomenon for centuries and across countries all over the world. Deflect the novelty frame by depicting the candidate as just one in a long line of women who have been national leaders. (Falk, 2008, p. 159)

According to Falk (2008), when women frame their candidacy as historic, the press is more likely to frame their candidacy as such. But when women make consistent references to the number of successful women who have come before them, the media and the general public are less likely to be fearful of having a woman in office (p. 159-160).

While the number of women in positions of power is still disproportionately low, the number of women senators and business leaders has been on the rise in the last few decades. Additionally, the number of women serving as the heads of other countries shows that women are capable of leading a nation and being respected on in our current global society. As women continue to reach these offices, we not only see that women are

capable, but also we are provided with role models that we can follow on our way to the top.

Until we have a more just society that recognizes women as being on the same playing field as their male counterparts, the road to the White House for women political candidates will continue to be paved with sexist and unfair press coverage. Though the path for women will be a difficult one, it is not impossible, and *it is important to maintain optimism that electing a woman president can and will happen*. It is easy to fall into pessimistic thinking when reading sexist news articles and studies such as this one that point out the ways that sexism has pervaded mainstream news coverage of women political candidates for 135 years. We saw and heard Clinton referred to as a bitch, a nutcracker, and a nag; she was described as manly, aggressive, angry, and incapable of emotion. But in focusing exclusively on the difficulty women have had in trying to overcome these stereotypes, it is easy to fall into pessimism that can lead to apathy on the part of feminists and voters.

While I suggested in chapter 2 that Kathleen Hall Jamieson's (1995) work on overcoming the double binds in politics was overly optimistic in its assessment of how far we have come in dismantling the double standards placed on women vying for positions of power, her suggestions for how we can continue to strive for a more just society include several great ideas for improving the representations of women candidates. She suggests that women need to reframe the way they think about the situation women face to acknowledge the institutionalized pressures that made the inequalities a reality in the first place (Jamieson, 1995, p. 190). While it is easy to suggest that women are just fundamentally different from their male counterparts or that women

are choosing to be in the home and not the work place, we must also point out the social stigmas women experience when they attempt to assert themselves in the public sphere. Framing arguments around the ways institutions contribute to inequality can help others realize the faulty logic underlying the reasons they give to justify why we have already surpassed the need for feminism in the United States.

Second, we must recover the lost stories of women, both in the United States and abroad, that represent strong, accomplished, and influential women who have helped to shape the history of our country and the world (Jamieson, 1995, p. 191). When we read history books, we are so often confronted with the stories of white men, but rarely do we acknowledge the important roles women have played in shaping our country and our values. We hear endless stories about the Founding Fathers in our history classes throughout our formative years, but we rarely learn about the women's movements or prominent women politicians who have paved the way for historic elections such as the 2008 election. Along with this, it is important to remind others about the prominent women currently exercising leadership roles in our nation's top corporations and serving as politicians on the state and national levels.

Third, Jamieson (1995) suggests that women should reclaim language and the power to name their own experiences (p. 192). As discussed in the previous chapters, Clinton and Palin struggled to speak about the sexism they experienced in their own lives without incurring backlash in both mainstream and nonmainstream media. Even the candidates themselves were slow to acknowledge the differences in coverage between their campaigns and the campaigns of the woman candidates. In the face of the public's refusal to acknowledge Clinton's definition of the sexism she perceived in her campaign,

she spoke at length in her concession speech about the inequalities women still face in the home and the workplace and suggested that we need to continue to fight for a more just world. Within days, several reporters for major news sources had acknowledged the role that sexism played in their coverage (most notably Katie Couric). By continuing to fight for the ability to define their own experiences, women can encourage men and women in the general public and in mainstream media to see sexist coverage before it is too late.

Mary Vavrus echoes Jamieson's call for recasting and reframing arguments against women candidates. Vavrus suggests that the corporate media structure is one of the major reasons why postfeminist ideas are perpetuated in mainstream news sources, in part because both postfeminism and news coverage focuses on white, middle-class consumers. But while she states that it is difficult to imagine a new way of framing articles about women candidates, it is not impossible, and the public should demand better and more inclusive coverage. She calls for the public and media studies scholars to work together to:

redirect media attention away from its exclusive focus on glass ceilings and move it down, onto floors—a more apt metaphor for the many U.S. women whose incomes hover at this level and whose job descriptions quite literally place them there. (Vavrus, 2002, p. 185-186)

Vavrus believes that through reframing our understanding of issues and demanding a more inclusive focus in electoral coverage, an activist oriented public can bring about real change. And she remains optimistic that this type of change can take place.

Finally, *feminist academics and media studies scholars must take their research to the mainstream press*. In the “publish or perish” lifestyle of the academic world, it is

easy—and often beneficial—to focus exclusively on publishing work in academic forums. In the spirit and letter of public intellectualism, feminist academics must write letters to the editor, submit op-ed pieces, respond to political blogs, volunteer to be experts available to the media, and create their own web-based presence. Bringing versions of these studies to the mainstream press can help to inform the public about media trends in covering women candidates, provide a more robust vision of feminism in mainstream news sources, and call attention to ways news organizations can start to break the cycle of sexist coverage. Among the trends Falk (2008) discusses in her study on women presidential candidates is the framing of each prominent woman candidate as the first. When we fail to mention the problems previous women candidates faced in their quest for the White House, it is easy to ignore the ways the media contributed to their demise. As previously stated, drawing attention to these trends can help us to view statements about women candidates being unviable, unlikable, and unelectable as problems facing all women candidates, not just the one running at the moment. At a recent academic conference, a man questioning the results of a study on the unfair treatment of Sarah Palin in the first days of her candidacy for the vice presidency was unaware that the arguments made against Clinton and Palin were part of a larger pattern facing women candidates in general. Acknowledging these trends is a first step toward viewing this type of coverage as a problem and working to change it.

Disseminating knowledge and correcting “disinformation” about the long history of coverage of women candidates and of the women’s movement can also play a major role in creating a more diverse and accurate understanding of their rich histories. All too often antifeminist women masked as feminist writers have prominent places in the media

from which they publish antifeminist and postfeminist articles in the name of feminism (Hammer, 2002). While it is difficult to drown out these prominent voices with ones of women and men more sensitive to the inequalities women still face in their lived experiences, it is not impossible. There will always be a small minority of people that believe feminism is no longer necessary or that it is not something we should have started to work on in the first place. But teaching people that feminism does not have to be the dreaded “f-word,” that it does not represent a community of man-hating women, and that it is not just for whiners is necessary to overcome the negative associations the term currently has. Acknowledging the diverse views that exist under the umbrella term “feminism” can also help in encouraging more diversity in news coverage and paint a more accurate picture of the ways race and class intersect in people’s lived experiences.

By publishing in popular sources, reaching out to media as available experts, and creating our own web-based forums, feminists and media scholars can encourage members of the press to acknowledge the ways that their coverage contributes to “unfair” and “biased” coverage of women candidates. If such articles and studies can encourage reporters and other members of the media to question whether their work has or does contribute to the problem, they can begin the long road toward changing the patterns that have plagued women candidates for so long. Though I believe Vavrus (2002) is correct when she states that the problem is systemic, and not a problem facing just individual reporters, having news personnel that strive to fix this type of coverage from the inside can and will serve as a valuable asset.

Because women make up a disproportionate number of feminists and feminist media scholars, they will continue to face more of the burden of providing an intellectual

critique of biased press coverage of women candidates. As long as women academics continue to face sexism in hiring and tenure processes, asking women to spend their time on unpaid work like media commentary instead of focusing on academic advancement can be a dangerous predicament. However, there are a growing (though still disproportionate) number of women earning full professorships who can and do continue to voice their concerns about feminist issues in public forums. And while feminist women who are under more severe pressures to “publish or perish” may not have the time to completely change a news organization, the mounting pressure does not mean that they should do nothing. Even one letter to the editor or one guest column or one phone call to voice concerns about demeaning coverage can make a difference.

The practice of publishing academic information in popular sources is not limited to criticism of press coverage. Several major newspapers include articles about new scientific studies and discoveries every week, and they hear about these studies in large part because the academics heading these studies send press releases to news organizations about their findings. We hear about the positive and negative affects of caffeine and about new vaccinations against HPV and breast cancer making their way through clinical trials. We should also hear more positive information about women in leadership positions and criticism of biased coverage of prominent women candidates, and this will be more likely to happen if we can devote even a few minutes of our time to write a press release or make a phone call.

The path facing feminist media scholars and women political candidates will not be an easy one, but it is not impossible. Because broad, sweeping changes are not a reality in today’s corporate media culture, enacting grassroots solutions is an important

stepping-stone toward fostering a more accurate understanding of women candidates and of the feminist movement. We must continue to acknowledge the multiple, competing roles women can and do face as they balance their public and private lives, as well as the diverse positions feminists can and do take on a variety of issues affecting women. These issues are not and should not be limited to the issues the media and the candidates associate with women, but instead should include a range of political topics that affect women's daily lives. And most importantly, the media need to do a better job of addressing the intersections of race, class, and gender, as the current system limits our understanding to issues affecting the small percentage of the population that happens to be white and middle to upper class.

When we finally elect a woman to serve as President of the United States, it will not be because she is the first qualified candidate, the first likeable candidate, or even the first electable candidate. We have already had a long list of qualified women presidential candidates over the course of the last 135 years. It will be because feminist-minded people refused to stop fighting for a more just society that recognizes women's ability to succeed in leadership positions.

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