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Palin: wrong woman, wrong message



Sarah Palin shares nothing but a chromosome with Hillary Clinton. She is Phyllis Schlafly, only younger.

By Gloria Steinem

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Here's the good news: Women have become so politically powerful that even the anti-feminist right wing -- the folks with a headlock on the Republican Party -- are trying to appease the gender gap with a first-ever female vice president. We owe this to women -- and to many men too -- who have picketed, gone on hunger strikes or confronted violence at the polls so women can vote. We owe it to Shirley Chisholm, who first took the "white-male-only" sign off the White House, and to Hillary Rodham Clinton, who hung in there through ridicule and misogyny to win 18 million votes.

But here is even better news: It won't work. This isn't the first time a boss has picked an unqualified woman just because she agrees with him and opposes everything most other women want and need. Feminism has never been about getting a job for one woman. It's about making life more fair for women everywhere. It's not about a piece of the existing pie; there are too many of us for that. It's about baking a new pie.

Selecting Sarah Palin, who was touted all summer by Rush Limbaugh, is no way to attract most women, including die-hard Clinton supporters. Palin shares nothing but a chromosome with Clinton. Her down-home, divisive and deceptive speech did nothing to cosmeticize a Republican convention that has more than twice as many male delegates as female, a presidential candidate who is owned and operated by the right wing and a platform that opposes pretty much everything Clinton's candidacy stood for -- and that Barack Obama's still does. To vote in protest for McCain/Palin would be like saying, "Somebody stole my shoes, so I'll amputate my legs."

This is not to beat up on Palin. I defend her right to be wrong, even on issues that

matter most to me. I regret that people say she can't do the job because she has children in need of care, especially if they wouldn't say the same about a father. I get no pleasure from imagining her in the spotlight on national and foreign policy issues about which she has zero background, with one month to learn to compete with Sen. Joe Biden's 37 years' experience.

Palin has been honest about what she doesn't know. When asked last month about the vice presidency, she said, "I still can't answer that question until someone answers for me: What is it exactly that the VP does every day?" When asked about Iraq, she said, "I haven't really focused much on the war in Iraq."

She was elected governor largely because the incumbent was unpopular, and she's won over Alaskans mostly by using unprecedented oil wealth to give a \$1,200 rebate to every resident. Now she is being praised by McCain's campaign as a tax cutter, despite the fact that Alaska has no state income or sales tax. Perhaps McCain has opposed affirmative action for so long that he doesn't know it's about inviting more people to meet standards, not lowering them. Or perhaps McCain is following the Bush administration habit, as in the Justice Department, of putting a job candidate's views on "God, guns and gays" ahead of competence. The difference is that McCain is filling a job one 72-year-old heartbeat away from the presidency.

So let's be clear: The culprit is John McCain. He may have chosen Palin out of change-envy, or a belief that women can't tell the difference between form and content, but the main motive was to please right-wing ideologues; the same ones who nixed anyone who is now or ever has been a supporter of reproductive freedom. If that were not the case, McCain could have chosen a woman who knows what a vice president does and who has thought about Iraq; someone like Texas Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison or Sen. Olympia Snowe of Maine. McCain could have taken a baby step away from right-wing patriarchs who determine his actions, right down to opposing the Violence Against Women Act.

Palin's value to those patriarchs is clear: She opposes just about every issue that women support by a majority or plurality. She believes that creationism should be taught in public schools but disbelieves global warming; she opposes gun control but supports government control of women's wombs; she opposes stem cell research but approves "abstinence-only" programs, which increase unwanted births, sexually transmitted diseases and abortions; she tried to use taxpayers' millions for a state program to shoot wolves from the air but didn't spend enough money to fix a state school system with the lowest high-school graduation rate in the nation; she runs with a candidate who opposes the Fair Pay Act but supports \$500 million in subsidies for a natural gas pipeline across Alaska; she supports drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve, though even McCain has opted for the lesser evil of offshore drilling. She is Phyllis Schlafly, only younger.

I don't doubt her sincerity. As a lifetime member of the National Rifle Assn., she doesn't just support killing animals from helicopters, she does it herself. She doesn't just talk about increasing the use of fossil fuels but puts a coal-burning power plant in her own small town. She doesn't just echo McCain's pledge to

criminalize abortion by overturning Roe vs. Wade, she says that if one of her daughters were impregnated by rape or incest, she should bear the child. She not only opposes reproductive freedom as a human right but implies that it dictates abortion, without saying that it also protects the right to have a child.

So far, the major new McCain supporter that Palin has attracted is James Dobson of Focus on the Family. Of course, for Dobson, "women are merely waiting for their husbands to assume leadership," so he may be voting for Palin's husband.

Being a hope-a-holic, however, I can see two long-term bipartisan gains from this contest.

Republicans may learn they can't appeal to right-wing patriachs and most women at the same time. A loss in November could cause the centrist majority of Republicans to take back their party, which was the first to support the Equal Rights Amendment and should be the last to want to invite government into the wombs of women.

And American women, who suffer more because of having two full-time jobs than from any other single injustice, finally have support on a national stage from male leaders who know that women can't be equal outside the home until men are equal in it. Barack Obama and Joe Biden are campaigning on their belief that men should be, can be and want to be at home for their children.

This could be huge.

Gloria Steinem is an author, feminist organizer and co-founder of the Women's Media Center. She supported Hillary Clinton and is now supporting Barack Obama.

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