

A woman for president

Like all candidates, Hillary Clinton should be judged fairly on her character and judgment

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Hillary Clinton has already made history as the only First Lady to win elected office, and she may well win the history trifecta this year as the first of her sex to lead a major U.S. party and become president.

In most societies, leadership is gendered masculine. Studies on gender confirm that women's accomplishments are undervalued compared with equivalent performances by men. The success of women is generally seen as accidental rather than as the validation of expected competence, as it is for men. Women who show leadership qualities may be seen as deficient in femininity, although too much femininity makes them seem deficient as leaders.

Hillary Clinton's public profile over the years and the expectation that she would seek high office may well have helped to accustom people to her in a leadership role. The appearance of more women on the international stage as national leaders may also influence how Americans respond to the prospect of a woman president. But in the case of the current American primaries, an unusual question is being asked -- could Hillary Rodham Clinton be president if she were only Hillary Rodham?

Hillary Clinton's campaign for president is unlike any other we have seen. While America is not without its political dynasties, how much does Hillary Clinton's position as Bill Clinton's wife actually affect her status? The current president benefited not only from carrying the name of his president father, but also through inheriting the contacts, advisers and financial backers assembled over a long period by his family. Like George W. Bush, Hillary Clinton carries a famous name and she has inherited many of the political resources accumulated during Bill's time in elected office.

But unlike the current president, she was marked for stardom long before she acquired a famous name. When she achieved national notoriety as the first student ever to be chosen as commencement speaker at prestigious Wellesley College, people who knew her began to speak of her as a possible first woman president of the U.S.

She got into Wellesley and Yale Law School on her own merits and was a brilliant student. If she was not a Rhodes Scholar, like her future husband, it was because women were explicitly ineligible for that honour at the time. And this brings us to the problem. If a talented young woman in the 1960s dreamed of holding America's highest political office, what path could she follow to get her there in a society that still excluded women from many of the established avenues to success?

This reality helps explain the analysis of Hillary Clinton's victory in the New Hampshire primary which points to her loss in Iowa, rather than reactions to her "tearing up" incident, as the key factor.

The pundits and politicians who were so quick and happy to declare her candidacy "toast" reminded many women of just how close to the surface is the belief that a woman doesn't belong in a presidential race. Polls show that the wave of women who came out to support Hillary at the last moment were of the generation that remembers all too well what it had to overcome to get educations, jobs and rights. They were not ready to see the end of the Hillary Clinton candidacy.

For her supporters, Hillary Clinton's career as the equal partner of one of America's most successful and still-popular politicians is an enormous asset. She has been closer to the reality of the presidency than any of the current candidates and, throughout their marriage, Bill Clinton has presented his wife as a key player in his political life. In the minds of her detractors, however, Hillary Clinton is a "parasite" on the political career of her more talented husband and her claims to political experience, and even her ability to

establish her own political credentials as a U.S. senator, are derivative of her husband's accomplishments.

Scandals aside, marriage to Bill Clinton has been a mixed blessing to Hillary's political ambitions. When he failed to win election to the U.S. Congress early in their marriage and decided to pursue a career at the state level in Arkansas, her opportunities to develop an independent political life, perhaps building on her experience as a young lawyer serving the Senate Watergate Committee, were greatly constrained. She achieved distinction as a lawyer and an advocate for children, but Little Rock, Ark., was not Washington.

I think it likely that Hillary Rodham would have found a way to prominence without Bill but it seems hardly fair to penalize her for balancing these sacrifices with advantages from marrying someone who respected her as an equal, shared her commitment to public life, and who had a better chance at the time of breaking down the barriers to their shared dream. If a son can benefit from a father's efforts, why cannot a wife reap some advantage from a partnership to which she has contributed?

Times do change but there is still a double standard where Bill Clinton's role in Hillary's campaign is concerned. Attractive and popular family members are always an asset on the campaign trail but Barbara Bush's famous reference to female vice-presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro as something that "rhymes with 'rich' " reminds us that these advocates often say what the candidates will not, cannot or should not. In the end, women can only secure their right to the top jobs by changing the landscape from which people derive their sense of the way the world works, and this includes a new and different definition of the "political spouse."

Hillary Clinton, like all the candidates, will be judged on many factors -- issues, character, judgment, trust -- and it should be the goal of all who care about the advancement of women that she be judged fairly on the same basis as the men. Whatever the outcome of the 2008 American presidential election, Hillary Clinton is changing the way a presidential campaign looks and sounds and by sending a message to Americans that a woman has a right to be there, she is changing history. For that I, for one, am deeply grateful.

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