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The B-Word? You Betcha.

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By Andi Zeisler

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When you work for a magazine called Bitch, the phone tends to ring a lot when the word pops up in the news.

When the New York City Council announced a symbolic ban on the word several months back, the phone rang. When [New York Knicks](#) coach [Isiah Thomas](#) defended his use of the term toward [Anucha Browne Sanders](#), a former Knicks marketing executive who won a sexual harassment suit last month, it rang some more. And since one of [Sen. John McCain's supporters](#) used the B-word to refer to [Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) in a question last week, it has been ringing like crazy.

People want to know whether it is still a bad word. They want to know whether I support its use in public discourse. Or they already think it's a bad word and want to discuss whether its use has implications for free speech or sexual harassment or political campaigns.

The other thing about working for a magazine called Bitch is that you really can't cop to being totally sick of having this conversation. But I am. Still, I'll continue to say the same things I always say, partly because talking about the word is an occupational responsibility/hazard and partly because, despite the fatigue, I believe them.

So here goes: Bitch is a word we use culturally to describe any woman who is strong, angry, uncompromising and, often, uninterested in pleasing men. We use the term for a woman on the street who doesn't respond to men's catcalls or smile when they say, "Cheer up, baby, it can't be that bad." We use it for the woman who has a better job than a man and doesn't apologize for it. We use it for the woman who doesn't back down from a confrontation.

So let's not be disingenuous. Is it a bad word? Of course it is. As a culture, we've done everything possible to make sure of that, starting with a constantly perpetuated mindset that deems powerful women to be scary, angry and, of course, unfeminine -- and sees uncompromising speech by women as anathema to a tidy, well-run world.

It's for just these reasons that when Lisa Jarvis and I started the magazine in 1996, no other title was even up for consideration. As young women who had been bombarded with the word for, say, daring to walk down the street in tank tops, we knew what kinds of insults would be hurled when we started publishing articles on sexism in consumer and popular culture.

When Lisa and I were on tour with a 10th-year anniversary anthology, men wandered up to us after several readings to ask, nervously, whether we hated men -- or whether men were "allowed" to read the magazine. We always told them the same thing: If you actually read the magazine -- which includes everything from essays on racism in the modeling industry to columns on the marketing of the HPV drug [Gardasil](#) -- you'll find that it's not about hating men but about elevating women. But too many people don't see the difference. And, at least in part, that's why the B-word is still such a problematic term.

In fact, we hoped that we could reclaim it for mouthy, smart women in much the way that "queer"

had been repurposed by gay radicals. As Lisa wrote in the magazine's mission statement, "If being an outspoken woman means being a bitch, we'll take that as a compliment, thanks."

I'm guessing that Hillary Clinton, though probably not a reader of our magazine, has a somewhat similar stance on the word. After all, people who don't like Clinton have been throwing the slur at her since at least 1991. So everybody else in the room laughed knowingly when a woman at a campaign event in [South Carolina](#) last Monday asked McCain, "How do we beat the bitch?"

In fact, the most surprising thing about the whole dust-up (available on [YouTube](#) for the world to see) is that something like it didn't happen sooner. Sure, it was disrespectful of McCain to laugh off the insult. (Rather than admonishing the questioner, he called it an "excellent question," then added, "I respect Senator Clinton.") And sure, the woman who asked the question was transparently courting sound-bite fame. (Congratulations, faceless woman! Stay classy!) But for Clinton, this episode has to be pretty much a case of another day, another insult.

These days, the people hurling the term at Clinton are her direct opponents: Republicans, social conservatives, assorted Schlafly-ites and Coulter-ites, and that sludgy, amorphous pool of across-the-board woman-haters.

Their hatred for Clinton has nothing to do with whether she fits the [Merriam-Webster](#) Dictionary definition: "a malicious, spiteful, or domineering woman -- sometimes used as a generalized term of abuse." It certainly has nothing to do with her stance on particular issues. When these people call Clinton (or House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#), or Sen. [Dianne Feinstein](#) or former vice presidential candidate [Geraldine Ferraro](#)) a bitch, or even the cutesier "rhymes-with-witch," it's an expression of pure sexism -- a hope that they can shut up not only one woman but every woman who dares to be assertive. Simply put: If you don't like Clinton's stance on, say, health care or [Iraq](#), there are plenty of ways to say so without invoking her gender.

Plenty of people are lukewarm on Clinton, for a variety of reasons: her support for the anti-gay Defense of Marriage Act, her ham-fisted attempts to put forth a clear position on Iraq, the fear that she would be just as beholden to corporate interests as her predecessor. Then there are the women who chafe at the idea that they're expected to vote their sex rather than their specific politics. But very few of these people seem to worry that Clinton isn't warm enough, or that she's too dowdy or mannish or whatever can't-win descriptor is lobbed her way daily.

So the word remains as incendiary as ever. (Sorry, Sen. McCain.) Back in 1996, a time when the word was just barely squeaking past the censors on network TV, I would never have thought it could get any more loaded. (Same for the word "feminism," but that's a whole other story.) But the rise of the first serious female front-runner for the presidency has proved me wrong.

On the street, in music and in the boardroom, it's the word that won't go away. Isiah Thomas's somewhat bumbling claim during his sexual harassment trial that casual, off-the-cuff usage makes the term less problematic when done within the black community didn't fly with the judge, and it doesn't fly with plenty of other folks.

A few years ago, the [New York Times](#) reported on the phenomenon of men using the term to describe other men, a use that has roots in the social dynamics of prison populations but has since spread to the realms of sports, rap music and junior high schools everywhere. The article reasoned that the term was becoming, if not respectable, then increasingly no big deal. I disagree -- it's simply another way to denigrate women.

I'm all for a lively discussion of how the word is used in daily life: by men, by women, in jest, in earnest. But I don't foresee that dialogue taking place in a political arena that considers mere femaleness a deficiency. Talking about the use of the word -- against Clinton, Browne Sanders or everyday women everywhere -- just isn't helpful if we don't also address the many unsaid words that follow in its wake.

My own definition of the term being what it is, I can confidently say that I want my next president to be a bitch, and that goes for men and women. Outspoken? Check. Commanding? Indeed. Unworried about pleasing everybody? Sure. Won't bow to pressure to be "nice"? You bet.

And guess what? I'm not even sure that person is Hillary Clinton.

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