



By Caryn Sullivan

**HISTORY IN THE MAKING
THE CHOICE, AND CHOICES, OF SARAH PALIN**

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When I saw Gov. Sarah Palin deliver her acceptance speech at the Xcel Energy Center last Wednesday, I understood what Oprah Winfrey meant when she said that Sen. Obama's convention speech made her cry her eyelashes off. Like many American women (donkeys, elephants and independents alike), I've waited impatiently for America to elect a woman to one of our highest offices. It was awe-inspiring to witness history in the making.

I am the daughter of a woman, who, when she died at 49, was a single, working mother of five who taught us that women are as capable and as deserving as men are. Raised in a liberal household, I have shifted further to the right with each tax return I've filed. Some of the most important lessons from my mother – take personal responsibility, accept consequences for your actions, and be self-reliant – have led me away from her political party.

Therefore, I was jazzed when I learned the Republicans would have a woman on the presidential ticket. By selecting a young woman governor, John McCain acknowledged the value of the different perspectives and styles that a dual-gender ticket would offer. While I wouldn't vote for McCain just because he chose a woman, I'm more enthusiastic about his candidacy because he did so. In the coming weeks, I'll be evaluating whether McCain's pick was a cynical slight to more qualified women, as some claim, or a brilliant selection of a woman who has the whole package – brains, guts, personality, and, God forbid, beauty — as others believe. I'll also continue to follow the fascinating debate about choice that the Palin pick has generated.

I always planned to be a career woman. Like Palin, I earned a communications degree from a western state university before I attended law school. When we discovered our son had autism, I chose to leave a promising career in law, becoming the quintessential suburban soccer and hockey mom of a blended family.

Shortly after the paychecks disappeared, I underwent an identity crisis. I dreaded attending social functions, becoming tongue-tied if someone asked me what "I did." Me, a homemaker? Already feeling like a traitor to my upbringing, I discovered that the tension between "working women" and "stay-at-home moms" was palpable. Years later, I appreciate that, while I haven't paid into social

security since the '90s, I've been a working mother all along, and I have no regrets.

In the past week, I've experienced déjà vu as I've watched the gloves come off in the post-Palin-pick brouhaha, with women debating women over our proper place in society – and men mostly watching from the sidelines. Some view Palin, with four minor children, one with exceptional needs, and a grandchild on the way, as not just a hockey mom with lipstick but as an unconventional neophyte who will break the gender barrier and restore integrity to a dysfunctional Washington system. Others view her as an unprepared, hypocritical woman who selfishly placed her own ambitions before her family's needs.

While I am just as wary of the Palin hype as I am of the Obama mania, she intrigues me. I've asked myself whether I would be as drawn to Palin if she and I had as much in common – age, family size, sports, educational background, middle class upbringing, and preference for lipstick at hockey games – but had divergent views about issues like the size and role of government and taxation. Would I still put on my non-judgmental hat, professing that it's the Palins' personal choice whether she works outside the home? Knowing what I do about the demands of a special needs child, would I withhold an opinion about whether she should accept the call to serve her country instead of making the choice that I made? Or, would I be among those who are criticizing her choices, some because they disagree with her politics and are threatened by her unexpected arrival on the national scene, yet others because they simply have different priorities?

Of course, I'll never know the answer to these questions. But I believe that, while I've made a different one, it's not my place to judge the choices Sarah and Todd Palin and Barack and Michele Obama make about their private family lives. Millions of women – including my mother — have mastered the art of juggling, some with the support of husbands, extended family members, and hired help, and some without it. While I suspect my mother would have favored Palin's choice over mine, the point is, American women, unlike our counterparts in many other countries, have the opportunity to make it.

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