

Reflections on Gender and Hillary Clinton's Presidential Campaign: The Good, the Bad, and the Misogynic

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I began the 2008 campaign season without much academic interest in Hillary Clinton's campaign. As a political scientist whose work focuses on gender and U.S. politics, and as a senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), I knew I would spend considerable time talking to the press about Hillary Clinton. And I certainly understood the historic nature of Clinton's candidacy — that she was taking the next big step toward putting a woman in the White House by actually entering and running through the primaries, something no woman had done since Shirley Chisholm entered some primaries and had her name placed in nomination at the Democratic convention back in 1972. On a personal level, I was certainly supportive of Hillary Clinton's candidacy. In fact, I always expected that the first woman candidate to make a sustained and serious run at the White House might well look a lot like Margaret Thatcher — that is, that she would be a Republican, ideologically conservative, and an opponent of much of the agenda of organized feminism. Perhaps it is all a matter of expectations, but since I was expecting Margaret Thatcher to show up,

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Hillary Clinton looked reasonably good to me — even if I did not agree with all of her proposed policies and political positions.

But academically I began this campaign season without great intellectual interest in Clinton's bid for the White House. I just did not think there was much to learn from her campaign. After all, she was a single case of a very exceptional woman with an idiosyncratic background as a former first lady. My attitude was more or less: "How much can you learn from an n of 1 and particularly an n of 1 as atypical as Hillary Clinton?"

In addition, I did not foresee that gender was going to be all that important in her campaign. I entered into this campaign season with the expectation that gender and gender stereotypes would matter a lot in the case of women candidates who are not well known. Thus, for example, gender might matter a great deal in the way people viewed and evaluated candidates for the state legislature or even a first-time congressional candidate. But in the case of long-serving incumbents who have become familiar to their constituencies or high-visibility candidates with considerable name recognition, gender and gender stereotyping should matter far less. Once a woman became well known to voters, it seemed likely that her individual persona would trump general gender stereotypes and that she would be judged more as an individual and less as a typical woman. Following this line of reasoning, I initially thought that Hillary Clinton was such a familiar figure that she would largely be able to transcend the usual problems based on gender and gender stereotyping that women face. Gender might matter some in her case, but not very much. She would be viewed and judged not so much as a woman candidate, with the advantages and disadvantages that might bring, but rather as Hillary Clinton — a persona with her own unique assets and baggage as a candidate.

Hindsight is 20/20, and I now wonder how I could have been so wrong! Clearly, I was envisioning the political world as I hoped it would be, rather than the political world as it really is. The 2008 presidential campaign has certainly been an educational experience for me, and contrary to my assumption at the beginning of the campaign that gender might matter some, but not much, I now perceive that gender was a pervasive force affecting almost all aspects of Hillary Clinton's campaign and people's reactions to it. I now strongly believe that there is much about gender and politics that can be learned from Clinton's campaign. Indeed, I view it as a great tragedy that most of us who are scholars of women and politics did not have a research strategy in place to study this historic campaign as it unfolded, but rather now must analyze it retrospectively.

It is difficult, I believe, to overstate the significance of this year's historic contest for the Democratic nomination. Who among us a decade or two ago could have foreseen a race where an African American man would emerge as the nominee, with a white woman as the other major contender for the nomination? This is truly an amazing moment in the history of our country, one that highlights how far we have come.

And while Barack Obama emerged from the primary season as the victor, Hillary Clinton went much farther than any woman has gone in the past. With all due respect to Obama and the excellent campaign he waged, Clinton, unlike any previous woman, came incredibly close to winning her party's nomination. She received more than 18 million votes, which, you will recall, she characterized as 18 million cracks in the glass ceiling, and she raised more than \$233 million. She won 1,640 pledged delegates compared, to 1,763 for Obama (CNN, Election Center 2008, Primaries and Caucuses), and she ended the primary season on a roll — even though the roll came too late. From March 1 on, she won 9 of the last 16 contests (CNN, Election Center 2008, Results: Hillary Clinton).

But while there is much that was positive for both Clinton and Obama in this historic election, there is a flip side as well. Unfortunately, this moment in American history also illustrates how far we have to go in overcoming racism and sexism. One of the truly troubling aspects of this nominating contest was the way that racism and sexism were again pitted against each other. At times during the campaign, the media raised the inevitable questions about which is worse or more deep seeded in American political life — sexism or racism — as well as questions, given Obama's defeat of Clinton in the Democratic primary, about whether there is something in American culture that always allows black men to advance politically before white women. Such questions strike me as particularly misguided, even pernicious, because they reflect an assumption that somehow, sexism and racism can be compared on a common metric when, in fact, the underlying dynamics, manifestations, and genealogies of the two are completely different and render any comparisons meaningless.

There is also a second respect in which I have found the 2008 nominating process unsettling, and I say this with great respect for Shirley Chisholm's bold and historic bid in 1972 and with admiration for Carol Moseley Braun's willingness to put herself forward in 2004. The very presence of a black man and a white woman as the major contenders for the Democratic nomination has underscored that which is not yet possible or imaginable in American politics — and that is the

emergence of a black woman or a Latina or an Asian American woman as a serious contender for the presidency of the United States. On July 10, in his first joint appearance with Hillary Clinton after she suspended her campaign, Barack Obama proclaimed that “because of what Hillary accomplished, my daughters . . . look at themselves a little differently today. They’re dreaming a little bigger and setting their sights a little higher today” (Broder 2008). While I sincerely hope this is true, I fear that even at their young ages, the Obama children comprehend that their mother could not yet stand where their father stands.

In reflecting on gender and Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign, I focus on two topics. The first is the role that gender stereotypes seem to have played in key decisions made by the Clinton campaign, and the second is the power and sexism that the media exhibited in their coverage of the Democratic race.

As I turn to a discussion of gender stereotypes, I do want to acknowledge a couple of critical factors. The first is that Clinton is not only a woman; she is a white woman, just as Obama is not only a man but also a black man. Although I am not going to deal with the hugely complicated question of how the intersectional dynamics of race and gender affected the Democratic campaign, I do want to acknowledge the presence of these dynamics and point to them as an important topic for future analysis and research.

Second, I want to underscore that both Clinton and Obama were running for an office where the default category is a white man. Both candidates had to run not only against each other but also against this construction in the public imaginary — this well-ingrained image of what a president is. As a result, both campaigns had to contend with additional obstacles and considerations that white male candidates do not confront. While my focus is on how Clinton’s campaign was constrained and affected by sexism and gender stereotypes, there is no doubt that Obama’s campaign has been constrained and affected by racism and racial stereotypes as well.

Let me now turn explicitly to the role of gender stereotypes in the Clinton campaign. If the historic, pathbreaking nature of the race for the Democratic nomination represents “the good” in my subtitle, then the way that the Clinton campaign seems to have been constrained by negative gender stereotypes represents “the bad.” The social psychological literature on gender stereotypes and leadership provides an excellent guide to the potential pitfalls that might await any woman who dares to seek the presidency. There is a large body of research conducted

under what is known as the Goldberg paradigm, which examines biases in perceptions of equivalent behavior on the part of men and women. Usually in experimental but sometimes in natural settings, subjects are presented with equivalent resumes or speeches or essays, one attributable to a man and one attributable to a woman, so that the only variable manipulated is gender. Perhaps not surprisingly, when the job or task is stereotypically masculine or even gender neutral, study after study has found that men are preferred over women (Davison and Burke 2000). Other research related to the Goldberg paradigm, much of it conducted or reviewed by Alice Eagly and her colleagues, has shown that women leaders are rated lower than their male counterparts when women occupy male-dominated roles and employ stereotypically male leadership styles. And this is especially true when men do the evaluating (Eagly, Makhijani, and Klonsky 1992). In other words, men are particularly likely to devalue women who occupy traditionally masculine leadership roles. Research has also shown that women “encounter more dislike and rejection than men do for showing dominance, expressing disagreement, or being highly assertive or self-promoting” (Eagly and Carli 2003, 820).

On the basis of this body of social psychological research, one might wonder how a woman could possibly be brave enough to put herself forward as a presidential candidate. Given these findings, one would certainly expect a female candidate for perhaps the most masculinized of all political jobs, commander in chief, to start at a significant disadvantage. The very role of presidential candidate demands that a woman demonstrate her ability to be dominant, and campaigning certainly requires self-promotion and disagreement with one's opponent. But the social psychological research suggests that seeking the position of president and engaging in the behaviors of campaigning would cost a woman candidate significant support based solely on her gender, especially among men.

And then the social psychological literature adds an additional twist to this already difficult scenario — a very serious Catch-22 for women in leadership. Social psychological research shows that women are perceived as “communal” — as warm and selfless, for example — but not very “agentic” — assertive and instrumental, for example — while men are perceived as the opposite (Eagly and Carli 2003; Eagly, Makhijani, and Klonsky 1992). Because of doubts about women's agentic qualities, which are, of course, those our culture tends to associate with leadership, women who wish to be leaders are held to a higher standard of competence than men. They have to do more to

demonstrate their qualifications and abilities. However, in doing so, there is a danger that they may appear too agentic and, consequently, not sufficiently communal. In other words, in proving that they are qualified to be leaders, women can easily cross the line and appear to be insufficiently feminine — that is, not “nice” enough. The trick, then, is that women who aspire to leadership must somehow find a way to strike a balance between agentic, masculine behavior and communal, feminine behavior. Margaret Thatcher, for example, struck this balance, in part, by always dressing stylishly, carrying a handbag, and wearing her signature pearls. She consciously adopted a very feminine appearance to complement her very masculine political behavior. But this line between agentic and communal, masculine and feminine, is a very fine line and a difficult one to walk, and it is perhaps a line that Hillary Clinton’s campaign did not walk well enough.

As I look back on Clinton’s campaign, it is clear to me that several of the most critical tactical decisions were made in order to counter certain gender stereotypes that could have adversely affected the campaign. Yet, the campaign got trapped by these tactical decisions; they became a sort of Catch-22. And these decisions and the traps Clinton found herself confronting likely contributed to her failure to win the nomination.

Let me illustrate what I mean through three examples. Research by political scientists and political pollsters has shown that voters have strong and specific stereotypes about women candidates and potential women political leaders (e.g., Alexander and Andersen 1993; Barbara Lee Family Foundation 2001; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a and 1993b; Kahn 1996). One of the stereotypes is that women are assumed to be less qualified to hold public office than men, even when they have more experience and stronger credentials. We see this stereotype at play not only in research on voters but also in studies of women officeholders. For example, in research on women state legislators conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics, we have found that women legislators tend to be more qualified than their male counterparts on every single measure of political experience except for holding previous elective office (Carroll and Strimling 1983) — an indication, I believe, that women who run for office often perceive and try to counter this stereotype that women are less qualified than men.

Because of this stereotype, it most likely was not at all coincidental, nor surprising, that Clinton made “experience” the centerpiece of her campaign for the Democratic nomination. To counter the gender stereotype, her campaign understood they needed to convince voters that

Clinton was competent and up to the job. In most of her stump speeches throughout the primary season, she proclaimed that she would be “ready to lead on day one.” While Obama talked in broad strokes, Hillary Clinton demonstrated over and over again her mastery of the details of public policy, showcasing the knowledge she had gained through her years of experience in public life. But, of course, as we all know in retrospect, by emphasizing experience as the major theme of her campaign, she ceded the issue of change to Obama, who made that the centerpiece of his campaign. Ironically, her campaign may have believed that Clinton’s being a woman was, in and of itself, a sufficient indicator of change for voters. After all, one of the truisms of the literature on women candidates is that women, as traditional outsiders in politics, are viewed by voters as the very embodiment of change. Thus, women candidates tend to do well, as they did in congressional races in 1992, for example, in elections where voters are dissatisfied and looking to throw the rascals out.

So it may well be that the Clinton campaign believed that they did not need to emphasize change explicitly; they may well have assumed that as a woman, she would, by default, be seen as an agent of change. Of course, one apparent miscalculation here was that another candidate entered the race who, like Clinton, embodied change in his physical presence and also explicitly embraced the mantle of change.

The Clinton campaign also may have miscalculated the extent to which Bill Clinton and the idea of a copresidency would or would not be seen as a potential asset. It would have been very difficult to convince voters both that Hillary Clinton represented change and that, at the same time, she would take the country back to the glory days of Bill Clinton’s presidency where the economy was booming and the nation was not at war. The choice between these two strategies — emphasizing change or harkening back to the past — was always a tension in the campaign. However, it appears that Hillary Clinton’s campaign chose, at least initially, to put more emphasis on the glory days of Bill Clinton’s presidency, and to make subtle and implicit suggestions about a copresidency, than on constructing Hillary as an agent of change.

Inadvertently, strategic calculations such as these may have contributed to one of the great ironies of this campaign — that the very first woman to make a serious run for the White House came to be seen as the representative of the status quo. Nothing in the literature or research would have pointed to this expectation, even with a former first lady as the candidate.

Contrary to most of the media reports that seemed to portray Clinton’s emphasis on experience as a campaign blunder, the strategic

error made by her campaign was not in emphasizing experience — they had to do so — but rather in failing either to transition effectively from an emphasis on experience to an emphasis on change or to find a campaign theme encompassing both experience and change — something like “experience for a change.” A theme such as this not only would have responded to what voters were looking for in this election, but also would have been a nice swipe at George W. Bush, perhaps reminding voters of the danger of having an inexperienced president in the White House. Instead, in what certainly appears to have been an attempt to counter a gender stereotype, the Clinton campaign got trapped into emphasizing experience in an election where voters were hungry for change.

A second gender stereotype that I believe the Clinton campaign worked to counter was voters’ concerns about whether a woman is tough enough to be president, whether a woman can take command and withstand the emotional demands of the job. Again, both political scientists and political pollsters have documented that toughness is an area of concern for voters, especially when it comes to women candidates for executive positions. Because of the negative gender stereotype of women as too weak and too emotional, Clinton had no choice but to portray herself as tough and strong, and her campaign was tremendously successful in establishing her strength. She was rarely, if ever, described as weak. From the very beginning of her campaign, she presented herself as tough as nails and as a fighter who would never give up. Governor Mike Easley of North Carolina described Clinton as someone “who makes Rocky Balboa look like a pansy” (Governor Mike Easley 2008). A union leader in Indiana even introduced her last April by describing her as a person who has “testicular fortitude” (Suarez 2008).

While the Clinton campaign was very effective in countering the perception of women as not sufficiently agentic, the strategic mistake they may have made was in not also showing the candidate to be sufficiently communal — in finding the right balance between agency and community, between showing the candidate’s strength and demonstrating her humanity. Clinton was so successful in demonstrating toughness that many observers thought she did not show enough emotion. People longed to see more of her human side, and she seems to have won over some people in New Hampshire when she teared up on the eve of the primary. Of course, had she shown her “softer side” without first establishing her strength, it would have been a disaster for her campaign — a sure sign that she was not up to the job.

Again, as with the issue of experience, the campaign may ultimately have placed too much emphasis on toughness without showing enough of her

personality, humanity, and humor. It is the balance between the two that seemed to be missing throughout much of the campaign although admittedly the structure of the primary season made striking such a balance particularly challenging. While early in 2008 voters in Iowa and New Hampshire might have seen enough of Clinton's toughness to have been positively receptive to seeing her human side, voters in Ohio and Texas and Pennsylvania, for example, were still in the early stages of exposure to her campaign. Consequently, a display of emotion might have been perceived much less positively by voters in these states, who, in a sense, had not yet been fully exposed to the "toughness treatment."

Finally, the Clinton campaign had to contend with a third stereotype, one that is very closely related to the stereotype of women as too weak and emotional to handle the demands of high-level political office. This is the stereotype that women are less prepared than men for the role of commander in chief and less able than men to handle the military, national security, and foreign affairs. Clinton tried to deal with this stereotype from the moment she was elected to the U.S. Senate by obtaining an appointment to the Armed Services Committee and, of course, she lined up a long list of military brass who supported her candidacy, perhaps most visibly Wesley Clark. She was careful as a candidate never to show any sign of weakness on military and defense issues, even going so far as to say, in a very controversial statement, that if Iran attacked Israel, "we would be able to totally obliterate them" (Morgan 2008).

But probably the best example that Clinton and her campaign knew she had to counter the gender stereotype of women being weak on defense and security issues was, first, her initial vote to authorize the war in Iraq and, second, her repeated refusal to say that this vote was a mistake. Clinton certainly had agency as a senator and as a candidate, and despite any potential electoral costs, she could, as a matter of principle, have made the choice that many progressives wanted her to make. She could have chosen to oppose the war initially, as Obama did, or to renounce her vote as a mistake, as John Edwards did. However, as a woman, she likely would have paid a much greater price for these decisions than either Obama or Edwards; because of gender stereotypes, she would have run a much greater risk of looking weak and indecisive on national defense. Clinton and Obama simply were not on equal playing fields when it came to the choice of whether to oppose the war from the beginning — and not just because Obama was not in the U.S. Senate at the time. Nor did Clinton confront the same playing field as Edwards in deciding

whether or not to renounce her vote to authorize the war. From an electoral perspective, Clinton just did not have a good alternative. She was almost certainly damned electorally if she opposed the war, but as the campaign played out, she found that she was also damned because she did not. Her reluctance to renounce her vote became a strong line of attack for her political opponents; she got hammered on the issue of Iraq, and there is little doubt that the war issue hurt her in the early primaries.

This discussion of gender stereotypes points to a couple of interesting questions for future research. On the basis of my observations of the campaign from the outside, I have suggested that Clinton campaign operatives appeared to be aware of gender stereotypes and to have constructed the campaign in part to counter these stereotypes. The media, of course, have offered other, very different explanations for key campaign decisions. Reporters and commentators rarely recognized or analyzed Clinton's tactical decisions as in any way gender related. Instead, they interpreted her continued emphasis on experience and toughness, rather than change, as a major campaign blunder, and they tended to interpret her reluctance to show emotion as an inherent character flaw. Of course, when Clinton did show emotion in New Hampshire, it set off all kinds of media speculation that her display of emotion was calculated — a campaign ploy — rather than genuine sentiment. Similarly, the media interpreted Clinton's initial vote on Iraq and her reluctance to renounce it as either a character flaw or a strategic mistake, rather than as a necessary response to a gender stereotype. So, in my observations and the media's interpretations, we clearly have competing hypotheses as to why the Clinton campaign made some of its key strategic decisions. Were these decisions made to counter gender stereotypes, or did they reflect tactical mistakes and personality characteristics, as media reporting so often suggested? Perhaps future research based on interviews with key campaign personnel will help to answer this question.

A second research question has to do with whether Hillary Clinton's campaign helped to diminish the strength of negative voter stereotypes about women candidates so that the next woman who makes a serious run at the presidency will have more freedom in her campaign strategy and will be less constrained by these stereotypes. This is where I wish we had had the foresight and resources to collect extensive baseline data on gender stereotypes prior to this campaign. While we can now do a good post-test, we lack a strong baseline pretest. Nevertheless, I am confident that some enterprising political scientist could piece together sufficient

data from different polls and surveys to provide at least suggestive evidence as to whether Hillary Clinton was able to lessen the hold that some of the negative gender stereotypes have on the public imagination.

One of the reasons why it is so important to find out whether negative gender stereotypes have diminished in strength is that they not only will constrain future women candidates who seek the presidency but also are likely to constrain — to the extent they continue to exist — the actions of the first woman president. So long as these stereotypes persist, any woman who occupies the oval office and has aspirations to seek reelection is likely to pursue a foreign policy that will be on the hawkish side. A woman in the presidency will feel considerable pressure to prove her toughness in both domestic and international contexts.

A number of feminists and progressives felt that they could not support Hillary Clinton in the 2008 election because of her vote to authorize the Iraq war; so long as gender stereotypes persist, those feminists and progressives are likely to find it very difficult to support not only Hillary Clinton but also any woman who has a serious chance of winning the presidency. Any woman who runs for or serves as president will likely have to position herself to counter the negative gender stereotypes or risk paying a price at the polls. Ironically, however, electing a hawkish woman as president might actually be the most effective way to lessen or eliminate the power of these stereotypes. Once a woman proves she can handle the job, voters will be less concerned about whether a woman can be a strong and effective commander in chief.

So far I have discussed “the good” — the historic nature of this election year — as well as “the bad” — the way that gender stereotypes seem to have constrained decision making within the Clinton campaign. Now I will turn to “the misogynic” — the media. I say this only partially with tongue in cheek.

I have already mentioned that the media did little, if anything, to help the public understand the way that gender stereotypes may have constrained Clinton's campaign. Of course, perhaps I am asking too much by expecting the media to educate voters, but I do not think I am asking too much by expecting the media to report on the campaigns in a fair and evenhanded manner. In this election it is not clear that they did.

Considerable attention has been paid to the fact that many of Hillary Clinton's supporters, and even some feminists who did not support Clinton, were upset by the coverage of this year's campaign. In my view, there are really three analytically distinct, even if not mutually exclusive, reasons for the outpouring of anger and emotion over the way the

Clinton campaign was covered. The first is that sexism directed at Hillary Clinton in the political arena often was not considered newsworthy. The second is that sexism and sexist remarks by journalists and on-air pundits were treated as acceptable — a normal part of political discourse. And the third reason is that some journalists themselves appeared to behave as political actors with clear preferences among the candidates.

Let me start with the first of these reasons for why many Clinton supporters were troubled by media coverage of this year's primary campaign — that sexism directed at Hillary Clinton was not considered newsworthy. As one example, at a campaign event in November 2007, John McCain was asked, "How do we beat the bitch?" His response: "That's an excellent question." This incident did receive some media coverage, but not nearly as much as many Clinton supporters felt that it merited. Moreover, as the online watchdog Media Matters pointed out, media reports on this incident often left out McCain's response and thus his implicit agreement with this sexist characterization of Clinton (Media Matters for America 2007a).

Then there was the incident in New Hampshire where two men at a Clinton rally yelled out, "Iron my shirts!" As Anna Quindlen observed in her *Newsweek* column, "The point wasn't the yahoos with the Neanderthal mantra; it was that their jeers got little coverage. If someone at an Obama rally had called out a similar remark based on racial bigotry — 'Shine my shoes,' perhaps — not only would it have been a story, it would have run on page one" (Quindlen 2008, 70).

But in my view, the best example that reporters, editors, and producers did not view sexism as media worthy is reflected in an incident involving Governor Ed Rendell of Pennsylvania. On February 12, 2008, Tony Norman, a columnist and associate editor for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, reported in his column that Governor Rendell had said, in a meeting with the editorial board, "I think there are some whites [in Pennsylvania] who are probably not ready to vote for an African-American candidate" (Norman 2008). The reporting of this comment set off a media and blogosphere firestorm, with Rendell repeatedly accused of playing the race card. In the aftermath of this incident, Norman acknowledged in an interview on *Radio Times with Marty Moss-Coane*, aired on February 15, that Rendell had made a comparable comment about men not voting for women (*Radio Times* 2008). He explained why he never reported this as follows: "If a state is going to have trouble with a black candidate, it will probably have trouble with a woman candidate, so that was not particularly new." In short, racism to

Norman was newsworthy; sexism was not. The reason I see this incident as emblematic is that Tony Norman's attitude — that sexism is not news — seemed to sum up the perspective of a sizable proportion of the news media in reporting on the 2008 election. Sexism simply was not considered newsworthy, and consequently, incidents of sexism on the campaign trail went either uncovered or underreported.

A second reason that many of Hillary Clinton's supporters were upset over media coverage of the 2008 Democratic primaries is that sexism and sexist remarks by journalists and on-air pundits were treated as acceptable forms of expression. These comments only became unacceptable, if they became unacceptable at all, after feminists and Clinton supporters complained about them. There are so many examples here that it is hard to know where to begin. There is, of course, the coverage of Clinton's pantsuits, and her cleavage, and the famous "cackle." The *New York Times* on September 30, 2007, devoted an entire article in its national news section to an analysis of the Clinton cackle with the goal of uncovering what was behind the laugh: Was it genuine or was it calculated? (Healy 2007). Of course, it was not just the laugh that was considered to be inauthentic; virtually every move Clinton made throughout the campaign seemed to be labeled by journalists or pundits as "calculated." For example, when she teared up in New Hampshire, many speculated that the show of emotion was not real; it was calculated. And the constant labeling of Clinton as calculating was all the more obvious, I believe, because her main opponent, Barack Obama, was rarely portrayed this way; the word "calculating" was seldom applied to him or his campaign.

Avid consumers of cable news coverage of the primaries saw example after example of sexist commentary. Chris Matthews of MSNBC made so many sexist remarks about Clinton that it is hard to choose, but perhaps the worst was when he said, "The reason she's a U.S. Senator, the reason she's a candidate for President, the reason she may be a frontrunner is that her husband messed around. That's how she got to be Senator from New York. . . . She did not win there on her merit" (Women's Media Center 2008a). Pundit Alex Castellanos on CNN said of Clinton being called a bitch, "Some women, by the way, are named that and it's accurate. . . . She can be a very abrasive, aggressive, irritating person" (Women's Media Center 2008b). Mike Barnicle on MSNBC described Clinton as "looking like everyone's first wife standing outside a probate court" (Women's Media Center 2008a). Jack Cafferty on CNN described her as "a scolding mother, talking down to a child" (Media

Matters for America 2008). Glenn Beck of CNN and ABC made numerous inappropriate comments, including one on his radio show where he observed, “There’s something about her vocal range. . . . She’s the stereotypical bitch, you know what I mean” (Media Matters for America 2007c).

The cable news folks were particularly guilty of sexism, but as the cackle article in the *New York Times* reveals, it was not just the cable news people who engaged in sexist commentary. National Public Radio political editor Ken Rudin, in an appearance on CNN, described Hillary Clinton as “Glenn Close in ‘Fatal Attraction’” (CNN Sunday Morning 2008). And consider this excerpt from a transcript of an interview with Clinton that aired on *60 Minutes* on February 10, 2008:

“What were you like in high school? Were you the girl in the front row taking meticulous notes and always raising your hand?” Couric asked.

“Not always raising my hand,” the senator replied, laughing.

“Someone told me your nickname in school was Miss Frigidaire. Is that true?” Couric asked.

“Only with some boys,” Clinton said, laughing. (CBS *60 Minutes* 2008).

When is it ever appropriate to ask a presidential candidate if she was called “Miss Frigidaire”? Again, the sexism is all the more evident when compared with coverage of Barack Obama, who was interviewed on the same show and was not asked any personal questions like these.

Of all the people whom I heard comment on the sexist treatment that Hillary Clinton received in the media, the most astute observation may have been made by Maria Echaveste, a senior Clinton advisor and a law professor at Berkeley, who was asked by Bill Moyers on May 16, 2008, why many women seemed to believe that Senator Clinton should not withdraw from the presidential race, but rather stay through the end of the primaries. Echaveste responded, “Because they believe . . . that Hillary Clinton did not get a fair chance. . . . I think there was in the media particularly. . . a zone of protection around Senator Obama on race where none existed on gender” (Bill Moyers Journal 2008). Although some might contest Echaveste’s claim that there was a zone of protection around Obama on race, her observation that there was no “zone of protection” around Clinton when it came to sexism strikes me as absolutely correct and a very useful way of describing the problem.

Finally, I come to the third reason that Clinton supporters were upset by the media coverage she received — that some journalists themselves appeared to behave as political actors with clear preferences among the

candidates. Timothy E. Cook made the claim several years ago in *Governing the News* (2005) that journalists are political actors, and perhaps in the 2008 election campaign, more than any other, journalists have allowed their personal political preferences to influence their work. For whatever reasons, and the reasons were likely complicated, numerous reporters, on-air personalities, and pundits seemed to have a strong personal dislike for Hillary Clinton. And this dislike was perhaps more evident by comparison because many of these same media people seemed quite enamored with Barack Obama and his campaign. The two candidates were not treated the same.

The unequal treatment was not limited to the evening shows on cable stations like CNN, MSNBC, and FOX, which those in the news business sometimes claim are not really news at all but rather entertainment. While there is not yet much research on media coverage of the candidates, the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University has monitored nightly news broadcasts. In an analysis of 933 election news stories that aired on the evening news shows of the three major networks from mid-December through mid-March, they found that coverage of Clinton was much less favorable than coverage of Obama on all of the networks, individually and collectively, throughout the period. For example, in the pre-Super Tuesday period, only 53% of comments about Clinton were positive, compared with 88% of the comments about Obama. And even during the height of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright controversy, March 13–22, Clinton received only 40% positive comments, compared with 62% positive comments for Obama (Center for Media and Public Affairs 2008).

Of course, to some extent, these differences reflect what communication scholars have referred to as situational and structural biases. Obama was the fresh political face in 2008, the new candidate who spoke in inspiring language and filled large arenas. This was bound to lead to more favorable coverage for him. But the differences in the amount of positive coverage Clinton and Obama received are so large, especially in the pre-Super Tuesday period, that it is hard to imagine that some of the difference is not due to simple preference for Obama over Clinton. When one considers the demographics of those who have the most power in the news business – white, male, well educated, higher income – it would not at all be surprising to find that they favored Obama over Clinton. After all, this is the profile for one of the groups in the Democratic primary electorate that was most supportive of Obama and least supportive of Clinton. Of course, reporters, editors, and

management will all deny that any such personal bias affected their work. But it is interesting that Katie Couric — yes, the same Katie Couric who asked Clinton if her nickname used to be “Miss Frigidare” — did speak out on the *CBS Evening News*, though only after Clinton had suspended her campaign. On her June 11 broadcast, in a post mortem on the Clinton campaign, Couric observed that “one of the great lessons of that campaign is the continued and accepted role of sexism in American life, particularly in the media. . . . [I]f Senator Obama had to confront the racist equivalent of an “Iron My Shirt” poster at campaign rallies or a Hillary nutcracker sold at airports, . . . the outrage would not be a footnote, it would be front page news” (Couric & Co. 2008).

I will provide just a couple of quick examples where I think reporters were very much influenced by their candidate preferences. The first example involves two NBC/MSNBC reporters and their contrasting statements. Reporter Lee Cowan admitted, “When NBC News first assigned me to the Barack Obama campaign, I must confess my knees quaked a bit” (Whitlock 2008). Contrast this with Tucker Carlson, MSNBC’s senior campaign correspondent, who has proclaimed on more than one occasion, “When she [Hillary Clinton] comes on television, I involuntarily cross my legs” (Media Matters for America 2007b). Given these statements, one doubts that either of these gentlemen could be very “objective” in covering the candidates.

The second example is from the *New York Times*, which clearly felt compelled to defend itself and media coverage more generally against charges of sexism in both a June 13 article¹ and a June 22 op-ed by Clark Hoyt,² public editor for the newspaper. The upshot of both was that the accusations of sexism were without much merit. However, consider this quote from a front page article in the *New York Times* on March 4, 2008: “The day was the latest installment in the riveting drama between two formidable, historic candidates: the first woman to be a serious contender for president and the charismatic young black man who has packed arenas across the country and overtaken Mrs. Clinton in many polls and the delegate count.”³ If you were an undecided voter, which candidate would you want to support? And consider that the

1. Katherine Seelye and Julie Bosman, “Critics and News Executives Split Over Sexism in Clinton Coverage,” *New York Times*, 13 June 2008, sec. A.

2. Clark Hoyt, “Pantsuits and the Presidency,” *New York Times*, 22 June 2008, Week in Review.

3. Elisabeth Bumiller and John M. Broder, “Democratic Rivals Clash Before Pivotal Primaries,” *New York Times*, 4 March 2008, sec. A.

New York Times actually endorsed Hillary Clinton as their choice for the Democratic nomination! With friends like these, who needs enemies?

Of course, I have clearly engaged in some cherry picking in order to illustrate my three reasons for the outpouring of anger and emotion over the way the Clinton campaign was covered. We will have to await further scholarly research to determine how much bias and sexism actually crept into the coverage. Nevertheless, there is so much smoke surrounding the media coverage of this campaign that it seems highly likely that researchers will find some fire as well.

To bring my series of reflections to a close, let me just briefly address the question that will inevitably be raised: Yes, major campaign decisions may have been influenced by gender stereotypes, and yes, perhaps there was some sexism in the media coverage of Hillary Clinton and her campaign. But are these the reasons she lost the Democratic primary? Here is how Al Hunt answered this question in commentary for Bloomberg News:

Hillary Clinton didn't lose the Democratic presidential nomination because she is a woman, and gender no longer is a big deal in American elections. There are two basic reasons the most formidable front-runner in contemporary presidential politics failed: Barack Obama is a sensational candidate who assembled a campaign team, which out-thought and out-strategized Clinton at every turn; and Hillary Clinton, in the most important venture of her life, picked the wrong people and adopted the wrong strategy. Unwilling to face this painful reality, some Clintonistas persist in the whiny complaint that it was all about sexism. (Hunt 2008).

Of course, Hunt does go on to say that part of the "wrong strategy" Clinton adopted was that she took "much too long to open up and display her human dimensions" without any recognition whatsoever that gender may have had something to do with this (Hunt 2008). Nevertheless, Hunt's perspective that gender is not the reason Clinton lost is a common one.

One can surely point to numerous problems with the Clinton campaign. The campaign lacked a post-Super Tuesday strategy and certainly did not put sufficient energy or resources into caucus states. Clinton's advisers were often smug and arrogant and too convinced they would win. And husband Bill was clearly an issue. Perhaps some of these other factors — such as the lack of a post-Super Tuesday strategy, the arrogance of Clinton's advisers, or the misdeeds of Bill Clinton — mattered as much or more than the need to counter gender stereotypes or sexism in the media. Nevertheless,

in an election as close as the primary race between Obama and Clinton, any one of these factors could potentially have changed the outcome. Consequently, when the history of this campaign is written, the role of gender stereotypes and the sexism of the media need to be part of the mix. Gender was not the only thing that mattered, but yes, gender *did* matter.

Just as Obama's candidacy and his potential presidency will likely pave the way for future African American candidates, Clinton's candidacy has hopefully pushed the door open a little further for women. (In fact, Sarah Palin seems already to have barged through the opening Clinton created.) Perhaps voters in the future will be less concerned about whether a woman is experienced enough or tough enough to be president. Perhaps the media will have a little more gender consciousness and awareness the next time a woman runs. And perhaps some day the American public and the media will come to value strength and assertiveness in women leaders as much as they value those qualities in men. If so, Hillary Clinton's 2008 campaign will be one with historic coattails.

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