

# Things Are Tough All Over

But Mrs. Clinton is no Iron Lady.

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The story as I was told it is that in the early years of her prime ministership, Margaret Thatcher held a meeting with her aides and staff, all of whom were dominated by her, even awed. When it was over she invited her cabinet chiefs to join her at dinner in a nearby restaurant. They went, arrayed themselves around the table, jockeyed for her attention. A young waiter came and asked if they'd like to hear the specials. Mrs. Thatcher said, "I will have beef."

Yes, said the waiter. "And the vegetables?"

"They will have beef too."

Too good to check, as they say. It is certainly apocryphal, but I don't want it to be. It captured her singular leadership style, which might be characterized as "unafraid."

She was a leader.

Margaret Thatcher would no more have identified herself as a woman, or claimed special pleading that she was a mere frail girl, or asked you to sympathize with her because of her sex, than she would have called up the Kremlin and asked how quickly she could surrender.

She represented a movement. She was its head. She was great figure, a person in history, and she was a woman. She was in it for serious reasons, not to advance the claims of a gender but to reclaim for England its economic freedom, and return its political culture to common sense. Her rise wasn't symbolic but actual.

In fact, she wasn't so much a woman as a lady. I remember a gentleman who worked with her speaking of her allure, how she'd relax after a late-night meeting and you'd walk by and catch just the faintest whiff of perfume, smoke and scotch. She worked hard and was tough. One always imagined her lightly smacking some incompetent on the head with her purse, for she carried a purse, as a lady would. She is still tough. A Reagan aide told me that after she was incapacitated by a stroke she flew to Reagan's funeral in Washington, went through the ceremony, flew with Mrs. Reagan to California for the burial, and never once on the plane removed her heels. That is tough.

The point is the big ones, the real ones, the Thatchers and Indira Gandhis and Golda Meirs and Angela Merkels, never play the boo-hoo game. They are what they are, but they don't use what they are. They don't hold up their sex as a feint: *Why, he's not criticizing me, he's criticizing all women! Let us rise and fight the sexist cur.*

When Hillary Clinton suggested that debate criticism of her came under the heading of men bullying a defenseless lass, an interesting thing happened. First Kate Michelman, the former head of NARAL and an Edwards supporter, hit her hard. "When unchallenged, in a comfortable, controlled situation, Sen. Clinton embraces her elevation into the 'boys club.' " But when "legitimate questions" are asked, "she is quick to raise the white flag and look for a change in the rules."

Then Mrs. Clinton changed tack a little and told a group of women in West Burlington, Iowa, that they were going to clean up Washington together: "Bring your vacuum cleaners, bring your brushes, bring your brooms, bring your mops." It was all so incongruous--can anyone imagine the 20th century New Class professional Hillary Clinton picking up a vacuum cleaner? Isn't that what downtrodden pink collar workers abused by the patriarchy are for?

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But even better, and more startling, people began to giggle. At Mrs. Clinton, a woman who has never inspired much mirth. Suddenly they were remembering the different accents she has spoken with when in different parts of the country, and the weird laugh she has used on talk shows. A few days ago new poll numbers came out--neck and neck with Barack Obama in Iowa, her lead slipping in New Hampshire. There is a sense that Sen. Obama is rising, a sense for the first time in this election cycle that Mrs. Clinton just may be in a fight, a real one, one she could actually lose.



**She never played the victim.**

It's all kind of wonderful, isn't it? Someone indulged in special pleading and America didn't buy it. It's as if the country this week made it official: We now formally declare that the woman who uses the fact of her sex to manipulate circumstances is a jerk.

This is a victory for true feminism, in its old-fashioned sense of a simple assertion of the equality of men and women. We might not have so resoundingly reached this moment without Mrs. Clinton's actions and statements. Thank you, Mrs. Clinton.

A word on toughness. Mrs. Clinton is certainly tough, to the point of hard. But toughness should have a purpose. In Mrs. Thatcher's case, its purpose was to push through a program she thought would make life better in her country. Mrs. Clinton's toughness seems to have no purpose beyond the personal accrual of power. What will she do with the power? Still unclear. It happens to be unclear in the case of several candidates, but with Mrs. Clinton there is a unique chasm between the ferocity and the purpose of the ferocity. There is something deeply unattractive in this, and it would be equally so if she were a man.

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I wonder if Sen. Obama, as he makes his climb, understands the kind of quiet cheering he is beginning to garner from some Republicans, and from those not affiliated with either party. They see him as a Democrat who could cure the Bush-Clinton-Bush-Clinton sickness.

I call it that because it seems to me now less like a dynastic tug of war than a symptom of deterioration, a lazy, unserious and faintly corrupt turn to be taken by the oldest and greatest democracy in the history of man. And I say sickness because on some level I think it is driven by a delusion: "We will be safe with these ruling families, whom we know so

well." But we won't. They have no special magic. Dynasticism brings with it a sense of deterioration. It is dispiriting.

I am not sure of the salience of Mr. Obama's new-generational approach. Mrs. Clinton's generation, he suggests, is caught in the 1960s, fighting old battles, clinging to old divisions, frozen in time, and the way to get past it is to get past her. Maybe this will resonate. But I don't think Mrs. Clinton is the exemplar of a generation, she is the exemplar of a quadrant within a generation, and it is the quadrant the rest of us of that generation do not like. They came from comfort and stability, visited poverty as part of a college program, fashionably disliked their country, and cultivated a bitterness that was wholly unearned. They went on to become investment bankers and politicians and enjoy wealth, power or both.

Mr. Obama should go after them, not a generation but a type, the smug and entitled. No one really likes them. They showed it this week.

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