



## Ferraro faced hurdles with strength and grace

**(CNN)** -- Geraldine Ferraro led the way for women in politics as the first female major-party nominee for the office of vice president of the United States in 1984. In her vice presidential campaign, Ferraro confronted substantial gender-related obstacles, including the daunting challenge of proving that she was tough enough for the job.

A woman who exhibited both strength and grace and who spoke directly and frankly about the issues that concerned her most, Ferraro -- who died Saturday at age 75 -- became an inspirational role model for the political women who came after her.

Vice presidential candidate Ferraro, appearing on NBC's "Meet the Press" on October 14, 1984, was asked an unprecedented question by moderator Marvin Kalb: "Ms. Ferraro, could you push the nuclear button?"

Without hesitation and with great fortitude, Ferraro replied, "I can do whatever is necessary to protect the security of this country."

In a further display of toughness, when Kalb asked whether she would have been nominated were she not a woman, Ferraro suggested, "I don't know if I were not a woman ... whether or not I would be asked questions like, 'Are you strong enough to push the button?'"

As this stunning exchange suggests, Ferraro continually confronted barriers and double standards based on her gender throughout the campaign. She was frequently addressed as "Ms." or "Mrs." rather than "Congresswoman" Ferraro, not only by Kalb but most famously by her opponent George H.W. Bush in the vice presidential debate. The press and Bush continually questioned her knowledge of foreign policy.

The archbishop of New York attacked her pro-choice stance on the abortion issue much more vociferously than he had ever attacked male candidates with pro-choice views. Ferraro's family was subjected to an unusual degree of scrutiny; in particular, her husband's financial dealings received relentless press attention. Because Ferraro's candidacy was path-forging and highly visible, it was the first to draw widespread attention to problems such as these faced by female candidates.

Ferraro was a fervent supporter of Hillary Clinton in her bid for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination and frequently spoke out about the gender-related biases and obstacles that Clinton faced in her campaign. On election night 2010, Ferraro joined Sarah Palin, the first Republican woman nominated for the vice presidency, in an unprecedented appearance together on Fox.

Although she acknowledged disagreement with Palin's policy positions, Ferraro recognized that they faced common hurdles as women and bemoaned the unfairness of some of the attacks that Palin, Clinton and other prominent female candidates have experienced.

Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, two prominent leaders of the women's suffrage movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, both died before realizing the goal to which they had devoted their lives.

It seems equally tragic that Geraldine Ferraro will not be around to congratulate the first woman elected as president or vice president of the United States. The first female chief executive, whoever she may be, certainly will be standing on the shoulders of Ferraro, who never stopped advocating for the equitable treatment of women in politics and who would delight in seeing a woman of either party -- but especially a Democrat -- occupying the Oval Office.

*The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Susan J. Carroll.*

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