Were to vote today, American voters would elect Hillary Clinton as the 45th President of the United States. The first woman president who would make history with her election, would not enter the White House with her last name, Rodham, but with her husband’s, Clinton. And, if things were to go in the opposite direction, and, among her Republican opponents, were to prevail Carly Fiorina, the former number one of Hewlett-Packard, the new republican Madam President would have at her side a First Man to whom she owes her name: Frank Fiorina. (VERSIONE ITALIANA)

In American politics, at the highest levels, there are many women who keep their husband surname, as Nancy Pelosi, born D’Alesandro, a former House Speaker and presently leader of the House Democrats; or Senator Barbara Boxer, born Levy; or the Supreme Court justice Ruth Ginsburg, born Bader. Elizabeth Warren, born Herring, standard bearer of the Democratic Left, is married since 1980 to Bruce Mann, and still carries the surname of her first husband, Jim Warren. Media, on the other hand, seldom refer to a female political figure or to a business manager with her maiden name, although – interestingly for the European readers – it is also a common practice writing the middle initial of a public figure, not only if he is a member of a dynasty (George W. Bush).

According to the etiquette which is still in use in most parts of America, a couple is introduced, on formal occasions, with only the name and the surname of the husband. His wife’s first name is not even mentioned.

Yet, in the United States, where no university of high or low rank does not have a department or a field of women studies and / or gender studies, and where the attention to “political correctness” is very high, the choice of Hillary (and Carly) and of other powerful women provoke no eyebrows, not even in the leftist and progressive circles.

The costume is changing, though, exceptions are more and more numerous, in many spheres of the American life, also because of the significant increase in professional women in positions of power.

What pushes this change – adopting his/her own name – is also the increasingly visible presence and role of gays in the American society, in politics, in the military, in the religion, in the business. Which also poses new problems in the “codes of conduct” in all fields (for example, the distinction
of public toilets for women and men, is called into question in liberal areas of the US) and in the etiquette and in the social codes. As a matter of fact it is already on the table the issue of how to relate to the partner of a gay or a lesbian possible future president, and to both of them, a scenario which is not so far away, after the election of the first African-American president and, perhaps, the first woman president.

Interestingly, in the modern American electoral campaigns candidates increasingly tend to drop their last name of a candidate, focusing only on their first name, especially if it is an easy name to be remembered name or easily becoming iconic. In the current Clinton campaign, she is just Hillary, there is mostly only her name on the pins stickers and posters of her campaign. Same with Carly Fiorina. When she runned last year against Barbara Boxer for one of the two senate seats in California, and lost, she led her campaign just like “Carly”.

This narrative “trick” not only serves to cut the distance of the candidate from the electorate, it makes appear the candidate like “my own man” (Jeb Bush’s words), not a family affair, and make look the candidate just like any other ordinary guy. But at the same time, the family name, written in smaller characters, keeps the candidate in balance, on a double level of communication, according to the kind of audience he/she has to face.

In the case of Jeb Bush, it is clear that he emphasizes his name over his family name, without of course never giving it up, if and when needed (for example when he meets his big donors, for whom Bush is a hallmark).

Barack Obama had and still has an opposite problem: to let audiences forget his middle name, Hussein, while not making look too exotic and “non-American” his “funny name”. He has achieved his goal mainly with a style and manners perfectly in tune with the gravitas of his high office, as it befits a Harvard and Columbia alumnus. Up to appear aloof and cerebral, the opposite of the stereotype caricature usually sewn to African-Americans. Nevertheless, the campaign of the most stupid and brutal conservative right against his “unproved” American citizenship was and is one of the most shameful pages of the American presidential history.

In the American society – mobile and demographically very diverse – in which pronunciation and writing of non-English names and surnames often result surprisingly distorted, and where so many names, because of the difficulty of their pronunciation and spelling, have been modified or changed (or they can be changed even just on a whim), it can happen that a candidate is asked why he changed his last name, and why he gave different explanations in different times.

This is what happened to Gary Hart, in 1988, the “new democrat” who had not only the smile but all it was needed to become “the new John Kennedy”. But he failed miserably in his enterprise not
Clinton, the American elections: what’s in a name?

only for his hot experiences of marital betrayal but also for having changed, he was 25, his family name from Hartpence to Hart (and providing a different birth date in different circumstances). A bizarre behavior which reinforced his image of a liar (about his relationship with Donna Rice) and of an unreliable person, the very image that an implacable campaign the media were mounting against him (it was the first sex scandal to weigh on the fate of an American politician).

It is clear that the prospect of a “Madam President” offers a lot of juicy meat on the grill of a media circus more and more interested in the “very personal” sides of the candidates. And of course the journalistic curiosity is already at least fifty percent devoted to Bill (what he will do in the course of Hillary’s campaign? and how he will behave once again, back in the White House, this time as the First Man?).

Right, how to call him, when he will side Madam President in the official occasions? Last January, Rachael Ray asked him how he wanted it to be called, and he joked: “Adam.”. Yes, like the first man on earth.

Inevitably, with the name Clinton, resurfaces the sad and hard story that accompanies this famous surname which is again on the front pages, everyday.

Yet, Bill’s father was actually William Jefferson “Bill” Blythe, as the former president recalls in his memoirs, “My Life”.

On May 17, 1946, Bill’s father, who was a salesman, “was driving from Chicago to Hope to fetch his wife. Late at night, he lost control of his car, when the right front tire blew out on a wet road. He was thrown clear of the car but landed in, or crawled into, a drainage ditch. He drowned, only 28 years old, married 2 years & 8 months, only 7 months of which he had spent with Mother”.

William Jefferson III – Bill as the future 42 president of USA would have been called - was born three months later. In 1950, Virginia married Roger Clinton, an owner of the local Buick dealership. Though Bill loved his stepfather, Roger’s alcoholism and subsequent abuse of his mother would lead to Bill’s intervening on numerous occasions with physical force, each time resulting in his stepfather’s arrest.

And, yes, the name of that irascible and violent man, who died of alcohol abuse, has entered the presidential history of America once, and possibly twice. Like the “funny name” of Barack Obama. Because throughout modern American history, ordinary Joe and the president of United States have never been too far from each other, and, as a matter of fact, the American history, in its best pages, is the result of incredible stories like the ones behind the Clintons and Obama.

JUDITH STILES WRITES:

Interesting article.
I think the name issue with these women in politics simply came down to which name was more centrist and all-American, and that is the one they chose.

Would you rather be a Herring or a Warren? A Rodham or a Clinton?
Herring and Rodham are easy to poke fun at and are not middle of the road/all American. . .
Often it comes down to which name will gain more respect? Barry Obama or Barack Obama? He was called Barry as a youth. Would Gary Hart gain more respect with Hartpence? Probably not.
The name these people chose tells us most about their inner workings and aspirations for a certain type of identity.
I did not ever change my name because my name is my name and always has been. I was lucky I got a good one.
People like to reinvent themselves, especially politicians. These people happen to be wishy-washy politicians who seem to have a lust for intellectual and political attention and sadly they do not have a great determination to follow their true moral compass no matter what lobbyist gets in their face. I consider them ALL egotistical and lacking in being totally true to their ideals.
Rather they are all led by the need to advance themselves in history and popularity BEFORE their need to do what is moral and just. Barry Obama has allowed the NSA to get into our sacred space of privacy and that act is most likely here to stay. Big Brother is here. Hillary Clinton made a terrible mistake as Secretary of State when she ignored the requests of the ambassador to Libya to get more security but worse, she never took responsibility for that failing and tried to cover it up by the silly little story about protests. She got caught. Elizabeth Warren tries to champion the working class BUT she and her husband made a bloody fortune off the misery of people who foreclosed on their homes.
They went around and bought tons of homes that were foreclosed and then flipped them. I ask: why didn’t she and her husband work vigorously to protect these middle-class people from foreclosure, losing their home and life-dream. Why didn’t they start a program for manageable re-financing or lobby and legislate to protect people from foreclosure? I do not like her. She hides her past and has re-invented herself. I guess when she claimed American Indian as her ethnicity on her Harvard application she was actually a Herring back then. Aha, but she re-invented herself with her new name and new righteous identity as a champion of middle-class people (many who foreclosed on homes that she and her husband scooped up). In my book, they all stink. I have seriously thought of writing in a vote in next election: Preet Bahara, the US Attorney for the Southern District of NY who has been cleaning up Wall Street and is not afraid to follow a strong moral compass and just arrested Sheldon Sliver (Dem) and Dean Skelos (Repub) who are
PROMINENT NY politicians who accepted bribes (business as usual), caved to lobbyists, and were corrupt. It was a VERY gutsy thing to do. President Preet Bahara!