



U.S. POLITICS

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The Submissive Michele Bachmann

In a stunning video, the Tea Party titan says she follows the biblical rule that women should obey their husbands. But, Jill Lawrence asks, isn't that a problem for a presidential candidate?

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"The Lord says be submissive. Wives, you are to be submissive to your husbands." – Michele Bachmann, October 2006.

There's nothing unusual about a conservative evangelical woman quoting the biblical admonition that wives submit to their husbands. But it delivers quite a jolt when that woman is trying to become the leader of the free world.

Maybe Michele Bachmann would phrase things differently now, amid a bid for the Republican presidential nomination, than she did in a church setting during her 2006 House race. But YouTube is forever, so we have Bachmann on video saying those words—saying she submitted to her husband when he told her to get a post-doctoral degree in tax law, and agreed to run for Congress after he pushed her in that direction.

It's not unusual for male presidents to be plagued by suggestions that they are hen-pecked and their wives are butting in too much. Did Rosalynn Carter weigh in at Cabinet meetings? Did Nancy Reagan's astrologer dictate hubby's schedule? Did Hillary Clinton drag Bill to the left? But at least the men didn't have to worry about biblical instructions that might give foreign foes the wrong idea. In fact the Bible is completely clear on who's in charge: "The husband is the head of the wife ... Wives should submit to their husbands in everything."

For their part, husbands are supposed to submit to God. But that's been a manageable linguistic problem for male presidents. Usually they say they look to God and their faith for "guidance, enlightenment and clarity," says Ruth Mandel,

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director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers. “I’ve never heard anything as explicit as ‘God has told me to do this and I submitted,’” she added in an interview. Even George W. Bush, who told Bob Woodward that he appealed to “a higher Father” rather than his own father while mulling whether to invade Iraq, famously called himself “The Decider” and had no trouble projecting strength.

Back in October 2006, recounting her life journey to an audience at the Living Word Christian Center, Bachmann talked about “receiving Jesus” at 16, studying hard, meeting her future husband at college, and earning a law degree. “My husband said ‘Now you need to go and get a post-doctorate degree in tax law.’ Tax law! I hate taxes—why should I go and do something like that?” she told the audience. “But the Lord says be submissive. Wives, you are to be submissive to your husbands.”

Bachmann said she never had taken a tax course, “never had a desire for it,” but “I was going to be faithful to what I felt God was calling me to do through my husband.” Later, when the opportunity to run for Congress arose, “my husband said, ‘You need to do this,’ and I wasn’t so sure.” She became sure two days later, after praying and fasting with her husband.

“ Women can’t send signals to voters by cloaking themselves in cowboy swagger or machismo mythology. They’ve got to prove in other ways that they are tough and strong. ”



Republican presidential candidate U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-MN) and her husband Marcus Bachmann wave as they march in a Fourth of July parade July 4, 2011 in Clear Lake, Iowa., Steve Pope / Getty Images

When I saw Bachmann’s comments in a recent [Washington Post profile](#) of her marriage and tracked down the [fuller videos on YouTube](#), I had to admit: I wondered if her husband had directed her to run for president, and whether both of them should be standing at the microphone during debates. That wasn’t charitable, but nor was it atypical, according to John Green, a religion and politics expert who heads the Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron. He calls Bachmann’s language “very unstandard for national politics. Outside of an evangelical context, it’s very likely to raise questions about Michele Bachmann’s ideas and attitudes. Who’s in charge of her life? What are the appropriate decisions that individuals make as opposed to the decisions that couples make?”

The relationship of subordinate women to powerful men is, as Mandel notes, rooted in centuries of history. Certainly as compared to Saudi women who must have male guardians and aren't allowed to drive, American women are on a path to power. They are making inroads in legislatures and Congress, where the work is collaborative and consistent with stereotypes of women. They have made less progress in executive jobs—governorships and the presidency—that require a starker break from how women are traditionally viewed.

Women can't send signals to voters by cloaking themselves in cowboy swagger or machismo mythology. They've got to prove in other ways that they are tough and strong. Talking about submitting—even if it's just religious boilerplate—digs that hole deeper.

Clinton managed to convey such steeliness in her 2008 campaign that, as Hillary loyalist James Carville famously jeered, she could give Obama one of her cojones and then they'd both have two. Yet things could have gone differently for Clinton, in part due to her decision to stick with her husband after the Monica Lewinsky scandal. "The fact is that Hillary Clinton could not stand up to a cheating husband, so how in the world would she stand up to North Korea and some of our other enemies around the globe?" Republican pollster Kellyanne Conway said on MSNBC in 2005.

Conway stands by that thought even today. "When people think of women submitting to their husbands, it's usually they don't have access to the family checkbook and they're stuck picking up Cheerios from the floor—not 'you should get an advanced degree in tax law and run for Congress,'" she told me. That looks more like "loving encouragement," she says, and it's a lot different than what happened to Clinton. "I can't think of anything more submissive of a wife to do than stand and face public humiliation side by side with the man who has just admitted to cheating on her," Conway says. "It's making a mockery out of their marriage and her sacrifices."

She also raises the possibility that Bachmann may have been joking about that submitting thing. Hmm.

Democratic pollster Celinda Lake, Conway's co-author for a book on women and politics, calls Bachmann's remarks "code to Christian audiences" and "completely uncharted terrain" in a presidential campaign. She says Bachmann might be tempted to repeat similar things this year to solidify and energize evangelical support in the GOP primaries. Yet looking ahead to a general election in a country in which only three in 10 Americans interpret the Bible literally, that's not a strategy for broad appeal. "Independent suburban women are going to hear it anew in the context of her running for president and they are going to think, 'What are you talking about?'" Lake says.

Consultants often tell religious candidates they must learn to be "bilingual," Green told me. "They have to speak the general language of politics which potentially touches all voters, but at the same time be able to talk the special language of their religious community." The problem these days is that few forums are purely religious or beyond the reach of cellphone video. The pastor who introduced Bachmann at Living Word said the church could not, by law, endorse Bachmann in the election a few weeks away. But he drew knowing chuckles when he said he personally planned to vote for her. All this is available online because it was put there by a person who made clear he is not a Bachmann fan.

Bachmann is showing herself to be a capable politician and probably will find other ways to describe her marriage and faith for both religious and non-religious audiences. Case in point: the response I received when I asked the Bachmann campaign to comment on the Bible quotes, her marriage and the perception problems that confront women seeking the presidency. Her spokeswoman, Alice Stewart, said in an email: "Congresswoman Bachmann has been happily married

for 33 years. She and her husband, Marcus, have worked together as a team to raise their five children and welcome 23 foster children into their home."

The statement is fine as far as it goes, but it goes only as far as family life. What about career decisions, professional decisions, financial decisions? Are the Bachmanns equals on a team, or does the biblical instruction apply? Who would be making decisions in a Bachmann White House? And are these fair questions to ask, say, at a candidate debate? "Yes," Mandel says. "She made the statement. This is the quote. It might have been in a church but it was in public, outside the home. It's fair to ask her to clarify that as a candidate for a presidential nomination."

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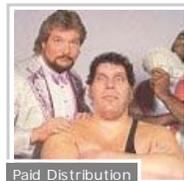
Jill Lawrence is an award-winning journalist who has covered every presidential election since 1988. Most recently, she was a senior correspondent and columnist for PoliticsDaily.com. Her other positions have included national political correspondent for USA Today and national political writer at The Associated Press.

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