



Perspectives

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A WOMAN AS PRESIDENT

Hillary won Florida's democratic primary. Despite what you think about Hillary, the USA is as close as it has been in its 225+ year history to having a woman president. That fact caused me to consider my own relationship with "woman as president".

Do I love the idea of a woman as president? Yes, I do.

I am of that age that the first president I knew was Ike. Ike was a good President, I guess. He's not ever ranked very high on the list of "great presidents" that academicians post occasionally. On the other hand, what do they know? And, anyway, it hasn't even been 50 years since he was out of office, so it's probably too soon to tell. Kennedy, the first President I really remember substantively, was much more glamorous. I was living in Texas at the time and I can sure tell you that he was not popular in the north Texas oil country – but he was glamorous!

And then I had the big revelation! I was spending a week in July with my Aunt. I was spending this particular week with my Aunt because she let me sleep on her hid-a-bed in the living room and watch TV all night. This particular week was the 1964 Republican Convention in the Cow Palace in San Francisco was underway. Back then, things really *happened* at conventions. They weren't scripted, as they are today. They were fun! News commentators got arrested and escorted off the convention floor. Yes, they were on the floor, not in booths 500-feet removed from the delegates. Nobody really knew – precisely – who the running mate was going to be. In fact, nobody really knew – precisely – who the *candidate* was going to be.

Which was why it was so fascinating to watch – and at approximately 2 a.m. one morning – a terrific floor demonstration occurred supporting Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, the first woman to ever have her name placed in nomination for the presidency of the United States by a major party in America. I was just a kid, having just turned 13. I was watching *history*. It confirmed what Mom and Dad always told me: I could do anything I wanted to do. Here was this woman I hardly knew existed, but her name was being placed in nomination for consideration by the GOP as their candidate for their presidential nomination.

Is this what they mean by a tipping point? Probably not, but in my life it sure was! Now, 40 years later, there is a woman who is actually poised to obtain the nomination of her party.

Will Hillary obtain the nomination of the Democratic Party? Who knows?

Was Senator Smith poised to obtain the nomination of her party in 1964 in San Francisco? No. Willing, indeed, and personally poised, but not standing on the precipice of the nomination as many

pundits believe that Hillary is today. But Senator Smith was willing to step out, to cast her hat into the ring, and her leadership made a difference in my life!

In later years, I realized that there were many women who had come before her: Victoria Woodhull and Belva Lockwood ran as presidential candidates representing the Equal Rights Party in the 1870s and 1880s. Other lesser known women ran as presidential candidates for other lesser known parties.

Eight years after Senator Smith's name was placed in nomination, Shirley Chisholm was nominated for president at the Democratic Convention in 1972, as were Patsy Mink and Bella Abzug. It was not until 1988 – another 16 years – before a major party again nominated a woman presidential candidate – Patricia Schroeder. Geraldine Ferraro was nominated as Walter Mondale's running mate in 1984, the only woman ever nominated as a vice presidential candidate of a major party.

And now, in 2008, we might just elect a woman president. Do I think it's likely? Maybe not. I talk with lots of men and women who tell me that it's not that Hillary is a woman, it's just that she's Hillary. I'm not sure I buy that; on the other hand, I'm not sure that I don't.

But what I do buy into is that Hillary is a real candidate, and her candidacy proves that we are getting closer to the first woman President of the United States, even if it doesn't turn out to be in the 2008 election and if it doesn't happen to be Hillary. We in the U.S. like to think we're leading edge, but we are hardly leading edge when trusting a woman to run our nation.

Other democracies have trusted women: Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India; Benazir Bhutto, Prime Minister of Pakistan; Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel; and Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

Some tout Thatcher as the finest Prime Minister since Winston Spencer Churchill. These democracies have not turned out the worse for wear. Will Hillary be the nominee? Can Hillary win? These are questions that I can't answer.

I know that Hillary is taking us closer to the tipping point.

For me, it all began on a hot July night in 1964 in front of a black-and-white TV. Men and women were parading around in circles with straw boaters on that had "Margaret Chase Smith" printed on the hat-bands. They had placards on tall sticks that said "*Maggie for President*" thrusting them up and down in the air as the delegates pranced and danced around the floor. Balloons fell from the ceiling. As the band played a peppy tune – with childish naivety and wonder, I *realized* that we really could have a woman president. And it felt great!

Senator Smith's archives are located at her library in Skowhegan, Maine.

