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First Lady to Madam Secretary: Hillary Clinton and The Struggle to Be Seen
In Politics

A political candidate stands before you. They are decorated in accolades, from being the first student in their university's history to deliver a commencement address, to graduating from Yale Law School at the top of their class. They have written articles that have been published in the Harvard Educational Review that are still cited today, and they served on the editorial board of the Yale Review of Law and Social Action. They have worked on countless campaigns since they were undergraduates, and had a bright political future and a successful law career. Their devotion to their family is bar none, and their spouse is likeable, even appearing approachable to the public. In a bid for the presidential race, you would think that the media would eat this candidate up, sing their praises from a mountaintop; and yet, when Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy for the President of the United States in early 2007, the media was less than receptive to her high hopes and aspirations. In fact, Clinton was harshly criticized and faced severe media scrutiny throughout her

entire campaign, and many scholars speculate that the reason for the harsh media coverage was because she was a woman. Hillary Clinton had the money, the means, and the motives to propel herself to the highest position of power in the free world-and yet, because of her media portrayal and the combination of their lack of perspective of her as a political power with their continuation of seeing her as they did when she was First Lady, she lost the Democratic nomination she so desperately fought for.

Hillary Clinton did not start her political career, contrary to popular belief, when she ran for the New York Senate following her husband's successful two terms as president. Hilary Rodham was president of the Wellesley Young Republicans when she was a freshman in college, and interned in the House Republican Conference as a young political science student. She attended the 1968 Republican National Convention, but soon found that her political views aligned more strongly with the Democratic Party and changed her political leanings accordingly. She was recruited first by New York Representative Charles Goodell while still in college, and later, by political Anne Wexler during her time at Yale Law, to work on political campaigns for Nelson Rockefeller and Joseph Duffey, respectively. Upon her graduation from Yale Law, Rodham worked as a staff attorney for the Children's Defense Fund and was a member of the impeachment inquiry staff advising the House Committee on the Judiciary

during the Watergate scandal. For all intents and purposes, Hillary Rodham had a political future ahead of her-but she chose to take a different path and instead married Bill Clinton, her long-term boyfriend, and move to Arkansas with him to support his own budding political endeavors as he ran for a seat in the House of Representatives. Instead, Rodham became one of only two female law professors at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and taught classes in criminal law while her husband (after losing the congressional race) moved up quickly through the political ranks as Attorney General, Governor, and then, eventually President of the United States.

Although Hillary Clinton's reign as First Lady (first of Arkansas, and later of the United States) is a study in itself, politically the spotlight was primarily shone on her husband and his own career, instead of hers. Of course, Ms. Clinton made some comments during her husband's election, and during his time in office, that generated their own media controversy (such as her comments about women staying home) but her real representation in the media began when President Clinton gave her an office of her own in the West Wing, and her opinion was weighed heavily for many of the choices that the President made for his top-level positions. The media jumped on this information and often would play up the fact

that she was playing a major role in her husband's presidency,¹ ranging from referring to the pair as "co-presidents,"² to combining their names as "Billary," a tactic often employed by the tabloids towards celebrities today. And a celebrity Ms. Clinton became, with a great deal of her media coverage focusing not only on her seemingly surprising role in the President's politics, but towards her appearance. During her time in Arkansas, her fashion choices never seemed to be headline fodder, but as First Lady, Ms. Clinton's hairstyles and attire were often discussed as a regular topic of conversation.³

What is interesting about the way that Ms. Clinton was represented in the media during this time is that the media seemingly solidified how they were going to treat her in the spotlight. Ms. Clinton was a powerhouse, and could be seen in how she commanded her own initiatives and managed certain aspects of her husband's presidency.⁴ However, the media had not seen a First Lady with this much initiative since the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt, and thus in their uncertainty as to how to react to Ms. Clinton, they fell back on a safe media tactic of attacking

¹ Brown, "Feminism and Cultural Politics: Television Audiences and Hillary Rodham Clinton," p.261

² Gardetto, "Hillary Rodham Clinton, Symbolic Gender Politics, and the New York Times: January-November 1992" p.229

³ Paal, "Forget the Primaries: Vote for Hillary's Hair," *South Coast Today*

⁴ Brown, "Feminism and Cultural Politics: Television Audiences and Hillary Rodham Clinton," p.262

her femininity and her role as a woman while simultaneously playing it up.⁵ First, they took her power and made it seem like the only reason that the President was giving her any say in decision-making was because she was his wife.⁶ In reality, as discussed previously, Ms. Clinton had significant political clout and experience with not only politics, but also with the law. More often than not, those points were ignored and her history before becoming "Ms. Clinton" was erased, seemingly representing her as a wife who was trying to nose her way into her husband's career.⁷ In addition, when the media was not discussing her politics as if she was a newcomer, they were focusing on what she was wearing⁸ and how her hair looked, playing up that same feminine aspect they attacked as "Mrs. President" and helping to perpetuate that idea that as the First Lady, the public should only be focusing on her skirts and shoes instead of her policies and politics.⁹

Hillary Clinton also became the first First Lady of the United States to be a candidate for an elected office when she decided to run for one of the New York Senate seats after Daniel Moynihan's retirement in 1998. The media, at this point in her political career, played up two very significant points that they seemingly combined to amplify the effect. The first of

⁵ Ibid. p.267

⁶ Ibid. p.262-263

⁷ Ibid. p.265

⁸ Lawless, "Sexism and Gender Bias in Election 2008: A More Complex Path for Women in Politics," p. 71

⁹ Ibid. p.71

these points varies very little from their attacks on her during her husband's time in office-that she was inexperienced, unqualified, and unprepared to take the Senate position.¹⁰ The second point was that she was "carpetbagging," since she had never lived in New York previously and had recently bought a house in Chappaqua, purely for the reason of providing proof of residence. ¹¹The second point was only augmented by the first; because Ms. Clinton had never lived in New York before and had previously shown little to no interest in their politics, she appeared to have no previous political experience at all and the media was quick to jump onto that point. However, Ms. Clinton was able to counter this negative media coverage by spending a significant part of her campaign visiting with every county in the state, as well as laying out a detailed economic plan specific for the citizens of New York. ¹²

After being elected in the 2000 Senate race, Senator Clinton tried very hard to maintain a low media profile, instead concerting the majority of her efforts towards the people of New York and their needs, especially after September 11th. She was re-elected in 2006, and once again the media criticism rose up-this time about spending the most on her campaign than any other Senate candidate in the election. Although the

¹⁰ Parry-Giles, "Mediating Hillary Rodham Clinton: Television news practices and image-making in the postmodern age," p.208

¹¹ Anderson, "From Spouses to Candidates: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Elizabeth Dole, and the Gendered Office of U.S. President," p.109-111

¹² Ibid, p.115

media was quick to make judgments on her spending, especially with speculation that she would not have enough money for a potential presidential bid, for the most part, Senator Clinton was largely left alone by the media. There was always speculation, however, that she would be looking towards the presidency, in the media, but it was always just that-speculative at best. It wasn't until Senator Clinton announced her presidential exploratory committee in early 2007 that the media exploded with their coverage on her. The barrage of media that followed was vastly different from the campaign coverage that her two strongest opponents at the time, Senator Barack Obama, and Senator John Edwards, were facing.

One of the best examples of how Senator Clinton was portrayed in a vastly different manner can be seen in the media coverage immediately preceding her "comeback" win in New Hampshire during the primaries, after trailing Senator Obama in the days following the Iowa caucus. Senator Clinton was campaigning in Portsmouth, New Hampshire the day before the primary, and was at an event in a small coffee shop. The question given to her was "How do you get out the door every day? I mean, as a woman. I know how hard it is to get out of the house and get ready. Who does your hair?" Senator Clinton laughed in response, gave a trivial, noncommittal answer at the beginning-but after a moment, she

paused, choked up, and continued to answer the question with tears in her eyes.¹³

The teary-eyed response may have been sincere, but the coverage on this single moment was extraordinary. The media loved that Senator Clinton was showing us a softer, more feminine side. The media hated that Senator Clinton was using her femininity to try to gain political ground. Regardless of which side the media took, the focus was not on her answer-which, politically, was powerful in itself. Instead, the focus was on the fact that she had started crying because she was so overcome with emotion.¹⁴ Nowhere in the political campaign of her closest competitor, Barack Obama, was there any question of his emotional investment in one of his answers-the coverage was always on his policies and politics. Jumping forward to the present-day, a video was released shortly after Barack Obama's re-election, showing him overcome with emotion and crying as he spoke to campaign volunteers. Although this garnered significant media coverage, nearly as much as Senator Clinton's tears, the focus was not on his voice breaking or how it would affect his political career. Instead, it focused on the message that he was giving to those volunteers, and the emotion only made the message more meaningful. Senator Clinton, however, faced scrutiny as to whether her tears were sincere; the

¹³ Breslau, "Hillary Tears Up," *The Daily Beast*.

¹⁴ Decker, Barabak, "Clinton Had Voters' Sympathy-And A Message They Liked," *LA Times*

media even went as far as to question whether or not she was capable of holding such a high office if she was going to become so emotional about the politics.¹⁵

Throughout her bid for the presidency, Senator Clinton had to deal with the resurfacing of the media's attacks on her clothing choices over the campaign she was running so efficiently-though the message had changed since her years as a youthful, spry First Lady. The conversations going on about her appearance no longer addressed her contemporary hairstyles, but instead attacked her image and her choices of pantsuits over dresses, and the media frequently discussed how the years had taken their toll on the Senator.¹⁶ The media played up the negative attacks on her figure and her femininity as a whole, publicizing those who would hold up "Iron My Shirt" signs at her rallies and comments like those of the Drudge Report, stating that America loses interest in women as they age, and that no one wanted to watch a woman grow older in their eyes.¹⁷ The message was still the same, though, as it had been when she was First Lady; Senator Clinton wasn't being taken seriously for her opinions, or her politics, thanks to the media coverage she was getting. The only thing that the public was being informed of was of her cool, calculating demeanor and the abandon of her femininity for the power she craved.

¹⁵ Breslau, "Hillary Tears Up," *The Daily Beast*.

¹⁶ Carlin, Winfrey, "Have You Come A Long Way, Baby? Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Sexism in 2008 Campaign Coverage," p.331-332

¹⁷ Ibid. p.332

The message that the media had been blasting out to the public about Senator Clinton never changed-it was always about her clothes, her hair, her shoes, and overall, her gender. Although it has been stated time and time again, in publication after publication, that Senator Clinton was one of the first (and arguably, the strongest) female candidate for President of the United States, the media coverage on her never changed from her days as First Lady, and thus, it can be argued that the media never truly took her seriously. Senator Clinton made a point to tell the media over and over that she would be "ready to lead on day one," with her extensive knowledge and detailed understanding of policy¹⁸-a strong contrast to her opponent, who spoke in terms of "hope" and "change," and nothing truly solid in terms of political policy. However, it's nearly impossible for the average reader to make an informed political decision on a candidate if one is being portrayed as a factual, educated individual with a focus on their policies, albeit broad-and the other only garners headlines on their necklines, ignoring most of their political clout that they've gathered over years of experience.

Hillary Clinton, though defeated in the primary by now-President Barack Obama, managed to come out of this entire political process on top. After his election, President Obama formally announced his decision to make Senator Clinton his nominee for the position of Secretary of State.

¹⁸ Carroll, "Reflections on Gender and Hillary Clinton's Presidential Campaign: The Good, the Bad, and the Misogynic," p.7

Secretary of State Clinton served four successful years in this position, before announcing that she would not be serving a second term upon his re-election. Although she faced her own trials and tribulations as a serious female candidate, Hillary Clinton's biggest struggle with the media was their misunderstanding of her as a candidate to be reckoned with, instead choosing to frame her as the First Lady she once was so long ago and refusing to accept the alternative. The media had a First Lady standing before them-a strong, determined First Lady with experience and an understanding of how the country needed to be run, and yet the expectations they anticipated hindered their ability to see Hillary Clinton for the presidential candidate she had become.

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