

Network News

According to a February 17, 2003, *Time* magazine article written by Joe Klein, “Women are not squeamish about the use of force—pollsters suggest they’re more interested in the war on terrorism than in any other foreign policy issue in recent history—but they tend to have a different priority: protection of hearth and home against the next terrorist attack.” As Senator Joe Biden concluded in the article, “Soccer moms are security moms now.” Media coverage of the last presidential election largely attributed George W. Bush’s victory to this never before seen voting bloc. With a female frontrunner and future first “ladies” covered almost as much as their candidate husbands, women are very much a part of the 2008 presidential election. Not surprisingly, feminists are already watching election politics.

NOW’s Stop Sexist Campaign Coverage Campaign

In the span of a few weeks, fellow Democratic presidential candidates commented

on Hillary Clinton’s pastel jacket during a debate when asked to critique a fellow candidate. Talk show hosts insinuated that John Edwards’s \$600 haircut undermines his masculinity (read: respectability). In response, The National Organization of Women has initiated a Stop Sexist Campaign Coverage campaign.

According to NOW’s website, “One of their [the media’s] favorite pastimes is judging presidential candidates on superficial traits—like their hair or weight—rather than their positions on important issues. A popular feature of this brand of reporting is assessing how well politicians fit into outdated gender stereotypes.” The site documents instances of gender stereotyping including the following:

On NBC’s *The Chris Matthews Show* on April 28, 2007, Matthews asked this question about Clinton’s performance at a recent debate: “Did she have the right modulation? Was she calm and grown up? Or was there a little bit of stridency in the voice still? . . . [W]as she shrill? Was she strident? Or was she solid?” NOW sees Matthews’s criticisms as an attempt

to frame Clinton as “a nagging housewife, with a voice that makes manly men cringe.” Gendered digs at candidates and their spouses are *de rigueur*. In another episode, Matthews asked his panel of pundits, “Do you think Obama wishes he could dial Michelle back a notch?” The question reeks of sexist assumptions.

In an April 21, 2007, *New York Times* column, Maureen Dowd wrote of John Edwards, “Whether or not the country is ready to elect a woman president or a black president, it’s definitely not ready for a metrosexual in chief.” She added, “In presidential politics, it’s all but impossible to put the man in manicure. Be sensitive, but not soft. Effete is never effective.” In other columns, Dowd has implied that Barack Obama is insufficiently masculine, calling him “Obambi” and “a Dreamboy” and comparing him to “Scarlett O’Hara” and “a puppy.” In effect, Dowd affirms the notion that a good president needs to be a manly man, an interesting (and insidious) rhetorical move to make when the candidate in question’s biggest competition is a woman.

In an April 15, 2007, *Washington Post* article titled “Gore ’08: Does He Round Up or Down?” writer Sridhar Pappu declares, “Yes, we’ve certainly seen a lot of Al Gore lately. And there’s a lot of Al Gore to see. Calling Planet Girth!” In reference to Barack Obama, Pappu writes, “There are moments where one fears that if Obama were to lose any weight he’d be on the cover of *Us Weekly* with Lindsay Lohan.”

Visit NOW’s website to find additional examples of gender stereotyping and sexist coverage and to sign a petition telling the media to stop relying on outdated gender stereotypes. <<http://www.now.org/issues/media/070501petition.html>>

Reproductive Health Reality Check

Reproductive Health Reality Check is an online community and publication serving individuals and organizations committed to advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights. The organization maintains an election coverage page, covering candidates from multiple positions along the political spectrum. The page provides links to stories detailing candidates’ positions regarding reproductive health, including references to each candidate’s voting record. Visit <<http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/election-2008>> for more information.

Figure and Spot-On

During the 2004 presidential election, political blogs served as public forums for readers to hash out the issues. Instead of asking the question, “Will Americans elect a woman president?” feminist blogs critically assess the issues and invite readers to add their own perspectives to the conversation.

Figure: Demystifying the Feminist Mystique describes itself as “a feminist blog from both sides of the pond.” A January 2007 post compared Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama’s announcements that they were forming presidential exploratory committees. Besides posting links to the politicians’ online announcements, the post explains the function of an exploratory committee. The blog writers promise to cover the presidential election from a feminist perspective in the upcoming months. Visit <<http://feministfigure.blogspot.com>> for updates.

Spot-On, formerly known as “Politics