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Zombie feminists of the RNC

How did Sarah Palin become a symbol of women's empowerment? And how did I, a die-hard feminist, end up terrified at the idea of a woman in the White House?

By Rebecca Traister

Sep. 11, 2008 | I have been dreaming about Sarah Palin. (Apparently, I'm [not alone](#).) I wish I could say that I'd been conjuring witty, politically sophisticated nightmares in which she leads troops into Vancouver or kindergartners in the recitation of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." But, alas, mine have been nonsensical, kiddie-style doozies in which she kidnaps my cats, or enjoys a meal with my girlfriends while I bang on the restaurant window. There's also a chilling one, in which a scary witch stands on a wind-swept hill and leers at me.

What troubles me most -- aside from the fact that there is suddenly a Republican candidate potent enough to so ensnare my psyche -- is my sense that these are dreams in which it matters very much that Palin is a woman.

I have been writing about feminism for more than five years; I have been covering the gender politics of the 2008 presidential election for more than two. And I am absolutely gobsmacked by the intensity of my feelings about Sarah Palin. I am stunned not only by the way in which her candidacy has changed the rules in the gender debate, or how it is twisting and garbling the fight for women's progress. But I'm also startled by how Palin herself is testing my own beliefs about how I react to women in power.

My feelings about Palin have everything to do with her gender -- a factor that I have always believed, as a matter of course, should neither amplify nor diminish impressions of a person's goodness or badness, smartness or dumbness, gravitas or inconsequence. Why are my rules changing?

I am still perfectly capable of picking out the sexism being leveled against the Alaska governor by the press, her detractors and her own party. Every time someone doubts Palin's ability to lead and mother simultaneously, or considers her physical appeal as a professional attribute, or calls her a "maverette," I bristle.

But that's the easy stuff. The clear-cut stuff. I'm far more torn about the more subtle, complicated ways in which Palin's gender has me tied in knots.

Perhaps it's because the ground has shifted so quickly under my feet, leaving me with only a slippery grasp of what the basic vocabulary of my beat -- feminism, women's rights -- even means anymore. Some days, it feels like I'm watching the civics filmstrip about how much progress women made on the presidential stage in 2008 burst into flames, acutely aware that in the back of the room, a substitute teacher is threading a new reel into the projector. It has the same message and some of the same signifiers -- Glass ceilings broken! Girl Power! -- but its meaning has been distorted. Suddenly it's Rudy Giuliani *and Rick Santorum* schooling us about pervasive sexism; Hillary Clinton's 18 million cracks have weakened not only the White House's glass ceiling, but the wall protecting *Roe v. Wade*;

the potential first female vice president in America's 200-year history describes her early career as "your average hockey mom" who "never really set out to be involved in public affairs"; and teen pregnancy is no longer an illustrative example for sex educators and contraception distributors but for those who seek to eliminate sex education and contraception.

In this strange new pro-woman tableau, feminism -- a word that is being used all over the country with regard to Palin's potential power -- means voting for someone who would limit reproductive control, access to healthcare and [funding](#) for places like Covenant House Alaska, an organization that helps unwed teen mothers. It means cheering someone who allowed women to be charged [for their rape kits](#) while she was mayor of Wasilla, who supports the teaching of creationism alongside evolution, who has inquired locally about the possibility of using her position to ban children's books from the public library, who does not support the teaching of sex education.

In this "Handmaid's Tale"-inflected universe, in which femininity is worshipped but females will be denied rights, CNBC pundit [Donny Deutsch](#) tells us that we're witnessing "a new creation ... of the feminist ideal," the feminism being so ideal because instead of being voiced by hairy old bats with unattractive ideas about intellect and economy and politics and power, it's now embodied by a woman who, according to Deutsch, does what Hillary Clinton did not: "put a skirt on." "I want her watching my kids," says Deutsch. "I want her laying next to me in bed."

Welcome to 2008, the year a tough, wonky woman won a primary (lots of them, actually), an inspiring black man secured his party's nomination for the presidency, and a television talking head felt free to opine that a woman is qualified for executive office because he wants to bed her and have her watch his kids! Stop the election; I want to get off.

What Palin so seductively represents, not only to Donny Deutsch but to the general populace, is a form of feminine power that is utterly digestible to those who have no intellectual or political use for actual women. It's like some dystopian future ... feminism without any feminists.

Palin's femininity is one that is recognizable to most women: She's the kind of broad who speaks on behalf of other broads but appears not to like them very much. The kind of woman who, as Jessica Grose at Jezebel has eloquently [noted](#), achieves her power by doing everything modern women believed they did not have to do: presenting herself as maternal and sexual, sucking up to men, evincing an absolute lack of native ambition, instead emphasizing her luck as the recipient of strong male support and approval. It works because these stances do not upset antiquated gender norms. So when the moment comes, when tolerance for and interest in female power have been forcibly expanded by Clinton, a woman more willing to throw elbows and defy gender expectations but who falls short of the goal, Palin is there, tapped as a supposedly perfect substitute by powerful men who appreciate her charms.

But while the Republicans would have us believe that Palin can simply stand in for Hillary Clinton, there is nothing interchangeable about these politicians. We began this history-making election with one kind of woman and have ended up being asked to accept her polar opposite. Clinton's brand of femininity is the kind that remains slightly unpalatable in America. It is based on competence, political confidence and an assumption of authority that upends comfortable roles for men and women. It's a kind of power that has nothing to do with the flirtatious or the girly, nothing to do with the traditionally feminine. It is authority that is threatening because it so closely and calmly resembles the kind of power that the rest of the guys on a presidential stage never question their right to wield.

The pro-woman rhetoric surrounding Sarah Palin's nomination is a grotesque bastardization of everything feminism has stood for, and in my mind, more than any of the intergenerational pro- or

anti-Hillary crap that people wrung their hands over during the primaries, Palin's candidacy and the faux-feminism in which it has been wrapped are the first development that I fear will actually imperil feminism. Because if adopted as a narrative by this nation and its women, it could not only subvert but erase the meaning of what real progress for women means, what real gender bias consists of, what real discrimination looks like.

Perhaps that's why my reaction to Palin is so bone-deep, and why she is shaking some of my convictions about how to approach gender. When, last Sunday, I picked up the New York Post, with its front-page headline "Ladykiller: Hillary to Check Hockey Mom" next to photos of Palin in porno librarian mode and Clinton with her teeth bared, I didn't roll my eyes in disgust at the imagined cage match. Instead, I envisioned it. And I enjoyed it. I was overcome by the desire to see Clinton take on Palin, not only checking her but fouling her, smushing her, absolutely crushing her. Get her, Hillary! Don't let her channel all the energy generated by you and your Democratic supporters into anti-woman, pro-God government! You are the only one who can stop her.

It's true that the last time I had this kind of visceral yearning for a politician to save the day was on the evening of Sept. 11, when the only person whose face I wanted to see on my television was Bill Clinton's. Perhaps when the Clintons took office in my 18th year, they became imprinted on my brain as my presidential parent-figures, my ur-protectors. But it's hard not to notice that if that's the case, it's Bill I want to nurture and soothe me, and Hillary I want to show up, guns blazing Ripley-style, to surprise the mother alien just as she is about to feast on independent voters, protectively shouting, "Get away from them, you bitch!"

There I go again with the hyper-feminized anxieties. I think it's mostly that I want Hillary Clinton -- the imperfect history maker whose major selling points for "First Woman..." status, in retrospect, included the fact that she was not a Republican, not pro-life, did not believe in teaching creationism alongside evolution, had never inquired about the feasibility of banning books, understood the American economy, supported universal healthcare and did not kill wolves from planes -- to make Sarah Palin go away and stop threatening to make history I don't want to see made.

It is infuriating that Clinton, her supporters and, yes, also those Obama supporters who voiced their displeasure at the sexist treatment Clinton sometimes received, and also female voters, and also females full stop, are being implicated in feminism's bastardization.

But if we inadvertently paved the way for this, then the Democratic Party mixed the concrete, painted lanes on the road, put up streetlights and called it an interstate. The role of the left in this travesty is almost too painful to contemplate just yet.

For while it may chafe to hear Rudy Giuliani and John McCain hold forth on the injustice of gender bias, what really burns is that we never heard a peep or squawk or gurgle of this nature from anyone in the Democratic Party during the entire 100 years Hillary Clinton was running for president, while she was being talked about as a pantsuited, wrinkly old crone and a harpy ex-wife and a sexless fat-thighed monster and an emasculating nag out for Tucker Carlson's balls. Only after she was good and gone did Howard Dean come out of his cave to squeak about the amount of sexist media bias Clinton faced. That may not be pretty to recall, especially in light of the Grand Old Party's Grand Old Celebration of Estrogen. But it's true. And it's also true that if there hadn't been so much stone-cold silence, so much shoulder-shrugging "What, me sexist?" inertia from the left, if there had been a little more respect (there was plenty of attention, of the derisive and annoyed sort) paid to the unsubtle clues being transmitted by 18 million voters that maybe they were interested in this whole woman-in-the-White-House thing, then the right would not have had the fuel to power this particular weapon.

Which leads us to my greatest nightmare: that because my own party has not cared enough, or was too scared, to lay its rightful claim to the language of women's rights, that Sarah Palin will reach historic heights of power, under the most egregious of auspices, by plying feminine wiles, and conforming to every outdated notion of what it means to be a woman. That she will hit her marks by clambering over the backs, the bodies, the rights of the women on whose behalf she claims to be working, and that she will do it all under the banner of feminism. How can anybody sleep?

-- By Rebecca Traister

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