
The Meaning of Sarah Palin

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TWO POLITICAL figures dominated the final months of the 2008 presidential campaign. One was the Democratic nominee, Barack Obama. The other had been unknown to all but 670,000 Americans only a few minutes before she was first introduced by the Republican nominee, John McCain, at a rally in Ohio on the Friday before the Republican National Convention, only 66 days before the November election.

By the close of that first weekend, Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska had become a national sensation. Two days after that, she delivered her debut address at the Republican National Convention as the party's vice-presidential nominee—a dazzling stemwinder, it was all but universally acknowledged. McCain's dramatic and unexpected bet appeared to have paid off in spades.

But by November 4, the day of the election, Sarah Palin had been transformed into one of the most divisive figures in recent American history. There was almost no middle ground between those who had come to adore her and those who believed she represented just about every dark and dangerous element of contemporary American politics. In choosing Palin, McCain had hoped to shake up the race; but the fault lines exposed by the Palin earthquake were not the ones he had thought they

might be. He had wanted to run against the Washington status quo as a reformer with an independent streak. He believed he was picking a fellow reformist politician with a history of taking on the leadership of her own party, and that Palin would prove acceptable to the Republican base because of her social conservatism. Instead, Palin became an instant cultural and political magnet, attracting some and repelling others and dragging a helpless McCain into a culture war for which he had little stomach. Indeed, the overheated response to Palin's presence on the national stage, from both friend and foe, was oddly disconnected from Palin's actual actions, statements, and record. It was a turn of events no one could have anticipated, and one that has much to teach us about American political life in our day.

BEFORE HER elevation, Palin had not been known as a combatant in the cultural battles of recent years. She had been serving as the popular chief executive of a geographically vast, sparsely populated, and economically vital state. She held conventionally conservative Republican views—pro-gun, anti-tax, and pro-life. She had risen to prominence by taking on Alaska's corrupt and profligate Republican establishment. In running for and winning the governorship in 2006, she had promised (and had begun to deliver) reforms of the state's relationship with Washington and with the oil companies that dominated its economy.

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In all these respects, Palin was an uncanny match for John McCain. Her political style and priorities resembled McCain's in a way that no other senior Republican elected official's did. Her conservatism, like McCain's, was more an attitude than an ideology: it was a kind of moralistic anti-corruptionism, obsessed with honest dealing and powerfully allergic to excess and waste. Palin did not, of course, share McCain's foreign-policy expertise or his heroic biography, but she shared what he often stressed most about himself, and what he most wanted to run on: she was, as the public would soon be informed ad nauseam, a reforming maverick.

Palin's social conservatism had never been the core of her political identity in Alaska. She always expressed general support for traditionalist views in interviews and debates, and it was widely known that she had also chosen to proceed with her fifth pregnancy after discovering the child had Down syndrome—a discovery that in about nine of ten cases leads parents to opt for abortion. But Palin never went out of her way to raise abortion or other social or cultural issues, and in her first two years as governor had not sought to change state policies in these areas. She was a good-government reformer with social conservative leanings, not the other way around.

BUT THIS was not how Palin was received on the national scene. Instead, her views on matters of cultural and social controversy very quickly became the chief focus of media attention, liberal criticism, and pundit analysis. Palin was assigned every view and position the Left considered unenlightened, and the response to her brought into the light all manner of implicit liberal assumptions about cultural conservatives. We were told that Palin was opposed to contraception, advocated teaching creationism in schools, and was inclined to ban books she disagreed with. She was described as a religious zealot, an anti-abortion extremist, a blind champion of abstinence-only sex education. She was said to have sought to make rape victims pay for their own medical exams, to have Alaska secede from the Union, and to get Pat Buchanan elected President. She was reported to believe that the Iraq war was mandated by God, that the end-times prophesied in the Book of Revelation were nearing and only Alaska would survive, and that global warming was purely a myth. None of this was true.

Her personal life came under withering assault as well. Palin's capacity to function as a senior elected official while raising five children was repeatedly

questioned by liberal pundits who would never dare to express such views about a female candidate whose opinions were more congenial to them. Her teenage daughter's pregnancy was splattered all over the front pages (garnering three *New York Times* stories in a single day on September 2). Some bloggers even suggested her youngest child had not issued from her, but from her daughter instead, and that she had participated in a bizarre cover-up. I attended a gathering in Washington at which a prominent columnist wondered aloud how Palin could pursue her career when her religious beliefs denied women the right to work outside the home.

Palin became the embodiment of every dark fantasy the Left had ever held about the views of evangelical Christians and women who do not associate themselves with contemporary feminism, and all concern for clarity and truthfulness was left at the door.

To be sure, some criticisms of Palin were entirely appropriate. She had no experience in foreign or defense policy and very little expertise in or command of either. In a time of war, with a seventy-two-year-old presidential candidate who had already survived one bout with cancer, this was a cause for very real concern. And Palin did perform dreadfully in some early interviews. Some of her more level-headed critics did make their case on these grounds. But the more common visceral hostility toward her seemed to have little to do with these objections. Rather, the entire episode had the feel of a kind of manic outburst; it was triggered by a false understanding of who Palin was, and once it began, there was no stopping or controlling it.

The reaction to Palin revealed a deep and intense cultural paranoia on the Left: an inclination to see retrograde reaction around every corner, and to respond to it with vile anger. A confident, happy, and politically effective woman who was also a social conservative was evidently too much to bear. The response of liberal feminists was in this respect particularly telling, and especially unpleasant.

"Her greatest hypocrisy is her pretense that she is a woman," wrote Wendy Doniger, a professor at the University of Chicago. "Having someone who looks like you and behaves like them," said Gloria Steinem, "who looks like a friend but behaves like an adversary, is worse than having no one."

This preposterous effort to excommunicate Palin from her gender suggests that the kind of new-order feminism she represents—a feminism that embraces cultural traditionalism and workplace egalitarianism at the same time—is especially frightening to those on the feminist Left because

they recognize its power and appeal. The attempt to destroy Sarah Palin by rushing to paint her as a backwoods extremist was not a show of strength, but rather a sign of desperation.

MEANWHILE, ON the Right, Palin was the cause of a manic episode of a different sort. The governor's touching life story, her folksy way of speaking, and her gut-level appeal to the culture of the lower middle class exercised tremendous power over many conservatives, which inclined them to fill the sizable blanks in Palin's political profile with their own wishful assumptions, and to make flustered excuses for her shortcomings.

There was a strong case to be made in her defense. Palin had as much foreign-policy experience as most governors do, and Americans have been willing time and again to overlook such inexperience in their hunger for proven executive acumen in Washington. (Four of the last five Presidents had been governors, after all, and Palin was running for Vice President with a foreign-policy expert at the top of the ticket.) And while Palin seemed out of her depth in several television interviews, she was extraordinarily effective on the stump, was a quick study, and proved to be at least an even match for Joe Biden, a six-term senator, in the vice-presidential debate.

Yet, for all these defenses, there could be no denying Palin's real deficiencies. Nonetheless, Palin was embraced practically without reservation in many conservative circles. The very heat of the Left's campaign against her made her all the more a darling of the Right. She became the 2008 poster child for the longstanding conservative grudge against the mainstream media. And, of course, having warmly accepted her unborn child with Down syndrome and having supported and encouraged her teenage daughter's decision to bring to term an unplanned pregnancy and to marry the baby's father, Palin instantly became an icon of the pro-life cause.

It seemed to matter not a whit that Palin had never taken any action on abortion in her time as governor, and rarely had much to say on the subject. Indeed, even as she campaigned before captivated audiences, drawing tens of thousands of proud conservatives to rallies in a display of rock-star popularity no vice-presidential candidate had ever earned, Palin barely spoke about abortion or social issues.

Palin did not merit her instantaneous conversion into the Joan of Arc of the American Right, just as she did not deserve the opprobrium that was heaped upon her by the Left.

So why did it happen? What was the Palin episode really about? The answer has much to do with the age-old tension between populism and elitism in our public life, which is to say, between the notion that we are best governed by the views, needs, and interests of the many and the conviction that power can only be managed wisely by a select few.

IN AMERICAN politics, the distinction between populism and elitism is further subdivided into cultural and economic populism and elitism. And for at least the last forty years, the two parties have broken down distinctly along this double axis. The Republican party has been the party of cultural populism and economic elitism, and the Democrats have been the party of cultural elitism and economic populism. Republicans tend to identify with the traditional values, unabashedly patriotic, anti-cosmopolitan, non-nuanced Joe Sixpack, even as they pursue an economic policy that aims at elite investor-driven growth. Democrats identify with the mistreated, underpaid, overworked, crushed-by-the-corporation "people against the powerful," but tend to look down on those people's religion, education, and way of life. Republicans tend to believe the dynamism of the market is for the best but that cultural change can be dangerously disruptive; Democrats tend to believe dynamic social change stretches the boundaries of inclusion for the better but that economic dynamism is often ruinous and unjust.

Both economic and cultural populism are politically potent, but in America, unlike in Europe, cultural populism has always been much more powerful. Americans do not resent the success of others, but they do resent arrogance, and especially intellectual arrogance. Even the poor in our country tend to be moved more by cultural than by economic appeals. It was this sense, this feeling, that Sarah Palin channeled so effectively. Her appearance on the scene unleashed populist energies that McCain had not tapped, and she both fed them and fed off them. She spent the bulk of her time at Republican rallies assailing the cultural radicalism of Barack Obama and his latte-sipping followers, who, she occasionally suggested, were not part of the "the real America" she saw in the adoring throngs standing before her. Palin channeled these cultural energies more by what she was than by what she said or did, which contributed mightily to the odd disjunction between her professional resume and her campaign presence and impact.

PALIN'S CULTURAL populism put her at odds with the foe that did her the most serious damage: the nation's intellectual elite, whose initial suspicion of her deepened into outright loathing as the campaign progressed. Her inability in interviews to offer coherent answers about the Bush Doctrine, regulatory reform, and the Supreme Court's case history, together with her unexceptional academic record and the fact that she had spent almost no time abroad, were offered as evidence that Palin represented a dangerous strain of anti-intellectualism on the Right.

She was, the Left-leaning Christopher Hitchens insisted, "a religious fanatic and a proud, boastful ignoramus." The Right-leaning David Brooks called Palin "a fatal cancer to the Republican party" because her inclination "is not only to scorn liberal ideas but to scorn ideas entirely."

Palin never actually boasted of ignorance or explicitly scorned learning or ideas. Rather, the implicit charge was that Palin's failure to speak the language and to share the common points of reference of the educated upper tier of American society essentially rendered her unfit for high office.

This form of intellectual elitism is actually fairly new in America, though it has been a dominant feature of European society since World War II. It is not as exclusive or as anti-democratic as cultural elitism is in other countries, because entry to the American intellectual elite is, in principle, open to all who pursue it. And pursuing it is not as difficult as it once was, at least for the middle class. Indeed, most of this elite's prominent members hail from middle-class origins and not from traditional bastions of American privilege and wealth. They can speak of growing up in Scranton, even as they raise their noses at dirty coal and hunting season.

Nor is membership in the intellectual upper class determined by diplomas hanging on the wall. Palin could have gained entrance easily, despite the fact that she holds a mere degree in journalism from the University of Idaho. Although the intellectual elite is deeply shaped by our leading institutions of higher learning, belonging to it is more the result of shared assumptions and attitudes. It is more cultural than academic, more NPR than PhD. In Washington, many politicians who have not risen through the best of universities work hard for years to master the language and the suppositions of this upper tier, and to live carefully within the bounds prescribed by its view of the world.

Applied to politics, the worldview of the intellectual elite begins from an unstated assumption that governing is fundamentally an exercise of the

mind: an application of the proper mix of theory, expertise, and intellectual distance that calls for knowledge and verbal fluency more than for prudence born of life's hard lessons.

Sarah Palin embodied a very different notion of politics, in which sound instincts and valuable life experiences are considered sources of knowledge at least the equal of book learning. She is the product of an America in which explicit displays of pride in intellect are considered unseemly, and where physical prowess and moral constancy are given a higher place than intellectual achievement. She was in the habit of stressing these faculties instead—a habit that struck many in Washington as brutishness.

This is why Palin was seen as anti-intellectual when, properly speaking, she was simply non-intellectual. What she lacked was not intelligence—she is, clearly, highly intelligent—but rather the particular set of assumptions, references, and attitudes inculcated by America's top twenty universities and transmitted by the nation's elite cultural organs.

Many of those (including especially those on the Right) who reacted badly to Palin on intellectual grounds understand themselves to be advancing the interests of lower-middle-class families similar to Palin's own family and to many of those in attendance at her rallies who greeted her arrival on the scene as a kind of deliverance. But it is hard to escape the conclusion that while these members of the intellectual elite want the government to serve the interests of such people first and foremost, they do not want those people to hold the levers of power. They see lower-middle-class populists like Palin and their supporters as profoundly ill-suited for governance, because they lack the accoutrements required for its employment—especially in foreign policy, which, even more than domestic affairs, is thought to be an intellectual exercise. It is for this reason that Barack Obama, who actually has far less experience in executive governance than Palin, was not dismissed as unprepared for the presidency. Palin may have been elected governor of Alaska, but his peers in Cambridge had elected Obama editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. He is thoroughly fluent in the parlance of the college town, and in the eyes of the new American elite, Washington is the ultimate college town.

THE REACTION of the intellectual elite to Sarah Palin was far more provincial than Palin herself ever has been, and those who reacted so viscerally against her evinced little or no appreciation for an essential premise of democracy: that practical

wisdom matters at least as much as formal education, and that leadership can emerge from utterly unexpected places. The presumption that the only road to power passes through the Ivy League and its tributaries is neither democratic nor sensible, and is, moreover, a sharp and wrongheaded break from the American tradition of citizen governance.

AND YET one must acknowledge that Palin *was* a problematic candidate. Charismatic and thrilling though she was at first glance, and impressive and dogged though she was throughout her 66-day run, she ended up at the center of a political and cultural vacuum of her own creation. She began by opening up a huge space for herself, and then was unable to fill it.

The sense of potential that accompanied Palin's introduction, and the feeling that she might really reverse the momentum of the campaign, were not illusory. For two weeks or so, the polls moved markedly in McCain's direction, as it seemed that his running mate was something genuinely new in American politics: a lower-middle-class woman who spoke the language of the country's ordinary voters and had a profound personal understanding of the hopes and worries of a vast swath of the public. She really did seize the attention of swing voters, as McCain's team had hoped she might. Her convention speech, her interviews, and her debate performance drew unprecedented audiences.

But having finally gotten voters to listen, neither Palin nor McCain could think of anything to say to them. Palin's reformism, like McCain's, was essentially an attitude devoid of substance. Both Republican candidates told us they hated corruption and would cut excess and waste. But separately and together, they offered no overarching vision of America, no consistent view of the role of government, no clear description of what a free society should look like, and no coherent policy ideas that might actually address the concerns of American families and offer solutions to the serious problems of the moment. Palin's populism was not her weakness, but her strength. Her weakness was that she failed to tie her populism to anything deeper. A successful conservative reformism has to draw on cultural populism, but it has also to draw on a worldview, on ideas about society and government, and on a policy agenda. This would make it more intellectual, but not necessarily less populist.

McCain's advisers were right about Palin: she was a mirror image of John McCain. She was not a visionary politician, or a programmatic politician,

but an attitude politician with an appealing biography. In the end, she was no more able than McCain to offer a coherent rationale for his presidency.

That was not her job, though; it was his. The striking thing about the last two months of the 2008 presidential race was not Palin's inability to turn things around decisively for McCain, but her success in giving McCain a lead for even a short while. She seized the imagination of the public in a way that scared the Left, and rightly so. It is not Palin's fault that McCain was incapable of harnessing the phenomenal response to his running mate to his own advantage.

In the end, Palin had a modest impact on the race. About 60 percent of those interviewed in the exit polls said McCain's choice of Palin had been a factor in their vote. Of these, 56 percent voted for McCain while only 43 percent voted for Obama. In other words, she appears to have helped McCain more than she hurt him, but not by much, which is as it should be; we were voting for a President, after all. In the face of unprecedented attack, Palin succeeded where almost no vice-presidential candidate ever has before in winning sustained support for the ticket.

This suggests Palin's potent combination of cultural populism and social conservatism might provide the roadmap a Republican politician will need in the future to make headway against the Democratic tide. But that roadmap will only take that Republican politician so far. The rest of the journey requires the articulation of a broader vision for American families, American prosperity and freedom, and American security; a vision of conservatism, not only a nimbus of populism.

There is every reason to believe Palin will try to accomplish just this in a future national election. It may be, however, that other ambitious Republicans will be better suited to the task of perfecting the formula for electoral success she introduced last fall.

Either way, the Palin moment shed a powerful light on the power, the potential, and the ultimate inadequacy of a conservatism grounded solely in cultural populism. It also exposed the vulnerability of the Left to a challenge to its most cherished claims—as the sole representative of the interests of the working class and the only legitimate path to political power for an ambitious woman.

And, perhaps even more telling, it revealed the unfortunate and unattractive propensity of the American cultural elite to treat those who are not deemed part of the elect with condescension and contumely.