

'Girls Don't Cry': Beware 'Campaigning While Female'

by MAUREEN CORRIGAN



Enlarge

Joe Raedle/Getty Images

In a now famous moment during the 2008 presidential primaries, Hillary Clinton fought back tears after an undecided voter asked her how she managed to keep at it, day after day. Above, Clinton responds to a reporter's question about that uncharacteristic display of emotion.

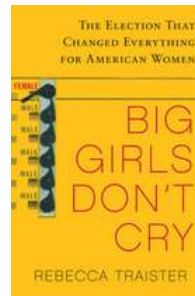
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I thought I was awake and alert throughout the 2008 presidential election. I faithfully read two major American newspapers each day; I was glued to news and talking-head analysis on TV and the Internet; and I live in Washington, D.C., after all, where politics is the hometown industry.

But reading Rebecca Traister's superb new book about the election, called *Big Girls Don't Cry*, made me feel retrospectively dopey, like the "stupid sidekick" in detective fiction who dutifully takes in the details of a crime scene, but always fails to see the Big Picture.

The problem with the 2008 presidential campaign was that there were so many head-snapping moments to take in, so many "firsts," that even Traister, who was [covering the campaign for Salon](#), admits to having felt dizzy and distracted. (One of my favorite of these "Say what?" moments in the book is the morning when Traister recalls being awakened by one of her colleagues with the news that John McCain had "picked Palin" as his running mate. Traister, groggily coming to consciousness, asked, "Michael Palin?")



Big Girls Don't Cry: The Election That Changed Everything For American Women

By Rebecca Traister
Hardcover, 336 pages
Free Press
List price: \$26

[Read An Excerpt](#)

But *Big Girls Don't Cry* is much more than an assemblage of these type of "boys on the bus" campaign anecdotes. As anyone who's followed Traister's sharp and lively essays in Salon knows, her particular "beat" is gender. What she does here is tease out the cultural narratives that came to wield so much power during the campaign and, finally, in the voting booth: narratives about femininity and the demands of wife- and motherhood, as well as narratives about how women should "play nice" and let the other historically discriminated-against guy go first through the door of the White House.

Traister surveys a changed political landscape in 2008 where women were key players, not only as candidates but also sometimes outspoken spouses of candidates, as well as reporters and pundits. She brings a historically informed perspective to her reading of the cultural curveball that was Sarah Palin and her undoing — at least during the campaign — by the tag team of Tina Fey and Katie Couric, in addition to the sexist criticism lobbed at her even by her fellow conservatives.

But far and away the longest and most eye-opening part of Traister's book is devoted to Hillary Clinton and her gender misadventures in, as Traister wittily calls it, "Campaigning While Female." Traister excavates the Bill Clinton-era back story to many feminists' reluctance to support Hillary and chronicles the misogynist responses to her campaign not only by the usual Neanderthal suspects — the guys who took to wearing the "Iron My Shirts" and "Stop Mad Cow" T-shirts — but also by liberal commentators like Chris Matthews, Keith Olbermann and Frank Rich. She was pilloried — right and left — for her voice, her laugh, her age, her ankles and even a flash of her cleavage.

Traister charts the attitudinal shifts in the campaign: how Hillary, arguably misguided by her campaign manager, Mark Penn, embraced a stiff-upper-lip "gender free" strategy early in her campaign that ironically ceded the more traditional womanly role of appealing to passions and ideals to Barack Obama, particularly after he was endorsed by the nation's emote in chief, Oprah Winfrey. Here's a snippet of how Traister astutely analyzes the gender dynamics at this point in the pre-New Hampshire Democratic primaries:



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Rebecca Traister is a regular contributor to Salon. She has also written for *Elle*, *The Nation* and *The New York Times*.

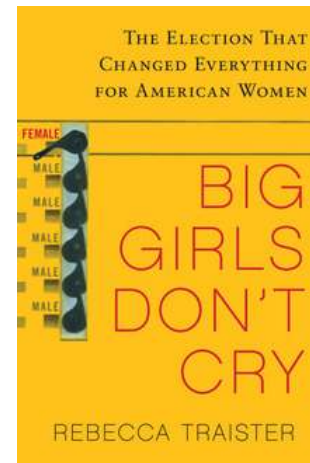
Where once Hillary's competence had made her a prepared and inevitable presidential standard, it was now the thing that made her a particular kind of female archetype. Like Harry Potter's Hermione Granger or Margaret from Dennis the Menace, Hillary was being portrayed as the hand-in-the-air, know-it-all girl, grating and unpopular in her determination to prove herself. By broadcasting their disdain for Clinton, pundits like Dana Milbank and Chris Matthews and Roy Sekoff were affirming their own social worth: nobody asked women like Hillary to the dance.

After that infamous moment in New Hampshire that Traister refers to as "The Night of the Imaginary Tears," hordes of formerly skeptical women flocked behind Hillary, not, as Traister says, "because she was a girl but because she was being treated like one" — jeered at by commentators for transforming from a so-called tight-ass into a "basket case."

There's so much more to be learned and argued over in *Big Girls Don't Cry*, whose subtitle is: "The Election that Changed Everything for American Women." Certainly one of the things that's changed about presidential elections is the very existence of books like this one. Girls, these days, can not only run for president; they can brilliantly analyze presidential campaigns, too.

Excerpt: 'Big Girls Don't Cry'

by REBECCA TRAISTER



LANGUAGE ADVISORY: This excerpt contains language that some readers may find offensive.

Hillary Clinton must have been as aware as anyone that by entering the presidential race she was kicking off a long-awaited social experiment. In 220 years of American presidential politics there had been no serious female major party contenders, though women had been campaigning for the presidency since before they could vote, starting with Victoria Woodhull in 1872 and Belva Lockwood in 1884.

In 1964 Maine's Republican senator and former congresswoman Margaret Chase Smith became the first woman to have her name placed in nomination and receive more than one vote at a major party convention. At the Cow Palace arena in Daly City, California, Chase Smith came in just behind Barry Goldwater, William Scranton, Nelson Rockefeller and George Romney on the first ballot, taking 27 of 1,308 votes.

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Eight years later, New York's Democratic congresswoman Shirley Chisholm became the first African American woman to run for the Democratic nomination, and the first black major party candidate to run for the presidency (Frederick Douglass received one vote during the roll call at the Republican convention in 1888; the minister and civil rights leader Channing Phillips's name was placed in

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nomination at the 1968 Democratic convention). Chisholm, who in 1969 became the first black woman to serve in Congress, was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus and the National Women's Political Caucus and the honorary president of the newly formed National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (which became the National Abortion Rights Action League, or NARAL). Chisholm won a nonbinding preference primary in New Jersey, though competitors George McGovern, Edmund Muskie, Hubert Humphrey and Eugene McCarthy were not on the ballot. Her run was more symbolic than realistic, and activists who might otherwise have backed her were anxious to curry favor with more powerful candidates. At a truly eccentric convention in Miami Beach, Humphrey released his black delegates to vote for Chisholm, helping her win 151.95 votes on the first ballot and ensuring that she would address the gathering at which McGovern and Thomas Eagleton received their party's nomination.

In 1984, when Minnesota Senator Walter Mondale chose another New York congresswoman, Geraldine Ferraro, to be his running mate, the idea was so exotic that Ferraro was treated more like a zoo animal than a politician. During a prenomination interview, Barbara Walters, a woman not known for her own professional timidity, noted that Ferraro had missed weekends with her kids because of her political career and wondered why she'd kept her maiden name. She also asked with wide-eyed incredulity, "Vice president, okay, fine. But do you think you're equipped to be president?" After her place on the ticket was official Ferraro met equally disbelieving interrogators, including one who asked during the vice presidential debate, "Do you think... the Soviets might be tempted to take advantage of you simply because you are a woman?" Her vice-presidential competitor, George H. W. Bush, offered in the same debate, "Let me help you with the difference, Mrs. Ferraro, between Iran and the embassy in Lebanon." Losing to Bush and Ronald Reagan in spectacular fashion, Mondale and Ferraro walked away from the election having won only Minnesota and the District of Columbia.

Recent elections had included marginalized runs by Pat Schroeder, Carol Moseley Braun and Elizabeth Dole. Had any of these women come into a race with the profile, momentum or money that Hillary Clinton had going into 2008, they might have been the ones to face the full-bore resistance of a white male establishment. Any plausible female candidate for the presidency was not simply offering herself up as a double-x interruption in the circle of white male faces that ring commemorative presidential plates. She was also presenting herself for cultural dissection, as a prism through which the country's attitudes about sex, power and the place of women in society were going to be projected. It was impossible for Hillary Clinton to have chosen a path to the White House that bypassed the loathing, jeering derision and gendered stereotyping built on two centuries of male power. What was interesting was how hard she tried to do just that.

As Clinton got closer to the race, a widely anticipated wave of resistance began to make itself apparent. This was the easy-bake misogyny of anti-Hillary men, but also of women eager to advertise their solidarity with and enthusiasm for traditional gender roles, like the one who entered a John McCain rally in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, in November 2007 and asked the presumptive Republican candidate, "How do we beat the bitch?" McCain looked only momentarily uncomfortable before congratulating her on her "excellent question" and trotting out his most recent poll numbers against Hillary Clinton. He hadn't needed a proper noun to know to which bitch his supporter was referring.

Ideas about how to beat her came via truckloads of T-shirts, bumper stickers and urinal targets bearing Hillary's image — the crude calling cards of her most predictable foes: right-wing bullies. These guys had been spoiling to express their animus toward Clinton, whom they, if no one else, saw as a symbol of left-wing feminist politics. What better way to simultaneously neutralize her menace than by mocking, belittling, desexualizing and demonizing her while peeing on her likeness?

This population of Hillary antagonists produced a dizzying array of paraphernalia. Among the favorites were T-shirts from a group with a clever acronym, Citizens United Not Timid, and a related "I Love Country

Music" rebus involving images of Hillary and of a tree. Anything that stood still long enough to be silkscreened bore lines like "Life's a Bitch So Don't Vote for Her," "Fuck Hillary: God Knows She Needs It," "Anyone But Her '08," "Even Bill Doesn't Want Me," "Stop Mad Cow" and "KFC Hillary Meal Deal: Two Fat Thighs, Two Small Breasts and a Bunch of Left Wings." More naked expressions of loathing included "I Wish Hillary Had Married O.J." and "Wanna See Hillary Run? Throw Rocks at Her." This brand of misogynist aggression was bracing, yes, but it also felt like the death rattle of a patriarchal culture, the last gasps from critics who had been spewing anti-Hillary bile for decades yet had failed to impede her rise to political power.

The most widely celebrated anti-Clinton effigy was a nutcracker. On the website that sold the implement (later to be joined by the Bill Clinton corkscrew) a thought balloon was attached to the Hillary figurine; it read, "I don't bake cookies. I crack nuts." After hearing Gloria Feldt complain about the nutcracker on television, its creator, Gibson Carothers, wrote her an email defending its production and sale. He concluded with the antifeminist chestnut, "Don't sell short the value of showing a sense of humor." Blogger Melissa McEwan, still an Edwards supporter, unknowingly took his advice, inaugurating a "Hillary Clinton Sexism Watch" on Shakesville (a series that would eventually comprise 114 posts). The September 6, 2007, entry showed the nutcracker with the hypothetical "Q: What's the going rate for indisputably proving to the world that you are a tiny little man who is profoundly afraid of women? A: \$19.95."

Some men on television were antsy to get the Clinton bonfire started. One was Tucker Carlson, who seemed fixated on the possibility that the candidate might geld him. First he claimed, "Something about her feels castrating"; then "[When Clinton] comes on television, I involuntarily cross my legs"; finally he suggested, "The one thing we learned from the Lorena Bobbitt case . . . [is that] women are angry at men in a lot of ways." In one interview with Carlson, Cliff May, president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, called Clinton "a vaginal-American," prompting Carlson to ask, "Do you think that people who are voting on the basis of gender solidarity ought to be allowed to vote in a perfect world?" He seemed unaware that his gyno-obsession with Clinton, alongside his castration anxiety, revealed his very own commitment to gender solidarity.

In December, when a CNN Headline News guest observed to the conservative host Glenn Beck that most senators see a president in the mirror when they shave, Beck replied, "Does that include Hillary?" Then he mimed her shaving her chin and growling, "Gimme a pack of Kool cigarettes, will ya?"

I was almost glad for this first, coarse wave of Hillary-hate; I practically wanted to buy a Hillary nutcracker myself. As someone who had written for years about the ambient antipathy toward ambitious women, I was more attuned to it than those who had been lulled by the myth of a peachy postfeminist world and were now aghast. These brazen expressions of threatened masculinity were gratifying, in part because they did not seem particularly effective, but also because they were loud, bright, incontrovertible consciousness-raisers. This stuff wasn't new, and it wasn't unearthed just for Hillary. For young women and men who had never seen blatant misogyny before, who had never heard a woman called a "cunt" or seen the size of a senator's thighs referred to on a T-shirt, these in-your-face examples of gender-based resistance to Hillary were eyeopening. They would later prove to be powerful talismans, tangible examples on which to call when the misogyny got more insidious, more complicated, more difficult to parse or name.

Far more curious, in the year of preprimary campaigning, was the unwillingness on the part of everyone except the bumper-sticker louts and right-wing windbags to address the thing that made Hillary different from the rest of the presidential candidates.

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