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 From the Los Angeles Times

## CAMPAIGN '08

### With Clinton, end of line for a woman who 'is the line'

Her presidential campaign undoubtedly broke ground. But what does it mean for the future of women and politics?

By Cathleen Decker

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Susie Wilson has spent hours each day calling strangers, all over the country, to ask them to vote for Hillary Rodham Clinton. She traveled to three states, knocking door-to-door. In Lancaster, Pa., she stood on a street corner with her sign: Honk for Hillary. And people did.

Susie Wilson is 78 years old. The odds of her working in another campaign to put a woman in the White House are "slim to none," she says.

So today, as Clinton brings the longest and most successful such effort ever to its not-successful-enough close, women who supported her wonder:

Did Clinton's roller-coaster ride from inevitable nominee to indebted also-ran shatter stereotypes that had long kept women from the height of American politics, or not? Did the insults that accompanied her run -- the shouts of "Iron my shirt," the Hillary Nutcracker, the mocking T-shirts -- lay bare a vein of sexism that many had considered long gone, or were they anomalies? What exactly did it all mean for the next woman?

Susie Wilson offered the lesson she learned: "Be strong. Don't let people put you down. You keep going. That's a good message for women."

For others who have worked for years to elect a woman president, the larger answer is nuanced. Clinton's bid, most of them believe, certainly made things easier for the next woman to run for president -- whether that is the New York senator herself or someone else.

But, as one said, close your eyes and imagine a president, and the figure that pops into view is male. Even one of Clinton's own supporters, introducing her in Indiana at the height of her springtime strength, felt compelled to declare why -- in his opinion -- Clinton should win: She has, he said, "testicular fortitude."

And then there is the question of who could succeed her in the ambition. Only two dozen women serve as governors and senators, the traditional entree to a presidential campaign, noted Ruth Mandel, who founded Rutgers University's Center for American Women and Politics and was its director for 24 years.

"Hillary Clinton is not at the head of a line; she *is* the line," Mandel said.

Former Rep. Patricia Schroeder (D-Colo.), who toyed with a run in 1987, put it more bluntly: "The White House is still a great big treehouse with a 'No girls allowed' sign on it. And it is going to take a while."

The campaign was not merely a national referendum on a woman president, to be sure. The crosscurrents were fierce.

Clinton was running to become the first female U.S. president, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama to become the nation's first nonwhite chief executive. Women were split beyond the usual Democrat-Republican schisms; younger women embraced Obama more readily than their elders. Class and race, as much as gender, determined loyalties in many states.

The candidates, too, sent mixed messages. It was Clinton who was knocking back shots, talking tough about her political opponents and "obliterating" Iran. It was Obama who disdained such approaches as "cowboy" diplomacy and promised to be more embracing and conciliatory -- the very tactics women had always said was their stock in trade.

"The irony here is that Barack has some of those qualities," Susie Wilson said. "He has more of a feminine side that he shows."

But that was not a luxury allowed Clinton, according to those who have strategized for a woman president.

"If she had run his campaign," Schroeder said, "she would have been attacked: 'Now, there, see, this is what they do.' . . . Maybe now it's OK for both men and women to be more feely-touchy. I hope so."

After playing out for 17 months in America's living rooms, it is hard to remember how revolutionary Clinton's candidacy actually was. Despite the reality -- Obama won, she didn't -- Clinton succeeded beyond the wildest imaginings of those who preceded her. The last four decades have offered up less than a handful of serious contenders, and none of their efforts ended well.

Lacking money and enthusiasm, Elizabeth Dole dropped out of the 2000 Republican race before any votes were cast. Schroeder also dropped out broke, and -- worse -- in a televised torrent of tears.

Then there is Clinton, who raised more money and collected more votes than any primary candidate ever -- except, unfortunately for her, Obama. Many who watched the race unfold saw Clinton doing what everyone had always said a serious woman candidate had to do: establish toughness and credibility on foreign affairs and defense policy first, and drum home your competence.

"Men come to it in their dark-blue suits and red ties with sort of an automatic authority," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Rutgers center since 2001. "They don't have to prove it. They look presidential. The woman candidate has to do more to prove that. You saw a little bit of that struggle. . . She was running on experience, and the ground shifted on her. And experience wasn't what was selling."

If Clinton's tenacity surprised no one who had watched her morph from Watergate-era lawyer to first lady to New York senator, the campaign element that most stunned many women was the sexism they saw visited upon her.

It is impossible to determine how prevalent a problem it was, or its ultimate effect on the campaign, but a rogue's gallery of insults has been captured: the time in New Hampshire that "Iron my shirts" was chanted. The time Arizona Sen. John McCain, now the presumptive GOP nominee, laughed after he was asked how to "beat the [rhymes-with-witch]." The battering by cable pundits who compared Clinton to first wives and hectoring mothers and the deranged Glenn Close character from "Fatal Attraction."

"It's a very clear message that blatant sexism at some level is still acceptable," said Ellen Malcolm, who in 1985 established EMILY's List, the political powerhouse that raises money for Democratic women who favor abortion rights. "It's sometimes even amusing in our society, in ways that are pretty diminishing."

Chief among the culprits cited by Malcolm and others is the Hillary Nutcracker, whose co-creator inadvertently confirmed their view that sexism was treated less seriously than racism in the campaign.

Gibson Carothers said he has sold more than 200,000 of the devices, which feature a plastic Clinton with serrated metal nutcracker blades lining her inner thighs.

"We thought it was funny," he said, adding that it meant to play off Clinton's "polarizing and tough" persona. But could he imagine something like that for Obama or McCain?

"One is African American, and there's where you run into problems," he said.

Mary Schnack, an international business consultant from Sedona, Ariz., ran into the nutcracker and a host of other anti-Clinton memorabilia at an airport during the campaign. To her, Clinton is a trailblazer, much like the first wave of women in the business world who toughed it out, floppy bow-ties and all, paving the way for others.

Next time, Schnack said, "I don't think there will be as much of a question if a woman can do the job. I don't think people question that Hillary can do the job."

Schnack volunteered for Clinton in Iowa and Nevada, where she weathered comments from those who said a woman wasn't fit to run the country.

So did Susie Wilson when she made her phone calls. When it ended, she was left with memories of those slights and something more.

She would end her calls by asking women to consider that for 200 years, only men have run the country. Have you thought, she asked them, what it would be like to have a woman president?

"It was as if I turned on a light switch for them," she said. "You could feel the glow over the wires. They wanted it, yes, and nobody had asked them before."

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