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Ten Miles Square: **Mama Bear**

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How Sarah Palin has inspired an army of Republican women to run for office.

By **Malcolm Gay**

Palinmania: The GOP base loves Sarah Palin. Will it also love her many imitators?

Photo: Getty Images

Speaking last May at the pro-life Susan B. Anthony List, former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin described what she saw as a new breed of feminist, the kind who takes her cue from the likes of Annie Oakley—a woman, as Palin would have it, who can shoot a gun, push a plough, and raise a family all at once. “It seems like it’s kind of a mom awakening,” she told the crowd. “The mama grizzlies, they rear up, and if you thought pit bulls were tough, well, you don’t want to mess with the mama grizzlies ... and that’s what we’re seeing with all these women who are banding together, rising up, saying, ‘No, this isn’t right for our kids.’”

Dressed in a black suit and sporting a jewel-studded cross around her neck, Palin predicted 2010 would be the year conservative women stormed Congress. “Look out, Washington!” she warned. “Because there’s a whole stampede of pink elephants crossing the line, stampeding through! And the ETA is November 2, 2010.”

The menagerie of metaphors notwithstanding, Palin had a point. By early June—with seventeen states yet to have reached their filing deadlines—Rutgers University’s Center for American Women and Politics reported that there were already 239 female candidates running for Congress, a figure that nearly rivals 1992, the so-called Year of the Woman, when a record 251 women ran for office. But whereas in 1992 Democrats outpaced Republicans by a ratio of nearly 2 to 1, by June of this year a record 108 Republican women were running for office, nearly equaling their 131 Democratic opponents.

“The numbers are really being driven by Republican women,” said Gilda Morales, data maven for the Rutgers center. “These are huge numbers.”

For many of the candidates, Sarah Palin has been an inspiration. They see in Palin not only a charismatic woman scorned by the mainstream media, but also a politician with an unlikely résumé who provides a blueprint for their own political aspirations.

“She’s just courageous—she’s courageous and brave. She steps out there and speaks about issues that are close to her heart. It’s very inspiring to watch,” says Beth Anne Rankin, a music teacher and former Miss Arkansas now running against Rep. Mike Ross, Democrat from Arkansas, in the state’s Fourth District. “Sarah Palin has brought such an electricity to the political landscape. She’s invigorated millions of people.”

Patricia Sullivan, a homemaker and first-time candidate vying for a shot in Florida’s Eighth District, feels similarly. Reinforcing Palin’s grizzly bear comparison, Sullivan says she entered the race “out of an innate sense of wanting to protect my cubs.

“There’s something called women’s intuition,” explains Sullivan, whose scant political résumé includes helping to organize her local Tea Party. “Sarah Palin has put a face on the conservative woman—who’s able to raise a family and also offer the good qualities that a woman can bring to the table.”

Common to all of these new candidates are some hard-right beliefs. They oppose the stimulus package, auto bailouts, abortion rights, and health care reform. Many think that prayer belongs in schools, that President Obama is a socialist, and that Arizona officials have the right to demand citizenship papers from those deemed suspicious. They generally feel that Democrats have governed the country into a state of moral and economic putrefaction—and they love Sarah Palin.

“Sarah Palin changed the marker for what knowledge set a candidate needs to run,” said Victoria Budson, executive director of the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. “When she said she was a hockey mom, she was saying, ‘It is legitimate for me to say that my key identifier is my role in the home and with kids.’ ... That resonated with women all over the country.”

Of course, some of these grizzlies, like Robin Smith, who is waging a fierce primary battle for Tennessee’s open Third District, are seasoned political hands who got into the game long before Sarah Palin appeared on the national scene. Smith, for her part, made headlines in 2008 when her party issued a press release titled, “Anti-Semites for Obama,” ominously referring to then-candidate Obama as “Barack Hussein Obama.” (Time has not mellowed her. Smith’s Twitter feed now includes communications like this: “Least surprising news of the day: Communist Fidel Castro praises Obamacare.”)

But it’s the neophytes who have surged. One is Donna Campbell, an emergency-room physician who is running a long-shot race against Democratic Rep. Lloyd Doggett in Texas’s Twenty-fifth District. Campbell had never so much as dipped her toe in a candidate pool but says she was overcome by a sense of “doom” following the 2008 election and asked her county chairperson how she could help. The chairperson, says Campbell, told her to run for office. Campbell’s campaign is being documented on *Running*, a political reality show produced by the conservative Right Network.

The GOP has taken notice of the mama grizzly upsurge. The women's program for the Republican National Committee is cultivating its female candidates with a series of "issue-based" conference calls and regional summits aimed at schooling its members on election issues and strategies.

"The Republican Party leadership is beginning to understand, in a way that the Democrats have for many years, that running women is good politics," said Budson. "When women run, women win."

Of course, the rise in female candidates has meant some establishment Republican women politicians—like their male counterparts—are at risk of being pushed aside by the upstarts, who often challenge their rivals' conservative credentials. In Nevada's closely watched Republican Senate primary, Tea Party darling Sharron Angle had languished in the polls against frontrunner Sue Lowden, a former state senator and Miss New Jersey. Then Angle, who has frequently been compared to Sarah Palin for her folksy populism, received a cash infusion from the Sacramento-based Our Country Deserves Better PAC and managed to grab endorsements from red state heroes like Phyllis Schlafly, Pat Boone, and Joe the Plumber. Angle went on to an upset victory.

"This is a time of great political investment in change," said Budson. "And people who are marketing themselves as agents of change are doing incredibly well—particularly in the Republican Party."

Even so, this army of female candidates has a tough battle ahead: nearly 70 percent of those running for the House will face Democratic incumbents in the fall—and *that's* assuming they win their primaries. Those are daunting odds, even for a Palin-approved mama grizzly.

