

JEANE KIRKPATRICK, ADDRESS TO THE WOMEN'S FORUM (1984)

Kirkpatrick, President Ronald Reagan's representative to the United Nations, describes from personal experience the difficulties faced by women today in political life.

. . . When I have replied to criticisms of the United States (which is an important part of my job), I have frequently been described as "confrontational": This is an interesting experience for me, since I had never been described as "confrontational" in my life before I went to the United Nations. I reflected a good deal on this "confrontational" label, and on what behavior is described as "confrontational," and whether it is more likely that a woman will be described as "confrontational" than a man. In the beginning I thought that I was described as "confrontational" because we adopted a policy inside the United Nations that, when the United States was publicly attacked, we would defend ourselves. We would address the charge and examine the record. That was a policy of the U.S. government. Interestingly enough, it was attributed to me, as a personal characteristic, as demonstrating that I was a confrontational person. It was a while before I noticed that none of my male colleagues, who often delivered more "confrontational" speeches than I, were labelled as "confrontational."

In thinking about this "confrontational" label, I have concluded that it is extremely unlikely that any woman who arrives at a very high level in any public activity is confrontational. If they were, they would have long since been eliminated. To achieve a significant level of recognition in our society, it is necessary to pass through numerous doors in which males are the gatekeepers. It is highly unlikely that any woman with a confrontational style would make it through more than one of those doors.

In fact, most successful women have become expert at avoiding confrontations. At Georgetown, for example, I managed to stay out of the most incredible faculty-administration "Star Wars," because I had learned to side-step conflicts.

I now think that being tagged as "confrontational" and being a woman in a high position are very closely related. There is a certain level of office the very occupancy of which constitutes a confrontation with conventional expectations. Similarly, I think being described as "tough" and being a woman in public life are very closely related. Again, this is an adjective that was never applied to me before I entered into high politics. Yet, it was not long before the French were calling me the "Femme de Fer," and our own papers were describing me repeatedly as "Reagan's Iron Woman," and most frequently as "tough." I've thought about that, too, and I've come to see here a double-bind: if a woman seems strong, she is called "tough"; if she doesn't seem strong, she's found not strong enough to occupy a high level job in a crunch.

Terms like "tough" and "confrontational" express a certain very general surprise and disapproval at the presence of a woman in arenas in which it is necessary to be—what for males would be considered—normally assertive. Stereotyping has endless variations. I have recently had a whole new set of adjectives applied to me. They also come as a surprise; they also are clearly sex-related. The key new term is "temperamental." Now, being called

“temperamental” is a classically Victorian sexist charge against women. Noting that some six stories had appeared in which White House aides described me as “temperamental,” too temperamental to occupy responsible office, one male colleague queried, “What do they mean? Too temperamental once a month?” Who is not familiar with the notion that women are a bit erratic, a bit unstable, hormonally disabled? . . . I found this one downright amusing. Not only is it anachronistic, it utterly ignores the fact that I have led the most extraordinarily stable life; I have lived in the same house for twenty-eight years, with the same husband, and had the same jobs. Even Dr. Edgar Berman has approved my performance.

Well, it’s all very interesting. I also noticed, as I’ve watched the media treatment of Geraldine Ferraro or Ann Gorsuch-Burford, that there are some identifiable regularities in media response, although they were very different people in very different roles, different from each other and from me.

What do I want to say about it all, finally? I want to say that I think that sexism is alive in the United Nations, in the Secretariat; it’s alive in the U.S. government; it’s alive in American politics—I’ve seen enough, by the way, of Democratic politics at high levels to know that it’s bipartisan. And I also want to say that sexism is not unconquerable, if one can avoid getting and staying angry and wasting one’s energies on rage. I don’t know how many of you have recently read *A Room of One’s Own*, which remains my own favorite feminist classic. In that beautiful essay, Virginia Woolf talks about the pitfalls of anger for women, of wasting one’s energy, one’s self, on rage. I think that’s very important, because if one is angry much of the time, that anger unbalances one’s judgment, consumes one’s energy. If you can avoid the pitfalls of rage and paranoia and can hang in long enough to prove seriousness and competence, then I find, in the diplomatic world and in American high politics, too, then you can develop good relations based on mutual respect with almost all your colleagues. In the UN, that applies to representatives of countries that don’t even grant legal equality to women.

But that is not the end of the inquiry. I still think, even more clearly than when I wrote *Political Woman* or *The New Presidential Elites*, that the lifestyle in high politics and government may be peculiarly unattractive to women. I find myself thinking of the number of women, the relatively high percent- age of women, who withdraw from high politics and government by personal decision— not because they can’t hack it, but because they don’t choose to. High politics involves a weirdly unbalanced kind of life-style, which requires continuous involvement with power. It is not only necessary to work eighty or ninety-hour weeks; that is true of many vocations. It is that the whole enterprise resembles that described by Thomas Hobbes: you know, the “restless striving after power which [one suspects] ceaseth only in death.”

I don’t know what styles of interaction would be like in politics and government if there were enough women there to affect the way in which business is conducted. Today, any one woman present, whether it’s in the UN Security Council, or in our National Security Council, or in the decision arenas of any major power process in our society today, adapts to a male pattern of interaction. To do that for long, you have to like it a lot. You have to need it a lot.

We are back here with the ultimate questions of whether there are identifiable male and female sensibilities and social styles. I tend to think there are; and I tend to think that the patterns of interaction in high politics are peculiarly unattractive to women, that is, to most women I have known (and to me, I might add), as I think these social processes as unattractive to most women as they are inhospitable to them. Neither of these tendencies—if they exist—portend a rapid influx of women into top positions in government, least of all foreign policy. . . .