

Center for American Progress



Think Again: The Media's Color (and Gender) Wars, Continued

By Eric Alterman, Tim Fernholz

February 8, 2007

Guess the subject of the quotes below:

"Women, especially women seeking public office, have been allowed a very narrow range of acceptable behavior. A woman candidate must be neither too sexy, nor too severe, too young nor too old....Her voice must be modulated into an aural approximation of the dress-for-success suit. Otherwise she will be thought—God forbid—too aggressive....She must seem tough enough to stand up to [national security threats] without being tough enough to frighten Freud."

And

"He has shown himself to be the most powerful communicator in either party. His greatest asset is his skill as a speaker. This is the cleverest, most touching, most engaging orator we have in America—a man who can take an issue and make it sing as if it had legs."

OK, so maybe you guessed it was a trick question. These quotes aren't talking about Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama.

Quote one comes from a 1984 issue of *Time* magazine and is addressed to Geraldine Ferraro, Walter Mondale's choice for Vice-President. I'm sure we all remember how that turned out. Quote two is Mondale's own appraisal of Jesse Jackson four years later.

Yet how much has changed since Ferraro was the vice-presidential candidate, or since Jesse Jackson became what many called "the president of black America" with his political campaigns for the White House?

In the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, Alan Keyes received a microscopic level of support from the conservative hinterland. And in the 2004 election, Rev. Al Sharpton and Carol Moseley-Braun played diversionary roles in their races for the Democratic presidential nomination. But all three had personal baggage that significantly overshadowed their messages—respectively being reactionary, embroiled in racial controversy, or dealing with the appearance of corruption. More credible presidential candidates over the past decade like Liddy Dole and Colin Powell led decidedly more lackluster and demure campaigns.

So here we are, about a generation later, and media outlets are peddling the same stale stew of stories about whether a woman or a black man can successfully campaign for and win the presidency—possibly because the issue is still largely untested.

Clinton and Obama lack the variety of damaging issues that surrounded many previous breakthrough candidates—any baggage Clinton may have has long been aired. So, if the media will let them, the two newcomers may have the chance to step beyond their gender and racial stereotypes.

Unfortunately, this so far appears to be a hopeless fantasy. Both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have already run stories asking if Obama can attract black voters in the wake of a *Washington Post* poll revealing that 60 percent of black voters support Clinton and only 20 percent support Obama. And *The Washington Post* has similarly questioned Clinton's appeal to women. Almost identical stories were written when Ferraro and Jackson were running more than 10 years ago.

One of the few people approaching the Clinton and Obama "firsts" with any sense of perspective is Gloria Steinem. In a *New York Times* *op-ed* that appeared this week, she explains that asking if America is ready for either of these candidates is a "dumb and destructive question."

Steinem recognizes that most "Americans are smart enough to figure out that a member of a group may or may not represent its interests. After all, many African-Americans opposed the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court in 1991 because they were aware of his record—and the views of his conservative supporters." And no one is expecting women to automatically support Clinton in 2008, whatever their political convictions. Catholics did not support John Kerry in 2004—by a slim margin—and it sure looked like Jews deserted Joe Lieberman in the 2006 Democratic primary. Identity, it would appear, is no longer destiny.

The New York Times ran an [article in December comparing the progress of women and blacks in American politics](#) by chief political correspondent Adam Nagourney. He gauged the progress since the founding of the

Congressional Black Caucus in 1969 and Ferraro's run in 1984, and then concluded that a woman will have an easier time than a black man before adding, somewhat sheepishly, "Race and gender are big issues in American politics, but they are not the only ones, particularly in the coming race." There's not a war on, is there? A health care crisis? Income inequality?

Still, coverage has unarguably improved. When Jackson made his second presidential run in 1988, stories throughout the primary season consistently wondered what he wanted. His chances of winning the nomination were discounted, and it was widely believed—even occasionally by his own campaign—that he would hurt a Democratic ticket as a vice-presidential candidate. Today, no one is questioning what Obama wants—he wants to be president. He even wants to move the United States into a post-race era, though it may put some journalists out of business.

"Doesn't matter to me whether the guy's colored or not," one Milwaukee voter told late *New York Times* political correspondent R.W. Apple in 1988 during Jackson's campaign. "What matters is whether the guy can save jobs."

Amen, brother.

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