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Woman As Contender for the United States Presidency: A Look at the Movie, "The Contender"

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Abstract. This article explores whether the movie, "The Contender," supports the viability of a woman for the presidency of the United States.

Watching "The Contender," a movie from DreamWorks and directed by Ron Lurie, one might conclude that it supports the viability of a woman for the presidency of the United States (US). After all, the plot depicts a male president choosing a woman to be his candidate for vice president after the death of the incumbent. And by the end of the movie, the woman is about to be confirmed according to at least one interpretation of the 25th amendment to the US Constitution and is about to be just one heartbeat away from the presidency. Yet much that transpires along the way seems to detract from the woman's political viability as a leader of what the French call the one global hyperpower.

The woman, a US Senator, makes her entrance on her back on a desk in an office as her husband towers over her--apparently before, during, and/or after a sexual consummation. It turns out that her husband is also her campaign manager and premier political consultant and fixer who may well have had a very large part in her political success up to that time. Upon her introduction to the mass media, much is made of whether her "look"-viz., wardrobe--is right for this momentous and magic moment. It eventually becomes apparent that the Senator has superior political and class pedigrees, in that her father has been a governor and seems to own quite an estate. She is certainly no "rags-to-riches story" and has quite probably received lots of help from high-class and politically savvy family friends along the way. The Senator also helped to break up the marriage of her husband and his former wife. In an interesting turn of phrase, she states that she couldn't help it because she succumbed to love. In reaction to heated interrogation from her enemies and those of the President during the confirmation hearings, she loses her composure and is at a loss of words for seconds that seem like hours before she concludes with a short and tame response. Moreover, her eyes tear up in at least one private and emotional session with the President and his main adviser. Near the end of the movie, during a private conversation with the President in a dark expanse of lawn adjacent to the White House, one might be forgiven if one senses that the Senator is about to either kiss, be kissed, or savor some sense of intense intimacy with the President right before they are interrupted by a horde of Secret Service agents. So much for whether the two could work well together. And finally, it is the President's own remarkable charisma and oratorical powers that draw the Senator's confirmation to the very point of consummation before a Joint Session of Congress. The Senator is no Margaret Thatcher.

An alternative take on "The Contender" is that--within the demeaning, sexist stereotypes of woman that still persist regardless of all the contributions of feminism--it is really about the womanization of the political man. Take the two major US presidential candidates in the real world of the current campaign. Both have had lots of familial help; both seem to be obsessed with perceptions and style to the exclusion of cogent policy analysis; both tout the nature of their marital relationships; both attempt to keep alleged youthful indiscretions away from prying eyes based on principle and/or pragmatics; both are being manipulated by all sorts of political, economic, and social interests for all sorts of agendas--in essence, both are acting as contestants for a beauty contest. Again, at least within sexist stereotypes, "The Contender" may not at all be about the political woman but about how politics has become

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womanly. (See Adler, N.J. (1996). Global women political leaders: An invisible history, an increasingly important future. *Leadership Quarterly*, 7,133-161; Chu, J. (1987). Asian Pacific American women in mainstream politics. *Asian American Psychological Association Journal*, 12, 19-33; Kalfus, M. (1994). Phallic women and macho men: Hollywood, "The Dread of Woman," and Hillary Clinton. *Journal of Psychohistory*, 21, 287-300; Ricklander, L. (1991). Women and politics. In J. Firth-Cozens, & M.A. West (Eds.). *Women at work: Psychological and organizational perspectives* (pp. 185-191). The Open University. Rooke, P. T. (1983). Public figure, private woman: Same-sex support structures in the life of Charlotte Whitton. *International Journal of Women's Studies*, 6, 412-428.)(Keywords: Leadership, Presidency, Sexism, The Contender, Women.) (Keywords: Film, Presidency, The Contender, Women.)