



A new playing field

As CEO of Hewlett-Packard, Carly Fiorina busted barriers for women in the corporate world, then took a big fall—and a break from public life. Now out stumping for Senator John McCain, she's bringing all she learned to the ultimate power game: politics

JUST A FEW YEARS AGO, the business press called Carly Fiorina “the most powerful woman in corporate America.” But in 2005, after months of headline-making clashes with her board, she got a new, less flattering moniker: ousted CEO. For a while, she eschewed the spotlight, choosing to start a charity, write a memoir (*Tough Choices*), serve on a Central Intelligence Agency advisory panel and spend time with her grandchildren.

Now, at 54, Fiorina is back in the public eye as Victory Chairman for the Republican National Committee. “I’ve become a political junkie,” she says.

That’s good, because the heat is on. In her new role, Fiorina is not only a proxy (in campaign-speak) for a candidate who has lagged behind in the polls, she’s also an unofficial GOP attack dog on women’s issues, speaking out on gender whenever the occasion requires. Another of her jobs is recruiting disenchanted Hillary Clinton supporters to the party, and she’s a great choice—if there’s one thing Fiorina knows, it’s how punishing being a powerful public woman can be. From her days at HP, she remembers the “blogs around Silicon Valley: I was routinely called a bimbo or that other B-word. »



This happens to women all the time.” And she faced endless questions about her hair, clothes and jewelry. “I don’t think we have enough practice with women in positions of authority, so we get very hung up on style,” she says.

Writer **Jennifer Senior** talked with Fiorina (who says she needs two BlackBerrys these days to keep up) about her own political ambitions, the challenge of reinventing a career and how great it felt to stop being a CEO.

More Let’s start by discussing another pathbreaking woman. Have you met Hillary Clinton?

Fiorina Oh, yes. I was giving the commencement speech at Stanford the year that Chelsea graduated, so the first time we met it was in an intimate and celebratory context. And I have been to her office to talk about various issues. She asked me for my support early on in her campaign.

M | She didn’t know where you stood, politically?

F | I think she probably did, but she asked anyway. I have enormous admiration for Hillary Clinton. And I felt empathy for her.

M | Because of how the media treated her, I assume. Was there one moment that stands out?

F | In New Hampshire, after she’d had an incredibly grueling several weeks, she was asked a question—one that was compassionate towards her—and she teared up. She didn’t break down and cry; she choked up momentarily and regained her composure. And three days later we were still talking about it on television. I’ve seen John McCain tear up. We were not still talking about it three days later.

M | Is it easier for women with experience, like Hillary or you, to take that kind of heat?

F | It helps. You understand what happens, and in some ways why. It hurts, but you take it less personally. I don’t feel I have to prove anything to anybody.

M | You did when you were younger?

F | It was even less sophisticated than that. When I joined the business world, I felt like I had to make sure I didn’t fail or get fired. I had to prove that, yes, I can do this. I can take on these jobs women haven’t taken on before. Everyone is afraid at various points in their lives. I’ve learned that having doubts is human. People who have no doubts worry me, frankly.

M | It’s funny how so many powerful women are referred to by their first names. I think it started with Chris Evert; she was always “Chrissy.” Martha. Oprah. Condi. Carly. Is that a problem?

F | Familiarity is a two-sided coin. If it’s a way of denigrating someone’s accomplishments, that’s problematic. If it’s a token of affection, a belief that someone is accessible, it’s a good thing.

M | You’ve said that Hillary Clinton would have made a formidable opponent for McCain. More formidable than Obama?

F | They’re very different candidates. Hillary is—like most women who make it in a man’s world—incredibly hardworking, hyperprepared, hyper-competent. Let me put it this way: John

McCain said through the primaries, “I’ll out-campaign anybody.” But he wouldn’t have been able to out-campaign Hillary. She would have matched him, stride for stride. But he can out-campaign Obama.

M | Why don’t we see more prominent GOP women in public office?

(Editor’s note: Democratic women in Congress outnumber Republican women 63 to 25. Three of the eight women governors are Republicans.)

F | I’m not steeped in Republican politics yet, so I’m the wrong person to ask about the history of the party. But I wouldn’t want you to go hang a flimsy premise, that the GOP is somehow hostile to women, on this one factoid. If John McCain is elected, he will have a transformative effect on the party. Look at the number of women in powerful positions in his campaign. This is a guy who gets it. He was raised by a powerful woman; he’s married to a powerful woman.

M | Cindy McCain looks a little bit like the cliché of the campaign wife: impeccably dressed and quiet.

F | Well, she’s been out there more. She’s done *The View*, she’s done *Access Hollywood*. Women shouldn’t misunderstand Cindy’s choice to let the candidate speak for himself as weakness on her part or not being in control of her own choices. You will hear more from Cindy. She is very much involved in this campaign.

M | Do you see differences between the personalities who run big corporations and those who run states?

F | What strikes me are the similarities. Honestly, the turf-building and turf-protecting that go on—it’s the same in business as in government. And people are pretty resistant to change, in spite of their intellectual embrace of change.

M | At HP, you faced deep resistance when you acquired Compaq. Later, your board turned against you.

F | I had two board members who leaked confidential conversations. »

I confronted them directly and said, “We cannot operate this way as a board. We need to talk about why you felt it necessary to do that.” And 10 days later I was fired.

M | Who did you turn to first?

F | My husband. My husband is a rock. He has been a steadfast believer in me from the first moment we met. He was really shocked, in disbelief that the board would be that dysfunctional. And then we immediately called our extended family. When you go through such a public six years [as CEO of HP], that wasn’t just happening to me, it was happening to our whole family. But it’s not something I agonized over. I was comfortable with my decisions.

M | So you didn’t isolate yourself, eat buckets of Ben & Jerry’s . . .

F | Oh, I ate a little more chocolate for a couple of weeks. (I’m a dark chocolate girl.) I don’t want to minimize the trauma of it. But, you know, there are people who would look at being fired in this incredibly public way and say, “Oh my god, it’s the worst thing that could happen.”

But in another way, what a gift I got. The gift I received was freedom. To do whatever I chose.

M | What would you say to other women in such situations?

F | I have to be realistic and say I had a great luxury: My freedom came with financial security. For many women, freedom is terrifying because they don’t know how they’re going to take ends meet, how they’re going to take care of their families. That’s a whole different experience.

M | Was there pressure to take another CEO job, to be that top woman in corporate America?

F | I consciously said, “I don’t want to be a CEO again.” Never say never, but there are many opportunities to make a difference. Being a CEO is a privilege, but it is also confining. You represent an institution; you have responsibility for thousands and thousands of people—their investments, their careers. Now I am a free agent. And that’s very liberating.

M | Were you happy to get out of the spotlight?

F | It was great. Great! Taking the McCain job, putting myself in the spotlight again, was a big decision, because there’s a cost to it. But when I was asked to play this role, I was able to think it through with a lot of knowledge, having experienced the scrutiny. And this is not the same as being a CEO. It’s about John McCain, being an advocate for him.

M | Have you often chosen male confidants—powerful men—because they’re in a better position than many women to understand you?

F | You know, one unfortunate thing that happens when you’re prominent is that people all of a sudden think you’re some different species. That they can’t relate to you and you can’t relate to them. And honestly speaking, I feel

>> **Powerful pair:** Fiorina, with Condoleezza Rice last May, announces the One Woman Initiative, a public-private venture that supports Muslim women abroad.

like I’m the same person. I have the same kinds of conversations with my girlfriends that I had 25 years ago.

M | When you first lost the job, was there a moment when you looked at your inbox, and it was empty, and you thought, oh my god?

F | The day you suddenly leave a six-year mission, it’s shocking in many ways. But my inbox was filled to overflowing from the minute I left: well-wishers, friends, leaders from around the world—the president of Poland, of South Africa, George Bush.

M | How did you decide what to do next? Did you write up a five-year plan, a 10-year plan?

F | No, no. The way I choose what I’m going to do next, it’s not by plan; it’s, where can I make a positive difference? Where can I learn something new? If you do the best you can with those criteria, opportunity will knock.

M | I see you and Condoleezza Rice as similar in some ways: Stanford graduates, classical pianists, advisers to affable men with strong internal compasses who didn’t necessarily get great grades. Have you two ever discussed this?

F | Truthfully, when Condi and I get together, we don’t talk about politics. We’re either sharing a meal or we’re shopping—for great shoes, great clothes. It’s a fun pastime for millions of women, and guess what, it’s fun for Condi Rice too! And Carly Fiorina!

M | There’s talk of a post for you in a McCain cabinet. Would you want to be Treasury secretary? Commerce?

F | You know, that’s a subject I won’t speculate on.

M | I’ve also heard rumors you might run for governor of California in 2010.

F | I won’t speculate.

M | Let’s put it this way: After what you went through at HP, do you think you could handle the slings and arrows of running for public office?

F | Yes. *That* I do think. ☺

