

# 10

## SHE'S THE CANDIDATE!

### A WOMAN FOR PRESIDENT

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This chapter is divided into two major sections: the first is a brief descriptive summary of historical and quantitative information about women as candidates for the presidency of the United States; the second is an essay contemplating the question of a woman for president from the vantage point of 2007, the moment when the first woman to be a serious contender for the highest office in the world's most powerful nation announced her candidacy for the 2008 presidential election.

#### **A Woman for President?**

*"Why not me?"*

A song sheet from 1961 captures the social context in which women who might have dreamt of running for president have found themselves. In large print above the freckled face of an intense little boy with tousled hair, the song's title proclaims, "Every Little Boy Can Be President."<sup>1</sup> At the end, he sings: "Every little boy can be President, Why not me? Why not me? Why not me? Why not me? Why not me?" A few bold women did ask themselves just that and considered presidential races both before and after that song was written. But the dominant cultural presumption through the centuries weighed in on the little boy's side; the women candidates' side was fantasyland.

For the record, some women have run. They merit a place in the annals of women's political history. We might call them proto-candidates. In the course of 132 years—between 1872 and 2004—perhaps a few dozen women presented themselves as presidential candidates: some sought major party nominations, and the rest ran as candidates representing minor parties.<sup>2</sup> No matter how impressive, determined, or putatively qualified some of them might have been, it seems important to emphasize that not one was ever considered a serious contender for a major party nomination, much less a winner of a national presidential election. None of these women could have been self-deluded about winning, but most had an audience to reach, a message to send, or a point to make about the value of the candidacy itself. A number of them enjoyed enthusiastic national followings.

Victoria Woodhull was the first, nominated in 1872 as the presidential candidate of the Equal Rights Party, a party she had conceived and organized.<sup>3</sup> Twelve and sixteen years later (1884 and 1888), Belva Lockwood ran as the nominee of the same party. Between them, Woodhull and Lockwood chalked up a remarkable string of firsts for women in the United States. Lockwood, an attorney, was the first woman to argue before the Supreme Court. Woodhull, the first woman stockbroker and newspaper publisher, also broke ground as the first woman to testify before Congress. As an outspoken, flamboyant personality who was involved in a major scandal of the time and as a proponent of what were considered outrageous views about sex and marriage, her record as a pathbreaker was overshadowed by her notoriety. Controversies notwithstanding, both Woodhull and Lockwood were extraordinary women, exhibiting courage and daring. Their sense of entitlement to options most women had not yet begun to imagine for themselves made them vulnerable to easy dismissal or ridicule.

It does seem fitting that the first two women to make active bids for the U.S. presidency should do so as feminists under a banner of equal rights, which sent a message still relevant a full century later when the next audacious woman launched a visible but doomed national presidential campaign on behalf of women. The hundred-year distance from 1872 to 1972 took U.S. feminists from the fight for the ballot box to

the fight for political leadership. But it was all of a piece—a struggle to gain full citizenship for women in the democracy.

Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm's 1972 run for the Democratic nomination remains the most sustained, visible, and passionate campaign ever organized by a woman bidding for the presidency. The campaign attracted dedicated supporters who saw Chisholm as a crusader delivering a challenge to America. An elementary school teacher from Brooklyn, New York, and in 1968 the first black woman ever elected to Congress, Shirley Chisholm told the world in no uncertain terms that a woman—a black woman at that—had every right to aspire to the nation's most powerful political position.<sup>4</sup>

A year after the race, Chisholm wrote a memoir of the campaign in which she offered her view of its achievement: "The mere fact that a black woman dared to run for President, *seriously*, not expecting to win but sincerely trying to, is what it was all about. 'It can be done'; that was what I was trying to say, by doing it. . . . At any rate, I feel the Chisholm candidacy accomplished one thing. The next time a woman of whatever color, or a dark-skinned person of whatever sex aspires to be President, the way should be a little smoother because I helped pave it."<sup>5</sup> Thirty years later, she believed her run for the nomination had sent an overdue message: "I knew I could not become president. But the time had come when persons other than males could run for the presidency of this country. Why couldn't a woman run? Why couldn't a black person run? I was angry that everything always, always redounded to the benefit of white males."<sup>6</sup> Chisholm was always clear that she would not be nominated and elected, but she fought stubbornly and audaciously to make herself heard and to be taken seriously as a contender for center-stage leadership.

Resisting pressure from African American male political leaders to withdraw her candidacy and creating an uncomfortable situation for activist feminists who very much wanted to gain Democratic party influence by supporting a winner that year, Chisholm remained in the contest. She entered primaries in twelve states and campaigned nationwide until the Miami nominating convention, where she won 151.25 delegate votes, a record no woman has bested thirty-five years later.

Actually, the name of another trailblazing elected official had garnered votes at a presidential nominating convention eight years before Chisholm's quest. This time on the Republican side, Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine was nominated for president in July 1964 at the Republican convention in San Francisco. Her name was placed in nomination by Senator George D. Aiken of Vermont who, recalling her famous Senate floor "Declaration of Conscience" speech denouncing Senator Joe McCarthy, described her as someone with the "courage to stand for the right when it may not be popular to do so—courage to stand for decency in the conduct of public affairs—courage to stand alone if necessary against formidable odds."<sup>7</sup> The first woman to achieve the distinction of having her name placed in nomination on the floor of a major political party's national presidential nominating convention, Smith withdrew after winning twenty-seven delegate votes on the first ballot.

A groundbreaker in political history, Margaret Chase Smith had been the first woman elected to both houses of Congress. As a congressional widow, in 1940 she won the House seat vacated by her husband's death; eight years later, she moved up to the U.S. Senate, where she served until 1973. But Senator Smith did not view herself as a champion or symbol of progress for women. She did not wish to travel the country asking for money and organizing to mount a national campaign, and she fully understood that the political realities of the time were not on the side of her achieving the presidency. But make no mistake about it, Margaret Chase Smith, a woman who began professional life as a secretary and ended her career as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Senate Appropriations Committee, believed that she had what it took to be president of the United States. To her, the nomination was not just symbolic, a courtesy with a wink and a nod. It spoke to her sense of being qualified and fully prepared. A deeply ambitious woman who did not hesitate to say "I like to win," Smith wanted the nomination and she wanted the presidency. She believed that she had earned and deserved it.<sup>8</sup> A biographer who grew close to Smith during years of interviewing writes, "She wanted to be president because it was the top job in her business, because it was the capstone to a lengthy and distinguished political career, because she loved the limelight, because she thought she could do a good job."<sup>9</sup>

In 1988 in the Democratic party and in 2000 on the Republican side, highly accomplished and nationally prominent political women, each with a law degree from Harvard University, emerged as possible presidential contenders. After sixteen years in the U.S. House of Representatives, Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder of Colorado spent the summer of 1988 exploring whether she could become a viable candidate in her party's primaries. The exploration ended in an emotional press conference at which she announced that she could not raise the money required for a serious race. Remaining in Congress for another eight years, Schroeder continued to play a vocal role as a national spokesperson for women's rights and for a progressive policy agenda. In her 1988 exploration, Schroeder contributed to the record set by previous women who knew that they could not win the presidency but that someone must sound the call and call attention to the importance of beginning the long march to the White House.

More than a decade later, Elizabeth Hanford Dole spent the better part of 1999 exploring a race for the presidency in 2000. She had not yet held elective office; but she had a long history of high-level government service, having worked for four presidents in major roles, including cabinet positions as secretary of transportation (1983–1987) and secretary of labor (1989–1991). Moreover, she was married to Republican Senate leader Bob Dole, himself a previous presidential contender. She could also claim executive leadership credentials based on eight years as president of the American Red Cross. By virtue of her own professional and political experience, as well as a vast network of connections, Elizabeth Dole might have been expected to become a serious candidate for the presidency. Yet after nine months, she dropped out without ever developing as a contender on the campaign trail.<sup>10</sup> She cited the difficulty of raising money as a major barrier to building a viable presidential candidacy and gave her support to George W. Bush, who had a campaign chest with tens of millions of dollars.<sup>11</sup>

The same obstacle was cited as insurmountable four years later when Carol Moseley Braun, another political woman with a law degree, ran for the Democratic presidential nomination. She came to the race after serving for one term as the first African American woman in the U.S. Senate and for a brief time as President Clinton's Ambassador to New Zealand. While Braun was one of two African American

Democrats to announce for president in 2004, she remained the sole female among her party's ten candidates during primary season. She maintained her profile as a candidate by taking advantage of the free media attention offered by debates. From May 2003 to January 2004, Braun appeared on stage with her fellow candidates in six debates that were televised locally in various primary states and aired nationally on C-Span. Notwithstanding the platform provided by this visibility, Braun was never able to attract the funding and voter support required for creating a serious campaign organization. Reading the tea leaves, she withdrew four days before the first 2004 primary votes were cast in the Iowa caucuses and threw her support to former Vermont governor Howard Dean, who was viewed as a leading candidate at that time.

To a greater or lesser extent, these five accomplished and well-known political women—Smith, Chisholm, Schroeder, Dole, and Moseley Braun—all of whom expressed presidential aspirations in the forty years between 1964 and 2004, lamented that a lack of money defeated their efforts. The dollar deficit probably did not surprise any of them. Politically savvy as they were, they knew that hot contests in America survive on cold cash, and that in turn, money is organization, staff, message, and media time—every ingredient in the lifeblood of a successful campaign beyond the candidate herself. Without personal fortunes to spend on political ambitions, women and men seek votes by buying the means to contact voters, the funds coming from donors comfortable with a candidate's vision and viability. Racing enthusiasts do not bet on untrained, untested horses, and political supporters rarely risk money on unfamiliar candidate breeds. In the period that these five women tested the presidential waters, women were (and continue to be) an unfamiliar breed in the rarefied realms of national executive leadership.

None of these women broke through to the stature that made them serious contenders in the eyes of party leaders, power brokers, or the national media. All

five women lacked a vast national base of party support and the organizational structure required for mounting a sustained campaign. They had not laid the groundwork for building a credible race in modern presidential politics. It would have been unrealistic for any of them to undertake the task at that level. The time had not come when a woman candidate had a real chance to break through the historic barriers that being female added to the enormous, grinding burdens of presidential candidacy. And they knew it.

Each one had other points to make or other objectives to pursue. The early equal rights candidates Victoria Woodhull and Belva Lockwood were running to express the sense of entitlement they believed women should assert. Senator Smith and Congresswoman Chisholm conveyed important messages to women who would later take the presidential path. Margaret Chase Smith knew she was no mere symbolic figure. She could raise her hand to take an oath to become the nation's chief executive convinced she had the ability to fulfill the requirements of the office. Shirley Chisholm knew that a right unclaimed might as well be a right not granted. She would run to make a statement that power and tradition will not yield to change without being challenged by those who seek to claim their rights. Patricia Schroeder ran largely to call attention to an agenda that included the gender issue, a platform of progressive family and feminist issues that she and her supporters wanted to keep before the public's eyes during the national election season. At a moment when Republicans were intent on recapturing the White House, Elizabeth Dole might have liked her heightened visibility and a demonstration of widespread support to boost her chances for consideration as the first female vice-presidential nominee on her party's national ticket. Carol Moseley Braun, still suffering the effects of controversial stories during her Senate years that questioned her conduct and character, held her own in the primary debates, impressing audiences with her knowledge, poise, and articulateness. She used the presidential primary stage to rehabilitate

her public image and position herself for an appointment if her party won the White House.

While it was never in the cards for Smith, Chisholm, Schroeder, Dole, or Moseley Braun to win a major party nomination, much less become president of the United States, their races remain of interest. Each woman individually and all collectively left a legacy of daring, a mark on women's political history. At a minimum, other women could absorb the message that these political leaders' behavior sent into the public consciousness. They made a claim on public awareness by attaching voices and living images of accomplished women leaders to the idea that one day a woman could conceivably become president. Their actions made the idea less outrageous to conceive. Now the time has come when there should no longer be a need to establish the point that women can consider themselves presidential candidates. The time has come for a dead serious run on the White House. To be sure, gender will not be beside the point, but we are well past the time when it should be viewed as the central point.

### **From “If” to “When”—Public Consciousness, Public Attitudes**

Until the issue has been tested in a real contest, there is no certainty about whether a majority of U.S. voters will press the presidential lever for anyone other than a Caucasian man. Since the option has not yet been presented by the two major parties, we know only what voters say they would be prepared to do.<sup>12</sup> Public opinion data about women and the presidency have told a relatively consistent, unsurprising story over time: the closer we come to the present day, the more people say they would be willing to vote for a woman.

The increase in positive attitudes toward a woman for president coincides with the impact of the feminist movement on a period of vast social change in women's and men's lives beginning in the 1970s. In the political arena, U.S. women held fewer than 5 percent of all elective offices in the early 1970s. By the



early years of the new century women had broken age-old barriers throughout the system. Still accounting for only a relatively small minority of public leaders, women had achieved a visible and significant presence in political life across the country, as elected and appointed officials, political party activists, campaign organizers and professionals, high-level strategists, political staff, donors, and fundraisers. Federal and state offices that had been almost the exclusive province of men—governor, secretary of state, attorney general, treasurer, supreme court justice—had been occupied by more than one woman. Furthermore, beginning in the 1980s, the political community developed a keen interest in women’s voting power after discovering that women, the majority of the voting electorate, turned out at the polls at higher rates than men and often voted differently from men. These and other changes in late twentieth-century society opened minds and doors to women’s leadership.<sup>13</sup>

The Gallup Poll is the familiar early source of information about national attitudes on the matter of a woman’s being president, with data collected as far back as the 1930s—when only a third of Americans said they would consider voting for a qualified woman for president. By mid-century, a change in attitude had taken place, and the majority switched to the positive side, backing the idea of a woman as president. Between 1958 and 1969, both women and men were positive, but there was a gap, with men more positive: 50 percent to 53 percent of women and 55 percent to 60 percent of men answered “Yes” to the question of whether they would vote for a woman if she were their party’s nominee. A big leap forward took place in the early 1970s, just when the women’s rights movement had reached a pitch of activist intensity. Both the Gallup Poll and the National Opinion Research Center’s General Social Surveys throughout the 1970s found that large majorities (from over two-thirds to over three-quarters) of both women and men said they were willing to vote for a woman for president.<sup>14</sup> By the early twenty-first century—about seventy years after the public’s opinion on the matter of a woman for president began to be measured—positive responses

had climbed toward the heights of unanimity. In a news release, the CBS News/*New York Times* Poll noted that support had increased steadily over half a century and reported that 92 percent of respondents in their January 2006 poll said “they would vote for a woman for president from their party if she were qualified for the job.”<sup>15</sup>

Because the media are full of stories about a woman or two who might actually seek the presidency in the near future, the question is no longer simply abstract. A woman’s candidacy has become far more interesting and complex than its being a simple gauge of broad societal attitudes about women in charge. By 2006, polling organizations were regularly including more than one question about the issue as they sought to tease out nuances in the public’s views. Having been tracked for many decades, attitudes about the public’s willingness seem to be known, but what about its readiness? When it comes to the kind of change represented by a woman head of state, it seems that openness and readiness are a distance apart.

This question has attracted interest. While overwhelming majorities of respondents say they would vote for a woman, much smaller percentages say that the country is ready for a woman president (92 percent versus 55 percent in the CBS News/*New York Times* Poll)<sup>16</sup>. Analyzing responses by variables such as gender (60 percent of men versus 51 percent of women think the country is ready), age (younger citizens see the country as readier than senior citizens do), partisan affiliation (a 61 percent majority of Democrats versus a 48 percent minority of Republicans consider America ready), and ideological orientation (declining majorities of liberals, moderates, and conservatives all see the country ready for a woman president), the CBS News/*New York Times* Poll and other survey organizations are building a trove of information as the country heads closer to the inevitable day when the attitudinal database will be enriched with information about actual voting behavior.

It takes a bit of social psychology to interpret what people say about readiness and timing. For example, a 2005 CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll found large majorities of citizens (94 percent of Democrats and 76 percent of Republicans) saying they themselves would vote for a woman, but they did not think their neighbors were quite as enlightened. The numbers took a deep dive—twenty to thirty points—when people were asked whether their neighbors would vote for a woman: only 72 percent of Democrats and 47 percent of Republicans believed that their neighbors would pull the lever for a woman. As for timing, while a large majority of respondents expressed their own willingness to vote for a qualified woman for president, less than a majority thought a woman would be elected to the White House in the next decade. A quarter of a century appears to be a safe distance from which to contemplate change, with most respondents predicting that within twenty-five years a woman would be elected.<sup>17</sup>

Answers to an informal poll taken at a bipartisan conference of women state legislators in late 2005 are of interest here. Women's progress in political leadership generally has taken the arduous step-by-step route, and expectations about the next big breakthrough seem to reflect an awareness of that course. The group was asked to respond anonymously in writing to two questions: In what year would a major party nominate a woman for president? In what year would the first woman be elected president? Of thirty respondents, almost everyone selected 2008 as the year when the United States would reach the milestone of nominating a woman for president (twenty-eight answered 2008; the other two chose 2012). But when it came to winning, only ten people attending a conference of elected women had confidence that the first nominee would win the first race. Oddly, another ten said that while a woman would be nominated in 2008, the first woman would win in 2012. Was this group of experienced people predicting the defeat of an incumbent president? Did they assume that the man who won against the first woman nominee in 2008 would become a one-term president by being challenged and defeated in a primary by a woman from his own party in

2012, or lose the general election to a woman nominated by the opposing party? It is easy to speculate confidently that almost every woman attending this conference believed that the most obvious potential candidate in 2008, Hillary Rodham Clinton, would be nominated. But was it hard political calculus that led only one-third to think she would win? Like the Gallup poll respondents, did these elected women reveal their own willingness to support a woman in their answers about a nomination date, and then their projection of their neighbors' hesitation in their answers about a victory date? Or were they unable to cross the psychological hurdle between knowing and feeling that the time is right for change and believing that it can actually happen? Interpreting their puzzling answers obviously requires more information than this playful, informal poll offers.

Whether we review findings from large, national, scientifically drawn samples or from playful, informal polls, whether we listen to talk radio or watch talking heads on television, whether we read analysis in political journals or check out *Parade* magazine (inserted for mass circulation in Sunday papers), it is obvious that the matter of a woman for president has entered the national consciousness and everyday discourse. The focus of inquiry has shifted: the question is no longer "If"; it is "When."

## **The Closer We Come, the More Interesting It Gets**

From the vantage point of 2007, "When" may very well be now. For the first time in over half a century, the door to the Oval Office is wide open, with neither an incumbent president nor an incumbent vice president a candidate for the presidency in 2008. At the same time, this unusually open election year shows signs of becoming unique by producing the first woman to win a nomination for president of the United States.

It is remarkable, really, that in the history of the republic not one woman has been a serious candidate for a nomination, much less a nominee in a general election. Equally mind-boggling is the fact that as late as 2007, still only one woman in the entire land is considered viable as a potential candidate. After more than thirty-five years of major breakthroughs in politics, accounting for this paucity presents a monumental challenge to those who believed that parity for women in leadership positions would flow from the social reforms and new educational and professional opportunities gained in the twentieth century's latter decades.

If for no other reason, that granite fact alone makes the subject interesting. Yet, upon hearing that I was planning to write something about women as candidates for the presidency, a highly regarded political scientist dismissed the topic as lacking interest. He offered, "I don't like the topic. It suggests that gender is the qualification. People should not vote for or against someone because of gender." I found this comment surprising because I had no intention to argue a proposition that being a man or a woman should be the reason for running or winning votes. While gender, race, religion, and ethnicity are not qualifying characteristics one way or the other, these identity markers have been relevant historically. Their entrance as characters with growing speaking parts on the stage of electoral politics late in the twentieth century and their visible presence in the twenty-first elevate them to relevancy in considering the evolution of political leadership. In the calculus of constituency power and campaign dynamics, they influence political viability no less than geography or other traditional variables.

My colleague elaborated that people should be talking about real qualifications, tactics, and policy positions, and explained that his vote for a woman for president would be driven by party and policy, not gender. I agree; all of that makes sense. I disagree with his hot-button and, in my view, defensive

reduction of the gender issue to a nonsubject. It reminded me of a comment made in the early 1970s by another prominent political scientist in response to the news that a colleague was beginning research for a book about women in politics. “But you don’t have a subject there,” he pronounced.

Are these opinions packed with weighty knowledge, or is there less here than meets the eye? Since I suspect that a version of these views is held by more people than these two individual scholars, I want to pause over them. Both opinions suggest a lack of curiosity about aspects of a subject that might not be immediately apparent. While the reactions are not the same, both objections raise the issues of the legitimacy of a candidate and her being taken seriously. Both seem instantly and unabashedly dismissive. Such an unqualified, outspoken response could arise from distaste or discomfort—swat the idea to get rid of it quickly—or more likely the opposite, that response could emerge from confidence in a time-honored framework of accepted assumptions and well-established grounds for inquiry that grant gender no conceivable standing as a serious topic.

I find it hard to understand that these topics are either threatening or unworthy. That 1970s opinion has been rendered obsolete and irrelevant by the many volumes written about women’s political participation in the intervening thirty years. The 2006 response seems to assume, even after thirty years of change and interest in women’s leadership, that the only angle of interest in a gender question would be polemic or simplistic advocacy. (“If you’re writing about the topic, your point must be that a woman should run and be elected president simply because she’s a woman. What else is there to say about the subject?”) But even if gender were being advocated as a qualification in and of itself, which has never been the case, it would not be surprising if it stimulated interesting discussions.

Having no body of empirical data to examine, social science research understandably rejects the subject of women as presidential candidates. That situation will change in the face of events to come. The closer the day comes to witnessing a viable female presidential candidate who can mount a competitive race for the White House, the more interest will heighten. The media will be interested, as will pollsters and pundits, party leaders, businesspeople and interest groups, foreign leaders, and allies and enemies. Voters will be curious and have opinions on the matter because a female candidate's gender is not (yet) an invisible characteristic and because heretofore the office of president has become identified with its male occupants. People will want to know whether and how the gender difference will make a difference.

How will a woman hold the reins and exercise power in a job no woman has ever held? Will a woman in the Oval Office think differently or face crises differently, govern differently, and serve differently as a commander in chief? Because the overwhelming majority of people firmly believe that women and men are not the same, they do not know if a woman holding the nation's top leadership position will bring about change that is somehow influenced by her gender. People tend to fear change. When a friend who says he is more than willing to vote for a woman president was asked whether he has negative feelings or concerns, he admitted, "Honestly, I'm a little leery. I haven't had an experience or good example of a woman as a leader. If anything gives me pause, it's the unknown." Needless to say, every newly elected male president is an unknown in that role. But the man is still one among the fifty-seven varieties, not a different brand name

The nature of the interest in a woman running for president will, of course, depend on the individual candidate. Its intensity will decline markedly after the first woman has made a run of it and won. Soon after the first woman joined the Supreme Court or became secretary of state or won election as governor or other

official in a previously all-male office, the extraordinary converted to the ordinary in public life—so, too, at the peaks of political leadership. After the first breakthroughs, it will not take forever before having a woman at the top of the ticket or in the White House becomes merely the way things are. The first woman will be tasked with clearing the path from the extraordinary to the ordinary. Predictably, some percentage of voters who claim to support the idea of women running for president will demur, “but not this one.” It might be vexing for them to find precisely the right woman they would trust to carry the banner of this particular historic change.

Naturally, whoever is the first nominee will meet and probably exceed the basic qualifications of competency, ambition, experience, preparedness, organization, and resources. If she also identifies with the societal transformations for U.S. women in recent decades and relates to liberal feminist thinking, the discussion about her candidacy and what she symbolizes will intensify. Because the most obvious potential first female presidential nominee, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, is just such a woman, this scenario is the most likely and is fascinating to imagine.

Here the curtain rises on familiar plot twists. First female candidates have often faced the double bind that if they are “outsiders,” breaking ground for newcomers to electoral politics, their “outsiderness” looms as a hurdle to political acceptability and viability. Yet those who have stood for progressive social change for women and have themselves broken barriers into the political system can find themselves in a no-win situation. Having succeeded in acquiring the credentials and gaining the support to mount winning races, they become suspect and may even forfeit the trust of outside constituencies who are wary of the accommodations and inevitable compromises a newcomer makes along the road to becoming a tenable candidate in our two-party system. Like other women leaders who have pioneered in new territory since the 1970s, the former



First Lady and now Senator from New York is not an “either-or” in this matter, neither an outsider nor an insider. She is both—at once a unique newcomer and a recognizable political type.

A Hillary Rodham Clinton presidential candidacy simultaneously offers the nation a historic outsider and a consummate insider. On one side of the coin, here is a former First Lady, a wife publicly betrayed and humiliated, a proud mother, an “uppity” feminist baby boomer, a successful lawyer, an outspoken voice for women’s rights, a strong children’s rights advocate: as a presidential candidate, Hillary Rodham Clinton is uniquely different, “other,” and pathbreaking. On the other side, Senator Clinton is as well-known, prepared, well-positioned, organized, and formidable a Democrat to approach presidential politics as any in recent memory, a senator who works with people across the political spectrum, attracting partners and adherents from various backgrounds, with a strong state and national network of supporters. In a lengthy *New York Times Magazine* cover story appearing more than two and a half years before the 2008 presidential election, journalist Matt Bai variously tagged her as the “establishment candidate,” the Democrat who could be challenged in her party’s primaries by an outsider. Describing the then possible primary campaign of former Virginia Governor Mark Warner as an insurgency, Bai concludes: “You have to be ready, as an earlier generation of Democrats would have put it, to take on the Man—even if the Man this time happens to be a woman.”<sup>18</sup>

A Hillary Rodham Clinton candidacy for president of the United States provokes discussions and encounters far removed from the electoral arena itself. Variations on the following campus scene will play out elsewhere, among all ages and groupings around the country and across the oceans. In late 2005, a college student described an incident in which she and several other campus leaders (female and male) went out to celebrate the conclusion of a demanding semester’s work in student government. The women represented different points

of view, including an apolitical student, a liberal feminist, and a more conservative Republican. When someone mentioned Hillary Clinton's name, one of the male students offered, "Well, she's not smart; she's just stupid." Offended, the women rose in unison to challenge this insult. A Clinton race for the White House will set off conversations within generations, within and across genders, classes, and races. Her running will prompt confrontations with the unfinished work of men and women moving to a twenty-first-century way of being together. It will stimulate conversations and arguments about who we are as women and men and how we view one another.

Most of these exchanges will be rooted in specific reactions to this specific candidate, the woman who repeatedly has been characterized in the media as controversial, a woman who elicits strong feelings and has been described as someone some people love to hate. Many men will be uncomfortable with any woman who is the first presidential nominee and commander in chief, but they will consciously or unconsciously feel more threatened by a woman who is not only brilliant and tough but who also voices and represents a special interest in progress for women. For other reasons, many women will also feel uncomfortable about such a woman. Nonetheless, women in droves will develop personal pride in her and will find themselves defending her. Office workers, service workers, professionals, retirees, and stay-at-home moms—all manner of women will be as offended as the college students who didn't share political affiliations but expressed mutual anger at hearing some guy friend dismiss Hillary Clinton as "stupid."

Except for the intense historic moment provoked by Anita Hill's nationally televised testimony at the confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas in late 1991, nothing like a sustained, widespread, charged national conversation about gender has taken place since the activist phase of the women's movement, which had cooled down by the mid-1980s.<sup>19</sup>

As to the broader subject of women's leadership, the nomination of the first woman for president of the United States is of major interest. The event will signal an unprecedented change in the nation's political history, symbolizing acceptance for women at a height of public leadership never before scaled, and representing a decisive break with the view that men and women cannot cross centuries-old boundaries defined by stereotypes of maleness and femaleness.

That interest is slated to play out with Hillary Rodham Clinton. If not then with her, in 2008, the question appears moot for the foreseeable future. Fed up with historic limitations on women's public roles, activists in the early 1970s announced a claim on leadership and the intention to acquire it.<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding all the hurdles leapt in the interim and the changes in how women are viewed and behave in political life, no more than one woman in the entire country is positioned, prepared, and has the vaunted fire in the belly to make a serious run for the White House at the close of the twenty-first century's first decade.

Yet this is the situation: a single woman in the United States stands with two feet firmly planted at the entrance to the arena of a presidential race. Popular magazines, running stories on the subject of a woman for president, have profiled several high-placed political women as potential candidates.<sup>21</sup> Women's organizations, seeking to stimulate interest in the idea and required to present more than one name, have carefully offered lists balanced in racial, geographic, and partisan composition. People speculating about the issue bandy about names of female politicians, military officials, business leaders, and celebrities. But extraordinary as she is, Oprah Winfrey is not going to run for president. Neither is Condoleezza Rice. All of that is image and media sport, useful for popularizing the issue and perhaps especially for capturing the attention of girls and women who might otherwise be unaware that when it comes to leadership at even the highest levels, gender history should not have to be political destiny.

Some hard facts come into consideration. The fact is that we do not nominate state cabinet officers, mayors, or even congresspeople for the presidency. Nor do we nominate corporate or foundation executives, university presidents, newspaper editors, or any number of other influential leaders whom we might admire. For largely good reasons—although resulting perhaps in some interesting missed opportunities over time—the structures of our political system have evolved to sift out presidential candidates from among a relatively small group of highly experienced public leaders capable of running a brutally difficult gauntlet to capture a nomination. A number of presidents over the past hundred years began life as elected officials in local or state positions, or in the U.S. House of Representatives, but by the time they won the presidency, the overwhelming majority had held at least one of three offices: the vice presidency, a U.S. Senate seat, a governorship. Only three twentieth-century presidents (two cabinet secretaries and one wartime general) came from other positions.

At one level, therefore, the straightforward answer to the question of why women have not yet been nominated and elected president is that as late as 2007 only twenty-five women, sixteen senators and nine governors, stood in the right line that leads to the White House.<sup>22</sup> Eliminating those who are not native born, or consider themselves too old to run, or do not have a strong political or geographic base for fundraising, organization, delegate votes, and electoral college strength, or plainly have no burning desire to become president, the line just about disappears. Hillary Rodham Clinton is not at the head of a line. She is the line. The real question about women and the presidency is the pipeline question, not only for the highest office in the land but for those offices below it that are short of women.

The reason that only one woman stands at the threshold of a presidential nomination is that only one woman prepared herself to run, and everyone knows it. Heightened journalistic coverage is no random matter. Without a credible,

serious candidate in place, the media show little interest in whether and when women break the presidential glass ceiling. Carol Moseley Braun recalls that in 2004, the *New York Times* editorial board interviewed all her male opponents for the Democratic presidential nomination but “did not bother” to give her an interview despite the fact that she had qualified for all the primaries.<sup>23</sup> During the long approach to 2008, the proliferation of print and electronic stories was linked specifically to speculation about a Clinton race.<sup>24</sup> While media attention could provoke musing about whether and when a woman will be elected president—and why it hasn’t happened, yet—without a credible candidate at the center of the story, too few people would care to make the subject newsworthy.

In the long trek forward and upward, a Hillary Rodham Clinton campaign for the presidency in 2008 bespeaks at least one certainty: she does not run with the organizational, structural, and financial disadvantages of the women who preceded her. They each raised an issue, an image, a challenge, a claim, a conversation, a lament, an item on the nation’s political agenda; still, not one of them was truly prepared in the way one must be in modern American presidential politics. Not one of them had built and placed an organization on the ground; not one of them benefited from a blueprint that included a systematic, strategic plan for wresting the nomination from competitors, or for preempting potential would-be competitors. To a greater or lesser extent, all five women who dared to see themselves as presidential material in the forty years between 1964 and 2004 lamented that a lack of money defeated their presidential aspirations. Hillary Rodham Clinton, relentless in raising money, will have a campaign treasury for any political contest she enters; so, too, she enjoys the benefits of a team of tested advisers and loyal staff, a strong organization, and long-range planning. Describing her political organization in early 2006, one journalist went so far as to call it a “vast political empire . . . that, in its scale and ambition, is unrivaled in Democratic politics.”<sup>25</sup>

Preparedness is necessary; yet it is never sufficient. The rest is about the political and historic moment at home and around the globe, about personality issues, about the strength of the competition and the forces of opposition, and about timing, chance, accident, and luck; and as always, about the unforeseeable hand of fate.

# Endnotes

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1. "Every Little Boy Can Be President," music by David Saxon, lyrics by Diane Lampert and Peter Farrow (New York: Sam Fox and Sewanee Music, 1961).

2. Information about the most visible candidates is presented in "Women Presidential and Vice Presidential Candidates," fact sheet from the Center for American Woman and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University ([www.cawp.rutgers.edu](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu)). See the fact sheet for basic information about each of these women, including dates, party affiliations, and brief profiles of the better-known candidates. This sheet is the source of the factual information incorporated in the following thumbnail sketches of several women who ran for president. It is likely that many additional women put their names forward in local areas or under minor party labels for brief periods during one campaign or another without rising to a level of broad visibility or political significance.

3. The extraordinary life of Victoria Woodhull (1838-1927), an audacious, flamboyant, and notoriously controversial early feminist, is described in Lois Beachy Underhill's *The Woman Who Ran for President: The Many Lives of Victoria Woodhull* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).

4. Chisholm often repeated her view that her gender had been a bigger obstacle than her race. In an interview with journalists many years later, she confirmed: "I suffered from two obstacles—I was a black person and I was a woman. . . . I met far more discrimination as a woman in the field of politics. That was a revelation to me. Black men got together to talk about stopping me. . . . They said I was an intellectual person, that I had the ability, but that this was no place for a woman. If a black person were to run, it should be a man." Quoted in Eleanor Clift and Tom Brazaitis, *Madam President* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 28.

5. Shirley Chisholm, *The Good Fight* (New York: HarperCollins, 1973; Bantam Books, 1974), 151. *Unbought and Unbossed*, a film documenting the campaign, directed and produced by Shola Lynch, was released in 2004 and premiered on PBS February 2, 2005.

6. Videotaped interview with the author on the occasion of Chisholm's receiving an honorary doctorate from Rutgers University, May 2002.

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7. Quoted in Janann Sherman, *No Place for a Woman: A Life of Senator Margaret Chase Smith* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 197.

8. These impressions and the quote (“I like to win”) are recorded in notes from a December 9, 1985. interview with Margaret Chase Smith conducted by Ruth B. Mandel and Katherine E. Kleeman at Smith’s home in Skowhegan, Maine.

9. Sherman, *No Place for a Woman*, 199.

10. Dole’s credibility as a serious candidate was not helped by her husband’s comment during a national television interview that he was interested in supporting a different candidate for the presidential nomination.

11. In 2002, Elizabeth Dole did succeed in winning elective office, this time as a U.S. Senator from North Carolina.

12. Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro’s name did appear on the ballot as the Democratic vice presidential nominee in 1984, but voting data have not demonstrated that she made a substantial difference one way or another to the election outcome. American presidential elections have always been about the top of the ticket, with the second slot used to balance the ticket geographically or shore up the loyalty of particular constituencies.

13. A variety of fact sheets with current and historical information about the numbers and status of women holding public office and women as voters are available from the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University ([www.cawp.rutgers.edu](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu) or [www.eagleton.rutgers.edu](http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu)).

14. For discussions of these public opinion data, see among others Hazel Erskine, “The Polls: Women’s Role,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Summer 1971): 275-290; Myra Marx Ferree, “A Woman for President? Changing Responses: 1958-1972,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1974): 390-399; E. M. Schreiber, “Education and Change in American Opinions on a Woman for President,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (1978): 171-182.

15. CBS News/*New York Times* Poll, “A Woman for President,” January 20-25, 2006, press release of February 5, 2006, available online: [www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/020306woman.pdf](http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/020306woman.pdf), access date: December 29, 2006.



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16. Perhaps people feel under pressure to express a perceived socially desirable opinion that reflects well on them but believe their neighbors to be less enlightened. Perhaps they are projecting their real opinions onto their neighbors. However, even with the drop of almost forty points, respondents still believed that a majority of Americans are ready for a woman in the White House.

17. Based on a poll of 1,005 adults conducted September 8-11, 2005, these findings were released by the Gallup Organization on October 4, 2005.

18. Matt Bai, "The Fallback," *New York Times Magazine*, March 12, 2006, p. 75.

19. While interest in women's roles and status and in changing relations between women and men is now woven into the fabric of contemporary life, it is more at the level of polite social conversation and TV sitcom material than it is a fulcrum for change. After the ERA failed in 1982 to win the last three states for passage of the constitutional amendment, and in 1984 the Democratic ticket with Geraldine Ferraro as vice presidential nominee was defeated, social change issues and progressive activism receded from center stage as the country moved in a conservative direction.

20. I mark the founding of the National Women's Political Caucus in July 1971 as the moment signaling that U.S. women had set a new collective goal for themselves as public citizens—that of seeking their own empowerment in politics and government.

21. In "A Woman for President?" the February 19, 2006, issue of *Parade* magazine included thumbnail sketches of eight experienced political women and encouraged readers to view them as potential presidential candidates.

22. Several former senators and governors would bring the total number up by only single digits.

23. Videotaped interview with the author during Braun's visit to the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, December 8, 2004.

24. Throughout 2006, newspapers and magazines across the country kept tabs on Clinton and regularly reported public opinion polls. *Time* magazine devoted its August 28, 2006, cover story to Hillary Clinton's presidential ambitions. In addition, general stories focusing on the subject of a woman for president have been appearing. See, for example, Anne E. Kornblut, "The Ascent of

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a Woman: After a Fictional Female President, Are Americans Ready for the Real Thing?" *New York Times*, June 11, 2006, Section 9, p. 1.

25. Ryan Lizza, "A Guide to the Clinton Juggernaut: Welcome to Hillaryland," *New Republic* online, February 20, 2006. Available online by subscription.

She's the candidate! A woman for president. Ruth B. Mandel. Victoria Woodhull was the first, nominated in 1872 as the presidential candidate of the Equal Rights Party, a party she had conceived and organized.<sup>3</sup> Twelve and sixteen years later (1884 and 1888), Belva Lockwood ran as the nominee of the same party. Between them, Woodhull and Lockwood chalked up a remarkable string of firsts for women in the United States.