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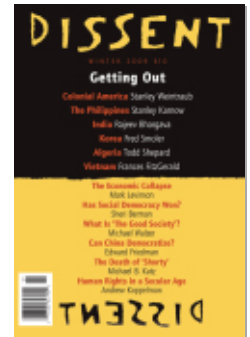
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Yes, Ms. President?

Judith B. Walzer

LAST YEAR, during the battle for the Democratic Party nomination, the rivals tried to keep both race and gender out of the campaign. After the conventions, with the entrance of Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin into the mix, the conversation was bound to change. At this writing in early fall, we couldn't know how American voters would feel about an African American president, but we had a little more information about their response to a woman candidate for the executive branch. Palin touched a chord across the country. She's a "hockey Mom," a pit bull with lipstick, a "regular gal," and a woman with a family scene familiar to many Americans. A lot of voters identified with her: her political brashness and success, her right-wing views, and her domestic story. But how do Americans feel about a woman in the *top* job? Barack Obama's contest with Hillary Clinton was a battle for the presidential nomination in one party, and the more liberal one at that. And even in *that* party there was plenty of anti-feminism during the primary contest. Maybe Americans can *only* make an exception for a female candidate who stands on the reactionary edge of our politics. But we still may not know what America thinks about a woman as president.

Perhaps popular culture can tell us something about what people *really* think. Most of us would deny that Hollywood or television represents what we think or say we think or what's in our imaginations. But popular culture often reveals the spirit of the times and gives broad hints about the most graceless parts of our collective unconscious. If we don't like what television or films say, we vote with our hands and feet—turning off the remote control on the

television set or staying away from the movies—or we watch and laugh dismissively. But in the space between what we say we think and what movies and television show us of American life lie some unpleasant truths. There are at least two examples of popular films and a television show that play with the possibility of a woman as president: *Kisses for My President* (1964), a comedy; *The Contender* (2000), a serious film about a woman who is a potential appointee to the vice presidency; and *Commander in Chief* (2005/2006), a television series about a female president. Each in its own way reveals what the American people may not admit they are thinking as they follow presidential politics.

THE 1964 EXAMPLE, *Kisses for My President*, seems to have been made in the dark ages of American political culture. Its approach is to show that the ridiculous consequences of electing a woman president make the whole notion impossible. The project is so untenable that it is really not the subject of the film; this woman's term ends very quickly—is it in weeks? months? Leslie McCloud (Polly Bergen) a wife and mother of two "got herself elected," as her husband says, to the highest office in the land. With her neatly tailored suits, perfect hairdo, bright eyes, and pert manner, she slips efficiently into the executive role. Not much comedy here, nor much politics. The real subject of the movie is the plight of her husband, Thad (Fred MacMurray)—a former electronics engineer and chief executive officer of a business he has built—a "regular guy" who resists transformation into a "first lady." From the start, as the couple discovers the president's no-nonsense bedroom and office suite and the first lady's frilly, feminine boudoir, the *impossibility* of the situation is milked for all its comic worth. Poor Thad wanders about looking for a bearable role: in the morning he is unable to

find the family dining room; he's uncomfortable in his office as he looks at the portraits of his predecessors and imagines himself in one of their flowery hats; he ends up in a brawl as he escorts a Latin American dictator around town; before giving a televised tour of the White House (as a first lady might do), he takes too many tranquilizers and too many drinks and collapses on camera; and when he is finally alone with his wife for a romantic sail on the presidential yacht, he's immobilized by seasickness.

Poor Thad has totally lost his bearings . . . and maybe his gender. When an old flame, (a *femme fatale*, in feathers and furs) asks if she detects a "wounded male ego," Thad responds, "Not wounded. Just deceased." She offers him a job as vice president and head of the men's division of her cosmetics firm, but the president advises him not to take it, "It will make us look ridiculous." He has already realized that, because "then I would have two presidents."

In scene after scene, the film is entirely occupied with his mishaps. The slapstick goofiness might work if any of it were funny, but from our current view it's (as my granddaughter would say) "too retro." Eventually, Thad redeems himself in congressional hearings, where the president's vicious senatorial enemy has accused him of influencing her refusal to support the Latin American dictator (played as pure stereotype by Eli Wallach). Thad reveals the senator's connection to the law firm that represents the dictator, to the delight of the committee, which has been frustrated by the senator's manipulations.

The beleaguered husband's full triumph is saved for last. For most of the movie he has been trying to get the president into bed, but either she has a meeting, a headache, or needs to take an urgent phone call. Finally, she clears her schedule and appears in a satin nightgown; they spend the night together (pillows pressed against the phones). Soon after, the president doesn't feel well and collapses. She is pregnant, and that is the end of the story. "The doctors have told me that I must give up my demanding schedule or lose my baby," she announces at a quick press conference, and promptly resigns. Whatever his bumbling, Thad even has the last laugh, telling her not to feel bad about

letting the country down. "It's just proof of the innate superiority of the male," he grins. "It took forty million women to get you into the White House, and one man to get you out." He wins in the end, and he has the best lines throughout. The female president has been the "straight man" for an archetypal, if sardonic, view of maleness.

Although the film purports to be about a female president, she—and all of politics—is largely ignored. We are preoccupied by her husband, the inflexibility of male gender roles, and the assumption of our attachment to them. Women don't seem to have such absolute limits to their adaptability; they can learn new roles, even when doing so explodes the boundaries of our social experience and expectations. But a man? Absolutely not. His role definition is a fixed star in our firmament; it cannot be moved.

BY 2000 AND *The Contender*, we are in another world. This film deals with the possibility of a woman's appointment as vice president (the incumbent has died in office) by a president who insists that a woman's appointment will be a crucial part of his legacy. Here, although the story is more strongly focused on the woman's situation, the president who wants her in office is a key figure. He is a powerful, attractive leader, a Bill Clinton type—but the "good" Bill Clinton. Large, convivial, and politically shrewd, he likes to eat lots of unhealthy foods at all times of day and night. Featuring the subtle charm and mimetic skill of Jeff Bridges, the film depends heavily on the strength of the president's character, his political power, and his unwillingness to be dissuaded from his goal. But it also depends on the strength of the candidate, Senator Laine Billings Hanson (Joan Allen). She's a straightforward political actor, staunchly courageous when opponents identify her in some scurrilous photos of a college orgy and attack her moral character. She simply refuses to discuss the issue. Blank-faced, she won't comment either to the media or at the congressional hearing, where she is beset by a vicious opponent to her nomination, a right-wing representative who has a candidate of his own. The representative's candidate, a governor reputed

to be a hero, is then exposed as a fake, and the representative (brilliantly played by Gary Oldman) is revealed as a fraud. Hanson has stuck to her guns, remaining silent about sexual allegations against her. She is confirmed anyway. In the final moments of the film, we learn that she wasn't the woman in the pictures of the orgy; the eyewitnesses to the event have lied or simply been mistaken. Her refusal to speak has been a matter of principle.

Hanson's silence is powerful—the image of her face as she refuses to answer questions stays with us—and the film is moving in many moments. But here, too, the focus on a woman candidate gets sidetracked, in this case, to her past sex life, as if it were the *only* interesting thing about her. The film is derailed by its focus on our prurient interests in our leaders—an interest heightened in this case by the candidate's gender. The whole question of Hanson's political life is sidetracked again when it's revealed that her husband and political consultant was married to her close friend when she met him. The story of a strong public servant is reduced to some of its lowest common denominators. (The fact that writer/director Rod Lurie probably used the story to point to the inappropriateness of our national interest in a real president's personal life may explain why he did what he did, but it does not absolve him for doing it.)

WE HAVE TO CREDIT Lurie with a continuing interest in the subject of female leaders. He is writer, director, and producer of many of the episodes on ABC's *Commander in Chief*, a series about an American woman as president that ran in 2005/2006. He may have been counting on the concern over Hillary Clinton's ascendancy to stimulate attention—both from those who would be intrigued by the prospect of a woman president and those who would be horrified by it. But the show didn't do well. There were “breaks” during the season as they tried to “re-group” to attract viewers, and the show was cancelled when the season ended. The series got the axe, but at least its president was still in office.

This production took itself very seriously. President MacKenzie Allen (called “Mac” because of its masculine resonance) is played by

Geena Davis, once the doomed Thelma in *Thelma and Louise*. In spite of the failure of the series, she won a Golden Globe award in 2006 for her performance in it. Tall and broad-shouldered enough to row crew, she sculls alone on the Potomac (with the Secret Service following). Mac's no ordinary party hack, but a former professor. An “independent,” she's drafted to the vice presidential slot by the late president, ostensibly for her vote-getting potential. But on his deathbed, the president asks her to resign, leaving the office open for his pal, the venerable speaker of the House. He puts it cryptically; the presidency “is not for you.”

The speaker, a cynical old pol (Donald Sutherland, exuding hypocrisy and corruption), covets the job, and the Washington “old boys” want him. After almost acceding to their collective prejudice, Mac abruptly changes her mind—women *will* do that—and takes the oath of office.

All this would be fine; serious doubts seem in order for someone assuming overwhelming responsibilities, and the tension that her wavering generates for the plot is an obvious way to jumpstart it. The speaker of the House makes the usual claims about women: they don't have the requisite drive; they don't want to do the job more than anything in the world; they lack courage, resolve, and toughness. A familiar tack that: a woman must be half mad with ambition to do jobs that men do, let alone an uncommon job like president. Total obsession alone will suffice; only a man has that “right stuff” to be the “Commander in Chief.”

Perhaps the message of this series is that it is too difficult for a woman to be president. In between the intrigues in the White House meant to undermine her, Mac is faced with as many domestic troubles as a desperate housewife, more than even Leslie McCloud faced in 1964 (although Mac has Polly Bergen, who played McCloud, in the role here of her mother). Her husband wants a real job (chief of staff) and resents her attempts to separate their private life from her professional one. She doesn't hire him, choosing instead her predecessor's chief of staff, knowing that continuity will serve her well in the White House. Her son brawls at school when his father is

called “a wimp.” Obviously, no man worth his salt should tolerate being a “first spouse.” Mac’s younger daughter can’t sleep—unmistakable proof of maternal neglect—and pays nocturnal visits to the master bedroom, teddy bear in hand. To add insult to injury, her teenage daughter, who might have been enthusiastic about her mother’s career, is thoroughly disabused of Washington, politics, and of anything that gets in the way of her adolescent self-absorption. The script evokes the daughter’s basic whininess and immaturity but seems unsure about her simplistic view of political life—is she right in some larger sense? (At least the children here have some character, unlike the strident bratty-ness of McCloud’s teenage daughter and younger son.)

In the midst of this maelstrom, Mac needs to focus on the political realities that beset her: the determination of the Machiavellian speaker to discredit her and the attempts of far-flung enemies to frustrate American global power, with ships, armies, and the odd threat of a nuclear attack. Helped by a feisty and loyal staff (as in *The West Wing*), she manages. The woman in the White House has not forgotten how to multitask. She’s able to enlist the cooperation of the speaker when the nation’s fate is at stake and to use his “special” links to an opposing great power. She can not so subtly pressure him if she needs to, with an old television interview revealing his earlier racist views. Women, besides being proficient multitaskers, can learn the skuzziest Washington games, or at least threaten to play and win them. Women are no better than the “next guy,” and they, too, have to compromise with principles sometimes.

Like McCloud before her, Mac seems to be up for managing affairs of state, but what will become of her marriage and family? We are stuck in the same rut as *Kisses for My President*, assuming that what should be important to all of us is entirely the responsibility of women. That the show takes a woman president seriously indicates progress simply by virtue of its seriousness. But the comedy and the drama have the same pressure points—the responses of the nearest and dearest who just can’t deal with a woman’s talents and their ful-

fillment. In *The Contender*, the heroine seems to stand more on her own, but she is reduced to the familiar “sexual object,” even though it’s through a false accusation.

AS WE WATCH Mac’s political and domestic problems, Laine Hanson’s struggle for confirmation, and Leslie McCloud’s comic travails, Josiah Edward “Jed” Bartlet (played by Martin Sheen in *The West Wing*) sits confidently in the back of our minds. How much more attractive a version of the presidency he presents! He has a domestic life—who can imagine an American president without a family to make him an acceptable leader? But he is focused on his job above all; his family is peripheral even in the most intense moments of his relations to them. Dr. Abigail Bartlet (Stockard Channing) was a regular fire-eater (modeled on Hillary Clinton as first lady?) and could easily chew up Mac’s or McCloud’s husbands for breakfast. Abbie’s a strong, independent character who has a professional life in which she excels. The Bartlet daughters are conveniently older, with lives of their own. Most important, everyone on *The West Wing* is convinced that politics is what’s important, even when family and personal life interfere. If a character is “down on” the Washington scene (as is true for Zoey, the Bartlets’ younger daughter), she speaks her mind eloquently, raises the essential questions about power and our obsession with it, and is promptly sidelined. *The West Wing* was based not only on the male presidency but on a fascination with politics. The story in *Commander in Chief* doesn’t embrace that interest, it’s left behind in *The Contender*, and isn’t even imagined in *Kisses for My President*. Truth is, each of these is bogged down in an outworn imagination. Each fails to work itself out of old clichés or newer versions of them. Inhibited by this mental block, none of them could begin to think creatively about what life would be like for Ms. President. ●

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