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She Broke the G.O.P. and Now She Owns It

By [FRANK RICH](#)

SARAH PALIN and Al Sharpton don't ordinarily have much in common, but they achieved a rare harmonic convergence at [Michael Jackson's memorial service](#). When [Sharpton told the singer's children](#) it was their daddy's adversaries, not their daddy, who were "strange," he was channeling the pugnacious argument the Alaska governor had made the week before. There was nothing strange about her decision to quit in midterm, [Palin told America](#). What's strange — or "insane," in her lingo — are the critics who dare question her erratic behavior on the national stage.

Sharpton's bashing of Jackson's naysayers received the biggest ovation of the entire show. Palin's combative resignation soliloquy, though much mocked by prognosticators of all political persuasions, has an equally vociferous and more powerful constituency. In the aftermath of her decision to drop out and cash in, Palin's standing in the G.O.P. actually rose [in the USA Today/Gallup poll](#). No less than 71 percent of Republicans said they would vote for her for president. That overwhelming majority isn't just the "base" of the Republican Party that liberals and conservatives alike tend to ghettoize as a rump backwater minority. It is the party, or pretty much what remains of it in the Barack Obama era.

That's why Palin won't go gently into the good night, much as some Republicans in Washington might wish. She is not just the party's biggest star and most charismatic television performer; she is its only star and charismatic performer. Most important, she stands for a genuine movement: a dwindling white nonurban America that is aflame with grievances and awash in self-pity as the country hurtles into the 21st century and leaves it behind. Palin gives this movement a major party brand and political plausibility that its open-throated media auxiliary, exemplified by Glenn Beck, cannot. She loves the spotlight, can raise millions of dollars and has no discernible reason to go fishing now except for self-promotional photo ops.

The essence of Palinism is emotional, not ideological. Yes, she is of the religious right, even if she winks literally and figuratively at her own daughter's flagrant disregard of abstinence and marriage. But family-values politics, now more devalued than the dollar by the philandering of ostentatiously Christian Republican politicians, can only take her so far. The real wave she's riding is a loud, resonant surge of resentment and victimization that's larger than issues like abortion and gay civil rights.

That resentment is in part about race, of course. When [Palin referred to Alaska](#) as "a microcosm of America" during the 2008 campaign, it was in defiance of the statistical reality that her state's tiny black and Hispanic populations are unrepresentative of her nation. She stood for the "real America," [she insisted](#), and the identity of the unreal America didn't have to be stated explicitly for audiences to catch her drift. Her [convention speech's signature line](#) was a deftly coded putdown of her presumably shiftless big-city

opponent: “I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a community organizer, except that you have actual responsibilities.” (Funny how this wisdom has been forgotten by her supporters now that she has abandoned her own actual responsibilities in public office.)

The latest flashpoint for this kind of animus is the near-certain elevation to the Supreme Court of Sonia Sotomayor, whose Senate confirmation hearings arrive this week. Prominent Palinists were fast to demean Sotomayor as a dim-witted affirmative-action baby. Fred Barnes of *The Weekly Standard*, the Palinist hymnal, labeled Sotomayor “[not the smartest](#)” and [suggested that Princeton awards academic honors on a curve](#). [Karl Rove said](#), “I’m not really certain how intellectually strong she would be.” Those maligning the long and accomplished career of an Ivy League-educated judge do believe in affirmative-action — but only for white people like Palin, whom they boosted for vice president despite her minimal achievements and knowledge of policy, the written word or even geography.

The politics of resentment are impervious to facts. Palinists regard their star as an icon of working-class America even though the Palins’ [combined reported income](#) (\$211,000) puts them [in the top 3.6 percent of American households](#). They see her as a champion of conservative fiscal principles even though [she said yes to the Bridge to Nowhere](#) and presided over a state that [ranks No.1 in federal pork](#).

Nowhere is the power of resentment to trump reason more flagrantly illustrated than in the incessant complaint by Palin and her troops that she is victimized by a double standard in the “mainstream media.” In truth, the commentators at ABC, NBC and CNN — often the same ones who judged Michelle Obama a drag on her husband — all tried to outdo each other in praise for Palin when she emerged at the Republican convention 10 months ago. Even now, the so-called mainstream media can grade Palin on a curve: at MSNBC’s “Morning Joe” last week, Palin’s self-proclaimed representation of the “real America” was [accepted as a given](#), as if white rural America actually still was the nation’s baseline.

The Palinists’ bogus beefs about double standards reached farcical proportions at Fox News on the sleepy pre-Fourth Friday afternoon when word of her abdication hit the East. The fill-in anchor demanded that his token Democratic stooge name another female politician who had suffered such “disgraceful attacks” as Palin. When the obvious answer arrived — Hillary Clinton — the Fox host angrily protested that Clinton had never been attacked in “a sexual way” or “about her children.”

Americans have short memories, but it’s hardly ancient history that conservative magazines portrayed Hillary Clinton as both a dominatrix cracking a whip and a broomstick-riding witch. Or that Rush Limbaugh held up a picture of Chelsea Clinton on television to identify the “White House dog.” Or that Palin’s running mate, John McCain, [told a sexual joke](#) linking Hillary and Chelsea and Janet Reno. Yet the same conservative commentariat that vilified both Clintons 24/7 now whines that Palin is receiving “the kind of mauling” that the media “always reserve for conservative Republicans.” So said [The Wall Street Journal editorial page last week](#). You’d never guess that *The Journal* had published six innuendo-laden books [on real and imagined Clinton scandals](#), or that the Clintons had been a leading target of both Letterman and Leno monologues, not to mention many liberal editorial pages (including that of *The Times*), for much of a decade.

Those Republicans who have not drunk the Palin Kool-Aid are apocalyptic for good reason. She could well

be their last presidential candidate standing. Such would-be competitors as Mark Sanford, John Ensign and Newt Gingrich are too carnally compromised for the un-Clinton party. Mike Huckabee is Palin-lite. Tim Pawlenty, Bobby Jindal — really? That leaves the charisma-challenged Mitt Romney, precisely the kind of card-carrying Ivy League elitist Palinists loathe, no matter how hard he tries to cosmetically alter his history as a socially liberal fat-cat banker. Palin would crush him like a bug. She has the Teflon-coated stature among Republicans that Romney can only fantasize about.

Were Palin actually to secure the 2012 nomination, the result would be a fiasco for the G.O.P. akin to Goldwater 1964, as the most relentless conservative Palin critic, David Frum, [has predicted](#). Or would it? No one thought Richard Nixon — a far less personable commodity than Palin — would come back either after his sour-grapes “last press conference” of 1962. But Democratic divisions and failures gave him his opportunity in 1968. With unemployment approaching 10 percent and a seemingly bottomless war in Afghanistan, you never know, as Palin likes to say, what doors might open.

It’s more likely that she will never get anywhere near the White House, and not just because of her own limitations. The Palinist “real America” is demographically doomed to keep shrinking. But the emotion it represents is disproportionately powerful for its numbers. It’s an anger that Palin enjoyed stoking during her “palling around with terrorists” crusade against Obama on the campaign trail. It’s an anger that’s curdled into self-martyrdom since Inauguration Day.

Its voice can be found in the postings at a Web site maintained by the fans of Mark Levin, the Obama hater who is, at this writing, the [No.2 best-selling hardcover nonfiction writer in America](#). (Glenn Beck is [No.1 in paperback nonfiction](#).) [Politico surveyed them last week](#). “Bottomline, do you know of any way we can remove these idiots before this country goes down the crapper?” wrote one Levin fan. “I WILL HELP!!! Should I buy a gun?” Another called for a new American revolution, promising “there will be blood.”

These are the cries of a constituency that feels disenfranchised — by the powerful and the well-educated who gamed the housing bubble, by a news media it keeps being told is hateful, by the immigrants who have taken some of their jobs, by the African-American who has ended a white monopoly on the White House. Palin is their born avatar. She puts a happy, sexy face on ugly emotions, and she can solidify her followers’ hold on a G.O.P. that has no leaders with the guts or alternative vision to stand up to them or to her.

For a week now, critics in both parties have had a blast railing at Palin. It’s good sport. But just as the media muttering about those unseemly “controversies” rallied the fans of the King of Pop, so are Palin’s political obituaries likely to jump-start her lucrative afterlife.

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