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THE BODY POLITIC | SEPT. 12, 2019

How I Learned to (Try to) Stop Asking Female Candidates About Sexism

By Rebecca Traister



Photo: Mark Makela/Getty Images

In advance of the third Democratic primary debate, in which Elizabeth Warren will face off for the first time this year against Barack Obama's former vice-president Joe Biden, *Politico* published a lengthy, detailed [story](#) about Warren's rocky relationship with Obama's economic team during his term as president.

The story, reported by Alex Thompson, is remarkable from several angles: Thompson tells the long and complex story of the liberal Warren's interactions with Obama's more centrist economic team, during the years that she was overseeing the administration's bank bailout, building the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and finally, working as a senator. Thompson manages to extract a huge amount of animus — over serious questions of priorities and strategy when it came to the administration's approach to the financial crash and housing crisis — from both sides. It's a difficult needle to thread: Elizabeth Warren, one of the front-runners for the Democratic nomination, is deeply beloved by many of the same people that Barack Obama is beloved by. It is also true that the people she was at odds with, and who clearly despised and resented her — including Tim Geithner, Larry Summers, and Rahm Emanuel — are some of the figures that even many liberals feel were the worst thing about Obama's years in the White House.

In this excellent piece, a tiny detail leapt out at me, one that has long-term resonance when it comes to how we have covered history-making political candidates, including Warren and Obama himself. It's one line, near the start of the piece, in which Thompson presses Warren to comment on the suggestion made by one White House official, that instead of running the CFPB, an agency she had both proposed and built, she should instead work as its “cheerleader.”

This is what Thompson writes: “It was insulting. And I wasn't going to do it,' Warren recalls ... dodging whether she found the suggestion sexist.”

The notion that by not affirming Thompson's query about sexism she was “dodging” anything is flawed at best, and symptomatic of sexism itself at worst, though I do not mean to suggest that by posing this question to Warren — and reporting that she chose not to answer it — Thompson is remotely alone.

In fact, reading and rearing back from this sentence made me immediately think of how many times, as a reporter who covers women and politics, I have done *exactly this thing*. I have sat down in conversation with Hillary Clinton and Stacey Abrams and Kirsten Gillibrand and Barbara Lee and Nancy Pelosi and with Warren herself and reeled off to them litanies of indubitably sexist or racist locutions made about them; I have described to them in minute detail instances in which bias has altered or shaped their path; and then I have looked at them expectantly and asked, “So, do you see this as sexist? Racist? Sexist and racist?”

I guess the thing I've hoped for when I've asked this question, perhaps what Thompson was hoping for, is that they'll nod enthusiastically, embark on a ruminative description of what it feels like to enter rooms in which they are the "only" or the "first"; to have their very personhood leveraged against them; to build careers as exceptions not norms; to not see their experiences, priorities, or worldviews respected or even acknowledged by colleagues or the media.

Were they to give this kind of long and thoughtful answer, they might eventually get around to describing what it feels like to be asked all the time whether they think they have experienced sexism or racism, because facing that question from eager reporters including me and Alex Thompson is *also* part of the tax they pay on their identity. They might explain to me, or to Thompson, that what they'd get by answering this query in full honesty might be a big headline and juicy pull quote in one of our stories, and how their words would quickly be transmuted into *other* headlines and pull quotes about how they're playing gender and race cards and trying to portray themselves as victims.

Which is probably why what usually happens when I chirpily ask them these questions is that I am met with silent gazes, long stares — sometimes hard and exasperated, sometimes pleading. These women look me straight in the eye, seemingly willing me to understand the position they are in. There is often a pause. And then a refusal, expressed one way or another, to answer the question.

They are correct to decline. It is not a dodge; it is a refusal to step into a trap. It is an act of self-preservation. Here is the reality: Of course everyone who is not white or male and aims to represent and govern within a world built by, for, and expecting only white men has their path shaped in one way or another by their difference. That doesn't mean they always suffer for it. Some play into it and serve a white patriarchal model; some defy it, and in their defiance, attract admirers.

But Elizabeth Warren cannot say to Alex Thompson that the suggestion that she work as a "cheerleader" for the agency that she invented and built while someone else runs it is sexist, even though *of course it is sexist*. It's so sexist that in the dictionary under the word "sexist" there should be a picture of someone saying aloud that the woman who made a federal bureau should work not as its boss but as its "cheerleader."

But for Warren to just say this basic, banal, true thing would be an enormous risk. Because as soon as she said it, she would be cast by everyone made uncomfortable by the

acknowledgment of sexism and racism (i.e., a hell of a lot of people) as a whining victim.

This is the bleakest, realest reality. It has happened before!

Back at the start of the 2008 primary, Barack Obama remained determinedly silent on race for a very long time, even as members of Hillary Clinton's campaign made repeatedly racist insinuations about his past: Clinton campaign adviser Bill Shaheen speculated about him having been a drug dealer; in trying to clean that up, her campaign manager Mark Penn went on television and repeatedly used the word "cocaine"; one of her surrogates, former Nebraska senator Bob Kerrey, took care to use his middle name "Barack Hussein Obama."

Through it all, Obama refused to publicly call this racism racist. So explosive would it have been to call it out that *even though he didn't*, his opponents claimed that he had. Bill Clinton got huffy, erroneously arguing that the Obama campaign had called his wife "a racist" while congressman and civil-rights hero John Lewis, then still a Clinton supporter, claimed that some in the Obama campaign were orchestrating "a deliberate, systemic attempt ... to really fan the flame of race." The notion that Obama might have described racism — even when he hadn't — became so heated that he eventually had to issue a statement insinuating the opposite: "Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton have historically been on the right side of civil-rights issues."

Obama would eventually tackle race in a famous speech in March of 2008. But that was a careful, lengthy, beautifully crafted elocution, one that Obama delivered in response to an alarmist new cycle that was, pointedly, about the panicked anxiety caused by his pastor Jeremiah Wright, a man whose disruptive threat seemed mostly to be his impassioned willingness to describe the racism on which the United States had been built.

Eerily similar dynamics were in play in 2008 for Hillary Clinton, an election cycle during which she navigated plenty of misogyny. There was the open variety: "Fuck Hillary: God Knows She Needs It" T-shirts; Tucker Carlson calling her "castrating" and noting that when she comes on television "I involuntarily cross my legs"; the comedian Penn Gillette joking that Obama did well in February because it was Black History Month but that unfortunately for Hillary "there's no White Bitch Month." There was also more subtle derision from the media and her opponents: Obama calling her "likable enough" before chuckling about football during a debate, Chris Matthews pinching her cheek, John Edwards commenting during a debate that he "admired [her and] what her husband did for America ... I'm not sure about that coat."

For the most part, Clinton declined to acknowledge any of this as sexist, *even the part about the husband and the coat*. But when she did try to make the point, it backfired hugely. After a bad debate that her staff called a “pile-on,” Clinton described to a crowd at her alma mater, Wellesley, how “this all-women’s college prepared me to compete in the all-boys’ club of presidential politics.” The reaction to even this acknowledgement *of reality* — presidential politics was in fact, and overwhelmingly remains, an all-boys’ club — was so fiercely negative that Clinton soon had to pull back: “I don’t think they’re piling on because I’m a woman. I think they’re piling on because I’m winning,” she said. Here, mirroring John Lewis being the one to chastise Obama’s wholly imaginary nod toward racism, it was John Edwards’s adviser and former NARAL president Kate Michelman who went after Clinton, saying that she was “disingenuously playing the victim card.”

Like Obama, Clinton didn’t offer full-throated thoughts on bias until there was a chance to do it in a long, carefully written speech that was, to some degree, delivered on her terms. For Clinton, it was her concession speech, in June of 2008, during which she famously talked about putting those cracks in the glass ceiling. By 2016, Clinton came into the race more prepared to ply these waters, and spoke more often about gender; her campaign even offered the “woman card” swag for when she was accused of playing it.

But spoiler: This approach didn’t work either.

There is, so far, no good way to talk about the experience of having had bias, prejudice, and discrimination work against you. If Warren had herself used, or even affirmed, Thompson’s use of the word “sexism,” she would have invited a hailstorm of affronted shock and allegations of trying to gin up sympathy and support. But had she said in some soothing way that *no it’s not sexist to call me a cheerleader*, she would have been lying.

So whose job is it to report on and describe bias as bias? This is the question that seems to be bedeviling the news outlets that have trouble bringing themselves to simply call Donald Trump’s unapologetic and inarguable racism, sexism, and xenophobia “racism,” “sexism,” and “xenophobia,” leaning instead on mushy phrases like “questionable,” “controversial,” “racially charged,” and cloudy with a chance of racism.

In Thursday’s *Politico* piece, Thompson himself does a terrific job of letting the gendered angle of the Warren-Obama story tell itself, deftly laying out the dripping condescension of the powerful men on the president’s economic team, the fury that this woman would come in and challenge or rebuke them, would not be grateful to them for the opportunity, would exhibit her

own ambition or sense of self-importance or have her office painted or tell them to wear a seatbelt. Thompson manages to do all this without commenting himself, in his own voice, on what kind of sexism Warren has faced, or is likely to face going forward.

I get to do more of that direct description in the kind of writing I do, when I can't — and should not — rely on my subjects to do the work of identifying prejudice for me. Not all reporters have the freedom or length that some of us do, to include our voices or all the nuanced details, though I'd argue that even in more straightforward reporting of political news, it would be useful to begin to think rigorously about both individually expressed and structural bias as crucial *facts* about this nation and its power structures, rather than as controversial or unproven opinions about them.

But there is something else that all of us in the media could do: Instead of asking the objects of bias to do the work of identifying and describing it, we could ask its perpetrators. No, it probably wouldn't go well; they'd deny any ill intent and send up offended cries about having had some set of scary cards unjustly played against them. But it's hard not to wish that the work of explaining the dynamics of discrimination didn't always fall to the objects of discrimination, and instead could be shouldered by those whose claims to power have more rarely been questioned or impeded by bias.

If only we didn't have to attempt to compel the Elizabeth Warrens of the world to explain sexism to us, and could instead press the Tim Geithners to take a crack at it instead.

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