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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

Click Here

[Home](#)

**The Peculiar Presidential Political Tap Dance
Beneath The Spin
By Molly Secours
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[Molly's back! And we're so glad she is. -ed]

Last week I stumbled upon a bizarre news story about a fatal epidemic referred to as the "dancing plague" of 1518 in Strasbourg Austria.

According to historians, in early July a woman stepped into the street and began to dance uncontrollably.

After several days she was still dancing and after a week was joined by hundreds of others, consumed by the same irresistible urge to dance.

The weak hearted died after a few days and by the end of August about 400 people had succumbed to the hysteria.

It took two months (September) before the epidemic was over. Sound familiar?

Struck by the haunting images of maniacal dancing in 1518, I pondered the peculiar political tap dance of the 2008 presidential campaign. Not as eerie, but scary enough.

In a campaign of historical firsts for women and African Americans, Hillary Clinton's

concession to, and endorsement of, Barrack Obama reinvigorated Clinton supporters giving Barack Obama a healthy lead over John McCain

In response to Obama's appeal across gender, race and party affiliation, John McCain did the unthinkable - for a Republican. He chose a woman. For a moment, I was wowed. A woman? John McCain? I began to shuffle back and forth - swept up in the dance fever.

Sarah Palin, the Governor of Alaska - whom McCain met only once before and with whom he (McCain) had never engaged in a lengthy conversation - became the first female Republican to run for Vice President.

And so the maniacal happy dance of 2008 erupted. The difference is this time the dancing plague was orchestrated and no one - especially the press - seemed immune.

For several weeks images of all things Palin pummeled the media. Many woman were almost giddy to see another woman's name on the electoral dance card and many men (white) relieved that perhaps the black Senator from Illinois might not run away with the ticket after all.

From a gender perspective, indeed a historical moment. Upon closer look, not so much.

Unfortunately, Sarah Palin's nomination wasn't so much a victory for women, as a diversion meant to deflect the attention away from what opponents refer to as "Obamamania" - not to mention the fiscal and foreign policy blunders committed by the current administration.

As a women, it is always uncomfortable to watch another women being used for any reason - whether or not she acknowledges or revels in the usury. Women have danced for men's political gain since the beginning of time. This election seems to be no exception.

Lagging behind Obama in the polls, McCain capitalized on the potential disappointment of several million voters who had rallied behind Clinton by tapping a "small town girl" - with a fairly light political resume - and asked her to dance.

Unfortunately for McCain, Hillary Clinton had already raised the political bar for women. We have already witnessed a serious woman candidate, competent to govern, come close to winning.

With over 30 years of experience advocating for women's rights - including reproductive rights - like her or not - Hillary Clinton earned the respect and widespread support she garnered. She was not my choice but she was qualified, capable and competent to be president. But then again, Hillary Clinton was actually running for President.

Whatever your position, Palin "fever" is understandable. Obama and Clinton stirred the imagination and passion of Americans of all ages, races, political parties and ignited young people eager to vote for the first time.

The threat was palpable. The first African American male in history is a breath away from the White House and McCain had little choice. An attractive, unknown, spunky, white woman on the ticket was one of the few eleventh hour gambles worth making in a campaign lagging in the polls.

Unlike 1518, the current hysteria was expedited by the Internet and media. Rather than weeks, it took mere days before the cyber streets were jammed with manic dancers chanting the name of "that women from Alaska".

Rather than discussing the war in Iraq, the escalating violence in Afghanistan, poverty and racism at home, John McCain played the wallflower. Watching from the sidelines he (McCain) crowed while Palin's shuffle, ball, changed her way (easy on the change) into the homes of millions of Americans.

Hoping we would succumb to her charms and not notice as she stepped on toes, she mocked Obama's efforts as a community organizer in the early days of his career - yes, the same people who fight for things like the right of women to vote, or for civil rights, or the 8-hour workday.

What is fascinating about this election is the ways in which race is not being discussed and how quickly personal family matters became sacred - if you are white. If Obama had a 17-year-old pregnant daughter who was dating a hockey player who used the "f" word in public and bragged about liking to "shoot sh*#" for effect, it is doubtful the Obamas would be viewed as a suitable first family.

Imagine Obama bragging he is a gun enthusiast and how excited we would be to see photos of him with an AK47 slung over his shoulder.

To say that race doesn't matter how we perceive the candidates is ludicrous.

Although Palin glows in the limelight, it is her ability to two-step on demand that makes her an excellent dance partner for McCain - but not such a great choice for higher office. Rehearsing McCain's every position with a saucy and twangy down home accent, Sarah Palin asserts that she represents "us" (women) when in reality she represents McCain - who in reality represents the current administration in most policies fiscal and foreign.

When we stop dancing long enough to catch our breath we remember that Palin is not competing against Obama. John McCain is.

To suppose that Hillary supporters or independent voters would automatically transfer votes just because a woman is tacked on the ticket - at the last minute - is demeaning. To think that women only vote their gender rather than experience or values is naive. If that were the case, we would rarely vote.

That Palin hasn't the experience, record or savvy required is not the major issue. That she has not traveled extensively and has little experience with other cultures or extensive knowledge of other religions - an issue which matters greatly at this time - is besides the fact.

It is simply this: Palin is not competing against Barack Obama; John McCain is. This is not sexist. Just a fact. McCain's policies are her policies.

Historians and experts postulate that the manic dancers of Strasbourg were in a trance caused by extreme psychological distress. The people suffered severe famine and disease and dancing provided short term relief.

We, too, are suffering from collective psychological distress. We are nine trillion dollars in debt, ensconced in war and starving for leadership immune to the disease of self-interest. Without a dramatic shift in political policies - both at home and abroad - we face permanent wars and conflicts with our neighbors.

If history is any indication, the mania will subside in the next three weeks - just in time for November elections.

By all means vote. Vote with sure footedness, a clear mind and an open heart leaning toward peace. Who will bring about the change we ache for?


And when you exit the polls, by all means dance!


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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)
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[Home](#)

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