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HBO film 'Game Change' focuses plenty on Palin, but lacks punch

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"Game Change"
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In August 2007, the media pundits were after Republican presidential candidate John McCain (Ed Harris), and he hated being their target. He brought in experienced strategist Steve Schmidt (Woody Harrelson) to take over the senior staff position on his campaign, shaking up the team then headed by campaign manager Rick Davis (Peter McNicol) and including Mark Salter (Jamie Sheridan) and Mark Wallace (Ron Livingston), with Fred Davis (Bruce Altman) as image consultant.

When the primaries were over and McCain was the de facto Republican nominee, he had yet to choose a vice presidential running mate before the Democratic convention in August 2008. The team floated Sen. Joe Lieberman (a miscast, goofy-looking Austin Pendleton), but choosing him, according to Schmidt, was "the right thing to do but the wrong thing to win." Schmidt tells McCain and staff that they needed a "game changer," which meant they had to do four things: win back the independents, excite the base, create distance from the Bush administration and close the gender gap with women. Unless they could regain at least 15 percent of the 20 percent disapproval rate for McCain with women, they had no chance at winning the White House.

Rick Davis does an Internet search for female Republicans holding office, because they didn't really have anyone in mind. He discovers Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin (Julianne Moore), and is riveted by her charisma. She's pro-life, a devout Christian, mother of five and likes to moose hunt. "A woman with a gun," Davis says. "The base will love her."

"She's the maverick choice," Schmidt says when they present her to McCain. They arrange for a swift five-day vet by attorney A.B. Culvahouse. Although the team realizes there may be something they don't know, they move forward and bring Sarah to Arizona.

Palin accepts the invitation to be McCain's running mate, and when Schmidt observes that she seems very calm, she replies, "It's God's plan." Schmidt seems startled to hear this, though he knew of her Christian background. He never took her seriously, and he should have, especially when he let it out that the Palins' oldest daughter was pregnant at 17 and Sarah and Todd Palin (David Barry Gray) were happy about it. The Palins were not happy about Bristol's pregnancy and seem sincerely concerned about sending the wrong message to teens. Schmidt alienated Palin early on by lying to her, though some might call this politics as usual.

From the opening scene with the real Anderson Cooper of CNN interviewing Woody Harrelson's Steve Schmidt for "60 minutes," I was riveted.

"If you had it to do over," Cooper asks, "would you have her on the ticket?"

But the film is not only about Sarah Palin: It's about John McCain and his team that, by this account, failed to serve him well.

The film also shows McCain's flaw of quasi-disengagement and overdependence on advisors. In this modern era of such high-speed information flow, how do you get to the national convention and not have a person in mind for vice president?

From the film, it seems the problem was McCain's personal lack of a clear identity. What you hear most is the "maverick" label rather than policy, conviction or an actual strategic plan. Vietnam was a long time ago, and in 2008, the country was tired of the faux war in Iraq that cost so much in human lives and treasure, though McCain's team does not articulate this aspect very well. A label or a slogan makes a thin political platform on which to stand, especially if that's all there is, and you cannot connect to a man's real heroism in another unpopular war in decades long past.

When four-time Oscar-nominated actress Julianne Moore's Sarah Palin first hits the screen, it's not clear if it is Sarah Palin in the YouTube video or Moore -- the makeup and physical and vocal impersonation is that good. I did a double-take when Moore/Palin watches Tina Fey portray Palin on a "Saturday Night Live" sketch. If the real Sarah Palin watches this movie, I hope someone tapes her watching Moore watching Fey. The thought of this is really funny, and it created a comic moment for me -- and still does. But this razzing by late-night comedians was not at all humorous to Sarah Palin. The superficiality of media also plagued her. The comedians may not have gotten the facts straight, but they seemed to have nailed the truth about Sarah.

I don't think the film makes Sarah Palin look as bad as some people may fear. The story certainly does not blame her, even if it means to, but it does show that she was unprepared to talk about foreign policy and most of the important topics that a vice presidential candidate should know or be familiar with. And to be fair, she did not go looking for the job. Although Schmidt warns her about everything that can go wrong, and though they get her to commit to supporting McCain even about policy she does not agree with, she is not able to be all that these men want her to be.

Her strong point was energy policy, and when she talked about this, she was on the mark as far as the McCain team was concerned. But she could not make up for her narrow worldview and her deficit in world affairs. After the disastrous interview with Katie Couric, the team realized Palin was a good actress, so instead of trying to teach her world affairs in a couple of weeks, they would have her memorize 25 or so statements that she could pivot to -- that is, say what the team wanted her to say. She complied, though it took a tremendous toll. The film shows her as a loving mother, and at her lowest moments, all she wants is to hold her baby.

Palin did go rogue and off McCain's message to her own because she grew tired of being managed, of not being able to be herself, to buy her own clothes. She understood Alaska politics, but national politics in partnership with the national media were (and are) the components of a sharply honed meat grinder that few people can survive.

Palin at the worst was naïve, and this inexperience combined with overconfidence made her unsuitable to play the political game and vulnerable to the campaign leadership and the media.

The film focuses on some serious factual Palin issues. When she takes credit for stopping the famous "bridge to nowhere," boasting that if Alaskans wanted a bridge they would have built it themselves, Schmidt becomes angry. The reality is that Palin supported the bridge when running for governor. Then after the state received the earmarked federal funds, Palin killed the plans for a bridge and managed to keep the federal money for Alaska.

Then there was "Troopergate": Sarah tells the press she was cleared of all wrong-doing in having the state's Public Safety Commissioner fired when he would not fire her former brother-in-law. But Schmidt calls her on this, too, for fudging the truth. In 2006, the Alaskan Legislative Council did find that Palin had violated state ethics laws regarding executive personnel. Then, in 2008, the Alaska State Personnel Board concluded that

Palin did not violate ethics laws. In effect, Palin was not "cleared of all wrong-doing" in so many words, as she stated to the press, but was found "not to have violated any ethics laws." Schmidt realized that the question hanging there is: What is she not telling us?

"Game Change," as it portrays the McCain/Palin campaign, made me feel sympathy for Palin. John McCain should have known better: If he wanted to win, he needed to begin months before by actually having convictions and a point of view beyond that of a maverick.

I missed the memo that said John McCain was a prolific curser. I looked it up; he is. He has a temper, too. The film gets the cursing right, but let his angry persona off easy; it was as if he were a deflated puppet. Palin refused to curse; "flippin'" was as close as she came to swearing.

There are mild moments when the team criticizes then-Sen. Barack Obama, but not on matters of substance. After his triumphant speech in Berlin, Schmidt asks if McCain wants to be a candidate or a celebrity like Obama. Obviously, McCain went the candidate route, but in the age of the 24-/48-hour television news cycle, which Schmidt teaches Palin (and us) about continually and refers to as entertainment (which it is) -- well, it makes you wonder how Schmidt and team could have missed the path to victory so badly.

The film doesn't really critique President Obama either; it's very self-conscious without revealing very much about anyone except Sarah Palin. But it's a good watch. Harrelson's Schmidt calls the McCain campaign "bad reality TV." The film is better than this, but I wanted to know more about these guys. Alas, maybe there wasn't much there to begin with. Are all politics as superficial as this movie portrays? At the end, once Election Day is over and it is clear that McCain has lost, senior adviser Nicolle Wallace (Sarah Paulson), who has tried to mold Palin into the vice presidential candidate, tearfully tells Schmidt that she has a confession to make: She couldn't vote, not even for her own candidate. That's a pretty damning statement, true or not, of all that went down on the McCain campaign trail.

Writer Danny Strong interviewed 25 people close to McCain's campaign in addition to relying on the book, and though the cover letter for the screener I received said Strong reached out to both McCain and Palin, they declined to speak with him. He relied on Palin's books for source material as well. Julianne Moore said in an interview on "The Today Show" last week that she watched Sarah Palin tapes for hours to get the impersonation just right.

Overall, Palin is the focus of "Game Change." She is the most interesting personality, the most developed character in Emmy Award-winning writer Jay Roach's script. Although we know her story, her flaws and verbal foibles, if the film is as accurate as it is supposed to be (based on the insider-informed best-selling book "Game Changer" by journalists Mark Halperin and John Heilemann), there are some moments that reveal levels of her frustration and political commitment I was not aware of.

Yes, Palin was unprepared and lacking in personal insight and awareness of what she didn't know, but McCain's campaign team was made up of a bunch of white guys in suits, except for Fred Davis, for whom every day must have been casual Friday, and Nicolle Wallace. And this team was, for want of a better word, bland. I never got the feeling McCain's team, as played by this ensemble of actors, was in the campaign for keeps, that they really believed in John McCain. I am not sure he believed in himself, but Sarah Palin believed in herself. She knew what she knew, even if it was not enough.

One of the most troubling aspects of the film is when Nicolle Wallace questions Sarah Palin's mental stability. If the inside story here is true, then there is cause to wonder. As recently as October 2011 [1], Nicolle Wallace certainly believed this was true.

Oscar-winning actor Tom Hanks is one of the executive producers for "Game Change." He is also the narrator

for the Obama campaign's new 17-minute documentary [2], "The Road We've Traveled."

The only one with any passion in the film is Julianne Moore's Sarah Palin. I am not sure if this is true, that McCain's team was not passionate or committed. But if you go by the results of the election and this movie, it sure seems so.

"Game Change" doesn't blame anyone in particular on McCain's team for his loss to Obama; it blames the whole bunch, even if it means to pin it all on Sarah Palin. Is it cynical? At worst, yes. If nothing else, it is a sad look inside the current politic process in the United States.

And no, you cannot go back and redo some things.

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