



Sarah Who?

It didn't take long for "Sarah *who?*" to become the "Sarah Sensation" of 2008. In this age of instant communication and a TV set in every room (and 50 or more in some sports bars), an unknown can become a household name literally overnight. On the Friday morning before the Labor Day weekend, it would have been difficult to find anyone outside of Alaska who had heard of Sarah Palin. Twenty-four hours later, it would have been equally difficult to find someone who had not. And a surprising number had already formed opinions of her, most of them positive.



"The others can talk the talk," said a clerk at a Cumberland Farms store in Manchester, New Hampshire. "She's walked the walk." A bartender in the same city was impressed with the new celebrity's prowess as a latter-day Annie Oakley. "Any woman that can handle an automatic weapon like that has got my vote," he said.

A Democratic alderman and Hillary Clinton supporter during the primary campaign was overwhelmed with enthusiasm for the selection of Sarah Palin. "I am so excited!" she exclaimed. "She brings so much energy to the campaign. I don't agree with her on all the issues and I don't know how I'm going to vote, but I am excited by this." Less than 48 hours after Senator Joe Biden of Delaware accepted his party's nomination for vice president, the previously unknown "babe" (as Rush Limbaugh unabashedly called her) had made the veteran U.S. senator and newly crowned running mate for megastar Barack Obama the forgotten man.

Indeed, by the time she finished her acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in St. Paul five days later, there was a danger that presidential nominee John McCain might not be able to match it for eloquence, smoothness of delivery, or most of all, audience enthusiasm. But Sarah Palin, with her smile, her personality, her family story, and her unmistakable charisma, tied up the support of social and religious conservatives with everything but the ribbon in her hair and presented it to McCain as an invaluable campaign contribution.

McCain's "gamble" was paying off, despite the grumblings in the press and among Democrats that by selecting the "rookie" Palin, he had thrown away the issue of Barack Obama's substitution of celebrity and charisma for experience and seasoned judgment in foreign and military matters. On that front, Republicans were left to refer rather lamely to Palin's role as commander in chief of the Alaska National Guard and to the fact that the northern frontier of her state borders on Russia. And maybe the state's senior senator and other Alaska politicians with whom Palin has clashed in her short time in her state's political arena bore some resemblance to the commissars and party secretaries of the old Soviet Union.

"If she can take on Ted Stevens and that crowd in Alaska, she can deal with the Russians," said Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a longtime friend and ally of John McCain. Since Governor Palin is 28 years younger than the 72-year-old McCain, who is, in turn, 22 years older than the state of Alaska



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(the territory became a state in 1958), the choice of a running mate who could step into the Oval Office and be in command in the situation room at once might be considered crucial. The Hillary Clinton campaign had used a 3 a.m. phone-call scenario in an ad against Obama during the primaries. Might Obama use it now against the McCain-Palin ticket?

Then there was the mini “troopergate” scandal surrounding Palin’s efforts to have her former brother-in-law, with whom her sister was locked in a custody battle, removed from the state police. But Palin appeared to be on the side of the angels when word got out that the trooper allegedly used a Taser gun on his 10-year-old stepson. And the revelation that Palin’s 17-year-old daughter, Bristol, is pregnant raised questions about how much McCain had actually learned about the Alaska governor before deciding to put her potentially “one heartbeat away from the presidency.” But even that story seemed to bolster Palin’s stature with social conservatives, since Bristol will not only bring the baby to birth but is engaged to the infant’s father. There would be no “Murphy Brown” paradigm from the Palin family.

So while Palin was wowing the convention delegates and a national TV audience estimated at about 37 million (just a million fewer than watched Barack Obama become the first African-American to receive his party’s presidential nomination six days earlier), Joe Biden faded into relative, albeit temporary, obscurity. But the Delaware senator is sure to be in the thick of the battle for the White House, and he and his party will no doubt be happy to contrast his knowledge and experience with those of the rookie governor of -Alaska.

But just as McCain may have thrown away the “experience card” by putting Palin potentially a heartbeat away from the nuclear trigger, Obama has, critics say, undermined his “outsider” appeal and promise of a change in Washington by choosing as his running mate a man who has been in the U.S. Senate for the past 36 years. And while Obama has said he wants not only to end the Iraq War but to change “the mindset that gets us into wars,” he has chosen as his vice presidential candidate and apparent mentor in foreign policy, a man who supported President Bush’s invasion of Iraq, President Clinton’s war on Serbia, and the resolution naming Iran’s Revolutionary Guard a “terrorist organization.” Biden, like McCain, Bush, and Vice President Dick Cheney, was in favor of bringing Georgia into NATO, which would have created a military commitment for the United States to join in a defense of Georgia when attacked by Russia. That at least calls into question whether bipartisan militarism and an ocean-hopping, globe-trotting police patrol of the planet is among the things that would “change” in an Obama-Biden administration.

But Biden as the insider and foreign policy establishment guru is only part of the story. Both parties were eager to show that the running mate is an average Joe and everyday Sarah. Biden takes the Amtrak home from Washington every evening. Palin, the pretty young housewife and “hockey mom,” sold the governor’s jet when she took over in Juneau. Both are deemed fighters, fighting for working people, taxpayers, etc. Both have railed against the “special interests,” however differently they may define them. Palin is famous for bucking the party hierarchy in Alaska on, among other things, ethics in government. (She thinks there should be some.) She defeated the incumbent governor of her own party in a primary, then defeated a popular former Democratic governor to win the general election in 2006.

Her record as a fiscal conservative is not unspotted. She famously said, “No, thank you” to Congress over Alaska Senator Ted Stevens’s “Bridge to Nowhere,” but only after the ’06 election. (She was for the bridge before she was against it.) She has cheerfully lobbied for and gratefully received earmarks for other projects, both as governor and as mayor of Wasilla.

As THE NEW AMERICAN’S Dennis Behreandt has reported, Governor Palin used the money of Alaska



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taxpayers to keep alive the now defunct Matanuska Maid Dairy operation. As mayor of Wasilla (pop. 8,471), she increased the local sales tax (yes, they have sales taxes in Alaska) in order to pay for an indoor arena and convention center.

Palin may not have the knowledge and experience and philosophical consistency to shore up McCain's limited knowledge of economics, but she appeals to conservatives in many ways. An avid outdoorswoman, she is a hunter and fisher, a gun-rights advocate and lifetime member of the National Rifle Association. She is pro-life and pro-family, opposed to abortion and "gay" marriage. She has "walked the walk" on the right to life by bringing into the world in April of this year a Down's syndrome baby. She is known to be an advocate of abstinence-only sex education, a point eagerly seized on by critics once it was learned that her unmarried teenage daughter was pregnant. (One might have even thought, judging by that response, that the teenage pregnancy rate among those receiving "comprehensive" sex education must be zero.) And she is decidedly pro-military. The facility with an automatic rifle that so favorably impressed the bartender in Manchester, New Hampshire, was demonstrated during a visit to an Alaska National Guard unit in Iraq.

Certainly Palin complements McCain in many ways. To his age and white-haired experience, she brings youth and energy. To his often scowling countenance, she brings an ever-present and disarming smile. To his extensive military background, she brings a mother's instinctive patriotism and prayer for the safety of the troops, one of whom, her son Track, left for Iraq on September 11, the seventh anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attack.

But they are also alike in many ways, not all of them flattering. While McCain can obviously be grumpy and testy, Palin also has her rough side. Whatever the facts in the "troopergate scandal," Palin demanded and eventually got the resignations of the police chief and the town librarian shortly after taking office as mayor of Wasilla. She apparently sought control of the content of the library as well, playing into the liberal stereotype of conservatives as book-burning censors. However much Palin may preach the values of limited government, her temperament and her actions indicate she is less like Thomas Jefferson and more like Louis XIV than her rhetoric suggests.

Palin has been painted by much of the major media and numerous Internet sites as a religious nut who believes that the Iraq War is "a mission from God." This portrayal is based on a YouTube video of Palin speaking in her church, and Charles Gibson, the first major network anchor to interview Palin, referred to it while questioning her. Gibson asked if the United States was in a "holy war," saying that he based the question on the part of her church speech in which she supposedly said: "Our national leaders are sending U.S. soldiers on a task that is from God." When Palin doubted having said this, he said those were her "exact words." Not only was Gibson's wording inaccurate, he had taken the words grossly out of context. In her church speech, Palin really said, "Pray ... that our leaders, our national leaders, are sending them out on a task that is from God."

That's not to say that Palin doesn't have an internationalist, interventionist mindset. She does. She believes the United States should be intervening in the Georgia/Russia conflict. She told Gibson that she wanted to expand NATO to include former Soviet countries, and that "when you are a NATO ally,... if another country is attacked, you're going to be expected to be called upon and help" - in other words, go to war. Palin also said that it is America's job to stop countries like Iran from possessing weapons of mass -destruction.

It is thus unlikely that Palin will be any kind of restraining influence on the -former Navy bomber pilot. McCain reputedly has a short and fiery temper. While he is a knowledgeable and experienced figure on



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the world stage, he is known to make snap decisions and play hunches. He is also willing to accept matter-of-factly that, as he said during his primary campaign, "There will be more wars." Given that McCain turned 72 on the very day he announced his choice of Palin as a running mate, her fitness to lead and her view of America's international responsibilities may give many voters - including those who share her godly, pro-family values - pause in the voting booth.

But by picking Palin, McCain the "maverick" may have changed the way running mates are chosen for a long time to come. It has been given scant attention, but this year the presidential candidates of both major parties have chosen running mates from states with three electoral votes each. Regional balance and electoral math appeared not to play a significant role in the selection of either Biden or Palin. What's more, Palin's choice and the timing of the announcement was, as someone said about the death of Elvis, "a great move, public relations-wise." In the future, it may no longer suffice to make a good, solid choice. A surprising, even sensational choice may be required to hold media attention and to steal the same from the opposing party.

Biden was, according to the popular pundits, the "safe" choice, despite the Delaware senator's reputation as an endless talker and walking "gaffe machine." Palin is a roll-the-dice gamble. But Biden may prove the loose cannon on Obama's good ship, *Democrat*. Palin will likely stay on message and follow the Republican script. And in hindsight, her selection might seem about as risky as the decision by executives at RCA Victor in 1955 to pay Sun Records of Memphis, Tennessee, the staggering sum of \$35,000 for the contract of a young rockabilly singer with shaky legs and swivel hips, a powerful, emotion-stirring baritone voice, and a funny name.

Elvis *who*?

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