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"Too Feminine or Not Feminine Enough?"

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Let's say someone has been in a coma for 50 years and wakes up today in a world that barely resembles the one he knew half a century ago. Upon picking up a newspaper, he discovers that the two front-runners for a major party's nomination for the presidency are a woman and an African-American. Not only that, but the current secretary of state — our nation's chief ambassador to the world — is an African-American woman, and the speaker of the House is a woman.

He would be amazed at how far women have come from his time, when few worked outside the home and fewer still were on the public stage as anything other than entertainers.

And he would be right. Women have come a long way. But it's hard not to notice how difficult it remains for a woman — whether she's a politician or a mere professional — to be judged by the same criteria as a male in the same position.

The three women I mentioned earlier — U.S. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi — have all accomplished more than just about anybody. Yet, the criticism of them tends to be so shallow and appearance-related that it leads me to question how far women really have come.

One famous commentator, after prattling on about how he found himself in agreement with the majority of Clinton's policy stances, said she nevertheless gave him "cootie vibes" and, hence, he found her unsupportable. And much of the criticism of Nancy Pelosi hinges on how often she blinks. Of course, I'd rather see that than hear her called "The Wicked Witch of the West," as she has been labeled at least once, or "shrill," which occurs so frequently I've lost count.

She and Clinton have been criticized for being "manipulative," "aggressive" and, the worst thing a woman can be, "ambitious." Has anyone ever met a successful politician, male or female, who wasn't all of those things to a certain extent? Rarely, however, do you hear male politicians (or professionals) criticized for those qualities.

And why on earth do I know that Rice wears Ferragamos? I'll tell you why: If you Google "Condi" and "Ferragamo," you get 14,700 hits. I quit scanning them past No. 600, but even the 600th item was about the secretary of state's recent shopping trip to the famous shoe store.

I almost fell out of my chair as I was watching a press conference by former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, at which he referred to Rice as "Condi." It's one thing for the media to call her that (and I'm not even a fan of that), but it's quite another for the head of our country's military to call her that in front of a room full of reporters. Of course, Rice may have asked to be called Condi as part of her personal "image-building" campaign. But I doubt it.

One recent example from the presidential campaign trail really struck me. John Edwards, who's running for the Democratic nomination, announced that his wife's cancer had returned but that he would nevertheless continue the campaign — a decision, he was quick to note, that he and his wife had made jointly. One or two commentators questioned his decision, but all quickly noted that the Edwardses were united in their decision to continue their quest for the presidency. None made any Lady Macbeth comparisons.

Now, what if Clinton were to announce that her husband's heart troubles were kicking up again and that he would be bedridden for the foreseeable future? Were she to do anything less than cancel her campaign and rush to her husband's side for as long as it takes to get him back on his feet, she would be branded an "Ice Lady" in a heartbeat.

No-Win Situation

As any professional woman will tell you, the double standard applied to our nation's most visible female politicians is pretty much the same as they encounter on a daily basis. If you're too feminine, you're not taken seriously. If you're not feminine enough, you're threatening.

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And, believe me, the gap between “too feminine” and “not feminine enough” is exceptionally small.

To be taken seriously, a woman has to be about 900 different kinds of perfect. Her hair, voice, wardrobe, grooming, make-up, posture — you name it — have to be above reproach. It’s as if we step up to the plate with two strikes against us before the first pitch is thrown.

I realize that much of the problem is because there are just too many options for women. Men have pretty much one hairstyle — short — and unless they have comb-over issues, nobody gives them too much grief about it. For women, if our hair is too long, we’re deemed frivolous; if it’s too short, our sexuality is questioned.

It’s the same thing with clothes. Men have suits or, on casual days, khakis and polo shirts. Women must wade through aisles and aisles of clothes to try to find something that’s flattering but not sexy, professional but not dowdy, classic but not boring — you get the picture. This topic is still so hot and still such a subject for debate that the *Wall Street Journal* addressed it in a March 22 story called “Wall Street Women: Dress Code of Silence.” Many women refused to talk about their wardrobes, for fear of “appearing frivolous.” The men interviewed by the reporter, on the other hand, “spoke eagerly.”

When it comes to our personal appearances, our strike zone is just way too wide, and there’s a lot of room for error between dressing like an Amish farm woman and dressing like a Pussycat Doll.

No, I don’t have a solution, but I do have a request. Ladies, if you want to be taken seriously, dress seriously. Teach the same thing to your daughters. Scholarships, jobs and promotions go to those who do great work and project professionalism. Clients want a lawyer with gravitas, not décolletage.

Gentlemen and ladies (since women tend to be as hard on other women as men are), members of the media, colleagues, bosses, all of you: Give us a break. If a female colleague does bad work, then hold her accountable. If you don’t like a politician’s policies, then criticize them. But if you can’t come up with anything better than she gives you “cootie vibes” or she blinks too much, keep it to yourself.

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