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INSIGHT

Woman president in U.S.: Will it ever happen?

By Barbara Palmer

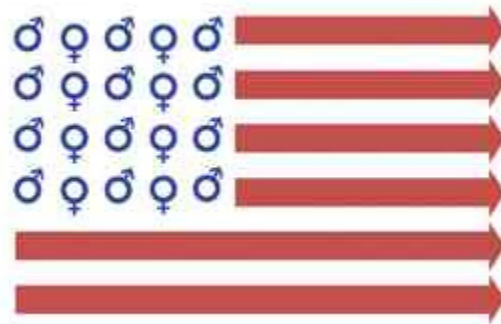
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On Sunday, Jan. 21, Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., formally announced she was running for the presidency. That decision officially ended speculation that began in 1992, when presidential candidate Bill Clinton remarked, "Buy one, get one free."

There have been countless analyses of her candidacy. Will being a woman help her or hurt her? Will she be able to balance toughness with tenderness? Will female voters vote for her? What about her vote on the Iraq War? What's up with her hair?

But all of this raises the question: Why has the United States never elected a female president?



Leilah Rampa/*The Anniston Star*

Even in Afghanistan in the first post-Taliban election, Hamid Karzai had a female opponent, Masooda Jalal, a 41-year-old doctor. In 1997, Ireland's presidential contest featured five female candidates. The token male candidate finished dead last. Vigdis Finnbogadottir of Iceland was the first democratically elected woman in the world to serve as a president. During her 16 years as president, from 1980 to 1996, children in Iceland grew up thinking only a woman could be president.

The Council of Women World Leaders, a network of female heads of governments, has 36 current and former presidents and prime ministers as members. At least five countries have elected more than one woman: Bangladesh, Finland, Ireland, the Philippines and New Zealand. Currently, women are leading countries as different as Chile, Sao Tome and Principe, Jamaica, Latvia, Germany and Liberia.

The stories of these women are familiar, inspiring and astonishing all at the same time. Kim Campbell, who served as Prime Minister of Canada in 1993, was an attorney until she ran for a seat in the British Columbia Legislative Assembly and eventually became involved in national politics. Chandrika Kumaratunga, the president of Sri Lanka from 1994 to 2005, served as commander-in-chief of the armed forces and as the Minister of Defense, Information and Interior. Both her mother and father served as prime minister. Her husband was assassinated in 1988, and she survived an assassination attempt during her 2000 re-election campaign.

We tend to forget that several women have run for president in the United States. Victoria Woodhull ran in 1872 and Belva Lockwood ran in 1884, before women even had the constitutional right to vote. In 1964, Sen. Margaret Chase Smith, the first woman to serve in both the House and Senate, also was the first woman to be nominated by one of the two major parties. At the Republican National Convention, she came in second behind Barry Goldwater.

Rep. Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman elected to Congress, ran in 1972. The other Democratic candidates tried to exclude her from the televised debates, so she secured a federal court order that allowed her to participate. Rep. Pat Schroeder announced her candidacy in 1987. Unfortunately, instead of being known for running for president, she is well-known for the famous photo of her crying when she announced she was dropping out. In the 2000 campaign, Elizabeth Dole was a presidential contender. Sen. Carol Moseley Braun, the first African American woman to serve in the Senate, ran in 2004.

There probably is no simple answer to the question of why we have never elected a woman to our highest office, but Laura Liswood, co-founder of the White House Project and the Council of Women World Leaders, probably has one of the best explanations.

It lies in the idea of American exceptionalism. During the Cold War, and particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, we saw ourselves as the undisputed "leader of the free world." We tend to assume that our president will have some kind of military experience. This is a "warrior" image of leadership, and it is very gendered. While Jamaicans, for example, may be fiercely proud of their nation, they probably do not see themselves the same way.

For several years, polls have consistently shown that more than 90 percent of Americans say they would vote for a female candidate for president. Last September, Gallup conducted a poll asking a slightly different question: Whether respondents thought Americans were ready to elect a woman as president. Only 61 percent said yes.

Social scientists will tell you that this question is far more revealing than the first. Today, very few people would outright admit that they would not vote for a woman, so the first question tells us nothing. It is quite striking that almost 40 percent of the country does not think America is ready for a woman president. What this is really telling us is that there still are many people who have serious doubts about voting for a woman.

It also does not help when political pundits and talking heads in the media not only say that Hillary Clinton is unelectable, but that her loss will ensure that we will never have a woman president. When Bob Dole lost in 1996, I don't recall hearing anyone say he had forever ruined it for white men over the age of 70. Somebody had better break that news to John McCain.

The Citizen Political Ambition Study found that when someone says they should run for office, men and women were equally likely to consider it. However, women were far less likely to be told to run, even by their own spouses. This does suggest, however, that the solution is quite simple. Tell women to run.

This is why organizations like the Alabama Women's Initiative and the Women's Leadership Institute at Auburn are critical. Love her or hate her, win or lose, it is tremendously important that Hillary Clinton is running. It is a compelling visual image that sends a message to the rest of the world.

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