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## Where Have All the Good Girls Gone?

Posted September 5, 2007 | 06:22 PM (EST)

Women have reached another milestone. For the first time, thanks to Hillary Clinton's neckline in a recent C-Span interview, the word "cleavage" has come up in discussion of a presidential candidate.

The great debate about Hillary Clinton's décolletage in her C-Span interview is about more than a candidate's fashion sense. It's about more than how the media covers a female candidate. It's another tricky turn in a confusing passage in how we view femininity.

I recall President Reagan stripped to the waist clearing brush -- becoming a role model to a new generation of presidential weed cutters. I recall President Clinton - pre-South Beach Diet - on a jog with skimpy short gym shorts covering somewhat ample thighs.

I recall no dissection of this exposure of Presidential skin.

Barack Obama's problem - Is he black enough? -- is one-dimensional compared to Clinton's. Depending on the audience, he can sound like a Harvard-trained lawyer or a Baptist preacher. But which way does Hillary go?

By flashing the heavy-breathing C-Span audience, what signal was she sending? Was she emphasizing her femininity? Or by doing so, was she somehow violating it -- at least in conventional terms?

The decision and the ensuing debate are fueled by a fundamental question: What exactly is femininity? Does the term even have meaning in an age of crumbling glass ceilings and female bull riders? The debate is hardly new. It's just the first time it has played out in a presidential race.

Some will argue -- and persuasively -- that femininity is actually about oppression. It neatly defines what nice girls can do, and what they cannot.

Chris Everett, pigtails and flirty dresses; versus Martina Navratilova, chiseled and kinetic: name the feminine role model? Hint -- who got the big endorsement dollars?

There is also an argument - also persuasive - that when you throw off the old oppressive aspects of the word femininity, you have to be prepared to accept what takes its place: former Mouseketeer Britney Spears flashing the paparazzi with anatomical precision; Paris Hilton extolling the benefits of installing an in-home stripper-pole. Brutal "girl fights" on YouTube blur the line between assertiveness and aggression. A surge in female binge drinking proves the girls can get just as fall-down drunk as the boys.

Even woman and careers is not as clear cut as we thought in the days when a new generation stormed corporate America. But growing numbers of women -- many who rode the hard-won victories of the first generation of female pioneers -- are packing up their MBAs, leaving their well-appointed offices and going home to have and raise children. Again, who is the feminine role model -- those who stay and make the climb, or those returning to more traditional confines of home and PTA?

Hillary Clinton finds herself in the middle of this storm-tossed sea of expected female behavior.

There are few roles more precisely written than First Lady - the term, alone, speaks volumes. From Jackie Kennedy - speaking in her best breathy little girl voice about redecorating the West Wing to Laura Bush, who always seems to be walking several paces behind her husband, Americans have certain expectations about the woman of the White House.

Hillary Clinton is a difficult fit. From the beginning, she made few concessions to so called traditional feminine expectations -- from promising she would not be a first lady who stayed home and baked cookies to playing the political game like a man.

Now those assumptions carry over to the woman who would not be humanizing the place-as so many First Ladies have done in the past -- but actually running it. Many will expect Hillary Clinton to end the war, kill Bin Laden, save Social Security, balance the budget -- and do the holiday baking. If the man who has the job now can bike, pump iron and clear brush while he invades a country, she should be able to whip up a plate of tollhouse cookies.

Polling tells us that women won't vote for a woman just because she's a woman. I doubt that many felt that John Kennedy's election would improve the lives of Irish Catholics. I don't think the Mormons believe that Mitt Romney will be a boon to church recruitment. But the first woman is uncharted territory. Alone in the voting booth with the chance to help make history -- how will women respond?

If they are going to vote their gender, Mrs. Clinton has some work to do.

With a powerful place in the Senate, plenty of money and ample time left in the campaign, she can prove herself on the security and fiscal issues. While it will take a sense of balance, she can also prove herself on the women's issues -- staking out positions on child care, reproductive rights, equal pay and others on the litmus list.

But to prove she is not, as one critic called her, a "patriarch in sheep's clothing," she will have to prove herself on the femininity issue.

First, however, we are going to have to decide exactly what that means. Until then, a little cleavage probably didn't hurt.