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SARAH PALIN, CONSERVATIVE FEMINISM, AND THE POLITICS OF FAMILY

By

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Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota, 2003

Thesis

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Sarah Palin, Conservative Feminism, and the Politics of Family

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Female politicians are heavily constrained by discourses that prescribe masculine values as natural, yet at times they draw on societal expectations of femininity that allow them to utilize such discourses to their advantage. Motherhood, a feminine yet powerful role, provides such an opportunity. Capitalizing on this acceptable avenue of female power, women have strategically relied on maternal appeals since they first entered public life, often to challenge patriarchal social structures. Utilizing Lakoff's (2002) concept of the nation-as-family metaphor and informed by the pervasive myth of the traditional family, this analysis explores the consequences of Sarah Palin's use of maternal appeals related to discourses of family, politics, motherhood, and feminism.

The rise of prominent conservative women like Palin engages questions about the feminist potential of maternal appeals. Conservative politicians often support "family values," including a more traditional familial structure with relatively strict gender roles. A female politician's support of this family model creates an interesting contradiction, as participating in public office necessarily involves stepping outside of the home and traditional role of a wife and mother. Despite this seeming inconsistency, Palin bases her political image on her family and role as a mother, and frames her political career as a necessary response to protect America's children and conservative family values. She describes herself as a ferocious "mama grizzly" and emphasizes that women's unique perspective and special talents—such as mothering—are valued skills that should be brought to the public sphere. She argues that not only are women capable of working just as hard as men, because of their essential nature and experiences as mothers, they bring special gifts and abilities to public office that men cannot.

Through this use of maternal appeals, Sarah Palin creates room for herself in a male-dominated political arena, but because she bases her political persona on traditional family values and a tough but self-sacrificial "mama grizzly" persona, she effectively reinforces expectations of femininity and motherhood that limit women's other opportunities.

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Sarah Palin, Conservative Feminism, and the Politics of Family

Chapter 1: Women, family, and politics

So, it's with only a little bit of overstatement that I call so many of the new generation of American women leaders—many of whom I've met on the campaign trail and in the towns and cities of America—mama grizzlies... These women are at the forefront of a new wave of strong, confident American women who are positively affecting not just the Republican Party, but America itself. They're building businesses, managing charities, leading men and women in government—and, while they're at it, raising families. (Palin, 2010a, p. 128)

The typical American family may be anything but typical, yet even in a society characterized by variety, there remains a powerfully entrenched concept of what the word family represents. Family constructions and ideological associations with familial expectations are more than purely personal issues. The rhetoric of “family values” remains politically relevant, and politicians, as public figures, must rhetorically negotiate their actual family experiences with their policies. For women, who continue to be more strongly associated with family roles, this is even more of a concern.

Although women have made great strides into American politics throughout the last several decades, they are still drastically under-represented in elected office. Women who work outside the home deal with not only personal challenges related to dividing their time and efforts, but also public perceptions of what constitutes appropriate behavior for a mother, wife, and worker. Politicians bear this burden in the public eye. For example, McCarver (2011) explains the public fascination with Sarah Palin's family and its relationship to her political career.

As people learned more about the details of Palin's family life—five children, the oldest in the military, the youngest a newborn with Down syndrome, and a pregnant teenage daughter—mothers, women, and men weighed in with their views of Palin as a mother and a candidate. Was Palin a good mother? Could she be while vice president? Which was more important? (p. 20)

These questions highlight the complex challenges facing female politicians, who must navigate public and private expectations related to family. Republican female politicians have an even more interesting position.

Conservative politicians often support “family values,” including a more traditional familial structure, usually characterized by relatively strict gender roles. A female politician’s support of this family model creates an interesting contradiction, as participating in public office necessarily involves stepping outside of the home and traditional role of a wife and mother. For this reason, conservative female politicians must navigate the unique demands facing all female politicians, as well as justify their participation while supporting a traditionalist ideology that does not necessarily encourage their involvement. Complicating the already incredibly complex rhetorical moves that female politicians face by participating in a sphere powerfully controlled by hegemonic masculinity, conservative women both challenge and support the masculinity that controls them. They must be perceived as good politicians *and* as good mothers; members of good traditional families. Sarah Palin’s rhetorical treatment of her family engages the political importance of family, the gendered implications of family values rhetoric, and the contradictions faced by female politicians who navigate these extremely difficult political and personal demands.

While the implications of family values rhetoric have been studied in the context of welfare mothers (Gring-Pemble, 2003) and the privatization of social responsibility (Cloud, 1998), it has not been fully explored through the context of female politicians utilizing such discourse to make room for themselves in the public sphere. This use of “family values” rhetoric is worth examining; the influence of conservative women’s activism over the media and political leadership, as well as their participation as leaders themselves, demonstrates the importance of

understanding this group, who will “indeed be taken seriously as policy advocates for women” (Schreiber, 2008, p. 127). As conservatives actively seek the support of female voters, women like Palin, who challenge feminisms’ right to speak on behalf of women, are held as the model for female conservative leadership. Ralph Reed, former executive director of the Christian Coalition, referred to 2010 as the year of the conservative woman, “The election of a liberal president in 2008 has now sparked a conservative, limited government, pro-family counter-reaction — clad in lipstick and pumps” (2010, para. 6). As evidenced by Reed’s “praise,” stereotypical, even sexist, expectations of femininity are simultaneously embodied and obscured by the growing power of such women.

The popularity of Michele Bachmann, Sarah Palin, and her fellow “mama grizzlies,” masks the dearth of women holding power within the Republican Party. In fact, Republicans are represented overwhelmingly by males, and have been accused of ignoring or attacking many women’s issues. The national hearings on birth control in which no women testified, and very few Republican women spoke up for their party in the following media controversy exemplified this issue, which came to be known as a “woman problem” (Moore, 2012). Republicans, aware of this problematic image, mobilized to better support female leadership and in one effort formed a new Political Action Committee: ShePAC. ShePAC gives directly to campaigns and operates also as a super PAC, with the hope of developing stronger support and organization for female candidates, which has been an advantage enjoyed by Democratic women (Khan, 2012). Penny Nance, president of Concerned Women for America, a conservative women’s organization says, “Republicans are ‘highly sensitized,’ to the importance of having visible female leaders” (Moore, 2012). The strategic increased focus on conservative female politicians emphasizes the

importance of studying this emerging group and what their presence suggests for politics and gender in American culture.

In what follows, I offer background to describe challenges faced by female politicians generally, as members of a family, and as conservatives. Next, I describe the three Palin artifacts utilized for this analysis. Thirdly, I provide theoretical background which demonstrates the importance of family as both a political ideology and powerful mythology, explores Lakoff's (2002) concept of a metaphor that visualizes the nation as a family, and engages the political implications of female politicians' utilization of maternal appeals. In subsequent chapters, I present my analysis, beginning with Palin's presentation of her own family as a conservative model, her efforts to extend this family model into the metaphor of a powerful "mama grizzly," and then to use this powerful role to support traditional family values, which can limit women's public and political opportunities. Throughout the analysis, the emphasis on and consistent rhetorical construction of family as a source of power and focus of policy becomes clear. I conclude by revealing the consequences of the gendered nature of family, and by exploring in which ways such family politics are actually detrimental to women.

Hegemonic masculinity of American politics

As Connell (1987) explains, practices have been institutionalized in our society so as to seem normal, "just the way things are." After several decades of effort to challenge this norm, it continues to be natural and normal for politicians to be overwhelmingly male. When a culture accepts a form of masculinity as not only commonsense, but desired, it has become hegemonic (Gibson & Heyse, 2010). Hegemonic masculinity involves cultural expressions of both male domination and female subordination (Connell, 1987), such as take place in American politics.

The political sphere, a space traditionally occupied exclusively by men, continues to be heavily male dominated. Numbers alone demonstrate that American women are still a long way from achieving parity in political representation. Electing more women is difficult, because female politicians face greater expectations and challenges than their male counterparts, simply due to their gender. According to Walsh and Kleeman (2011) from the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, steady past progress made by women has recently begun to slow, and in some cases, reverse.

The number of women in Congress fell from 90 in 2010 to 88 today, the first decline in 30 years. In state legislatures, the number of women slipped by an alarming 81 nationwide after the last election, a full percentage point drop. Women hold less than 17 percent of congressional seats, just six of 50 governorships and not even a quarter of state legislative posts. We have yet to break the 25 percent barrier at any level, let alone achieve parity for a group that's more than half the U.S. population. (para.6)

Republican female politicians have even less representation than their Democratic colleagues in national politics. In the 2011 Congress, out of 90 women serving, 61 are Democrats while only 29 are Republican (Center for American Women in Politics, 2011).

The hegemonic masculinity of politics is accomplished in part through the naturalization of "masculine" characteristics as politically desirable. As Gibson and Heyse (2010) discuss, the celebration of masculinity "defines much more than our cultural expectations for masculinity; it also defines our expectations for political leadership" (p. 237). Fine (2009) describes how women are effectively excluded from positions of leadership:

Dominant representations of leadership were articulated by men and based on men's experiences. The male ideology of leadership is visible in two critical ways: (1) the lack

of representation of women in leadership positions in the U.S., and (2) the construction of leadership as comprising masculine characteristics. (p. 181)

Organizations such as Congress reflect larger gender and power relations that exist in society, and reveal a preference for characteristics associated with men. “Masculine modes of leadership are more valued and rewarded in organizations...Leaders are believed to have stereotypic masculine qualities—leaders are direct, assertive, commanding, and powerful” (Fine, 2009, p. 182). Men are believed to naturally possess leadership skills that women must carefully cultivate in public perception. Studies have shown voters intuitively prefer male politicians on the basis of gender because of their beliefs related to typical male and female behavior, which supports the continuation of male leadership. “Male characteristics”, such as toughness and decisiveness, are preferred over “female characteristics” (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007).

Even when women display such leadership qualities, they are not evaluated in the same positive light as their male peers. Instead, as Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995) discusses, it places them at risk of losing their femininity. Women who exhibit characteristics valued in male politicians, such as toughness and directness, are seen as “bitchy,” and unwomanly. Jamieson identified many “double-binds” that female leaders must negotiate. These double-binds are rhetorical constructs that offer penalties for either chosen alternative. For example, the feminine/competency double-bind that persists for women in politics explains that women can be perceived as either feminine and incompetent, or seen as competent, but risk losing their femininity. Consider Hilary Clinton, widely criticized for her toughness and lack of appropriate femininity, or Sarah Palin, praised for feminine virtues, but harshly critiqued in terms of competence. “Palin’s attractiveness resulted in frequent and varied references to her ‘sexiness’;

whereas, Clinton was viewed as not feminine enough in pantsuits that covered her ‘cankles’” (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009, p. 330). Neither choice is especially appealing or politically effective.

Political implications of family

When women, who remain associated with the private sphere, enter the public sphere as a political candidate, their familial roles, such as wife and mother, are often consequential for how they are perceived, and may influence the rhetorical strategies they choose to present their public persona. As Adams (2011) explains, families themselves are gendered, which supports the gendering of the public sphere also.

Family is a gendered institution, and women’s historically subordinate status in the home may be one reason that women continue to be underrepresented in American politics.

Traditional gendered family arrangements making women responsible for housework and childcare have not only limited their opportunities for pursuing demanding political careers that spawn presidential candidates, but they have also created expectations about women’s ‘inherent’ personality traits. (p.225)

Women are portrayed as out of place in the public sphere, and continue to be perceived as primarily responsible for private (family) concerns, places, and characteristics. As Campbell (2005) explains, the idea of a woman leader has been an oxymoron; women have a long history of being excluded from the public sphere, and are often rebuked for entering it. Their private role as a family member—be it mother, wife or daughter—follows them into the public sphere, and influences their ability to participate.

Social expectations related to women’s association with the private sphere connect socially desirable traits for women to nurturing, rather than public expectations regarding leadership. “Women’s roles as mothers and caregivers historically have been cast in opposition

to men's roles as rational thinkers" (Anderson and Sheeler, 2005, p. 6). Women should be gentle, quiet, and considerate of other's feelings, yet these traits are stereotyped as "ineffective and incapable of dealing with issues of public import" (Robson, 2000, p. 208). Women's association with the private sphere frequently works to their disadvantage, discouraging their participation simply through their femininity. Yet at times, female politicians use their connection with private issues to justify their involvement in public affairs.

Gender stereotypes associate women with warm and expressive behaviors, and a more natural orientation toward family (Bernstein, 2000). Accordingly, female politicians are perceived more positively when dealing with "compassion" or women's issues, while men are typically favored on issues like the economy and national security (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007). Of course, these assumed priorities may or may not be true in actual candidates' experiences. Yet the perception persists, and "being experts on day-to-day lives of families is a political credential for women" (Robson, 2000, p. 214). Female politicians are often aware of their advantage when issues relate to family concerns. Dolan and Kropf (2004) found that women strategically capitalize on voter stereotypes that women are better at "female" policy issues. For example, a mother may have more credibility on an issue such as education, because she has firsthand experience with the education system through her children.

While this advantage can help women in some areas, it does not extend to all issues, and actually hurts them on issues that are perceived to be more public, and therefore masculine. "Women seeking to publicly address issues of policy must walk a fine line between submissive and assertive, self-sacrificing and ambitious. They must linguistically tie issues of public policy to their expertise in the domestic realm or risk violating audience expectations" (Robson, 2000, p. 208). As Niven and Zilber (2001) discuss, "women candidates and legislators are taken less

seriously, receive less coverage, and receive attention on ‘women’s issues’ such as abortion and family leave while being ignored on most other matters of substance” (p. 395). Interestingly, studies have also discovered that voters perceive men to be more knowledgeable about “male” issues and affiliated women with “female issues,” even when the political message was identical. Aalberg and Jenssen (2007) found that when a female and male actor both deliver an actual political speech (originally given by a real politician), “the male ‘politician’ was believed to be more knowledgeable, trustworthy, and convincing than the female ‘politician’, even though they presented the same speech verbatim” (p. 17). Lawless (2009) describes that female politicians are more likely to receive media coverage on their “appearance, ‘feminine’ traits, and ability to handle ‘women’s issues’” (p.79).

Female politicians’ actual family construction is also an important concern, not only as a demonstration of her femininity, but related to perception of her ability. Running for, or serving in, political office occupies an enormous amount of energy and requires a large time commitment. Many women raising children are unable or reluctant to leave them in order to pursue a public position, whereas men typically have the expectation that they will work outside of the home. “The key here is that men are assumed rightfully to occupy the public sphere...this is the legacy of the public-private split in Western politics” (Gardetto, 1997, p. 234). In fact, many women delay their entrance into the public realm until their private duties as a parent are minimized. “Women committee chairs are older than their male colleagues, less likely to have children still in the home, and more likely to have postponed electoral ambitions that conflict with family or marital responsibilities” (Rosenthal, 1997, p. 588). If women attempt to take on both parenting and public responsibilities, they face judgments that men do not deal with. “Until domestic responsibilities and parenting are genuinely shared endeavors, married women with

children should still expect to be asked, ‘who will care for your children and husband?’” (Robson, 2000, p. 217).

The public expects a mother with a young child to stay home, or at least have enough flexibility to place childrearing as a high priority, while such an expectation does not exist for men. “Voters might form a negative impression of mother candidates if they believe she is violating her traditional role as mother and keeper of the private home. Thus mother candidates, especially those with young children, are caught in a bind” (Stalsburg, 2010, p. 381). McCarver (2011) found that online commenters debating Palin’s choice to run as vice president focused heavily on her family duties. “A majority of the comments weighing in about Palin’s role as mother ‘versus’ her role as politician argue passionately for Palin’s need to put her family first” (p. 27). Her choice to pursue a demanding career is criticized as personal ambition at the sake of her family.

Overall, it is clear family expectations and obligations are more of an issue for female politicians than their male counterparts. These expectations often work against women, or at the very least, present issues that men simply don’t have to deal with. While men are expected to participate in both family and public affairs, as Gardetto (1997) aptly points out, “Married women’s careers are a potential social problem” (pg. 233).

Sarah Palin

Sarah Palin presents an interesting public figure through which to analyze the tension created by public women who support traditional family values. “Lauded by some as the quintessential example of a successful ‘woman with it all’ and lambasted by others as the ultimate anti-feminist, Palin unquestionably prompted responses from women on a range of issues” (McCarver, 2011, p. 20). As a prominent and successful conservative politician, pundit,

author, and television personality, family is often at the forefront of Palin's rhetoric. Much of Palin's national image centers on her family at large, and her persona as a strong "mama grizzly" hockey mom in particular. She consistently portrays her family as an average, traditional family with a hardworking father, supportive (but tough) mom, and their five children. Her family values platform has a strong relationship to both her political ideology and the personal family philosophy she professes.

A long-time resident of Alaska, Palin got her start in local politics. First elected to the Wasilla city council, then elected mayor of Wasilla, in 2006 Alaska elected her its first female governor. John McCain's selection of Palin as his Vice Presidential running mate in 2008 thrust her into the national public spotlight and the highly masculinized world of presidential politics (Anderson, 2002a). After McCain's loss, Palin remained a prominent public figure, influential in the development of the Tea Party movement and an outspoken supporter of other female conservative politicians. Although many called for her Presidential run in 2012, Palin announced on October 5, 2011 that she would not run for President herself, but would use her influence to support other candidates who share her vision for America (2011a). She added, "As always, my family comes first and obviously Todd and I put great consideration into family life before making this decision. When we serve, we devote ourselves to God, family and country. My decision maintains this order." She remains a popular and prominent public figure as a Fox News contributor, author of two best-selling books, and leader of a successful and well-funded Political Action Committee, SarahPAC.

Palin's role as a political figure is heavily shaped by her other roles of wife, mother of five, and grandmother. This influence comes in the form of Palin's own numerous references to her family experiences and values, as well as outside praise and criticism. Although she

complains of intense media scrutiny of her family, she frequently discusses personal family issues in public. In her 2009 book *Going Rogue*, Palin says “Todd Palin roared into my life in a 1972 Ford Mustang...By the time I met him, he had honed an independent spirit and a sterling work ethic that drew me like a magnet, and would help define me and clarify my life’s priorities more than anything else” (p. 34). Likewise, in her 2008 speech to the Republican National Convention, which heralded her arrival on the national political scene, Palin said of Todd, “We met in high school, and two decades and five children later, he’s still my guy.” Later in the speech, she introduced the world to her family.

So, Track is the eldest of our five children. In our family, it’s two boys and three girls in between—my strong and kindhearted daughters Bristol, and Willow, and Piper. And we were so blessed in April, Todd and I welcomed our littlest one into the world, a perfectly beautiful baby boy named Trig. You know, from the inside, no family ever seems typical and that’s how it is with us. Our family has the same ups and downs as any other, the same challenges and the same joys. (Palin, 2008)

Palin’s family story has remained a centerpiece of her public image. Gibson and Heyse (2010) state “the positioning of the ‘family story’ front and center in the address rhetorically functions to privilege her maternal identity from the outset” (p. 245). In fact, many of her most memorable public remarks relate to her personal family experiences. Who could forget the most infamous and oft-quoted line from her Vice-Presidential acceptance speech, “You know they say the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull: lip stick” (Palin, 2008). This quip received more attention than any other part of her speech, and according to Gibson & Heyse, can be explained by Palin’s compelling rhetorical mix of femininity and strength—a mix that can be very tricky for women in politics to master successfully. The “combination of motherhood,

toughness, and femininity seemingly represented by Palin—and captured by that pitbull sound bite—led many to assert that Sarah Palin represented a new face of feminism” (p. 251). From a tough lipstick-wearing pitbull, to her later reliance on the metaphor of a strong mama grizzly, Palin consistently constructs herself as not only a mother, but also an animalistic fighter.

Palin is a self-declared feminist, a prominent public woman who has broken down gendered barriers. Elected the first female governor of Alaska and the first woman to receive the Republican Vice-Presidential nomination, Palin can be considered a trailblazer in those respects. Yet she remains widely criticized by feminist groups, and represents a complex challenge to modern feminism. Many feminist groups critique her reliance on conservative family values and policies that they find repressive (Marsh, 2010). Certainly, since her arrival on the national stage in 2008 with her Vice-Presidential acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, Palin has become a lightning rod for both positive and negative commentary, much of it gender related. Some ridiculed what they labeled her inexperience and incompetence, some hailed her folksy common sense, while others photo-shopped her face onto bikini-clad babes. Often, the media’s criticism of Palin has included speculation regarding her marriage and children. As McCarver (2011) points out,

It wasn’t long after the McCain camp announced Sarah Palin’s vice presidential candidacy and addition to the Republican ticket when the Internet and blogosphere began buzzing with comments about Palin’s role as a mother and rumors about her family.

Whose baby was that? How many kids does she have? They are named *what?* (p. 20)

Palin’s personal life has been both willingly offered up to her fans and harshly scrutinized by her opponents. Challenges to her family have been many, including divorce rumors, critiques of her children’s behavior, and questions about whether a woman with five children, including an

infant, has enough time to “do it all”. The fact that Palin works so hard to make private family values public domain, while simultaneously being constrained by the separation of public and private spheres, makes this case especially intriguing.

Description of artifacts

I examined three of Palin’s rhetorical constructions that specifically and meaningfully reference family issues and their relationship to policy. Although all three artifacts address family, they vary somewhat in focus from mainly family centered to primarily political. The complex intersection created when family and politics merge is the focus of this analysis.

First, I examine the TLC reality television show, *Sarah Palin’s Alaska*, which features the Palin family in their Alaska home. Next, I review Palin’s second book *America by Heart: Family, Faith, and Flag*, which specifically connects her political views to family issues and values. Third, Palin’s well-known “Mama Grizzly” campaign advertisement, in which she compares fellow conservative female politicians to grizzly bears, offers a powerful maternal metaphor to explore. Through these artifacts, I seek to explain how Sarah Palin, as a conservative woman, rhetorically constructs her family in order to create opportunities and minimize liabilities created through family expectations.

Sarah Palin’s Alaska

In March of 2010, the TLC network debuted *Sarah Palin’s Alaska*, a reality television show featuring Sarah Palin and her family members as they explore the natural wonders and local industries of Alaska. The first episode aired to a record-breaking five million viewers, the highest for any TLC show to date, polarized the public, and generated much speculation about the possibility of a Palin presidential bid (Mandel, 2010, Poniewozik, 2010).

Sarah Palin's Alaska portrays the Palin family in their home and follows them as they undertake various Alaska-centered adventures, such as fishing, rock climbing, kayaking, shooting rifles, and caribou hunting. However, because of Palin's public position and political involvement, any time she puts herself into the public eye, it becomes consequential for how she is perceived as a potential candidate—in this case, specifically within the context of her family as a mother, daughter, and wife. The program offers an opportunity to hear Palin's philosophy regarding family, and allows viewers to witness her acting as a mother and wife. The TLC network touts the show as featuring the state of Alaska and the Palin family, not as a political show, and on the surface, Palin's politics are not a direct focus of the show (Poniewozik, 2010). Yet much of the show's content relates to Palin's political career, and she often references her political views and experiences. In one episode she compares her family's large privacy fence to a solution for national border security. In another episode, she jokingly refers to the media's criticism of her lack of foreign policy experience in the 2008 campaign; "You can see Russia from here—almost" (Baltazzi, 2010i).

Although TLC did not advertise *Sarah Palin's Alaska* as a political effort, the Palins' choice to participate in a program showcasing their personal life and family is interesting, not to mention unique for a political family. In his *Time* magazine review, Poniewozik (2010) addresses the show's political ramifications.

It's just a little reality show. A little reality show about the former vice-presidential candidate raising her family and shooting guns and celebrating 'hardworking Alaskans' and encountering fierce mama bears and exploring the greatest country on earth! Who could possibly see that as a political statement? (para.1)

Some labeled the show an extended campaign advertisement for the Palin family, while

others viewed it as less than presidential. Karl Rove criticized Palin in an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*. “With all due candour, appearing on your own reality show on the Discovery Channel, I am not certain how that fits in the American calculus of ‘that helps me see you in the Oval Office’” (Spillius, 2010). Despite, or perhaps because of, its focus on the Palin family, not Sarah Palin as a public figure, this show has ramifications for her political image.

America by heart: Reflections on family, flag and faith

The success of Palin’s first book, *Going Rogue* (2009), and her experiences with “everyday Americans” during her subsequent book tour led to her second book, *America by Heart: Reflections on Family, Flag, and Faith*, an exploration of the traditional American values of Palin’s brand of conservatism, including a heavy focus on family values. According to the book’s publisher, Harper Collins, “her reflections on faith, family, and patriotism will read like a bible of American virtues for anyone hoping to understand the truths that lie at the heart of the nation” (2010, para.1). In 2010 Palin sold nearly 800,000 books, making it the year’s third highest selling political book behind George W. Bush and Glenn Beck (Weigel, 2011).

This book engages the clear connection between Palin’s traditional family values and her politics. Throughout the book, and as evidenced by the title, Palin praises what she describes as “real” American family values, and emphasizes the link between these personal family choices to conservatism, the Tea Party movement, and the political change she seeks. While *America By Heart* has a strongly political focus, and many interpreted it as further evidence of a 2012 Presidential run, it becomes clear that Palin does not separate family from politics. As Harper Collins describes, “the book ranges widely over American history, culture, and current affairs, and reflects on the key values—both national and spiritual—that have been such a profound part of Governor Palin’s life and continue to inform her vision of America’s future” (2010, para.3).

Inevitably, for Palin, these values originate in the American home, reflecting “her profound love and appreciation of family” (Harper Collins, 2010, para.3) and underscoring Palin’s political and rhetorical reliance on the power of familial ideology.

Mama Grizzlies

In a speech given in May 2010 to the Susan B. Anthony List pro-life group, Palin described her fellow female conservative candidates as tough “mama grizzlies” rising up to defend their “cubs”(Gardner, 2010). This speech was later incorporated into a highly popular campaign advertisement commissioned by Palin’s PAC, and placed on the internet (including Palin’s YouTube channel), with the intention of supporting female Republican and Tea Party candidates.

The advertisement, while ostensibly created to raise money for Palin’s PAC with the purpose of supporting her fellow mama grizzlies, appears to be an advertisement for Sarah Palin herself. Palin’s voice delivers the mama grizzly speech, as dramatic music swells and the audience is shown a series of clips featuring Palin interacting with various female supporters. While Palin’s words speak of the uprising of conservative female power, we are shown such women and how they adore Sarah Palin. “As she speaks, the camera locks onto examples of these women, who are shown embracing their families and toting signs like ‘No Government Run Healthcare’ ‘Don’t Tread on Me’ or ‘We Heart Sarah USA’” (Altman, 2010). Palin is shown to be *the* mama grizzly, portrayed as a hero for likeminded “commonsense conservative women,” as she graciously shakes hands, poses for photographs, and waves to adoring fans, who hold signs with slogans such as “I love Sarah Palin because she loves my country.”

Although Palin had resigned as Alaska’s Governor, and was not running for office herself, as Altman (2010) describes, the video “has all the hallmarks of a campaign ad. There is the slow-motion montage set to a soaring score; shots of the candidate pumping hands and

hugging fans; a flick at the race's November finish line. But Palin, the star of the spot, is not a candidate for any office — at least, not yet.” In this case, the context is extremely political, but she relies on family expertise and maternal appeals to demonstrate the power and importance embodied by Palin and fellow conservative female politicians.

Myth of the traditional family

Often, when modern Americans envision an ideal version of a family, they refer to a bygone era in which families were better—more stable, more satisfying, and less ambiguously defined. As Fineman (1995) states, there is a continued preference for a traditional family form.

A traditional family is typically imaged: a husband and wife—formally married and living together—with their biological children. The husband performs as the head of the household, providing economic support and discipline for the dependent wife and children, who correspondingly owe him duties of obedience and respect. This assumed archetypal family provides the normative expectations for the institution of the family. (p. 2183)

However, this mythical family may be derived more from 1950s sitcom reruns than a family type that truly existed in history. As Coontz (1992) describes in her work *The Way We Never Were*, “Like most visions of a ‘golden age,’ the ‘traditional family’ ... evaporates on closer examination. It is an ahistorical amalgam of structures, values, and behaviors that never coexisted in the same time and place” (p. 9). Fewer than ten percent of American households are composed of a working father, full-time homemaker mother and their children (Coontz, 1992). A traditional nuclear family may be more fantasy than reality, but continues to be idealized in American culture—especially political culture—despite growing numbers of divorces, step-families, single-parent families, and same-sex partners (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007). It is

framed as natural and timeless. As the Christian Coalition states on their website, “the definition of traditional marriage is under attack as liberals seek to radically redefine an institution that has existed for thousands of years.”

Various changes within actual families have reduced the practical reliance on a traditional family model, yet the ideological construction of family as traditional has remained constant. Cloud (1998) encourages us to “make a useful distinction between the actual, unstable, and varying experiences of diverse families at different moments in history, and ‘the family’ as an ideological construct, that, in contrast, has been remarkably consistent and stable for more than a century” (p. 393). While lived circumstances continue to evolve, as an ideology, the myth of the “traditional family” is powerful, consistent, and political. Politicians frequently utilize nostalgic representations of American ideals; Lee and Murfield (1995) explain that family is the most basic of these ideals frequently used to make sense of politics. “Candidates are designated either ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ family; legislation is deemed to ‘protect’ the family by promoting ‘family values’; and the most visible examples of social pathology are said to be caused by the ‘breakdown of the family’”(p.36). Justifying this type of family may help support policies that revive the idealized era of the prosperous 1950’s, “associated in many people’s minds with the relative stability of marriage, gender roles, and family life in that decade” (Coontz, 1992, p. 23-24).

Conservatives, in particular, have urged a return to what they see as the true version of America, based on values supported by the mythic traditional family—values conceptualized as fundamental to public policy. They have been successful at claiming the term “family values” and associating their worldview with the traditional family. Lakoff (2002) says, “They have learned that politics is about family and morality, about myth and metaphor, and emotional identification” (p. 19). As Pat Buchanan said to *Time* regarding what he called America’s

“culture war”--“It's not a battle of right and left but right and wrong. What do we believe about abortion? What do we believe about gay rights?”(Chu, 2006).

Ideas associated with “family values” have been applied to a variety of conservative causes, such as “opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, women working outside the home, legal abortion, same-sex marriage and embryonic stem-cell research. To some the phrase has religious connotations. To others, it’s about how politicians live and what it says about their character” (Lawrence 2008). A multitude of conservative groups, such as Republicans For Family Values, the Christian Coalition, Focus On The Family, The Heritage Foundation, and Concerned Women for America, to name only a few, focus a great deal of money and attention on social issues related to family and traditional values. As Senator Rick Santorum (2006) writes in his book *It Takes a Family*, “I have been talking about the ‘traditional’ family. By that, I mean a family constituted by a mother and a father who have committed themselves to each other in lifelong marriage, together with their children. This is ‘traditional,’ but the reason it is a traditional relationship is because it is fundamentally *natural*” (p.28). He frames the traditional family as based in natural law, and therefore unquestionable.

The Republican focus on a very specific set of “family values” puts the responsibility for social inequalities and troubles foremost on individual families (Cloud, 1998). For many conservatives, such as Sarah Palin, the family—not government—is fundamental to solving social problems, and is the basis for many political beliefs. The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, explains the importance of traditional family values as a focus of the Republican Party.

Children raised by never-married mothers are seven times more likely to be poor when compared to children raised in intact married families. Religious institutions and

individuals form the backbone of civil society, providing for the welfare of individuals more effectively than government-funded programs can... Policymakers must strengthen and expand the current pro-family constituency and unite religious and economic conservatives more effectively” (2012, para.1-2).

This strategy seeks to bring together social and fiscal conservatives under the banner of family values, in order to strengthen and unify their base of supporters. The “pro-family constituency” maintains that family must be composed of children raised by both a mother and father, and based in Christian values. In much conservative philosophy, this particular family form is essential to the success of our nation. As Janice Crouse (2011), of Concerned Women for America writes, “The traditional married-couple family is the most effective training ground for building citizens who contribute to the common good. Marriage conveys numerous economic, educational, health and safety benefits that establish a foundation from which communities and nations thrive.” The traditional family is more than a personal choice; it is a foundational structure that imparts public benefits.

In the traditional family, fathers are seen as the primary financial supporter and protector, while mothers are expected primarily to raise the children and care for the home. Sharron Angle, former Nevada Republican senatorial candidate explained, “Right now we say, in a traditional home, one parent stays home with the children and the other provides the financial support for that family. That is the acceptable and right thing to do” (Atal, 2010). Angle does not assign these roles to either a husband or wife, but traditionally the parent who stays at home is the wife. Indeed, Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of pro-life group the Susan B. Anthony List says feminists should make "a common-sense acknowledgment that because of [motherhood] there

will be fewer female CEOs" (Atal, 2010). The obligations of family life and motherhood create expectations in a traditional family that limit the ability of women to work outside the home.

Moreover, these limitations are often positioned as natural, part of women's inherent role within a family. When Marilyn Quayle spoke to the 1992 Republican National convention, she spoke proudly of her decision to quit her job as a lawyer to stay at home with her family, and argued liberals misinterpreted the needs and wishes of women. "They're disappointed because most women do not wish to be liberated from their essential natures as women" (Stanley, 1992). Senator Rick Santorum wrote in his 2006 book *It Takes a Family* that women are most suited to staying at home (Knowlton, 2012). He states, "The radical feminists succeeded in undermining the traditional family and convincing women that professional accomplishments are the key to happiness" (Santorum, 2006). In this view, feminists persuaded women to abandon their sole focus on motherhood and family life, and thus have destroyed the traditional family by altering women's natural role within the family. Conventionally, a family's success "depends upon an image of women as the keepers of the domestic hearth, guarantors of stability and prosperity" (Cloud, 1998, p. 399). Conservative female politicians who advocate traditional family values essentially support a model that is in contradistinction to the way they live their own lives, at least in part.

Stepping outside the traditional female role poses somewhat of a challenge to conservative "family values," yet many such women foreground their families and maternal role to justify their participation. On Republican Michele Bachmann's congressional website, she describes herself in terms of family values. "As a believer in the traditional values upon which this country was founded, she consistently defends America's religious liberties and the importance of the family as the first unit of government" (Bachmann, 2011). Women such as

Bachmann and Palin, who do not remain in a supportive, stay-at-home maternal role and enter the public sphere, must somehow resolve the ostensible contradiction created by their espousal of traditional family values, which in some ways undermines their own participation in the public sphere. Family values as a cornerstone of conservative philosophy emphasizes the importance of traditional families, and mothers as the key of successful home life. Because of the mother's importance in maintaining the family, conservative women who enter politics often wind up supporting the association of women with private family concerns, and cementing men's place in the public, despite their own presence.

The ideology of the traditional family is a lived experience for some, and as I will discuss in the next section, can provide a metaphor for their political views. The relationship between an idealized ideology of family and the realities lived by American family members can be illuminated by viewing family as a multi-layered concept that simultaneously refers to a diverse social institution, an enduring ideology, and a fundamental metaphor for political worldviews. Family is not only a personal way of life, but also a political philosophy that individualizes social problems. The multiple layers of "family" emphasize the importance family has politically, from personal experiences up through comprehensive metaphorical worldviews. Because "broader social systems and structures impinge on everyday family life, reproducing inside families the divisions that exist outside of them" (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007, p. 157), social and cultural expectations of the family are reflected in individual family experiences, while personal family constructions simultaneously mirror back their values onto various aspects of society, such as politics.

“Nation as Family” metaphor

In his book, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, George Lakoff (2002) offers a model of family-based morality through which to better understand the belief systems of liberals and conservatives. He believes both political worldviews are fundamentally based on a metaphor of the nation-as-family. This metaphor is Lakoff’s attempt to explain the very different moral systems and political discourse of liberals and conservatives—to explain why “common sense” means very different things to these groups, and outline the cognitive model that is deeply embedded in both philosophies. As he sought to understand what unified these opposing political and moral priorities, he discovered “it was what the conservatives were talking about nonstop: the family” (Lakoff, 2002, p. 20).

In the nation-as-family metaphor, the United States is conceptualized as a family, with the government as the parental authority and citizens as its children. This metaphor is profoundly woven into American political culture. Consider the commonplace related metaphors of our founding fathers, Uncle Sam, and Big Brother. However, the overarching metaphor of nation-as-family does not prescribe what kind of family the nation is—and that gap allows room for the different worldviews of the liberals and conservatives (Lakoff, 2002).

Lakoff (2002) argues that while conservatives see the role of government as a “Strict Father” who enforces authority and demands personal strength and responsibility, the “Nurturant Parent” supported by liberals stresses empathy and nurturance. These two metaphorical family models are not meant to describe all possible viewpoints held by each conservative or liberal, but rather to help explain how a familial metaphor influences political philosophy. As Lakoff states, the models he presents rely on radial categories and “are not definable in terms of some list of properties shared by every member of the category. Instead, they are characterized by variations

on a central model” (p. 7-8). Of course, conservative and liberal categories are extremely elaborate and multi-faceted. There is no one “conservative” worldview. It is not possible to fully describe the intricacies of each model; however, “the theory of radial categories allows us to account for both the central tendencies and the variations” (Lakoff, 2002, p. 8). This quality allows for analysis of potential variations made to the Strict Father model by female conservatives.

The Strict Father family is a “model of an ideal family, a model which Americans should find familiar. Different individuals may have somewhat different versions of it, but in its major outlines it is an important part of American mythology” (Lakoff, 2002, p. 65). In fact, the Strict Father family is essentially the same family typically referenced when politicians refer to traditional “family values”. Despite the wide variety of American families, this family model resonates strongly with American traditions and narratives about family. It is characterized as:

A traditional nuclear family, with the father having primary responsibility for supporting and protecting the family as well as the authority to set overall family policy. He teaches children right from wrong by setting strict rules for their behavior and enforcing them through punishment... The mother has day-to-day responsibility for the care of the house, raising the children, and upholding the father’s authority. (Lakoff, 2002, p. 65-66)

The Strict Father model ascribes to a conventional ideology, remarkably similar to the myth of the traditional family. It is “a cognitively real idealized model, that is, a model that Americans grow up knowing implicitly” (Lakoff, 2002, p. 67). In the Strict Father worldview, children are expected to learn discipline and build character. Children must learn obedience in order to achieve self-discipline, which is the only path to success in a dangerous and difficult world. While a Strict Father family also nurtures their children, emphasizing discipline enables

children (citizens) to be responsible for achieving their own success through hard work and reliance on family values. As a political metaphor, the need for self-discipline rejects systemic causes for social problems and focuses on individual behavior. Success, then, is a reward for acting morally (Lakoff, 2002).

Politics are very much connected to morality. Lakoff (2002) believes that both the Strict Father and Nurturant Parent family models correspond to moral priorities, which arise naturally from the particular model's worldview. As Lakoff explains, the opposing conservative and liberal ways of understanding the world are based on more than just a political division. "It is a moral division. It is about what you think makes a 'good' person and what is the 'right' thing to do. And it goes even deeper than that: it is ultimately a family-based division, about what you think the right kind of family is...the political division is personal" (p. x). Each family model is metaphorical, and the morality associated with the models is in many ways metaphorical as well.

The Strict Father family operates using a metaphor of moral boundaries. Through this metaphor, there is a clear line between right and wrong, good and evil. Those who choose wrong behavior are threats to society because they blur the clear boundary between morality and immorality. Therefore strict behavioral requirements exist in order to remain moral. In the Strict Father model, morality is also based on the moral order, a folk theory of the natural order of the world. In this moral order, God is more powerful than humans, who are more powerful than animals and plants. Adults are more powerful than children, and men are naturally more powerful than women. This theory of dominance is translated into a moral order that legitimizes a hierarchy and also ascribes a moral component to that authority. Because they are more powerful, adults have a responsibility for children, and men have a responsibility for women.

As the nation-as-family metaphor is fundamentally based on a certain conception of the appropriate family model, it ascribes appropriate parental and spousal roles. Lakoff (2002) states that the two models of the family are “culturally elaborated variants of traditional male and female models. These are rooted in long cultural experience” (p. 155). Importantly—especially for female conservatives—the Strict Father model relies on conventional gender roles for the husband and wife. The father operates as the head of the household, and retains ultimate responsibility for the mother and children alike. In a Strict Father metaphorical family, the government retains a patriarchal organization. In fact, although Lakoff (2002) avoided using the term, he admits, “what I have been calling Strict Father Morality is what many feminists mean by the term ‘patriarchy’” (p. 304).

The recent conservative emphasis on traditional family values, especially by female politicians, has gendered implications for both policy and actual families. When conservatives urge a return to family values, through their Strict Father model they are appealing to a traditional family comprised of both a strong, disciplining father and a nurturing homemaker mother. Despite their presence as women in the public sphere, conservative female politicians may be helping to enforce the association of women with private responsibilities. If the nation is a family, these conservative women are attempting to mother the nation, but to fit within the Strict Father morality; they must also respect the ultimate authority of the father. How do conservative female politicians negotiate this obligation, while simultaneously enacting their own authority? Lakoff (2002) believes conservative feminists have altered one aspect of the Strict Father model that allows them to participate on an equal level: the moral order that places men as dominant over women is removed. “Here’s what changes: In the family, men and women have equal responsibility for decisions” (Lakoff, 2002, p. 304). According to Lakoff,

this results in a kind of conservative feminism that is similar to other conservatism on most other issues, but allows a woman to work outside of the home and feel comfortable about using power.

While Lakoff (2002) explains that conservatism contains many varieties within its ideology that may differ slightly but remain based on a Strict Father family model, a feminist version of conservatism bears exploring further. In what ways are conservative female politicians, who identify themselves as feminists, helping to resist the power of the patriarchal Strict Father, and in what ways are they reinforcing his authority? To what extent is Sarah Palin creating opportunities for other women in the public sphere, and to what extent is she simply manipulating Strict Father values for her own purposes? I seek to explain the role of the mother within the Strict Father model, particularly when she challenges some aspects of Strict Father morality.

While the conservative Strict Father model is based on a metaphorical traditional family, importantly, they are also calling for this model to be reflected in actual family life. As Lakoff (2002) states, he does not claim there is usually a simple correlation between family models and worldviews, but does suspect such correlations exist.

A conceptual system with such a one-to-one correspondence between family and politics would be simpler, more unified, and more stable (or more rigid), and produce less cognitive dissonance than a system that uses different models at different times on different issues. The conservative focus on family values can be seen from this perspective as an attempt to unify the use of the Strict Father model for family life with its use as a basis for conservative politics. From the perspective of cognitive science, this is an extremely sophisticated and powerful strategy. (p.160)

The makeup of American families, and the roles of mothers and fathers within those families becomes a political statement. Lakoff (2002) describes this battle over family ideology as a culture war.

Conservatives have understood very well that their goals are not just political and economic. Conservatives want to change American culture itself. They want to change the idea of what counts as a good person and what the world should be like.

Conservatives understand that this means starting with the family. (Lakoff, 2002, p. 222)

It seems likely actual family arrangements and idealized metaphorical families, while not always precisely correlated, are substantially related. Of course there are families with conservative political values that personally have a less traditional family, and politically liberal families with traditional tendencies. But such a discrepancy would not likely be well received in the political realm, and the alignment between actual family structure and rhetorical appeal grants this political strategy more power. As Lakoff (2002) points out, conservatives attempt to unify those with a traditional family in their own lives with the metaphorical traditional family of conservatism. “Conservative politics tries to link the family use and the political use of the models more closely; to point out that conservatives have the Strict Father model of the family and to convince others with the Strict Father model of the family that they should be political conservatives” (p. 16). The power of family values rhetoric lies in its ability to engage mythic ideals of what family should be in the home, and extend those same values to policy. This is often seen with conservative politicians, who understand the substantial power embodied within family morality, and idealize a return to certain family values within their rhetorical appeals. By uniting the actual lived experience of family and the metaphorical worldview derived from an idealized traditional family, conservative leaders are able to present a unified and especially

powerful worldview that encompasses not only political issues, but personal and family ones as well. As Lakoff says, “The family, conservatives understand well, is the basis of all morality, all social arrangements, and all politics” (p. 225).

Maternalism

Female politicians are constrained heavily by discourses that prescribe masculine values as natural, but at times they draw from expectations of feminine roles that allow them to utilize such discourses to their advantage. Many women have been able to create a successful political identity, often redefining or reimagining potentially subordinating discourses in alternative, empowering ways (Anderson, 2002b; Dow and Tonn, 1993; Ponton, 2010; Robson, 2000). Motherhood, a feminine yet powerful role, provides such an opportunity. Capitalizing on this acceptable avenue of female power, women have strategically utilized maternal appeals since they first entered public life. Hayden (2003) states that early female activists successfully used this strategy, which continues today.

A maternal stance legitimized women’s public relationships to the state, the community, and the workplace. For many contemporary women, maternal appeals function in a similar way. Living in societies in which their identities remain tied to their maternity, motherist politics offer women around the world an organizing base in which to justify public activism. (p. 197)

In a variety of ways, maternal appeals allow women to draw on their experience and authority as experts in matters relating to the domestic, private sphere to justify their participation in the public, political sphere. Public perception commonly recognizes women’s expertise related to the care and protection of children. As Gibson and Heyse (2010) describe, “appealing to their roles as mothers allowed women to draw on their supposed gender difference

to legitimate themselves as public actors and lend them special authority when advocating on behalf of many social issues” (p.238). Activist groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving have successfully appealed to the common expectation that mothers speak up to protect children. Tonn (1996) adds that motherhood can justify a tough, forceful persona that would otherwise be considered unfeminine, as in the case of labor activist “Mother Jones.” In another example, Hayden (2003) explains that the women who participated in the Million Mom March in support of gun control utilized maternity to “challenge the dominant social and political order and to promote an alternative set of values based in their daily interactions with children” (p. 196).

As in the case of the Million Mom March, maternal appeals can serve to challenge the power of Strict Father morality by emphasizing the values of nurturance and empathy rather than strict family discipline. Yet Hayden warns that the effects of performing motherhood depend upon context, and the morality within a political philosophy. After all, the Strict Father and Nurturant Parent models “suggest fundamentally different roles for mothers within the family structure and, hence, fundamentally different possibilities for maternal politics” (Hayden, 2003, p. 199). In one sense, maternal appeals offer opportunities for women trapped by stereotypically masculine expectations of political identity. The performance of motherhood allows female politicians to portray characteristics such as toughness and authority within an acceptably feminine role, which can help navigate the competency/femininity double-bind. But maternal appeals can also support Strict Father morality and traditional family values, which can reinforce conventional gender roles and limitations for women. So although this rhetorical strategy illuminates areas of agency for women, it can also strengthen controlling hegemonic discourses. Even maternalism with a feminist aim “underscores traditional gender roles and reinscribes the dichotomy between feminine and masculine” (Anderson, 2002b, p. 8).

Scholars have identified a variety of female politicians who have successfully used perceptions of motherhood to enhance their political image and gain acceptance in a male-dominated sphere. These women have manipulated stereotypes related to women's roles as wives and mothers in ways as diverse as the women themselves. The results are equally varied, and demonstrate the continuing debate over the consequences of maternal appeals. In some cases, performing motherhood serves to reify traditional and limiting views of motherhood, while in other cases, it allows politicians to challenge expectations of women in the public sphere and create opportunities for other women; at times it does both.

Ann Richards, the second female Governor of Texas, demonstrated a distinctly feminine rhetorical style in her 1988 Keynote Address to the Democratic National Convention; she frequently referenced her family and an "alternative political philosophy reflecting feminine ideals of care, nurturance, and family relationships" (Dow & Tonn, 1993, p. 289). Richards used her feminine, maternal persona to critique President Reagan and the Strict Father government and privilege an alternative philosophy. She drew a comparison between Reagan's remarks regarding the Iran-Contra affair and the answers she receives from her children. "And when we get our questions asked, or there's a leak, or an investigation, the only answer we get is 'I don't know' or 'I forgot.' But you wouldn't accept an answer like that from your children. I wouldn't. Don't tell me 'you don't know' or 'you forgot.'" (Dow & Tonn, 1993, p. 290). Dow and Tonn (1993) conclude that Richards's rhetorical style embraces feminine experiences and priorities in order to challenge the status quo and therefore "has potential to function as a critique of patriarchal modes of reasoning as well as to offer an empowering alternative" (p. 299).

Ponton (2010) found that Margaret Thatcher, Britain's first female Prime Minister, faced significant media attention about stereotypical gender roles, including her obligation to her

family and her ability to win over critics that doubted the ability of a woman to run a country. The press asked such questions as, “Have you been able to combine your political life with looking after a family, running a home?” (Ponton, 2010, p. 201) and “Mrs. Thatcher what would you like to say to people who are still sceptical about the idea of a lady leader?” (Ponton, 2010, p. 204). Thatcher often collaborated with the media in creating her image as a conventional wife, and thus avoided appearing threatening. In this sense, her identity as a housewife was politically useful. “The female virtues associated with the housewife — common-sense, good housekeeping, balancing the books — resonated with voters, who were ready to receive her message, in an economy where public spending was out of control” (Ponton, 2010, p. 215). When it served her purposes, she compared her experiences as a wife running a home to running the country; for example, she stated, “Perhaps it takes a housewife to see that Britain’s national housekeeping is appalling” (Ponton, 2010, p. 206). Thatcher’s housewife persona is not identical to that of a mother, but she similarly turned a potentially limiting discourse about femininity to her advantage; in so doing she reinforced the appropriateness of focusing on her gender as well as the association of women with the private sphere.

Maryland Senator Barbara Mikulski recognized familial expectations placed on female politicians and adapted rhetorically (Robson, 2000). To diffuse criticism of her single status, she joked, “If you’re married, you’re neglecting him; if you’re single, you couldn’t get him; if you’re divorced, you couldn’t keep him; and if you’re widowed, you killed him!” (Robson, 2000, p. 212-213). Mikulski relied on her sense of humor and ability to manipulate familial stereotypes to her advantage. As a single woman, she did not fit the mold of the ideal woman: wife and mother. Instead, she described her constituents as her family; she said she was married to the public. “To negotiate the expectation and idealization of marriage, Mikulski rhetorically

constructed an almost familial relationship between herself and her constituents by redefining and enlarging the concept of ‘family’ to include constituents” (Robson, 2000 p.212). By emphasizing her selfless devotion to public service, she successfully engaged expectations of motherhood. “In doing so, she facilitated women's increased participation in the political arena and broadened the lens through which women in politics are viewed” (Robson, 2000, p. 205).

As First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton was criticized for being an overly masculine, pushy, bitch (Anderson, 2002b). To moderate this public perception, Clinton embraced the power of the maternal archetype and remade her image into that of a softer, more traditionally feminine woman. “The First Lady took great pains to cast herself as a traditional wife and mother” (Anderson, 2002b, p. 7). She relied on narratives that framed her as a mother devoted to caring for all children, and adopted a maternal tone in her speech to the 1996 Democratic National Convention (Anderson, 2002b). “Rodham Clinton exuded maternal character when she invited her DNC audience, figuratively, into her private sphere, stating, ‘I wish we could be sitting around a kitchen table, just us, talking about our hopes and fears, about our children’s futures. For Bill and me, family has been the center of our lives” (Anderson, 2002b, p. 7). By minimizing her professional career and drawing on traditional feminine priorities, Clinton appeared to be a more conventional First Lady. Anderson (2002b) found that although Clinton’s image could be considered an acceptance of traditional gender roles and had the potential to undermine her feminist politics, she managed to both “placate her critics and at the same time promote a feminist message” (p.8).

Sarah Palin has taken maternalism in a new direction. She represents a group of conservative women who describe themselves as feminist and embrace the power of female roles, like motherhood, but do so with the intent of supporting traditional values that often

subordinate women. As noted previously, Palin has repeatedly chosen to rhetorically highlight her family; many of her most well known statements are directly related to her role as a mother. Throughout her Vice Presidential nomination acceptance speech, Palin emphasized that she was “just your average hockey mom” and has since introduced the concept of “mama grizzlies” into the public sphere. In many ways, this strategy appears to be working. Her acceptance speech was widely praised by conservatives and successfully bolstered her founding national image as the first woman to accept the Republican Party’s nomination for Vice President. Representative “Bill McCollum admired her as a “hockey mom that can stand beside anybody, man or woman” (Gibson & Heyse, 2009, p. 236).

The ability of performing motherhood to challenge the patriarchy of politics is partly dependent upon the role of the mother in the family, as well as the purpose of her maternal appeals. For this reason, the increased presence of conservative females alone does not necessarily represent progress for women. Maternal appeals can facilitate individual success for conservative female politicians. Yet within a conservative context, they can also reinforce the natural hierarchy embodied in the traditional family and strengthen the conservative strategy of unifying the Strict Father model for family life and political worldview. As Ashcraft (2007) points out, a particular groups’ image production is often co-created by the very groups that are excluded from it. In some instances, maternal appeals simply reinforce the traditional stereotype that women’s primary roles are their domestic and relational ones. This serves to bolster the identity of politicians as male, in contrast to domestic women. When considered in this light, although maternal appeals provide women with a tool to negotiate the tension of required political identity with their required identity as a woman, it may not be as empowering as some

would insist. While Palin insists she is creating an “emerging, conservative, feminist identity,” this version of feminism may simply be patriarchy under another name.

In what follows, I first explore Palin’s rhetorical construction of her own family as a model of Strict Father morality, yet one with important changes to the role of the mother. Next, I discuss how Palin takes her altered Strict Father family to the public sphere—she acts as a powerful “mama grizzly,” determined to protect her “cubs” from harm. Finally, I argue that while Palin presents the mama grizzly persona as a conservative form of feminism, her representation of motherhood and traditional family values has negative consequences for women as a group.

Chapter 2: An “Average American” Family

Powerful women in American politics are still asked if they can “do it all,” yet Sarah Palin embraces her familial roles and utilizes her family as justification for political participation. She describes family as her main motivation, greatest treasure, and guiding “north star”—as well as the crucial foundation of a healthy nation. “Ok, I’ll admit it: I talk a lot about Todd and my wonderful kids and my beautiful grandbaby” (Palin, 2010a, xvii). As Lakoff (2002) describes, conservatives have a Strict Father metaphorical view of the political system, but also strategically call for their family values to be reflected in actual American homes and in public policy. “There is more cognitive coherence and less cognitive dissonance if your politics is governed by the same model of the family that you use in your home life” (p. 16). When Sarah Palin, as a conservative political celebrity, bases so much of her political philosophy on the values contained within families, it bears examining how her own family matches up.

Palin makes much of her experiences as a mother and wife, and publically displays her family in very consistent terms: as just an “average American” family. Rather than portraying her family as exceptional, she creates a family just like the average Americans she aims to influence, simultaneously defining what an average American family should look like. While the Palin family represents the traditional American family, they are also described as hearty, pioneering Alaskans. In her rhetoric, Alaska represents the “true” America, forgotten by many in the lower 48 states and especially neglected in Washington D.C.

In many ways, Sarah Palin presents her family very much like the Strict Father described by Lakoff (2002). Most notably, she frequently praises the value of hard work and self-discipline. Over and over, she discusses these ideals and her attempts to instill a strong work ethic in her children. Success and failure are earned through competition and framed solely in

terms of individual achievement. As Palin emphasizes the similarity between her family and the majority of American families, the Palins' successes reflect the path to success for all Americans. These achievements are gained through reliance on the values of hard work and self-discipline—American ideals that remain pure in Alaska.

However, Palin also makes important changes to the Strict Father family model through her relationship with her husband Todd Palin. Sarah and Todd are portrayed as partners who share leadership of the family. This changed relationship is key to Palin presenting the powerful maternal persona—the mama grizzly—she enacts in the public sphere. Her brand of “conservative feminism” supports women as powerful mothers within their own families and on the public stage. This develops as Palin presents her family in *America by Heart*, but especially through the reality show *Sarah Palin's Alaska*, which explicitly focuses on the Palin family.

This analysis of Palin's personal rhetorical family construction first describes the similarities of the Palin family to Lakoff's Strict Father model. Then I explore the changes made to the traditional roles of the mother and father, based on the notion that personal family construction is very much a political statement. As Ruddick (1997) says, “Political motherhood almost always begins with and represents a mother's commitment to her ‘own’ children and family” (p.374). Further chapters of analysis will explain how Palin's modified Strict Father family allows her to capitalize on the power of her maternal role, which she translates cohesively into conservative policy.

Just an average Alaskan family

Sarah Palin's Alaska offered the Palins an opportunity to demonstrate and reinforce the myth of their own traditional family and ultimately link such morality to their political views and policy agenda. While enacting the rituals, activities, and beliefs of what she portrays as an

average, relatable family, she presents her family as a model of traditional Strict Father American values. Lakoff (2002) explains this choice is part of a successful conservative strategy. He says Republicans have been very good at

carefully working out their values, comprehending their myths, and designing a language to fit those values and myths so that they can evoke them with powerful slogans, repeated over and over again, that reinforce those family-morality-policy links, until the connections have come to seem natural to many Americans, including many in the media. (p. 19)

Although her famous family may not be entirely typical, its form is recognizable to most Americans and especially conservatives who support such traditional values. So while Palin goes to great efforts to portray her family as average, she also suggests it is somehow better, a model of the *true* American family. Other families, such as the Nurturant Parent family, are flawed and unnatural, because they have lost sight of true American family values.

Throughout *Sarah Palin's Alaska* and *America By Heart*, Palin consistently repeats themes of Strict Father morality and develops the populist appeal of her family by describing herself and the rest of her clan as “average” many times. In many ways Sarah Palin is anything but average. As a former governor of Alaska and Republican vice presidential candidate—not to mention the first woman to reach both posts—she is a member of a small, powerful, and elite group. Rather than embracing that which makes her exceptional, Palin identifies herself with a broad base of the American public by describing her family as at once average and typical, while also idealized and representative of lost American values. This creates an interesting tension as she states the Palins are both ordinary and extraordinary.

Palin tells us her family is “normal and boring” (Baltazzi, 2010i). Her daughter Willow is a “typical teenager” (Baltazzi, 2010i), a “normal 16 year old” (Baltazzi, 2010c). When riding in a luxury RV they are just an “average American family on a road trip” with children bickering in the back (Baltazzi, 2010i). Palin (2010a) writes of the day her son Track was deployed in the army. Although she had just been selected as John McCain’s running mate in the upcoming Presidential election, “That day I was just one of thousands of proud but wary American women: I was the mom of a young soldier being sent overseas to defend our country” (p. 37). Even on one of the most significant days in her career, Palin identifies first as a mother—one of many sharing a similar experience.

In addition to the multiple explicit references to the “average” nature of the Palin family, they are depicted engaging in many ordinary daily activities, and within her family, Sarah is not shown to have any extra power or clout due to her public position. Whether she is baking cookies with her youngest daughter Piper or babysitting her grandson Tripp, Palin does not present herself or her family as special or expert. In fact, she makes an effort to make them relatable to the ordinary person. They are portrayed participating in routine activities such as cooking, raising children, and vacationing in their home state—never mind the television studio in the backyard or reality show following their activities. Palin’s children do not treat her with any additional deference, emphasizing their ordinary relationship. Daughter Bristol teases Palin at the gun range, “Mom, take your prom hair back home!” (Baltazzi, 2010i). Sarah’s adopted persona of an everyday average American bolsters her image as a relatable, traditional mother, which she translates into political strategy. When giving political opinions, Palin is not a more knowledgeable authority, but simply describes that Americans need to “remember the commonsense most of us learned before we went to kindergarten” (2010a, p. 267).

While the Palins are presented as an average family, they are also shown to have a special characteristic that keeps them closer to what Palin presents as true American values: they are Alaskan. Alaska is portrayed as a beautiful, but demanding setting that requires inner strength and determination from its citizens. Because Alaskans have no choice but to engage in hard work and self-discipline in order to survive their harsh environment, they are naturally closer to such Strict Father values.

The Alaskan environment clearly inspires Palin's political outlook, and she utilizes this unique identity to distinguish herself as tough and independent. On a hunting trip, she describes the hard physical work required of life in Alaska. "I know my feet are going to be wrinkled and blistered by the end of the day. But this is what has created within me a desire to be tough and to be self sufficient and independent. A lot of it has to do with my upbringing in Alaska" (Baltazzi, 2010f). Alaska, nicknamed "the last frontier," calls to mind the pioneering spirit prominent in American mythology. Alaskans are described as hard-working and tough individuals, by necessity. Palin tells us that "Alaska breeds a kind of self-reliance that has gone out of style in much of the rest of the country" (Palin, 2010a, p.144). She creates an Alaska in which hard work isn't an option for either recreating or working: it is necessary for safety and survival.

Sarah and Todd climb Mount Denali, and although Sarah is terrified and unsure of her abilities to reach the top, she tells us "I didn't want to quit" (Baltazzi, 2010i). The guide approves, explaining to the audience "It's that Alaska girl grit" (Baltazzi, 2010i). This kind of family is implicitly compared to the pioneering spirit of America's past and is reminiscent of life in rural western states, when women worked just as hard as the men, out of necessity (Hayden, 1999).

Sarah Palin's Alaska features a variety of hard-working “average” Alaskans. In one episode the audience is introduced to Sue, a woman who lives alone at an incredibly remote camp accessible only by bush plane. Palin describes Sue as “*the* Alaskan woman—she is the mama grizzly. Nobody knows what she goes through” (Baltazzi, 2010f). This description seems apt, as Sue details a gruesome story of being attacked by a bear and sewing her own head back together before getting a gun and shooting the bear. She lay injured and alone in the tundra for ten days before a pilot arrived and offered help. Sue tears up when the Palins’ plane departs, leaving her alone once more. She speaks highly of Sarah.

As Governor, Sarah really affected my life as an Alaskan. But to be able to meet them, get to know them as humans, they became my friends very quickly. They’re not just people I care about, they’re neighbors. My neighbors just live 1000 miles away.

(Baltazzi, 2010f)

In Alaska, the Governor is seen to be approachable and accessible to the average person: a neighbor. Returning the compliment, Sarah says Sue “is a very amazing and inspiring person. Encapsulating that Alaskan spirit—pioneering, independent, not looking for anyone to meet challenges for her, she’s going to do it herself” (Baltazzi, 2010f). The harsh and dangerous Alaskan landscape requires its hardy citizens to rely only on themselves, and calls to mind the myth of America’s strong, pioneering founders. Strict Father morality, when viewed through Palin’s frame of the frontier, reinforces the morality of hard work, and emphasizes this demand is placed upon all its residents. Alaska, as Palin presents it, requires hard-working and fearless *women* as well as men. As Sue significantly puts it, “The tundra is the kind of landscape that would make a man out of anybody” (Baltazzi, 2010f). Toughness, independence, and a willingness to work hard, traditionally considered masculine qualities, are used to define both

men and women in Alaska. Alaskan women are just as tough as the men, because they have to be.

As evidenced by Sue's incredible tale, and throughout *Sarah Palin's Alaska*, much is made of the risk associated with each activity the Palin family undertakes. This again, is representative of the Strict Father concept that life is difficult and the world is fundamentally dangerous (Lakoff, 2002). In order to survive, children must learn to depend upon themselves. Recreational pursuits such as hunting, rock climbing, camping, fishing, kayaking, and rafting are all portrayed as extremely dangerous. On a caribou-hunting trip with her father, Palin heightens the sense of danger associated with the activity. "Out here, the hunter can become the hunted if you're not careful. Because there are dangerous predators everywhere. And we're outnumbered" (Baltazzi, 2010f). On one adventure, the Palins hike across an iceberg to explore a beautiful ice cave, and both their guide and the Palins emphasize the danger of the ice. "You can't stay very long if you want to stay alive" (Baltazzi, 2010h). Before a camping trip, Sarah lectures about the danger of camping in the Alaskan wilderness. "If you're not armed and prepared, you are putting your family in danger" (Baltazzi, 2010e). Alaskans' choices of recreational activities are potentially deadly, and work is dangerous as well. As the Palins explore the local industries of commercial fishing, logging, and mining, much is made of the life-threatening nature of the work undertaken by tough Alaskans. She heightens the Strict Father view that all life (especially in Alaska) is dangerous, and parents are responsible for demonstrating to their children how to protect themselves.

In one episode of *Sarah Palin's Alaska*, Kate Gosselin, star of TLC show *Kate plus 8* arrives in Alaska with her eight children to experience life with the Palins. Gosselin provides an opportunity to examine an unprepared outsider thrust into the challenging Alaskan environment.

She is set up as a weak, incompetent counterpoint to Palin's tough, self-sufficient Alaskan woman. Sarah tells us that Kate is relying on her to "protect her because she doesn't know what camping in Alaska is like" (Baltazzi, 2010e). On a simple camping trip with all the Palin and Gosselin children, Gosselin breaks down and is unable to function for mere hours in the Alaskan wilderness. She spends most of the trip complaining.

It's horrible. The kids are having fun so I'm tolerating it... This is cruel and unusual punishment... I mean this is just ridiculous! Why would you pretend to be homeless? I don't get it! I just don't get the concept!... I am freezing to the bone! My hands are frigid! I've held it together for as long as I can, and now I'm done! (Baltazzi, 2010e)

Kate, obviously miserable and depicted as incredibly whiney, decides to abandon the camping trip. When the children object, wanting to stay, she tells them, "Then you're a Palin, not a Gosselin. We're deciding who's a Palin and who's a Gosselin." On the other hand, Palin says, "Come on, it wasn't that bad," while the children continue to play happily. And because the children obviously enjoyed the experience, Kate Gosselin is depicted as spoiled, selfish and less family oriented. Palin, by comparison, is rugged, tough, and appreciates family time more than the weak and spoiled mother from the city. Gosselin serves to demonstrate that without Strict Father toughness and the self-sufficiency bred in Alaska, she remains a helpless, undisciplined person who wants to be taken care of. She does not know how to operate a firearm to protect her family from Alaskan wildlife (which Palin teaches her), she does not have the sense to warm herself by the fire when she gets cold (which Palin urges her to do), and because she cannot manage herself, she is unable to demonstrate such toughness or basic survival skills for her children. This scene emphasizes that the Palins' Alaskan values of self-reliance and dedication allow them to live and enjoy a place others cannot stand for hours.

In this way, Alaska is developed as an antidote to the progressive forces Palin sees as degrading the superior traditional values of America. Sarah discusses why she encourages her teenage daughter Willow to participate in hard Alaskan work, such as salting fish with her family.

The teenage years are not easy years, any parent will tell you. I'd rather she be doing this than texting her buddies, thinkin' she needs to be all dolled up and goin' out and partying or anything else. I'd rather she be here, out in the woods in Alaska, pickin' fish and processing a resource with her great grandma. (Baltazzi, 2010g)

The hard work found in Alaska keeps children working closely with family members and prevents them from indulging in dangerous weaknesses that might tempt children in other environments.

Likewise, when Sarah and her youngest daughter Piper visit Todd's Eskimo relatives to help them smoke fish, Sarah praises the fish camp for being such a tight space. "Keeps a family close, doesn't it? Its so good for these kids" (Baltazzi, 2010g). Physical labor, especially the variety found in Alaska, by necessity keeps the family unit close and together, and provides those Strict Father family values.

I'm blessed to get to be a part of this lifestyle. You know its all about family for us, and its all about teaching kids strong work ethic and being together and being productive and passing on from generation to generation a really great tradition. (Baltazzi, 2010g)

Alaska, family, and tradition are among the most common themes in Palin's rhetoric, and illustrate the relationship she envisions between traditional family values, the hard work required of life in Alaska (and America by extension), and the importance of imparting these values to the next generation of children.

Work ethic

In a clear similarity to the moral system of the Strict Father family, teaching their children the principles of self-discipline and hard work are professed to be the Palins' highest parental priorities. As Lakoff (2002) explains, in the Strict Father family, parents are responsible for instilling the moral values of hard-work and self-reliance in their children, who are then responsible for their own successes, which are a reward for such moral behavior. "Survival in the world is a matter of competing successfully. To do so, children must learn discipline and build character" (p. 67). Social or institutional influences over individual outcomes are rejected, and the child's (or citizen's) ability to succeed in this difficult world is dependent solely upon their ability to work hard.

Just as a Strict Father government encourages hard-working independent citizens, the Palin family values are based in instilling a strong work ethic in their children. As she so often states, family values are the basis of a strong society and functional government—and it is the parent's job to model and teach these values to their children. As Palin writes, "Our basic understanding of self-discipline and our ability to work hard for an often distant reward are formed early, in strong families and communities that don't confuse hard-earned self-esteem with unearned self-regard" (Palin, 2010a, p. 167). Children must be taught self-discipline and encouraged to work hard in their families. We are shown how Sarah's parents instilled these values in her, and how she encourages her children to adopt the same philosophy in turn. As Sarah tells us, her father demonstrated the importance of independence and hard work for his children. "All the quirky adventures he took me on as a kid really taught me how to think for myself, work hard, and embrace challenges. And now, it's Piper's turn" (Baltazzi, 2010b). Just as Sarah's father showed her the importance of hard work, she now provides such an example for

Piper and her other children. “My dad has lived that, and I got to see it first hand. He was happy and fulfilled because he worked so hard. He instilled that in me, and I get to pass that on to my children” (Baltazzi, 2010f). This skill is crucial for a successful, satisfying life, and comes directly from family. Sarah passes down the values she learned from her parents onto her children, which becomes a tradition that preserves the ethic of hard work and Strict Father morality.

The values of the Strict Father are also implied to be uniquely fundamental and patriotic—based on an idealized version of America’s past. Palin (2010a) writes, “The founders took it for granted that strong families instilled in children the habits and disciplines necessary for those children to govern themselves in adulthood” (p. 111). Palin’s traditional family values are consistently compared to the values of the founding *fathers* and described as fundamentally American, the key to our nation’s success. Parents are to raise strong, self-sufficient children that will not become reliant on government to do for them what they have been trained to do for themselves.

Once more, Strict Father values are contrasted with Nurturant Parent philosophy, which is described as immoral and ineffective. Palin describes these beliefs in *America by Heart*:

What happened to the old-fashioned American ethic of hard work and selflessness, of trying to build a better country for your kids than the one you inherited? I think most Americans still believe in this, despite all the promises of a free lunch being dangled in front of them by their government. (2010a, p. 179)

In this case, Palin again praises the “American ethic of hard work,” but also contrasts this strategy against what she describes as unnecessary and irresponsible government intervention in the form of a “free lunch,” or unearned reward, which is associated with the Nurturant Parent

(liberal) model. Lakoff (2002) explains that according to the Strict Father model, “Without the incentive of reward and punishment, self-discipline would disappear” (Lakoff, 2002, p.69). If Americans are provided with unearned help from their government, they will lose the will to take care of themselves and neglect the moral qualities of hard work and self-reliance. “Rewards given to those who have not earned them through competition are thus immoral. They violate the entire system” (Lakoff, 2002, p. 68).

In most episodes of *Sarah Palin's Alaska*, one or both of the Palin parents take the children on an outing with the purpose of exposing them to the hard physical labor undertaken by many “average Alaskans.” While Palin certainly lives a life separated from such occupations, she makes much of the jobs completed by these workers, emphasizing both the danger, and the hard work they require. Author, pundit, and former vice-presidential candidate Palin tells the workers on the “slime line” processing fish, “You’re lucky to have these physical jobs” (Baltazzi, 2010h). Blue-collar Alaskan industries are positioned as the most difficult, and therefore most moral work.

In one example of indoctrinating the children into the value of hard work, Sarah takes Piper to a restaurant to watch her wait tables. “Piper saw what hard work was all about, and tolerance for other people, and truly to be of service to other people” (Baltazzi, 2010d). Also, Sarah takes Bristol out for a “mother/ daughter day” on a commercial halibut fishing boat to get Bristol “back to the seat of the brow, blue-collar work that she is used to doing” (Baltazzi, 2010h). As they reflect back on their day together, Bristol tells us “It was nice to get out here, and just be on the water with my mom—seeing her work hard. Work ethic is the biggest life lesson, and it will outline your kids’ future. We had a good time” (Baltazzi, 2010h). Clearly, as a daughter and young mother herself, Bristol repeats her mother’s message about hard work

being the most important life lesson. This priority reflects Strict Father morality, in which individual hard work is the single most important moral action, overshadowing other possibilities such as empathy.

One of the most glaring examples of indoctrinating children into Strict Father morality features Track, the Palin's eldest son. He must "prove" to his parents that he is ready to take over the responsibility of the family fishing business (managed by Todd) by demonstrating his dependability and strong work ethic. One morning Track and his fellow fishermen oversleep. As Piper wakes them, Sarah lectures about personal responsibility and the importance of work ethic.

It's important to remember that the more successful fisherman is going to be the harder working fisherman. The harder you work, the more money you're going to make, the more fish you're going to be able to pick. That, again, is such an important life lesson that so many should and could be learning. (Baltazzi, 2010f)

Waking up in time for the day of fishing certainly has a strong bearing on the number of fish caught and money earned (oversleeping can cost them thousands of dollars), yet a sole focus on work ethic overlooks other potential factors such as weather, available fish, and market prices—as well as having parents who own a lucrative fishing site. The Strict Father model denies the possibility of causes outside the individual. Not only does Sarah pass this lesson onto her son, but discusses its wider value to others who may not be given this background from their family. Not all parents teach their children the moral values of hard work and discipline, and while Palin recognizes such a failure, Strict Father morality denies that the government or anyone else is responsible for helping those children as they mature into adult citizens. Society's only obligation is to teach them self-discipline and self-reliance.

In another episode, Sarah, Todd, and Willow visit a logging camp, with the intent of demonstrating to reluctant teen Willow the importance of hard work. Sarah describes the logging camp as “so Alaskan.” The location is remote and Sarah says those that live there are “very hearty and self-sufficient” (Baltazzi, 2010c). Although they take Willow on a tour of the camp kitchen to impress upon her the hard work done by the logging chef, she prefers to be texting on her phone. She complains, “My mom’s always talking to me about being independent and not relying on others. I guess it’s my mom’s job to drive me crazy” (Baltazzi, 2010c). Despite her reluctance, in a later episode she recounts the lessons she learned. “You have to work hard to make your money” (Baltazzi, 2010a). Willow intends to use her hard-earned money to buy herself a car, which her parents have refused to purchase for her, despite her persistent pleading. While it is assumed the Palins could provide Willow with a car, her parents are not expected to do for Willow what she can do for herself through hard work.

Sarah and Todd visit the loggers and watch the cutting, which is described as incredibly dangerous, too dangerous for Willow, a minor, to participate. Sarah describes her nervousness at watching the “potentially deadly work they’re engaged in.” The logger tells them “a chainsaw can end your life quicker than a Colt 45” (Baltazzi, 2010c). Similar to the recreational activities, Alaskan jobs are portrayed in terms of the danger inherent in such hard, physical work. This depiction aligns with the Strict Father view of the world as an extremely dangerous and unpredictable place, in which self-discipline and hard work become necessary to succeed. Parents must prepare their children for the danger of the world.

Overall, the Palin family presents itself very much as a model of conservative family values, and the morality of Lakoff’s Strict Father model is prominently displayed. The common focus on individual success through hard work is especially striking. Importantly, though, the

Palin family makes one very important adjustment: the mother is seen to be just as powerful—if not more so—than the father.

Todd Palin: Mr. Mom/Captain America

The Palins present themselves as a model Strict Father family in many ways, but they have altered one important aspect: the mother, Sarah, has moved to a position of equal responsibility with her husband. In the traditional Strict Father family, the father is charged with the ultimate authority, protection and discipline of his family. The Palins, however, have elevated the mother's role and removed some gendered divisions of parental responsibilities, such as financial support and child rearing—both parents engage in these activities together and frame their marriage as a partnership. As such, they have altered both the roles of the Strict Father and mother. Lakoff (2002) suggests that conservative feminists still follow conservative metaphorical thought but have altered the natural order of dominance to allow women to exercise power as men do. “In this version of the SFM, the father no longer has authority over the mother in the family and both parents set and enforce the rules equally and make decisions equally” (p. 105). This type of Strict Father morality is demonstrated by the Palin family, in which Sarah does not usurp Todd's power, but does take a more public role in supporting Strict Father family values. Meanwhile, Todd helps manage family matters and is celebrated as a masculine hero in other areas. This changed family structure facilitates Sarah's public career by allowing Todd and other family members to absorb some of the responsibility for family work, while Sarah assumes some responsibilities of the Strict Father.

Sarah does not describe herself as the more authoritative parental figure, but due to her political successes and lucrative career, it is clear that at least publically, she is the more powerful figure. In some ways, especially in her role of imparting Strict Father values to her

children and the public in order to protect them from harm—in the form of literal danger as well as immoral Nurturant Parent morality—Sarah Palin very much takes on some of the duties traditionally accomplished by the father. Lakoff (2002) acknowledges that a man need not fill the role of the Strict Father. There are “variants of the model that can be used by a strict mother as well. There are many mothers, especially tough single mothers, who function as strict fathers” (p.67). However, the Palin family already has a Strict Father in Todd Palin, and as his supportive partner, Sarah can best be described as a Strict Mother. In this role she joins with Todd to best discipline the children into Strict Father morality. This enlarged sphere of influence for the mother is important in Palin’s political rhetoric, in which she must challenge the traditionally private role of the mother in order to make room for her political career.

While the private support Todd provides may empower Sarah as a wife and political leader, she takes care not to diminish Todd’s contributions. Frequently, she offers glowing praise for Todd as a wonderful husband and an irreplaceable partner who allows her to achieve what she has accomplished.

I lucked out when I met Todd Palin. He has been a partner to me in every conceivable way—in life, in love, and in doing battle with *the New York Times*. He is a wonderful father, a wise adviser, and the love of my life. Yes, I was fortunate to have met Todd. If you want to get anything done in this life, it’s helpful to have a First Dude. (Palin, 2010a, p. 93)

The label “First Dude” calls into focus the traditional male and female roles “Governor” and “First Lady,” and emphasizes that by changing the role of the mother within a family, the role of the father is necessarily revised as well. Not only was Sarah the first female Governor of Alaska, Todd was the first husband to be in the position of publicly supporting his powerful wife.

A name did not exist for his position, so the Palins coined the term “First Dude,” and in that capacity he helps Sarah get things done—the public accomplishments are hers.

However, their family is also positioned as an important accomplishment that Sarah and Todd achieve together. This categorization is bolstered throughout *Sarah Palin’s Alaska* and *America by Heart*—both Sarah and Todd participate in raising the children, earning money, and running the household. Todd’s support enables Sarah’s career as a successful politician, author, and pundit, as well as her family life. She says, “He’s my helpmate, he’s the most common-sense advisor I could ever ask for” (Baltazzi, 2010h). She describes the length of their commitment to each other and the variety of life experiences they have shared.

Todd and I have grown up together. Teenage kids coming together, falling in love, getting married, having five kids—lots of ups and downs in our life. Tragedies and triumphs. And he’s been by my side through it all. I couldn’t have done it all without him. (Baltazzi, 2010g)

Throughout the good and bad, Todd has been “by her side,” supporting her. As Sarah reflects on her experiences throughout *Sarah Palin’s Alaska*, she expresses her appreciation for Todd’s companionship. “The guy who’s been by my side through all these adventures plus many more than what you saw, for thirty years now, is Todd. Nobody that I would rather have by my side” (Baltazzi, 2010a). Todd has always been “by her side,” supporting and encouraging her, and she frames his help as not merely secondary, but indispensable.

Sarah’s more egalitarian relationship with Todd enables her public achievements by freeing her from the sole obligation of caring for the home and family. As Sarah says, “Normally we hunt together, but this year Todd and I split the hunting and gathering duties” (Baltazzi, 2010f). In *Sarah Palin’s Alaska* Sarah frequently frames hunting as necessary to feed

the family, and although conventionally men are hunters and women are gatherers, she challenges such traditionally gendered roles within her marriage (Baltazzi, 2010f).

Just as hunting and providing for the family is not solely Todd's responsibility, caring for the household is not solely Sarah's. In one scene, as Todd lays back and watches Sarah scrub their boat, he asks her, "do you need another brush?" She replies, "You grab a brush, dude!" (Baltazzi, 2010g). Clearly, the Palins share such responsibilities. Evidenced by Todd's teasing tone and Sarah's immediate retort, household cleaning is not simply the wife's obligation.

Raising the children is also a shared endeavor. Sarah and Todd alternate weekends away for hunting so someone will be with the children. While Sarah spends time with all her children and frequently states how much she enjoys mothering, Todd is also seen as a very hands-on father who participates fully in disciplining and nurturing the children. Sarah tells us this is one of her favorite qualities of Todd's. "Todd is like 'Mr. Mom.' He loves kids. That's one of the things that attracted me to him. We both wanted a big family...we both pitch in and do whatever needs to be done to raise this family and raise a household" (Baltazzi, 2010g). In addition to Sarah's characterization, in *Sarah Palin's Alaska* we are frequently shown Todd spending time and playing with the children. He fishes with Track, plays basketball with Piper, and cares lovingly for Trig, the youngest (and down syndrome) child. Hunting, fishing, and athletics are not uncommon activities for a traditional father, although Todd is also described as having a special relationship with his son Trig. When Sarah had doubts about the challenges of raising a special needs child, Todd reassured her, and is shown caring for Trig in a very nurturing role (Palin, 2010a, Baltazzi, 2010).

Alternatively, Sarah is frequently shown to be distracted and busy with work. While she frames her life mainly in terms of motherhood, in *Sarah Palin's Alaska* she spends a significant

amount of time on her Blackberry and is most commonly featured outside of the home—typically with only one of the children at a time. Youngest son Trig very rarely accompanies the family on outings. Sarah is shown to be frequently on the road, Trig is quite young, and many of the Palin's activities are not suited for small children. Sometimes Trig is cared for by his grandparents, but other times he is simply absent, and childcare is not addressed, although we can assume there is additional help. So although Sarah still retains a strong identity as a mother, it is certainly not her only focus; she shares parenting duties with her husband and family and ostensibly has outside help as well.

Palin has altered the Strict Father model to allow the mother to be just as powerful as the father, and emphasizes the importance of the entire family unit bonding together to face the dangerous world. The father alone is not always enough to protect the family. In fact, for Palin, the unity of the entire family—especially the enlarged role of mother—is necessary. As she watches a herd of musk ox, Palin again explains how her Alaskan experiences and connection to the natural world provide her with a unique perspective on the natural importance of family.

If somebody's goin' to come threaten one of the baby musk ox, all the adults surround the baby. The musk ox behavior is fascinating, and in fact, in my last address as governor, I used the example of how they circle and they protect their young. And I thought, I'm probably the only governor in the nation who knows what a musk ox's all about and how applicable I think it is to how we should be as a society...Piper, come, we'll do what the musk ox do—we'll surround you. You get behind us. I'll be the mama musk ox. (Baltazzi, 2010b)

While Lakoff (2002) describes that the role of family protection falls upon the Strict Father, Palin has assigned that duty to not only the mother as well, but the entire family. This is

an adjustment to the traditional Strict Father structure as it allows the mother a greater and more powerful role, especially related to protecting her children from danger. However, it still allows Palin to retain the morality of the Strict Father, in which family responsibility—not government intervention—is expected. Palin explicitly ties this metaphor to her politics because she recognizes the uniqueness of this Alaskan experience, and the insight it has given her as a mother and a Governor.

Because Palin sees her family as one cohesive unit and a source of support, she does not believe it affects her political capability adversely—in fact, she consistently describes family as her source of power. However, perhaps especially because of her support of traditional values, at times she faces public expectations that her family obligations limit her ability to act as a political leader.

During the vice-presidential campaign, people would ask me how could I expect to balance it all if we won the White House. I thought, *they really don't get it. I don't balance anything. We do it together...* And by the way, Ms. Reporter, I assume you're asking all male candidates the same question. (Palin, 2010a, p. 94)

Palin recognizes the unfair assumption that a mother with young children and a family to care for would not have enough time to lead, when it is expected men can do it all (probably because their wife supports them). Instead, she emphasizes the support provided by her husband Todd as well as her strong connection to family as the justification for her political involvement. Family is not a political liability; it is a source of strength.

In some ways, Sarah's elevated role as a mother and public career woman represent a threat to the traditional role of the mother as focused on the home, and the husband as ultimate family authority and breadwinner. Although she makes an effort to frame their marriage as a

partnership, Sarah holds a great deal of public power. Almost as a counteraction of his potential emasculation by such a powerful wife, Sarah often emphasizes Todd's masculinity in other areas. Adams (2011) explains that in families with nontraditional gender arrangements, gender roles can be enacted in other ways.

Wives with higher occupational status than their husbands may be seen as "gender deviant" and resort to "doing gender" to re-establish the normative family gender order... individuals 'prove' their masculinity or femininity by enacting normative expectations of what it means to be a man or a woman, thus reinforcing the gender status quo. Attempts to do gender may be particularly apparent in families with otherwise non-traditional gender arrangements. (p. 226-227)

Todd's persona as "Mr. Mom" challenges traditional masculine roles, but in other aspects he is portrayed as hyper-masculine, a superhero. Sarah says "he's like superman" (Baltazzi, 2010a) and "Todd's like Captain America—he can do it all!" (Baltazzi, 2010i). Perhaps because the Palin's marriage involves non-traditional gender roles, Sarah frequently bolsters her husband's masculinity. Palin's focus on Todd's masculine accomplishments can be seen as an effort to mediate her fame and success in the public sphere.

Palin often minimizes any characterization of herself as the dominant person in the marriage. Palin may be the political celebrity, but Todd is celebrated as a model of Strict Father morality. Sarah and their children often praise his dedication and hard work. In one instance he is held as the role model for eldest son Track, who hopes to take over the Palin's fishing site, but must first prove to his father that he is capable of following in his footsteps. Track admires his father's exceptional commercial fishing skills and high expectations for his children. "My dad

doesn't baby me at all, or any of us" (Baltazzi, 2010g). Although Sarah is the public figure, Todd still acts as a Strict Father, imparting discipline to his children and leading by example.

Sarah and Todd collaborate on family matters, but individual activities are frequently turned into competitions. The Palin's constant competition goes along with their emphasis on hard work and individual achievement. Lakoff (2002) states that competition is a key part of Strict Father morality. "Competition is a crucial ingredient in such a moral system. It is through competition that we discover who is moral, that is, who has been properly self-disciplined and therefore deserves success, and who is fit enough to survive and even thrive in a difficult world" (p. 68). Competition teaches children morality and the hard work that will grant them success as adults. Sarah tells us she grew up "active and competing" and that's the way she's raising her kids (Baltazzi, 2010h). A leisurely kayaking trip turns into a race between Sarah and Todd, each taunting the other, "Are you tired?" (Baltazzi, 2010h). Ultimately, Todd wins. Piper and Sarah compete with Sarah's brother and his son in a fierce "boys versus girls" gold-mining contest. The cousins both "worked their tails off," but the girls' team won. About the competition, Sarah says, "it seems like our family always ends up doing that" (Baltazzi, 2010b). After a day of fishing, Sara, Todd, and Bristol compete to see who has the best halibut recipe. Todd wins again, and Sarah boasts, "There's something about Todd, with his magical touch on things, that he usually wins the competition" (Baltazzi, 2010h). Indeed, Todd is shown to best Sarah at many competitions, and as much as Palin enjoys competing with her husband, she also seems to enjoy his victories.

When in Homer, Alaska, a man stops Todd and Sarah on the street and asks for a picture. When Sarah agrees, the man stops her and clarifies that he wants the picture with Todd, the four-time champion of the intense Iron Dog snowmobile race. Sarah laughingly replies, "I don't

know if this has ever happened before,” but later describes it as the “highlight of my night.” (Baltazzi, 2010i). While Sarah, former governor and national political figure, is accustomed to the public spotlight and attention, she encourages the admiration being paid to Todd. On a family fishing trip, most of the Palins are unsuccessful, but Todd immediately starts reeling in fish. Sarah jokes, “He’s bringing home the bacon. That’s how it should be” (Baltazzi, 2010i). Sarah supports Todd as a superior fisherman, and seems to gloss over the reality that she makes a significant amount of money for her family—likely much more than her husband. She may be comfortable describing her husband as Mr. Mom, but minimizes that challenge to Strict Father and patriarchal norms by also building him up as a superhero figure that brings home the bacon.

Although Palin often states that her work is accomplished with—not in spite of—her family, at times she acknowledges the time and energy required by her many commitments. For example, she confesses her shock at learning of Bristol’s teen pregnancy, and acknowledges that other obligations, both work and family, prohibited her from spending the time and attention necessary to prevent such a mistake.

Preoccupied with the enormous job of being governor of the nation’s largest state, juggling schedules around Todd’s job fifteen hundred miles away in the North Slope oil fields, saluting (and worrying about) our son’s decision to enlist as an infantryman in the U.S. Army, and busy with our younger kids while wrapping my arms around the fact that we’d soon be joined by our newest family member, Trig, I assumed that Bristol was making only wise decisions while staying with my sister in Anchorage. I kick myself to this day for my selfish assumption. I made a mistake. (2010a, p. 95-96)

In this case, Palin blames herself as a mother for being preoccupied and busy, and for neglecting her oversight of Bristol’s decision-making. Despite this one candid confession, Palin

denies that balancing work and family is an issue, probably because to do so would bolster some conservative criticisms of working mothers. In fact, this situation and Palin's response demonstrates the limitations embodied by her altered Strict Father family. Sarah and Todd share family responsibilities, yet ultimately it is Sarah, as the mother, who assumes the blame for her children's mistakes, because the children are traditionally her responsibility. In the traditional view, when the mother is equal to the father (as in Palin's case) and leaves the home, the responsibilities of child rearing may not be fully met, which undermines the Strict Father model.

This tension is at the heart of Palin's philosophy, in which she praises "mama grizzly" leadership, but does not support a changed view of maternal policies to support their full involvement. Palin's public participation is allowed through her own family's assistance, which continues her Strict Father focus on individual and family responsibility rather than government or institutional support. While the Palin family necessarily altered the Strict Father model to allow for Sarah's political career, her discussion of Bristol's pregnancy becomes an apology for not fully accomplishing her maternal duties, rather than an acknowledgement of the realities faced by a busy working mother. Despite the Palin's self-professed partnership and Todd's support of Sarah's career, Sarah accepts the traditional expectation that the mother bear absolute responsibility for her children. Todd's potential culpability for Bristol's pregnancy is not addressed, nor is any guilt he may have felt as well. Sarah refers to her political career as a "selfish" distraction that prevented her from fulfilling her maternal duties, and seems to offer an apology to those conservatives who may fault her, as the mother, for Bristol's choices.

Ultimately, Palin's modifications to the Strict Father family model provide her with the means to enlarge her public opportunities, but do not remove the association of women with the private sphere, which continues to constrain their efforts. In her view, women are just as capable

as men at enforcing Strict Father morality and participating on the public stage, but their true purpose and priority remains family. This viewpoint is emphasized through her continued focus on conservative motherhood, feminism, and “mama grizzlies.”

Chapter 3: Strict Mother Feminism

While remaining a model of Strict Father morality, the Palin family presents a variation to the traditional family by sharing typically gendered parental responsibilities. This changed family structure not only enables Palin's public work by relieving her from what would traditionally be solely a mother's duty, but also translates directly into her "mama grizzly" political persona. The Strict Father family metaphor is consistently reinforced from Palin's personal family life to her professional image, enhancing her conservative appeal.

Within her own family, to balance any potential challenge to the power of the Strict Father caused by her role as a Strict Mother, Palin highlights her husband's masculinity. This same technique is revealed by Palin's public use of maternal appeals in which she describes mothers as empowered mama grizzlies, but also strengthens traditional assumptions about women's natural priorities and responsibilities—family—and despite her own public successes, supports patriarchal family values. In fact, rather than challenging the stereotype that women belong at home, Palin reinforces it—with the caveat that a liberal government has forced conservative women to enter the public sphere to protect their children's futures. Relying on mythic ideals of motherhood, she manages to both strengthen and challenge expectations that women are naturally suited to the private sphere. This longstanding stereotype becomes justification for her participation, rather than a constraint, and allows Palin to retain her traditional values while increasing opportunities for women like herself to enter the public stage as powerful mothers.

However, Palin (2010a) goes farther than simply presenting herself as a powerful mother; she claims the term feminist—unusual for any female politician, let alone a conservative.

It surprises some people to hear that I consider myself a feminist. I believe both men and women have God-given rights that haven't always been honored by our country's politicians. (p. 139)

The choice to embrace the label feminist is notable both for its uniqueness as well as the implications it suggests. As she attacks liberal feminism and provides a conservative alternative, Palin characterizes a feminist as a strong woman who utilizes power to help her family and protect her children from the threat of liberalism. She praises "mama grizzlies" and encourages women to enter politics; however, there exists an interesting tension between Palin's insistence that feminism contains room for conservative women like herself, and her Strict Father morality that fundamentally limits her ability or desire to challenge the patriarchy of politics. Indeed, conservative feminism represents a curious combination of ideologies that appear to be at odds. Exploring this concept can illuminate tensions faced by conservative female politicians, and as Lakoff (2002) points out, helps engage emerging questions about American politics.

The question of what a conservative feminist is, then, is important first because there are going to be many more of them, and second, because it sheds light on what conservatism is, what feminism is, why feminists have tended to be liberals, and why conservatives are appalled by the classical liberal varieties of feminism. (p.303-304)

In what follows, I explore Palin's presentation of conservative feminism, her criticisms of liberal feminism¹, and her use of maternal appeals. Through the mama grizzly metaphor, Palin is able to publicly act as a powerful mother, but also reinforce the authority of the Strict Father. As such, the significance of the myth of the traditional family is revealed, as well as the role of

¹ To avoid confusion, I use the term liberal feminism as Palin does, though it should be noted that her definition of the term is not in line with most feminist theory. To Palin, liberal feminists are those that she identifies as politically liberal.

women within families and the abilities of those women to engage as political candidates and office-holders.

Conservative feminism

Through her depiction of conservative females—mama grizzlies—as protective mothers and powerful women, Palin introduced what she called an “emerging, conservative, feminist identity” to American politics (Gardner, 2010). “I proudly call myself a conservative feminist. One question liberal feminists would do well to ask themselves is why most American women today reject the label ‘feminist’ (Palin, 2010a, p. 136). Her answer to that question involves a complete reimagining of the meaning of feminism.

Essentially, Palin’s version of conservative feminism identifies the ability of women to exercise power and make changes in their families and communities. This move justifies her use of power on the public stage, and continues to display her altered Strict Father family, in which men and women are equals.

I believe women and men have important differences, but those differences don’t include the ability of women to work just as hard as men (if not harder) and to be just as effective as men (if not more so). I also consider myself a grateful beneficiary of the movement for female equality, particularly Title IX...So I proudly call myself a conservative feminist. (Palin, 2010a, p. 139)

Women can work just as hard as men, and therefore have the same ability to succeed through self-discipline and hard work. Though Palin praises the early woman’s rights movement, which she associates with female equality, she does not recognize contemporary social disadvantages for women. She references past leaders of the woman’s movement such as Susan B. Anthony and Alice Paul, and even includes an excerpt from Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s

“Declaration of Sentiments,” to argue that conservative feminism more closely represents what feminism initially represented—basic equal rights. “Our foremothers in the women’s movement fought hard to gain the acceptance of women’s talents and capabilities as equal to men’s” (Palin, 2010a, p. 140). This equality is now presumed to be widely accepted, and represents the foundation of Palin’s feminism, which she sees as the original intent of the woman’s movement.

This new crop of female leaders represents a return to what the women’s movement originally was. The women’s movement used to be about honoring for women the same God-given rights that our country honored for men. It used to be about dignity and hope. It used to be about respecting women by respecting their choices—whether it is to be a nuclear engineer or stay-at-home mom. (Palin, 2010a, p. 156)

It is unclear if Palin questions why more women are not nuclear engineers, or politicians, for example, but she certainly believes they are capable of doing so, and often reinforces the idea that women are equal to men in intelligence and talent. She lists Abigail Adams as one of her heroes, saying, “She had a brilliant, insightful mind that like so many female minds, played a powerful if indirect role in shaping America” (2010a, p. 110). Palin frequently comments on women’s capacity for intelligence and leadership. For example, in *Sarah Palin’s Alaska*, Sarah and Piper visit an Iditarod sled dog training kennel and the owner explains that one of his best dogs is a female. “She happens to be a girl. I can’t discriminate against 50% of the great dogs, you know?” Palin agrees as he explains that often the dominant alpha dog is a female. She adds, “Because females are the more intelligent ones!” (Baltazzi, 2010d). Palin’s joke illustrates her faith in women as intelligent and capable. Female dogs are just as valuable as the males, and women are just as intelligent (in fact, more intelligent) and hard working as men. There are no natural differences preventing females from exercising Strict Father discipline.

In fact, Palin (2010a) says the ability of women is well established in Alaska, where the strength of female pioneers who “worked, hunted, and pioneered alongside frontier men,” is carried on by their modern counterparts (p. 145). As discussed in the previous chapter, Palin depicts the values of strength and discipline as unavoidable in the demanding environment of Alaska, which she frequently refers to in her description of hard-working women. According to Palin, women work hard in Alaska, because life in the frontier state is tough and demanding. “Maybe it’s because I’m from Alaska (state motto: The Last Frontier), but I have a great reverence for the women of the American frontier. We forget how much the frontier is a part of our national character, even today” (Palin, 2010a, p. 144). Palin tells us the frontier created hardy citizens, and “the frontier also produced a different kind of woman” (2010a, p. 145). Alaskan women are used to working like men, and Palin sees no reason why all women shouldn’t do so as well. As the frontier represents true American values, frontier women represent the essential nature of all American women.

Truth is, mama grizzlies have been with us for a long time. These are the same women who settled the frontier, drove the wagons, ploughed the fields, ran cattle, taught their kids, raised their families—and fought for women’s rights. These women are like America itself: strong and self-sufficient. (p. 128)

The frontier, which is presented as the true bygone America, produced strong women, who are still working hard out of necessity in Alaska. “In my own childhood we grew vegetables out back, warmed our house with the wood we chopped, and hunted much of what we ate” (Palin, 2010a, p. 144). Palin describes women as capable of doing hard, physical labor while raising their families and fighting for their own rights. This implies American women were (and still are) naturally strong and independent, and undermines the definition of feminism

as seeking progress—women already have all the strength and equality they need to succeed. This vision encapsulates Palin’s view of the fundamental American spirit, and her Alaskan identity, which she channels through her “mama grizzlies” metaphor.

In her philosophy, while men and women have equal abilities and obligations to work hard, they also have important differences. According to Palin, women can be strong and capable, yet also appropriately feminine. She credits her Alaskan background with teaching her the value of hard work and the importance of traditional feminine ideals. This conservative feminism is contrasted with an inaccurate stereotype of feminism, in which all liberal feminists reject traditionally feminine ideals and seek equality by eliminating distinctions between masculine and feminine. She conflates equality and sameness, and positions her version of feminism as the only option that allows women to retain their femininity.

Maybe it’s my upbringing in Alaska that leads me to challenge the feminist stereotypes of what a woman ought to be. I grew up in a place and time where women did the same work as men—but were still allowed to be girls. My sisters and I were expected to work just as hard as the boys. We hauled wood to stoke the stove heating our house, we hunted, we fished, and we played sports. But at the same time, we were taught to be proud of the fact that we were girls. (Palin, 2010a p. 139)

Palin portrays liberal feminists as divorced from their essential femininity, and argues that conservative women still appreciate traditional feminine norms. Although women are capable of working equally as hard as men, they are different; they must still be “allowed to be girls.” Palin enacts this image of a strong, yet feminine woman. She writes, “There was a time for dressing up, paying the flute in the band, and doing some traditionally ‘girly’ things—and there was a time for getting into dirt clod fights” (Palin, 2010a, p. 139). Importantly for Palin,

while a conservative feminist may be powerful and hard working, she is still “girly.” In this case, rather than holding her back or diminishing her abilities, femininity is a source of power.

This “feminine” version of feminism resonates with conservatives; for example, Janice Crouse (2009) attacks previous feminists in her praise of Palin. “Palin illustrates that a woman can be feminine while being a strong, smart leader. Sarah Palin’s feminine appearance, charm, and rhetoric transformed the dowdy image of female leadership a la Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, Madeleine Albright, or Janet Reno” (para.4). Liberal feminists are portrayed as unwomanly and unattractive, and their complex challenges to gender roles and expectations of feminine beauty are oversimplified in order to more easily dismiss their claims. Palin, by comparison is praised for her feminine image, and is considered a more legitimate female leader as a result. Her conservative version of feminism is less threatening to gendered expectations of femininity because it embraces traditional feminine ideals such as physical appearance and charm as a source of power, rather than criticizing the patriarchy’s tendency to evaluate women solely on their appearance (Wolf, 2002).

Anti-woman liberal feminism

Palin is especially critical of what she labels “liberal” feminism, which challenges the natural moral order of the Strict Father family and therefore represents a prime enemy of conservatism. In her view, liberal feminism’s focus on discrimination actually hurts women by treating them as helpless and in need of government or social assistance. Related to the values of strength and self-reliance that conservatives consistently praise as the path to success, Palin (2010a) condemns liberal feminism for portraying women as weak and unable to help themselves. “In the new feminist version of America, women are perceived as constant victims of beatings by their husbands, date rape by their boyfriends, and self-induced starvation of

society as a whole” (p. 141-142). She mocks the possibility of widespread social problems that harm and oppress women, and suggests women are stronger than feminists portray them to be through their focus on such issues. Palin (2010a) writes, “somewhere along the line feminism went from being pro-woman to being effectively anti-woman” (p.140), and “at some point feminism began to be about emphasizing women as victims” (p. 141). Problems afflicting American women are described as exaggerated by liberal feminists, who treat women as passive victims, rather than as actors in their own lives. Within the context of Strict Father morality, this portrayal of liberal feminisms as weakening women is especially hazardous, because strength and self-reliance are the most important qualities in conservative philosophy.

The antagonism between Palin and the liberal feminism she attacks is evident; she likewise finds herself scorned by many liberal feminists, and resents their reaction. “Today’s self-proclaimed feminists have (more than once) accused me of not being a ‘real woman’ because I don’t share their leftist views.” (Palin, 2010a, p. 136). She asks, “What kind of feminist is it who declares that a diversity of political opinion among women (but not men!) is somehow ‘selfish’? And what kind of advocate for women is it who laments the success of female political candidates?” (Palin, 2010a, p.137). Palin believes the idea that only liberal women can be “real” women or feminists is actually sexist, and argues that feminism needs to contain room for various opinions, including conservatism. “No single group can speak for all women any more than a single group can speak for all men. To suggest otherwise is no less than old-fashioned sexism” (Palin, 2010a, p. 138). Rather than rejecting feminism, she argues for her inclusion, and the inclusion of other conservative voices. This choice is unique, in that rather than framing the longstanding debate in terms of feminism versus conservatism, or structural

versus individual change, she says that feminism and conservatism can be the same thing—that individual efforts alone are needed to help women.

This redefinition of feminism attempts to co-opt the meaning of the word, and minimize the power and ideology it represents. According to Schreiber (2008), conservative female activism seeks to “challenge the notion that organized feminist groups like NOW are the ones that know what women want. And their activism has had, and continues to have, very real political consequences” (p. 13). By calling herself a feminist, Palin challenges the privilege of liberal feminists to speak on behalf of women’s issues, and positions herself as a different kind of advocate for women. “In the name of liberating women, modern feminism has wrapped us up in a one-size-fits-all straitjacket of political correctness” (Palin, 2010a, p. 136). To Palin, feminism should leave room for alternative, even oppositional points of view in order to fully represent women, and rather than fighting for women’s complete social equality, she believes feminism should celebrate the idea that women are already empowered.

Indeed, for Palin, a feminist is simply a powerful woman who relies solely on individual effort, and she supports “the right of strong, accomplished women who just happen to believe in the sanctity of life to call themselves ‘feminists’” (Palin, 2010a, p. 158). By amending the complex ideals of feminism to refer only to strong individual women, Palin heightens the need for individual women like herself in public, rather than directly defying traditional conservative family values that may not support such activism. Her participation is thus not a challenge to conservatism; it is a challenge to liberal feminism, a typical conservative adversary.

Mama Grizzlies

The key to Palin’s conservative feminism is the maternal persona she adopts and offers to other women: the fierce mama grizzly. She initially introduced this concept in a speech given to

the Susan B. Anthony List pro-life group that was later incorporated into a popular campaign advertisement, and this metaphor continues to be a major part of Palin's rhetoric (Palin, 2010b). Through the "mama grizzly" metaphor Palin utilizes the power of maternal appeals, which have proven successful for past female activists (Tonn, 1996; Crittenden, 2001; Hayden, 2003); it also allows her to capitalize on traditional conceptions of motherhood and the ideology of the Strict Father family. As Crittenden (2001) explains, motherhood can be extremely useful for gaining moral authority. "In the United States, motherhood is as American as apple pie. No institution is more sacrosanct; no figure is praised more fulsomely" (p. 1-2). Instead of laboring under the discourse of motherhood as a confining, feminine role and out of place in politics, Palin relies on maternal appeals to justify her and other fellow female candidates' involvement and toughness in the context of protecting her "children"—the American public. Just as she acts as a Strict Mother within her family, protecting the children and providing them with Strict Father discipline, she uses her political position to accomplish the same tasks.

While this tactic has a long history, Palin is the first to extend the concept of maternity to a grizzly bear, an especially fierce (non-human) creature. She writes, "Grizzly bears—mamas or otherwise—are beautiful, ferocious, serious-as-a-heart-attack creatures. When you come upon one, you don't give her a hug. You tread lightly. Because when the ones she loves are threatened, she rises up" (Palin, 2010a, p.127). By taking on the mama grizzly persona, Palin is able to enact an extremely aggressive stance. Tonn (1996) explains, "as mothers in myth, slave mothers, and even animal mothers remind us, maternal love entails the fierce protection of children, often at any cost" (p. 3). Although female politicians must be perceived as tough, they are also expected to be feminine. Motherhood is one such female-identified role that encapsulates both, and Palin utilizes it to her advantage. The mama grizzly as a metaphor works

particularly well for Palin because it encapsulates her Alaskan frontier image, the natural power of a grizzly bear, and the expected role of mothers as fiercely protective of children. Often, Palin emphasizes that mama grizzlies are ferocious and powerful.

Here in Alaska, I always think of the mama grizzly bears that rise up on their hind legs when somebody's comin' to attack their cubs, to do something adverse toward their cubs.

Ya thought pit bulls were tough! Well, ya don't wanna mess with the mama grizzlies.

(Palin, 2010b)

This concept of powerful women who take care of their families without outside assistance resonates with Palin's definition of feminism. She explains that "mama grizzlies reject the notion of women as victims," and indeed a grizzly bear is certainly not weak or helpless (2010a, p. 131). Also, these women are not just any grizzly bear, but a "mama," who would be justified in—and ultimately expected to—take a very aggressive position to protect her "cubs." In another circumstance, such a forceful metaphor might be perceived as overly masculine, but expectations of motherhood serve to minimize that threat (Tonn, 1996). Mothers are known to do anything to protect their children, and Palin uses this ideal to extend the role of protective mothering to politics.

The idea of a mama grizzly reinforces the idea that women are more naturally suited to protecting children. By comparing "common-sense conservative women" defending their children to a grizzly bear defending her cubs, Palin bolsters her common-sense, "regular American" rhetoric. Bears do not need specialized training, expert advice, or scientific evidence to understand how to best protect their children, and it is implied that neither do mothers. The instinct is natural and animalistic, which is another advantage of the grizzly metaphor. Palin (2010b) explains, "it seems like it's kind of a mom awakening in the last year and a half, where

women are rising up and saying, 'no, we've had enough already.' Because moms kinda just know when something's wrong." Palin's maternal instincts tell her something's wrong, and she needs no other proof. The notion of a natural form of motherhood is often used to support traditional family values, which as Stearney (1994) points out, obscures the gendered nature of families and women's subordination within them.

The assumption that this is women's "natural" role has been predominant in a decade influenced by conservative leaders. The result has been a new focus on the "family" as the warrant for political and social reform. However, the danger in focusing on the family was the lack of discussion of power within families, or the obscuring of women's oppression within these social arrangements. (p. 150)

In Palin's championing of mama grizzlies, women's unique perspective and special talents—such as mothering—are valued skills that should be brought to the public sphere. Not only are women capable of working just as hard as men, through their essential nature and experiences as mothers, they bring special gifts and abilities to public office that men cannot. Mama grizzlies are not human mothers, but animals, which enhances the natural essence of their involvement, and diminishes questions of personal ambition. A grizzly bear has no political motivation; she cares for her cubs out of natural instinct, which Palin relies on often. This metaphor empowers women to feel they already have the natural instincts to protect their children, and resonates with public expectations about the natural state of motherhood. "It makes sense that moms would be at the forefront of the great American awakening we're experiencing. Moms can be counted on to fight for their children's future" (Palin, 2010a, p.129). Palin portrays motherhood and politics as a natural fit and extension of the role of the Strict Mother.

Palin (2010a) believes women's unique perspective makes them excellent politicians.

For more than 150 years the women's movement in America has been advocating for more women in public office—and they've been right! Women have a unique perspective. Typically, they are less ambitious for superficial power than men and more focused on providing for the needs of others. I think we appreciate, more than some men, the fullness of American life, everything from raising decent kids to protecting our national security. If I do say so myself, most women have the stamina for endless multitasking and the ability to bring about consensus on tough issues. And we're not afraid to work hard and get our hands dirty. We're busy enough to know that time must be spent efficiently; in fact, we're too busy to waste time with typical political games and power struggles. (Palin, 2010a, p. 132)

Rather than arguing women's inherent equality, this approach bases women's political participation on their differences from men, their maternal instincts and "natural" selflessness.

Palin argues that although women might not want political power for its own sake, which is not traditionally a female priority, they must get involved for the sake of their children. In *America By Heart* Palin explains her own experiences entering local Wasilla, Alaska politics as a young mother. "All I wanted to do was lend a hand in my community, trying to help solve some day-to-day problems that directly affected my family, friends, and neighbors" (p. 129). Palin did not originally entertain lofty political goals; she only wanted to help her community and family. This description of political involvement as starting with addressing small, daily, problems encourages other women to get involved for the purpose of helping their families, not for a political career. Atal (2010) explains that mama grizzlies have a "narrow view of the spheres open to female interest and achievement. Their public life has a self-described conservative goal: to protect their vision of domestic life. A political career, so they say, is a means rather than an

end.” These conservative mothers have special, selfless motivations for entering politics: to protect their children and their country.

Whereas conservative men previously managed to protect the traditional family, Palin suggests that the current political climate so threatens Strict Father morality and children’s future opportunities to succeed, that the entire family, including concerned mothers, is needed to participate in the fight. Conservative female politicians do not seek to replace the role occupied by conservative men; they feel compelled to help defend the traditional family and Strict Father morality, which is threatened by an out-of-control liberal government. While Palin insists that mama grizzlies belong in politics, it becomes clear that mothers retain their other responsibilities and remain associated primarily with family. Female politicians serve to fulfill the nurturing, supportive role of a mother, both in and outside of the home. She cites concern about government spending and family values as the cause of women contemplating public office when they would never have normally considered it, and would have preferred to focus on raising their families.

In other times, most women with small children to take care of and bills to pay—women like South Dakota’s Kristi Noem (three kids) or New Hampshire’s Kelly Ayotte (a five-year-old and a two-year-old)—may have thought they should leave politics to others. But these days, the stakes are so high—the future we want for our kids and grandkids is so threatened—that we feel we have no choice but to get involved. (Palin, 2010a, p. 129)

By addressing traditional female priorities of raising a family and caring for children, and giving examples of female politicians with small children—women who would traditionally focus firstly on their children—she frames political involvement as an extension of the mothering role. Women had “no choice” but to get involved for their children’s sakes to oppose

the actions of a dangerous liberal government. She characterizes the decision to enter politics as entirely different from a man's; it appears to be a natural sphere of influence available to men, but one that women enter purely out of necessity, not desire. This characterization resonates with the traditional view of women as focused in the private sphere and might appeal to conservative women reluctant to challenge traditional family values and gender roles.

This strategy works particularly well for Palin, who bases much of her political persona on family values and her experiences with her own husband and children. Just as Sarah and Todd partner in instilling Strict Father discipline in their home, Sarah has entered politics as a Strict Mother for the sake of her children's future. She embraces her traditional role as a mother in order to minimize the threat to family values that might occur as women leave the home and enter the public, political sphere. "Self-described feminists talk a lot about how family and children hold women back and limit their professional choices...but in my case, precisely the opposite is true" (Palin, 2010a, p. 93). In Palin's conservative feminism, family is an inspiration, the reason for public participation, not the burden she says liberal feminists consider it to be. Palin (2010a) shares columnist Mary Kate Cary's opinion that as in Betty Friedan's best-selling feminist book *The Feminine Mystique*, women are identifying a "problem that has no name," which in this case is out of control government spending. "Those women have also asked the question "Is this all? —and not liking the answer, they are running for office" (p. 132). While Friedan (2001) encouraged women to seek employment outside the home for their personal fulfillment, because of the extreme nature of the threat to traditional values, Palin encourages women to leave the home for the sake of their families, a selfless act.

The "mama grizzly" label has stuck in the public mind, and is now part of political discourse, used by pundits and politicians in addition to Palin herself. It works well for her

politically—she is able to navigate the contradictions facing conservative woman in the public sphere, and remains quite popular among conservatives. This metaphor has allowed Palin to base her politics on her family values and traditional female role, as well as demonstrate an appropriate level of assertiveness without unsexing herself. Janice Crouse (2009) of Concerned Women for America specifically praised Palin for demonstrating a tough, yet feminine example, the “ideal for a vast number of American women” (para. 6).

However, because Palin’s new conservative feminist bases her identity foremost on her family, and uses her power to support traditional family values, she reinforces patriarchal ideals of motherhood and femininity. In fact, Palin’s focus on motherhood and *mama grizzlies* reveals a key tension in her position. She describes her husband Todd, as equally responsible for caring for the children and maintaining the family, yet she defines women as the more natural, instinctive caregivers of children. Although Todd is “Mr. Mom,” he is not a “*mama grizzly*.” It seems that women can work as hard as men, but men cannot nurture as well as women—they lack the natural instinct and ability. This tension exposes the limitations of Palin’s modified Strict Father family, in which women should take on more public responsibilities, but ultimately remain responsibility for their private sphere duties as well. Todd provides the necessary support to allow Palin’s public career, but rather than explaining how she manages to balance her family and work, she simply sidesteps the issue that women—more than men—must make arrangements to hold a public career, and continues to describe children as primarily the mother’s natural responsibility. As she frames family responsibility as based within individual families, it makes sense that she refuses to address the needs of other women, which are simply not her concern.

Chapter 4: The Politics of Family

For conservatives, family is the building block of society, the cause of—and solution to—social problems. As Lakoff (2002) says, “The family, conservatives understand well, is the basis of all morality, all social arrangements, and all politics” (p. 225). Sarah Palin’s family, and especially her role as a mother, is an enormous part of her public image and political rhetoric. However, the family values championed by Palin are not simply metaphorical. Both symbolically and explicitly, family values are at the heart of her politics. Women’s roles within these families, then, are of great importance, for policies based on Strict Father family values that support gendered inequalities are likely to reproduce such inequalities on the political level.

As discussed previously, Sarah Palin assumes a more powerful position within her family, but minimizes that challenge to traditional gender norms by building up the masculinity and power of her husband. Similarly, Palin extends her powerful maternal persona to the public, but uses this position to reinforce the morality of the Strict Father. As a *mama grizzly*, she is able to navigate the tension of supporting Strict Father family values with her words and policies while implicitly challenging them with her presence as a non-traditional woman in the public sphere. This strategy works well for her as an individual, but she problematically uses the public power enabled by her more egalitarian marriage and family to reinforce traditional family ideals that effectively limit women as a group.

In many ways, Palin’s family values rhetoric reveals the contradiction within her description of motherhood and *mama grizzlies*; her own modified family structure is entirely necessary for her public success, yet she denies this need in her support of traditional “family values” and rejects the existence of social and cultural problems that unfairly hinder women. Despite her usage of the term feminism, Palin does not acknowledge the domination of

masculinity, and retains the Strict Father morality that rejects social causes for women's subordination and relies on the ability of individuals to guarantee their own success. Palin's version of conservative feminism may create opportunities for herself and other female conservative politicians, but cannot be considered a real challenge to the hegemonic masculinity of politics because it retains a Strict Father morality that denies the patriarchal power structure it supports. In fact, as I will illustrate below, the implications of Palin's conservative feminist rhetoric are not at all feminist for at least two reasons: (1) she generally supports individual solutions to social problems, which translates into an opposition of feminisms' focus on the need for structural changes to help women and (2) she reinforces oppressive views of motherhood.

To explain in which ways Palin's political success limits women's opportunities in the public sphere, I explore the family values she publicly advocates. First, I present Palin's discussion of traditional family values to illustrate that instead of supporting social or structural change, Palin places family as the cause of, and solution to, social problems. Then, I argue that such a focus on individual change has important implications for the limitations of conservative feminism, namely its inability and refusal to help women as a disadvantaged group. Lastly, I argue that Palin's brand of family values reinforce traditional views of motherhood that obligate women to selflessly sacrifice personal fulfillment for the good of society. Therefore, Sarah Palin acting as a Strict Mother does not represent feminism, but a confining definition of femininity and motherhood, which serves to disadvantage all women, even as it allows tokenistic success for Palin.

Private family responsibility

The familiar American myth of the traditional family is at the heart of conservative philosophy, and as such Palin emphasizes the importance of this family in solving major social

issues such as poverty and crime, and argues for the value of preserving the traditional family form to guarantee a healthy nation and America's continued exceptionalism. In her book *America by Heart: Reflections on Family, Faith, & Flag*, as the title suggests, family is key. Instead of addressing structural problems, Palin emphasizes Strict Father morality, once again placing the focus on individual families, rather than larger social issues. This general emphasis on family as a political issue provides an important context for the discussions to follow; Palin's focus on the traditional family as the centerpiece of her rhetoric demonstrates the importance of the politics of the family, and also provides a background for understanding how such politics affect women in particular.

Palin (2010a) explicitly states the importance of family cannot be overstated, and is in her view, supported only by conservatives.

Families matter. This was something that our Founders took for granted, but it's a truth we commonsense conservatives are increasingly forced to defend these days. After all, the damage done to the American family by widespread divorce and children without fathers is relatively recent in our history. (p. 113-114)

When Palin says families matter, she means *traditional* families matter, that they are the only form of family that can guarantee personal and social success for America. Her description of the established nature of conservative family values suggests any changes to this form are relatively recent. As Coontz (1992) states, this idyllic family is not based in historical fact as much as powerful mythology. However, Palin believes she and other conservatives recognize the fundamental social benefits granted by this family, and are forced to defend its time-tested utility because of recent challenges made to this ideal by liberals. Alternatives such as divorce

and single-mother families, along with any other variation on the traditional family do not work in Palin's (2010a) view.

The left wants us to believe that any grouping we choose to call a family is worthy of the name, that it doesn't matter if children are raised by two loving parents or are shipped off to virtual full-time day care, and that divorce has no effect on children's quality of life. But we now know that commonsense objections to these radical ideas are not based on close-minded prejudice. When it comes to raising good citizens, all "lifestyle" choices are *not* equal. (p. 117)

According to Palin, liberals want to widen the definition of family to include other "lifestyle choices," and have accused conservatives of being narrow-minded and discriminatory because of their reluctance to accept alternative family forms. Palin argues these objections to other families are actually based on the damage caused by the recent loss of the traditional family. She says the left supports "full-time day care" and divorce as effective family choices, which she frames as radical ideas in contrast to her own "commonsense objections."

To Palin, while traditional families are the backbone of American society, liberals seek to devalue that structure in favor of whatever form best suits them, and then expect government to do the job of families. "At the same time they are busy downplaying the importance of the traditional family, liberals are busy justifying expanding government in the name of 'the children'" (Palin 2010a, p. 123). In her view, liberals discount the value of traditional families, but when their alternative families fail to provide for or protect children sufficiently, they expect government to step in and fill that role. Palin (2010a) describes how her husband instructs their children on the path to success. "My husband, Todd, sums up the spirit of initiative and hard work behind the American dream when he repeats to our children the old adage: 'God helps

those who help themselves” (p. 83). Families must not expect government to help them—their ability to work hard and maintain discipline will be passed from parent to child through traditional family values. This echoes the mantra of personal responsibility given by the Strict Father and advocates for family solutions rather than governmental action. Instead of an over-reaching, intrusive government giving out “free lunches,” citizens must rely on the ability of the traditional family to guarantee success.

For Palin, the proof that traditional families are the correct family form is seen through the failings of alternative families. The decline in traditional families, and therefore personal responsibility, is blamed for poverty, violent crime, and the disastrous aftermath of Hurricane Katrina—especially for minority groups. According to James Wilson, whom Palin (2010a) cites, “Family disorganization is more important than either race or income in explaining violent crime...To avoid poverty, do three things: finish high school, marry before having a child, and produce the child after you are twenty years old” (p.119). In other words, the lack of a traditional family structure can lead to violent crime and poverty—utter social decline. In order to be successful, most importantly, follow the guidelines given through the traditional family. Wilson’s findings show a connection between family organization and poverty, but do not take into consideration any larger social or structural causes. Despite someone’s circumstance, if they follow the family values line and work hard enough, they will be rewarded.

Even natural disasters are mitigated by a strong family structure according to Palin (2010a), who blames declining families for dependent, helpless communities. “Hurricane Katrina revealed something other than government incompetence. It revealed a population of Americans dependent upon government and incapacitated by the destruction of the American family” (p.114). She cites the high rates of children born to single mothers in New Orleans as

the distinguishing factor that led to their vulnerability to the hurricane's destruction, and believes this to be the reason residents of New Orleans had the hardest time recovering among other Americans along the coast. "They all had the same federal government and the same president. What was the difference? In many cases, the difference was strong, intact families—the families our Founders deemed essential to the success of our republic" (p. 115). The breakdown of families leads to a loss of Strict Father values, and an inability to rely on hard work and determination. If the government will take care of those who have not put in such efforts, then citizens become dependent and helpless. Such citizens are vulnerable to hurricanes or any other event in which they expect the government to fulfill the role that family should have.

Throughout Palin's discussion of traditional families, she argues that the declining morality found within America's liberalized families has spread to the national level, causing an irresponsible government and a large population of helpless, unmotivated citizens. As a politician, she consistently advocates for the traditional family and Strict Father morality instead of governmental or social solutions. This perspective underscores one reason that Palin's conservative feminism is actually completely opposed to the original meaning of feminism, which I will discuss next.

Feminism and individualism

Palin believes that family responsibility, not government intervention, is responsible for solving our nation's social problems and therefore that individual women, not feminist structural change, are responsible for helping women succeed; this viewpoint stands in direct contrast to most feminist philosophy. As one feminist theorist, bell hooks (1984) explains, feminism as a social movement needs to focus not on individual equality with men, but on "systems of domination" (p. 31).

The foundation of future feminist struggle must be solidly based on a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression. Without challenging and changing these philosophical structures, no feminist reforms will have a long range impact. Consequently, it is now necessary for advocates of feminism to collectively acknowledge that our struggle cannot be defined as a movement to gain social equality with men...so that feminism will not be continually co-opted to serve the opportunistic ends of special interest groups. (hooks, 1984, p. 31)

The work done by most feminist groups reflects such an insistence on working to end cultural and social oppressions for all women, not individual women finding success within the confines of patriarchy. For example, take prominent feminist organization, The National Organization for Women's mission:

Since its founding in 1966, NOW's goal has been to take action to bring about equality for all women. NOW works to eliminate discrimination and harassment in the workplace, schools, the justice system, and all other sectors of society; secure abortion, birth control and reproductive rights for all women; end all forms of violence against women; eradicate racism, sexism and homophobia; and promote equality and justice in our society.

Palin opposes or ignores all these priorities. Rather than working to end systemic and structural problems that subordinate women as a group, she co-opts the concept of feminism for her own purposes. As McCarver (2011) points out, feminist efforts toward systemic change are often resisted by conservative ideals of individual effort and personal responsibility.

Feminism's recognition of oppression prompts theoretical discussion, activism, and awareness surrounding the need for change at the structural and social level. However,

these efforts often conflict with broader and widely held cultural narratives involving individual autonomy, equality, personal responsibility, and ‘against-all-odds’ success. (p. 36)

Instead of focusing on opportunities for all women, Palin encourages individual women to exercise their equal rights and urges individual families to take responsibility for their situation alone. In her view, traditional family values are the appropriate and most effective source of social change, and structural changes are not only unnecessary, but immoral.

As a result, Palin carefully distinguishes herself from the feminist concept that women face gendered disadvantages, and changes to the social structure are needed in order to achieve full equality. Although Palin does not explicitly deny systemic subordination, she frequently minimizes such concerns and focuses instead on women’s abilities. Palin believes that because women have basic equal rights—to employment, to education, to civil rights—they have gained equality to men, if they choose to work hard and succeed through their own merits. In fact, according to Palin (2010a), the original women’s movement only sought to empower women with equal rights. “They didn’t believe that men were oppressors, women were victims, and unborn children merely ‘personal choices’” (p.141). She believes that focusing any attention on discrimination actually does women a disservice, because it implies they are weak and in need of outside assistance.

The original feminists were interested in securing equal rights and opportunity for women in a man’s world. But at some point feminism began to be about emphasizing women as victims. Instead of being seen as fully capable of taking care of ourselves, we began to be portrayed as in constant need of protection. (Palin, 2010a, p. 141)

Framing women as victimized is unacceptable in Palin's Strict Father morality, in which personal strength is the most moral and valuable quality. Not only are women able to help themselves, but they—not the government or society—are responsible to do so. As Palin (2010a) writes,

But at some point the message of the women's movement came to be one that seemed designed to support not independence for women, but dependence...on government. In short, the message of feminism became 'No, we can't—at least not unless government helps.' (p. 142)

Palin's conservative feminism celebrates women's independence and rejects the notion of women as disempowered or in any way disadvantaged. However, because a conservative "feminist" does not recognize gender stereotypes as culturally or socially powerful, she effectively undermines the very basis of most feminist thought and activism.

Palin occasionally acknowledges sexism, which she frames as the small-mindedness of individual people, but does not acknowledge that sexism based in social stereotypes interferes with women's ability to achieve; such thinking suggests that as a group, women are disadvantaged and unable to rise simply due to their own abilities and determination alone. Conservative feminists gain power by acknowledging the impact sex discrimination has on their efforts, but addressing it individually. Such difficulties are to be overcome through Strict Father values: hard work and self-reliance. In *America By Heart* Palin praises Crystal Brilliant Snow Jenne, the first woman to run for Alaska's Territorial House of Representatives. Jenne didn't consider herself a "victim of anti-female bias" even though Palin's own description suggests she faced significant sex discrimination. Palin (2010a) quotes Jenne's words, "Far be it from me to cramp the boys' style! I feel justly proud that these men all know I shall neither weep nor faint if

they notify me that my presence is unwelcome” (p. 149). Even in the face of discrimination and unfair treatment, Jenne (and Palin) revel in their toughness and individual ability to work through challenges, and deny the need for systemic change.

For example, Palin identifies the sexism inherent to questions about her ability to balance political duties and family during the 2008 presidential election, asking “and, by the way, Ms. Reporter, I assume you’re asking all male candidates this same question” (2010a, p. 94). As Palin points out, such questions are not posed to men, because they are not assumed to be the primary caregivers of children. However, while she recognizes the traditional expectation that mothers belong at home with their children, she simply denies that such stereotypes negatively affect her.

When I was tapped for the Republican vice-presidential nomination I got a lot of quite frankly, sexist criticism for pursuing the White House while I had a family with small children. Some of it came from conservatives who didn’t think a woman had any business being on the campaign trail with young children. I’m used to that; I’ve heard it since I first entered politics two decades ago. (Palin, 2010a, p. 130)

To Palin, obligations of family and related social disadvantages are not to be addressed politically, but handled individually or within the family. Rather than acknowledging how issues of gender unjustly affect her, she focuses on her own abilities, which in the Strict Father view, are the only tools she needs. Sexism on a structural level would require cultural or governmental redress, but sexism on an individual level can be ignored or independently overcome by strong women. However, as hooks (1984) explains, denying the importance of eradicating the “underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression,” ensures that no lasting changes or significant improvements in the lives of women will occur.

Mama Grizzly motherhood

Not only does Palin's focus on family values emphasize women's individual responsibility in the face of structural discrimination, her mama grizzly discourse celebrates the idea of motherhood as selfless and reinforces women's association with the private sphere. As argued earlier, a mama grizzly bases her public participation on her natural maternal instincts and desire to protect her children. She fights selflessly for the interests of children, thereby acting as an appropriate Strict Mother and guardian of family values. As a public figure herself, Palin does not directly state that women belong only in the private sphere, yet she idealizes the traditional family and women's "natural" maternal priorities, which has nearly the same result. The discourse of family values and especially the enactment of the mama grizzly persona attach women to the private sphere, even as they engage in public. As I will show, the discussion of family values winds up being a critique of motherhood and women who abandon their traditional priorities. This is not expressly stated by Palin, and allows her to claim to support women's equality, and even to claim the term feminism, while indirectly enforcing traditional values that do just the opposite.

As noted above, the use of maternal appeals is not a new rhetorical development—many women have successfully utilized them in the past, usually to support progressive policies and expanded opportunities for women. "Maternal selflessness has endowed mothers with a unique moral authority, which in the past has been used to promote temperance, maternal and child health, kindergartens, a more lenient juvenile system, and most recently, to combat drunk driving and lax gun controls" (Crittenden, 2001, p. 1-2). However, as Hayden (2003) points out, scholars are divided upon the ability of maternal appeals to create meaningful change to women's identities as individuals and as mothers.

The frequency with which activists use maternal appeals suggests that they are both powerful and effective, yet scholarly assessment varies from generally positive to deeply critical. One way to explain this discrepancy is to consider maternal appeals in terms of the larger family structures within which they are embedded. (p. 196)

The position of the mother within her family has a great deal to do with how her public efforts are received, and what her activism accomplishes. When liberal women enter the public sphere to demand changes to Strict Father policies, they challenge his authority. When conservative women like Palin enter the public sphere and join conservative men in their support of the Strict Father, they challenge the limited role of the mother as a private citizen, but do not challenge the authority of the Strict Father—or patriarchy. As such, the power of the Strict Father remains intact, with the added authority and support of the Strict Mother. The Strict Mother only claims to present a new form of feminism, but instead engages standard conservative philosophy, just presented by a woman—a mama. For this reason, “the Grizzlies are more appropriately thought of as ‘feminine conservatives’ than ‘conservative feminists’” (Atal, 2010). When women participate in obscuring gender issues it can be even more powerful. After all, if women themselves support the conservative focus on family values, it can moderate criticism that such policies disadvantage women. Therefore, the presence of the mama grizzly actually contributes to the patriarchy that disadvantages female politicians, who are left to battle unfair gendered expectations with only their individual efforts to combat systematic subordination.

As shown previously, Palin builds her public image upon her family, through her public enactment of Strict Father morality, the mama grizzly persona, and frequent references to the traditional family, which she describes as empowering and even feminist. “Self-described

feminists talk a lot about how family and children hold women back and limit their professional choices...but in my case, precisely the opposite is true” (Palin, 2010a, p. 93). She says motherhood is her greatest inspiration, and minimizes the gendered challenges she faces as both a busy political celebrity and mother of five.

Far from holding me back, my family is my main motivation. It’s the source of my energy as well as my optimism about America. During the vice-presidential campaign, people would ask me how I could expect to balance it all if we won the White House. I thought, *They really don’t get it. I don’t balance anything. We do it together.* (Palin, 2010a, p. 94)

The public’s interest in Palin’s ability to “balance it all” demonstrates the unique challenges faced by female candidates that stem from women’s traditional association with private family concerns. It is assumed that a mother of five children would be too preoccupied with her family to sufficiently handle a political career—once again, not an issue for male candidates. Rather than working to dismantle such unfair cultural expectations, Palin embraces her maternal role and publicly supports the traditional view of family, in which a woman’s first priority is to her children and family.

Janice Shaw Crouse (2009) of Concerned Women for America, praises Palin as a model of conservative womanhood, and emphasizes the importance of Palin’s traditional family priorities. She says, “Palin illustrates that a woman can be happily married, have children, and maintain her family priorities while pursuing a demanding career” (para. 5). For conservatives like Crouse and Palin, a woman’s career is acceptable only if family responsibilities take precedence. Motherhood, either literally or figuratively, is the reason for her political involvement and the basis for her brand of conservatism. In this conservative philosophy,

mothers are the sustaining force behind family values, and family values are the solution to our nation's problems, which creates room for women like Palin to utilize their family expertise to speak as a conservative leader, but places oppressive views of motherhood on women at large.

On the other hand, liberal feminists have frequently challenged conservative patriarchal depictions of motherhood, which tend to be extremely limiting of women's other opportunities.

One of the first tasks of the contemporary feminist movement was to extricate motherhood from its moorings as a "natural" desire on the part of women and understand it instead as a socially constructed and historically, economically, and socially specific experience. Feminist theorists between 1963 and the early 1980's defined and developed the idea that motherhood is a 'myth', which, as constructed by patriarchy, has functioned to romanticize and idealize the experience of mothering and to make motherhood a compulsory role. (Stearney, 1994, p. 148)

While conservatives like Palin emphasize the natural state of traditional motherhood and the traditional family, feminists point out that the power imbalance within such a family often goes ignored. Stearney (1994) describes that feminists have urged a "proliferation of family forms and more public support for women's work in the home as important steps away from the institution of motherhood and toward a true valuing of mothering" (p.150). Palin, alternatively, continues to privilege the traditional family and denies the need to focus on obstacles created by women's roles within those families.

Conservatives establish family as the key to private success and a prosperous nation, which leads them to seek the causes weakening American families. Their blame frequently rests on broad progressive cultural changes that have taken place in America in recent decades, often linked to the changing place of women in our society encouraged by liberals and especially by

feminism (Adams, 2011). The feminist movement worked to grant women greater freedom and increased opportunity outside the home (Rosen, 2000), but also created a backlash among those conservatives who believe efforts to free women from the entire burden of caretaking a home and family are particularly to blame for threatening the security of the traditional family. These goals are considered selfish and destructive to children's happiness and families' well being, and because modern motherhood is defined in terms of self-sacrifice and care for others (Hays, 1996), mothers who neglect their private duties because of their public participation are not acting as good mothers. Adams (2011) describes the rise of family values discourse as a backlash response that prevented feminists from completely achieving fundamental changes to gender roles, especially related to family structures.

This lack of success at the cultural level can be at least partly attributed to a 'family values' backlash against feminist gains of the 1970s. As these gains began to disturb the traditional gender order, religious and cultural forces united to reconstitute conservative beliefs organized around the notion of family break-down. Linking 'family decline' with women's workforce participation and disruption of the gender order, conservative family values proponents blamed feminists and employed mothers for destroying the traditional family. (p. 226)

The blame for the destruction of traditional family values is essentially placed mostly upon mothers who abandon their traditional role to pursue personal fulfillment. In order to maintain the traditional family, mothers are required to selflessly make choices based not on their own needs, but only on the needs of their families and children. This same expectation is not placed upon fathers. As Coontz (1992) explains,

When commentators lament the collapse of traditional family values, they almost

invariably mean the uniquely female duties associated with the doctrine of separate spheres for men and women...a seemingly gender-neutral indictment of family irresponsibility ends up being directed most forcefully against women. (p. 40-41)

In fact, the ideology of traditional motherhood prevents women from finding real equality to men, as expectations of motherhood affect their public success, and the responsibilities of private family life unevenly require their time and attention. Crittenden (2001) quotes Burggraf as saying, "Getting 'women's work' done when women are no longer volunteering their unpaid or underpaid labor is what much of the public discussion of family values is really about" (p. 7). Many conservatives would not explicitly state that women belong at home with their children (although some do) but arguments in support of the traditional family typically foreground maternal responsibilities, and do not ask the important question of what the father's changed role might be. In fact, in some ways, the father's family involvement also reflects upon the mother.

Even in situations in which an absent father disrupts the traditional family structure, blame is still ultimately placed on single mothers. Fathers are described as crucial, not only because two parents are vital, but also because a male father and female mother provide the most overall benefits to their children. This reinforces the importance of the Strict Father and emphasizes that a Strict Mother alone is not enough to correctly raise a family; it also prescribes a particularly limited form of motherhood. For example, Dan Quayle's infamous 1992 speech criticizing the television sitcom character Murphy Brown for choosing to raise a child alone is highlighted by Palin as misunderstood but completely correct. Palin (2010a) quotes Quayle:

It doesn't help matters when prime-time TV has Murphy Brown—a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid professional woman—mocking the

importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another ‘lifestyle choice.’ (p. 116)

Quayle blamed a lack of family values for urban strife and poverty, and held the Murphy Brown character as an example of the disregard for traditional families causing many of America’s problems. Although he was criticized for oversimplifying complex social struggles, Palin argues that Quayle’s analysis actually addressed the true source of the problem. “What we’ve learned since—and what Hollywood is still having trouble accepting—is that families matter and fathers do matter” (p.117). In the end, discussion of the importance of fatherhood ends up being an indictment against single mothers—like Murphy Brown—who fail their children by not providing the traditional family structure and therefore not giving them the necessary skills and values to succeed. Palin and Quayle’s criticism of Murphy Brown’s (fictional) choice obscures the fact that many women do not plan to or wish to raise children alone, but are often given no other choice. Palin (2010a) says that although we are not to “turn our backs” on pregnant single women, “two-parent families do matter when it comes to raising kids to be happy and productive citizens” (p.120). Fathers are cited as indispensable, but by blaming liberalism and feminism for breaking down the fabric of society, the focus on single-mother families becomes a question of good mothers, not good fathers.

While it is not always explicitly stated, family values discourse prescribes a minimal realm of acceptable maternal behavior, and effectively limits the available options for women as mothers and individuals. “The family values argument often obscures the role of gender in perpetuating inequality in the home, and gender difference has become a taken-for-granted requirement for ‘preserving’ the family” (Adams, 2011, p.226). It is assumed that women are responsible for maintaining the family, which in the traditional view, is her first priority. “We

talk endlessly about the importance of family, yet the work it takes to make a family is utterly disregarded” (Crittenden, 2001, p. 5). If the father leaves, the single mother is blamed for not providing a two-parent family, and if the mother leaves to participate in public sphere work, Palin implies that children will be left alone in full-time daycare. Instead of dividing public and private responsibilities by gender, such tasks could be shared, as in the Palin family. But in the traditionalist argument that Palin also supports, mothers hold a crucial role in society, one that apparently cannot be filled by the father, and is certainly not the job of society or government. While the Palins divide family responsibilities and rely on greater paternal involvement, publicly Sarah supports traditional families, which conceals the need for changed family dynamics in order to support the mama grizzly’s career. Again, this is a clear limitation of Palin’s Strict Mother morality, and exposes the contradiction between her family values policy and the real demands of her private life and the lives of other women. A mama grizzly can enter politics, but she cannot expect to put her cubs in daycare in order to do so and still be considered a good conservative mother.

This tension is expressly revealed in *America By Heart* as Palin (2010a) cites conservative author James Wilson’s words about the importance of maintaining traditional values in regards to family rather than pursuing progressive goals.

To many Americans who look backward—conservatives, in the main—maintaining the family, albeit one with some changed human dimensions (such as greater freedom for women), is vitally important. To many who look forward, the family is much less important than female emancipation, personal self-expression, and economic careers. (p. 120)

Wilson argues that strengthening the traditional structure of the family is the most

important goal in conservative philosophy, although he does allow for changes like “greater freedom for women.” However, despite the acknowledgment that the traditional family may not have sufficiently provided equal opportunities for women, he also criticizes progressives for supporting the goals of “female emancipation” and “personal self-expression” at the *expense* of the family. Wilson’s argument (supported by Palin) exposes the paradox inherent to the conservative insistence on traditionally structured yet egalitarian families; they claim to support increased opportunities for women but continue to privilege the family over “female emancipation.” Wilson attempts to avoid the implied choice between mothers selflessly supporting the traditional family for the greater good, and sacrificing the family for the sake of expanded freedom and equality for individuals (i.e. women). However, it becomes clear that the changed role of the mother in the traditional family raises questions of the ultimate responsibility for children and the home. The support of “greater freedom for women,” up until the point at which the family is affected is an ambiguous position that allows conservatives to fault women for the transformation of the traditional family even as they claim to support gender equality.

Palin herself illustrates this contradiction through her condemnation of other family forms even as she herself modifies the traditional family for her own purposes. Rather than admitting that women should not be unevenly tied to private sphere expectations—particularly by traditional family values that espouse gendered family roles—she makes the change in her own personal life, and proudly discusses this choice, but continues to deny the effect this type of motherhood has on women as a group.

A particularly glaring example is seen in her daughter Bristol, an unmarried teen mother. Palin frequently argues that a single mother family offers far fewer benefits to children than could be provided by a traditional family that includes the child’s father. Yet these arguments

are totally absent when Palin (2010a) discusses Bristol's unplanned pregnancy.

But my strong, beautiful Bristol reacted in a way that made me proud. She went to college. And worked full time. And took care of a needy, colicky baby through many, many sleepless nights, doctor's appointments, and lonely, cold car rides to and from babysitters. She worked as hard as any young single mother could possibly work. (p. 96)

Just as conservatives fear, as a single mother Bristol faces many challenges and cannot provide the ideal family structure; her son is left with babysitters—which Palin has in other cases exaggerated as “full-time daycare.” Palin attempts to mitigate this inconsistency with her traditional values by focusing on the self-reliance and discipline Bristol gained from her Strict Father upbringing. Despite the difficulties of raising her son Tripp alone, Palin (2010a) praises Bristol for meeting that challenge through hard work, and continues to present her family as average: “ours has been a typical American family story. It may not be because of an unplanned pregnancy that grows on a national stage under a scorching spotlight, but everyone ends up in a foxhole once in awhile” (p.99). Palin tries to moderate such nontraditional aspects of her family by remaining focused on the importance of traditional family values and Strict Father morality.

The nontraditional circumstance Bristol found herself in is accepted by Palin as her own failing. Discussing her numerous public and political obligations and the hectic schedule involving her children and family, Palin blames herself for not preventing Bristol's unexpected pregnancy. “I assumed that Bristol was making only wise decisions while staying with my sister in Anchorage. I kick myself to this day for my selfish assumption. I made a mistake” (Palin, 2010a, p. 96). Palin's ownership of Bristol's choices demonstrates the tension found in the intersection of Palin's conservative feminism and motherhood in actual women's lives. Family values discourse blames “selfish” mothers who fail to provide the proper traditional family for

their children, as in the case of Bristol's pregnancy, for which Palin blames herself. Palin states that she was "preoccupied with the enormous job of being governor of the nation's largest state," and so public duties prevented her from keeping a closer eye on Bristol's behavior; she says she "deluded" herself into thinking nothing would go wrong. Although she frequently minimizes the public's questions about her ability to "balance it all," in this confession, Palin illustrates some limitations of her form of traditional motherhood, in which mothers may take on outside responsibilities, but are not released from their private ones.

Also, although she supports a changed form of motherhood that works for her, and also one for Bristol, she does not acknowledge that other women in similar situations might not have the advantages she does—a helpful husband and extended family, and money to afford greater schedule flexibility for herself and her family. While Palin never states that the traditional family form does not grant women sufficient opportunities, she makes changes to the structure to allow herself full public participation, and gets around that possible contradiction by arguing that she and her family accomplish everything together as a unit, albeit one in which the children remain her responsibility, and she blames herself for their failures and struggles. The morality of the Strict Father remains intact. Family remains the centerpiece of her rhetoric, and the subtle changes she makes—in form, if not in speech—are excused because of her continued support of Strict Father values and family responsibility.

In a sense, Palin's public career represents an expansion of the roles of conservative women and a challenge to traditional family norms; yet she uses her public position to criticize feminism, glorify traditional motherhood, and place the burden of battling systemic discrimination on individual women. By guarding family values as a ferocious mama grizzly, Palin effectively cements the notion of traditional motherhood into conservative discourse, and

political discourse in general. Meanwhile, from her more egalitarian marriage to her political career, Palin reaps the benefits of feminism while disputing its value. Although conservative women have prominently led the backlash against feminism since Phyllis Schlafly, Palin represents an innovative challenge to feminism in that she not only criticizes liberal feminists for hurting women, but also calls herself a new feminist. She does this not to align herself with the vast majority of contemporary feminisms—feminisms that seek to improve the lot of all women through attention to systematic oppressions—but to reclaim the word and fundamentally alter its meaning. Her choice to redefine feminism into its opposite dangerously gives force to conservative ideals that deny the need of feminism itself. Unlike her description of liberal mothers, whose selfish abandonment of their maternal priorities has led to the destruction of the traditional family, the *mama grizzly* enters public life uniquely committed to family and selflessness. This depiction of motherhood has serious consequences for gender stereotypes and for women who attempt to enter politics on other than maternal grounds, for example, as men are free to do.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study of Sarah Palin's family and politics explores the connection between family as a powerful myth, political metaphor, and lived experience. The intersection of these concepts provides insight into the special situation faced by conservative female politicians, as well as the consequences of the traditional family ideology that so powerfully permeates American political culture. Palin has successfully integrated her somewhat nontraditional family with traditional conservative values and turned the potential constraints of femininity and motherhood into political capital. "Never before had motherhood been so finely balanced with presidential politics. Biological vigour translated into political energy, motherhood transformed into an intoxicating political ideal" (McCabe, 2012, p. 149). Challenging the supportive role typically reserved for conservative women, she has entered public life to enforce Strict Father values through the power of the *mama grizzly*: a natural protector of children and important moral force in politics.

The publicity she garners puts focus on issues of gender and politics, and can mediate public criticisms of Republicans as anti-woman. In fact, uniquely for a conservative, she claims to be a feminist, and declares herself solidly pro-woman. For such reasons, it is important to continue to study conservative women's activism, which can "draw women into conservative campaigns and demonstrate the centrality of female political actors to a movement that has been charged with sexism and with hindering women's social and professional mobility" (Schreiber, 2008, p. 13). It also challenges the ability of feminists to claim to speak for women. Palin, a woman, criticizes the feminist movement for not knowing what the majority of American women want, and has popularized an alternative feminine ideal. Her choice to self-identify as a feminist problematically engages other feminists—rather than conservatives—to defend their vision of

the appropriate place for women in our society. In order to successfully refute her claims, and future similar challenges, feminists must understand the secrets to her political success. Rather than dismissing her as “a pretender, a fake, a feminist fraud”, as Marsh (2010) of *the Huffington Post* and many more have done, further study should be focused on revealing her rhetorical choices, which have kept her at the forefront of the conservative movement.

Indeed, such conservative female activism is likely to continue to grow, as Republicans actively seek female faces to join those in the highest political positions. “Among current GOP leaders, recognition is growing that the party risks alienating women if it doesn’t have female representation at the highest levels. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash, vice chairman of the House Republican Conference and the highest-ranking Republican woman in the House, said that aggressive recruitment efforts for 2012 are already under way” (Khan, 2012). Sarah Palin herself has actively extended the “mama grizzly” label to other conservative women such as Michele Bachmann, Nikki Haley, Carly Fiorina, and Susan Martinez (Palin, 2010a). In fact, the success of such women only encourages their movement to continue to grow. As McVeigh (2012) stated, “just as Palin did, Bachmann may have just galvanised another wave of Republican women with her unprecedented straw poll victory” (McVeigh, 2012). Sarah Palin and others, such as Michele Bachmann, have popularized an ideal of the conservative female politician, which appears to be a trend on the rise and in need of attention.

Scholars have debated the efficacy and consequences of maternal appeals, and as discussed in the introductory chapter, Palin raises the question of how maternal appeals function for conservative women—especially conservative women who define themselves as feminist. This study suggests that while motherhood offers a powerful persona to female activists, the emancipatory possibilities it provides depend upon the mother’s role within her family—the

political context in which the maternal appeals are utilized. In other words, despite her success, a conservative woman utilizing a traditional, limiting view of motherhood is not a positive step for feminism; in fact, it is just the opposite. The vast majority of feminist organizations critique the conflation of femininity with motherhood, and have worked to redefine oppressive expectations associated with motherhood, while Palin problematically embraces them and encourages other women to do so as well. Stearney (1994) explains the danger in such a tactic. “While women have struggled to redefine and revalue their identities through the feminist movement, the use of the mother metaphor...returns women to a primary identification as mothers, and reinforces the notion of women's roles and natures as inextricably connected to their reproductive capacity” (p. 146).

While Palin argues that women’s place is in politics, she also effectively reinforces stereotypical expectations that link women to motherhood and to the home, limiting their public opportunities. Rather than dismantling the hegemonic masculinity of politics, Palin has found a way to navigate such challenges as an individual, but then uses her success to emphasize traditional female responsibilities that are major obstacles to all female politicians.

Suggestions for future study

Issues of family are relevant to all women, but as feminist theory widely recognizes, understanding the experiences and needs of women—an incredibly diverse group—requires more than an analysis of gender alone, but an examination of the intersecting experiences and oppressions of (at least) race, class, sexual orientation, and gender. Although it can be complex in practice, such research more usefully explores the multifaceted situations faced by women as a large and varied group. Contemporary feminist scholars urge us to study not just gender but other systems of dominance and oppression that have large impacts on the lives of women.

hooks (1984) explains that such work is more meaningful and enables feminists to represent women more fully.

Significantly, struggle to end sexist oppression that focuses on destroying the cultural basis for such domination strengthens other liberation struggles. Individuals who fight for the eradication of sexism without supporting struggles to end racism or classism undermine their own efforts. (hooks, 1984, p. 39)

Future study in the area of family politics and female politicians would do well to consider the interconnectedness of such issues, many of which are extremely applicable to the consequences of family values discourse. “Within the present family structure, individuals learn to accept sexist oppression as ‘natural’ and are primed to support other forms of oppression including heterosexist domination” (hooks, 1984, p. 38). “Pro-family,” “pro-marriage” messages and policies prescribe very narrow acceptable forms of family, which have implications beyond female politicians. In one example, the myth of the traditional family certainly prescribes heterosexuality as the basis of the traditional family. In fact, any kind of systemic discrimination is not acknowledged by conservative philosophy as articulated through SFM, because Strict Father morality opposes cultural or social changes in favor of individual effort and family responsibility. Palin’s form of “feminism” assumes that despite their extremely different circumstances and challenges, all women are the same. In order to avoid making the same mistake, future study should investigate intersectional aspects of political identity to reach a more nuanced understanding of the politics of family values. Instead of praising the abilities of individual women to succeed, we need a fuller examination of women as a diverse group and the various obstacles they face.

As I have argued, family values rhetoric comes in large part from social conservatives who unabashedly support traditional, even complementary (i.e. unequal) places for men and women. This study indirectly asks whether conservative feminism is possible—in other words, is such a woman by definition, anti-feminist? Considering the lack of conservative women in politics, and this study's rejection of Palin's feminism, what does this suggest about the possibility of conservatism to create emancipatory opportunities for women? In some ways, my findings suggest that conservative philosophy is antithetical to feminism. There are many diverse viewpoints under the umbrella of feminism, but they all must acknowledge masculinity as a social-structural privilege, and seek social-structural remedies, which Palin and conservatism reject. Ideally, the number of female politicians would be on par with the males, and issues of gender would not be so salient. However, in our current political culture, women undermining women's rights is a danger to feminists and therefore to women.

However, not only conservative politicians support the patriarchy of American politics. After all, family is a complex ideology and powerful social order that limits women of all kinds, including women from both American political parties. Certainly, the hegemonic quality of this masculinity means that it is maintained by cultural practices such as the media, as well as even by those it suppresses. Democratic women are also vastly underrepresented and disadvantaged and just as constrained by traditional expectations of the role of women within families. Although they have better numbers than conservative women—in 2012, 61 of the 90 women in Congress are Democrats—there is a lot of work to do to reach equality with men (CAWP, 2012). Only 16.8% of the 535 Congressional seats are held by women (CAWP, 2012), which suggests that it would also be worthwhile to conduct a similar study with a progressive female politician, who are also very impacted by the myth of the traditional family. In fact, previous examples such

as Hillary Clinton's effort to feminize herself to gain public acceptance underscore the importance and relevance of such a study (Anderson, 2002b).

Contributions

The concepts that women in public roles face unique challenges and that female politicians battle sexism are not new. Although it is widely understood that the separation of public and private spheres have negative effects on women, we must continue to analyze the obsessive connection America places on women and the family. Feminist theory has long focused attention on issues of motherhood, yet the politics of family values rhetoric is not as yet fully explored within the context of female politicians. Many studies have shown that issues of family are extremely political and unevenly affect female politicians, but with a few exceptions, fewer studies have focused on particular female politicians and examined their specific responses to these constraints. The particular circumstance created by female politicians like Palin that support oppressive views of family has been even less frequently addressed. I argue that family should be placed at the forefront of any discussion of the masculinity of politics. As Adams (2011) aptly states,

As long as traditional gender stereotypes drive the institution of family, women's depiction as family-engaged will not serve them well in politics. For women to ultimately succeed in the highest echelons of politics either they must distance themselves from association with family or the institution itself must be increasingly divorced from the stereotypical association of women with dependency and support. (p. 239)

With an increased focus on female voters, the rise of conservative women like Palin and her group of mama grizzlies is a growing trend that bears examining for many reasons which I have expressed previously—most especially, the dangerous trend of conservative women co-

opting the concept of feminism to minimize the power it represents. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly common for female politicians to hypocritically use their public influence to support traditional values that continue to associate women with private sphere obligations.

Sarah Palin is rhetorically adept in her ability to take confining discourses of femininity and turn them to her advantage. Her extremely consistent focus on motherhood as a source of power and influence over the traditional values at the heart of conservatism has served her well throughout her public career. This study contributes to the scholarly debate on maternal appeals, and supports the belief that performing motherhood in public has negative consequences for women as it reifies traditional views of motherhood that feminism has long struggled to dismantle. Using Sarah Palin as a case study also exposes the growing trend of conservative women to frame their traditional family values as not only good for women, but as feminist. Couching conservative family expectations as progressive reforms for women is a dangerous development that suggests study in this area is timely and important. At first, it may seem counterintuitive that conservative women would enter the public sphere in order to praise ideals that typically relegate women to the private sphere, but this study suggests that not only is it very effective, but it appears to be a growing field of opportunity for conservative women as it minimizes the potential challenge they pose to conservative ideology. If conservative women continue to battle feminist efforts to de-masculinize American politics and disassociate women with their family roles, the struggle to elect more female leaders will be that much more difficult.

Ultimately, Palin as a woman in the very masculinized political sphere does not acknowledge or desire the need for systemic change to allow more female leadership. Instead, she accesses her conservative dependence upon family values and her authority as a mother to grant herself access to the highest echelons of politics. As such, Palin's presence demonstrates

only that a few token women will successfully enter politics, which remains a natural sphere of influence available to men. In Palin's world, while men enter politics as individuals, women enter politics as mothers—simultaneously on behalf of and in spite of their families.

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