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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## McCain's Baked Alaska

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It is conceivable that some people will think John McCain picked Sarah Palin to be his running mate because she is a woman. I know you find this shocking, but I swear I have heard it mentioned.

McCain does not believe in pandering to identity politics. He was looking for someone who was well prepared to fight against international Islamic extremism, the transcendent issue of our time. And in the end he decided that in good conscience, he was not going to settle for anyone who had not been commander of a state national guard for at least a year and a half. He put down his foot!

The obvious choice was Palin, the governor of Alaska, whose guard stands as our last best defense against possible attack by the resurgent Russian menace across the Bering Strait.

Also a woman, but that's totally beside the point.

True, the only nonfamily members other than McCain that Palin really mentioned in her introductory speech were Democrats Geraldine Ferraro and Hillary Rodham Clinton. Whatever happened to Ronald Reagan? Isn't there a rule that you have to mention Ronald Reagan?

"It was rightly noted in Denver that Hillary made 18 million cracks in the highest, hardest glass ceiling in America," Palin said. "It turns out the women of America aren't finished yet, and we can shatter that glass ceiling once and for all."

O.K., the women thing might have been a little bit of a selling point. Not nearly so much as the national guard commandership, of course. But if the millions of Democratic women who are still ticked off at Obama for stepping in front of Hillary in the line want to look elsewhere ...

John McCain has a low opinion of the vice presidency, which he's frequently described as a job that involves attending funerals and checking on the health of the president. (Happy 72nd birthday, John!) There's a lot we don't know yet about Palin, and I am personally looking forward to deconstructing her role in the Matanuska Maid Dairy closing crisis. But at first glance, she doesn't seem much less qualified than Tim Pawlenty, the governor of Minnesota who most people thought was the most likely pick. Unlike Joe Lieberman, Palin is a member of the same party as the presidential candidate. And unlike Mitt Romney, she has never gone on vacation with the family dog strapped to the roof of the car.

However, I do feel kind of ticked off at the assumptions that the Republicans seem to be making about female voters. It's a tad reminiscent of the Dan Quayle selection, when the first George Bush's advisers decided they could close the gender gap with a cute running mate.

The idea that women are going to race off to vote for any candidate with the same internal plumbing is both offensive and historically wrong. When the sexes have parted company in modern elections, it's generally been because women are more likely to be Democrats, and more concerned about protecting the social safety net. "The gender gap traditionally has been determined by party preference, not by the gender of the candidate," said Ruth Mandel of the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

Over the last week, we have heard over and over and over that Tuesday was the anniversary of the day women got the right to vote. (They got it when a state representative in Tennessee, where the House was split on the ratification issue, changed his vote because his mother wrote him a letter telling him to shape up. That's a story that I would love to get into, but, unfortunately, right now we have Sarah Palin to deal with.)

After that big moment of enfranchisement, women went through a long period in the desert where they had the vote but not much else. Then came the great revolutions of the 1970s, when all the assumptions about the natural divisions between the sexes were challenged. During that era, women could be excited and moved by symbolic candidacies that promised a better, more inclusive future, like Shirley Chisholm's presidential race and Geraldine Ferraro's presence on the Democratic national ticket.

This year, Hillary Clinton took things to a whole new level. She didn't run for president as a symbol but as the best-prepared candidate in the Democratic pack. Whether you liked her or not, she convinced the nation that women could be qualified to both run the country and be commander in chief. That was an enormous breakthrough, and Palin's nomination feels, in comparison, like a step back.

If she's only on the ticket to try to get disaffected Clinton supporters to cross over, it's a bad choice. Joe Biden may already be practicing his drop-dead line for the vice-presidential debate: "I know Hillary Clinton. Hillary Clinton is a friend of mine, and governor, you're no Hillary Clinton."

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