

Bachmann, Palin and a new season for sexism

(CNN) -- Yes, it has already begun: The comparisons between Rep. Michele Bachmann and Sarah Palin--one declared as a presidential candidate at this point, the other in a prolonged state of suspension. Their hair. Their jackets. [The fashion face-off.](#)

Of course, Palin doesn't even have to be running for president for this sloppy sexism to get under way. But should she decide to run, make no mistake, we are headed for some long, hot months of "Which woman gets it more wrong?"

Just as the 2008 Democratic primaries offered us a chance to examine the way the media and others in the popular culture frame a race between a woman and an African-American, the Republican primary season is giving us an unprecedented opportunity to watch what happens when two attractive women with brown hair are sharing the spotlight during a campaign.

To be clear: I'm no fan of Palin, and like many women, I can't stomach Bachmann's opposition to reproductive rights, environmental policies and gay marriage, to name just a few of the reasons I'll never vote for her. But what I also can't stomach is another primary season in which women in politics are subjected to treatment that men would only very rarely run into.

We've seen this before: Hillary Clinton was called a "[worthless bitch](#)" (by Ted Nugent, in a clip that ran on Sean Hannity's show) and "[stereotypical bitch](#)" (by Glenn Beck on his radio show). Nancy Pelosi has been praised for looking "[smashing in that mint green](#)," by no less an illustrious journalist than Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson (he was trying to be nice). The late Geraldine Ferraro was [referred to as "a f*ing whore"](#) (by Air America's Randi Rhodes) .

Palin, of course, has been characterized for some time now as ambitious, devious and none-too-bright. Bachmann takes hits for her brightly colored attire and "[unhinged](#)" statements. Such charges just don't stick to men in the same way.

Have we not moved beyond this? It is depressing to consider that it comes from both sides of the political spectrum, liberal and conservative. The only thing consistent is the target: Women.

To be sure, there are doubts -- many -- to be raised about Bachmann's stance on policy matters. And like many male candidates flubbing lines while running for office, the serious, repeated factual errors that come out of her mouth demonstrate that she's either careless, factually challenged, or, as women's advocate and author Gloria Feldt notes,

living in an alternate universe.

But why, so immediately, these questions about her brains? Perhaps one of the reasons fewer women run for public office is that they see how women are portrayed.

There are some hopeful signs the paternalistic labeling might not fly as easily this time. Bachmann picked up on it recently and hit back, reportedly telling a voter on Wednesday that the media would like her to dive into a "[mud wrestling fight](#)" with potential presidential rival Sarah Palin.

She may be wrong on some of the most fundamental rights of women, like abortion, even in the case of incest or rape -- the very rights that allow ordinary women to become "empowered Americans," as she likes to put it -- but she's spot-on in sizing up the way female candidates get publicly framed.

While pundits may enjoy "Palinizing" Bachmann, reducing her to her gaffes, Bachmann is forcing the media (both mainstream outlets and her liberal antagonists) [to rewrite this script](#). She went into the first Republican debate painted as "nuts," she emerged as a contender.

And while I should not have to even say this, though the two women may have the same length hair and like red blazers, they are different -- and certainly no more alike than, for example, Jon Huntsman and Tim Pawlenty.

One major difference between Palin and Bachmann so far is their responses to criticism. I'm sickened by Bachmann's apparent inability in a recent appearance to differentiate the macho movie star John Wayne from the serial killer John Wayne Gacy. But when Palin botched the story of Paul Revere and was given a chance to say "whoops," [she stood by her version, then characteristically blamed the media for her mistake](#). At least Bachmann, unlike Palin, can own up to her errors. "People can make mistakes, and I wish I could be perfect every time I say something, but I can't," she said. But this was not the part of the story the media focused on.

Traditionally, there has been little recognition by members of the press and, ultimately, the campaigns, that any kind of sexist bias exists -- unless, of course, you're Fox News and you think strategically crying "sexism!" will help win women's votes.

Fox News' unsuccessful attempt this week to [appropriate the rhetoric of feminism in Bachmann's defense](#) was laughable at best. "So you think they'd get away with these kind of verbal attacks if the candidate in question was, say, Hillary Clinton instead of a conservative congresswoman?" quipped Sean Hannity on Tuesday.

"The last acceptable form of prejudice in this country is misogyny against conservative females," added Andrea Tantaros, who appeared on Fox News' "Your World" with Neil Cavuto earlier that day. A bit of amnesia for the network, here, about its [stunningly sexist treatment of Hillary Clinton during the 2008 primary season](#).

Let's just agree: sexism transcends. The double standard is not about political parties, but about women and men. Even so, these reductive comparisons of two female candidates mark a new low for women in politics. We're simply not seeing similar comparisons between, say, Mitt Romney and Rick Perry. How ridiculous it would seem to point out their proclivity for wearing a certain pattern on their tie or a 1950s-style hairdo.

History will prove whether either of these female prospective candidates has what it takes to run a country. But in the meantime, let's not lick our lips for a catfight, nor reduce Bachmann prematurely to "a flake."

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Deborah Siegel.

