



Posted on Sat, Nov. 15, 2008

The Barracuda was part of a sea change

By ELLEN GOODMAN

BOSTON | Have you ever seen a transformation this fast? In barely two months, the Barracuda became the Scapegoat. Think of it as evolution on steroids.

In September, Sarah Palin, the little-known governor of Alaska, was hailed as the great female hope of the Republican Party. Double the maverick, double the fun. John McCain called her "the most marvelous running mate in the history of this nation." Pro-life conservatives were "ecstatic," and she was a "hottie" to boot.

But after a handful of disastrous interviews, after polls showing she was a drag on the ticket, and after, of course, losing the election, McCain staffers began dropping little poison pellets all over the media. Sarah was a "diva." She was a Wasilla hillbilly "looting Neiman Marcus from coast to coast." She was a "wacko" who couldn't tell the French president from a Canadian radio prankster.

Did they actually think that Palin would go quietly into that good Arctic night? How you gonna keep her down on the tundra after she's seen herself on teevee?

Palin has always shown more moxie than substance. What she lacks in syntax, she makes up in self-confidence. Now Sarah Unbound is everywhere, serving the media moose chili and spin from her Anchorage crockpot. She's busily defending herself and her future: "If there's an open door ... then I'll plow through that door."

Well, a little door check, please. While all eyes were focused on Palin and the "Sarah-centric" (her words) crowds that turned out for her rallies, there was a quieter "women's story" in this race that may make the doorway a little narrow.

Nationally, Obama won the election with a bare majority of men: 49 percent to 48 percent. But he won with a landslide of votes from women: 56-43. Eight million more women than men voted for him.

In some of the battleground states, women made all or nearly all the difference. In New Hampshire, men split their votes pretty evenly, but women chose Obama nearly 2-to-1. In North Carolina, men picked McCain 56-43 and women picked Obama 55-44.

The other good news is that there will be a record number of women serving in the Senate and House. But it's not exactly record-shattering. The percentage of women in both houses is a dismal 17. More to the point, three-quarters of those women are Democrats.

In the final breakthrough this year, the New Hampshire Senate became the first legislative body in the country with a majority of women. Nationally, the number of women state legislators barely and finally crawled past the 24 percent mark.

This connection between women and the Democratic Party is as old as the gender gap itself. As Debbie Walsh of the Center for American Women and Politics explains: "The women's vote ends up being around economic issues and economic security. Women, as candidates and voters, are more likely to support a bigger role for government." It's not the gender, as they say, but the agenda.

So the other women's story of 2008 is that women voters and women officeholders are increasingly Democratic. That R by her name makes it hard to envision a door that a moose-hunting, pro-life, pit bull of a hockey mom can plow through.

What a year. For the first time, a woman, Hillary Clinton, became the "establishment candidate." Voters wanted change. For the first time, the GOP picked a woman, Sarah Palin, to energize the base. And the base kept shrinking.

Diva or not, Palin did change her corner of the landscape. Because of Palin, conservatives now speak of "sexism," the religious right describes teen pregnancy as a "challenge," and the culture warriors officially approve of working moms. For all that, what the heck, let her keep the clothes.

© 2008 Washington Post Writers Group

To reach Ellen Goodman, send e-mail to ellengoodman@globe.com.

© 2007 Kansas City Star and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kansascity.com>

<http://www.kansascity.com/273/story/892495.html>