

n June 18, the Hearst Corporation announced that Alyssa Mastromonaco, the former White House deputy chief of staff for President Barack Obama, would shortly join the publishing juggernaut as “an ambassador for the Marie Claire brand.” Mastromonaco, whose tasks will include “providing insight on trends and women to watch,” says she is excited about the move. Marie Claire, she notes in the press release, “not only produces gorgeous fashion editorial and provides cultural insights but also helps its readers navigate world news and get smart on global women’s issues.”

Providing “fashion editorial” and “getting smart on global women’s issues” might seem like mutually exclusive goals. But for women profiled as political players, there is rarely a chance to choose between them. The personal is political, the saying goes, but for women, the political is removed from the person, replaced by trite obsessions with clothes, hair, child care choices and exercise routines. The media’s preoccupation with such trivia is no mere relic of an earlier era. Even today, several generations removed from the devastating critique of their triviality that was at the heart of first-wave feminism, Marie Claire and other women’s magazines remain obsessed with the appearance of female public figures, an obsession that still extends far beyond them into leading news publications like the New York Times and the Washington Post. You can take the woman out of the woman’s magazine, but the style of coverage—and it is all about style—remains the same.

For nine years, Mastromonaco guided Obama’s political trajectory behind the scenes. In 2011, the New Republic listed her as one of “Washington’s Most Powerful, Least Famous People”; according to POLITICO, she “managed nearly every aspect of Obama’s political rise.” But even as she guided the life of the man running the most powerful country in the world, she remained typecast in the media in the two (very contradictory) roles allowed for women in public life: at once a Machiavellian maneuverer and a cupcake-eating cheerleader.

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Here’s a 2014 New York Times article with her in the scary role. It opens with a sober description of Mastromonaco’s appearance: “Her reddish hair is colored; stress turned it prematurely white years ago.” She is called “a secret weapon” with “a power that is relatively scary to people.” Advisers note she remembers things about Obama, for whom it is her job to remember things, in “somewhat disturbing detail.” In contrast, a 2008 Washington Post profile infantilized Mastromonaco to the point of actual infancy: “Her signature blend of extroverted insistence on organization and political savvy asserted itself when she threw an elaborate party for one of her teachers,” the Post recalls of the deputy chief of staff’s seminal nursery school days. “She called a meeting with her fellow 4-year-olds and gave each of them an assignment: cupcakes, streamers, balloons.”

The Post gave Mastromonaco a nickname—“Ms. Fix-It”—and emphasized her obedience to the president: “She kept Obama’s secrets and took his grief.” Mastromonaco, they told us, was single, enjoyed celebrity tabloids, and was too subservient to call her boss by his first name. The sole allusion to her authority was that she “can be a bossy micromanager.” (Bossy! Paging Sheryl Sandberg, the Facebook COO who has turned her

global celebrity as an advocate for women “leaning in” to the workplace into the cause of trying to ban the practice of labeling ambitious young girls “bossy.”)

Now Mastromonaco lands at Marie Claire, where she will shape the profiles of women much like herself—women in or in proximity to positions of power, nearly all young and attractive. How will Marie Claire operate? A clue lies in Mastromonaco’s own 2013 profile and photo shoot, described by photographer Melissa Golden as an uncomfortable, staged process. Under Golden’s guidance, Mastromonaco “fake-walked” the Eisenhower Executive Office Building and laid out her papers in a stereotypical image of “work.” (In a phone call with Politico Magazine, Golden disputed the characterization of the shoot as uncomfortable.)

“I think she was thrilled to end the shoot,” writes Golden. Can you blame her? As both the orchestrator and subject of multiple media profiles, Mastromonaco knows how the game is played—and how, for women, it is rigged.

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan critiqued the narrow topics women’s magazines would allow in a time of domestic unrest and Cold War: “[They are] crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit?”

Fifty years later, women have advanced in “the world of thought and ideas” only to find that, in the very same magazines, ideas pale in importance to the superficial qualities valued in Friedman’s time—bodies, clothes, houses, makeup. Even the profiles that do manage to focus on ideas and achievements—like Marie Claire’s 2012 take on Obama campaign adviser Stephanie Cutter—begin with “buttery highlights” and end with workout tips.

It is often said that “Washington is Hollywood for ugly people,” but the adage is only half true. Women are not allowed to be ugly people because women—and nowhere more than in such women’s magazines that reduce female political leaders to their supposed fashion and lifestyle choices—are not really allowed to be people at all. Female political leaders, even after decades of alleged advancement, remain pre-selected personas, trotted out to readers to conflicting and confusing effect.

Glass Ceiling  
The Princess Effect

How women's magazines demean powerful women—even when they're trying to celebrate them.

By SARAH KENDZIOR

July 02, 2014

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Read these women’s magazines today—particularly those articles focusing on the “power women” of the Obama era, and there is a full shelf of them by now, from Mastromonaco to Michelle Obama, Samantha Power to Susan Rice—and you will find a familiar pattern. There are still only two main tracks for the female politico: intimidating and powerful or submissive and charming. When combined, these qualities translate into “having it all,” although “all” must be tempered with notes of humility, lest the women vault back into the “intimidating” category. As pundits debate the virtues of female confidence, it is the confidante who is still made to appear the ideal female type: the yes-woman, capable yet culpable, assertive in her lack of assertions.

Powerful women, whether in politics or business, are too confounding without some spin or gloss to soften them up. When Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer was profiled in Vogue, audiences were struck not only by the lopsided profile—she is literally posed upside-down in evening wear—but by her insistent insecurity. “It’s not like I had a grand plan where I weighed all the pros and cons of what I wanted to do,” she says of her role as leader of a major corporation. “It just sort of happened.” (The profile was rounded out with service-journalism web sidebars: “What would Marissa Mayer wear? A workweek guide to office dressing.” and “‘Pregnant in Prada’—see our Marissa Mayer-inspired maternity wardrobe.”)

Things are “just sort of supposed to happen” to powerful women—good things, determined by fortuity instead of fortitude. For women in politics, whose responsibilities extend to a public constituency, passivity is a hard pose to hold. Politicians are supposed to make things happen – not only for themselves, but for others. But women in politics are profiled like Disney princesses: vaguely appointed, lavishly decked out in gowns, smiling, packaged and sold.

In a frank interview with the Wall Street Journal in 2012, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the first woman to hold that office, noted that it was not men in foreign governments, but men in the U.S. government who were most reluctant to take her seriously: “They had seen me through this very long trajectory. I had been a carpool mother, or a friend of their wife’s, or a staffer. I had made lots of coffee and did lots of Xeroxing. And they thought, ‘Well, how did she get to be secretary of state when I should be secretary of state? So I did have more problems there.’”

These long trajectories—complicated and unglamorous, less ridden with cinematic hardship than the patient navigation of everyday misogyny—are often swept aside for the “it just sort of happened” narrative of female power. The media peddles princesses. The problem is that no one is sure anymore what fairy tale the public wants to hear.

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In 1963, Look magazine published a series of photos of President John F. Kennedy working in the Oval Office as 2-year-old “John-John” played under his desk. The father and son portraits were an instant hit. They heightened the president’s personal appeal without diminishing his political power.

In 2014, Vogue published a photo of U.N. Ambassador Samantha Power in a similar scene, but with a few notable differences. Like Kennedy, Power sits at her desk with her toddler—whom she ignores for her cell phone. She is flanked by two assistants, both of whom disregard Power and the child as they gaze at their own screens. The little boy clings to his blanket and stares into space.

Unlike the warm spontaneity of Kennedy’s photo, the Power photo conveys alienation. Why is her son even there? Who is taking care of him? Why would photographer Annie Leibovitz stage this scene? Power is not humanized by the presence of her child, as Kennedy was, but appears distracted, overwhelmed. She’s either a bad worker (for parenting while working) or a bad mother (for working while parenting), the image tells us.

It is a catch-22 familiar to any working mom, though that was likely not the photo’s objective. The photo—captioned “liberal hawk, human-rights champion, mother of two”—seeks to provide evidence for something Power should have no obligation to prove: that she is a caring mother who works hard at a difficult job. (“The work-life balance is the thing I struggle with most,” she says in the profile. “But everything’s a cost-benefit, right?”)

The “having it all” narrative follows Power from profile to profile. A 2014 New York magazine photo essay shows her spoon-feeding her son and sending handwritten thank-you notes. Like Mayer in Vogue, she talks like a teenager: “This was a really cool event where a number of the U.N. ambassadors came to me”; “Ukraine has been intense.”

The New York photos seem aimed at making Power relatable, but likely had the opposite effect. (It is hard to tell from online feedback, since any working mom watching Power make time for handwritten thank-you notes may have had trouble typing with both middle fingers up.) The problem for Power—for all women in politics—is there is no persona that works. Accomplished professional with a Pulitzer Prize is too intimidating, caring mom too weak. Combining both is a mommy wars minefield.

The solution, of course, is to simply accept Power as a complex individual with the right to a private life and evaluate her based on her ideas and professional actions. But that would be breaking a long media tradition.

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As problematic as the idealized portrayal of Power may be, she at least meets the criteria— conventionally attractive, young, statuesque—to be the object of repeated glowing profiles, willingly photographed in an endless series of couture gowns. The Janet Napolitanos and Janet Renos of the world, powerful Cabinet-level officials like Power

without the requisite princess factor, are not accorded similar treatment. The grandmotherly Janet Yellen may be the most powerful woman in the world now that she is head the Federal Reserve, but she probably will not be posing in a satin cocktail dress anytime soon. And is that a bad thing? It is hard to say whether this lack of interest is a problem, given that even the most flattering profile ultimately, in its obsession with appearances, diminishes a woman's power.

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In 2000, Americans learned that Condoleezza Rice, their future national security adviser, is a "size 6, but occasionally jumps to an 8, because of 'muscle mass,'" "keeps two mirrors on her desk at Stanford, apparently to check the back as well as the front of her hair," and is "impeccably dressed, usually in a classic suit with a modest hemline." Secretary of State Colin Powell approved: "Condi was raised first and foremost to be a lady," he told the New York Times.

It is difficult to imagine a male corollary. ("Dick Cheney, resplendent in size-46 balloon seat pants...") But the most pernicious aspect of the profile is not the obsession with Rice's appearance, but its sanction by the Times. The New York Times—and the Washington Post and other "hard" news sources—are often no different from women's magazines in their refusal to emphasize ideas and actions over body and gender. (In 2005, Rice, by then secretary of state, had evolved to a "dominatrix" of "shadowy daydreams" in a Washington Post article devoted solely to her decision to wear a black coat and leather boots.)

All politics is performance, but for women, it is literally a cosmetic battle. "When I press her to articulate her personal positions, her eyes, lined in her trademark aqua blue, settle in a glare," writes Jason Horowitz in *Vogue* of Susan Rice, then Obama's U.N. ambassador and now his national security adviser. What would a diplomat's answer about "her interventionist tendencies" be without a description of her eyeliner color? We never hear a full take on Rice's positions, although she is chided for her "temper."

For those deemed too unconventional to make the *Vogue* cut, an extreme makeover is in order. A 2012 *Vogue* profile of Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz describes her as "frizzy-haired," and "neither elite nor rich." But the photo that ran with the profile is of a glamorous, coiffed blonde in designer dresses. Many who know Wasserman Schultz called the picture "unrecognizable." For *Vogue*'s editor, Anna Wintour, that's apparently the point. When Hillary Clinton backed out of a 2008 cover shoot for fear, the magazine said, that she might appear "too feminine," Wintour responded in her editor's note: "The notion that a contemporary woman must look mannish in order to be taken seriously as a seeker of power is frankly dismaying. How has our culture come to this? How is it that the Washington Post recoils from the slightest hint of cleavage on a senator? This is America, not Saudi Arabia."

Other female political players lose their human characteristics altogether. This year alone, Clinton has made magazine covers as both a flesh-colored moon and a spiky shoe

trampling a tiny man. In 2011, Newsweek ran a cover of a wild-eyed, ghoulish Michele Bachmann with the headline “The Queen of Rage.” A female politician is an adversary, an accessory, a distortion, a dress size—but rarely a thinker or leader.

Even when winning, female politicians are losing. Those who get the Vogue treatment—relentlessly upbeat, mercilessly superficial—have been known to provide inadvertent fodder for their opponents. “Among the most important details of her filibuster, apparently, are her ‘pink Mizuno running shoes and a sky-blue Escada day coat concealing a back brace,’” growled the conservative aggregation site Breitbart, in a sudden shift to feminist analysis, commenting on Vogue’s profile of Texas gubernatorial candidate Wendy Davis. “Yet Davis, the profile insists, is a woman of the people.”

In the end, every woman who cooperates with this inanity—not just Mastromonaco—becomes the ambassador of a puff-piece brand. For male politicians, the media spotlight illuminates flaws, often in a ruthless way. For women, it creates silhouettes, veiled versions of what publications think their audience wants to see.

As Hillary Clinton gears up for the 2016 election, we will undoubtedly face a new barrage of these questions. Already, the media is breathlessly debating why her new memoir, *Hard Choices*, is failing to attract anticipated interest, under-selling by at least 48,000 copies, and what it might mean for her presidential prospects. Perhaps she should have stuck with her (jokingly) proposed original title: “The Scrunchie Chronicles, 112 Countries And It’s Still All About The Hair.” At least it would have been more honest: Have no doubt that the Clinton campaign, whatever it means for the glass ceiling in American politics, augurs a barrage of think pieces couched in demeaning, gendered terms—“scrunchie,” “cankles”—along with the enduring classic: she’s “old and stale.”

This is not to say journalists should not go after Clinton—they are not obligated to treat female politicians gently. If a woman is in a position of power, her words and actions should be critically analyzed and interrogated. But it should be her words and actions, not her body or clothes or children. A female pol has nothing to prove but that she can do her job. Treat her like a person. Treat her like a man.