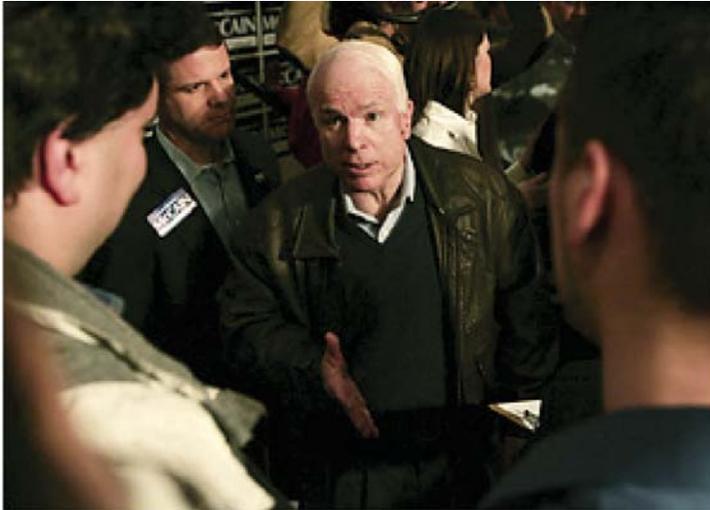


## Campaign Chic: Not Too Cool, Never Ever Hot



John Paul Filo/CBS; Scott Olson/Getty Images, left  
*TRAILWEAR* John McCain, left, going casual in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. David Letterman called Barack Obama's suit "electable."

By Guy Trebay  
THE NEW YORK TIMES

WHEN Senator John McCain's campaign went into a midflight stall last week, it was not only the candidate's hard-line stance on Iraq or problems with his party's conservative wing that enthralled the thumb-tapping hordes of the blogosphere. It was leaks from inside the campaign alleging that Mr. McCain thought his handlers were dressing him up as a metrosexual.

Political blogs like the Stump and the Swamp, and gossipier ones like Radar, had a field day with Mr. McCain's so-called "gay sweater," a V-neck worn over a T-shirt. Fashion insiders, for their part, shrugged off the look as more appropriate to the buffet line at an assisted living center than the pages of *Out*.

But Mr. McCain's so-called gay sweater brought up a perennial political bugbear. How much attention should politicians pay to their clothes?

"There's too much emphasis and scrutiny on this," said Bill Carrick, a Democratic political strategist who managed Richard A. Gephardt's 1988 campaign and was a consultant for the candidate in 2004. "There's a fine

line," Mr. Carrick added, between candidates staying on top of the message their clothes project and their "turning this all into some sort of Hollywood, television, Garry Trudeau, Bob Forehead kind of thing."

There is a fine line, that is, between ignoring Dale Carnegie-era notions of dressing for success (a particularly weird concept in an age of iMoguls in cargo shorts), and the truth instinctively acknowledged by canny public figures and generations of Miss Popularity: people judge us by our clothes.

"That is a tremendous suit you have on," David Letterman told Senator Barack Obama last April when he made an appearance on the "Late Show." "That is a very electable suit."

Mr. Obama's outfit that night was in some ways standard-issue Capitol Hill: a single-breasted two-button suit whose only nod to fashion was in the choice of color — black in place of the regulation dark blue. His shirt was white and starched. His tie was a reassuring blue and of a width (2.5 inches) that locates him squarely in the middle of the sartorial road.

Throughout his campaign, fashion experts say, Mr.



Kevin Sanders/Associated Press

**READ MY PANTSUIT** Hillary Clinton eschews power suits. Railbirds note that she has also lost her trademark hairband.



Jeremy Portje/Telegraph Herald, via Associated Press

**VOTE FOR JEANS** What do rolled-up sleeves say about John Edwards?

Obama has managed to score hits with wardrobe choices — jackets nonchalantly slung over a shoulder, short sleeves in the heartland, neatly tailored suits on television — that somehow telegraph personal comfort without sacrificing authority.

“Voters are looking for a new language and new thinking,” said Dori Molitor, the chief executive of WomanWise, a consulting company specializing in marketing to women. “Obama helps bring in that new language visually by breaking the dress code of blue suit, starched shirt and red tie.”

Unlike some candidates, Mr. Obama “comes across more like a common person and has an aura of authenticity,” she said.

Voters will be hearing a lot about authenticity in the coming months. Mr. Carrick, the Democratic strategist, called it “the one thing you’ve got to worry about.”

“If somebody doesn’t come across as real and believable in their image,” he said, “they’re not going to be believable in their content, either.”

They risk becoming Al Gore in earth tones, in other words, to cite a famously lampooned misstep the former presidential candidate undertook. They risk making the mistake that Nixon did when he wore lace-up shoes on the beach. They risk John Kerry’s damaging decision to turn up on television tinted the tangerine hue of a Mystic Tan.

“You neither want to be seen as somebody who cares too much about appearance or too little,” said Jay Fielden, the editor of Men’s Vogue. His magazine’s July-August cover shows John Edwards looking model-handsome and yet sufficiently populist. He wears, as Mr. Fielden pointed out, a Carhartt field coat from his own closet, presumably in an attempt to deflect scrutiny away from his wealth, his North Carolina McMansion and his costly grooming habits and toward the antipoverty agenda he pursued last week on a sweep through the South.

“There’s a strict code that’s kind of understood, but that you know these guys can’t talk about,” said Mr. Fielden, referring to sartorial guidelines whose very existence is subject to Beltway omerta. “If you get into a situation like McCain did, it ends up seeming like you’re being dressed by your mother. It’s not very macho.”

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And masculinity is always in contention, both at the level of instinctive emotional response among voters, and at the level of scrutiny maintained by the “army of professional interpreters,” as D. A. Miller, a literary and political critic, calls the legion of journalists and bloggers dissecting political minutiae like cyber-sibyls consulting the entrails of birds.

“Everyone reads everyone,” said Professor Miller, who teaches at the University of California, Berkeley.

So, when a candidate appears to be dressed by others, immediately that candidate is interpreted “as gay or effeminate or not butch enough to be president,” Professor Miller said.

That is, unless the candidate is Mrs. Clinton, who has forgone the persona that the National Review contributor Myrna Blyth recently characterized as Hairband Hillary, the first lady whose unsteady self-image led to frequent coiffure changes and endearing wardrobe missteps.

The old Hillary Rodham Clinton has been replaced by a candidate who would never be caught dead in one of Nancy Pelosi’s flaming “Dynasty” suits, clothes that send up power woman flares. Mrs. Clinton’s bid for an aura of Oval Office assurance is orchestrated around a wardrobe of the androgynous beige pantsuits beloved of policy wonks.

“For women it’s a totally separate game, a separate psychology,” said Juliana Glover, a lobbyist and longtime Washington insider. A female politician cannot afford to be too well turned out, Ms. Glover said, or she risks being read as untrustworthy, a virago, or worse, a vixen.

Mrs. Clinton, of course, is far from clueless about fashion, counting among her friends the designer Oscar de la Renta, at whose oceanfront estate in the Dominican Republic the Clintons have spent holidays.

And her traveling chief of staff, Huma Abedin, enjoys semi-legendary status for maintaining an improbable level of chic on the campaign trail with a wardrobe of Yves Saint Laurent, Prada and Marc Jacobs.

“This is a bipartisan phenomenon absolutely,” Ms. Glover said. “Just as one would be suspicious of someone fabulously dressed, wearing top-of-the line skis

who can barely get off the ski lift in Aspen,” she said, “in politics, there’s a high level of suspicion of anyone too finished and coiffed.”

Spit and polish, Ms. Glover said, is one thing. Spit and nail polish is something else.