

What has George W ever done for women?

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By Laura Flanders

When George Bush addressed a forum on women's entrepreneurship in Cleveland, Ohio, this month, he told the crowd: "As the husband of Laura and the son of Barbara, I feel right at home." If this sounds like a rather desperate grab for feminist credentials, it is. When it comes to this year's presidential election, the president faces a female problem and the White House has good reason to be desperate.

Since 1980, US women voters have preferred Democrats to Republicans for president - in the 2000 election, Al Gore won the women's vote by 11%. With greater participation rates than men, women also make up the majority of voters. In the latest polls, Bush and Democratic candidate John Kerry were tied, with 47% support among men, but 53% of women preferred Kerry while 43% preferred Bush. Other polls show that 65% of unmarried women think that, under Bush, the country is headed in the wrong direction.

In a country whose electorate is narrowly divided, every swing vote counts, and moderate women - especially married, suburban women - constitute a large swing voting block that could make or break the election. Bush's challenge is to woo as many as he possibly can. But that will take some doing.

In the 2000 election, Bush, promising to "restore civility" in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, ran on a "W Stands for Women" pledge. When he came into office, he made great claims about fulfilling his "for women" promise. He appointed a number of high-visibility women to his cabinet and inner circle - including labour secretary Elaine Chao, the first Asian-American woman cabinet secretary, and Condoleezza Rice, the first African-American national security adviser. "A symphony of diversity," Time magazine applauded.

In its first few months, Bush's administration advanced some socially conscious-sounding initiatives. It backed something called a Family Time Flexibility Act, (which claimed to offer working mothers more choice about working hours) and an education proposal called Leave No Child Behind, which ostensibly sought to improve state-funded education by demanding schools adhere to a strict regimen of new testing.

After September 11 2001, images of burka-clad women in Afghanistan flooded the media, providing a backdrop to Bush's drive to war. To judge by his rhetoric, the US bombing of Afghanistan was motivated not by revenge for the strikes on the US, but by a wish to liberate women and girls from the sexist Taliban. "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women," declared the first lady, Laura Bush, in a special radio broadcast. Then, as he laid out his case for the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, the president made a point of mentioning Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party's grim record of abuse and rape of women.

Beneath the masterful spin, a very different reality has been emerging, something US journalist Richard Goldstein has called Stealth Misogyny. While the president

dresses up his cabinet and policies in "W is for Women" clothing, the effects of his actions have been quite the opposite.

As it turns out, the "flexibility" in Bush's much balleyhooed Flexibility Act was all the employers'. Under the plan, bosses would have the flexibility to pay overtime (as has been required for more than 70 years under federal law), or to "offer" time off instead - at the employer's not the worker's convenience. Bush's Leave No Child Behind Act actually left millions of children behind when the law imposed expensive new mandates on already struggling schools.

His administration tried to shut the department of labour's network of women's bureaux, which inform women about workplace rights. (Women's rights activists defeated that effort.) In the name of budget-cutting, he stopped money for the programme that monitored discrimination in federal agencies, and forced cutbacks at the equal employment opportunity commission even as the number of complaints of discrimination in the workplace hit a multi-year high.

While Bush spends billions of dollars promoting sexual abstinence - with no evidence that such programmes work - his administration has done little to educate sexually active adults about sexually transmitted diseases. Abroad, the president used last year's trip to Africa to tout a five-year, \$15bn anti-Aids initiative, but it quickly emerged that his plan merely extended his war on international family-planning groups. A third of his proposed new Aids prevention money for Africa is directed to groups that exclude condoms and rely on "abstinence-only" messages - activists have condemned this as a human-rights crime.

In contrast to Ronald Reagan, whose administration the president most seems to want to mimic, Bush has gone to some lengths to put on a female-friendly face, but that can't hide the reality: women's rights advocates agree his administration is doing its best to reverse the gains that women have made, not just in the past decade, but over much of the 20th century. This past winter saw the White House celebrate the passage of the misleadingly named Partial Birth Abortion Act, which criminalises doctors who conduct procedures such as late abortions (usually carried out only when the foetus is severely deformed or when the mother's life is in danger). The US justice department has already started sending subpoenas to hospitals, demanding abortion records.

As the election heats up, the pressure is on. "For Bush to get re-elected, he has to do particularly well among men and do well enough among women to neutralise their support for Kerry," says pollster Frank Newport.

Without a legislative record to attract the majority of female voters, the Bush/Cheney campaign is deploying its female faces. While Bush courts so-called Nascar dads at the Daytona car-races and slaps the backs of cowboys at rodeos, the first lady makes her appeals to women. A self-proclaimed former Democrat, who appeared on TV shortly before her husband's inauguration to say she didn't believe abortion should be banned, Laura Bush's job is to lull social moderates. The White House isn't really in the clutches of religious extremists, she reassures.

Her differences with her husband, if differences there are, soften Bush's image, but do nothing to blunt his policy. In April 2001, the first lady (a former librarian) made a series of appearances in support of America's libraries. A week later, Bush's budget

slashed library funding. None the less, she provides good cover-art. In the first wave of Bush-Cheney commercials, Laura appeared at the president's side, smiling as he said he knew "exactly where I want to take the country".

Some campaign challenges require a woman's touch. In Texas, where Bush ran for governor against the popular Democrat Ann Richards, it was Karen Hughes, then the Republican party's executive director, who launched the most bitter assaults on the charismatic Richards. This spring, when the first Bush/Cheney TV ads offended scores of bereaved 9/11 families because they used pictures of Ground Zero and a flag-draped body, Hughes showed up on virtually every news programme to defend the ads and disparage the families. (Hughes left the White House staff officially in 2002, but never strayed very far. She has recently returned as a presidential spokesperson.)

Rice can defend America's wars in a way that vice-president Dick Cheney never could. Cheney can barely appear in public these days, without provoking a firestorm of protest about his relationship to the war-profiteers at Halliburton, (the company he headed until 2000, and from which he still receives deferred, monthly payments.)

Rice also served an oil company - Chevron. Throughout the 1990s, she sat on the board of directors and secured for the corporation some of the most valuable oil contracts in the former Soviet republics. Her credentials earn her a spot in the Bush "oligopoly" berated by US progressives. She is a flack for the oil companies, but in stereotype-sodden America, she doesn't look it - and the Bush team knows that.

The White House team does not tell warm, fuzzy tales of Cheney's childhood in Nebraska, and the presidential spin machine positively flees from any scrutiny of Bush's own youth in de facto segregated midland Texas, but the PR staff can't refer often enough to Rice's personal history growing up an African-American child in pre-civil rights Alabama.

Similarly, the White House emphasises Chao's past as an immigrant from Taiwan. "Her successful life gives eloquent testimony to the virtues of hard work and perseverance and to the unending promise of this great country," Bush said when he announced her appointment. In fact, her biography is a little more complicated. Her father owns a successful shipping company, and is a personal friend of former Chinese president Jiang Zemin. Chao attended Mount Holyoke, an elite US women's college, and is now married to one of the Republican party's most powerful senators, Mitch McConnell.

Media tend to play along; emphasising the personal, playing down the political. When Rice became national security director, the New York Times ran a feature that did not discuss her views on national security until the 27th paragraph of a long piece dominated by talk of dress size and hair. "She eats either a bagel or cereal for breakfast," said the NYT, and "she is always impeccably dressed." She keeps "two mirrors on her desk, apparently to check the back as well as the front." And oh, yes, "She has an oil supertanker named after her, a result of being on the Chevron board." That was it for discussion of Rice and Chevron.

The Bushwomen - women appointed to the inner circle of the president's cabinet and sub-cabinet - are the media friendly face on an extremist administration, one lawyered by anti-civil rights, anti-government radicals, and fuelled by the theocratic

right. Their mission: to help the Republican party gain new support, without changing the policies and personnel that have set it on a collision course with mainstream voters.

If political women were taken more seriously, the makeover plan would not stand a chance, but in the contemporary US, it just might. Dusting itself off from the controversy over the first Bush/Cheney campaign ads this month, the White House released its second ad two weeks ago. Its message? A vigorous attack on senator John Kerry. The messenger? A mellifluous-voiced woman narrator.

- Adapted from Laura Flanders' *Bushwomen, Tales of a Cynical Species*, published this week by Verso, price £15.