

### 3 A.M. For Feminism

Clinton dead-enders and the crisis in the women's movement.

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Amy Siskind, a 42-year-old mother of two from Westchester, stood in a Washington, D.C., park on the last day in May, telling a few hundred cheering people that she would not, under any circumstances, vote for Barack Obama. She was a lifelong Democrat, she said, a donor and a volunteer for the party. But, watching the race with a "mixture of shock, disgrace, and disgust," she was appalled at the leadership's failure to defend Hillary Clinton from the sexism that she believes bolstered Barack Obama's campaign. "Now I have a message for Howard Dean and the DNC," she said into a microphone, acid in her voice. "I'm not your sweetie!"

Siskind was one of the speakers at a rally that brought busloads of people, overwhelmingly women, to demonstrate near the Democratic National Committee (DNC) meeting that would decide the status of the Florida and Michigan delegations. The states had been stripped of their delegates--a decision Clinton endorsed--because they had broken party rules in holding their primaries early. But, as Clinton lost steam, seating them in full became crucial to her argument for the nomination, and thus, to her supporters, a matter of high democratic principle. Oaths to oppose Obama proliferated, often among longtime female fund-raisers. "You have betrayed us, our children, and our future," Siskind proclaimed during her speech, "and you will learn the new meaning of stay-at-home moms!"

Hillary Clinton has lost the nomination, but some of her most ardent female backers seem unwilling to accept it. A strange narrative has developed, abetted by Clinton and some of the mainstream feminist organizations. In it, the will of the voters was thwarted by chauvinistic party leaders in concert with a servile media, and Obama's victory represents a repeat of George W. Bush's in 2000. It's a story in which Obama becomes every arrogant young man who has ever edged out a more deserving middle-aged woman, and Clinton, hanging on until the bitter end, is not a spoiler but a feminist martyr.

This conviction, that sexism cost Clinton the nomination, is likely to be one of the more toxic legacies of this primary season. It is leaving her supporters feeling not just disappointed but victimized, many convinced that Obama's win is illegitimate. Taylor Marsh, a blogger and radio host whose website has become a hub for Clinton fans, says she gets hundreds of e-mails from angry Democrats pledging not to vote for Obama. She's started running posts from such readers under the headline DEMOCRATIC STORM WARNINGS. "I'm not saying that this is a huge voting bloc," she says. "I'm just saying that there is a huge amount of talk and I'm convinced it's a reality that needs to be addressed."

Surely some of this political nihilism will fade by November. Right now, it's hard to quantify; Internet forums and political protests exist, in part, to magnify the passions of a few into an illusory groundswell. In exit polls from Indiana and North Carolina, at least half of Clinton supporters said they wouldn't vote for Obama, but there's no way to calculate the role of gender in their disaffection.

In the months to come, feminist leaders and Clinton herself will urge women back into the Democratic fold. Still, the bitterness is intense. Kate Michelman, the Obama-supporting former head of NARAL, has heard enough of it to get worried. "It does feel to me, just recently, like we're on a death mission," she says. "[T]here is a danger where we set a course for failure in November."

**It didn't start out this way.** In February of 2007, Gloria Steinem pushed back against the mushrooming discussion of identity politics, publishing an op-ed in *The New York Times* titled "Right Candidates, Wrong Question." She argued that queries about whether Americans were more prepared to elect a woman or a black man were "dumb and destructive." "[M]ost Americans are smart enough to figure out that a member

of a group may or may not represent its interests," she wrote. "This time, we . . . could double our chances by working for one of these candidates, not against the other." When reporters asked if she was supporting Clinton or Obama, she said, "I just say yes."

Eleven months later, her position, and that of many feminists, had grown more rigid. Taking to the *Times* op-ed page once again, she argued, "Gender is probably the most restricting force in American life, whether the question is who must be in the kitchen or who could be in the White House." When the time came to choose a candidate, it turned out identity politics mattered. "We have to be able to say: 'I'm supporting her,' " she concluded, " 'because she'll be a great president *and* because she's a woman.' "

Like Steinem, much of the second-wave women's movement would move from enthusiasm for both candidates to dismay and solidarity as Clinton was eclipsed and dismissed. They watched professional media types sing smitten fanboy hymns to Obama and, at the same time, spend hours dissecting Clinton's laugh and cleavage. The prospect of electing a black man clearly thrilled commentators, while the prospect of electing a woman elicited a derisive shrug. For some women, reaction to the coverage was radicalized.

What's more, seeing Clinton losing to a younger, more charismatic man seemed to echo a primal experience of middle-aged female humiliation. "One can find it in any place of employment," Steinem tells me. "Women who were senior tellers in banks were performing the same work as junior vice presidents. They trained them as they came in at the entry level and then saw them pass upward."

By the spring, the Clinton campaign and the cause of women's rights were joined in the minds of many. Second-wave activists chided Obama-supporting women for not getting on board and began interpreting any attack on Clinton as a slight against their gender. The seating of delegates from Michigan and Florida started to seem like a feminist cause célèbre.

The movement coalesced in mid-May, when members of Clinton's finance committee, including Susie Tompkins Buell, sometimes described as one of Clinton's closest friends, and Allida Black, editor of the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers at George Washington University, formed WomenCount PAC. The group ran full-page advertisements in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and other newspapers addressing the country on behalf of "the women of this nation." The ads proclaimed, rather grandly, "Hillary's voice is OUR voice, and she's speaking for all us." Their story was featured on the "Today" show, "Good Morning America," CNN, and Fox, and they joined other volunteers in organizing the rally at the DNC.

Meanwhile, Clinton, who'd previously avoided presenting herself as the woman's candidate, brought gender to the forefront of her campaign as never before. On May 19, in a *Washington Post* interview, she spoke out for the first time about the sexism she's faced throughout the race, calling it "deeply offensive to millions of women." The press, she suggested, had failed to decry "incredible vitriol that has been engendered by the comments by people who are nothing but misogynists." She began injecting feminist and civil rights language into her arguments for seating the Michigan and Florida delegates. Piously invoking Seneca Falls and Selma in a May 21 speech, she pledged to "carry on this legacy and ensure that in our nominating process every voice is heard and every single vote is counted."

More and more, she was tying her campaign to the grand narrative of women's emancipation. "I am in this race for all the women in their nineties who've told me they were born before women could vote, and they want to live to see a woman in the White House," she wrote in a letter to superdelegates on May 28. "For all the women who are energized for the first time, and voting for the first time. For the little girls--and little boys--whose parents lift them onto their shoulders at our rallies, and whisper in their ears, 'See, you can be anything you want to be.' "

Mainstream feminist organizations joined calls to seat the two states, with leaders of NOW and the Feminist Majority Foundation participating in the rally at the DNC. Some have suggested that the DNC's reluctance was in itself a sign of covert sexism. "There's a strong feeling that this would have been handled differently if Hillary Clinton hadn't won [those] states," says Kim Gandy, president of NOW.

Feminists who supported Obama were incredulous. Harvard Law professor and civil rights activist Lani Guinier suggests that Clinton's supporters were trying to turn her into the Al Gore of 2008. "It appears that some of Hillary's supporters want to externalize the problem, which is why the analogy to 2000 seems to work," she says. "Then they can say it wasn't anything wrong with her candidacy--instead, it was an injustice that was done to women."

**The wholesale conflation of Clintonism** and establishment feminism--and the merging of their grievances--has created a kind of disorienting parallel reality. But what accounts for this through-the-looking-glass split?

Partly, it's a response to simple longing. The prospect of a female president who is also a feminist would have been a shining triumph for a movement that has lately had more disappointments than successes. "At least in a certain segment of second-wave feminism, the emphasis on getting women in office was always very, very high," says Frances Kissling, former president of Catholics for a Free Choice, now a fellow at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute. "In a certain sense, second-wave feminism is in its old age. . . . For many second-wave leaders who are at the peak of their professional life, or beyond the peak of their professional life, this would seem like such an enormous final victory."

Back in the pre-feminist days of 1934, Malvina Lindsay, the women's page editor of *The Washington Post*, argued that women wouldn't vote for one of their own for president "because they have set too high ideals for their goddesses." Indeed, she wrote, "the woman President that Miss Lillian D. Rock, secretary of the National Association of Women Lawyers, expects to see in the White House within her lifetime will have to be a super-woman to take the hurdle of female appraisal."

Second-wave feminism was supposed to prove Lindsay wrong. One of the central premises of the movement was that women had been artificially set against each other, and that, if they could unite behind their common interests, they could revolutionize their roles in the world. In the mid-'70s, elite young women were already pondering who could break the ultimate glass ceiling, and among their candidates was an impassioned young lawyer, Hillary Rodham, deemed an icon of her generation by *Life* magazine after her 1969 Wellesley commencement speech. In his biography of Hillary Clinton, Carl Bernstein describes Betsey Wright, later Bill Clinton's gubernatorial chief of staff, imploring Bill not to marry Hillary, take her off to Arkansas, and thus spoil her chance at becoming the first female president. "I really started in on how he couldn't do that. He shouldn't do that," Wright said. "That he could find anybody he wanted to be a political wife, but we'd . . . never find anyone like her" to run for office.

For young feminists, who have largely gone for Obama, their first encounter with Hillary came when she defended Bill from charges of philandering during the 1992 presidential campaign; for them, her case for leadership was never clear-cut. But, for many of those who remember Hillary Rodham, her reemergence as a political power in her own right seems a kind of generational redemption. "She's the candidate that I have wanted for decades," says Allida Black. "I had heard about Hillary for a good fifteen years before Bill ran in '92, and I was for Bill because of Hillary."

For these supporters, Clinton's portrayal during the campaign has been anything but inspirational. They say the press has demonized and degraded her, and almost any zealous supporter can reel off a list of journalistic insults. The media is the real target of their rage, while the anger at Obama comes from the sense that he's benefited from it and failed to denounce misogyny the way he does racism.

"We thought we'd gotten past a lot of this stuff, and it turns out that we were deluding ourselves," Black says. "When CNN calls Hillary a white bitch, when they talk about her cleavage, when the metaphor to describe her presentation is, oh, she reminds me of my wife when she's angry and tells me to take out the garbage, or when they *mock* that Hillary has the support of white women . . . I've been stunned by it. I've been flabbergasted by it." (CNN, of course, did not call Clinton a white bitch. The GOP consultant and McCain adviser Alex Castellanos did, or kind of did, on the network. But the way many Clinton supporters retell it is itself indicative of their distress.)

Of course, Clinton has encountered straight-up misogyny--lots of it. At the same time, anger at obvious instances of sexism has expanded to encompass every setback she's faced, every jab thrown her way--the cut and thrust of any normal campaign. Several of her feminist defenders, for example, interpreted calls for Clinton to drop out, lest she cause a party rift, as expressions of condescending gender bias. "The first woman ever to win a presidential primary is supposed to stop competing, to curtsy and exit stage right," Ellen Malcolm, founder and president of Emily's List, wrote in *The Washington Post* on May 10. But that wasn't anti-woman or even anti-Clinton; it was just Democratic politics. Similar worries were aired about Edward Kennedy in 1980--a *Christian Science Monitor* story claimed his "to-the-bitter-end candidacy already may be irreparably splitting the Democratic Party"--and about Jerry Brown in 1992, once Bill Clinton came near a mathematical lock on the nomination.

Indeed, Clinton has never been just a victim of her gender. When it came to the deeper narratives of the campaign, Clinton benefited, as do many women in politics, from her good fortune of having married a successful political man. Hillary Clinton has spent only four more years than Obama in the Senate, but she was consistently assumed to be a more plausible commander-in-chief than her rival based on her time as First Lady. At the same time, it's been widely assumed that she's been entirely vetted, leaving many parts of her life--her disastrous leadership style on health care reform, her role in trying to silence and discredit Bill's mistresses, her husband's post-White House financial dealings--unexamined. The slimy right-wing rumor mill that tormented the Clintons in the '90s has directed its venom toward Obama: He's the one who has been depicted as a Muslim Manchurian candidate in a smear campaign that has gotten a dispiriting degree of traction.

**Obama was probably smart not** to bring up more of his opponent's shortcomings; doing so would play into the narrative of victimization that became the dominant theme of Clinton's campaign in its final weeks. "Without question," Susan Estrich, author of *The Case for Hillary Clinton*, wrote in late May, "there is serious disaffection right now among many women about the sense of being shunted aside, told to pipe down and line up, the sense that the Hillary campaign, and Hillary herself, has become a mirror for the frustrations the rest of us have faced as we battle subtle and no[t]-so-subtle discrimination."

This psychic wound is not Obama's fault, but it is his problem. Establishment feminism has not done itself proud using its noble struggle for social justice as an alibi for political hardball. But it represents women whose frustration and sense of unfairness are deeply felt, and those feelings need to be addressed.

For a start, that probably means Obama shouldn't nominate a vice president like Jim Webb, who has a number of attractive attributes but a notably bad record on women's issues. He also needs to stop calling women he doesn't know "sweetie." Beyond that, both feminists who support Obama and those who support Clinton suggest he give a speech about women's issues similar to the one he made about race. One of the things Obama is best at is making people feel that he understands their grievances and anxieties, even if he disagrees with them about remedies. If he can reach out to working-class whites offended by affirmative action, surely he can do the same for the middle-aged women who feel wronged by their surrogate's defeat.

"I do think he could talk more about the contributions that feminism has made to this country, from pay equity to basic respect for women, and, in particular, he should acknowledge the legitimate frustrations of women who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s," says Guinier. "The way you speak to people who are in pain is to acknowledge their pain."

Clinton and her feminist supporters, though, also have work to do, because their rhetoric of disenfranchisement has become destructive--witness the chants, during Clinton's speech on the night Obama won the nomination, urging her to continue on to the convention. It would be the grimmest irony imaginable if feminist irredentism helped elect a candidate as anti-feminist as John McCain. In recent weeks, Clinton has fashioned herself as a standard-bearer for women's rights. Ultimately, her work on behalf of Obama will show whether she means it.

*Michelle Goldberg's new book, The Means of Reproduction: Sex, Power And The Future Of The World, will be published in April, 2009. It recently won the J. Anthony Lukas Work-in-Progress Award.*