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Ask Hadley

Why does Hillary Clinton wear such bad clothes?

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Hadley Freeman
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Why does Hillary Clinton wear such bad clothes? With a budget that big, surely she can afford a stylist? And does it matter?

Anonymous, via email

As fashion designers have long said, one finds the motivation behind women's personal style in the most unusual of places. And so we turn, naturally, to Lake of Fire, Tony Kaye's brutal documentary about abortion in the US. In this film a certain Father West from Colorado comes closer than many to explaining why Hillary insists on dressing as she does. Fr West isn't a Hillary fan, you see (and I somewhat doubt he supports Obama either), but he particularly doesn't like "that Hillary Clinton, with her dress up to her hips, telling our little children what they must and mustn't do".

Clinton doesn't tend to wear her dress up to her hips, and it's unlikely that she would even if Fr West hadn't counselled her against it. But the two suggestions in his statement - that she is a woman and therefore dangerously sexy, but also a woman and therefore a tedious maternal nag - go some way to explaining the sexless, lumpen style that Clinton has settled on for her presidential campaign.

(True, the fact that Fr West also claims that Clinton and her husband have been "seduced by Satan" might, one could think, somewhat mitigate the legitimacy of his argument, but, to adapt an old American business saying, no one ever went broke overestimating the power of the Christian right in the US.)

It is obvious to the point of cliché that Clinton is in a trickier position in many ways than Obama: when he is emotional, he is persuasive; when she is emotional, she is betraying her feminist roots. So just as Obama can cut a dash in his slimline, clearly style-conscious suits, Clinton has to hide herself in garishly coloured squares going under the name of "jackets", or else risk being dismissed as so vain that she would be too busy putting on her lipstick to respond to an international terror threat.

But is this necessarily true? One need only look at Condoleezza Rice to see that, contrary to what some might think, American voters aren't always horrified to see a woman in power who doesn't look like Eleanor Roosevelt, and Rice has to placate a far more conservative group of people than the one Clinton is meant to be wooing. Nor did Rice's appearance several years ago in US Vogue seem to harm her credibility. Clinton, on the other hand, was so fearful of such a possibility that she backed out of a shoot with the magazine at the last minute last year, provoking a diatribe from Vogue's editor, Anna Wintour. To make matters even worse for Clinton, who should appear that same month on the cover of Men's Vogue but Obama, appearing very suave and relaxed, whereas Clinton now looked as if she was neurotically focus grouping her campaign to death.

When Clinton complained in a debate just before the March 4 primaries that she "always" got the tougher time from the press, there was another clue to her personal style. It is as if Clinton - incredibly, given what her husband went through - seems to be under the impression that the media is always fair. So last year, when there was a bit of a hoo-ha in the US press about Clinton showing some cleavage, instead of dismissing it as the load of misogynistic nonsense it was, she seems to have taken this to heart and buried herself ever since in shapeless, defeminised, frequently yellow (yellow!) suits.

Of course a woman shouldn't be denied the presidency just because she can't dress well, but that is not the point with Clinton - she has always carefully tailored her style to what she thinks the electorate desires. Just look back at photographs from when Bill was elected and Hillary was wearing pleated skirts and alice bands, looking very much like a Sloane circa 1984. In short, she is doing what she thinks she should as opposed to having a splinter of courage and being true to herself. Which kinda makes you wonder what sort of leader she would be. And that, Anonymous, is why it matters.

Should there be an age limit on jeans?

MS (almost 69), by email

Personally, I think there should be a limit on jeans, full stop. Why, oh why does everyone wear them? They're uncomfortable, they fade, they're no better than a decent pair of trousers - what gives (not the waistbands, that's for sure)? But since you ask, MS, no, there shouldn't. In fact, I find older people very fetching in a pair of jeans, far more so than their younger counterparts. To wit, look at a picture of P Diddy in his jeans. Yes, ewww. Now look at Tommy Lee Jones sporting the denim. Oooh, sexy. Case, obviously, closed.

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