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'Sexism's Coming Out Party'

By HANNAH SELIGSON

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When CBS anchorwoman Katie Couric asked Hillary Clinton in an October 15 interview why she thought Sarah Palin was portrayed as an action figure and Sen. Clinton as a nutcracker, Ms. Couric, in one fell swoop, identified the essential feminist dichotomy of the 2008 election season and pinpointed how each of the candidates was covered by the media. Looking ahead, will female candidates seeking office continue to battle these labels and double standards?

In 2005, when Carol Jenkins was making the case for creating the Women's Media Center (a non-partisan organization which aims to give women a more visible role in the media, and of which Ms Jenkins is now president), she was told by potential supporters, board members, people in the media and other women that "there is no such thing as sexism in the media."



Associated Press

Hillary Clinton waved to the crowd after her daughter, Chelsea Clinton, introduced her at the Democratic National Convention in Denver.

Three years later, a video montage entitled "Sexism Sells, But We're Not Buying It," released by the Women's Media Center and Media Matters a left-of-center media monitoring group, documented a torrent of sexism directed toward Hillary Clinton. The highlight reel included lengthy discussions about the senator's cleavage and comments about how men hear "take out the garbage" when she speaks.

The video was a reminder that, at least where Hillary Clinton was concerned, sexism remained very present in the media.

Then, on Aug. 29, 2008, Sarah Palin was picked to be John McCain's running mate.

The Palin pick raised questions. As the comments bandied about by pundits and columnists that Sen. Clinton was a "ball buster" (MSNBC Host Tucker Carlson), "haggard" (syndicated columnist Michelle Malkin on Fox News), and "big-bummed" (Kurt Anderson in New York Magazine) became a faint echo in the campaigning distance, would the second woman to run on a major-party ticket in the 2008 election cycle endure similar treatment?

Treatment of Gov. Palin in the media turned out to be heavily sexualized.



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Sarah Palin waved to the crowd as she prepared to address the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minn.

CNBC host Donny Deutsch commented numerous times on her "sex appeal." Liberal radio host Ed Schultz used the words "bimbo alert" and "empty pantsuit" to describe the vice-presidential pick. Conservative radio show host Rush Limbaugh referred to Gov. Palin's great legs while Gary Kamiya's Salon.com piece, "The Dominatrix" featured an illustration of Gov. Palin wearing a blue bustier and wielding a whip.

According to Ruth Mandel, a senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, the media

doesn't quite know what to do with the issue of women's leadership. "It's been an easy way out [for the media] to caricature, pigeonhole, and flatten women seeking positions of power rather than seeing them as multi-dimensional leaders," she says.

Even those who have been critical of Gov. Palin, such as Kathleen Parker, a syndicated columnist for the Washington Post Writers Group, concede that the media is harder on women.

"We want to talk about their hair and their clothes and we just apply a different standard, something we should try to check," says Ms. Parker, adding that after reviewing the "Sexism Sells, But We're Not Buying It" video, she was stunned at how pervasive the personal and sexist commentary was."

"The media should focus more on legitimate political commentary and we probably should leave women's legs out of it," says Ms. Parker.

Ms. Jenkins believes the 2008 election was "sexism's coming out party." She notes: "People now seem to intrinsically understand that sexism is an issue that has to be talked about. You see that it's now coming up when we talk about people in the new Obama administration. Sexism has really become a barometer."

What are the repercussions of this character-flattening and stereotyping in a 24-hour news cycle?

"Everything is image," says Ms. Mandel. "We don't meet our candidates at our front porches. We meet them through the lens of the media."

And at times, that lens has blurred and skewed the image of these two female candidates.

Martha Burk, author of *Your Money and Your Life: The High Stakes for Women Voters in '08 and Beyond* and the immediate past chair of the National Council of Women's Organizations, a bipartisan network of women's organizations, says this campaign, particularly the treatment of Sen. Clinton, has reminded us that publicly being anti-woman is not seen as that serious.

"We have a long way to go to adjusting our language and position. It's so deeply embedded in our culture," explains Ms. Burk.

Looking ahead, Ms. Mandel believes it's still uncertain that the media will start portraying female candidates as multi-dimensional. "We don't have a settled view or settled image of the American woman leader." Ms. Jenkins, however, despite acknowledging that she will probably have enough ammunition to make another "Sexism Sells, But We're Not Buying It" video for the next female presidential candidate, is optimistic about 2012.

"We have widened the concept of what women are about," says Ms. Jenkins.

"Hillary and Sarah were the first soldiers to go over the wall. Now no one could ever say that a women could never run."

The question is: Will they want to?

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