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The Bitch America Needs

By ANDI ZEISLER SEPT. 10, 2016

There are so many ways to be a bitch when you're Hillary Clinton. You can refuse to give up a thriving law career when your husband is elected governor of Arkansas. Later, when he becomes president of the United States, you can infuriate housewives across the nation with a dismissive reference to baking cookies.

You can be too loud, too ambitious, too emotional, not emotional enough. You can say things and do things that are still considered the exclusive realm of white men. You can rally millions of people to vote for you. You can do anything and everything, and it doesn't matter: The word "bitch," more than almost any other, will cling to the back of your smart pantsuits forever.

But what if that's not a bad thing?

The fact that "bitch" has become both an epithet and an honorific for Mrs. Clinton has turned out to be one of the least weird things about this election year. In a race that is indelibly colored by gender and sexism, it's also potentially transformative. Few of the women who choose to venture into the male-dominated sphere of American politics are hothouse flowers, of course, but Mrs. Clinton's long journey to the center of presidential contention mirrors a larger impatience with a time-honored tradition of going along to get along. This is not just in politics either: From film stars to athletes to teenage activists, outspoken women from all arenas are increasingly visible, much to the concern of sexists everywhere.

"Bitch" has long been an effective way to silence women because so many of us have been brought up to believe that remaining likable to others — even those we ourselves don't like — is paramount. For instance, after the candidates' forum on

national security on Wednesday, Reince Priebus, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, included this in his criticism of Mrs. Clinton's demeanor while she answered questions: "No smile."

For more than 20 years in American politics, Mrs. Clinton has embodied what we might call Classic Bitch. She's perceived as an interloper who challenges or threatens masculinity, entitlement and a status-quo worldview; she's the scandal magnet who can seem as heartless and venal as any old-boy's-club member. Worst of all, she's the woman who accepts that she will be disliked and carries on anyway.

As a first lady, a senator and the secretary of state, Mrs. Clinton had bitch bona fides that ran counter to her husband's public image as a genial, thumbs-up Bubba of the people. As a presidential candidate, they've proved cartoonishly polarizing. "How do we beat the bitch?" a woman asked at a John McCain rally in 2007, to an eruption of applause. (Senator McCain himself called it an "excellent question.")

This time around, the giddiness of bitch-slapping the candidate is at the forefront of her current opponent's campaign. Donald J. Trump supporters sell T-shirts emblazoned with "Trump That Bitch!" One reporter noted that mentions of Mrs. Clinton at a Trump rally in Greensboro, N.C., were greeted with gleeful shouts of the word; this summer, a "school-age" child yelled, "Take the bitch down!" repeatedly at another rally. When asked where he might have picked up such language, his mother answered, "Democratic schools."

But there's a whole other group of people embracing and amplifying Mrs. Clinton's bitchiness. The person showcased and celebrated in Tumblrs, photo captions and satirical statements from the candidate herself is revolutionary not just for her political stature, but for demonstrating that likability is no longer the heaviest cudgel a woman can wield.

The power of "bitch" to shame is, with a perspective adjustment, also its power to shine. All that's required to reframe the word is to point out that the things bitches are often guilty of can be both unexceptional and necessary: flexing influence, standing up for their beliefs, not acting according to feminine norms and expectations. Mrs. Clinton's efforts to address her rigid persona have been cringeworthy, to put it mildly; watching her gamely do the Whip with Ellen DeGeneres or awkwardly spoof herself alongside her "Saturday Night Live"

doppelgänger Kate McKinnon is doubly painful because it seems so unnecessary.

She's not a comedian, definitely not a dancer, not even someone who can — unlike her husband — look authentically excited amid a shower of balloons. The bitch in dark glasses and pursed lips who became an internet sensation, the bitch who sighed and brushed invisible lint from her shoulders while being grilled on Benghazi, the bitch who cares deeply about winning and doesn't care who knows it — that's the candidate we need.

Aligning Mrs. Clinton with “bitch,” a term that's retained its potency through countless reclamations and adoptions across race and gender, turns out to be the one thing people can agree on at the moment. For those who hate her, no other word will do (though the truly dedicated don't hesitate to throw in other derogatory options for further emphasis). She aggravates their longstanding discomfort with a woman whose power isn't situated within the private spheres of marriage or family.

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For those who want her to be president, which is not synonymous with liking her, she's the human embodiment of a shrug emoji, dodging flamethrowers from both sides and continuing to take care of business. Her supporters know that worrying about other people's discomfort with powerful women has never served

female politicians — or any woman — very well.

It's not just that "Bitches get stuff done," as Tina Fey and Amy Poehler pointed out in a hilarious defense of Mrs. Clinton back in 2008. It's that they reject the expectations, assumptions and double standards that have always dogged women in the American political system. As one of the memes Mrs. Clinton inspires might put it, we need a bitch who can do both.

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