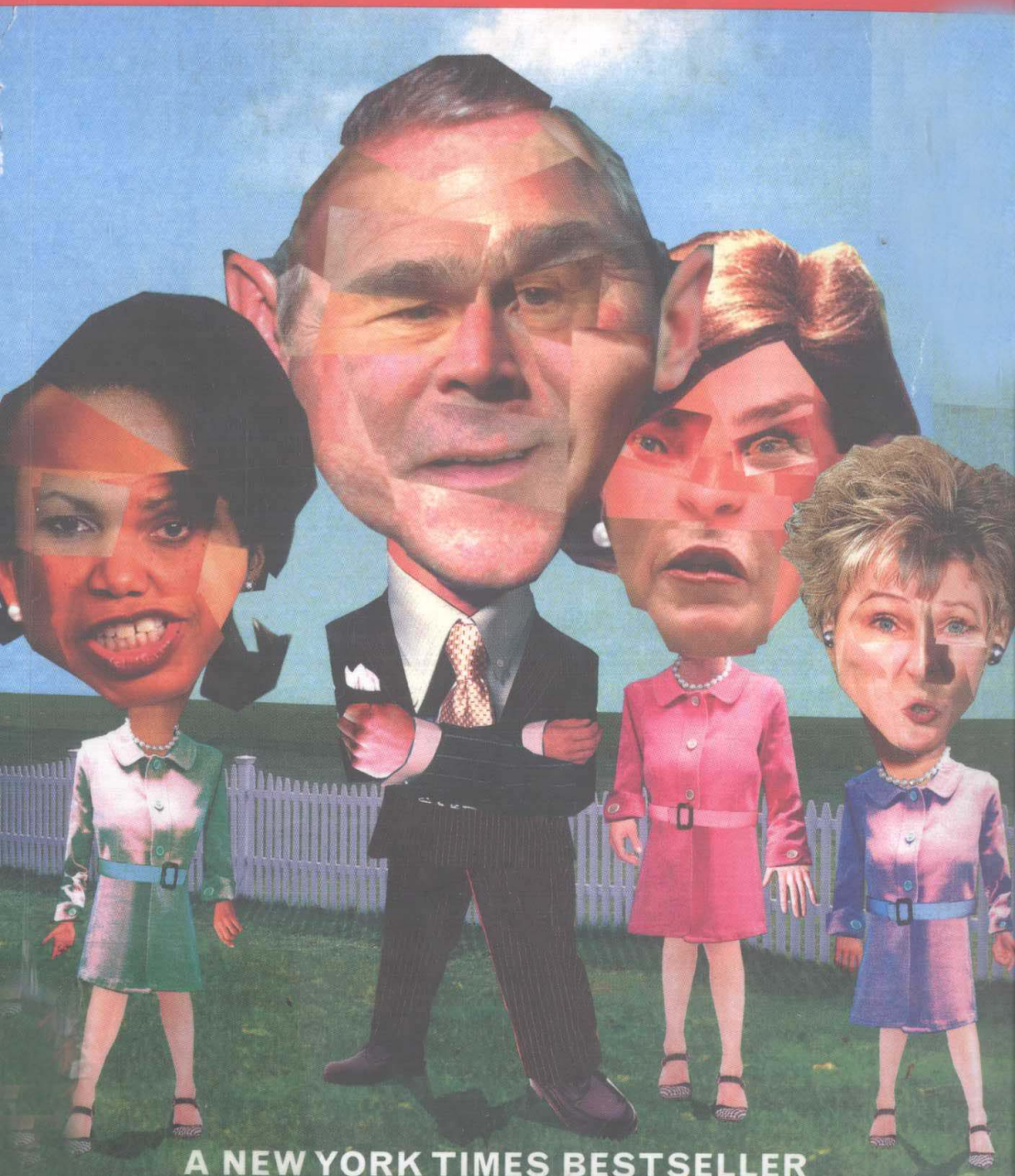


BUSHWOMEN

How They Won the White House for Their Man

LAURA FLANDERS



A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

BUSHWOMEN

Tales of a Cynical Species



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To Claudia Flanders (1933–98),
who taught us to say nothing at all if we couldn't
say something positive.

You'd understand; you always did.
And to sister Stephanie—go get 'em, girl!

FOREWORD TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

PUTTING THEIR MAN BACK ON TOP

Six months after the first publication of this book, the people it profiles—the women of George W. Bush’s cabinet and inner circle—took time out from their public jobs to appear on a stage at New York’s Waldorf Astoria hotel. It was the first day of the 2004 Republican National Convention. The Bushwomen’s mission was what it had been for four years: to put a female-friendly face on the most reactionary administration of our lifetimes.

At the Waldorf, the same George W. Bush quotation appeared on every flyer: “The country and my administration have benefited from the strong women who serve as senior members of my White House team.” The theme of the event was “W Stands for Women” and no speaker strayed off message. “Bush men have never been afraid of strong women,” the President’s mother, Barbara, assured the mostly

female crowd. “The President has more women in leadership positions than any other president in American history,” his sister, Doro Koch, added to ecstatic applause.

While the talk of the Bushwomen’s leadership and service was fervent, their actual achievements barely came up. Have the country’s workers benefited from Labor Secretary Elaine Chao’s service, virtually rescinding the Civil Service Act and overhauling the nation’s bedrock labor standards laws? Thousands of public workers, whose right to union representation was revoked during the first Bush term, would say not. In the wake of the first confirmed US case of mad-cow disease, has the country’s food supply been made safer by USDA Secretary Ann Veneman’s opposition to universal testing of US beef? “Security moms” might disagree. At the Waldorf there was no talk of Interior Secretary Gale Norton’s plans for Utah, where she quietly opened up nearly 5,000 acres of preserved canyon area to oil and gas drilling, just three days before publicly announcing “protections” for scenic rivers. Bush’s women love to cast themselves as defenders of “traditional” values, but as you’ll see, their programs are anything but traditional.

The Bushwomen at the Waldorf followed precisely the Bush–Cheney campaign playbook. For the purposes of public—and media—consumption, the tone was fluffy. The main point of contention on the stage was who best deserved the title “Grandmother of America.” Was it Barbara Bush, the President’s mother, or Lynne Cheney, the Vice-President’s wife? (Barbara Bush made a strong pitch when she described her evenings spent with W.’s dad: “While he spends every night cursing at the TV and occasionally throwing things, I calmly sit

by, needle-pointing and listening to books on tape.’’) Thus did the world’s most powerful women bury their professional accomplishments beneath a bushel of blather. For media purposes it worked. Where journalists covered “W Stands for Women” at all, the personalities got all the print space, Bush’s policies barely got touched. Only in organizing meetings that were closed to journalists, did the “W Stands for Women” teams get down to business. There, the cabinet secretaries led training sessions for campaign volunteers on such “women’s issues” as tort reform, tax “relief,” social security privatization, free trade, the war on terror, and “flex time” (the Bush administration plan to relax overtime laws allegedly to benefit working parents). In effect, they held two simultaneous events: one public, one private.

Flash forward to January 2005. The majority of the Bush-women are returning for more. Christine Todd Whitman and Ann Veneman have left Bush’s cabinet, but Margaret Spellings has joined as Education Secretary and Elaine Chao and Gale Norton are serving second terms. Condoleezza Rice has moved on up, from National Security Advisor to Secretary of State, replacing Colin Powell. Karen Hughes is flush with triumph from her work as the Republican candidate’s one-woman rhetorical rescue-team. First Lady Laura Bush proved to be even more popular, and even more under-rated on the campaign trail than her husband, the President. Just as predicted here, in the general election, George W.’s support among women voters grew (from 43 to 48 percent of the female vote), sufficient to return him to the White House.

The same George W. Bush who first acquired the presidency

half a million short of a popular vote majority, beneath a stolen-election cloud and belittled by the daddy's-boy nickname "Shrub," is returning to DC with a three-million-strong popular-vote margin and Republican majorities in all branches of government. Democrats came close but not close enough. On Election Day they brought eight million more voters to the polls than they did in 2000, but the Republicans managed to bring in eleven million additional voters. Bush's victory was narrow, and contested officially by some Democrats who held up the certification of the result to raise questions about the process and about reports of violations of voting rights. His victory was slim, but sufficient.

Election 2004 was decided on "values," we are told. The analysis is based on an Election Day exit poll which showed that 22 percent of the country's voters said "moral values" were what they cared most about. Had merely 60,000 more votes in Ohio gone for Kerry, the outcome would have been reversed and the conventional wisdom would be that the GOP was out of touch. As it is, the mainstream media embrace the "moral values" verdict as do politicians of both stripes. It has plenty going for it. As this book documents, media love to play up personality over policy, and the values version suits the GOP just fine. Spotlight their actual program—maximize private profits and minimize public responsibilities, for example—and the message can sound a little harsh. Focus on social values and the conclusion for the pundits is simple: the Bush team appealed to the inherently conservative traditions of Americans, especially in "wartime." It lets media off the hook for the low fact quotient of much election reporting. For their part, the same Democratic

leaders who have led their party to accept defeat in three successive elections prefer to adapt themselves to Christian-speak than mount a hot-blooded campaign against the barbaric policies and culture-war propaganda of their opponents.

As I write this, the Democratic Party is locked in an internal struggle over whether to “soften” its stance on abortion and women’s reproductive rights. It’s precisely the wrong message to take from the 2004 election.

George W. campaigned for office on multiple tracks. For the affluent and those aspiring to affluence, there was substance. Four years of tax cuts, government contracts and deregulation equipped W. to promise some voters benefits that they could take, literally, to the bank (and voters earning over \$100,000 a year turned out in record numbers to vote for him). For single-issue religious Americans, there was carefully crafted policy on gay marriage and abortion. Those policies, along with a promise of more, sent four million evangelicals (who stayed home in 2000) out to vote. For everyone else, George W. Bush offered something less bankable, less concrete. The domestic economy was drowning in deficits, the social safety net lay in shreds. An unpopular war in Iraq was claiming mounting thousands of civilian and military lives. What Bush had to offer the majority of Americans had little—or nothing—to do with self-interest. He appealed instead to primal instinct. At the level of advertising, TV and talk radio, the presidential race shrank to just one question. Who do you trust? John Kerry—the man the GOP successfully cast as a flip-flopper, flim-flam, effeminate “girlie man”—or George W. Bush, the with-me-or-against-me, “wartime President?”

There's no question that the Bush team fed their ground-troops plenty of partisan red meat. What has come in for less scrutiny is the way they deployed female and "minority" figureheads to shave away at their opponent's base. After all, it is not possible in the USA to win only the support of the religious, the rich and the white and still be elected President (even if your party's loyalists do own the voting machines). While the Democratic candidate stands accused of focusing on people of color, young voters and women far too little and far too late, the Bush team are savoring the results of having waged a multi-pronged attack, one that waged media war on cultural grounds at the same time that they reconfigured identity politics and "women's issues" to serve their purposes, if not their voters'.

The Bushwomen did what political appointees do in an election year. The cabinet secretaries fanned out to disperse government largesse in strategic spots. In the weeks before the election, Labor Secretary Chao announced millions of dollars in job-training grants in Michigan, Wisconsin and California (the first two were important swing states). In the last week before the vote, Chao also announced \$10 million for a church-based job-training scheme in Jacksonville, Florida. Interior Secretary Norton announced a new wildlife refuge in Minnesota and a new national park in Colorado—both projects that had been in the works for years. The US Department of Agriculture awarded \$207 million to clean up drinking water for Columbus, Ohio, and two days before Election Day, USDA secretary Veneman returned to that hotly contested state to meet with farmers and ranchers and announce yet more bounty in the form of USDA grants.

The very same White House that deemed it inappropriate and a grievous breach of protocol for the National Security Advisor to appear before Congress to discuss national security in the spring, had no objection to Condoleezza Rice touring swing states on an unprecedented speaking tour just before Election Day. Even as Vice-President Dick Cheney was warning voters that the nation's security was under threat (and even that terrorists might be targeting US cities with nuclear weapons), Rice criss-crossed the country lecturing in the battlegrounds of Washington, Oregon, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Florida. Sometimes she expounded on her belief that national security aides should remain outside of the partisan fight. ("I think it's important that we not campaign," she told a Pittsburgh TV station, especially because "we are in a time of war.") But she used every chance (including that same TV interview) to attack John Kerry's positions and to reassert a nonexistent link between Iraq and the attacks of 9/11. Rice's speech in Pittsburgh, 12 days before November 2, provoked the editors of the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* to remark that "The security advisor's talk reveals a disconnect ... If she actually believes what she said Thursday, it is frightening."¹

The cabinet secretaries did what political appointees always do—stump for their boss at the public's expense, but they and the other Bushwomen performed another function, too. Call it culture-war camouflage. As described in this book, the Bush administration's genius lies in presenting many different faces to different constituencies. From day one of the first term, the

1 Editorial, October 23 2004.

GOP cronies on the religious Right had been promising their congregations (if they voted Bush back for a second term) nothing less than an end to abortion, a halt in sexual liberation and a roll back of every right that brought the Bushwomen to high office. At the very same time, the loyal women and people of color appointed by W. to powerful spots in his administration sent a different message. Namely, that all that retro talk about a Christian revolution on Capitol Hill was not inconsistent with a commitment to equality, opportunity and everyone's economic good fortune. The Bush crew didn't shun so-called identity politics; they recast them, and honed in on class differences among targeted populations. In a political environment in which "women's issues" are treated by media as related to "social issues" and abortion alone, the Right's reconfiguring went unremarked. But in right-wing and anti-feminist journals, the thrust was clear: tax cuts, deregulation, unfettered capitalism and the war on terror, they said, are all "women's issues."

The Bush-Cheney 2004 "W Stands for Women" campaign kicked off in May with an event that featured Labor Secretary Elaine Chao and Elizabeth Cheney, the Vice-President's daughter, who was described as "a women's empowerment specialist." (Cheney headed up the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative, which is promoting democracy and a Middle East free-trade pact.) *Roe v. Wade* never got a mention, but Chao made a point of talking about the ways in which "10.1 million women-owned businesses" had benefited from President Bush's tax "relief." On the campaign trail, Elizabeth Cheney liked to talk about the inextricable way in which

democratic rights for women in places like the Middle East were wrapped up in market economics. And “W Stands for Women” cheerleaders missed no opportunity to mention the liberation of Iraqi and Afghan women. By the time the President, at the RNC, declared that “50 million men, women and children” had been “liberated” by US forces abroad, and “25 million women and girls [are] now free to go to school,” his supporters should have known the lines well enough to sing along. His wife, Laura, had been using the same words (usually in exactly the same order) for a year.

Karl Rove, it is said, had set a goal for the GOP of breaking the 10 percent mark among African American voters. African Americans are the most loyal of Democratic constituents. In 2000, Bush scored a scant 8 percent of all black votes cast. In 2004 he surpassed the 10 percent point and won the support of 11 percent of black voters. Although the precise numbers are debated, Bush won something like 44 percent of the Hispanic/Latino vote and the same proportion among Asians. In 2000, Bush drew just 31 percent of Hispanic votes. Comparable to the “W Stands for Women” campaign, former Congressman J.C. Watts, Maryland Lt. Governor Michael Steele and NFL Hall of Fame inductee Lynn Swann, led “African Americans for Bush,” a committee that touted Bush’s tax cuts, and the advantages of Bush policies to minority-owned small businesses. During the Republican National Convention, Steele et al hosted a party at the 40/40 night club (owned by hip-hop entrepreneur Jay Z) and talked up black “values” of family, faith, “enterprise” and ownership. Alphonso Jackson, Bush’s Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, wrote in *USA Today*

that “For the first time in history, more than 50 percent of black Americans own a home.” It sounds good, but it’s not right. (That’s a generous figure even for all minorities combined, according to the Census Bureau.) The President emphasized black home-ownership in almost every speech, too. What he failed to mention was that the gap between white and black home-ownership, which had been shrinking in 1990s, actually widened on his watch.² When W. asked the convention of the National Urban League whether the “Democrat Party take[s] the African American vote for granted” his comments got attention on all the TV networks. But black Republicans had been making the same point in op-eds and on black-focused websites for months. “What I found is that the GOP seemed to go out and learn at least a couple of things about potential, targeted demographic groups,” reflected hip-hop journalist, Davey D, who covered the RNC for Pacifica radio. “We all know their policies may not be conducive, but at least they made the effort.” Immediately after the November 2004 election, George W. Bush announced the nomination of Alberto Gonzales for Attorney General, a nomination supported by the nation’s largest Latino organizations.

While the Bush team played up their own version of identity politics strategically to diminish the Democrats’ base, the Kerry–Edwards team played down demographics in their search for the elusive (imaginary?) undecided vote. The buzz

2 *Presidential Candidate questionnaire*, October 11 2004, Campaign for Housing and Community Development Funding; <http://www.nlihc.org/news/candidates04.pdf>.

among young black activists was that Democratic leaders didn't really care. Black-led organizations and youth activist groups in cities like Columbus and Pittsburgh complained that outside-outfits like MoveOn and ACT (America Coming Together) kept their money to themselves, rather than cede control to locally run get-out-the-vote efforts in their communities. Black entrepreneur Russell Simmons hosted a hip-hop summit in Boston during the DNC and none of the white Democratic leadership in town showed up. Non-voting poor women and poor people of color told journalists that they didn't see any point in voting because government doesn't do anything to help them whether they vote or not.

Instead of red meat, John Kerry threw kiss-offs to his core supporters. During the primaries, he actually told a roomful of Women for Kerry supporters that he didn't want to single out female voters because that would be "pandering" to a special interest. Kerry was said to have considered John McCain, an anti-choice Republican, to be his running mate. When a million Bush critics took to the streets of Washington to "March for Women's Lives" in April, the Democratic candidate walked not one step. (He was raising money elsewhere, and sent his daughter and his sister in his stead.) Torie Vallely, director of the "Women for Kerry" campaign, was a longtime friend and colleague of the candidate's, but she was unknown in women's rights circles. "Would he have appointed someone with no media experience to head up media strategy?" the director of one national women's group grumbled privately. Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers Union, became "chair" of "Women for Kerry" shortly before the

Democrats' convention began, but she too, had complaints. "At this moment in time, we don't have a budget for women organizers. What's up with that?" she told a gathering at the DNC. "Women have given a lot of money to this campaign. We don't want all of the money back ... but how about just a little bit?"

Even as he shied away from "pandering" to women, Kerry pulled out every stop to appeal to veterans, gun owners and NASCAR dads. When TV-watching America tuned into the Democrats' convention between 10 and 11 pm on the three nights the major networks aired live coverage, the featured speakers were almost all white, middle-aged men, many in uniform. In an effort to look tough on terrorism, Kerry used the word "kill" in debates *a lot*, but he refused to talk about his longtime support for a woman's right to have an abortion. Finally, at *Redbook's* annual Mothers and Shakers awards luncheon in September, he was expected to address the topic. Instead, he made a vague allusion to reproductive issues abroad. "Sheesh," wrote an exasperated blogger on the *Ms Magazine* website. "He's got a room full of women who *like* him and that was it?"³ A major theme of the Kerry campaign was courage, but it seemed to be measured only in war ribbons.

Pitching for women's votes was left largely to Theresa Heinz Kerry, a foreign-born, former Republican billionaire, exactly the wrong person to appeal to the blue-collar, economically

3 *Ms. Musings*, "Kerry's speeches don't include the A word," September 22 2004; www.ms magazine.com/blog/archives/2004/09/kerrys_speeches.html.

vulnerable women whose support Democrats desperately needed.

A poll of women voters on the eve of the election showed that the Democratic candidates could have expanded the party's base while at the same time bolstering their core supporters. Across party lines and in every demographic group, women were very likely to say that the candidates did not focus enough on equal pay for women (60 percent said not enough), prevention of violence against women (58 percent) and women's equality under the law (61 percent.) The numbers (compiled by Democratic pollster Celinda Lake) reveal an intensity around those issues among Republican, Democratic and Independent women that was entirely unreflected by any of the candidates.⁴ Had Kerry attended the March for Women's Lives he might have seen that vast numbers of mainstream women could be mobilized for a clear equal-rights agenda. Those who had qualms about aborting fetuses were brought along by the march organizer's definition of reproductive rights to include not just abortion but also access to contraception and opposition to sterilization abuse. Health issues were accompanied by an equally strong commitment to securing workplace and legal equality. (Kerry might also have noticed that when all is said and done, pro-choice women do the organizing.)

It wouldn't have been impossible to derail the Bush-Cheney multiple message attack. For one thing, the GOP's messages to different constituencies ran not so much on parallel, as on

4 Lake Snell Perry & Associates, "The Gender Gap and Women's Agenda for Moving Forward," November 9 2004.