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COMMENTARY

## Rushing to judge a candidate by her wrinkles

By Ellen Goodman

And so we gather to praise the old feminazi hunter himself. Rush Limbaugh has single-handedly brushed aside the blinding snow on the windshield and let us have another clear view of the double standard running down this campaign highway.

This week, our man Rush offered a lengthy monologue about an unflattering photo of Hillary Clinton in the New Hampshire cold. He ended by asking the question: "Will this country want to actually watch a woman get older before their eyes on a daily basis?"

EEEEK! Hillary has wrinkles! Somebody call the exorcist!

Remember last summer when the nation was treated to a bit of fashionbabble about Hillary's cleavage? This alerted us to the startling news that the senator had breasts. Two of them. News at 11. Now we are being treated to a psychodrama titled "The Candidate Has Crow's Feet."

Let me stipulate that the photo was not one she'd put on Match.com.

These days, candidates are like celebrities stalked by the sort of paparazzi who can find cellulite on Jennifer Love Hewitt. Anyone who wants to run for the presidency should first imagine herself trying on bathing suits in a fluorescent-lit dressing room while six of her worst enemies point their cell phone cameras.

Hillary made mocking note of this when she mounted the stage at an Iowa auction barn. "I've been to cattle barns before," she joked, but "I've never felt like I was the one being bid on. I know you're going to inspect me. You can look inside my mouth if you want."

The now-infamous photo ended up on the Drudge Report with a caption reading: "The Toll of a Campaign." Rush then picked up the old bat, I mean, baton, and ran off (at the mouth) with it.

The svelte and charming 56-year-old talkmeister framed his words about the 60-year-old Clinton who is getting older before our eyes on a daily basis as a cultural comment. He bemoaned the reality of a country "addicted to physical perfection." He cited the laments of aging actresses. He oozed special sympathy to women, since older men look "more authoritative, accomplished, distinguished."

Do you believe that this was a pro-woman rant? Then you also believe that Limbaugh's routine about Hillary Clinton's "testicle lockbox" is a paean to female leadership qualities.

What a long way we have come already in this campaign. Ten months ago, opponents were asking whether America was ready for a woman president. Now they're asking whether America is ready for a woman getting older before our eyes on a daily basis as president.

Meanwhile, it's become retro, maybe even feminazi, to notice the teensiest whiff of sexism. Hillary was accused of playing the gender card for merely mentioning that presidential politics was an "all-boys club." If you complain about the heat, you'll end up back in the kitchen.

So when Limbaugh talks about the older woman as a kind of Dorian Gray — a figure of such terrifying crone-ishness that we don't even want her portrait in the Oval Office — we are required to acknowledge the talk of John Edwards' hair

and Barack Obama's swimsuit. Not to mention the grimacing Giuliani and the robotic Romney.

Well, we do notice what both genders are wearing. But we have not yet passed the Equal Right to Be Scrutinized Amendment. Haggard still comes from old hag, which comes from witch, which rhymes with you know what. If Romney tears up, he's sensitive; if Hillary cries, she's toast.

In phase one of this campaign, Hillary was the experienced candidate. No gender need apply. In the last tense stretch to the first primaries, the headlines tell us she's being humanized, which is a political synonym for "feminized." When Hillary campaigns with her family, the media sometimes react as if she found Dorothy Rodham at Rent-a-Mom.

So it bears repeating, alas, that women still have to negotiate the Scylla and Charybdis of political life. If you're seen as an authority figure, you aren't seen as womanly; if you're seen as womanly, you aren't seen as an authority figure. By the time you tack through that narrow channel, you have — ohmigod — wrinkles!

In the 1990s, Hillary tried on more looks than Madonna. Now that she's arrived at a comfort zone, she's still studied for signs of cleavage, cackle and crow's feet. Since there's no whining allowed, she has to tough it out. At which point she's accused of being too tough.

What a business this is. Come to think of it, maybe I'd prefer that bathing suit photo op. Only Rush, ol' buddy, you go first.

*Ellen Goodman is a columnist for The Boston Globe. Reach her at [ellengoodman@globe.com](mailto:ellengoodman@globe.com).*

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