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Ladies Choice - What does America Want?

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Come January, one of two women is going to be keeping house with the leader of the free world.

The question: what kind of first lady do Americans want? In recent history, the answer came down to style and likeability. How else can Laura Bush's approval ratings remain high in the wreckage of her husband's presidency?

But the rules have changed for the first lady, and the stakes have gone up.

Hillary Clinton, a new generation of working women and the Web have injected gender - and some charge sexism - into politics in ways that push us into unexplored territory. The female half of the ticket - and that is what it really is this time - is going to weigh on decisions like never before.

The two women offer a clear contrast.

It says something interesting about America when an African American daughter of a municipal maintenance worker has to turn to the cover of US magazine and on the View to counter the impression that she is elitist.

Elitist or not, she is a force - and a target. The attack-bloggers are poised over their keyboards like Jeopardy contestants over their buzzers, waiting for a repeat of any statement that says she is less than patriotic, less than a helpmate, and - let's be real - less than enraptured by white America.

The Web-enabled ability to create a crap cocktail out of simple ingredients - think turning a Viet Nam medal winner into a coward - is fact. And proven, I should add, to be effective with the "low information voter" - those who might make a political decision based on a cover of US Magazine.

Not that there is anything wrong with foregoing positions and records and deciding whether or not you might like them as a neighbor. It's how the game is played in an era of media saturation.

In these formative hours of the national campaign, it's all about first impressions.

Reference the sexy-funny-and quite possibly spontaneous fist bump heard 'round the world. And compare it to John McCain's Ted Bundy smile and the sickly green background in his answering speech.

Will she be a factor? That single moment says she already is.

Will Cindy McCain? That depends on what they decide to do with her.

For now, she is Pat Nixon, serenely standing by her man, sometimes seeming to be staring off into the distance, sometimes looking like she would rather give a kidney than an interview, usually speaking only when there is a reason. She was the one tapped to answer Michelle Obama's assertion that this was the first time in her adult life that she was proud of her country. Michelle Obama said she was proud of her country for the first time in her adult life because (media ignored this part) Americans were hungry for change. Cindy McCain just said she was proud.

Voters are going to know Cindy McCain in installments; her introduction to America has a tentative feel.

She is a pilot who reportedly bought a plane and learned to fly to get over her fear of flying. She suffered a stroke and learned to walk again on her own. She is chairman of the company her father started. She founded a nonprofit group that provides medical care to third-world countries in disasters. On a mission to Bangladesh, she encountered a baby girl in one of Mother Theresa's orphanages, and informed her husband that they had a new member of the family. She drives race cars. She kicked an addiction to pain pills. She is 17 years younger than her husband.

Drip by drip, we're learning that no potential lady ever had a resume quite like this one.

Which new-model first lady will shine brightest in the media showroom? Will it be the fiery partner or the ethereal presence?

We'll have our answer in the coming months. And the ride may get bumpy.

Whether or not the first ladies should be "fair game" is irrelevant. They are. Criticizing a first lady's style-sense is worlds different from critiquing a wife's fiery campaign speech or the fact that a candidate is flying free on his wife's airplane.

These are new women; these are new rules. Neither is going to be an accessory. They are going to be part of the result.