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Going Rogue: An American Life
By Sarah Palin
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"The only cure for the presidential virus," Congressman Morris Udall once observed, "is embalming fluid."
And, it's increasingly clear, Sarah Palin has got the bug. In her memoir, Going Rogue, the former governor of Alaska and 2008 Republican candidate for vice president sees the hand of providence everywhere. "As every Iditarod musher knows," Palin tells us, "if you're not the lead dog, the view never changes." She's ready, it seems, to head to the Midwest to prepare for the election of 2012.

Palin is a compelling political - and pop culture - phenomenon. She knows how to present herself, on the campaign trail and in her book, as a feisty, folksy citizen willing to speak out on behalf of hardworking, unpretentious, patriotic Americans. A working mom, married to a handsome Yupik Eskimo, with five kids, including an Iraq War veteran, an unwed mother and an infant with Down syndrome. A no-nonsense governor who fought Big Oil, refused per-diem reimbursement for meals for First Family members ("Piper can't eat that much in a month") and signed an energy bill wearing her "best pair of Carhartts, clogs painted by the Alaska artist Romney Dodd and a T-shirt that said FREEDOM." A fundamentalist Christian who encourages her readers to invite God "in to take over... and then see how He will get you through."

And a "common sense conservative." Her political philosophy, she reminds readers, is pretty darn simple. The role of government "is not to perfect us, but to protect us" and get out of the way so that individual liberty and free-market capitalism can flourish. In foreign policy, she indicates, America will remain free and keep the homeland safe if - and only if - the nation stays the course in Iraq and Afghanistan. "And our goal in the War on Terror must be the same as Reagan's: 'We won. They lost.'"

The Sarah Palin in Going Rogue is often attractive and articulate. That's why polls indicate that more Americans now have a favorable impression of her than they did before her book was published.

Nonetheless, questions remain about Palin's competence, credibility and character. Consider her narrative of the 2008 election. She blames everything that went wrong on Steve Schmidt, John
McCain's campaign manager. As she prepared to debate Sen. Joseph Biden, she claims, Schmidt panicked - and could think only of hiring a nutritionist to get Palin off an Atkins diet she wasn't even on!

"Sir," she said to herself, "you've told me how to dress, what to say, who to talk to, a lot of people not to talk to, who my heroes are supposed to be, and we're still losing. Now you're going to tell me what to eat?"

Before Election Day, Palin suggests, Schmidt set in motion a plan to destroy her reputation to save his own. Even if she's right - and there is considerable evidence that her account of the role of "headquarters" is incomplete and inaccurate - she doesn't explain why she put herself in the hands of campaign professionals. If no one "had a good answer" to her questions about spending $150,000 for clothes and accessories, why did she allow herself to be packaged and micro-managed?

Palin's critique of the media also strains credulity. Her insistence that "what used to be called 'mainstream' national media are, in many respects, worthless as a source of factual information," while the "credible broadcasters" are on cable news and talk radio, is best understood as a Rush to judgment. And her assertion that Katie Couric, the CBS TV anchor, was biased, "seeking out the bad moments" in their interview and "systematically" editing out her more substantive answers, verges on slander. Couric's question - "What newspapers and magazines do you regularly read... to stay informed and understand the world?" - may well have been condescending. But surely her response - "All of them. Any of them that have been in front of me all these years" - and not the question constituted the "gotcha."

As it energizes right-wing true-believers, Going Rogue, in all likelihood, will not convince all that many Americans that Palin has the right stuff to be president. Her policy pronouncements, such as they are, remain more rhetorical than analytical. She opposes Barack Obama's stimulus packages and bailouts as "immoral," adding, as would virtually no economist, liberal or conservative, that government spending cannot help combat recessions. She brands the "cap and trade" program to tax businesses according to how much pollution they produce "a Ponzi scheme in which only the government benefits." And, of course, she advocates "getting spending under control," without specifying what she'd cut.

"Sarah's not retreating," her dad, Chuck Heath, Sr., said after she resigned as governor of Alaska. "She's reloading." He's probably right. Feeling her knees stiffen and then creak whenever she stood up, Palin has "started running again." Although it's not entirely clear whether she wants to replace Obama or Oprah Winfrey, she plans to pick up momentum and "turn the corner" toward her goal. And America's. "You betcha."

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