

'Politics Makes Strange Bedfellows'

"Politics makes strange bedfellows" . . . but bedfellows nonetheless, says one political consultant. Man appears to be more animal than political when let loose on the campaign trail and women are advised to steer clear of their advances

to protect their own future.

In the following article, writer Jeff Greenfield examines the strange morality that governs political campaigns and tells how women on the inside can get burned.



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By JEFF GREENFIELD

In the past seven years, I've worked in a lot of campaigns that were sources of professional and personal satisfaction; I've seen good people win office and helped get rid of some bad ones. But the single most disturbing part of politics for me lies not in the candidates but in the process of politics; and most specifically, in a narrow-minded, war-time mentality which makes the values of compassion and decency all but laughable.

And the most blatant sign of this emotional hardness is the hostile, almost terrorized way most political operatives treat women who attain a reasonably high rank in a campaign. Almost without exception, their stature is attributed not to talent and hard work, but to the most obvious kind of sexual manipulation.

I've heard of one case where a woman's working relationship with a candidate was almost destroyed when other staff members hinted to the candidate's children that the woman had designs on her father. Countless times I've heard it said, with a knowing wink, that a female campaign worker bed-hopped her way into power.

One long-time political worker explained the rumor mill this way: "It's divided into three parts. If a campaign worker is plain or homely, then she got the job as a substitute for sex — compensation for an empty bed. If she's attractive and outgoing, people assume she's sleeping with the candidate or campaign manager. If she's attractive, but is cold to sexual offers, then, of course, she's a lesbian."

This does not mean political campaigns are living embodiments of the Watch and Ward Society. To the contrary, the fever pitch of campaigns, the compressed time and space of electoral work, the travel that throws a few hundred people together night after night and the sheer emotional to

days and seven-day weeks take, often throw campaign workers together for brief encounters.

There's something of a summer romance or winter cruise quality to campaigns and passionate couplings go with the territory. Particularly in presidential campaigns, where staff assistants sometimes attain the status of minor celebrities, local volunteers sometimes make the visitors welcome above and beyond the call of duty. Celebrity bedding is, after all, not confined to visiting rock stars and athletes. Even Robert Redford, who studied politics to make "The Candidate," says, "When I got into it, I couldn't believe how male it all was. Women are just for sex."

For a woman who is interested

in reaching the policy-making level of politics, however, sex is probably the least effective method of reaching that goal. For one thing, it tends to limit other people's views of your talents.

"Campaign workers are the biggest gossips in the world," says Maureen Kelly, who has worked in many Republican campaigns in Pennsylvania. "They talk to each other all the time about their conquests. More often than not, the women who fall into bed with high-ranking 'pols' never seem to get the good jobs."

More important, I think, is that some politicians regard bed as the only place for a woman in a campaign (not counting typing and coffee-making). The real battle is to

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force these people to regard women as competent workers, instead of as an aggregation of secondary sex characteristics.

Bed is a less than ideal arena for this bit of "consciousness raising." As Rep. Pat Schroeder from Colorado put it, "I have a uterus and a brain and they both work."

One of the most successful alternatives to the battle for respect is to take on a campaign where there is no competition for power because no one thinks the battle can be won — in other words, to work for a "sure loser."

Politicians are a little like sharks; they can smell fresh meat a mile away. You can always tell a winning campaign by the number of job-hungry leaders lurking about, swearing eternal fidelity to the candidate — as long as the polls are up. But when a 100-to-1 shot enters a race, it's hard to find workers.

This is how Anne Wexler entered politics. As a suburban Connecticut housewife, she had spent years in local campaigns doing the heavy work while men held the titles and the limelight.

But when her anger over the war in Vietnam led her to organize a peace campaign against incumbent, pro-war Democrats, she found herself a campaign manager by default.

"There was no challenge to me, no arguing about my authority," Wexler says. "But you have to remember — people weren't exactly knocking down doors to get in."

By gaining the experience and the authority of actually running campaigns, Anne Wexler wound up organizing Eugene McCarthy's campaign in Connecticut in 1968, and then managing Joe Duffey's unsuccessful Senate race in 1970.

By the time a "credible" campaign came along, Wexler's experience made her too formidable to relegate to an unseen role.

Marilyn Shapiro found herself as a

key policy adviser to Elizabeth Holtzman when she ran for Congress in 1972 for the same reason; almost nobody else thought Holtzman could unseat the 50-year incumbent, Emmanuel Celler. But Holtzman did and Marilyn Shapiro became her top congressional aide.

Organizing around "causes," whether for local improvements or national policy, often develops those skills that political campaigns desperately need: Organizing events and rallies, planning a schedule and always, always, raising money.

Learning these skills is critical because in politics there is no such thing as an "affirmative action" program. You cannot decree a quota system which will give 50 per cent of all policy-making jobs to women and expect that system to work, unless the women have learned the craft of political organizing first hand.

When Anne Wexler was working in the McCarthy campaign — after more than a decade of grassroots work — she recalls, "The people who used to drive me crazy were the Sak's Fifth Avenue women, who'd come in for an hour between their tennis games and their massages, and say, 'I want to help make policy.' In politics, you have to pay your dues."

In the last few years, the traditional image of political women as cheerleaders and bed-warmers has undergone a radical change.

More and more women who have paid their dues have come into the political arena, prepared to play for keeps. Whether because they see politics as the way to win feminist goals (equal pay, day care), or because they seek a greater share of power, women are going to be a more significant factor in campaigns from now on.

And the most fascinating question yet to be answered is not whether this will change national policy — but whether it will change the atmosphere of campaigning itself.

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