

U.S. edges toward Mrs. President

By SUSAN TAYLOR MARTIN, Times Senior Correspondent

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With more women holding high public office, Americans are closer than ever to having a female president.

Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, who has already spent eight years in the White House as first lady, hopes to go back as commander-in-chief. And House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is third in line for the presidency.

But in this area at least, the United States is behind the times. Britain, Pakistan and many other countries have had female presidents or prime ministers. And yes, female leaders can be just as bold, inspiring, controversial or corrupt as their male counterparts.

"Any individual woman can have any individual trait at any extreme," notes Swanee Hunt, former U.S. ambassador to Austria and head of the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard.

"If you have one woman coming to the top of a male hierarchy, she usually has qualities that are more aggressive or sharp-elbowed than many of the guys she climbed over."

That was certainly the case with Margaret Thatcher, Britain's prime minister from 1979 to 1990. Taking office in the waning days of empire, she restored a measure of national pride by sending British troops 7,500 miles to recapture the Falkland Islands from Argentina.

Far more significantly, Thatcher dismantled much of the welfare state, privatized many industries and helped turn Britain from the "sick man" of Europe into one of its most robust economies. She and soul mate Ronald Reagan were in the forefront of a conservative movement whose effects continue to be felt in Britain and the United States.

Thatcher's unflinching resolve - she told wavering then-President George Bush in 1991 "not to go wobbly" on driving Iraq out of Kuwait - earned her the nickname "Iron Lady." But that nickname was first applied to Golda Meir, who rose from tending chickens on a kibbutz to becoming Israel's fourth prime minister.

Although she could also project a warm, grandmotherly image, Meir was once admiringly described by a predecessor, David Ben-Gurion, as "the only man in the Cabinet."

Meir's tenure covered typically tumultuous times for the young Jewish state - the 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics followed by the 1973 Middle East War. It was Meir who officially delineated boundaries that included captured territories, a policy of annexation that still plagues Israel's dealings with the Arab world.

Today, the Iron Lady title goes to Angela Merkel, Germany's first woman chancellor. After taking office in 2005, she set out to repair U.S.-German relations badly strained by the Iraq war. Dubbed the most powerful woman in the world by Forbes, she has emerged as the administration's point person in Europe now that President Bush's closest ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, has skidded in popularity and plans to resign this year.

Bush apparently feels so warmly toward Merkel he gave her a neck rub at a G8 summit last year.

Several female world leaders got their start in politics because of family connections. India's Indira Gandhi and Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto were the daughters of former prime ministers. Corazon Aquino of the Philippines became the focus of opposition to President Ferdinand Marcos after her husband, a popular senator, was gunned down.

But the careers and fates of the three women were very different, showing, paradoxically, that female leaders often fare no differently than men. Gandhi was assassinated in 1984. Aquino was named Time's 1986 Woman of the Year for her support for democracy. And Bhutto and her husband - called "Mr. 10 Percent" because he allegedly skimmed that much from government contracts - were forced to leave the country under a cloud of corruption.

Clinton, too, owes much of her prominence to the fact she is seeking the same job that a close male relative held. But unlike many female leaders in the past, she is also a product of a strong women's movement that is creating, albeit slowly, a "critical mass" of women in government, Hunt said.

The ramifications are potentially great.

"As a group, women are more collaborative, they are much more interested in health care and education and less interested in the military," Hunt said. "They are more fiscally responsible because men spend so much on wars and wars are so terrible on a budget."

The world's newest female leader, Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, was elected last year largely because of an aggressive get-out-the-vote drive among women in the war-shattered African nation. Although she is a Harvard-educated economist, Johnson-Sirleaf prefers to talk about being a grandmother, said Hunt, who knows her well.

"That makes her think about future generations and what has to be done to prepare for them. She literally walked into a capital with no electricity and no sewer system and utter despair and destruction, and she is attracting help because she is so believable and trustworthy."

Just as Johnson-Sirleaf's election is galvanizing African women to enter politics, a female U.S. president would give a "huge" boost to women worldwide, Hunt said. Clinton, though, wouldn't be the first female head of government even in North America.

Dominica's Eugenia Charles and Nicaragua's Violeta Chamorro led the way, followed by Canadian Prime Minister Kim Campbell in 1993. A series of gaffes, however, cost Campbell her job after just five months.

"Gee," she reportedly said, "I'm glad I didn't sell my car."

Susan Martin can be contacted at susan@sptimes.com.

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