

# BACK TALK

BY SUSAN J. DOUGLAS

## Invisible Women



**S**O HERE'S THE great contradiction of the 2008 presidential campaign: It was all about women, and not about women at all.

With Hillary Clinton's historic run for the presidency, and Sarah Palin's high profile run for veep—which maybe set women back 50 years—the spotlight remained on individual women and, inevitably, on their pantsuits, cleavage and peep toe shoes.

But women's issues? Invisible, barely uttered. Indeed, the person making the most sustained case for a focus on female-centered issues was Michelle Obama.

The high visibility of all of these women (each different, of course, but nonetheless successful and financially comfortable) makes it seem as if gender equality has been achieved and that sexism—except that coming from white male pundits on cable—is a thing of the past.

The word “sexism” got bandied about (laughably, by Republican operatives), but almost exclusively to characterize what you could or couldn't say about Clinton and Palin.

That actual sexism and genuine economic discrimination might continue to keep millions of women (and their children) in their place? Preposterous. Isn't that so 1970s?

If a woman can run for president and vice president, aren't we done here? Isn't feminism unnecessary, even irrelevant?

Television reinforces this notion, as well. Watch various successful, primetime shows—“Grey's Anatomy,” “Boston Legal,” “The Closer,” “House,” the various iterations of “CSI” and “Law & Order”—and women are surgeons, top partners in law firms, judges, DAs, forensic scientists (although with cleavage usually reserved for “gentlemen's clubs”).

On the news, in addition to Katie Couric now anchoring “CBS Nightly News” (and, by the way, doing a much better job than she's given credit for), the cable channels are filled with female reporters, anchors and pundits.

Women like me celebrate these accomplished women who handle, quite well, jobs previously reserved for men. But ironically, women are now overrepresented as having achieved “it all,” so that the notion that there might be the need for ongoing feminist struggle seems, well, quaint.

Women who earn the median income—\$35K for females in 2007—working-class women and poor women have

been erased from the national, public imagination.

In the real world, most women are not doctors, lawyers or TV reporters. What were, in 2007, the top jobs for women? Secretaries, nurses, elementary and middle school teachers, cashiers, retail salespersons, nursing and home health aids, waitresses, maids and housekeeping cleaners and hairdressers.

While some of these jobs provide a decent living, others pay minimum wage—or less. According to Sara Gould, president of the Ms. Foundation, two-thirds of the minimum wage and below-minimum wage work force in the United States is female. Of the 37 million Americans living in poverty, 27 million are women. The National Council for Research on Women reports that the subprime disaster disproportionately affects African-American and Latina women.

White women still make 77 cents to a man's dollar (it's 62 cents for African-American women and only 53 cents for Latina women), and a 2007 American Association of University Women study showed

that after one year of employment, female college graduates earn 20 percent less than their male colleagues. After 10 years in the work force, they earn 30 percent less.

Many mothers face discrimination at work, some of it subtle yet costly. We have the flimsiest support network for mothers and children of any industrialized country, with, still, no paid maternity leave and no nationally funded and regulated day care system. African-American and Latina women, still vastly underrepresented or stereotyped in the media, endure more poverty, brutality, crappy healthcare and disease than their white counterparts.

The foundational role that female poverty plays in the health of a nation's economy is a fact not only for the United States but for developing countries around the world.

So, I'm hoping that, as secretary of state, we might get Hillary “It Takes A Village” Clinton who—in addition to all the post-Bush disasters she'll have to confront—will see the welfare of women and children as central to her statecraft.

And I'm cheering Michelle Obama on in her efforts to advance a variety of policies that support women and families.

The legions of invisible women, struggling without any acknowledgement and erased by a media that makes them seem the minority when they are the majority, need to be made visible right now. Maybe we can make the 2008 campaign about women after all. ■

**I'm hoping that, as secretary of state, we get a Hillary 'It Takes A Village' Clinton who will see the welfare of women as central to her statecraft.**

BY SALIM MUWAKKIL

## Al Qaeda Plays the Malcolm Card



**W**HEN MEDIA REPORTS emerged that al Qaeda's second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, disparaged President-elect Barack Hussein Obama as a "house negro," it angered many in the black community. However, it also struck a chord.

The Egyptian physician—who is reportedly Osama bin Laden's confidant—actual-

ly used the phrase "house slave," but it was later translated as "house negro."

Al-Zawahiri said, "You [Obama] represent the direct opposite of honorable black Americans like Malik al-Shabazz or Malcolm X," who "condemned the crimes of the Crusader West against the weak and oppressed, and he declared his support for peoples resisting American occupation."

The al Qaeda leader said Obama, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice "confirmed" Malcolm X's definition of a "house slave." He was referring to Malcolm X's distinction between slave-era "house Negroes," who lived comfortably in the big house abetting white supremacy, and "field negroes," who toiled in the fields under the whip, plotting resistance.

But his metaphor was wrong about Obama: If anything, he would now be the housemaster, not the slave.

What's more, Al Qaeda is deploying this particular metaphor to offset Obama's global popularity, particularly in East Africa. Many of these Islamist groups fear the election of a black American president with explicit African roots and symbolic Islamic connections will lessen the anti-American fervor among their recruitment targets.

Although al-Zawahiri overplayed his hand with such a transparent racial ploy, he did manage to draw attention to what could be a troublesome issue for many progressive activists, particular for those who are African-American.

Many advocates of progressive international policies see the United States as "imperialism central." And for good reason. Stephen Kinzer's 2006 book, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*, makes clear this nation's ignoble history in subverting and deposing foreign governments. Kinzer concludes, "No nation in modern history has done this so often, in so many places

so far from its own shores."

The response to al-Zawahiri's comments also revealed African-American Muslims have little love for radicalized Islamists. At a news conference in New York City at the Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial, Educational and Cultural Center, a gathering of African-American Muslim leaders denounced al-Zawahiri's remarks as "insulting." The group added, "As Muslims and as Americans, we will never let terrorist groups or terror leaders falsely claim to represent us or our faith."

The statement also noted that radicalized Islamists have, "historically been disconnected from the African-American community generally, and Muslim African-Americans in particular."

**Many Islamist groups fear the election of a black American president with explicit African roots will lessen anti-American fervor among their recruits.**

This was a veiled shot at Arabs' historic role in the slave trade and the racism still blemishing some Arab nations, such as in Sudan.

Minister Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of

Islam—which is generally separate from other African-American Islamic groups—has been effusive in his praise for Obama. And Farrakhan has made clear his disdain for groups that employ terrorism.

Despite Farrakhan's aversion to al Qaeda's tactics, his foreign policy prescriptions probably would please al-Zawahiri and "condemn the crimes of the Crusader West against the weak and oppressed." With their man Obama now leading the "Crusader West," where will the Nation of Islam stand when the crusade inevitably continues?

More generally, where will black progressives stand?

No doubt, there will be strong black critics of the Obama administration who will keep the first black president's feet to the fire.

Others may find more to love about America. If the Obama administration decides to bomb Pakistan's tribal territories, for example, these supporters, who once may have questioned the wisdom of unilateral bombing, now will urge critics to "understand the bigger picture."

In October 2002, actor and activist Harry Belafonte called Powell and Rice "house negroes" for their subservience to the Bush administration. He was condemned in the media, but the black community had his back. If Belafonte said the same about Obama today, he would have to take a banana boat back to Jamaica. ■