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ELEVEN YEARS LATER—Whither Feminism?

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The numbers tell the story most clearly. In 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry won the women's vote by 3%. In 2000 Al Gore won the women's vote by 11%.

What happened to that vaunted advantage the Democratic party has enjoyed with women voters over the last few elections? The short answer is that white, married women between the ages of 39 and 50 years old, who vacillated between Kerry and Bush throughout the campaign, voted for Bush in significant numbers. If Kerry had won these women in Ohio or Florida, he would be President. (The majority of women in all other age groups stayed with the Democrats.)

Most of these women agreed with the Kerry agenda on health care, education, environmental protection and were nominally pro-choice. They were moderately religious, going to church a few times a month rather than every week as Bush religious right supporters did. Many were mothers. They voted for Bush because they believed he would keep them and their families safe from terrorism. A man who had never seen combat, who had skipped out on his duties in the Air Reserve convinced these women that he would do a better job of protecting the country than a highly decorated Vietnam Navy officer who had proven his courage on the battlefield. The predisposition that the nation doesn't change commander-in-chief in the middle of a war also played in their decision.

Right after the Bush inauguration in 2001, his political advisors began working to diminish the Republican party's voting disadvantage with women. This included telling pro-choice women that Bush was compassionate about poor women and their families and wouldn't dismantle family planning options and legal abortion even as the Bush Administration was cutting funding for international family planning and championing a law that would undercut second and third trimester abortions. Bush pushed through a new education law targeted specifically at married women with school age children even

as his administration provided no funding to make the law work. All major Bush initiatives had a component targeted toward pleasing married women.

After 9/11, the Bush political team quickly realized that the 2004 reelection campaign would be won on the issue of national security. For the next three years, the theme that President Bush could keep Americans safe was orchestrated by the Bush campaign. It was relentlessly televised into married woman's homes and preached in religious institutions. (A modification of this theme resounded in Jewish temples where congregations heard that Bush was "the best for Israel as well as for America.")

With the nomination of John Kerry in July, Democrats had a decorated war hero who could prove that he would be better than Bush at keeping America safe. The message worked quite well as noted by the closeness of the 2004 election, but not quite well enough. While fifty-one percent of American women voted for Kerry and must have believed he would make an excellent wartime president, this argument did not resonate with white, 39 to 50 year old, married female voters.

Eleven years ago on a Barnard panel on "Whither Feminism" I warned that the campaigns of Reagan in 1980 and 1984 and Bush in 1988 had recruited mainstream women to win their elections and that feminists must not ignore these women. While great strides were made to win non-affiliated women to the Democratic party during the Clinton years, the President's scandals with women tarnished this effort. These scandals did not completely eliminate the gains Democrats had made as witnessed by Gore's support from women voters in 2000, but the Clinton missteps left a sense of uneasiness and distaste among these women --many would have been young mothers and newlyweds at the time and particularly sensitive to Clinton's behavior.

The Bush campaign realized that the Clinton scandals had softened women's support for the Democrats although not for the domestic issues the Democratic party championed. Bush's campaign believed that these "security women" could be convinced to vote for Bush. They were worried about terrorism and were married to men who leaned toward or were for Bush. Republicans worked relentlessly in 2004 to damage Kerry's credentials as a strong, courageous man, hoping to win over these women in swing states. Unfortunately, the Democratic campaign focused its energy on unmarried women in Democratic strongholds. There was not a concerted effort to reach out to married, mainstream women in exurban communities. In suburban areas, the campaign effort was sporadic depending upon the strength of the Democratic party in the state. The last straw came a few days before the election when Bin Laden released a tape claiming credit for the 9/11 attacks. For some women, this was just enough to push them into Bush's camp.

Reviewing my comments on the 1993 panels and comparing them to the 2004 election, I am saddened by what I find. First, the polarization that I so feared has occurred. The national Republican party has become more anti-feminist even as they have adopted many of the words of our movement and have learned smart politics means appointing women and minorities to high positions. Second, the leadership within the 2004 Democratic campaign did not try to be inclusive beyond its base. The necessity to win

married white, centrist women has not yet been learned. This is a constituency that should be ours.

In the panel, I warned how difficult it would be to maintain feminists' gains if only one political party shares our goals. Unfortunately, this is the situation today as most moderate Republicans have disappeared into the Democratic party or have become independents. Feminists must reach out beyond the Democratic party if we are to protect a women's right to choose, find decent economic opportunities for ourselves and those less fortunate, create a sustainable environment and bring peace to the world. I am sorry to say that the warnings I made so many years ago have not been heeded, and we are in for a difficult four years with many policy losses.

On the positive side, the election numbers prove that the majority of women still believe in the feminist message of equal opportunity. Kerry overwhelmingly won the women and men between the ages of 18 to 30 years old. If the Democrats can keep the allegiance of these young people, it augurs well for the future of feminist values, but that assumes the party holds to its recent policy positions on issues of specific concern to women.

We must learn to speak to those women who agreed with Kerry on the issues but voted for Bush. In the next four years, feminists must convince these women that America's security is dependent upon its ability to be strong at home. If our schools are lousy, our health care unaffordable, our environment falling apart, our education substandard, and few of us able to find decent jobs, Americans will be not be safe from the terrors of the world.

It is unfortunate that those women voters who were with us on the issues didn't understand that there is no safety from terror if we are weak at home. That is one of the principle messages feminists must now send over and over again to the nation.