

Palin, Clinton have one thing in common

Both candidates faced media sexism - but chose to respond in different ways

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"Women want to be her. Men want to mate with her." Last month, Donny Deutsch, host of CNBC's "Big Idea," praised Governor Sarah Palin as the representation of the "new feminist ideal" on CNBC's "Squawk on the Street." Equating Palin to a product (the mother-approved cereal, Palin-Os), Deutsch explained how to "sell" a woman in power. According to Deutsch, Palin fits all three criteria: she's a supermom, she's sexy, and she's a "lioness." "Hillary Clinton didn't figure it out. She didn't put a skirt on."

On Sept. 22, Susan Carroll of Rutgers University analyzed Hillary Clinton's gender-based campaign mistakes - none of which, of course, involved her failure to don a skirt. During her lecture entitled "Gender and Hillary Clinton's Campaign: The Good, The Bad, and the Misogynic," Carroll discussed the role of gender stereotypes in the decisions of the Clinton campaign and the power of sexism in the campaign's media coverage.

According to Carroll, a woman must find a balance between traditional perceptions of assertive masculine behavior and communal feminine behavior in order to successfully fight for the "most masculinized job of all": Commander-in-Chief. This balance is a fine line to walk, and Clinton's campaign did not walk it well. A series of stumbles in the handling of gender stereotypes led to her failure, said Carroll.

To counter the stereotype of the weaker, emotional female, Clinton portrayed herself as the exact opposite. With "testicular fortitude," Clinton established herself as tough as nails and as a tireless fighter, inevitably "making Rocky Balboa look like a pansy," said Carroll. However, Clinton didn't demonstrate her humanity along with her strength. When Clinton did express emotion, the media discounted the display as calculated. For instance, while Clinton's tearing up during a press conference after the New Hampshire primary won over her audience, the media scoffed at what it saw as a deliberate dramatic performance.

To counter the stereotype that women are less prepared for the presidency than men, Clinton attempted to convince citizens she was ready for the job on day one. To reveal her competency in foreign policy and national security, Clinton joined the Arms Service Committee immediately upon her election to the Senate. Sometimes too careful to avoid showing weakness on these issues, Clinton tended to make the occasional overstatement. If Iran attacked Israel, she stated, "We would be able to totally obliterate them."

Perhaps the most important strategic flaw of the Clinton campaign, Carroll asserted, was the campaign's lack of emphasis on change. Viewing the candidate's gender as the embodiment of change, the campaign didn't feel the need to explicitly emphasize change. The campaign also did not stress this characteristic because it hoped the candidate would win nomination due to her experience and not her gender. But, in an election year when what voters want most is change, Clinton needed to ride the change train all the way to the Democratic Convention.

The media rarely recognized Clinton's campaign strategies as gender-related, and instead "interpreted her reluctance to show emotion as a character flaw or strategic mistake." In addition to this error, asserted Carroll, the media made three analytical mistakes.

First, sexism directed at Hillary Clinton was not considered newsworthy. During a November 2007 campaign event in South Carolina, a questioner asked McCain, "How do we beat the bitch?" McCain called the question "excellent" and pointed to a poll that showed him beating Clinton in a head-to-head match-up before saying, "I respect Senator Clinton." Only Media Matters for America documented his sexist reply. In New Hampshire, audience members of a Clinton speech waved signs that said "Iron my shirts." The jeers received little coverage. However, if signs said "Shine my shoes" at an Obama speech, news of the incident would have run on page one. During the Clinton campaign, Governor Rendell of Pennsylvania reportedly stated, "I think there are some whites who are not ready to vote for an African American candidate." He also said that, in his opinion, "There are men in Pennsylvania that probably wouldn't vote for a woman." The latter comment was deemed unremarkable by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and didn't receive media coverage. Racism was newsworthy; sexism was not.

Second, sexist comments were treated as acceptable. The entirety of a New York Times article on September 30 analyzed the "Clinton Cackle" as either genuine or calculated. Chris Matthews on MSNBC said, "The reason she's a U.S. Senator ... is because her husband messed around." Another MSNBC reporter stated, "When Hillary Clinton comes on TV, I automatically cross my legs." CNN's Jack Cafferty likened Clinton to a scolding mother talking down to a child. Glenn Beck said Clinton had a vocal range "like the stereotypical bitch, you know what I mean." During a CNN appearance, NPR's political director equated Clinton with Glenn Close in "Fatal Attraction." Such blatantly sexist comments were only deemed unacceptable after feminists and Clinton supporters complained. Still, the media felt compelled to deny its sexism despite the evidence. Even The New York Times printed articles in June stating accusations of sexism were without merit. Only after Clinton lost the Democratic nomination did some prominent reporters, like Katie Couric, speak out on the media's sexism: "One of the great lessons of [Hillary Clinton's] campaign is the continued and accepted role of sexism in American life."

Third, journalists repeatedly showed preferences for candidates and allowed personal preferences to alter coverage. According to the Center for Media of Public Affairs at George Mason, evening news shows during mid-December to March reveal much less favorable coverage of Clinton on

all networks. Pre-Super Tuesday coverage, the study found, portrayed Clinton positively 53 percent of the time and Obama 88 percent of the time. Consider one New York Times reporter's article on March 4th: "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."

While Susan Carroll's lecture centered on the sexist coverage of the Clinton campaign, the recent media coverage of Governor Sarah Palin deserves attention as well. However, in Sarah Palin's instance, sexist coverage has received much more attention than sexism towards Clinton during the campaign. The now-infamous Tina Fey and Amy Poehler SNL skit exemplifies the latest attention to sexist coverage. In the skit, Fey's Palin addresses the "now very ugly role sexism is playing in the campaign" - to which Poehler's Clinton adds, "an issue which I am frankly surprised to hear people suddenly care about." Comedy Central's John Stewart too reported on the coverage change. Stewart shows clips of how political commentator Dick Morris changed his remarks on media sexism from Clinton's running to Palin's. In reference to Palin's confrontation with media sexism, Morris stated, "A man would never have to go through this. It's the deep sexism that runs through our society." However, in talking about Clinton's confrontation with media sexism, Morris had earlier stated the following: "When a woman wants to be president she shouldn't complain based on gender. I'm going to take my toys and go home because the boys are picking on me...Are we going to have the president of the U.S. say the boys are picking on me? Whenever [Hillary] gets under fire she retreats behind the apron strings." Apparently, those same apron strings look more flattering on Palin.

Certainly, coverage of Palin has been sexist-though most sexist commentary has been flattering to Palin. Praised as a supermom and a M.I.L.F., Palin has been asked if she will still cook for her family if elected VP. She's been admired for her chic glasses and copper highlights. In fact, her personal style has sparked a fashion frenzy. The Wall Street Journal produced a picture series on Palin's wardrobe-three of which were shots of Palin's heels on stage, five were of her lipstick, glasses, and hair. Palin's head has been repeatedly photoshopped onto bodies of bikini models. Reporters and commentators comment more on her physical appearance than on her policy positions.

Feminists believe in voting for a candidate based on what he or she will do for women, not just on his or her sex. As Feministing.com states, "Unfortunately, Palin's uterus alone won't help much." Sadly, if media coverage is any indication, her physical appearance just might. As CNBC's Donny Deutsch says, "I trust her. I want her watching my kids. I want her lying next to me in bed. That's the way people vote." Let's hope not.