# WHAT IT WILL TAKE FOR A WOMAN TO BE ELECTED

SEAL OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

# PRESIDENT

In politics, reality has a way of catching up with fantasy. Who would have predicted Richard Nixon toasting the health of Mao Tse-tung in Peking? In 1960, a Catholic candidate for national office was considered dangerous. Now, at least for the Democratic Party, a Catholic will probably be a part of the national ticket for years to come.

As the women's movement begins to change the shape of American politics, the prospect of a woman President has changed from the ludicrous to the possible. And a number of political pros believe the idea of a woman successfully running for the Presidency is a clear political likelihood—not in 1976, but certainly within the next three or four Presidential elections.

Political campaigns, however, do not work because we want them to work; indeed, those occasions when "true believers" have had their way within one party have most often resulted in disaster come November—Goldwater in 1964 and McGovern in 1972 are the most recent examples. Campaigns work when a candidate and a campaign organization have a clear-eyed, unsentimental understanding of the suspicions and prejudices of voters, and a clear plan to shatter those prejudices. The best way, then, to elect a woman President is to understand exactly why people have doubts about a female chief executive—and how to address those doubts.

Millions of Americans simply cannot accept the idea of a woman President. A Lou Harris poll taken in 1972 reported that 49 percent of men, and a disturbingly high 40 percent of women, would be less likely to vote for a woman Presidential candidate than for an equally qualified male. The poll also revealed that a substantial chunk of voters—a majority in some instances—believed several encrusted myths about women in politics: they would be more affected by emotion than logic; they could not bear up under the pressure; they could get more done as the wife of a politician. A more recent poll, conducted early this year by Cambridge Survey Research, showed a shift toward the acceptance of women politicians—only 14 percent said flatly they would not vote for a qualified female Presidential candidate, but that 14 percent translates into about ten million American voters who would categorically reject a woman candidate.

Unsatisfying as it is, the most persuasive answer to much of this bigotry is time—time for women to enter the ranks of government in decision-making, pressure-filled, executive jobs. For years, the political world had a male-only, locker room quality. "Women are welcome as cheerleaders and water girls," Susan and Martin Tolchin wrote in *Clout—Womanpower and Politics,* "but are seldom accepted as members of the first team, or even the bench." In 1974 (to finish the metaphor) women came to play. Eight hundred of them ran for posts from city council to U.S. Senator. Three states saw women win major party nominations for governor; and three women ran for Senator as well. And that election meant an infusion of women into those jobs that genuinely test decision-making.

When Ella Grasso was elected Governor of Connecticut, she was the first woman elected governor of any state who did not use her husband's coattails. Last year was also the first time a woman won the mayoralty of a big city (San Jose, California), and the chief justice's job of a state supreme court (North Carolina). What that means is that the spectre of a woman making decisions, giving orders, acting as an executive instead of as one member of a legislative body, will become more and more familiar, and therefore less and less odd and frightening. When John Kennedy became the first Catholic President and did not install the Pope in the East Wing of the White House, much of the purely irrational fear of a Catholic Presidency disappeared. When Tom Bradley, as the first black mayor of Los Angeles, did not turn City Hall into Black Panther headquarters, the inchoate, blind fear of a black chief executive vanished. The same psychological reassurance is bound to help the chances of the first serious woman Presidential candidate.

There will, nonetheless, be serious barriers to such a candidacy. Some will be ridiculous ("Who's going to cook the children's dinner?"). Some will reflect a deep-seated double standard: when Colorado's Pat Schroeder campaigned for her husband in a local election, she was congratulated on her interest; when *she* ran for Congress, she was attacked for neglecting her home. Women also find their personal lives under intense, sometimes unfair scrutiny. One New York Congressman kept calling his female opponent a "divorcée," even though she had been married to her present husband for more than twenty years. Waging a successful campaign requires an ability to understand such prejudices and to respond to them.

In practical terms, that means, first of all, that a woman candidate for President will have to come from the political mainstream, rather than from a feminist base, no matter how committed that base is. A militant activist with a special constituency can win—Bella Abzug from Manhattan's Upper West Side, for example—but a national campaign will almost certainly be more

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**BY JEFF GREENFIELD**

WIDE WORLD PHOTOS; UPI

successful with a candidate like Ella Grasso, who spent twenty-two years in government as a legislator, state official and congresswoman, before running for governor of Connecticut. Given the incredible variety of the American electorate, a woman President will probably be cast in the mold of Ella, not Bella.

Political history bears that out. When the first candidate from a once-unrepresented group seeks office, that candidate almost always has to refute the expectations of voters—to say "do not judge me too quickly." Thus, John Kennedy took an adamant stand against aid to parochial schools, and the sending of an Ambassador to the Vatican. When Tom Bradley ran for Mayor of Los Angeles successfully in 1973 (as opposed to his losing race in 1969), he stressed the fact that for twenty-one years he had been a policeman. It is hardly a measure of political sophistication that some citizens assume that a Catholic President would take policy direction from his spiritual leader, or that a black mayor would somehow be on the side of criminals, but those assumptions were quite real. To have ignored them, to have put forth a candidate who affirmed those assumptions, would have been a fatal political problem. Significantly, both Ella Grasso and New York Lt. Governor Mary Anne Krupsak stressed their personal opposition to abortion in their successful campaigns.

The challenge for a woman candidate, then, is to wage a campaign that deliberately moves to wider ground, that makes "non-women's" issues a major concern. For example, one of our most neglected areas of national debate is industrial health and safety: the conditions in our plants, factories and mines that kill fourteen thousand Americans a year and injure or sicken a million more. This is not thought of as a classically "woman's" issue in the sense that abortion, child-care or consumer protection are; indeed, despite the millions of women doing industrial labor, worker safety is perceived as a "male" issue. A woman candidate who directed her energies to that issue, who went into plants and factories and mines to see conditions for herself, would help shape a campaign with breadth.

Crime is the same kind of issue, a concern that conjures up the desire for a tough, burly cop on the beat to protect the lives and safety of the populace. Despite the heated rhetoric on all sides of the issue, it is fair to say that crime, particularly in our cities, has gotten out of control, and that the answers we have tried so far have not worked. Taken out of the hands of demagogues, crime is a legitimate issue, since unsafe streets strike at the very heart of a neighborhood's sense of security. A woman can-

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didate, just as her male counterpart, should be actively concerned with programs to fight crime. For her, it would have the added political benefit of dissipating the notion that a woman is somehow not "tough" enough to fight crime.

On the other hand, a woman candidate might well benefit from a shrewd use of stereotypical assumptions about females. For example, the elderly are a group that is growing bigger, more vulnerable and more politically active every year; and given actuarial tables, there are more old women than old men. A woman candidate might well be able to strike a particularly responsive chord here, since women are supposed to reflect more compassion and emotional empathy than males. (This may be nothing more than a stereotype, but since a woman candidate is often harmed by such views, she might as well do what she can to take advantage of them.)

Another answer to the prejudices against a woman President lies in the nature of her campaign. Energy, vigor, "toughness" cannot merely be claimed; they must be shown. The most important campaign tactic of a woman candidate would be constant visibility: a strenuous fifteen-hour-a-day campaign that demonstrated clearly that the candidate had the stamina to take on the job. Breakfast meetings in Detroit, a luncheon speech in Cleveland, a twilight rally in Chicago, a nighttime address in New York—that is the pace to which Presidential candidates march.

To many thoughtful observers of politics, such pageantry is wasteful, trivial. I don't agree: clumsy as it is, the pace of Presidential campaigning *is* a test of a candidate's dedication, and it is one way of forcing a candidate out of isolation. For a woman candidate, a strenuous campaign has another advantage: it shows that she is cut from the cloth of Presidential contenders, that she can bear up under the weight of office. A smart campaign might well change the nature of some campaign travels: a few less luncheon speeches to Chambers of Commerce, and a few more face-to-face talks with ordinary voters, would be an undisguised blessing. But remember: a woman candidate *is* being held to a higher, unfair standard. She cannot, for example, schedule a nap into her daily campaign routine (as did Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Henry Cabot Lodge in 1960) and get away with it. Yes, Presidential campaigns are too long, but the first female candidate for that office cannot change the rules of the game so long as there are millions of Americans who believe a woman cannot play by the present rules.

Where would such a candidate come from? Politically, I mean. The conventional assumption is that a woman would probably run as a liberal, since the women's movement is clearly shaded toward the left of the political spectrum. Yet, that very fact might make a more conservative woman candidate far more effective. The unsentimental nature of American conservatism (its opponents would call it heartless) seems to be a strong antidote to the belief that women are emotional "bleeding hearts."

In Boston, Louise Day Hicks has held down congressional and councilmanic seats with her vocal anti-busing stand; the opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment is led by diehard Goldwater supporter Phyllis Schlafly, who travels the country urging women to remain with home, hearth and kin. And in Britain, Margaret Thatcher has become the first woman to lead a major political party (and therefore Britain's first potential woman Prime Minister) with a strong conservative platform—in fact, as a cabinet minister under former Prime Minister Heath, she led a drive to scrap the free milk program in schools. That is exactly the kind of issue that a stereotypical woman politician would have been for, not against.

Thus, a woman candidate for President would carry an extra burden if her politics reflected the emotional, effusive style and substance of, say, a Hubert Humphrey campaign, with its uncontrolled, limitless supply of bombast and good cheer. Similarly, Eugene McCarthy's use of acerbic wit and literary grace, which some voters found refreshing, would probably work against a woman candidate, from whom such behavior would be considered "typically female."

The point is that you cannot combat prejudice in politics through folk songs, good intentions or polite evasions. A candidate from a disenfranchised or unrepresented group carries burdens no conventional candidate shoulders—and those burdens will not go away by protesting them unfair! when a prejudice bubbles to the surface. Male candidates are never asked if their careers have hurt their children (although there is strong evidence to support such a charge), just as white candidates are not asked if they are going to represent only one race, just as Protestant candidates are not asked if they will kneel and kiss the ring of the Archbishop of Canterbury. And the way to go at these feelings is to ventilate them—with candor, humor and understanding.

When the religious issue was bubbling over in 1960, John Kennedy addressed a meeting of Baptist ministers in Houston, a group bound to reflect uneasiness and suspicion over the prospects of a Catholic Presidency. His speech, and his answers to their questions, were effective enough to be used as a television commercial throughout that campaign. Running for Mayor in 1973, Tom Bradley openly talked about white voters' fears.

"Some of you may have voted against me four years ago because you worried

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that I'd only care about blacks," Bradley said. He reminded voters that Los Angeles has the smallest black population of any major city, and then repudiated bloc-style government. Bradley's very willingness to openly acknowledge the issue of ethnic voting helped ease some voters' minds.

A woman Presidential candidate would have to do the same thing: address herself directly and openly to the symbolic, and therefore real, fears of her audience. She would almost certainly need a strong family behind her, to demonstrate the reality of fusing a political career and family life. (Americans still are reluctant to vote for a divorced male, as Nelson Rockefeller found out a decade ago, and any deviation from "conventional" family attitudes can be dangerous, as Betty Ford discovered this year.) A strong political track record would dispel the notion of monthly incapacity or physical weakness. She would need the support of people she has worked with to speak out for her, particularly the kind of voters who would seem least likely to vote for a woman. If I were planning her television strategy, and if she had worked successfully in, say, worker safety, I would round up the roughest, toughest group of hardhats I could find for a commercial explaining exactly how Ms. X fought for them and won those fights.

The success of a Presidential campaign by a woman cannot be gauged so far in advance. Much of it would depend on the issues of that campaign. If war and peace became dominant, a woman would almost certainly suffer, because the sense of concern about matters military suggest the image of a firm, masculine hand at the helm, Indira Ghandi and Golda Meir not withstanding. A campaign fought on economic issues would probably help a woman, since the hard facts about managing a family with a shrinking dollar are well-known to any woman.

We must also remember that most "first" campaigns don't win. Al Smith, the first Catholic candidate for President, lost in a landslide in 1928, and other "breakthrough" forays failed at first—all three women candidates for U.S. Senator lost in 1974 (although all were running against popular incumbents). But one of the most important changes in politics is that women are starting to vote more regularly for other women.

"We have been taught since birth to compete with each other," says Betsy Wright, head of the National Women's Educational Fund, which teaches political skills to women. "Now, for the first time, women are joining with each other." And, Ronnie Eldridge, one of the most prominent figures in New York Democratic Party politics and a former high-ranking city official, says that "women know now that the only way to change things is through power—we'll never get it from men."

There is another still unanswered question about such a campaign—whether a woman might have specific advantages because of her sex. For example, in a year of colorless, unexciting candidates, a woman would have an instant and powerful advantage of recognition (Mary Anne Krupsak's primary campaign for Lieutenant Governor of New York was greatly aided by her uniqueness). Fund-raising and volunteer efforts would have a clear edge here because a woman candidate—even though she would not be running as a feminist—would be a cause in itself. In Presidential campaigns, at least before the conventions, a candidate who is established as the center of interest tends to be a strong candidate for the nomination.

Further, there might well be a hidden vote *for* a woman candidate; not just from women, but from at least some men who were tired of playing the *macho* role. It is my own opinion, also, that a woman candidate for President would be less threatening than other minorities—specifically, a black or Jewish candidate. The fears voters have about blacks, for example, are largely fears about public policy—welfare, crime, "special privileges." But bigotry toward women is less directed to this public area than to more private concerns: who is the sexual initiator, who raises the family? In other words, a typical voter might be far less afraid of electing a woman President than of electing a Jewish or black President. That is hardly encouraging, but it shows that a woman candidate might be less dangerous than some politicians now think.

Politics is an enterprise without fixed rules, an enterprise in which many experts apply inapplicable lessons learned from past campaigns. It is also an enterprise in which ego, personal ambition and emotional needs play powerful, sometimes decisive, roles. A campaign for a woman President would produce its full share—in the blind fears of some men and women, in the inevitable charges of "sellout" by some feminists, in the confusion any new factor brings.

But the recent past proves that politics does not work that well when it's left to the pros. The last ten years—with domestic violence, a futile, divisive war, wholesale corruption, and now economic stagnation—make the conventional political process vulnerable to a new kind of campaign, a new kind of politics. I am convinced that new campaign, and that new politics, will emerge in the form of a serious woman candidate for President within the next decade, and with a successful struggle for a major party nomination before this century is over.

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*Editor's Note:* Jeff Greenfield, a former aide to Robert F. Kennedy and John V. Lindsay, is now a free-lance writer and political consultant.