

The new wave of female firebrands striking fear into liberal America

USA: The right wing finds vicious new cranks to worship

Monday 23 November 2009, by [HARRIS Paul](#) (Date first published: 15 November 2009).

Right-wing radicals are already pinning presidential ambitions on a mother-of-five from Minnesota who calls herself a 'fool for Christ' and condemns Obama as a socialist at the head of a gangster regime.

She is a striking brunette with a decidedly outspoken attitude. She lambasts President Barack Obama as a socialist and has become the darling of America's right-wing activists who flock to her appearances. She is hated by liberals and loved by conservatives.

Sarah Palin? Not quite. Meet Michele Bachmann, a Republican congresswoman from Minnesota who is being hailed as a new and increasingly powerful voice in American politics.

Bachmann, at 53, is a darling of the so-called Tea Party movement, which has campaigned vociferously against healthcare reform, the economic stimulus package and legislation to combat climate change. Her followers have been behind mass rallies in Washington and smaller ones all over the country. She has emerged as one of the most visible politicians in America, frequently appearing on the conservative Fox News channel, whose hosts often champion her causes.

She is part of an increasingly visible "female brand" of conservatism that is rising in America in the wake of the election of Obama. They include notable syndicated commentators such as Michelle Malkin and Ann Coulter, whose dislike for liberals has grown ever more shrill in recent months. And, of course, Palin herself. She is still a giant of the political and media landscape and next week embarks on a book tour to sell her autobiography. It has already sparked a media frenzy, with a heavily hyped appearance on Oprah Winfrey's show, and become a huge bestseller on pre-orders alone.

All these women express a mood of conservative discontent that is becoming increasingly vocal and, some experts warn, extreme. The Republicans have been kicked out of power in the White House and Congress. The party is becoming more white and southern at the same time as national demographic changes give power to other regions and minorities. Many Americans are also suffering in the recession. That is a grim picture but one that also makes many voters vulnerable to a talented rabble-rouser. "They are tapping into grassroots frustration... they are charging up an already highly charged group of people," said Shaun Bowler, a political scientist at the University of California at Riverside.

The politics espoused by Bachmann, Palin and others on the far right of the conservative movement warn darkly of Obama's intentions. They paint a picture of an America that is under threat from its own president. Bachmann has spoken of the possibility of the White House setting up "re-education camps" for America's youth. Palin once accused Obama of "palling around" with terrorists. To the many critics of this new breed of conservatism, people such as Bachmann and Palin are putting an

attractive female face to a very ugly brand of politics.

The crowd gathered in Washington DC on 5 November had answered Bachmann's call. Using Fox News and her own press announcements, Bachmann had demanded that conservative activists descend on the nation's capital to invade the corridors of Congress and demand that politicians stop healthcare reform. Thousands of people did just that, showing up for a mass rally. They chanted: "We want Michele!"

Many liberals criticised the protest as a failure. But from Bachmann's point of view that was hard to see. The move catapulted her to the front of the Republican party as politician after politician showed up to address the crowd. She was a fixture on cable news all day. In the short space of a couple of years Bachmann had gone from obscure congresswoman to national media figure.

But out in the crowd the ugly face of some modern conservatives was not hard to find. There were 12 arrests. One protester wore a mask of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi with handfuls of bloody fetuses. Another protester held up a picture of piles of Jewish corpses from Dachau concentration camp. "National Socialist Healthcare", the sign read.

Bachmann later condemned those who had made Holocaust references at the rally. But even a cursory glance at her career reveals that this rising star has long trafficked in some extreme positions. In October last year Bachmann called some of her fellow congressmen anti-American. She has said Obama holds socialist views. She has attacked global warming by saying that carbon dioxide emissions are a natural part of the atmosphere. "Carbon dioxide is not a harmful gas, it is a harmless gas," she said. She has fed into fears of a violent backlash against Obama by saying that "having a revolution every now and then is a good thing". She has spoken of "gangster government" in a speech viewed more than two million times on the internet. She has dubbed Obama's plans to increase AmeriCorps - a government volunteer service group - as a plan to forcibly indoctrinate young people. "I believe there is a very strong chance that we will see young people put into mandatory service... there are provisions for what I would call re-education camps for young people," she told an interviewer. Her language in opposing healthcare reform has been bloodcurdling. At a recent event in Colorado she told her audience: "What we have to do today is make a covenant, to slit our wrists, be blood brothers on this thing. This will not pass. We will do whatever it takes to make sure this doesn't pass." She is also extremely socially conservative, strongly opposing abortion and gay marriage, and deeply religious. She has described herself as a "fool for Christ".

Such extreme statements and beliefs have made Bachmann a figure of both fun and fear among liberal Americans, especially in her home state of Minnesota. "It is hard to think that people take her seriously. But on a national level it is happening. It scares me," said Aaron Landry, a senior correspondent at MNpublius.com, a Minnesota-based politics blog. But what makes liberal Americans laugh or cry has got the conservative wing of the Republican party extremely excited. In an article that sent shockwaves through America's political classes, top conservative newspaper columnist George Will recently wrote a piece anointing Bachmann as a new star of the movement. "Some of her supposed excesses are... not merely defensible, they are admirable," Will wrote. It is easy to see why Bachmann is being so enthusiastically embraced by conservatives. The high profile of Palin showed the impact a charismatic, young conservative woman could have on the right wing of the Republican party.

"Politics on the right used to be a parlour game played by old, white men," said Bowler. Palin changed that and Bachmann has followed. They have replaced the dulcet tones of grey-haired Washington senators with Midwestern vowels and Alaskan twangs. They have risen swiftly through careers forged a long way from Washington, wearing their outsider label as a badge of pride. They

have given conservatism the look of a middle-American suburban soccer mom with first-hand experience of raising a family in tough times.

That is certainly much of Bachmann's appeal. She was born in Iowa and then moved to Minnesota. When her parents divorced, her mother was left to fend for herself. Bachmann has known what it means to scrimp and save to get by. But she made a success of herself. She and her husband now run a small business in mental health and she is the mother of five children. She has also given foster care to a staggering 23 kids. Political legend has it that her career began when she spoke out at a local Republican party meeting after her state senator had shifted his politics in a liberal direction. When asked by others in the crowd if she herself should try to unseat the incumbent, she gave a speech that so excited those assembled that she was plunged into the race, which she went on to win. It was the unlikely start of a career that has now come to national prominence.

But Bachmann – and Palin too – are more than just individual politicians. They have come to represent a mass social movement that stretches far beyond just turning up on election day. It is no coincidence that both Palin and Bachmann have inspired lines of T-shirts, coffee mugs and action figures for their fans to snap up. That movement first made its appearance during John McCain's rallies after he picked Palin for his running mate in the 2008 election. The choice electrified what had been a fairly moribund campaign. Suddenly crowds of thousands were turning out to Republican rallies, as well as Democratic ones. They were there to see Palin, not McCain.

Palin's brand of homespun wisdom, rooted in uber-patriotism and killer heels, was a breath of fresh air that conservatives had been looking for. So were unashamedly conservative views and a willingness to state bluntly what she thought about Democrats. Palin's subsequent self-destruction in a series of media interviews only served to make her more popular.

Indeed, to examine the impact of both Palin and Bachmann is to see an America split firmly into two different worlds. The first is a liberal one where such politicians make outlandish comments that become the butt of jokes on the Daily Show or Saturday Night Live. The other is one where Palin and Bachmann are the victims of a liberal media that hates its own country. "For their supporters, attacking Palin and Bachmann actually gives them the proof that they are the victims that they already believe themselves to be," said Bowler. To the conservative mind-set, these women are truth-tellers who are viciously attacked precisely because of the validity of the message that they are carrying.

That side of the great American divide is about to get a prolonged period in the sun. This week Palin begins her book tour, touting her autobiography. It is already a massive hit and leaks have hit the internet, generating stories and gossip. Palin is set to talk about her feelings about her daughter's pregnancy, dish dirt on McCain and his aides and slam the very same media that once slammed her. Her tour is like a mini political campaign. She and her family are set to travel by bus across America as she shuttles from stop to stop. She is also shunning large cities such as New York and instead going to small towns and out-of-the-way states.

It is a stunning reversal of the situation after the McCain-Palin ticket lost, when McCain's staff tried to distance themselves from Palin and blame her for the defeat. But now McCain, hated by many conservatives, has retreated quietly to the Senate, while Palin powers from strength to strength.

But the political future is not likely to belong to Palin. The trouncing that she received in the media during the presidential election campaign and the fact she currently holds no office have rendered her political power symbolic. Though it is not impossible, it is hard to imagine Palin launching a credible run in 2012. But what she has done is pave the way for an extremist conservative candidate to emerge as the Republican nominee. The excitement coursing through the conservative movement,

and the power wielded by its media stars such as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, has made selecting any sort of moderate very difficult.

Palin's legacy could be to place the 2012 nomination in the hands of the people who supported her. Could that recipient be Bachmann? It is an outside bet. But Bachmann has spoken of it, couching the question in religious terms that are deeply familiar and beloved of her followers. "If I felt that's what the Lord was calling me to do, I would do it," she told one conservative website of her potential presidential ambitions. Such comments have filled liberals with scorn and fear. "Most people don't think she can have presidential ambitions. She's too crazy," said Landry. "But a lot of people in Alaska thought that about Sarah Palin."

P.S.

* Paul Harris in New York. From The Observer, Sunday 15 November 2009:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/nov/15/michele-bachmann-president-sarah-palin>

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