



Perspectives

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on Women & Politics

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YOU CAN CALL A WOMAN ANYTHING!

I sit overlooking Capitol Hill. All is bustle, hurry, constant movement. To me, it is a metaphor for what is truly happening in the country right this minute which will resonate on Capitol Hill in January. People in this nation are all a bustle, in a hurry – constant movement – away from the Democratic Party’s original front-runner for President, Senator Hillary Clinton.

Remember the quote from a working-class white man who was supporting Hillary that I mentioned in Issue VIII: “You can call a woman anything”? You can call a woman competent, decisive, intelligent, honest; the list goes on. But that was not what the working-class white man was talking about. Rather he was talking about the “barefoot and pregnant” comment, among others – comments just as offensive to women as the “N-word” is to African Americans.

Is America just not ready for a woman president? I realize that for many Democrats the choice is quite clouded – do we want a woman or an African American? These are the options that the Democrats have established for 2008. And while Senator Clinton sprinted out in front, she seems to have given away the lead and the momentum to the African American male Senator from Illinois.

At present, it seems that the majority of Democrats have settled on an African American man rather than a woman. There are even whispers that if Senator Clinton fails to do admirably in Texas, she will bow out. I actually don’t think that race is a factor in this. I think the factor is gender.

When you take a historical view, it is clear that black men usually beat out women in most races. They simply succeeded before women did. We know that all individuals took a back seat to white men for many years in the venue of politics, as well as many other venues in the United States. But when advancements were made, usually a black man came before a woman of any color or creed.

Going back to basic voting rights – black men obtained the vote before women. Black men served on juries before women. After Reconstruction, black men were involved in politics at almost all levels before women were, and certainly obtained elective and appointive positions before women did. Even in the 21st Century, men of color outnumber women in most genres of politics.

What is wrong with America? Not only do we demure when given the option of a woman, the United States -- famous for “affirmative action” -- does not make the kind of effort to support women in politics as do other nations that we might consider our social or political inferior. For example, there are a number of nations which have welcomed and participated in programs to support women’s participation in politics and/or business:

- In Georgia (the nation), there has been a program dedicated to building women’s professional efficacy and political influence since 2003. This has been supplemented, in 2006, by a women’s candidate training program which focuses on campaign management, voter identification and outreach, message development, campaign financing and fund-raising.
- In Algeria, a series of core skill workshops in building party support, grassroots organizing, and communications techniques were afforded women from the country’s 48 provinces.
- Bolivia established a Women Candidate Training School in 2004, aimed at preparing women for candidacy and successful governance across the nation.
- Jordan began its Candidate Training for Parliamentary Elections in 2003, specifically targeting women in training workshops which assisted in generic campaign skills development, individual campaign plans and processes to further credibility for women candidates.

- Nepal instituted a multifaceted, non-partisan training program to increase political participation and effectiveness of women leaders including the components of women’s candidate training and women’s representative training. Included in the training was an analysis of local government structures, organizing campaigns, advancing within political parties and public speaking.
- Serbia’s training began about the same time; the Serbian government assisted in allowing implementation of a regular series of basic political skills seminars targeting women who were active in the various parties, but relatively new to politics in the sense of candidacy.

Need I go on? Morocco, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Rumania – each have provisions for training women in the political process.

Finland has recently followed other northern European nations in providing a quota for women on boards of directors of major corporations in the country, and penalizing the non-compliant with monetary fines. In Norway, 22% of boards of directors’ seats in the leading 200 corporations in Europe, as defined by Ergon Zenhder International, are held by women; in Sweden it is 20%, while in the U.S. only 13.6% of directors’ seats of Fortune 500 companies are held by women. Moreover, there is governmental legislation, policy, or at the very least “activity” which supports moving women into the boardrooms of major corporations in many European countries. Some, like Finland, have fines for non-compliance attached.

How incredibly deep does the distrust of women run in this country? Does it go back to Adam and Eve in the perception of many of America’s fundamental Christians? And how long will women as a gender continue to suffer as a result of the fact that a majority of the country’s population – some women included – somehow sense a need to defer to men.

As voters run away from Senator Clinton, I wonder if there will ever a woman elected president. Let’s face it: Hillary has more experience and more earned degrees than Senator Obama; whether you love her or hate her, most folks agree that she is incredibly bright. While both Senators are clearly as suited for leadership as many Presidents America has elected, Senator Clinton’s resume of earned degrees, experience and political acumen exceeds that of Senator Obama if only because of the breadth of her political involvement, begun during Watergate. If there were a time for a woman, this could be the time. In fact, only a month ago, things were looking like clear sailing for the first woman president in the United States.

It reminds me of the election of Mississippi’s first woman Bar President – in the 100th anniversary of The Mississippi Bar – Joy Phillips. While Joy may have been elected had she run against a man, the fact is that Joy ran against another woman, Collette Oldmixon. Either of these woman would have made a great bar president. The Mississippi Bar president who appointed the nominating committee that nominated the two women to run against each other held the opinion that the Mississippi Bar would never have a woman president unless two women ran against each other – just to break the ice. He was sure that after the first woman was elected as bar president, it would ever after occur without particular effort. Since that time, only one woman has been nominated; she ran against a man and was defeated.

Does that mean that a woman will only be elected when women are the only choice? I don’t know. The bar president who made it his duty to ensure that the Mississippi Bar had its first woman president may have been right: after the first time, subsequent election of women as president would ever after occur without particular effort. Only 4 elections have occurred in our bar after Joy’s election so it’s too soon to tell. But I am left to think, as support seems to flee from Senator Clinton, that we may not have a woman president until each major party nominates a woman in the same election year. And that may be a long time from now.

Remember what urban legend tells us: You can call a woman anything! Anything, apparently, except Commander-in-Chief.

If you would be interested in attending a seminar on “Applied Politics for Women”, please contact me at lydia@sig.msstate.edu.

