

Two women in a political race? Must be a catfight, according to Palin-Bachmann buzz

By Lee-Anne Goodman, The Canadian Press – 5/29/2011

WASHINGTON — They're telegenic, they're veritable Republican superstars, and they're women — therefore, they must despise one another.

Renewed speculation that Sarah Palin is going to make a run for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination has prompted a sea of political observers in the United States to suggest a snarling catfight must surely be brewing between the former Alaska governor and her Tea Party compatriot, Michele Bachmann.

Headlines and news stories from various news organizations immediately pit the two against one another following weeks of suggestions that Bachmann, expected to officially announce her candidacy soon, had stolen Palin's shtick and the Fox News personality was seething about it.

"Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann Size Each Other Up," read the headline on Politico.com. "Are We Ready For Two Women at Once?" asked a piece on left-leaning Salon.com.

"The sparks could fly if each woman decides to run for president," read a piece on the conservative NewsMax website.

Such talk exasperates Deborah Walsh, the director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey. She says the U.S. media has long had a knee-jerk tendency to reduce competing female politicians to hissing rivals who would do the characters of "Mean Girls" proud.

"You get two women in a race and it becomes a catfight," Walsh said in an interview Friday.

"You can only have one woman in a race, apparently — you can't have more than one because if you do, their claws will come out. It is still, and this is shocking in 2011, the scenario that comes so easily to the media when two women are running against one another."

Coverage focused on an alleged catfight, she argues, also pays short shrift to the truly newsworthy element of the story.

"The fact that there are two women who could be leading candidates in a presidential primary: You could see that as a certain kind of progress — historical progress, as a matter of fact — as opposed to reducing it to a catfight," she said.

"Yet I'm not seeing that story anywhere."

Pundits, instead, have opined that the two politicians would be competing for "the same space" because they're both socially conservative, popular with the Tea Party and female. Walsh says the fact that their gender is being raised is puzzling since no one is suggesting Palin's entry into the race would doom any of the male candidates' campaigns.

Both Palin and Bachmann are, indeed, socially conservative, she points out. But so are many of the lesser-known male candidates in the race, like Herman Cain and Tim Pawlenty. It's also true both women are darlings of the Tea Party movement; so too are Cain and Ron Paul.

Yet news that Palin was planning an East Coast tour of speaking engagements had barely broken when Bachmann, a Minnesota congresswoman, was asked what it meant for her campaign. It's a question that doesn't seem to have been asked of the male candidates.

"We are independent of what any other candidates decide — no matter which candidate gets in or which candidate gets out," Bachmann told reporters in a conference call shortly after Palin's announcement refuelled chatter about the former Alaska governor's presidential aspirations.

"I want to make it very clear: I consider Gov. Palin a friend and I have great respect for Gov. Palin. But, again, I don't believe that any two candidates are interchangeable. I believe each one of us brings our own unique skill sets into this race."

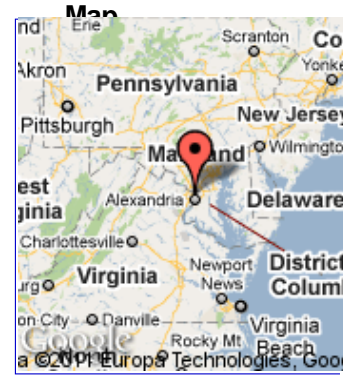
Jennifer Lawless, an expert in women in politics at American University in Washington, says it's natural that the media might view the two as rivals.

"It's still so unusual, to have two women in the running, so it's not surprising for the media to approach the story that way," she said. "Both Palin and Bachmann are also trying to stake out out much of the same territory, particularly when it comes to courting the right-wing media."

Nonetheless, it's hardly a new phenomenon for the media to fixate on the idea of bad blood between female politicians.

When Hillary Clinton was pondering a bid for a New York Senate seat in 2000, the New York tabloids pit her against Nita Lowey, a U.S. congresswoman who toyed with running but stepped aside when the former first lady threw her hat in the ring. One paper ran photos of both Clinton and Lowey beneath the blaring headline: "Catfight!"

THE CANADIAN PRESS



In New Jersey in the early '80s, Walsh adds, two women ran for governor, and were greeted with headlines that talked about how they were preparing to unsheathe their claws for battle.

"Let's face it, there are a lot of men in the media and they seem to like this kind of imagery, of two women duking it out; it's titillating," she said.

"I would bet large sums of money that if both of them get into the race, we will hear this kind of language routinely, as opposed to these women simply being part of the mix of a field of candidates.

"And we won't, at the same time, be hearing about two male candidates being in a dogfight."

Valerie Richardson, a South Carolina Democrat who supported Hillary Clinton in the 2008 Democratic race, called it an infuriating phenomenon.

"It's ridiculous that they're pitting the two women against each other, but then the media's treatment of every female politician is deplorable," she said.

"Regardless of party, I'm always disappointed in the way they are treated, be it Hillary Clinton or Sarah Palin."

Copyright © 2011 The Canadian Press. All rights reserved.