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Women see Clinton job as triumph, disappointment

By Andrea Hopkins

CINCINNATI (Reuters) - In what was billed as the Year of the Women in U.S. politics, the choice of Hillary Clinton as President-elect Barack Obama's secretary of state somehow seems both more and less than her supporters had hoped for.

"I wouldn't say I'm mollified, I'm just happy she's got something she'll be good at," said Barbara Hynd, 69, a retired research scientist and Clinton fan in Cincinnati. "I think she would have made a good president."



U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton speaks to the media after being announced by U.S. President-elect Barack Obama (L) as his choice for U.S. Secretary of State along with General Jim Jones (R) as his choice for National Security Advisor during a news conference in Chicago December 1, 2008. (REUTERS/Jeff Haynes)

Clinton's rise to one of the most powerful positions in her former rival's cabinet caps a year of dreams and disappointments for her often fervent supporters: Would the New York senator and former first lady be president? No. Would she be vice-president? Nope. Surely she'll be in his cabinet? Yes.

Is that good enough? Perhaps.

"I think it's great for Hillary, and we can all heave a sigh of relief that she's found a powerful perch," said Carol Jenkins, president of the Women's Media Center in New York.

"I'd love to see her ... bring on Mideast peace. If anyone can do it, it's Hillary," Jenkins added.

While 2008 will go down in U.S. history as the year the country's first black president was elected, it will also be remembered for the election in which a woman nearly became the Democratic nominee for president and Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin became the Republican party's first woman nominee for vice president.

The campaign was also marked by stereotypes of Clinton as the humorless harridan of the Democratic nominating contests and Palin as the know-nothing pretty face chosen to be Republican John McCain's running mate.

"There is no question this campaign exposed extreme gender bias from the media, from party leaders and from the voters," said Stacy Mason, executive director of WomenCount, a progressive women's organization.

SMALL GAINS

"What was heralded to be the year of the women really hasn't been the

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year of the women at all," said Mason.

The record number of women in Congress in the new session that opens in January still reflects small net gains in the November elections -- one in the U.S. Senate and three in the House of Representatives. As of now, women will number 17 in the 100-member Senate and 74 in the 435-member House. One Ohio race was so close it has not yet been decided.

"It's a really really dismal number ... the U.S. still ranks 83rd in terms of the number of women in elected office," said Mason.

That Clinton is the third woman to be the top U.S. diplomat -- after Madeleine Albright and Condoleezza Rice -- only adds to a sense that though women made great strides in 2008, they fell short of a breakthrough.

"Secretary of State has become the women's spot -- a safe expected place for women to be. In the ideal world, we'd see woman as Treasury secretary and throughout these ranks (of government)," Jenkins said.

Obama's decision to name Clinton to the high profile post is a nod to the need to mend fences with his formidable former rival, and an acknowledgment of the need for diversity in his administration.

"First and foremost I think he weighs how well he would work with a particular cabinet member and what this person has to offer substantively," said Ruth Mandel, a senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. But, she added, "political considerations" were no doubt part of his decision-making as well.

"It would not do well for a president in the 21st century to have a team that is 100 percent male," she noted. The first woman served in a presidential cabinet in 1933.

Mason is more direct.

"We'll be watching the Obama administration's appointments very carefully," she said. "It's all important, not just elected leaders, but also appointments below the secretary level where there is an opportunity for women to be represented in all kinds of numbers."

But Jenkins sensed some progress has already been made.

"In the end for Hillary, a lot of the wild sexist comments that she endured and triumphed over, even though she didn't win the presidential nomination, I think she did conquer many elements of sexism and came out ahead for herself and for women."

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