

 <p>10,000 small businesses</p>	<p>Goldman Sachs is committed to helping 10,000 Small Businesses create jobs and drive economic growth.</p> <p> PROGRESS IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS</p>	
---	--	--

August 18, 2013

**HUFF
POST** **POLITICS**

Backwards, in High Heels

Watching John McCain and Sarah Palin on the campaign trail, I'm reminded of Katherine Hepburn saying, of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, "He gives her class, and she gives him sex." Palin galvanized McCain's campaign by giving him both (in exchange for a potential ticket to the White House), though her class appeal is clearly to the working class--the Joe Sixpacks and the Hockey Moms--not the high society Hepburn had in mind, the same wealthy elite of which McCain himself is a member. The sex appeal she gives McCain by virtue of her gender is more complicated, as it would have to be to attract both those conservative white males who love her politics and think she's "hot" and those white female independents and former Hillary Clinton supporters who disagree vehemently with her politics but find themselves inexplicably drawn to her "empowering" persona.

Palin's woefully inadequate qualifications to be vice president have been amply documented by the media, and, although Barack Obama and Joe Biden have scrupulously avoided discussing them for fear of seeming sexist, even some conservatives are calling for her to resign from the ticket. Still, given her feminine beauty, her peeky-toe high heels, her flaunted fecundity, and her tendency to skirt tough issues with flirtatious winks, Palin's appeal to traditional men is no surprise: she epitomizes and celebrates the very two roles--sex object and mother--that have been used by patriarchal societies to define women as not only different from, but also less than men. She's a babe and she's a mom, and, listening to the right-wing pundits, you'd think these are her two primary qualifications for the vice presidency.

But if Palin were just a sexy mom, she would not be a marketable VP in a man's world, which the Republican party still very much is. In order to be seen as a potential commander-in-chief, she has to come across as macho: "twice the man Obama is," as Rush Limbaugh puts it, Rosie the Riveter on steroids, the female Teddy Roosevelt. And that she does--but she doesn't come off as a rival, since she not only exemplifies, but also extols, traditionally masculine attributes.

Whereas some male pundits felt their manhood threatened by Hillary Clinton (recall MSNBC's Tucker Carlson saying, repeatedly, that he had to cross his legs at the sight of Hillary), Palin makes these men feel more manly. (Check out the Sarah Palin action doll on the web, and then compare it to the Hillary nutcracker.) She manages to combine the most traditional stereotypes of femininity and masculinity--she's Mae West and John Wayne--and pass them off as something new and refreshing.

Palin "does it all," but never in a way that's emasculating. Todd Palin's manhood wasn't diminished when she became the first female Governor of Alaska. No, in a brilliant PR move, she dubbed him the "first dude," and enabled him, ex officio, to judge the 2008 Miss Alaska competition. And look what she's done for John McCain. Talk about energizing the base. She's the best male enhancement product since Viagra. As the Enjoli ad from the 70s goes, she "can bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan, and never, never, never let you forget that you're a man"--and she'll do that not only by being a babe, but by doing her darndest to make your rival look like a "wimp," while giving you the go-ahead to "drill, baby, drill" to your heart's content, ultimately screwing over the planet and most of its inhabitants.

In an attempt to sell its anti-woman policies, the GOP has cynically exploited the very identity politics it has long accused the Democrats of advocating. Why, even Palin herself, for whom gender was "never an issue," discovered just the other day some words from Madeleine Albright on her cup of Starbucks mocha (which, unlike latte, is apparently not drunk by elitists) about the importance of women helping women, which she misquoted to suggest that women who don't vote for her deserve a special place in Hell. And, in choosing Palin as McCain's running mate, the GOP did, indeed, tap into a deep well of anger and resentment on the part of some women voters who've felt disempowered for far too long and, most recently, disrespected by the Democratic party.

But don't be fooled. We've seen before that the first women to be let into bastions of male power can serve to reinforce existing gender norms and make things even harder for those women who would follow them.

Palin's candidacy puts an ironic twist on the 80s slogan about Ginger Rogers being able to do everything Fred Astaire could do and then some. Sure, Palin could, as his second-in-command or--gasp!--his replacement, do everything McCain could do: continue Bush's devastating domestic fiscal and social policies, further erode our global economic, political, and moral standing, pack the Supreme Court with justices who would devastate our individual rights--and then some: drill in ANWR, make rape victims pay for their own rape kits and deny them emergency contraception, prohibit schools from teaching sex education, but make them teach creationism. There's no doubt Palin could take us where McCain wants us to go, but do women really want to go there--backwards, in high heels?

*Susan Brison teaches philosophy and women's and gender studies at Dartmouth College. She is author of *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton University Press, 2002) and of numerous articles in scholarly journals. She has also published articles in the *Chronicle Review*, the *Sunday New York Times Magazine*, the *San Francisco Chronicle Sunday Magazine*, the *Guardian* and other newspapers and magazines.*

