Running As A Woman

GENDER AND POWER IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Linda Witt
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To Jim
—LW

To Janet, Ruth, Pen, and Tim
who made being a woman in politics so incredible
—KP

To my aunt, Norma Nicolais Cook,
an important source of love and continuity in my life
To the memory of my uncle,
Wilbur Nicolais
—GM

PREFACE: THE BIRTHING OF A BOOK

This book was conceived as a result of something women do well—a friend got friends together—and it has been blessed with many midwives. The first, Josie Heath, late in 1989 introduced two old friends of hers, journalist Linda Witt and political scientist Karen Paget. The book gestated over several long lunches spent discussing the various women running for high-stakes political office in 1990—among them their mutual friend Josie Heath, who was running for the U.S. Senate from Colorado.

Change was in the air that year. The Berlin Wall had tumbled. A new phrase, "peace dividend," was all the buzz among the media and politicians. Pundits were predicting this newfound windfall would focus the public's interest on domestic issues, thus flinging open the doors of governors' mansions and the U.S. Congress to the type of candidates deemed most tied to those issues: women. The year 1990 would be, they said, "The Year of the Woman in Politics."

To the two of us enjoying those getting-to-know-you lunches, the hype seemed too reminiscent of earlier electoral cycles, of earlier raised and dashed hopes: 1984 and Geraldine Ferraro, 1972 and a big freshman class that did include Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder, Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, and Barbara Jordan but still failed to create a critical mass.

But we were sensing something new in 1990. Not numbers, but a new level of confidence among women candidates. A new sense of legitimacy and entitlement. Gone was the old defensive posture, "It doesn't matter that I'm a woman. I can do this job as well as any man." Suddenly it did matter. Women candidates were arguing they would bring different views to the process of making public policy. There was a new edge in their voices and campaign messages. And there were new kinds of women entering the arena: women whose life experiences in the varied neighborhoods of America meant new ways of seeing political issues, new ways of expressing the policy needs of women and families, and a

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new sense that our national government might finally even look like all our people.

Enter the third member of this team, historian Glenna Matthews, whose earlier book, *Just a Housewife—The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America*, had given both the journalist and the political scientist new insights into the ways American women's cultural traditions meshed with politics. One of us said to the other, "You should meet . . ." and we discovered we both already were friends with Glenna. At the next lunch, as Linda and Karen began listing for Glenna the messages we were hearing in women's campaign slogans, she began explaining how they echoed the rationales American women had used, long before suffrage, to have a political voice.

When yet another friend, Lael Stegall, hosted a "book birthing" dinner party for us in Washington, D.C., early in 1991, we feasted as much on the richness and depth of some three dozen politically involved women's experiences and knowledge as on the food. It was a diverse group: some former candidates, some former campaign staffers, some just politically aware citizens. Among the "midwives" were author Celia Morris, the McCormick Foundation's Ruth Adams, Brigadier General Wilma Vaught (USAF-Ret.) and EMILY's List founder Ellen Malcolm.

When we began *Running as a Woman*, we had simple goals. The political scientist and the historian have taught various gender- and politics-related courses at the University of California at Berkeley and Stanford University, as well as elsewhere, and both felt a need for a contemporary text that would explain why women finally are beginning to succeed electorally—and what held them back for so long. As a reporter and columnist who has covered national politics since 1968 and whose special interest has been women's issues, the journalist wanted to tell the stories of the remarkable women who pioneered politics and made possible the swelling pipeline of elected women officials all across the country. What we did not understand then was how hard it would be to construct the necessary bridges to each other's disciplinary knowledge, ways of thinking, and ways of working. We accomplished it because we began as friends, and friends of friends, all philosophically committed to women's equality.

The wealth of professional experience and insight each of us brought from our respective disciplines led us much further than we had imagined possible, and we came to understand that the book we wanted to write could not be written by any two of us without the third. Despite our

involvement in our generation's politics and more than a quarter century each as participant/beneficiary/observers of the women's movement, our knowledge overlapped only occasionally. There were times, at our weekly brainstorming sessions, when one of us would struggle to find words that might explain some new direction her own investigation had taken, only to discover that one of the others could give it a name or connect it to another scholar's thinking or at least fit another piece into the puzzle.

And there were questions that initially puzzled us. Why had women voters never flexed the electoral muscle their majority status made possible? Why is the act of running for office still, to some women, an unseemly thing for a woman to do? Why, even after the gender gap was identified, quantified, and the threat of it exploited, could no one quite explain what it was or what triggered it? And why was it that women politicians were still being asked the same absurd question that might-have-been presidential candidate Pat Schroeder had been asked in 1987—"Are you running as a woman?"—despite her droll response, "Do I have an option?"

Some of the answers we sought became clear in the failed races and few successes of 1990— a "Year of the Woman in Politics" ridiculed by many, including *New York Times* columnist William Safire. In December 1990, he sarcastically denounced women and their political record as almost predictable failures "in the land of equal opportunity, where the U.S. Mint can't get rid of its Susan B. Anthony dollars."

Women's progress is slow, he sniped, because "women of every political stripe . . . are letting down their own sexual side by not demanding more female candidates and by not supporting them when they run."

Schroeder herself has expressed similar exasperation: "After we [women] got the vote this body quaked and said we'd better start paying attention. . . . It's not like they didn't know these issues were out there . . . they just never felt they had to deal with them. But [after suffrage] they found it didn't make any difference because women didn't hold them accountable.

"We were always very timid about pushing our own issues politically, we women. We would push others' issues. The environment, civil rights . . . just not ours," she added, lamenting the "common wisdom that it is somehow tacky for women to push their own issues. . . . We honestly believe if it's right and fair, the majority will just do it."

In his summation of 1990's Year of the Woman, Safire was harsher,

accusing women of a "dismaying lack of assertiveness" and wondering when they would learn, as had men, to vote with their buddies from the foxholes of shared battles.

Then came Anita Hill.

Over the course of the next year American women came to understand many of the battles we had shared, and our book, intended as an update on women in politics as of 1990, rapidly became something more. We found ourselves correspondents on the front lines of women's battle for full citizenship. In closing the gaps in our understanding of an issue or an era—or even of the would-be First Ladies' Cookie War—we found new ways of thinking and interpreting events.

Schroeder's 1987 response to this nation's odd perplexity at the mere possibility that one of its foremost congressional representatives—by chance also a daughter, wife, mother, Harvard-trained lawyer, and one of its most competent female citizens—might actually be "running as a woman" encapsulates the history of and core dilemma for America's political women. Her response was also an expression of the feminist hope that women finally might have achieved a right their brothers had always taken for granted: The right to be full citizens. The right to be persons whose gender—and all the biological and cultural traditions that word implies—is no barrier to life, liberties, happiness, and the fulfillment and purpose that can come from serving one's country.

Would that we could end this book secure in the knowledge that women now do have the option to be women wherever their lives, talents, and goals beckon them. Would that the question, "Are you running as a woman?" had ceased to be asked because it is, as it always has been, ridiculous on its face. It is as ridiculous as presuming a candidate for office will be in favor of, or "better on," issue Y because her chromosomes are X. It is as ridiculous, particularly, as asking a candidate, because she is a woman, if she could be "man enough" to declare war, forgetting that all candidates need to be strong enough to fight for peace and share responsibility for families, society, our planet, and human dignity everywhere.

To the extent that we are optimistic about the future, it is because of the women we have met during the research for this book—most in person, but some only through their too-brief mention in the history books. One of them, the very first woman to serve in the U.S. Senate, was a senator for just one day, November 21, 1922. Rebecca Latimer Felton was then 87 years old, an artifact of the nineteenth century and a product

of an anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, rigidly segregated South. At best she is flawed heroine, yet in some ways she was quite a modern political woman. She had been an activist: a temperance veteran and a "progressive" newspaper columnist. She had been a political daughter, stumping the state with her father as a child, meeting every president since Grant. As a political wife she had even managed her husband's campaigns, long before respectable "ladies" did such things. And she was a suffragist, a savvy one at that.

When Georgia's governor appointed her to finish the term of a senator who died in office, it was an obvious sop to the brand new women's vote. Congress had already adjourned that session. The appointment was merely symbolic. Yet Felton demanded to be treated seriously. She pleaded unsuccessfully with President Warren G. Harding to call a special session. When women throughout the country echoed her plea and petitioned him to reconsider, Harding suddenly found it politically expedient to call a special session for other reasons—no gender gap imperative existed at that time. Felton, although assumed to be too elderly and frail to make the arduous journey to Washington, nonetheless did so, then was forced to cool her heels for a day and a half in the Capitol's corridors while the Senate debated whether to allow a woman in. Once sworn in, she asked for the floor.

With the speech she proceeded to give—the first by any American woman on the U.S. Senate floor—this white-haired old lady put her fellow Senators on notice that, while she might be the first, she would not be the last of her gender in Congress, and when her sisters would follow, she declared, "I pledge you that you will get ability, you will get integrity of purpose, you will get exalted patriotism, and you will get unstinted usefulness."

Many colleagues and friends have supported this project with everything from bed and breakfast to financial contributions (Lisa Goldberg of the Revson Foundation, Nancy Woodhull of the Freedom Forum, and Jim Browne of the Tides Foundation). Many read early drafts and found encouraging words. We would particularly like to thank Jane Mansbridge, Margaret Gordon, Ethel Klein, Jane DeHart, John Snetsinger, Helen Kelley, Loni Hancock, Raymond Smock, the Women's Research Group and the Beatrice Bain Scholars at the University of California at Berkeley, the Institute for Historical Study, Beth Rashbaum (who cheerily promised to shoot us if we didn't finish the book), our guardian agent

Felicia Eth (who kept us on course), and editor Susan Arellano (who told us on Day One that the project "was far richer than even you now know.")

Ruth Mandel, Sue Carroll, and the other wonderful scholars and staff at Rutgers' Center for the American Woman and Politics let us sojourn with them early on and helped us at every turn. The Great Falls, Montana, chapter of Women in Communications gifted us with a pristine out-of-print and hard-to-find copy of Jeannette Rankin's biography. Political veterans Jane Danowitz, Linda DiVall, Celinda Lake, Ellen Malcolm, Sharon Rodine, and Harriett Woods were generous with time and resources. San Francisco's Women's Campaign Research Fund organized a series of breakfasts with women in politics—serendipity that saved us much travel time and money. Linda's column editors (especially Shirley Ragsdale in Muskogee, Pamela Moreland in Marin County, Mike Oakland and Dean Schacklett in Olympia, David Pollak in San Jose, and Sid Hurlburt of *USA Today*) not only encouraged but kindly suffered column after column on some aspect of the status of women in politics in the 1990s. We also benefited from the enthusiasm and library sleuthing of Jennifer Steen and Barbara Newcombe here and Letitia Wells in Washington, D.C.

Our own mothers (Enid Witt, Maxine Eggert, and Alberta Ingles) got into the act, showering us with clippings, as did our daughters (Amy Witt Leroux and Karen Matthews). Linda's husband Jim Marsh provided Frequent Flyer bonuses as well as broad technical support, and he and Karen's son Tim Enwall performed miracles when the PCs weren't speaking to the Macintoshes.

Beyond the dozens of formal interviews that served as the basis for this book, many far less structured moments, in elevators and "ladies" rooms, over coffee, and in cars and airports between appearances with the hundred-plus women we met, gave us a deeper understanding of our subject—the American political woman.

Again and again, when the "conference call" came that the Senator's or Congresswoman's aide had warned us "will have to cut short this interview," the Senator or the Congresswoman invariably waved the interruption away and continued talking—often for more than an hour beyond the time the aide had scheduled.

We were touched when Senator Nancy Kassebaum spoke so knowledgeably, and appreciatively, of the contributions made by Kansas pio-

neer women, a love the women and men of her staff acknowledged by each creating a piece for a Kansas quilt for her Senate office wall.

Another treasure: hearing then 90-year-old Senator Margaret Chase Smith express her delight at her first snowmobile outing a few weeks earlier, then receiving a note from her—on rose-engraved paper—with an insightful afterthought on our discussion about her fight for equal opportunity for military women: "It was because of the nurses and what I saw them doing in the Pacific in the 40s that caused me to make the fight. I was right. . . and hope time will prove it was well for all of us."

One moment that stands out, and one we undoubtedly will repeat again and again to bolster sagging spirits whenever we or a sister begin to lose hope that the women of America will learn to stick together, work across race and class lines together, and count on one another to create a new future and fight our common battles: Attorney General Janet Reno, after being introduced to a wildly cheering overflow crowd at the National Women's Political Caucus's July 1993 national convention, let everyone in on a secret. Her nomination had happened so fast, she confided, that the embattled White House staff didn't know—and wondered out loud—if women's groups would support her. "I didn't know, so I called an old friend of mine, Ann Lewis. . . . The next thing I knew Harriett Woods was quoted in papers saying 'Why not Janet Reno?' That afternoon, at my meeting with the President, he said 'Well, I see you have the support of women.'"

But the most stunning and thought-provoking moment came in late 1991: In the foyer of the Texas governor's mansion, a place replete with macho trappings that evoke every myth of the West, Governor Ann Richards was working a crowd of political women from across the nation when she spied and made a special point of singling out and welcoming Native American Wilma Mankiller, principal chief of the Cherokee Nation.

How might our nation's history have been different if those two women had had those two jobs a hundred years earlier? How will our nation be different when women are fully equal citizens and officeholders?

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1

Breaking Ground

The Evolution of Citizenship

"Who had more influence on the '92 election: Saddam Hussein or Anita Hill?" asked Maryland senator Barbara Mikulski, playing to the enthusiastic crowd that had gathered to celebrate the victories of new women senators.

"Anita Hill," they cried. The correct answer was never in doubt on this evening of November 10, 1992.

Again, Senator Mikulski called out the question. And again the crowd at the Democratic Women's Club roared back "Anita Hill."

Mikulski belted out the question one more time. As if on cue, Anita Hill, whose testimony on sexual harassment before an all-male Senate Judiciary Committee had created a wave of political action by women, entered the room. Hill's soft-spoken acknowledgment of the applause—and of her role in history—was lost in the pandemonium that followed her entrance.

In the space of one year, Anita Hill had become a symbol of women's status in American life and, in particular, their exclusion from the halls of power. Virtually all the women who ran for the U.S. Senate used references to Anita Hill in their campaign literature and direct mail solicita-

tions as a symbol of that exclusion. She had sparked the most unprecedented mobilization of women voters since they had won the vote in 1920, and she was now receiving accolades for the boost she had given to the newly elected female senators.

Prior to the November elections—just a few days before this celebration—women had been a mere 2 percent of the 100-member U.S. Senate, and about 6 percent of the 435-member House of Representatives. Since the late 1960s, their minuscule representation had been increasing at a slow but steady rate. Before Anita Hill, there was little reason to think that the change in the 1992 elections would be anything other than incremental.

Early in the election cycle, women candidates feared that the U.S. war with Iraq would dominate the 1992 presidential and congressional elections, as it had the November elections of 1990. That election year had been proclaimed the Year of the Woman, but women candidates for Congress saw their electoral hopes dashed with the invasion of Kuwait on August 3, 1990. The return of old worries of war and military preparedness shifted hopes that the post–cold war peace would allow for attending to domestic problems. Polling data indicated that foreign affairs and defense issues did not play to women candidates' strengths in the same way domestic issues of health care and the economy did.

A singular event had changed the expected dynamics of women's campaigns in 1992, and it changed the answer to Mikulski's question from Saddam Hussein to Anita Hill: President George Bush nominated Clarence Thomas, Federal Appeals Court Judge of the Washington Circuit and former director of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to the U.S. Supreme Court. Despite some argument over his judicial qualifications and protests over his conservative political positions, offset for some by his status as an African-American, Thomas seemed destined to be confirmed by the U.S. Senate.

No one was prepared for what happened next. On National Public Radio, Nina Totenberg reported confidential information that an unknown Oklahoma University law professor named Anita Hill, who had worked for Thomas at the EEOC, had given closed-door testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee accusing him of sexual harassment, and that the Judiciary Committee had chosen not to pursue her charges. *Newsday*'s Timothy Phelps reported the same story, also from undisclosed sources. Soon, the news ripped through the rest of the media.

News reports that the charges were not taken seriously infuriated women on Capitol Hill. Before noon on October 8, an impromptu delegation of Democratic congresswomen marched en masse from the House of Representatives to the U.S. Senate to demand an investigation of Hill's allegations. With Barbara Boxer (California) and Patricia Schroeder (Colorado) in the lead, they banged on the door of the Senate Democratic Caucus room, only to be told they were "strangers" who could not come in. The picture of these angry women charging up the Capitol stairs in a formation that evoked images of planting the flag atop Iwo Jima appeared on television and on the front page of major newspapers. It was an unprecedented display of anger, a frontal assault on the virtually all-male Senate.

Within a very short time, an embarrassed Judiciary Committee overturned its decision and agreed to extend the confirmation hearings. Anita Hill, who had been willing to speak to the Judiciary Committee staff only on the basis of confidentiality, reluctantly agreed to testify publicly before the full committee. For several days in October, the American public was riveted to these hearings. Women rarely brought charges of sexual harassment against powerful men, and none had ever done so on television. The traditional October preoccupation with baseball was suspended as viewers tuned in.

The televised hearings produced and sustained another image that proved even more politically potent in the long run than the Iwo Jima image of angry congresswomen. The sight of the Senate Judiciary Committee members, all male, all white, grilling Anita Hill as if it were her history that was on trial drove home to American women their absence from the U.S. Senate. "It was like free advertising for the Women's Campaign Fund," said Jane Danowitz, head of the organization that had spent twenty years helping women climb the electoral ladder with the hope of someday reaching the Senate.

Though Thomas was ultimately confirmed, the depth of the rebellion created by Anita Hill's confrontation with the men on the Judiciary Committee became quickly evident. Seasoned activists snapped into action. More important, women who had never been politically active were also aroused to action. Grandmothers, mothers, and daughters discussed their own episodes of sexual harassment. For many older women, memories often deeply buried came to life. Collectively, women convened public speak-outs to dramatize the pervasiveness of sexual harassment

and to overcome the shame and silence that accompany such experiences. The extent of the outpouring surprised almost everyone.

More women than ever before decided to run for political office, many as a direct result of the Thomas/Hill hearings. By April 30, 1992, over 213 women had announced they would seek, or consider seeking, their party's nomination for the House of Representatives or the U.S. Senate.[1] While more women announced for office at every level of government, the most dramatic change was the number of women declaring their candidacies for the U.S. Senate, the highest legislative office in the land and, short of the presidency, the most difficult elective office for women to obtain.

Jean Lloyd-Jones, state senator from Iowa who decided to challenge Charles Grassley for the U.S. Senate, said, "I never, ever thought I would run for higher office." Lynn Yeakel from Pennsylvania, who had never held public office, said it just "pushed people like me over the line." She announced she would take on Republican senator Arlen Specter, whose aggressive, prosecutorial role on the Judiciary Committee had especially angered women. Yeakel had considered running for office before, "but it took the image of seeing those men making those decisions and controlling our future to get me to do it."

Carol Moseley-Braun, the recorder of deeds for Chicago's Cook County, said she "started getting calls" about challenging Thomas supporter Illinois senator Alan Dixon. The hearings for Moseley-Braun were decisive: "I would not have run for the Senate had the Senate not gone on television."

Senate candidates Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer of California, who had announced before the hearings, found their campaigns "jump started" by an outpouring of money and volunteers. Other candidates experienced a similar surge of support. By early spring of 1992, twenty-two women had announced their candidacies for the U.S. Senate. In 1990, by contrast, only eight women had run.

Bipartisan organizations such as the Women's Campaign Fund (WCF) and the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), whose previous efforts to raise money for women candidates might best be described as painstaking, found their contributions doubling, even tripling, with little or no effort. The pro-choice and Democratic EMILY's List (for Early Money Is Like Yeast) enjoyed an astronomical rise in membership and donations. Within one year, it became the largest political action committee (PAC) in the country, growing from 3,000 to 23,000 mem-

bers, and from $1.5 million in 1990 contributions to $6 million in 1992. Republican women formed a new organization called WISH, short for Women in the Senate and the House, patterned after EMILY's List. At the state level, new statewide fund-raising networks and informal "lists" seem to spring up overnight.

The Anita Hill effect on women's political chances seemed confirmed when, in rapid succession, Carol Moseley-Braun defeated the incumbent senator Alan Dixon in the Illinois Democratic primary, and Lynn Yeakel beat out four men, including Pennsylvania's incumbent lieutenant governor, to win the right to challenge Senator Arlen Specter.

During the primary, Yeakel had not minced words about her real target. She ignored her primary opponents and focused her campaign ads on Specter. Showing him questioning Anita Hill, Yeakel asked, "Did this make you as angry as it made me?" In roughly one month's time, Yeakel rose from an unknown with no name recognition to victory in the primary. Yeakel's achievement occurred in a state traditionally inhospitable toward women candidates. No woman had ever before been elected to Congress from Pennsylvania, and women had never been able to claim more than 7 percent of the state legislative offices.

A month or so after Yeakel's victory, the unthinkable happened in California. Not one, but two women candidates beat their male primary opponents to become candidates for the U.S. Senate. An anomaly had caused two Senate seats to be open in the same year. Former San Francisco mayor Dianne Feinstein had announced for one. Marin County congresswoman Barbara Boxer had announced for the other. A firm conviction of just about every observer of politics was that California's voters would never elect two women. They were not only the "wrong" sex, they both hailed from northern California, the less populous region of the state, and they were both Jewish. But in June 1992, shortly after the Moseley-Braun and Yeakel victories, both California women won their primary races.

By the end of the primary season, 106 women had survived their primaries to run in the general election for Congress, and 11 women had won Senate nominations. Along the way, these women candidates had knocked out longtime incumbents, heir apparents, and other political veterans.

Media attention focused on women candidates with unprecedented intensity. The possibility of women voters exercising the clout inherent in their status as a 54 percent majority of the voting population was debated

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