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Mad Dog Palin

The scariest thing about John McCain's running mate isn't how unqualified she is - it's what her candidacy says about America

MATT TAIBBI

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I'm standing outside the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul, Minnesota. Sarah Palin has just finished her speech to the Republican National Convention, accepting the party's nomination for vice president. If I hadn't quit my two-packs-a-day habit earlier this year, I'd be chain-smoking now. So the only thing left is to stand mute against the fit-for-a-cheap-dog-kennel crowd-control fencing you see everywhere at these idiotic conventions and gnaw on weird new feelings of shock and anarchist rage as one would a rawhide chew toy.

All around me, a million cops in their absurd post-9/11 space-combat get-ups stand guard as assholes in papier-mâché puppet heads scramble around for one last moment of network face time before the coverage goes dark. Four-chinned delegates from places like Arkansas and Georgia are pouring joyously out the gates in search of bars where they can load up on Zombies and Scorpion Bowls and other "wild" drinks and extramaritally grope their turkey-necked female companions in bathroom stalls as part of the "unbelievable time" they will inevitably report to their pals back home. Only 21st-century Americans can pass through a metal detector six times in an hour and still think they're at a party.

The defining moment for me came shortly after Palin and her family stepped down from the stage to uproarious applause, looking happy enough to throw a whole library full of books into a sewer. In the crush to exit the stadium, a middle-aged woman wearing a cowboy hat, a red-white-and-blue shirt and an obvious eye job gushed to a male colleague — they were both wearing badges identifying them as members of the Colorado delegation — at the Xcel gates.

"She totally reminds me of my cousin!" the delegate screeched. "She's a real woman! The real thing!"

I stared at her open-mouthed. In that moment, the rank cynicism of the whole sorry deal was laid bare. Here's the

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thing about Americans. You can send their kids off by the thousands to get their balls blown off in foreign lands for no reason at all, saddle them with billions in debt year after congressional year while they spend their winters cheerfully watching game shows and football, pull the rug out from under their mortgages, and leave them living off their credit cards and their Wal-Mart salaries while you move their jobs to China and Bangalore.

And none of it matters, so long as you remember a few months before Election Day to offer them a two-bit caricature culled from some cutting-room-floor episode of Roseanne as part of your presidential ticket. And if she's a good enough likeness of a loudmouthed Middle American archetype, as Sarah Palin is, John Q. Public will drop his giant-size bag of Doritos in gratitude, wipe the Sizzlin' Picante dust from his lips and rush to the booth to vote for her. Not because it makes sense, or because it has a chance of improving his life or anyone else's, but simply because it appeals to the low-humming narcissism that substitutes for his personality, because the image on TV reminds him of the mean, brainless slob he sees in the mirror every morning.

Sarah Palin is a symbol of everything that is wrong with the modern United States. As a representative of our political system, she's a new low in reptilian villainy, the ultimate cynical masterwork of puppeteers like Karl Rove. But more than that, she is a horrifying symbol of how little we ask for in return for the total surrender of our political power. Not only is Sarah Palin a fraud, she's the tawdriest, most half-assed fraud imaginable, 20 floors below the lowest common denominator, a character too dumb even for daytime TV — and this country is going to eat her up, cheering her every step of the way. All because most Americans no longer have the energy to do anything but lie back and allow ourselves to be jacked off by the calculating thieves who run this grasping consumer paradise we call a nation.

The Palin speech was a political masterpiece, one of the most ingenious pieces of electoral theater this country has ever seen. Never before has a single televised image turned a party's fortunes around faster.

Until the Alaska governor actually ascended to the podium that night, I was convinced that John McCain had made one of the all-time campaign-season blunders, that he had acted impulsively and out of utter desperation in choosing a cross-eyed political neophyte just two years removed from running a town smaller than the bleacher section at Fenway Park. It even crossed my mind that there was an element of weirdly self-destructive pique in McCain's decision to cave in to his party's right-wing base in this fashion, that perhaps he was responding to being ordered by party elders away from a tepid, ideologically promiscuous hack like Joe Lieberman — reportedly his real preference — by picking the most obviously unqualified, doomed-to-fail joke of a Bible-thumping buffoon. As in: You want me to rally the base? Fine, I'll rally the base. Here, I'll choose this rifle-toting, serially pregnant moose killer who thinks God lobbies for oil pipelines. Happy now?

But watching Palin's speech, I had no doubt that I was witnessing a historic, iconic performance. The candidate sauntered to the lectern with the assurance of a sleepwalker — and immediately launched into a symphony of snorting and sneering remarks, taking time out in between the superior invective to present herself as just a humble gal with a beefcake husband and a brood of healthy, combat-ready spawn who just happened to be the innocent targets of a communist and probably also homosexual media conspiracy. She appeared to be completely without shame and utterly full of shit, awing a room full of hardened reporters with her sickly-sweet line about the high-school-flame-turned-hubby who, "five children later," is "still my guy." It was like watching Gidget address the Reichstag.

Within minutes, Palin had given TV audiences a character infinitely recognizable to virtually every American: the small-town girl with just enough looks and a defiantly incurious mind who thinks the PTA minutes are Holy Writ, and to whom injustice means the woman next door owning a slightly nicer set of drapes or flatware. Or the governorship, as it were.

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Right-wingers of the Bush-Rove ilk have had a tough time finding a human face to put on their failed, inhuman, mean-as-hell policies. But it was hard not to recognize the genius of wedding that faltering brand of institutionalized greed to the image of the suburban-American supermom. It's the perfect cover, for there is almost nothing in the world meaner than this species of provincial tyrant.

Palin herself burned this political symbiosis into the pages of history with her seminal crack about the "difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull: lipstick," blurring once and for all the lines between meanness on the grand political scale as understood by the Roves and Bushes of the world, and meanness of the small-town variety as understood by pretty much anyone who has ever sat around in his ranch-house den dreaming of a fourth plasma-screen TV or an extra set of KC HiLites for his truck, while some ghetto family a few miles away shares a husk of government cheese.

In her speech, Palin presented herself as a raging baby-making furnace of middle-class ambition next to whom the yuppies of the Obama set — who never want anything all that badly except maybe a few afternoons with someone else's wife, or a few kind words in *The New York Times Book Review* — seem like weak, self-doubting celibates, the kind of people who certainly cannot be trusted to believe in the right God or to defend a nation. We're used to seeing such blatant cultural caricaturing in our politicians. But Sarah Palin is something new. She's all caricature. As the candidate of a party whose positions on individual issues are poll losers almost across the board, her shtick is not even designed to sell a line of policies. It's just designed to sell her. The thing was as much as admitted in the on-air gaffe by former Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan, who was inadvertently caught saying on MSNBC that Palin wasn't the most qualified candidate, that the party "went for this, excuse me, political bullshit about narratives."

The great insight of the Palin VP choice is that huge chunks of American voters no longer even demand that their candidates actually have policy positions; they simply consume them as media entertainment, rooting for or against them according to the reflexive prejudices of their demographic, as they would for reality-show contestants or sitcom characters. Hicks root for hicks, moms for moms, born-again for born-again. Sure, there was politics in the Palin speech, but it was all either silly lies or merely incidental fluffery buttressing the theatrical performance. A classic example of what was at work here came when Palin proudly introduced her Down-syndrome baby, Trig, then stared into the camera and somberly promised parents of special-needs kids that they would "have a friend and advocate in the White House." This was about a half-hour before she raised her hands in triumph with McCain, a man who voted against increasing funding for special-needs education.

Palin's charge that "government is too big" and that Obama "wants to grow it" was similarly preposterous. Not only did her party just preside over the largest government expansion since LBJ, but Palin herself has been a typical Bush-era Republican, borrowing and spending beyond her means. Her great legacy as mayor of Wasilla was the construction of a \$15 million hockey arena in a city with an annual budget of \$20 million; Palin OK'd a bond issue for the project before the land had been secured, leading to a protracted legal mess that ultimately forced taxpayers to pay more than six times the original market price for property the city ended up having to seize from a private citizen using eminent domain. Better yet, Palin ended up paying for the fucking thing with a 25 percent increase in the city sales tax. But in her speech, of course, Palin presented herself as the enemy of tax increases, righteously bemoaning that "taxes are too high" and Obama "wants to raise them."

Palin hasn't been too worried about federal taxes as governor of a state that ranks number one in the nation in federal spending per resident (\$13,950), even as it sits just 18th in federal taxes paid per resident (\$5,434). That means all us taxpaying non-Alaskans spend \$8,500 a year on each and every resident of Palin's paradise of rugged self-sufficiency. Not that this sworn enemy of taxes doesn't collect from her own: Alaska currently collects the most taxes per resident of any state in the nation.

The rest of Palin's speech was the same dog-whistle crap Republicans have been railing about for decades. Palin's crack about a mayor being "like a community organizer, except that you have actual responsibilities" testified to the Republicans' apparent belief that they can win elections till the end of time running against the Sixties. (They're probably right.) The incessant grousing about the media was likewise par for the course, red meat for those tens of millions of patriotic flag-waving Americans whose first instinct when things get rough is to whine like bitches and blame other people — reporters, the French, those ungrateful blacks soaking up tax money eating big prison meals, whomever — for their failures.

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Add to this the usual lies about Democrats wanting to "forfeit" to our enemies abroad and coddle terrorists, and you had a very run-of-the-mill, almost boring Republican speech from a substance standpoint. What made it exceptional was its utter hypocrisy, its total disregard for reality, its absolute unrelation to the facts of our current political situation. After eight years of unprecedented corruption, incompetence, waste and greed, the party of Karl Rove understood that 50 million Americans would not demand solutions to any of these problems so long as they were given a new, new thing to beat their meat over.

Sarah Palin is that new, new thing, and in the end it won't matter that she's got an unmarried teenage kid with a bun in the oven. Of course, if the daughter of a black candidate like Barack Obama showed up at his convention with a five-month bump and some sideways-cap-wearing, junior-grade Curtis Jackson holding her hand, the defenders of Traditional Morality would be up in arms. But the thing about being in the reality-making business is that you don't need to worry much about vetting; there are no facts in your candidate's bio that cannot be ignored or overcome.



One of the most amusing things about the Palin nomination has been the reaction of horrified progressives. The Internet has been buzzing at full volume as would-be defenders of sanity and reason pore over the governor's record in search of the Damning Facts. My own telephone began ringing off the hook with calls from ex-Alaskans and friends of Alaskans determined to help get the "truth" about Sarah Palin into the major media. Pretty much anyone with an Internet connection knows by now that Palin was originally for the "Bridge to Nowhere" before she opposed it (she actually endorsed the plan in her 2006 gubernatorial campaign), that even after the project was defeated she kept the money, that she didn't actually sell the Alaska governor's state luxury jet on eBay but instead sold it at a \$600,000 loss to a campaign contributor (who is reportedly now seeking \$50,000 in taxpayer money to pay maintenance costs).

Then there are the salacious tales of Palin's swinging-meat-cleaver management style, many of which seem to have a common thread: In addition to being ensconced in a messy ethics investigation over her firing of the chief of the Alaska state troopers (dismissed after refusing to sack her sister's ex-husband), Palin also fired a key campaign aide who had an affair with a friend's wife. More ominously, as mayor of Wasilla, Palin tried to fire the town librarian, Mary Ellen Emmons, who had resisted pressure to censor books Palin found objectionable.

Then there's the God stuff: Palin belongs to a church whose pastor, Ed Kalnins, believes that all criticisms of George Bush "come from hell," and wondered aloud if people who voted for John Kerry could be saved. Kalnins, looming as the answer to Obama's Jeremiah Wright, claims that Alaska is going to be a "refuge state" for Christians in the last days, last days which he sometimes speaks of in the present tense. Palin herself has been captured on video mouthing the inevitable born-again idiocies, such as the idea that a recent oil-pipeline deal was "God's will." She also described the Iraq War as a "task that is from God" and part of a heavenly "plan." She supports teaching creationism and "abstinence only" in public schools, opposes abortion even for victims of rape, has denied the science behind global warming and attends a church that seeks to convert Jews and cure homosexuals.

All of which tells you about what you'd expect from a raise-the-base choice like Palin: She's a puffed-up dimwit with primitive religious beliefs who had to be educated as to the fact that the Constitution did not exactly envision government executives firing librarians. Judging from the importance progressive critics seem to attach to these revelations, you'd think that these were actually negatives in modern American politics. But Americans like politicians who hate books and see the face of Jesus in every tree stump. They like them stupid and mean and ignorant of the rules. Which is why Palin has only seemed to grow in popularity as more and more of these revelations have come out.

The same goes for the most damning aspect of her biography, her total lack of big-game experience. As governor of Alaska, Palin presides over a state whose entire population is barely the size of Memphis. This kind of thing might matter in a country that actually worried about whether its leader was prepared for his job — but not in America. In America, it takes about two weeks in the limelight for the whole country to think you've been around for years. To a certain extent, this is why Obama is getting a pass on the same issue. He's been on TV every day for two years, and

according to the standards of our instant-ramen culture, that's a lifetime of hands-on experience.

It is worth noting that the same criticisms of Palin also hold true for two other candidates in this race, John McCain and Barack Obama. As politicians, both men are more narrative than substance, with McCain rising to prominence on the back of his bio as a suffering war hero and Obama mostly playing the part of the long-lost, future-embracing liberal dreamboat not seen on the national stage since Bobby Kennedy died. If your stomach turns to read how Palin's Kawasaki 704 glasses are flying off the shelves in Middle America, you have to accept that Middle America probably feels the same way when it hears that Donatella Versace dedicated her collection to Obama during Milan Fashion Week. Or sees the throwing-panties-onstage-"I love you, Obama!" ritual at the Democratic nominee's town-hall appearances.

So, sure, Barack Obama might be every bit as much a slick piece of imageering as Sarah Palin. The difference is in what the image represents. The Obama image represents tolerance, intelligence, education, patience with the notion of compromise and negotiation, and a willingness to stare ugly facts right in the face, all qualities we're actually going to need in government if we're going to get out of this huge mess we're in.

Here's what Sarah Palin represents: being a fat fucking pig who pins "Country First" buttons on his man titties and chants "U-S-A! U-S-A!" at the top of his lungs while his kids live off credit cards and Saudis buy up all the mortgages in Kansas.

The truly disgusting thing about Sarah Palin isn't that she's totally unqualified, or a religious zealot, or married to a secessionist, or unable to educate her own daughter about sex, or a fake conservative who raised taxes and horked up earmark millions every chance she got. No, the most disgusting thing about her is what she says about us: that you can ram us in the ass for eight solid years, and we'll not only thank you for your trouble, we'll sign you up for eight more years, if only you promise to stroke us in the right spot for a few hours around election time.

Democracy doesn't require a whole lot of work of its citizens, but it requires some: It requires taking a good look outside once in a while, and considering the bad news and what it might mean, and making the occasional tough choice, and soberly taking stock of what your real interests are.

This is a very different thing from shopping, which involves passively letting sitcoms melt your brain all day long and then jumping straight into the TV screen to buy a Southern Style Chicken Sandwich because the slob singing "I'm Lovin' It!" during the commercial break looks just like you. The joy of being a consumer is that it doesn't require thought, responsibility, self-awareness or shame: All you have to do is obey the first urge that gurgles up from your stomach. And then obey the next. And the next. And the next.

And when it comes time to vote, all you have to do is put your Country First — just like that lady on TV who reminds you of your cousin. U-S-A, baby. U-S-A! U-S-A!

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