

VANTAGE POINT

Sex and Power

Our society still values female sex symbols more than female leaders. The pace of change is too slow.

by **Kathy Kiely**

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Like bookends on an era, the passing of two well-known American women last week underscored how much times have changed—and how much they have not.

The first to depart was [Elizabeth Taylor](#), a woman of undoubted savvy and accomplishment who did a lot for others, especially those with AIDS, but one whose celebrity and power derived from her status as one of the sultriest sex symbols of all time.

The other to leave was [Geraldine Ferraro](#), who turned her own traditional feminine role into a political base and who, in a bid for the vice presidency, changed American politics forever. “She took the ‘only men need apply’ sign off the White House,” said Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md.

Ferraro was a trailblazer rooted in tradition. She carefully cultivated her unpretentious image as a Queens, N.Y., wife and mother. But she also got a law degree and insisted on keeping her maiden name long before it was common for married women to do so. And she had a keen sense of the history she knew was making.

When Ferraro strode onto the podium of the 1984 Democratic National Convention to accept her nomination as Walter Mondale’s running mate, the first woman to be placed on a major party’s national ticket, she wore a dazzling suit of suffragist white.

No woman who witnessed the moment will ever forget its impact. “It epitomized for me the fact that women could do anything,” said Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., one of six female senators from both parties who paid tribute to Ferraro on the Senate floor on Tuesday. It inspired Ellen Malcolm, who was finishing up her master’s in business administration the year Ferraro was nominated, to launch EMILY’s List, the political-action committee that has gone on to help countless Democratic women win political office. “The excitement about that election really shifted the dynamic,” she recalled in an interview this week.

To think it took only 208 years from the nation’s founding for a woman to almost reach the pinnacle of power. That’s the other side of the long and excruciatingly slow-moving “herstory” in which Ferraro played such a landmark role—a side that most women didn’t want to highlight during a week understandably devoted to a celebration of the congresswoman’s achievement.

And it was an achievement. Every woman who has made it to an executive position today “stands on the shoulders of one who went before and didn’t make it,” said Christine Todd Whitman, the former New Jersey governor. Consider: When Ferraro entered

Congress in 1979, she was one of 18 women members. Today, there are 91.

But **further consider**: More than a quarter-century after Ferraro's historic breakthrough, women still constitute just 17 percent of the national legislature in a country where they make up 51 percent of the population. To put it another way, *My National Journal* colleague Jessica Taylor notes that she wasn't yet born when Ferraro was nominated as the Democratic vice presidential candidate but was already a working journalist by the next time a major party put a woman on its national ticket (the GOP's 2008 nomination of Sarah Palin for vice president).

"It's disheartening," says Debbie Walsh of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "There is still such a long way for women to go."

You would think by now that women have proved they can hold their own with the boys. My colleague Beth Reinhard pointed out this week that while Ferraro faced questions during the 1984 campaign about whether a manicured hand would have the strength to push the nuclear button, it was a cadre of female officials in his administration who persuaded President Obama to go to war in Libya.

And yet, like cockroaches, the old sexual prejudices still scuttle out of dark corners. Remember the brouhaha when then-Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton showed up in the chamber in a (very flattering, I thought) top that revealed the barest hint of cleavage? That this was regarded as news worthy of outraged commentary could only lead one to the conclusion that the nation still had not quite yet accepted the notion of a senator with mammary glands.

Only three years ago, when Palin ran for vice president, she faced questions about whether she could serve in high office while still raising young children. Just this week, alleged TV wit Bill Maher used a vulgar reference to the female anatomy to describe the former Alaska governor.

"We've all faced the same obstacles," Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, said last week to explain why women of both parties took to the Senate floor to pay tribute to Ferraro. "We've all been turned down or trivialized."

That's also why the women of the Senate, Republicans and Democrats, get together for dinner once every two months to commiserate and to swap tips for overcoming. They know, as the media space afforded Elizabeth Taylor's and Ferraro's obituaries attested, that society still values female sex symbols more than female leaders. But they also know, as Taylor's and Ferraro's lives attested, that women can grow from their age-old roles into something more. And they know something else: Geraldine Ferraro's legacy is far-reaching and historic. But it won't be fulfilled until another woman walks through the door that she left open.