

America's last glass ceiling will shatter ... some time

by Jo Biddle, Agence France-Presse, Nov 13, 2008

As the dust settles on the US elections, some women may be wistfully looking back on what might have been and wondering if not now, then when, America will elect its first female president.

Early in the historic 2008 White House race, the battle between African-American Barack Obama and former first lady Hillary Clinton appeared to many Democrats as a cruel twist of fate, a devil's choice: Support one and turn your back on the other.

Yet many observers believe Clinton's high-profile tilt at the male bastion of the White House may finally have dispelled any lingering prejudices about a woman's ability to occupy the country's highest office. "Whenever one barrier falls, the others will soon come crumbling down," wrote top Democratic Party strategist Donna Brazile in an email response to AFP.

"Although I cannot predict the day (who could have predicted this moment) or the candidate or the party, I see the day on the horizon. It's time we 'hurry history' and allow a new generation to serve. There's no question, a woman will make it soon and right in the nick of time." In her emotional June concession speech, Clinton took time to reflect on the import of her campaign as, without rancour, she urged her millions of supporters to switch allegiance and work to elect Obama instead. "Although we weren't able to shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it's got about 18 million cracks in it," Clinton said. "Children today will grow up taking for granted that an African-American or a woman can, yes, become the president of the United States."

This year's race also tore down another barrier when Alaska Governor Sarah Palin became the first woman to be run on a Republican ticket as vice presidential pick. But it is ironic that the land that espouses the spread of global democracy has yet to shatter that last barrier in women's empowerment. India's first woman president Pratibha Patil, 72, was sworn into office in July last year, Angela Merkel has been Germany's head of state since 2005, and even tiny Haiti, one of the world's poorest countries, briefly had a woman president, Ertha Pascal-Trouillot, as long ago as 1990. And Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first female president elected in November 2005, has been a regular visitor to the White House.

"I think this idea of American exceptionalism has been a huge factor in the way that Americans see their president. After all, we see ourselves as the leader of the free world," said Barbara Palmer, interim director of the Women and Politics Institute at the American University. "So we have had a very gendered view of the office, which after all is also that of commander-in-chief. Basically can a woman push that button? It's left over from the Cold War and I think that this election more than any other has been a tearing down of those final barriers."

Palmer, author of "Breaking the Political Glass Ceiling," agreed it was only a matter of time before a woman occupies the Oval Office. "I don't think you can underestimate the effect on an eight-year-old girl of seeing Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin running for office. We are a very

visual society and we have the attention of a tsetse fly so if it's not on TV then it didn't happen," she said.

Jonathan Parker, political director of Emily's List, a US lobby group working to win the election of pro-choice, Democratic women to offices across the land, agreed. There were certain voters out there who didn't feel that a woman should be president of the United States. Didn't think a woman was prepared and ready to be president," he said. "One of the things that was so incredible about Hillary Clinton's bid was that she was running on her experience and knowledge and the fact that she was ready to be president from day one. I don't think anyone ... could deny that she was prepared and ready. And I think that will trickle down to other races and other women candidates."

Just when that elusive day will come and who America's first woman president will be, remains for now a guessing game. Many observers believe Palin, 44, who just months ago was a political unknown, is already eyeing a 2012 run. But Clinton, 61, says she has put her White House ambitions aside, describing the chances that she will run again as "probably close to zero." Four years is a long time in politics though, and an army of women politicians are already at work in Congress and other offices, some possibly eyeing that last glass ceiling.