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Take My Wife, Please

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Reading about Bill Clinton's testy "don't be accusatory with me" outburst at a recent campaign stop we're reminded again how deeply and wildly churn the uncharted marital waters of this election.

In untested, untried ways, spouses may win and lose votes, maybe even elections.

The Clintons are bookends, of sorts. First, Hillary inflamed - and defamed - stay-at-home moms when she said that, as First Lady, she wouldn't be home baking cookies. We can now assume we won't find Bill Clinton waving to tourists from the lawn tractor, or puttering around in the White House garage, tuning up the old armor plated limo.

In a campaign where glimpses of the real candidate are as spontaneous as a heart-lung transplant, there may be brilliance at work here. Testy Bill Clinton staring down the media with gunfighter eyes followed just a news cycle or so Hillary's misty-eyed admission that it's hard, it's just so hard - each being what the other can't.

This fascinating presidential pas de deux is certain to continue straight through the general election. The candidates are a package deal. The prize - more than anytime in history - will be influenced by the effectiveness of the packaging.

There are some interesting choices. Among the candidate's spouses, we have: hot wives and helpmates; we have the wealthy patron; we have the scheming other woman; we have tough - if you want to get to my man you have to go through me - defenders; we have sharp operatives; we have the virtually invisible (Quick - what is Mike Huckabee's wife's first name.) And there is that first among firsts, a candidate's wife with a pierced tongue.

Hillary found her voice, the one softened with feminine sacrifice, in New Hampshire. Some of the political spouses seem to be struggling to find theirs.

Jeri Thompson, the political operative said to be the mastermind, maybe the hand on the whip, behind Fred Thompson's campaign, went all hapless helpmate when Maria Shriver asked the first-ever televised conversation among candidates wives their views on the political role of a candidate wife. Said the well-tailored and crackling-bright former DC

law firm media consultant and veteran staffer of the Republican Senate Conference and Republican National Committee: "I do what I can to help when he asks me. But I'm not even qualified enough to do any of the other stuff." She'll need to work on that if his candidacy ever goes prime time.

The historical use of pronouns aside, presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin made a point in a 1996 interview with Hillary Clinton: "When you vote for the President, I think you're really voting about how his leadership is going to make a difference in your own life, and that's the primary thing. But subconsciously, the relationship he has with his wife... that's got to make an impact."

Little could she know at the time that the impact could include the possibility of the first "First Gentleman" in the White House. The very idea raises a whole host of curious juxtapositions.

Suppose, for example, that the wife of one of the male presidential candidates came into the campaign dragging the admission to the televised universe that she had sex with one of her baby-faced interns.

Actually, we may see a close approximation of that - and a test of voter acceptance of previous campaign-killing moral imperfection - given the current investigations of Judith Giuliani's romps in the Hamptons with then-married Rudy Giuliani, while on-the-clock NYPD security waited dutifully in the parking lot.

Will the new political spouse be an issue or an asset? Can he or she really change an election? Like the first astronauts to see the dark side of the moon, we won't know until we get there.