

Clinton aides: Palin treatment sexist

September 3rd, 2008 · No Comments

By: Politico

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Sarah Palin found some unlikely allies Wednesday as leading academics and even former top aides to Hillary Rodham Clinton endorsed the Republican charge that John McCain's running mate has been subject to a sexist double standard by the news media and Democrats.

Georgetown University professor Deborah Tannen, who has written best-selling books on gender differences, said she agrees with complaints that Palin skeptics — including prominent voices in the news media — have crossed a line by speculating about whether the Alaska governor is neglecting her family in pursuit of national office.

“What we're dealing with now, there's nothing subtle about it,” said Tannen. “We're dealing with the assumption that child-rearing is the job of women and not men. Is it sexist? Yes.”

“There's no way those questions would be asked of a male candidate,” said Howard Wolfson a former top strategist for Clinton's presidential campaign.

The sexism charge was hurled with new intensity Wednesday afternoon by McCain surrogates, all women, at a news conference just hours before she was to make her acceptance speech here.

The tense encounter with reporters showed how McCain's team has abandoned all pretense that this convention is about anything but Palin, her thin résumé and her wildly unexpected ascension to the GOP ticket.

A choice that was intended to shake up the race did so with more ferocity than McCain ever intended. The mother of five — with one pregnant teenage daughter and an infant son with Down syndrome — has joined a parade of personalities from Anita Hill to O.J. Simpson to Monica Lewinsky to become a cultural flash point.

As the controversy over her qualifications and McCain's vetting process overwhelmed events here, hypocritical rhetoric was flowing at full tide on all sides of the debate.

Many conservatives, who spent a generation ridiculing the politics of victimhood and group identity, are now zealously invoking both in the Twin Cities. A common GOP talking point here is that Palin's gender and experiences as a mother should be counted as an asset among her qualifications. At the news conference, former Massachusetts Gov. Jane Swift condemned “an outrageous smear campaign” against Palin, and former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina said, “The Republican Party will not stand by while Gov. Palin is subjected to sexist attacks.”

Just last spring, Palin herself scoffed when Hillary Clinton's campaign complained about a double standard in coverage.

“When I hear a statement like that coming from a woman candidate with any kind of perceived whine about that excess criticism, or maybe a sharper microscope put on her, I think, ‘Man, that doesn't do us any good, women in politics, or women in general, trying to progress this country,’ ” Palin said.

Now, McCain's team is urgently recruiting female surrogates and loudly crying sexism to deflect legitimate inquiries into Palin's experience, her record, and the last-minute, improvisational process by which McCain chose a small-state governor who was elected in 2006 after serving of mayor of small-town Wasilla, a far suburb of Anchorage.

It was a process dominated by a small handful of male aides to McCain, consulting no woman other than the candidate's wife, Cindy McCain.

Even so, many media and liberal voices have made the job easy for McCain's spin squadrons. Among the eyebrow-raising comments in recent days:

*Democratic Joe Biden, in what he intended as self-deprecating remark, observed, “There's a gigantic difference between John McCain and Barack Obama and between me and I suspect my vice presidential opponent. ... She's good looking.”

*A spokeswoman for the National Organization for Women, noting Palin's opposition to abortion rights and support of other parts of the social conservative agenda, told Politico, “She's more a conservative man than she is a woman on women's issues. Very disappointing.”

*Liberal radio host Ed Schultz used the words “bimbo alert” to refer to Palin, and the Huffington Post featured a photo montage of Palin with the headline, “Former Beauty Queen, Future VP?”

*CNN's John Roberts recently pondered on air: "Children with Down's syndrome require an awful lot of attention. The role of vice president, it seems to me, would take up an awful lot of her time, and it raises the issue of how much time will she have to dedicate to her newborn child?"

This line of inquiry was echoed by writer Sally Quinn, who in her "On Faith" column for [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) agreed that Palin is a "bright, attractive, impressive person," but also asked, "is she prepared for the all-consuming nature of the job?"

"Her first priority has to be her children," Quinn wrote. "When the phone rings at 3 in the morning and one of her children is really sick what choice will she make?"

There is little question that these questions are being asked around kitchen tables. But there are recent examples of a double standard.

Former Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.) was more frequently praised for his perseverance than hazed for misplaced priorities when he continued his presidential campaign even after wife Elizabeth Edwards was diagnosed with an incurable form of cancer. The couple has two children still at home, ages 10 and 8.

Edwards was himself a close finalist for a vice presidential nod in 2000, when Al Gore nearly tapped him at a time when he had served the same amount of time in the U.S. Senate that Palin has as Alaska governor, and about the same amount of time that Barack Obama had served when he began his presidential quest two years ago.

Phil Singer, who worked with Wolfson on Clinton's campaign, said the news media tend to focus on different sets of subjects when covering women candidates. He noted articles on Clinton's cleavage, and whether she had the personality of a "bitch."

"There's no question that the issues a woman has to deal with are different," Singer said, adding that, "The real indictment that needs to be prosecuted is about her views, not her personal life."

Rep. Tom Cole of Oklahoma, chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, said in a Politico interview Wednesday that a double standard was being applied against Palin, in part because she is unknown to Washington reporters. "It's always a dangerous thing to surprise the press," he said. "When you're unorthodox and unpredictable, you pay a price."

He also noted a subject that "I probably shouldn't get into" on the record, before deciding to plunge in: Historically, Cole, said "to be a leader in the women's movement, you have to be a liberal. This is clearly a very liberated woman who is not a liberal. And I think there is some tension with that because again, she breaks a lot of stereotypes and molds."

Some commentators said the McCain campaign has no grounds for complaint about sexism because it stressed her family background in her public unveiling last week in Dayton, Ohio, with her children on stage.

"The first image here [of Palin] was: This is a woman who is a wife and a mother, and let us tell you about her family," said Ruth B. Mandel, a founder of and senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "If they want the country to see her in a different way, and if they want the children and the family to be off-limits, they have to reframe it. You can't have it both ways."

Barbara Risman, a leader of the Council on Contemporary Families and a sociology professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, walked a middle ground on the emergence of gender identity politics in the presidential race.

"It makes absolutely no sense for me to vote for a woman just because I have a vagina and so does she," said Risman. "But it does make sense for me ... I believe that someone who has lived a life like mine just might understand my struggles more than others."

And she hoped that Palin and the uproar over her coverage would prove itself to be a cultural milestone: "I think it's really important, from this day forward, that we all ask about every candidate's work life and home life. It's sexism otherwise. ... We have to be careful not to ask her questions that we wouldn't ask a male candidate."

Cecile Dehesdin, Ryan Grim, David Paul Kuhn contributed to this story.

Copyright © 2008 Capitol News Company, LLC | Distributed by Noofangle Media