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Imagining a world with more female heads of state

Women have shown they can handle the top job. Yet gender bias has persisted.

By John Hughes

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On Sunday, millions of French men and women will determine whether a woman should become their president. Socialist Ségolène Royal is running against conservative Nicolas Sarkozy. Should she win, both France and Germany, two of the major countries in Europe, would be presided over by women. Angela Merkel is the German chancellor and currently holds the rotating presidency of the European Union.

Although the current political wisdom in France is that Mr. Sarkozy holds the lead, Ms. Royal's campaign has captured international interest and draws attention anew to the role of women in politics and government. Other women of extraordinary talent, such as Britain's Margaret Thatcher, India's Indira Gandhi, and Israel's Golda Meir have led their nations successfully, winning lasting praise in the history books. But they are in the minority.

When national leaders gather for the photographers at various international conclaves, it is still men who dominate the picture, and women seem almost a rarity.

In the United States, women can become astronauts and Supreme Court judges and cabinet ministers and governors and newspaper editors and publishers and secretaries of State, but the presidency has so far eluded them. Geraldine Ferraro was nominated in 1984 as the Democratic candidate for vice president, but the Democrats did not make it to the White House.

Now Sen. Hillary Clinton is running for the presidency, and, though a victory for her would make history, she would actually not be the first woman to be nominated. That was Victoria Claflin Woodhull, nominated by the National Woman's Suffrage Association in 1872 on a ticket of National Radical Reformers.

America has already gone through the "Can a Catholic be elected president?" and the "Can a Jew be elected president?" debate. This time around, the country is having the "Can a Mormon be elected president?" debate. But though the barriers to candidacy on grounds of religion have been crumbling, till now there has been a kind of tacit sub rosa gender bias against women.

Is it that women are considered not "tough" enough to rule, not forceful enough to rally the troops in time of war? Ms. Thatcher did rather well in Britain's war against Argentina, and Ms. Meir had little problem keeping Israel intact and secure during troublesome times. And as political theorist Francis Fukuyama has done, the case can be made that with women in charge, we might enjoy a world that is more cooperative and less prone to conflict.

In the first combined show-and-tell performance of all the current Democratic contenders for the presidency, Senator Clinton came out swinging with an account of the forceful response that any faction or country could expect from her in the White House if it dared attack the US. Although she has criticized the Bush administration's conduct of the Iraq war, she wanted to be sure everybody would see her as the toughest of the tough in defending US national security.

Nor are the Clintons leaving any doubt about who would call the shots in the event that Mrs. Clinton becomes president. Husband Bill told interviewer Larry King that he would "take any assignment" his wife wanted him to if she won the White House but that he would not be a shadow president. She would make the decisions. From what we have seen of her on the campaign trail, there can be little doubt that she endorses that position firmly.

Meanwhile, although she is not running for the presidency, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is an example

of a woman on the Republican side who would be as capable as any man in the White House. Strong in countering threats and duplicity, whether they come from Pyongyang or Tehran, she is a seasoned warrior in the wars against communism and terrorism who can stare down the world's worst tyrants.

Former ambassador to Austria and Harvard expert Swanee Hunt writes in the May/June issue of Foreign Affairs that while women have made strides in most societies over the past century, they have eschewed politics and government for leadership roles as social reformers and entrepreneurs. In the US, there are only 16 women in the 100-member Senate and only 71 women in the 435-member House of Representatives. "[E]ven as the media spotlight falls on the 11 female heads of government around the world," she writes, "[w]omen are much more likely to wield influence from a nongovernmental organization (NGO) than from public office."

The weekend elections in France will determine whether that number of 11 becomes 12.

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