

EDITORIAL

Beauty and the Beast

Is France ready for its first female president? To date French presidents of the Fifth Republic, Charles De Gaulle, Georges Pompidou, Valery Giscard d'Estaing, Francois Mitterand, and Jacques Chirac have all been men, long on age and in full possession of a heavily wizened look. Now along comes Socialist Segolene Royal, the attractive, unmarried mother of four, and almost a sure thing to be one of two finalists for the French presidency in 2007. She doesn't look at all like what we have come to expect from French leaders.

Jacques Segeula, a former Mitterand advisor recently told London's *Financial Times*, "She represents a new generation, she is fresh, she is beautiful. In a televisual and media society, the beauty, the look, is terribly important. Television listens with the eyes. When Segolene Royal smiles and looks straight at the camera and says something then people have confidence in her."

Still, the French can be a sexist lot. Pierre Mignard, a family friend of Royal's, believes the French are ready for a woman president, and he discounts the naysayers, but admits they are out there. "Just because she's a woman, some people seem to think she will confuse the nuclear button with the button on her vacuum-cleaner. That's sexist."

The article, "Liberte, Egalite, Feminite: The camera loves her, but does France's would-be president, Segolene Royal have more to offer than socialism with a pretty face?" concludes that French people are agog with Royal excitement, and that the era of globalization may be just about to usher in a fresh image for stuffy old France. Before any of that happens, however, she will have to defeat a formidable opponent in next year's election — Nicolas Sarkozy, the head of France's largest conservative party, the UMP.

Across the pond, the U.S. appears to be getting ready for a fresh new face in its presidential contest of '08. Yes, it's true, the U.S., like France, has never had a woman president, but for the first time the nation does have a serious female candidate in Hillary Clinton. But much to Hillary's chagrin, hers isn't the face that has America in a tizzy. Instead it's Barack Obama. Obama has the charisma, the juice, just as Royal does. Next to either Obama or Royal, Hillary is one dog-eared, charismatically challenged politician. Obama is the real deal. Hillary is the real dead ender.

So, Obama for President? Yes, but maybe not so fast.

The recent Newmarket Films movie release, "Death of a President," whose plot tastelessly depicts the assassination of President Bush and the aftermath, does serve one purpose. It reminds us that America has a dark side to its political history — a history of its strong, charismatic leaders being assassinated, or at least being shot at. Colin Powell and his wife Alma were mindful of this history when he passed on the chance to run against President Clinton in '96, passed on the chance to be the nation's first African American president.

The history of assassination in America is a litany that citizens know too well, seldom speak, but can't push away from the edges of their minds. That litany: JFK assassinated, Martin Luther

King assassinated, RFK assassinated, George Wallace crippled, and Ronald Reagan seriously wounded.

American assassination fever got so out of hand from 1963-81 that even uncharismatic politicians were being fired upon — President Gerald Ford survived two attempts on his life during the 1970s. In 1981 assassination fever peaked with the shooting of Pope John Paul II and the murder of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Israel's Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in '95. Despite the attempts on world leaders, only India, with the murder of three Ghandis (Mohandas, Indira and Rajiv) shares America's dark stain of assassinating its most charismatic leaders.

A generation removed now from most of America's assassinations and attempts, many Americans believe and hope that chapter in our history is behind us. Maybe, but who can blame politicians like Colin Powell for not taking any chances?

These are the terrible realities that charismatic political leaders like Royal, Hillary, Obama, Giuliani, and McCain must face when weighing a run for high office.

But rather than taking Powell's "no go" approach, here's a suggestion, only mildly tongue in cheek. Face those fears, and embrace the cultural change full bore.

For example, not only should Obama run, he should nominate Harold Ford as his running mate and pick African Americans for all his major cabinet posts — say Colin Powell, Condolezza Rice, Thomas Edsell, Michael Steele, Alan Keyes, Juan Williams, Derek Jeter, etc. Filling the chain of succession to the presidency entirely with charismatic African Americans would surely give any potential assassin pause. What would be the point? Take out one leader, only to have them replaced by another African American.

Imagine if Abraham Lincoln had thought this through. He would have lived to finish his second term. John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln because he knew that the Republican "Emancipation Proclamation" President would be replaced by the border state Democrat segregationist Vice President Andrew Johnson.

Would Lee Harvey Oswald have shot John Kennedy if his vice president had been Bobby Kennedy, rather than the Southern political hack Lyndon Johnson? Johnson, ironically, would become a champion of civil rights.

Imagine Hillary picking her alter ego, a protective replica, for a running mate. One's thoughts lead to Maryland Sen. Barbara Mikulski. Need any more proof that Hillary is no match on the charisma meter to Obama?

In the age of globalization when the cultural melting pot extends around the planet and all things must look good on television, these considerations may be part of the new order. Our new leaders must be diverse and charismatic, but there are dark down sides that those qualities carry along with their power.

Even the beautiful Royal must worry that one day the pomposity of the Fifth Republic's politics will consumer her, and she will grow old in the Elysee Palace looking far more like the pinched Mitterand or Chirac than the ebullient Julia Child. It is a nation, after all, of heavy politics and much heavier sauces.

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