



Week of 9.19.08

Interactive Debate: Palin's Candidacy

Gloria Feldt and Rep. Michele Bachmann debate the qualifications, character and treatment of Sen. John McCain's running mate, Sarah Palin.

Gloria Feldt is an activist, author and blogger. Michele Bachmann is the first Republican woman to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Minnesota.

Some people say Sen. John McCain chose Gov. Sarah Palin as his running mate believing she was selected only because she is a woman. Do they have a point?

Gloria Feldt: It's THE point. I was sure McCain would pick a woman after Obama picked the good grey Joe Biden as his running mate (male, white, 65, chosen for foreign policy experience). That and other political circumstances worked in Palin's favor—her youth counteracts McCain's age, she has strong appeal to the right-wing anti-choice, anti-gay, pro-gun, anti-science, evangelical base McCain desperately needs. And McCain's campaign was in such trouble that he had little to lose by taking the risk of choosing Palin. But, yes, it was cynical sexism at its worst.

Michele Bachmann: She wasn't chosen for her gender. She was chosen for her strong conservative credentials, her executive experience, and her incredible ability to relate to everyday people. Just look at the excitement she has created in the conservative base of the Republican Party, and that excitement applies to both men and women. To say that she was chosen primarily for her gender is very insulting to her long track record of accomplishments. From city council to the Governorship of Alaska, she has made her own path and that's an attractive story for many Americans.



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In her acceptance speech, Gov. Palin said American women "can shatter that glass ceiling once and for all." If she becomes vice president, would that be a step forward for all women?

Gloria Feldt: It makes my feminist heart sing that even the Republican right knows women are the key to the 2008 elections. That said, voters will soon realize that Sarah Palin is to women's rights what Clarence Thomas and Ward Connerly are to civil rights: the antithesis of the struggle for social justice and equality. Palin's selection would be a giant leap backward, away from the aspirations of the American Dream that brought my grandparents to this great country, a leap away from real hope and true change.

Michele Bachmann: I cannot envision a scenario where Gov. Palin becoming our nation's first female Vice-President could be anything but a step forward for women. Attaining such a high level of office in a world where many societies regard women as inferior can only be beneficial. Even as a candidate, she is already providing a positive role model for girls all across the country. Instead of emulating Paris Hilton, many now are drawing their attention to Sarah Palin. Gov. Palin is opening the eyes and breaking down barriers for many girls who have doubts about their role in today's society.



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Gov. Palin is against abortion, even in cases of rape or incest. How do you think American women will respond to that?

Gloria Feldt: We'd better make it a wake-up call to reject her party's platform that gives fertilized eggs more legal rights than women, and calls for a constitutional amendment outlawing abortion even to save the woman's life. Palin demands privacy and respect for her family's choices (i.e., her pregnant daughter, her own decision to have a child with Down Syndrome) while she works to strip away the privacy and choices of all other American women. That hypocrisy alone will turn women off. It forces us to ask: does Palin have the character we want in someone who will be a heartbeat from the presidency?

Michele Bachmann: One of the great myths about abortion is that women are of a single mind on the issue. Nothing could be further from the truth. Not only are women divided on which side of the issue they fall, but women vote based on a number of different concerns. We're simply not one-issue voters. We want a stronger economy, more responsible government, lower gas prices and a whole host of things that John McCain and Sarah Palin can deliver. She wasn't elected governor for her stance on abortion, and McCain-Palin will not win or lose based on that issue alone either.



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There were charges of sexism in media coverage of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. Now there are charges of sexism in the coverage of Gov. Palin. Has the media been sexist in their campaign coverage?

Gloria Feldt: Ironically, Hillary's uphill battle against overt media sexism (the Hillary Nutcracker, the KFC Meal with its fat thighs, the way Chris Matthews excoriated her for expressing confidence in her candidacy, comments on her pantsuits, her cackle, her cleavage, her whatever) made Sarah's path easier. The media are gentler with her by far than they were with Hillary. Also because of Hillary's candidacy, both the media and the American public are more accustomed to seeing that leadership can come with breasts and a higher pitched voice.

Michele Bachmann: I don't believe that the media has been outright hostile to Gov. Palin for being a woman, but I honestly do believe that the criticism and questions being raised about her abilities as a working mother are way out of line. She is a strong, principled, and engaging leader. She's a tremendous role model for her kids and for Americans around the country. I believe that her humble roots make her a candidate that many Americans can identify with.



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Do you feel the Democratic candidates are treating Gov. Palin differently because she's a woman?

Gloria Feldt: I think the Democrats misjudged who their competition would be and have had to regroup. But Barack Obama comes from a younger generation well accustomed to working as equals with women. It might be a little more problematic for Biden, but overall, the Democrats have strong appeal to women because women know where their best interests lie—about the economy, health care, war and peace, and their own human and civil rights. The issues are the issues, regardless of whether the candidate is male or female.

Michele Bachmann: The Obama-Biden ticket has not yet figured out how to handle her. I think the pick came as a complete shock to the Democrat Party and has caused them to reassess their campaign message. I don't think they are looking down on her because she is a woman, and Hillary Clinton deserves some credit for that. But I honestly believe they were not prepared to run against a woman with her story and resume.



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Is it fair or is it sexist to question Gov. Palin's technical qualification to be Vice President?

Gloria Feldt: Absolutely, fair. And not just fair, but essential. If she is indeed qualified, she should welcome the scrutiny. If not, voters deserve to know, especially because of John McCain's age and the fact that he has had bouts with cancer.

Michele Bachmann: Examining a Vice-Presidential nominee's political record and legislative accomplishments is not sexist in the least, as long as the questions are actually about her qualifications. With that said, if you look at Barack Obama's record and qualifications and compare them to Sarah Palin's, I don't think there's any question that she is more qualified to be our top executive than he is—and he's the one running for President.