

## Spousal Politics and the Bipartisan Positioning of Hillary Rodham Clinton

By Julie Biando Edwards, Mansfield Library, University of Montana, USA

1 Towards the end of the first Republican Presidential debate, moderator Chris Matthews asked the candidates the following question, "Seriously, would it be good for America to have Bill Clinton back living in the White House?" The question, which drew laughter from the men standing at the podiums, is neither as ridiculous nor as innocuous as it may at first appear. The former governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney, responded with a question of his own, an incredulous "You've got to be kidding?". By way of elaboration Matthews, who had asked the question with a straight face, replied "No, I'm not. His wife's running — have you heard?" It can be argued that such a question, and Matthews's subsequent point of clarification, set the tone for the ways in which the complex issue of gender will be handled in the 2008 Presidential Election. With that single inquiry into the candidates' thoughts on Bill Clinton, Matthews at once evoked the most powerful Democratic candidate, and the party frontrunner, without mentioning her name or asking the Republicans to engage with her as a political rival. Instead, Hillary Rodham Clinton was relegated to that role which has been for years her greatest source of political and personal trouble — Bill Clinton's wife.

2 While it could be argued that such an inquiry is simply ridiculous, the fact remains that the very act of asking reveals the ways in which gender both currently informs and will continue to shape this election. What looks on the surface like a simple, though silly, question, actually illustrates the troubling ways in which a candidate's gender can overshadow any real focus on issues or political platforms. The problem is further complicated by the fact that Hillary Rodham Clinton is being referred to *not* exactly based on her gender — she is not being held up as a *female* candidate — but by that most gendered of terms — *wife*. Those who have watched Rodham Clinton over the years recognize the special weight that this term carries. Among the various roles she has played — lawyer, mother, First Lady, Senator — that of wife has always been most problematic. Whether it is as the "high-powered career wife" (Kingston 86) who doesn't know her place (such wives were later to be christened "Hillary Wives" by the *Wall Street Journal* [Kingston 86] the political wife who never could quite master the art of smiling and staying silent; the Baby Boomer wife struggling to balance work, family, and personal fulfillment; or the cuckolded wife — ironically the one iteration of the role that brought her both support and sympathy — Rodham Clinton has never seemed entirely comfortable when defined in terms of her husband. Quite simply, she has never been

able to finesse the behavior that people expect — and demand — from a wife. By framing her as Bill Clinton's wife, rather than as a political candidate in her own right, Matthews evokes all of the tortured history of her relationship with her husband while at the same time casting her in the role in which she seems least comfortable.

3 Because of the complex relationship with her husband and her discomfort with wifely roles, casting Hillary Rodham Clinton merely as Bill Clinton's wife is hugely problematic. The issue is further complicated though, by the fact that Rodham Clinton herself has relied on her connection to her spouse when she has found it to be politically expedient. She has, throughout her campaign, repeatedly referred to her husband's time in the White House, and subsequently to her own time there as First Lady, implying that her tenure as First Lady — as Bill Clinton's wife — has given her a degree of experience in politics that will serve the country well. Her use of her husband, a successful President still wildly popular with American Democrats, is pragmatic. After nearly eight years of deception, economic downturn, and war, hearkening back to the Clinton years is an understandably attractive way to shore up votes. Realistically, of course, one can't ignore the fact that indeed Rodham Clinton is the wife of a former President and, regardless of her comfort level with that position, she cannot feasibly run a campaign without mentioning this fact. The problem, though, is that in much the same way that Matthews chose to cast her as a wife and not a candidate, her own positioning of herself as Bill Clinton's wife downplays her significant contributions to politics and casts her as an object, not as a subject, in this presidential race.

4 This paper will examine the various ways in which Hillary Rodham Clinton has been positioned as a wife by both Republicans and Democrats and will analyze why this bipartisan positioning, though politically shrewd, is nonetheless problematic from both a political and a feminist perspective. It will examine the role that gender plays in this election and the effect that gender is having on the ways in which her Democratic challengers are being perceived and are constructing their own images. Finally, some of the problems with the way in which gender is being discussed — or not — in the 2008 presidential election will be explored.

### **Rodham Clinton as a Woman and Wife**

5 Few other modern American women have captured public imagination in the way that Hillary Rodham Clinton has and no other woman in modern politics provokes such a range of emotions in such a variety of people. She has had the hope of feminists pinned on her, only to see much of that hope turn to criticism in the wake of her husband's sex scandal and her decision to stay married to him (recall how she told *60 Minutes*, in response to allegations of

sexual misconduct on the part of Bill Clinton, "I'm not sitting here as some little woman standing by my man" [Clinton, *60 Minutes*], making her choice to do exactly that all the more unpalatable to some feminists). Likewise, some conservatives have held her up as the worst example of the modern woman, one who values her career over her family, is openly ambitious, and doesn't know her place. Despite being a champion for women's rights as human rights, much of her criticism comes from women who feel that she is too harsh, too cold, too unfeminine, and who have repeatedly said that she doesn't relate well to ordinary women or truly understand their concerns. On the other hand, her success in politics has made her a target of those who say that she is no better than the good old boys who have run Washington for decades.

6 In order to truly understand the ways in which discussions of gender have so often settled into defining Rodham Clinton as a wife, it is important to look in more detail at her own troubled history with that role. The meeting and marriage of Bill Clinton and Hillary Rodham has been analyzed in dozens of books, and both have shared their version of these events in their own autobiographies, *My Life* and *Living History*, respectively. Both write that they were not thinking of marriage when they met and fell in love, but that the attraction, both physical and intellectual, was intense and thus set their relationship in motion. It is interesting to note that, when she was asked by Bill Clinton to marry him, Hillary Rodham at first said no and, when they finally married, her status as a nontraditional wife was set from the start with her decision to retain her maiden name. Though not an uncommon practice now, retention of one's maiden name was still fairly new in the 1970s and her decision to be addressed as Hillary Rodham created personal and political problems for the couple:

Because I knew I had my own professional interests and did not want to create any confusion or conflict of interest with my husband's public career, it made perfect sense to me to continue using my own name. Bill didn't mind, but our mothers did. Virginia [Clinton's mother] cried when Bill told her, and my mother addressed her letters to "Mr. and Mrs. Bill Clinton" [. . .] it was a personal decision, a small (I thought) gesture to acknowledge that while I was committed to our union, I was still me. (Rodham Clinton 91-92)

Conflict with their respective mothers over her name might have been the first of the problems that Rodham Clinton would have as a wife, but they were nothing compared to the political problems this "personal decision" would create for her husband.

7 In 1980 Bill Clinton ran for a second term as governor in his home state of Arkansas and lost. Apparently, Arkansas voters were uncomfortable with his wife retaining her maiden name for, as Bill Clinton writes in his autobiography, "though it never showed up as a negative in our polls, it bothered a lot of people" (296). Rodham Clinton writes of how friends

began approaching her with suggestions that she adopt her husband's last name. One friend told her that "some people were upset when they received invitations to events at the Governor's Mansion from 'Governor Bill Clinton and Hillary Rodham'" and their daughter's birth announcement was also "apparently a hot subject of conversation around the state" (Rodham Clinton 92). She recounts a fascinating and telling scenario concocted by another mutual friend in which, to appease voters, "Bill would put his foot on my throat, yank me by my hair, and say something like 'Woman, you're going to take my last name and that's that!' Flags would wave, hymns would be sung, and the name would change" (93). Though the story is recounted with a good-natured tongue in cheek tone, and acknowledged by Rodham Clinton as a "joke," it speaks volumes about the ways in which the public expected her to conform and, in the event that she didn't, the ways in which it expected her husband to exercise his rights as the head of his household and force her to do so. It was the first public battle that Rodham Clinton would have to face regarding her status and role as a wife and, in the end, political pragmatism won the day — urged to "do the right thing: start using Bill's name" (93) she eventually announced that she would be known as Hillary Rodham Clinton.

8        Though the name change signifies a relatively small sacrifice, one she was ultimately willing to make for the sake of her husband's political career, the battle over what she should be called set the tone for the ways in which the public would view her as a wife. Her decision to adopt a married name obviously did not come easily to her, and understanding her discomfort with the decision (as well as her reasoning for eventually choosing to add the new surname) illustrates clearly the first of her many struggles with her role as wife. Today, in the midst of the 2008 presidential race, the issue has come up again as she struggles to find a balance between her personal preference and the expectations of voters. An article in the *Albany Times Union* notes that she "identifies herself as 'Hillary Clinton' in her campaign press releases and on her campaign website [HillaryClinton.com]" (Powell A1). Though the campaign insists that there is no significance to the change, the article quotes Laurie Scheuble, a scholar of women's maiden name usage, as saying that this "decision to drop her maiden name puts her in sync with the vast majority of married women in America" (qtd. in Powell A1), women who, theoretically, should be her base. Political expedience played a significant role in Rodham Clinton's initial decision to alter her name and obviously continues to do so today: in her presidential campaign press releases she is "Hillary Clinton," as senator of New York she is "Hillary Rodham Clinton," and her campaign bumper stickers and buttons announce her simply as "Hillary." There exists, in the many names of the candidate, something for everyone.

9        The drama over her name may have been the first, but it was most certainly not the last of the trials she would face as Bill Clinton's wife. As his political career took off — fully supported by Rodham Clinton — her husband's long history of infidelities began to be revealed. Rumors of his philandering would continue to grow, coming to light on a national scale in 1992, when allegations surfaced of an affair with Gennifer Flowers, and culminating in the devastating public revelation of his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. Rodham Clinton endured growing scrutiny of her marriage and was continuously forced to defend her relationship in front of a national media hungry for information about the inner workings of their household. Especially troubling were the allegations that she, by being so assertive, ambitious, and — even — sexually frigid or uninterested in men, had forced him into these relationships. Infidelity on the part of men often gets couched in terms of how their wives have failed them in one way or another, and such justifications were gleefully applied to the situation between Rodham Clinton and her husband. For one of America's most famous feminists — the woman who became the very model of the new wife — this justification was made even more problematic by the reaction of feminists and other women who felt betrayed by her decision to salvage her marriage — to "stand by her man."

10       It became an impossible situation. Rodham Clinton had to contend with those who had long lamented the rise of the feminist wife — the woman who did not know her place and put career and personal ambition over the nurturing of her family and the care of her husband — and who used the example of her husband's affair as concrete evidence that feminism had eroded family life. At the same time, feminists and other women criticized her for not divorcing her husband and moving on. Accused of staying with Bill Clinton for her own political agenda, she was further criticized for being so ambitious that she willingly overlooked infidelity and dealt with public embarrassment for the sake of political power. All of these criticisms accuse her of being too much like a man — she is not feminine and nurturing enough to satisfy her husband while at the same time her ambition and hunger for political power — typical of a man — is cited as the reason she decided not to divorce her husband. Complicating all of this is the fact that, despite all of this criticism, her approval ratings began to soar. The more she was seen as a wife — and a jilted wife at that — the more the American public apparently sympathized with her. Rodham Clinton had been shown her place, and the public smugly approved.

11       Anita Hill, in a brilliant piece in the *New York Times*, commented on this fascinating phenomenon, noting that:

[Her] approval rating as First Lady was at its lowest when she tackled health reform, rose steadily when she confined her activity to the traditional role as White House hostess, and was at its highest when she stoically stood by her husband despite his marital infidelity [. . .] [she is] only popular when she [is] seen as a wife. (31)

If this is true, and if the media insists on focusing on her as a wife, how does that shape the current campaign? How is she being positioned in this race as a wife and, if she is indeed "only popular when she is seen as a wife," how is she using that to her advantage? Finally, in what other ways is she being cast in terms of gender, and how do her problems with gender affect her male opponents and their public images?

### **The 2008 Presidential Race**

12 Chris Matthews's question at the end of that first debate was one of the more interesting instances of the positioning of Rodham Clinton as a wife. Recalling that political expedience has in the past trumped personal convictions, Rodham Clinton has positioned herself in relation to her husband when she has found it to be to her advantage. As her campaign matured and she and Bill Clinton began making more public appearances together it seemed as though discussion revolved around Clinton, rather than around the candidate. This is, of course, to be expected. He is an immensely popular former President and the public has long been fascinated by him and by the relationship between the two. However, one of the dangers that her campaign considered was the fact that he might overshadow the candidate. News stories about the two, with headlines such as "Bill Clinton Plunges into White House Campaign with his Wife" (Nicholas) and "Bill Clinton Steps into Spotlight in Wife's Campaign," ("Bill Clinton") seemed to suggest that this was indeed a possibility. The former, written by *LA Times* staff writer Peter Nicholas, stated that "rolling out the 42nd president reflects a calculation on the part of Hillary Clinton's campaign that he can rally Democratic voters without overshadowing his wife — not an easy thing to pull off" (A3) adding that "the more public her husband's role, the more the campaign may remind voters of a controversial theme from the 1992 presidential race — the Clintons as a 'two-for-the-price-of-one' package" (A3).

13 This "two-for-the-price-of-one" issue is particularly interesting because, after the 1992 election, when the seriousness of this campaign promise was revealed, the public resented Rodham Clinton for setting up offices in the West Wing and taking over health care reform. Her approval ratings plummeted and she was forced to reconsider her role as First Lady. While it made a great slogan on the trail — and one especially apt for a new generation of politicians who represented new ideas about marriage and family — this particular package

deal is not what Americans wanted in the end. In this election, however, voters seem excited by the idea of a Clinton "team." The same article quotes a voter in Iowa who noted that "'Bill is one of the best presidents we've ever had. And it bothers me that a lot of people continue to use the sexual things as an excuse not to look at the good things he did. I don't see how anyone cannot get excited about a team like that'" (A3). Nicholas quotes another Iowa voter who commented that "'I've always loved the man . . . with him and her together, it's a solid situation'" (A3). The irony here should not be overlooked — the "team" is great, so long as the players know their roles. In the eyes of the public, Rodham Clinton overstepped her bounds when she attempted to take on proactive roles in her husband's administration. Now that the reverse might be true — Nicholas writes that Rodham Clinton has, on the campaign trail, "[made] plain that her husband [. . .] would remain an influential advisor" (A3) — voters seem delighted. As a wife, her role should have been very prescribed — she was not expected to offer any serious counsel to the President. Yet, now that she is running, the public expects her spouse to explicitly, and perhaps publicly, serve as an advisor. Though she may have the most powerful office in the land, she will still be expected to rely on her husband, who in turn will be expected to routinely weigh in on issues.

14     Though some may wonder if Rodham Clinton would even be a viable candidate had she not been married to an ex-president, supporters of her campaign optimistically continue to insist that voters are interested in the candidate as a politician and potential leader, not as the spouse of the former president. Patrick Healy wrote in the *New York Times Online* that "the goal [of the campaign] is to position Mrs. Clinton to run for president not as a partner or a proxy, but as her own person." He goes on to quote Donna Brazile, a Democrat strategist, who perhaps naively asserts that "voters aren't interested in the Clintons as a couple as much as they're interested in what Mrs. Clinton is doing or saying" (qtd. in Healy). Democratic donor and Rodham Clinton supporter Robert Zimmerman echoes this by saying that "'her national appeal and national strength is not based upon her relationship with Bill Clinton, but her extraordinary stature and success as a U.S. Senator'" (qtd. in Healy). While this may prove true for the majority of Americans who will eventually vote in this election, the fact remains that Rodham Clinton has long been viewed in light of her husband, and particularly in light of her relationship with him. In the end, neither she nor her opponents can seem to resist hitching her rising political star to his. Indeed, though her opponents may use her connection to Bill Clinton to cast her in a negative light, bringing her husband along on the campaign trail may be the most politically shrewd move she can make. If it is true that, as Anita Hill states, Rodham Clinton is "only popular when she [is] seen as a wife" (31) then her campaign's

efforts to showcase her husband may eventually prove to further heighten her popularity and strengthen her appeal.

15 Her role of wife notwithstanding, there are other interesting ways in which gender is playing a role in the 2008 presidential election. Michelle Cottle, writing in *The New Republic*, noted that "for as long as there have been women candidates, there have been rules about how to run against them — what to say, what to avoid saying, which stereotypes to use to undermine their credibility" (9). While one of these stereotypes has often been that women somehow are not "tough enough" to lead at the highest levels, Rodham Clinton faces criticism of a different sort. She has often been accused of being too masculine — a persistent stereotype leveled against feminist women. The suggestion that Rodham Clinton is unfeminine is an attack on her gender with which she has had to contend ever since her days as Arkansas First Lady, if not before. This election is no different. Suggestions that Rodham Clinton is a man in women's clothes range from the obviously absurd to the more complex and problematic. To understand the absurdity of some attacks, one has to look no further than the YouTube video depicting Rusty Shackleford singing his song "Hillary Clinton is a Man," which includes these lines "I can see through your makeup and dress/All the way down to your hairy chest" and whose refrain is simply "Hillary Clinton is a man, man" (Shackleford). The video and song are, one assumes, ironic, as is the "Hillary Clinton Nutcracker" sold by Eagleview USA. The nutcracker is a model of the candidate with "Stainless Steel Thighs" between which the proud owner can crack nuts. The device is so popular that the company has also produced a men's t-shirt depicting the product with the slogan "I Feel the Squeeze". The women's t-shirt asks simply, "Why does Hillary Get to Have All the Fun?" ("Hillary Nutcracker").

16 The nutcracker, absurd as it is, manages to sum up the ways in which both Rodham Clinton's supporters and detractors view her. In an interview with the *New York Post* Gibson Carothers, one of the product developers, said that the device bridges political divides. The appeal, he said, is that the nutcracker highlights the candidate's dual public persona, asking "does it represent the pushy, polarizing Hillary or the tough Hillary that [sic] can handle a right-wing nut?" (Venezia 003). It is a fascinating representation, one that has served to sum up Rodham Clinton for years, and one that has been applied to all overtly ambitious women. On the one hand, the nutcracker represents the ambitious, modern woman who is not afraid to "crack a few nuts" — behavior practiced by men for ages — in order to get what she wants and/or deserves. On the other hand, women who are this openly ambitious are seen as dangerous to men in particular and threatening to the patriarchy in general. They are viewed



as "ball breakers" who manage to at once elicit respect from women (why *does* Hillary get to have all the fun?), fear from men (who "feel the squeeze"), and derision from both, for ultimately many feel that such behavior is unseemly ("pushy and polarizing").

17 Of course, Rodham Clinton has always been accused of being too manly, and in this presidential race, her party rivals are utilizing that stereotype in fascinating ways. Amazingly, for the first time in U.S. history, the question being asked is "Who is woman enough to be President?" In an effort to secure female voters, Democratic candidates are seemingly trying to "out-woman" each other. While Rodham Clinton has always tried to soften her image, she still comes across as tougher than her chief rivals Barack Obama and John Edwards, both of whom frequently display their softer sides in public. This particular question came to a head in July 2007, when Joan Walsh of *Salon.com* interviewed Elizabeth Edwards, wife of candidate John Edwards. Walsh asked Edwards if she ever felt conflicted about supporting her husband against two historical American candidates, an African-American man and a woman. She responded by saying that she is not in the least conflicted and stated further that "I think one of the things that make [sic] me so completely comfortable with [supporting my husband] is that keeping that door open to women is actually more a policy of John's than Hillary's" (Walsh). This quote alone would have been enough to fuel media fires, but Edwards continued on in language that seemed to reinforce the persistent gender stereotypes that have for so long been applied to Rodham Clinton:

Look, I'm sympathetic, because when I worked as a lawyer, I was the only woman in these rooms, too, and you want to reassure them you're as good as a man. And sometimes you feel you have to behave as a man and not talk about women's issues. I'm sympathetic — she wants to be commander in chief. But she's just not as vocal a women's advocate as I want to see. (Walsh)

18 Edwards, in drawing this distinction, managed to cut to the heart of Rodham Clinton's "woman problem," as Anna Quindlen so succinctly puts it (74). In a commentary in *Newsweek* she summed up the feelings of many female voters when she wrote that

when we imagined a woman president we imagined a new day, a new strategy, a new vision and new tactics [. . .] but with Senator Clinton's candidacy, the brand new is the same old, revolution and throwback simultaneously. She has been part of the political scene for so long that an entire generation of girls have grown up never knowing a world without Hillary, front and center. The fantasy was that the first woman president would be someone who would turn the whole lousy system inside out and upside down. Instead the first significant woman contender is someone who seems to have the system down to a fine art. (74)

Though she currently enjoys the highest percentage of female voter support among the Democratic candidates, many women still either distrust or dislike her. Elisabeth Bumiller

noted in a *New York Times* piece reflecting upon Rodham Clinton's Senate race in 2000 that it is "a truism of Hillary Rodham Clinton's campaign that the candidate inspired ambivalence, resentment, and even loathing among women, the very group that should have been her base" (5). As Edwards's comment illustrates, this is still an issue seven years later. Men have always dominated politics and the law. To succeed in such careers, women have had to be tough ("bitchy") to get a seat at the table and to work towards breaking that infamous glass ceiling. The tough tactics that they have to employ to get ahead professionally sometimes seem to define their personal lives as well, causing resentment among other women who feel that they are unable to separate their identities as women from their identities as professionals. The article goes on to quote Gloria Steinem, who famously stated, "I think women can tell the difference between their personal feelings and their political welfare" (qtd. in Bumiller 5). Progressive female voters have used Steinem's comment to justify supporting Rodham Clinton even though they may dislike her persona or disagree with her personal decisions. Edwards's comment to Joan Walsh, though, complicates the matter for conflicted female voters who are torn between voting for the woman who may be the first female president and voting for a candidate they actually support and like. She deftly threw doubt on Steinem's assertion by explicitly stating that Rodham Clinton in fact does *not* have the interests of female voters at heart. American women, who have embraced Edwards for her warmth, openness, and refined toughness, have new reason to second guess Rodham Clinton, as a woman and as a candidate.

19 The quote naturally garnered immediate attention. *ABC News* noted that "a striking gender role reversal on the campaign trail has taken place. Clinton is seen by many as the tough one politically and stylistically, while Obama and Edwards are openly emoting, often about the trials of spending time away from family" ("Who's Woman"). Edwards's comment was quickly recast into the favored terms of this particular stereotype, and she was accused by some of calling Rodham Clinton a "man." *Salon.com* ran an article entitled "Hillary is from Mars, Obama is from Venus" in which Michael Scherer wrote that "on the Democratic campaign trail these days [. . .] gender roles are being swapped [. . .]. Hillary Clinton has run her campaign with all the muscular vision and authority of the macho candidates of yesteryear" ("Hillary"). Scherer went on to quote an Obama supporter who summed up the issue succinctly: "Obama is the female candidate. Obama is the woman [. . .]. He is the warm candidate, self-deprecating, soft, tender, sad eyes, great smile [. . .]. [Rodham Clinton] is the male candidate — in your face, authoritative, know-it-all" (qtd. in "Hillary"). The responses his article received, many of them criticizing him for making gender an issue in the campaign,

prompted him to respond in part by issuing the clarification that "Hillary Clinton is not a man" (Scherer, "Dear Readers").

20 In his clarification Scherer went on to raise some interesting questions about gender in the campaign, and about the ways his readers reacted to the discussion of this supposed swapping of gender roles:

Many critics said that discussions of gender roles on the campaign trail are too superficial to warrant space in a serious publication [. . .] [but] gender roles are still enormously important in politics, as I also tried to explain in the piece. No one seems to doubt this. Many of my critics point out that Republicans have had some success in recent years attacking Democrats as unmanly [. . .]. This all raises an interesting question, which I did not discuss in the original article, but which most of my critics raise. Is it possible to describe these gender-bending roles, or the concept of gender in politics at all, without playing into the hands of the Republican attack machine? Do Ann Coulter, who hurls gay slurs at John Edwards, and Rush Limbaugh, who decries daily the wussification of America, have a monopoly on this discussion? ("Dear Readers")

21 Scherer's thoughtful question presents the problem of discussing gender in politics in a most concise form. Is it truly possible to discuss gender in politics? If so, why do so few people actually talk about gender in any kind of *substantive* way, foregoing ironic stereotypes in favor of exploring the state of gender in American politics and life? If it is *not* possible to discuss gender, why is that the case? How has this fear of talking about gender — or this conception that gender is not a "serious" issue — affected the ways in which gender informs politics? Further, if the liberal readers of *Salon* deem gender a frivolous issue, does that indeed allow the discussion of gender to be co-opted by both conservative pundits and satirists such as Rusty Shackleford and the creators of the "Hillary Nutcracker?"

### **The Problems with Gender — Political and Feminist**

22 Michael Scherer highlights a problem that has no easy or satisfactory solution. Indeed, the role that gender should (or does) play in this election is hotly contested. Some, like Scherer, believe that gender is indeed an issue in this race and that the ways in which candidates choose to either subvert or capitalize upon feminine stereotypes marks a fascinating shift in public perceptions of women in power. Others, such as Karrin Vasby Anderson, argue that while "gender remains a significant but complicated variable" (106), the example set by Rodham Clinton's Senate campaign proved that eventually, "she went from being viewed primarily as a woman to being judged predominantly as a candidate" (109). This is an accurate statement of the 2000 Senate race, though whether it will prove true in the presidential election remains to be seen. Anita Dunn, quoted in *The New Republic*, insists that

"Hillary Clinton almost transcends gender" (qtd. in Cottle 10). In the same article Frank Luntz, a GOP pollster, encourages voters to "put gender aside. Just treat her like you would any other candidate" (qtd. in Cottle 10). Wise, progressive words, perhaps, except for the fact that they come immediately on the heels of these statements, "'She doesn't have to prove that she's tough enough or smart enough [. . .] [but, at the same time] she does not have a sense of warmth [or] the family advantage" (10). Gender — whether overtly discussed or tacitly hinted at — is, indeed, an issue in this election.

23 Because Rodham Clinton is the first viable female candidate to run for the executive office, and because she has for so long been viewed in light of her nonconformity to gender stereotypes, the problem becomes the way in which superficial and dated gender constructs — Rodham Clinton as a wife or a "man" — tends to overshadow any substantive discussion of gender in politics. The focus on gender raises a number of problems that are both political and social. Though any discussion about a female candidate will eventually come to issues of gender, the ways in which the public approaches these issues — or doesn't, as in the case of *Salon's* readers — both highlight and obscure real political and feminist concerns.

24 In her article, "From Spouses to Candidates: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Elizabeth Dole, and the Gendered Office of U.S. President," Vasby Anderson asserts that the transition from the role of wife to that of candidate is a "logical progression [. . .] the move from spouse to candidate seems a logical next step for women immersed in the political sphere, who often were drawn there by their own education, interests, and ambitions as much as by any spousal relationship" (108). This is certainly a fair assessment of Rodham Clinton, and Vasby Anderson goes on to note that her "public bid for the Senate hinged on her status as a woman and wife of the president. Gender was the fulcrum on which Clinton's political identity and corresponding public opinions about her turned" (110). The author contends, however, that this changed as her campaign matured, and the media began focusing on her as a "carpetbagger" (110) rather than as a woman. Seven years later, though, voters still view Rodham Clinton as a woman and a wife, and that particular view obscures political issues that should be brought to light — chief among them being the question of whether or not her experience as First Lady in fact qualifies her to run the country.

25 Much of the debate between Rodham Clinton and Obama specifically has had to do with experience. The Senator from Illinois is routinely accused of being too new to the political scene to really grasp the complex workings of national politics and international relations. To neutralize questions of experience (a hot topic in this election, given the nature of American foreign relations) Rodham Clinton has repeatedly hearkened back to her

husband's time in office and to her own extensive international travel while First Lady. But, in a Newsweek article on August 6, Richard Wolffe correctly observes that

[T]hese sanitized, ceremonial trips abroad are hardly preparation for the middle-of-the-night call from the Situation Room. After all, Laura Bush has also traveled extensively as First Lady, taking in 68 countries either with her husband or on her own. No one is saying she has the experience to be commander in chief. (30)

26 Earlier in the year Joe Klein of *Time* took a slightly more subtle angle on this issue, pointing out that "Clinton's years on the Armed Services Committee [during her tenure in the Senate] have been well spent," and noting that "her most important qualification for the job [is] a knowledge of national-security issues unmatched in the Democratic field" — a qualification she "failed to mention" during a question and answer session in Iowa (31). Klein quickly followed up this observation, noting that "Clinton's national-security experience should be no small advantage in an election that may well take place in the midst of a war. But it is likely to take a backseat to a more prominent question about experience — whether eight years as First Lady qualifies one to the President of the United States" (31). Though Klein calls this the "more prominent question," it is one that is not routinely being asked. As long as Rodham Clinton "fail[s] to mention" her accomplishments in the Senate and continues to rely on the Clinton Administration as the primary source of her experience, any discussion of her political experience can not be seriously considered. Given the popularity of Rodham Clinton towards the end of the Clinton Administration (recall that those were her "jilted wife" years) her continued references to that time could be read as a brilliant and calculated political move — she is asking voters to see her in the way that casts her in her best light, at least in the eyes of many voters. However, though she may be using the positive aspects of her role as First Lady and wife of Bill Clinton as a way of garnering public approval, in the end, if she allows the focus to remain on her success or popularity in the latter part of those eight years rather than on her accomplishments as a Senator, she will be doing a disservice to her own campaign and to other women in politics who have the opportunity trumpet their accomplishments as individuals but who choose not to do so.

27 Matthews's comment in the GOP debate explicitly casts Rodham Clinton in terms of her husband, but her own reliance on her experience during his administration does the same. While it is beyond debate that she was the most involved and politically active woman to hold the title of First Lady, each time she is primarily labeled as such — each time she chooses to highlight her experience in the White House over her experience in Congress — she reinforces the notion that for a woman to be truly successful she must be attached to a man. Bringing up the successes of Bill Clinton's Administration deftly positions her as sympathetic

figure while at the same time allowing her to highlight her successful husband, whose presence in the campaign casts her in a more favorable light with many voters. This is an adroit political move, for reasons mentioned earlier, but it ultimately tells voters nothing about her actual experience. For those critical of her experience, and for those critical of the ways in which she is using her role as *Mrs. Clinton* rather than as *Senator Rodham Clinton*, this insistence on bringing up her husband is at once problematic and emblematic of the ways in which superficial applications of gender are at least clouding, if not outright warping, the political discourse.

28 Focusing on the political problems raised by gender discourse in this election is only part of the issue at hand. There are social problems being raised as well — particularly regarding the status of feminism in America at the beginning of the 21st Century. As was mentioned above, each time Rodham Clinton relies on her husband's experience to highlight her own resume, she is unwittingly reinforcing the stereotype that women should seek power through their relationships with men. Ironically, it was Ann Coulter who brought this point home in an interview with Chris Matthews on *Hardball*. She noted that Rodham Clinton "is where she is because of the guy she married. That's not what feminism told us to do — marry your [sic] way to power" (Coulter). While Coulter may be dramatizing the issue a bit, her argument does carry a certain amount of weight in the debate over gender. From the beginning, Rodham Clinton has subverted her identity (changing everything from her name to her hairstyles) to support the political career of her husband. And, while he was wildly successful in his political endeavors, she was routinely criticized for each choice she made. Today, in the midst of this election, she still relies on his experience and tenure in the White House to highlight her experience, and she capitalizes on her status as his wife to shore up the Democratic base and gain support. This has all proved to be politically expedient — shrewd even — but it is not exactly a victory for feminism.

29 It must be stated that, ultimately, politics will win the day over feminism. It would not be politically savvy for Rodham Clinton to run her campaign as if her husband didn't exist, as if he had never been president, as if he weren't a tremendous political asset to her. However, casting herself as his wife diverts the discussion from any true conversation about gender. It would be far better for Rodham Clinton, for American voters, and for feminism in this country if we could have an open discussion about not only the merits of the candidates, but about this historic opportunity for women. It seems almost too prosaic to ask if American voters are ready for a woman president, but that is the question that should begin this discussion, not because it will have any ultimate bearing on the election, *per se*, but because

the answer to that question would tell us volumes about how far feminism has come in this country. Of course, voters have been polled on this topic before and they overwhelming answer in the affirmative. But any *real discourse* on this topic, any really substantive *dialogue* on women in power, has yet to occur.

30 Those on the left and the right know that, in this day and age, it can be political suicide to question a woman's ability to lead. The reader responses to Michael Scherer's *Salon* article speak volumes about how progressives feel about gender — their argument essentially suggests that feminism won the day long ago, and any discussion of gender is old fashioned, reductive, frivolous. Liberal Americans point to the election of Nancy Pelosi as the first female Speaker of the House as a marker of how far we have come as a society. While this is a significant milestone for feminism in America, simply pointing to battles fought and won does not really shed much light on the true status of women in power. Indeed, there seems to be an unspoken suggestion that a female Speaker or a female Presidential candidate indicates that the work of feminism in America is done. I argue, though, that the work is far from done, and that issues of gender should be tackled head on in order to both gauge exactly how far we have come and to continue to forge ahead into more uncharted territory. Given that political correctness has become so ingrained in our social structure, perhaps that uncharted territory is an open and honest discussion about what it really means to be a woman in power. What does it take to succeed? Can a woman really achieve power and success on her own? Is it better to look at Rodham Clinton as the *wife* of Bill Clinton, or as the *female* candidate? Political correctness in America sums up these issues as such: men and women are equal — let's move on to the real issues. The problem is, however, that men and women are not equal, and gender is a real issue. Because we have chosen to view feminism as a successfully completed social project, true discussion of what it means to be a woman in politics gets subverted.

31 Some may argue that the real discourse, the real change, the real evaluation of American feminism and the status of women in power can only occur when a woman is in the White House. This revolution from the inside would indeed open up new ways in which to observe and evaluate feminism at the dawn of the 21st century. In the meantime, it would be wise for feminists, voters, and candidates alike to engage in a serious dialogue about what it means to have a viable female candidate and why we should look at that person as both a candidate *and* a woman — meeting the challenge of gender in politics head on, without satire or sanctimony, in order to truly gauge the effect that gender has on politics and power.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, Karen Vasby. "From Spouses to Candidates: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Elizabeth Dole, and the Gendered Office of U.S. President." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5.1 (2002): 105-132.
- "Bill Clinton Steps into Spotlight in Wife's Campaign." CNN.com. 21 June 2007 <[http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/06/21/bill.factor.ap/index.html?eref=rss\\_topstories](http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/06/21/bill.factor.ap/index.html?eref=rss_topstories)>.
- Bumiller, Elisabeth. "The Election: It Took a Woman; How Gender Helped Elect Hillary Clinton." *New York Times* 12 Nov. 2000 late ed., final, sec. 4: 5.
- Clinton, Bill, and Hillary Rodham Clinton. Interview. *60 Minutes*. CBS. 26 Jan. 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *My Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004.
- Cottle, Michelle. "The XX Factor: How to Run Against a Woman." *The New Republic* 21 May 2007: 9-10.
- Coulter, Ann. Interview. *Hardball with Chris Matthews*. MSNBC. 26 June 2007.
- Healy, Patrick. "For Clintons, Delicate Dance of Married and Public Lives." *New York Times Online* 23 May 2006. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/23/nyregion/23clintons.html>>.
- Hill, Anita F. "In Politics, Still a Man's World." *New York Times* 11 Feb 2000, late ed., final: A1.
- Hillary Nutcracker: The Official Site*. 10 Sept. 2007. Eagleview USA, Inc. 20 Sept. 2007 <<http://hillarynutcracker.com/completelynuts.html>>.
- Kingston, Anna. *The Meaning of Wife*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004.
- Klein, Joe. "Hillary's Quandary on the Campaign." *Time* 21 May 2007: 31.
- Nicholas, Peter. "Bill Clinton Plunges into Wife's Campaign." *L.A. Times* 3 June 2007: A3.
- Powell, Stewart M. "Eliminating the 'Hillary Clinton' Divide; Senator, Presidential Hopeful Drops Maiden Name from Campaign." *Albany Times Union* 30 April 2007: A1.
- Quindlen, Anna. "The Brand New and Same Old." *Newsweek* 28 May 2007: 74.
- Rodham Clinton, Hillary. *Living History*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003.
- Scherer, Michael. "Hillary is from Mars, Obama is from Venus." Salon.com. 12 July 2007 <[http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/07/12/obama\\_hillary/](http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/07/12/obama_hillary/)>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Dear Readers." Salon.com. 12 July 2007 <[http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/07/12/scherer\\_responds/](http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/07/12/scherer_responds/)>.
- Shackleford, Rusty. "Hillary Clinton is a Man." YouTube. 31 Jan 2007 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76Piz991rdk>>.



Venezia, Todd. "Nut Buster — Wacky Hillary Gizmo is a Real Easy Shell." *New York Post* 7 Sept. 2007: 003.

Walsh, Joan. "The Salon Interview: Elizabeth Edwards." *Salon.com*. 17 July 2007 <[http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/07/17/elizabeth\\_edwards/](http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/07/17/elizabeth_edwards/)>.

"Who's Woman Enough to be President?: Candidates Court Female Votes in Hopes of Becoming President." *ABC News Online*. 18 July 2007 <<http://www.abcnews.go.com/GMA/Story?id=3388702&page=1>>.

Wolffe, Richard. "Well, What Do You Know?" *Newsweek* 6 Aug. 2007: 30-31.