

BEAM ON POLITICS | ALEX BEAM

If looks make the senator, Coakley takes race

By Alex Beam, Globe Columnist | December 3, 2009

Right-thinking women everywhere have begged me not to write this column. My editors will later claim they have no idea how it got into the paper.

But someone has to say it: Martha Coakley is a very good-looking woman and by far the handsomest candidate among the four Democrats running for Ted Kennedy's seat.

Call it the Babe Factor.

I know what you are thinking, and you are right. She does not photograph particularly well. A television producer explained to me that the TV camera flattens her face and features on the tube. Coakley used to jut her chin forward during televised interviews, but I think she has cured that tic.

In person, however, she's a knockout. If you don't think women over 50 can be attractive, well, you've got a lot of living left ahead! "Foxy," one political blogger called her. "People say I am better looking in real life than I am on television," Coakley commented. Most definitely.

Are good looks all that matter in a political race? No. I understand that Coakley - like her rivals US Representative Michael E. Capuano, businessman Stephen G. Pagliuca, and social entrepreneur Alan Khazei - has big-time credentials for the Senate. And heaven knows she hides her light under a bushel, often wandering around the state in frowzy wool suits and age-inappropriate Mary Jane shoes. But remember Oscar Wilde's famous dictum: "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances."

In life and in politics, it helps to be easy on the eye. Frolicking in the Hawaiian surf during the 2008 presidential campaign, candidate Barack Obama reminded us that terminal buff-itude can be politically expedient, especially if your presumptive opponent just turned 70. Syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman accused Mitt Romney of instigating - and winning - a "swimsuit campaign" when he appeared shirtless, in a bathing suit, in a political ad during the 2002 governor's race against treasurer Shannon O'Brien.

You can talk all night about the strengths and weaknesses of our last five presidents, but one thing is for certain: They were all conventionally handsome men.

Good looks are one thing, but how does Coakley adorn them? In other words, what does she wear, and is she making the right choices?

"Women are held to a different standard in their dress and wardrobe," Ginger Burr, president of Total Image Consultants, told me in an interview. "They are scrutinized much more than men. It's unfair, but it does give women an opportunity that men don't have to purposely create the image they want to project."

I asked Burr to watch two videos of Coakley, one from a New England Cable News profile and the other from a Channel 5 appearance. Her verdict? Burr tipped me to the Mary Janes, the vaguely retro dress shoes that strap across the top of the foot. "They have a bit of young girl feel to them," Burr said. "That is sort of contrary to who she is."

Burr and I both think that Coakley, who says she doesn't get professional fashion advice, looks great in pants suits; Hillary Clinton without the baggage, you might say. Coakley successfully wore a dark pants suit at her first televised debate (don't hold me to the shade, as I am a trifle color-blind) and Burr loved the rich brown suit Coakley wore to the Channel 5 interview. "This is the best look I've seen her in to date!" Burr e-mailed me. "The deep brown is the perfect neutral for her - I would encourage her to wear it a lot! What gives it the sense of approachability is the fact that overall she is wearing lower contrast than she usually does."

Half the job of becoming a senator is looking like a senator. Right now, Martha Coakley is a slightly better-looking version of Senator Maria Cantwell of Washington State. It may not be enough to win, but it is certainly not going to hurt.

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