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## Sexism In Politics? Shocking!

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For the Hillary haters, Friday's display of unity in Unity keeps alive the possibility of a vice presidency, which must be like finding that a prowler is still lurking in the back yard after the police have left.

Even though the betting line is that it's all about the campaign debt and the chance to emerge as a player from the wreckage of a mismanaged campaign, the Clinton-Obama unityfest also keeps alive an unanswered question: is America ready for a female president?

Hillary still has a rooting interest in the answer.

If she comes out of this with forward momentum, eight years is not a long time. If John McCain wins, four years is even less time - since he would be running for reelection at age 75. For a woman who implied that assassination was among a campaign's late-stage uncertainties, the hard miles on McCain's body would certainly raise contingent possibilities.

But the campaign to date is no less instructive for other women who might contemplate a run for the top job, or even the number-two spot.

This has been a campaign historically rife "isms"; racism, ageism, elitism, and -- particularly if you listen to the nonstop keening of Bill Clinton -- sexism.

Was it sexism that did in Hillary's bid? Or was it Clintonism? As with all things Clinton, answers are relative.

In 20 minutes you can collect enough evidence for jury to convict on the first vote. There was a parade of subtle digs about the reasons for her choice of dark pants suits. Animated cartoons on the Web were not subtle at all. Neither was Maureen Dowd who, writing about Clinton in Iowa, referenced "a long parade of unflattering outfits and unnervingly changing hairdos." MSNBC's Chris Matthews upped the ante with an analogy about a stripper who needs attention.

Of course, gender works both ways.

When the senator choked up on cue to win New Hampshire, she was a girl crying on the shoulders of female voters. When she knocked back shots of Crown Royal in Pennsylvania, she was a cool broad hanging out with the fellas. To paraphrase Patrick Henry: If this be stereotyping, make the most of it.

It leads us to some interesting parallels.

If Obama hit the weights to bulk up his boney frame and grew out his hair to offset his protruding ears, would the media notice? Of course -complete with before and after pictures and bloggers hinting of steroids.

Eight years of macho posturing did not escape media notice. Many questioned how the current president's manly high-plain squint and his cotton-mouthed Texas drawl somehow emerged from those years at Andover, Yale and Harvard - along with his gun-fighter strut.

By contrast, Bill Clinton - the pudgy years - had to endure the painful photos of his jiggle white thighs encased in those Richard Simmons jogging shorts. And there was that little matter of serial infidelities.

There was the John Kerry - did he or didn't he - botox debate, and the Al Gore's switch from country to preppy to appeal to women, and his weight watch; if he loses weight, he's entering the primary.

More recently, there is the resurrected evidence of John McCain's tough-guy tempter - publicly calling his wife a trollop and, well, it gets worse from there.

Like the coverage that left the Clintons sputtering about anti-female cable television, none of the reporting had much to do with policy positions. The only difference is the gender.

The question then: when does a discussion of a candidate's physique, dress hairstyle or temperament or personal behavior cross the line from observation to sexism? When does it illuminate (ok, maybe entertain is a better word) and when does it trivialize?

That's a trick question. There is no line.

In a celebrity-obsessed, media-saturated culture, candidates are no less subject to the rules of celebrity than Misses Lohan, Hilton and Spears. Their jobs are more important, but their personal lives are equally fair game.

Politicians can become media chew-toys for all manner of failings. Any candidate is just a cell-phone camera away from a disastrously unguarded moment.

Sexism? Nope: just cultural reality.

To any woman who wants to run for high office: hitch up your pantsuit and deal with it.