

THE GENDER-IDENTITY POLITICS OF SARAH PALIN IN THE 2008-2009 UNITED STATES PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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This brief essay considers an important dimension of symbolic politics deployed during the 2008-2009 presidential campaign in the United States. Specifically, it addresses the role of gender in the rapid ascension of Sarah Palin as the Republican Party's vice presidential candidate. I argue that she combined two very powerful and interrelated symbolic constructs that draped her in a form of simulacra—an image of reality—that resonated strongly in America's conservative heartland.

Post-election 2009, I was hoping that I had seen the last of Sarah Palin. No more word salad and fuzzy thinking, and no more national stage to flaunt it. I imagined her snugly sequestered in the distant land of Alaska busily repaying the state for improper costs charged to it for travel for her family. Perhaps she would be fretting over her husband Todd's latest contempt of court slap in the wrongful termination case of an Alaska state employee that dogged Palin during her run as the Vice Presidential candidate for the Republicans. Certainly the challenges of governing the biggest welfare state in the U.S. would keep her busy; then there are those aerial wolf hunts. Surely all that would take up any leisure time she had in between taking care of her ever expanding family and the art of state governance.

But much as with the movie, *Fatal Attraction*, she just keeps popping up and not in particularly welcome ways. First it was the Thanksgiving turkey incident, then she's forming a political action committee, and now has summarily quite her job as governor to apparently further her political career through activities outside of the structures of government¹—dreams of 2012 presidential campaign. It all bodes ill.

¹ Shortly after the Republican loss in the 2009 election, Palin was filmed at a turkey farm in Alaska with a bird being summarily dispatched and de-feathered behind her. She talked to the reporter about her usual issues—freedom and the American way—with seemingly little recognition or concern about what was happening behind her. Also post election, Palin formed a PAC as a fundraising mechanism for future political activities. Finally, she resigned as Governor of Alaska at the end of July 2009. Many interpret these final two events as pointing toward her interest in running for the presidency in 2012.

Since she will not go away, I thought it was a good time to consider why that might be. Why does anyone think that she is the future of the Republican Party? Holding aside issues of class and race for the moment, I think much boils down to some interesting gender-identity politics; certainly it is not based on anything substantive.

My argument starts with an excellent article in *Slate* by Tom Perrotta, which explored Sarah Palin as “sexy puritan” (26 September 2008). He uncovered a deep cultural theme that takes on a very disturbing guise in political context. His characterization is that of an enduring iconic image—advocates of often extreme right-wing positions packaged in a mainstream notion of beauty and behavior. For male consumers the response is pretty straight forward: look, do not touch; think, do not act. But what is really interesting is how women perceive, understand, and respond to this powerful image.

I have recently moved to southern Utah—a hotbed of this particular form of gendered-identity construction. John McCain’s choice of Sarah Palin as his vice presidential candidate was a big hit here. Curiosity got the better of me, and I began asking women what they knew about Palin’s political positions and their perceptions of her as a vice presidential candidate. Based on those responses and other observations, I would add one other important dimension to Perrotta’s otherwise fine analysis; namely that the sexy puritan also strives to ascend to the status of “superwoman” who can multitask anyone into the ground (typically in support of husband, family, God, country, etc). Here this amounts to women who juggle boodles of children, hold a job, do all kinds of activities for their church, community, schools, and anything else they can think of in their spare time (please note that church and community often conflate in interesting ways so they do a little double dipping, but that can be forgiven). Go to a Parents and Teachers Association² meeting and there’s enough energy in there to light a small city. And make no mistake that this superwoman complex is accompanied by a strong normative expectation of perfection and a profound sense of righteousness.

Locally, an archetype of this identity is embodied in a young woman named Jill Stevens—tall, blond, charismatic, great smile. Stevens’ story reads a little like a fairytale (part Disney, part Brothers Grimm) as told through her recent book, *It’s All Good* (2008). She was a student at Southern Utah University—a small, state-supported liberal arts institution—where she became Miss SUU while also enrolled in Army Reserve Officer Training Corp (ROTC). She winds up in Afghanistan as a field medic, survives, returns to Utah, becomes Miss Utah, and

² Parents and Teachers Associations are designed to create a dialogue between parents and the schools that their children attend.

then heads off to the Miss USA pageant (she does not win but is voted “America’s Choice” based on web polling). She also bakes and runs marathons. Hers is a story of challenges she has confronted and overcome. The book’s title, in some ways, says it all. The notion that we can overcome adversity through individual will power is heady stuff, and a key to understanding the allure of the sexy puritan as superwoman. The beauty queen soldier who invokes God, country, family, and modesty is almost too much for local folks to endure because it is so iconic. Perhaps it is about as pure a version of the sexy puritan-superwoman as comes along in the real world.

Sarah Palin represented herself as that superwoman—a mother with loads of kids with the most recent being physically challenged, holding down the Governor’s job, being ambitious and going for bigger game altogether with her candidacy for the vice presidency. And she is a big game hunter to boot, one who enjoys moose chili. Though she does not quite have the soldier chic of Stevens, she did have her moment in the sun as Miss Wasilla and came in third in the Miss Alaska beauty pageant. If we substitute big game hunting for soldiering, there is an arguably close match between Stevens and Palin as an archetype for the sexy puritan-superwoman. For Palin, throw in a little pluck and feistiness, a few folksy Americanisms—“dogonits” and “you betchas”—and the entire state of Utah did a collective swoon as the 2008 presidential campaign fired up in earnest.

When I talked to women of varying stripe about Palin (universally they loved her), virtually none could tell me why beyond some variant of her being plucky and down-to-earth (the seeming disconnect between these qualities and the qualities needed to be a national leader did not seem to bother them either, probably because the superwoman rises to all occasions). The value of being a sexy puritan is, thus, so deeply internalized that Utahns recognize it when they see it, but have trouble articulating just what that is when pressed.

With the election of President Obama we have after such a long drought, a smart, articulate, and thoughtful person at America’s helm. One may or may not agree with his decisions, but rational people should be able to see the logic in his approach and appreciate it, right? I wish I believed that, but symbolic politics is not about rationality, it is about emotion. Given the devastated economy that took former President Bush and crew eight years to create, Obama is faced with challenges where there will undoubtedly be missteps, and much Republican pushback—we are already seeing it with healthcare reform—as well as amnesia about who caused the problem in the first place. As such, I fear I will be seeing more of Sarah Palin and her doppelgangers.

Summary

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