

The Ground Clinton Broke

Adapted from *The Washington Post*, Wednesday, May 21, 2008

By Ruth Marcus

5 Hillary Clinton isn't going to be elected the first female president – not this year, anyway. The reasons for this outcome have gratifyingly little to do with her gender. It may not seem that way right now to Clinton supporters seething over her treatment, but the 2008 campaign has propelled the country significantly closer to the moment when a woman takes the oath of office.

Yes, there have been sexist episodes and comments. Yes, it still is more acceptable to joke about gender than about race in the U.S. today.

10 But the notion that Clinton was the victim of unrelenting, vicious hatred because she is a woman – is it safe to call this reaction overwrought? Clinton managed to win more votes than any primary candidate in either party ever had before. It's hard to square that result with the notion that her candidacy exposed a deep vein of misogyny.

Considering the inexplicably intense emotions that Clinton evokes, the litany of ugliness is surprisingly short. Meanwhile, the 2008 campaign has rewritten the rule book on playing presidential politics when the team is coed.

15 The female candidate gets to be refreshingly post-feminist. "If you want a winner who knows how to take them on, I'm your girl," Clinton announced last August. "I'm very comfortable in the kitchen," she said last month, chiding Barack Obama for not being able to stand the heat of hard questions.

20 For male candidates, gender remains a treacherous minefield whose danger zones the 2008 campaign only began to chart. Think of John Edwards commenting on Clinton's bright coral jacket ("I'm not sure about that coat") when asked in one of the debates to mention something he disliked about his opponent. You can bet a male candidate won't be dispensing fashion commentary in 2012 – if there's a woman running.

25 And Obama won't be calling female reporters "sweetie" again anytime soon, as he did last week in brushing off a query from a local television reporter. The reporter got the last laugh, pointing out in her segment that "this sweetie never did get an answer to that question." This sweetie rather liked that.

30 More important than helping candidates figure out how to talk about gender, Clinton's candidacy has dispensed with damaging myths about women's capacity to compete in presidential politics. Not tough enough? If anything, Clinton came off as too tough. Too emotional? Clinton teared up in New Hampshire – and this display of vulnerability helped her win.

35 She demonstrated stamina and determination. Improbably, she ended up winning the white-guy vote – and not all of this can be explained by the notion that these voters faced an unpalatable choice between gender and race.

40 From a feminist perspective, Clinton's was not a perfect candidacy. Part of this stems from a fact outside Clinton's control: that her route to power was derivative. Hillary Clinton has been elected to the Senate, twice, in her own right, but the fact that her road to the White House involved standing by her man, no matter how badly he behaved, made her a weak vessel for the feminist cause.

And Clinton's least attractive campaign moments came when she took up the gender card and chose to play it as victim instead of trailblazer. The notion that the male candidates were ganging up on her because she is a woman was silly. The complaint that asking her the first question in debates was evidence of a double standard was even sillier.

45 By contrast, one of Clinton's most powerful lines came on Super Tuesday, when she thanked "my mother, who was born before women could vote and is watching her daughter on this stage tonight." It's easy to forget, in the passions of the time, the long way traveled in a relatively brief span.

50 Like the mountain climber forced to turn back just before reaching Everest's summit, however, women still face an aching long ascent. If you care about seeing a woman elected president, one of the biggest disappointments of this campaign is the paucity of credible women waiting in the wings, in either party.

55 If not 2008, then when? If not Clinton, then who? There are no obvious answers. Then again, four years ago, Obama was an unknown state senator, and almost no one imagined that an African American could win the presidency in 2008.

I. Find out synonyms in the text for the following words or expressions: /6

1. infuriated by
2. ceaseless
3. excessive
4. to reconcile
5. male and female
6. to blame
7. to explore
8. to dismiss a question
9. baffling
10. energy
11. unpleasant
12. pioneer

II. Answer the following questions. Please do not copy down from the text, but rephrase it with your own words (40 words each, approx.), and pay close attention to grammar and vocabulary accuracy: /6

1. Is the perspective of a female president more plausible now than in the past?
2. According to the author of the text, has the primary campaign been particularly violent?
3. Have there been any traces of misogyny in it?
4. Can Hillary Clinton be considered a feminist symbol?
5. Has Hillary Clinton benefited from referring to the gender issue?
6. Is the point of view of the author of this article a feminist one?

III. Essay (300 words suggested) /8

Race and gender as structuring factors of elections: a typically American reality?