

It Came from Wasilla

Despite her disastrous performance in the 2008 election, Sarah Palin is still the sexiest brand in Republican politics, with a lucrative book contract for her story. But what Alaska's charismatic governor wants the public to know about herself doesn't always jibe with reality. As John McCain's top campaign officials talk more candidly than ever before about the meltdown of his vice-presidential pick, the author tracks the signs—political and personal—that Palin was big trouble, and checks the forecast for her future.

By Todd S. Purdum



The pattern is inescapable: she takes disagreements personally, and swiftly deals vengeance on enemies, real or perceived. *Illustration by Risko.*

The crowds begin streaming into the Evansville Auditorium and Convention Centre a couple of hours before the arrival of the “special guest speaker” at the Vanderburgh County Right to Life dinner on a soft Indiana spring evening—nearly 2,200 people in the banquet hall, 800 more in an adjacent auditorium watching the proceedings on a live video feed. The menu is thick slices of roast pork and red velvet cake, washed down with pitchers of iced tea, and when Sarah Palin finally enters, escorted by a phalanx of sheriff's deputies and local police, she is mobbed. The organizers of the dinner, billed as “the largest pro-life banquet in the world,” have courted Palin for weeks with care packages of locally made chocolates, doughnuts, barbecue, and pastries, and she has requited by choosing Evansville, a conservative stronghold in southern Indiana, as the site of her first public speech outside Alaska in 2009. Like Richard M. Nixon, who chose the coalfield town of Hyden, Kentucky, for his first post-resignation public appearance, Palin has come to a place where she is guaranteed a hero's reception. She is not only a staunch foe of abortion but also the mother of a boy, Trig, who was born with Down syndrome just a few months before John McCain chose Palin as his running mate. The souvenir program for this evening's dinner is full of displays for local politicians and businesses, attesting to their pro-life bona fides. An ad for Hahn Realty Corporation reads, “If you need commercial real estate, call Joe Kiefer! Joe is pro-life and a proud supporter of the Vanderburgh County Right to Life.”

As Palin makes her way slowly across the crowded ballroom—dressed all in black; no red Naughty Monkey Double Dare pumps tonight—she is stopped every few inches by adoring fans. She passes the press pen, where at least eight television cameras and a passel of reporters and photographers are corralled, and spots a reporter for a local community newspaper getting ready to take a happy snap with his pocket camera. For a split second she stops, pauses, turns her head and shoulders just so, and smiles. She holds the pose until she's sure the man has his shot and then moves on. A few minutes later, the evening's nominal keynote speaker, the Republican Party's national chairman, Michael Steele, who has been reduced to a footnote in the proceedings, introduces the special guest speaker as "the storm that is the honorable governor of the great state of Alaska, Sarah Palin!"

Just where that storm may be heading is one of the most intriguing issues in American politics today. Palin is at once the sexiest and the riskiest brand in the Republican Party. Her appeal to people in the party (and in the country) who share her convictions and resentments is profound. The fascination is viral, and global. Bill McAllister, until recently Palin's statehouse spokesman, says that he has fielded (and declined) interview requests from France, England, Italy, Switzerland, Israel, Germany, Bulgaria, "and probably other countries I've forgotten about." (Palin, keeping her distance from most domestic media as well, also declined to talk to *V.F.*). Whatever her political future, the emergence of Sarah Palin raises questions that will not soon go away. What does it say about the nature of modern American politics that a public official who often seems proud of what she does not know is not only accepted but applauded? What does her prominence say about the importance of having (or lacking) a record of achievement in public life? Why did so many skilled veterans of the Republican Party—long regarded as the more adroit team in presidential politics—keep loyally working for her election even after they privately realized she was casual about the truth and totally unfit for the vice-presidency? Perhaps most painful, how could John McCain, one of the cagiest survivors in contemporary politics—with a fine appreciation of life's injustices and absurdities, a love for the sweep of history, and an overdeveloped sense of his own integrity and honor—ever have picked a person whose utter shortage of qualification for her proposed job all but disqualified him for his?

In the aftermath of the November election, the conventional wisdom among Palin's supporters in the Republican establishment was that she should go home, keep her head down, show that she could govern effectively, and quietly educate herself about foreign and domestic policy with the help of a cadre of experienced advisers. She has done none of this. Rather, she has pursued an erratic course that, for her, may actually represent the closest thing there is to True North. Her first trip to Washington since the election was to attend the dinner of the Alfalfa Club, an elite group of politicians and businesspeople whose sole function is an annual evening in honor of a plant that would "do anything for a drink." Some of her handlers first said she had accepted—though she then went on to decline—an invitation to speak at the annual June fund-raiser for the congressional Republicans. She created a political-action committee—SarahPAC—with the help of John Coale, a prominent Democratic trial lawyer. But just months into its existence the PAC's chief fund-raiser, Becki Donatelli, a veteran of Republican campaigns, suddenly quit. One person familiar with the situation told me that Donatelli could not stand dealing with Palin's political spokeswoman in Alaska, Meghan Stapleton, who has drawn withering fire from Palin friends and critics alike for being an ineffective adviser. Also with Coale's help, Palin formed the grandiosely named Alaska Fund Trust, to defray a reported half million dollars in legal expenses arising from a slew of formal ethics complaints against her in her home state—prompting yet another formal complaint, that the fund itself constitutes an ethical breach. Onetime supporters have become harsh critics. Walter Hickel, 89, a former two-term governor and interior secretary, and the grand old man of Alaska politics, who was co-chair of Palin's winning gubernatorial campaign, in 2006, now washes his hands of her. He told me simply, "I don't give a damn what she does."

Palin is unlike any other national figure in modern American life—neither Anna Nicole

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Smith nor Margaret Chase Smith but a phenomenon all her own. The clouds of tabloid conflict and controversy that swirl around her and her extended clan—the surprise pregnancies, the two-bit blood feuds, the tawdry in-laws and common-law kin caught selling drugs or poaching game—give her family a singular status in the rogues’ gallery of political relatives. By comparison, Billy Carter, Donald Nixon, and Roger Clinton seem like avatars of circumspection. Palin’s life has sometimes played out like an unholy amalgam of *Desperate Housewives* and *Northern Exposure*.

Another aspect of the Palin phenomenon bears examination, even if the mere act of raising it invites intimations of sexism: she is by far the best-looking woman ever to rise to such heights in national politics, the first indisputably fertile female to dare to dance with the big dogs. This pheromonal reality has been a blessing and a curse. It has captivated people who would never have given someone with Palin’s record a second glance if Palin had looked like Susan Boyle. And it has made others reluctant to give her a second chance because she looks like a beauty queen.

Soon Palin will take a crack at her own story: she has signed a book contract for an undisclosed but presumably substantial sum, and has chosen Lynn Vincent, a senior writer at the Christian-conservative *World* magazine, as co-author of the memoir, which is to be published next year not only by HarperCollins but also in a special edition by Zondervan, the Bible-publishing house, that may include supplemental material on faith. During the presidential campaign, Palin’s deep ignorance about most aspects of foreign and domestic policy provided her with a powerful political reason not to submit to interviews. The forthcoming book adds a powerful commercial reason.

Palin is a cipher by choice. When she chooses to reveal herself, what she reveals is not always the same thing as the truth. Her singular refusal to have in-depth conversations with the national media—even Richard Nixon and Dick Cheney, among the most saturnine political figures in modern American history, each submitted to countless detailed interviews over the years—has compounded the challenge of understanding who she really is. There has been Hollywood talk that Palin could star in a reality-TV show about running Alaska, but nothing has come of it yet. Recently, Palin did star in a week-long seriocomic feud with David Letterman over some of his borderline jokes. Meanwhile, she has begun sharing insights several times a day on Twitter, with chipper reports on her own doings and those of her husband, Todd, and the rest of what she calls the “first family.” “Look forward to today’s staff discussion re: my 3rd justice appt to highest court in 3 yrs. Supreme Court truly effects AK’s future,” reads one. And another: “Picking up my handsome little man to rtn to Juneau, Trig got 1st haircut so my little hippie baby’s ready for AK sunshine on his shoulders.”



Palin turns her debate with Joe Biden into a winkathon. *By J. Scott Applewhite/A.P. Images.*

little shop of horrors

The caricature of Sarah Palin that emerged in the presidential campaign, for good and ill, is now ineradicable. The swift journey from her knockout convention speech to Tina Fey’s dead-eyed incarnation of her as Dan Quayle with an updo played out in real time, no less for the bewildered McCain campaign than for the public at large. It is an ironclad axiom of

politics that if a campaign looks troubled from the outside the inside reality is far worse, and the McCain-Palin fiasco was no exception. As in any sudden marriage of convenience in which neither partner really knows the other, there were bound to be bumps. Palin had been on the national Republican radar for barely a year, after a cruise ship of conservative columnists, including *The Weekly Standard's* William Kristol, had stopped in Juneau in 2007 and had succumbed to her charms when she invited them to the governor's house for a luncheon of halibut cheeks. McCain had spent only a couple of hours in Palin's presence before choosing her, and she had pointedly failed to endorse him after he clinched the nomination in March. The difficulties began immediately, with the McCain team's delivery of the bad news that the pregnancy of Palin's daughter Bristol, which was already common knowledge in Alaska and had been revealed to the McCain team at the last minute, could not be kept secret until after the Republican convention.

By the time Election Day rolled around, the staff had been serially pummeled by unflattering press reports about the gaps in Palin's knowledge, her stubborn resistance to direction, and the post-selection spending spree in which she ran up bills of \$150,000 on clothes for herself and her family at high-end stores. The top McCain aides who had tried hard to work with Palin—Steve Schmidt, the chief strategist; Nicolle Wallace, the communications ace; and Tucker Eskew, her traveling counselor—were barely on speaking terms with her, and news organizations were reporting that anonymous McCain aides saw Palin as a “diva” and a “whack job.” Many of the details that led to such assessments have remained obscure. But in a recent series of conversations, a range of people from the McCain-Palin campaign, including members of the high command, agreed to elaborate on how a match they thought so right ended up going so wrong.

The consensus is that Palin's rollout, and even her first television interview, with ABC's Charles Gibson, conducted after an awkward two-week press blackout to allow for intensive cramming at her home in Wasilla, went more or less fine, though it had its embarrassing moments (“You can't blink,” Palin said, when Gibson asked if she'd hesitated to accept McCain's offer) and was much parodied. At least one savvy politician—Barack Obama—believed Palin would never have time to get up to speed. He told his aides that it had taken him four months to learn how to be a national candidate, and added, “I don't care how talented she is, this is really a leap.” The paramount strategic goal in picking Palin was that the choice of a running mate had to ensure a successful convention and a competitive race right after; in that limited sense, the choice worked. But no serious vetting had been done before the selection (by either the McCain *or* the Obama team), and there was trouble in nailing down basic facts about Palin's life. After she was picked, the campaign belatedly sent a dozen lawyers and researchers, led by a veteran Bush aide, Taylor Griffin, to Alaska, in a desperate race against the national reporters descending on the state. At one point, trying out a debating point that she believed showed she could empathize with uninsured Americans, Palin told McCain aides that she and Todd in the early years of their marriage had been unable to afford health insurance of any kind, and had gone without it until he got his union card and went to work for British Petroleum on the North Slope of Alaska. Checking with Todd Palin himself revealed that, no, they had had catastrophic coverage all along. She insisted that catastrophic insurance didn't really count and need not be revealed. This sort of slipperiness—about both what the truth was and whether the truth even mattered—persisted on questions great and small. By late September, when the time came to coach Palin for her second major interview, this time with Katie Couric, there were severe tensions between Palin and the campaign.

By all accounts, Palin was either unwilling, or simply unable, to prepare. In the run-up to the Couric interview, Palin had become preoccupied with a far more parochial concern: answering a humdrum written questionnaire from her hometown newspaper, the *Frontiersman*. McCain aides saw it as easy stuff, the usual boilerplate, the work of 20 minutes or so, but Palin worried intently. At the same time, she grew concerned that her approval ratings back home in Alaska were sagging as she embraced the role of McCain's bad cop. To keep her happy, the chief McCain strategist, Steve Schmidt, agreed to conduct a onetime poll of 300 Alaska voters. It would prove to Palin, Schmidt thought, that everything was all right.

Then came the near-total meltdown of the financial system and McCain's much-derided

decision to briefly “suspend” his campaign. Under the circumstances, and with severely limited resources, Schmidt and the McCain-campaign chairman, Rick Davis, scrapped the Alaska poll and urgently set out to survey voters’ views of the economy (and of McCain’s response to it) in competitive states. Palin was furious. She was convinced that Schmidt had lied to her, a belief she conveyed to anyone who would listen.

The next big milestone for Palin was the debate with Joe Biden, on October 2. An early rehearsal effort in Philadelphia found 20 people sitting in a stifling room with hundreds of sample questions on note cards. Palin just stared down, disengaged, non-participatory. A disaster loomed, so Schmidt made the difficult decision to leave campaign headquarters, in Virginia, and fly to McCain’s vacation retreat in Sedona, Arizona, where it was thought that Palin might be able to relax and recharge, and accept the assistance of a voice coach and a television coach. For three full days—at the height of the campaign—Schmidt dropped virtually all other business to help Palin prepare.

He also enlisted some extra help. By this point, Palin’s relations with Nicolle Wallace—a veteran of the Bush White House and a former CBS News analyst who had tried to help Palin get ready for the Couric interview, and whom Palin blamed for the result—were so strained that campaign aides cast about for someone who could serve as a calming presence: Palin’s horse whisperer. They settled on Mark McKinnon, a smart, funny, soft-spoken former Democrat from Texas. McKinnon had long admired McCain, and had begun the Republican primary season helping him out—though warning that he would never work against Obama in the general election. But now McKinnon, whose role in helping prepare Palin has not been previously reported, and who declined to elaborate on it to *V.F.*, changed his mind and quietly signed on. Mark Salter, McCain’s longtime aide, says that McKinnon was picked because “he’s got a lovely manner. You sort of want a guy who’s very easygoing, gives good advice, and doesn’t add to the natural nervousness.”

Palin worked hard, and the results were adequate. Palin’s winking “Can I call you Joe?” performance against Biden was nothing like a disaster. In fact, it seems to have emboldened her enough that the next day she openly voiced disagreement with the McCain team’s decision to pull out of active competition in Michigan. When orders or advice from McCain headquarters began to conflict with her own impulses, aides told me, she simply did what she wanted to do. “The problem was she came down from Alaska with basically Todd as a sort of trusted bellwether adviser,” one McCain friend says. “She was given this staff of 20. It was probably too big a staff. To be real honest with you, I don’t think she could figure out who to trust.” All the while, Palin was coping not only with the crazed life of any national candidate on the road but also with the young children traveling with her. Some top aides worried about her mental state: was it possible that she was experiencing postpartum depression? (Palin’s youngest son was less than six months old.) Palin maintained only the barest level of civil discourse with Tucker Eskew, the veteran G.O.P. operative who had been made her chief minder. A third party had to shuttle between them to convey even the most rudimentary messages. “She started to hedge her bets,” the same McCain friend says. “Frequently, she would be concerned about how something would play in Alaska. What? You’re worried about your backside in Alaska when there are hundreds of millions of dollars being spent?” One longtime McCain friend and frequent companion on the trail was heard to refer to Palin as “Little Shop of Horrors.”

Election Night brought what McCain aides saw as the final indignity. Palin decided she would make her own speech at the ticket’s farewell to the faithful, at the Arizona Biltmore, in Phoenix. When aides went to load McCain’s concession speech into the teleprompter, they found a concession speech for Palin—written by Bush speechwriter Matthew Scully, who had also been the principal drafter of her convention speech—already on the system. Schmidt and Salter told Palin that there was no tradition of Election Night speeches by running mates, and that she wouldn’t be giving one. Palin was insistent. “Are those John’s wishes?” she asked. They were, she was told. But Palin took the issue to McCain himself, raising it on the walk from his suite to the outdoor rally. Again the answer was no.

polar disorder

There is virtually nothing about Palin's performance in the fall campaign that should have come as a surprise to John McCain. Had he really attempted to learn something about her before the fateful day of August 29, 2008, when he announced that she was his choice for running mate, he would easily have discerned all the traits that he belatedly came to know.

The narrative that the McCain campaign employed to explain Palin's selection and to promote her qualifications—that she was a fresh-faced reformer who had taken on Alaska's big oil companies and the corrupt Republican establishment, governing with bipartisan support—was never more than superficially true. In dozens of conversations during a recent visit to Alaska, it was easy to learn that there has always been a counter-narrative about Palin, and indeed it has become the dominant one. It is the story of a political novice with an intuitive feel for the temper of her times, a woman who saw her opportunities and coolly seized them. In every job, she surrounded herself with an insular coterie of trusted friends, took disagreements personally, discarded people who were no longer useful, and swiftly dealt vengeance on enemies, real or perceived. "Remember," says Lyda Green, a former Republican state senator who once represented Palin's home district, and who over the years went from being a supporter of Palin's to a bitter foe, "her nickname in high school was 'Barracuda.' I was never called Barracuda. Were you? There's a certain instinct there that you go for the jugular."

The first thing McCain could have learned about Palin is what it means that she is from Alaska. More than 30 years ago, John McPhee wrote, "Alaska is a foreign country significantly populated with Americans. Its languages extend to English. Its nature is its own. Nothing seems so unexpected as the boxes marked 'U.S. Mail.'" That description still fits. The state capital, Juneau, is 600 miles from the principal city, Anchorage, and is reachable only by air or sea. Alaskan politicians list the length of their residency in the state (if they were not born there) at the top of their biographies, and are careful to specify whether they like hunting, fishing, or both. There is little sense of government as an enduring institution: when the annual 90-day legislative session is over, the legislators pack up their offices, files, and computers, and take everything home. Alaska's largest newspaper, the *Anchorage Daily News*, maintains no full-time bureau in Juneau to cover the statehouse. As in any resource-rich developing country with weak institutions and woeful oversight, corruption and official misconduct go easily unchecked. Scrutiny is not welcome, and Alaskans of every age and station, of every race and political stripe, unself-consciously refer to every other place on earth with a single word: Outside.

So, of all the puzzling things that Sarah Palin told the American public last fall, perhaps the most puzzling was this: "Believe me, Alaska is like a microcosm of America."

Believe me, it is not.

But Sarah Palin herself is a microcosm of Alaska, or at least of the fastest-growing and politically crucial part of it, which stretches up the broad Matanuska-Susitna Valley, north of Anchorage, where she came of age and cut her political teeth in her now famous hometown, Wasilla. In the same way that Lyndon Johnson could only have come from Texas, or Bill Clinton from Arkansas, Palin and all that she is could only have come from Wasilla. It is a place of breathtaking scenery and virtually no zoning. The view along Wasilla's main drag is of Chili's, IHOP, Home Depot, Target, and Arby's, and yet the view from the Palins' front yard, on Lake Lucille, recalls the Alpine splendor visible from Captain Von Trapp's terrace in *The Sound of Music*. It is culturally conservative: the local newspaper recently published an article that asked, "Will the Antichrist be a Homosexual?" It is in this Alaska—where it is possible to be both a conservative Republican and a pothead, or a foursquare Democrat and a gun nut—that Sarah Palin learned everything she knows about politics, and about life. It was in this environment that her ambition first found an outlet in public office, and where she first tasted the 151-proof Everclear that is power.

The second thing McCain could have discovered about Palin is that no political principle or personal relationship is more sacred than her own ambition. To be sure, Palin is “conservative,” whatever that means, but she can be all over the lot in the articulation of her platform. In a June interview with Sean Hannity, she sounded like a New Dealer when she proudly proclaimed that “a share of our oil-resource revenue goes back to the people who own the resources—imagine that.” In the next breath, sounding like a “starve the beast” conservative, she said she hoped the price of oil, the principal variable of state revenue, would not rise too much. “The fewer dollars that the state of Alaska government has, the fewer dollars we spend, and that’s good for our families and the private sector.” Palin has always been a party of one. She gained the mayoralty of Wasilla in 1996 by turning against the incumbent, John Stein, who had been one of her mentors when she was on the city council, and injecting sharply partisan issues such as gun rights and abortion into what had previously been a low-key local contest. She fired the police chief, eased out the museum director and the city planner, and fired and then rehired the librarian (who had opposed book censorship). Palin was entitled to make the dismissals, and she variously justified them on the grounds of budget difficulties or the need for a team that she could be sure would support her efforts. But the *Frontiersman* accused Palin of confusing her election with a “coronation.”

Even in broad outline the story of how a small-town mayor became the youngest governor in Alaska history seems improbable. There was her long-shot campaign for lieutenant governor, in 2002, in which she came in second against a veteran state senator in a five-way race; her appointment as chair (and ethics supervisor) of the state’s Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, which oversees drilling and production; and her resignation from that post, charging that a fellow commissioner, Randy Ruedrich, the chair of the Alaska Republican Party, was conducting political business on state time. In a climate where the sitting Republican governor, Frank Murkowski, had become the most unpopular figure in the state, and where the F.B.I. was swarming over Alaska, pursuing the corruption probe that later ensnared the state’s senior U.S. senator, Ted Stevens, Palin seemed like a breath of fresh air.

Yet Palin herself cut corners. Ruedrich, Palin’s target on the Conservation Commission, was forced to resign, but in 2006, as Palin was beginning her campaign for governor, a conservative columnist dug up e-mail messages showing that she too had conducted campaign business from her mayoral office. Confronted by the columnist, Palin acknowledged that she had erred. Then she turned around and issued a press release, demanding to know why the columnist was publishing smears.

Palin won the crucial support of Walter Hickel in her campaign for governor in part by supporting one of his longtime hobbyhorses, an “all-Alaska” natural-gas pipeline that would pump gas to the port of Valdez for export worldwide. As the campaign wore on, Palin backed away from that idea. “I helped her out, she got elected,” Hickel says now. “She never called me once in her life after that.”

Palin’s 2006 campaign for governor relied at first almost wholly on a ragtag band of true believers. “She had this little grassroots group that was going around the state on a wing and a prayer, talking up her platitudes,” says John Bitney, an old friend of Palin’s from junior-high band in Wasilla, where he played the trombone and she played the flute. Bitney at the time was a lobbyist and veteran legislative aide in Juneau, and he began passing political intelligence and advice to Palin. When Palin routed Murkowski in the Republican primary, she still had no real professional campaign staff. Bitney signed on, forming a triumvirate with Curtis Smith, a veteran Anchorage media consultant, and Kris Perry, another old friend of Palin’s from Wasilla, who functioned as her personal assistant and also held the title of campaign manager. Palin began preparing for a general-election campaign against Tony Knowles, the former two-term Democratic governor, and Andrew Halcro, a former Republican legislator who was running as an independent.

She apparently didn’t like preparing for debates back then either. “In the campaign for governor, they’re prepping her for debate,” Curtis Smith’s former business partner, Jim Lottsfeldt, told me recently in Anchorage, “and Curtis says, ‘The debate prep’s going

horribly. Every time we try to help her with an answer, she just gets mad.” (Smith himself says, “Unfortunately, I don’t recall having that exact conversation with Mr. Lottsfeldt, nor do I recall my experience, including debate prep, with Governor Palin in the light he portrayed.”) But Palin’s lack of knowledge turned out not to hurt her. Andrew Halcro later remembered that he and Palin once compared notes about their many encounters, and she said, “Andrew, I watch you at these debates with no notes, no papers, and yet when asked questions, you spout off facts, figures, and policies, and I’m amazed. But then I look out into the audience and I ask myself, Does any of this really matter?”

Palin’s victory that November was one of the flukiest successes in modern American politics. Rebecca Braun, the publisher of the *Alaska Budget Report*, a respected nonpartisan newsletter, describes the result as something “far beyond anything you could explain in terms of intellect or training.” But Palin had promised three big things, and with the help of Bitney, who became her liaison with the legislature, and Mike Tibbles, her chief of staff, she achieved them. She increased oil taxes; she won the legislative framework for a gas pipeline, though not the one Hickel wanted; and she signed significant ethics reforms. In all three efforts she won strong cooperation from Democrats. “She had an easy go of it,” says Larry Persily, a former editorial-page editor of the *Anchorage Daily News*, who went to work in Palin’s Washington office but is now a critic of the governor’s. “The Democrats were in love with her. She slew the oil-company Gorgon, and came in on the magic carpet of oil-tax reform and ethics. The Democrats were intoxicated because she wasn’t Frank Murkowski.” Rising oil prices provided an added lift. Palin was able to increase the annual distribution from the state’s Permanent Fund to about \$3,000 per resident, almost double the amount received the previous year. She could be a fiscal conservative and a big spender all at the same time.



But there were ominous signs—indications of an erratic nature. This is the third thing McCain could have discovered about Palin—a woman, after all, who kept a pregnancy secret for seven months, flew all the way home from Texas to Alaska with a near-full-term baby while leaking amniotic fluid, and then finally drove the 45 minutes from Anchorage to a hospital in Wasilla, all so that the child could be born in the 49th state. Palin was for the infamous Gravina Island “bridge to nowhere” before she was against it, and reversed herself only when such pork-barrel projects prompted a nationwide backlash. As governor, she hired several old high-school, hometown, or political friends with minimal qualifications for important state jobs. One friend, a former mid-level manager for Alaska Airlines, headed the department that reviewed candidates for state boards and commissions; another became director of the state Division of Agriculture, citing a childhood love of cows as one qualification. Palin communicated with legislators and her staff mainly by BlackBerry, sometimes using a personal e-mail account to avoid having to disclose documents under the state public-records laws. (The one time Meg Stapleton, who handles Palin’s personal and political public relations, ever answered multiple e-mails was when I wrote her and Palin’s gubernatorial office at the same time, and she replied: “Thank you for emailing. I will email you separately so as to remove us

Palin and Cindy McCain, never soulmates. *By Paul J. Richards/Getty Images.*

from the state account.”) Palin’s anti-politician stance had worked so well in her campaign that she carried it over into her dealings with actual politicians in Juneau, who didn’t take kindly to the practice. After one meeting between the governor and legislators in 2007, Lyda Green, then the president of the state senate, returned to her office to catch up on some paperwork. She caught Palin on the news. “And she comes on TV and says, ‘I want to once again confirm that neither I nor my staff ever holds closed-door meetings.’ Well, we had just been in a closed-door meeting for an hour and a half!” Representative Les Gara, an Anchorage Democrat who often worked with Palin, told me that he had at first thought that some of Green’s sharp criticism of Palin amounted to Republican infighting, or maybe just sour grapes that Wasilla had produced a new political figure whose star far outshone Green’s. But he came to realize, he said, that Green had a better handle on Palin than he did. “She didn’t work very hard. You would speak to her on particular issues, and it was like she didn’t know anything about them and she never seemed very engaged.” That said, “if your priorities happened to be her priorities, you could build a coalition.”

On the other hand, if *your* priorities happened to differ from *hers*, you could pay a terrible price. Only weeks after Palin praised John Bitney for doing so much to make her first legislative session a success, she summarily fired him—because, he says, he had had the bad luck to fall in love with the wife of one of the Palins’ best friends (a woman he has since married). At the time, Palin’s office cited what it called “personal” reasons for an “amicable” departure. But when *The Wall Street Journal* called Palin’s office during last fall’s presidential campaign to ask about the case, a spokeswoman for Palin said that Bitney had been “dismissed because of his poor job performance,” and refused to elaborate.

Not quite a year after Bitney’s departure, Mike Tibbles abruptly resigned as chief of staff, for reasons that neither he nor Palin has ever explained. Jim Lottsfeldt, a friend of Tibbles’s, says that the chief of staff was worn down “by the steady drumbeat of her not consulting with him.” She replaced Tibbles with Mike Nizich, a part-time taxidermist, who over 30 years had served seven governors of both parties, most of that time as director of the state Division of Administration—a man who made the trains run on time in the governor’s office but had nothing to do with policy issues. Palin’s effectiveness was never again the same. The brutal reality is that many people who have worked closely with Palin have found themselves disillusioned.

More than once in my travels in Alaska, people brought up, without prompting, the question of Palin’s extravagant self-regard. Several told me, independently of one another, that they had consulted the definition of “narcissistic personality disorder” in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*—“a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy”—and thought it fit her perfectly. When Trig was born, Palin wrote an e-mail letter to friends and relatives, describing the belated news of her pregnancy and detailing Trig’s condition; she wrote the e-mail not in her own name but in God’s, and signed it “Trig’s Creator, Your Heavenly Father.”

Perhaps no episode of Palin’s governorship has drawn more attention than the one that came to be known as Troopergate. For more than a year of her tenure as governor, Palin and her husband and aides repeatedly and aggressively complained to Walt Monegan, the former Anchorage police chief whom Palin had named to head the state’s Department of Public Safety, about Mike Wooten, a state trooper who had been involved in a messy divorce from Palin’s sister Molly. Wooten was no angel. Before Palin ever took office, he had been disciplined after drinking beer in his patrol car, Tasering his stepson, illegally shooting a moose, and making threatening remarks about Palin’s father. But Wooten had already been disciplined, and Monegan believed that further action was unjustified if not impossible. The final straw may have been Monegan’s June 30, 2008, e-mail warning to Palin that an unnamed state legislator had complained that she’d been seen driving with her newborn son, and that the infant had not been strapped into an approved car seat. “I have never driven Trig anywhere without a new, approved car seat,” Palin fired back. “I want to know who said otherwise—pls. provide me that info now.” Twelve days later, Nizich fired Monegan on Palin’s orders. Forty-nine days after that, John McCain announced that Palin would join him on the

ticket.

arrows in the back

In Alaska, there has never been a gubernatorial tradition of pardoning a turkey at Thanksgiving, but Palin decided to stage such a ceremony last November all the same, at the Triple D Farm & Hatchery, outside Wasilla. After granting the lucky bird its reprieve, she stopped to talk to a local television reporter about what she had learned in the campaign just concluded. “I don’t think it’s changed me at all,” she insisted, clutching a cup of coffee as her breath steamed into the frosty air. “You know, it’s pretty brutal, the time consumption there, and the energy that has to be spent in order to get out and about with the message on a national level, a great appreciation for other candidates who have gone through this, but also just a great appreciation for this great country. There are so many good Americans who are just desiring of their government to kind of get out of the way and allow them to grow and progress, and allow our businesses to grow and progress. So, great appreciation for those who share that value.”

As Palin spoke, a grisly scene unfolded behind her. A worker hefted one squirming white turkey after another into a metal funnel, slit its throat, and bled it out in full view of the camera. The clip was replayed tens of thousands of times on YouTube and seemed an all too apt metaphor for how Palin’s political fortunes had changed in the wake of her great national adventure, even if her personality had not. A career that thrived for years on extraordinarily good luck seems to have known nothing but trouble since November 4. In December, Bristol Palin gave birth to Tripp Easton Mitchell Johnston, her son with her boyfriend, Levi Johnston, and for a time there was talk of a wedding. But by early spring the couple had split up, and their families fell to trading charges on talk shows and in the tabloids. After Levi told Tyra Banks that he had often spent the night in the Palin home, in the same room as Bristol, and assumed that the governor knew they were having sex, Palin, through her spokeswoman, released a blistering statement expressing disappointment “that Levi and his family, in a quest for fame, attention, and fortune, are engaging in flat-out lies, gross exaggeration, and even distortion of their relationship.” On the CBS *Early Show*, days later, Johnston seemed resigned. “They said I didn’t live there. I ‘stayed there,’” he said. “I was like, O.K., well, whatever you want to call it. I had my stuff there.” Although Bristol initially told Greta Van Susteren that teen abstinence is “not realistic at all,” by springtime she had signed up as an ambassador for the Candie’s Foundation to promote abstinence as the way to avoid teen pregnancy.

Meantime, Levi’s mother, Sherry, agreed to plead guilty to a felony count of possessing OxyContin with intent to sell it, in exchange for the state’s agreement to drop five other drug-related charges against her. Her lawyer has conceded that she will draw an automatic jail sentence, but hopes to minimize the time she spends behind bars, because she suffers from chronic pain. In April, Todd Palin’s half-sister Diana was arrested on charges of twice breaking into a house in Wasilla to steal money from a bedroom cabinet, under circumstances that remain unexplained.

Because Palin had taken particular umbrage in the fall campaign at any effort to criticize her children or invade their privacy, her willingness to mix it up in public with an 18-year-old, who is after all the father of her only grandchild, struck many in Alaska as odd. So did Palin’s suggestion, at a time when declining oil prices have thrown the state budget into the red, that she did not want to accept about a third of the \$930 million in federal stimulus money available to Alaska, because it would come with too many big-government strings attached. The move seemed calculated to burnish her national conservative credentials. In the face of bipartisan outcry, Palin’s aides insisted she had never meant to say she wouldn’t take the money, only that she wanted to review the matter carefully. That was news to former aide Larry Persily. After the first meeting on the stimulus money, Persily told me, “Everyone in the room left thinking she’d said no. Then her staff said, ‘She didn’t say no. She just didn’t say yes.’” Palin wound up taking all but about 3 percent of the \$900 million available to Alaska. The consensus even among the Republicans I spoke to was that she rejected the last \$28 million—for energy assistance—mostly to save face.

The ever shifting sands of Palin’s sensibility were also on display after former senator Ted Stevens’s conviction on corruption charges was set aside, in April. Palin’s old nemesis, the

Alaska Republican Party chair Randy Ruedrich, called on Stevens's Democratic successor, Mark Begich, who had defeated Stevens just days after the original conviction last fall, to step down and allow a new election. Palin told the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* in an e-mail, "I absolutely agree." Days later, at a news conference, Palin insisted she had never called on Begich to step down.

Perhaps nothing has caused a bigger stir than Palin's nomination of Wayne Anthony Ross to be Alaska's attorney general. Ross is a two-time gubernatorial candidate and a board member of the National Rifle Association. He had sown controversy over the years by referring to gays and lesbians as "degenerates" (he later sought to downplay the remark, saying his aversion to homosexuals was no different from his aversion to lima beans) and for staunchly opposing subsistence-hunting preferences for native Alaskans. A flamboyant divorce lawyer who drives a big red Hummer with the vanity license plate WAR, Ross is a good old boy of pithy expression and considerable charm. ("In Alaska," Ross told me, "a liberal is someone who carries a .357 or smaller.") The final vote against Ross—with the Republican leaders of both chambers joining to defeat him—came just as Palin was speaking in Evansville. It was the first time in Alaska history that a cabinet nominee was rejected. "If I win a little, it's from the arrows in my back," Ross told me a few weeks later. "I think there were a number of people who were trying to show her who the boss was."

A year ago, 80 percent of Alaskans viewed Palin very favorably or somewhat favorably; by this spring, just 55 percent had a positive opinion. All this has given rise to speculation in Alaska that Palin may not run for re-election next year. She does not have to declare her candidacy until June 2010. Most politicians of both parties in Alaska with whom I spoke assume she could win, though not as persuasively as she did in 2006, which would hardly help her standing in a 2012 presidential campaign. Though Palin's spokeswoman has said she does not intend to challenge Senator Lisa Murkowski, the former governor's daughter, who is also up for re-election next year, Palin has changed her mind without warning in the past, and becoming a senator would keep her in the national spotlight. Surveying the landscape of political and policy troubles in Alaska, Gregg Erickson, an independent economic consultant in Juneau, concludes, "Everything she's doing seems to be saying that there'll be a problem in the future owing to her inattention, but she won't be here to deal with it."

"just make it all go away"

As Palin has piled misstep on top of misstep, the senior members of McCain's campaign team have undergone a painful odyssey of their own. In recent rounds of long conversations, most made it clear that they suffer a kind of survivor's guilt: they can't quite believe that for two frantic months last fall, caught in a Bermuda Triangle of a campaign, they worked their tails off to try to elect as vice president of the United States someone who, by mid-October, they believed for certain was nowhere near ready for the job, and might never be. They quietly ponder the nightmare they lived through. Do they ever ask, What were we thinking? "Oh, yeah, oh, yeah," one longtime McCain friend told me with a rueful chuckle. "You nailed it." Another key McCain aide summed up his attitude this way: "I guess it's sort of shifted," he said. "I always wanted to tell myself the best-case story about her." Even now, he said, "I don't want to get too negative." Then he added, "I think, as I've evaluated it, I think some of my worst fears ... the after-election events have confirmed that her more negative aspects may have been there ..." His voice trailed off. "I saw her as a raw talent. Raw, but a talent. I hoped she could become better."

None of McCain's still-loyal soldiers will say negative things about Palin on the record. Even thinking such thoughts privately is painful for them, because there is ultimately no way to read McCain's selection of Palin as reflecting anything other than an appalling egotism, heedlessness, and lack of judgment in a man whose courage, tenacity, and character they have extravagantly admired—and as reflecting, too, an unsettling willingness on their own part to aid and abet him. They all know that if their candidate—a 72-year-old cancer survivor—had won the presidency, the vice-presidency would be in the hands of a woman who lacked the knowledge, the preparation, the aptitude, and the temperament for the job. To ask why none of them dared to just walk away is to ask why Colin Powell did not resign in protest over the Bush

administration's foreign policy, or why none of Bill Clinton's disillusioned aides resigned after he lied to them about Monica Lewinsky. The question cannot comprehend the intense bonds that the blood sport of modern politics produces. To leave a campaign—especially a struggling, losing campaign—is akin to desertion in wartime, and even as they began to understand her limitations, plenty of McCain aides still saw Palin as the campaign's best hope. Some still believe that, simply in terms of the electoral math, she helped at least as much as she hurt, and maybe helped more.

McCain has delivered his own postmortem on Palin with the patented brand of winking-and-nodding ironic detachment that he usually reserves for painful political questions, an approach that simultaneously seeks to confess his sin and presume absolution for it. In November, he told Jay Leno he was proud of Palin and did not blame her for his defeat, but by April, when Leno asked him about who was running the Republican Party, McCain declined to mention Palin: "We have, I'm happy to say, a lot of choices out there: Bobby Jindal, Tim Pawlenty, Huntsman, Romney, Charlie Crist—there's a lot of governors out there who are young and dynamic." McCain went on, "There's a lot of good people out there, and I've left out somebody's name and I'm going to hear about it." When I ask Mark Salter, McCain's longtime speechwriter and co-author, about that comment, he says simply, "McCain always talks unscripted," and adds that he has heard "not one word of regret" about Palin ever pass McCain's lips. McCain's daughter Meghan, who has continued the blog she began on the campaign last year, has said that Palin is the one topic on which she will have no public comment.

Palin herself has alternately shied away from the spotlight and injected herself into public debate on questions dear to conservatives, as she did when she issued a statement defending the former Miss California, Carrie Prejean, for opposing gay marriage despite "the liberal onslaught of malicious attacks." Palin's speech in Evansville was her first major post-election foray into the national media, and she followed it up in June with a trip to New York State, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Alaska's entry into the union, visiting Auburn, the hometown of William H. Seward, who bought the Alaska territory from Russia, and making appearances at events supporting families with autism and developmental disabilities. But the biggest headlines the trip produced were those about Palin's feud with David Letterman, who joked that Palin had gone to Bloomingdale's to update her "slutty flight-attendant look" and made a tasteless sexual jibe about one of the Palin daughters. Letterman eventually apologized, though Palin fanned the flames in ways that were not necessarily to her advantage.

In Evansville, though, Palin concentrated on the task at hand: an emphatic defense of the anti-abortion cause. But in doing so she made a startling confession about what she thought when she learned she was pregnant at 43 with her youngest child, Trig, who arrived in April 2008, as the world now knows, with Down syndrome. "I had found out that I was pregnant while out of state first," Palin told the crowd. "While out of state, there just for a fleeting moment, I thought, Nobody knows me here. Nobody would ever know. I thought, Wow, it is easy to think maybe of trying to change the circumstances and no one would know—no one would ever know. Then when my amniocentesis results came back, showing what they called abnormalities—oh, dear God—I knew, I had instantly an understanding, for that fleeting moment, why someone would believe it could seem possible to change those circumstances, just make it all go away, get some normalcy back in life." It is almost impossible not to be touched by the rawness of her confession, even if it is precisely this choice that Palin believes no other woman should ever have, not even in the case of rape or incest.

Sarah Palin is a star in Evansville and all the many Evansvilles of America, but there is a big part of the Republican Party—the Wall Street wing, the national-security wing—in which she cuts no ice. At the 2009 Conservative Political Action Conference, Palin essentially came in tied for second with Governor Bobby Jindal, of Louisiana, and Representative Ron Paul, of Texas, with 13 percent support in a straw poll of potential 2012 presidential candidates; former governor Mitt Romney, of Massachusetts, got 20 percent. A more recent survey has Palin in a three-way tie with Romney and former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee. She could do well in the Iowa caucuses or South Carolina primary, but it is much harder to imagine her making headway in New

Hampshire, where independent voters were turned off by her last fall. It is also difficult to see just how she would expand her appeal beyond the base that already loves her.

In Alaska, almost everyone I met wondered who was advising her in Washington—and in Washington, everyone wonders the same thing. There are one or two clues. On the eve of the Alfalfa dinner, in January, Palin was a guest in the home of Fred Malek, a veteran Republican fund-raiser and government official dating back to the days of the Nixon administration. Malek raised money for McCain's campaign last year, and also agreed to play host to a fund-raising dinner for Republican governors in early May. (Palin was to have been an honored guest, but canceled owing to spring flooding in Alaska.) As noted, Palin has established a political-action committee with the legal advice of John Coale, who met Palin when his wife, Greta Van Susteren, the Fox News host, went to interview her during the campaign. Coale, a former Hillary Clinton supporter, told me he felt Palin had gotten a bum rap from liberals and conservatives alike, and he advised her that a PAC was a logical and legal way to pay for out-of-state political travel. "We raised a good bit of money without even asking," Coale says. "Just set up a Web site and, I think in the first month, \$400,000 came in." Coale says he still exchanges e-mails with Palin from time to time, but doesn't consider himself a political adviser; he also says that Van Susteren has "put up a Chinese wall about all of this," and has obtained her interviews with the Palins independently. Since the campaign ended, Van Susteren has interviewed Palin twice more, but she says she has never had a conversation with Palin off-camera, except for when Palin called to rescind her acceptance of Van Susteren's invitation to the White House Correspondents' Dinner in May, because of the Alaska flooding. Todd Palin came solo as Van Susteren's guest, and when a reporter for Politico sought to interview him at a pre-dinner brunch attended by hundreds of journalists, Van Susteren interposed herself, as in the manner of a staffer, to say it was a social event. Van Susteren told me she was just trying to exercise good manners.

Palin's closest adviser remains her husband—the "first gentleman" or "first dude," as she calls him. Testimony in the Troopergate investigation suggested that Todd was physically in the governor's office for about 50 percent of the time, often sitting in on meetings or phone calls in which he had no obvious official function. By the end of last fall's campaign, McCain's friends had picked up word that Todd was calling around to Republicans in South Carolina, urging them to keep his wife in mind for 2012—the implication being that the Palins believed McCain was about to lose. This spring, he stood in for Palin at an event in Manhattan—at Alaska House in SoHo, the cultural antipode of Wasilla—promoting the Alaska commercial-fishing industry's contributions to world food aid. In a brief prepared speech, he extolled Alaska salmon as "some of the world's healthiest protein, rich in vitamins and minerals, and a source of omega-3 fats."

"She doesn't at all have anyone who's willing to give it to her straight," one person who occasionally advises Palin told me. Todd may be the one exception. "I saw nobody else like that, nobody who would sit her down and say, 'Hey, wait a minute.'" He added, of the poor communications operation run by Stapleton, "I don't know what part Sarah Palin plays in the lack of communications, but I don't think she's aware of how big a problem it is."

And her national ambitions? "What it looks like to me she's trying to do is try the same formula that got her the governorship," John Bitney says. "You sort of start off with a conservative base. The right-wing base is obviously out on the far end of the spectrum, but it's a very motivated base. They show up, they're committed. It gets you that political beachhead. She did not get started with the blessing of the Republican Party. She started with a dedicated corps of sort of right-wing true believers who killed themselves for her, and got her going. And then she began to build on that, and after she crossed the primary hurdle, she moderated her message on some points."

When I ask Bitney what he makes of the whole Palin phenomenon, he sighs. "What do I take away from this?" he asks. "Oh, I don't know. I don't know. It's just a lot of emotions

and stuff. I find it's frustrating dealing with Sarah, because it seems we're always dealing with emotional crap and we never seem to be able to focus on the business at hand that needs to be done. I don't know whether to blame her or pity her for all this emotional upheaval that we're always going through with her. Now we all get to listen to Levi and Bristol. Check my feet for horseshoes if I have to sit there and listen to another talk show. I got involved in helping her become governor because we needed to change some policy directions. Teen abstinence is not why I waved signs for her."

Palin herself often sounds tired and resentful these days, as if wondering whether she should have blinked and just said no to John McCain. In a rambling, 17-minute speech introducing Michael Reagan, the former president's son and a conservative radio host at an event in Alaska in June—a speech that borrowed heavily, without clear attribution, from a four-year-old article by Newt Gingrich and the Republican strategist Craig Shirley—Palin seemed resigned to the fact that her reputation would never again be as fresh and glowing as it once was. She complained about "national figures and some in the press who, who want to put not just me, but anybody who dares speak up, it seems nowadays, right back down in their place." She bemoaned her changing fortunes in Alaska. "I think things here that have so drastically changed these past months ... Some want to forbid others from speaking up, and it's been through lawsuits, been ethics-violation charges, media distortions And those are the folks who want to tell me, they want to tell you to sit down and shut up. We will not do so. I just can't because I love my state, I love my country, and I need you, we need Michael Reagan to keep on fighting for our freedoms, for our country, and what we're being fed today, it seems, is a steady diet of selected misrepresented news So I join you in speaking up and asking the questions and taking action, and here at home in my beloved Alaska, I just say, politically speaking, if I die, I die."

Palin has disappointed many of those who once had the highest hopes for her. She has stumbled over innumerable details. But as she said to Andrew Halcro years ago, "Does any of this really matter?" Palin has shown herself to have remarkable gut instincts about raw politics, and she has seen openings where others did not. And she has the good fortune to have traction within a political party that is bereft of strong leadership, and whose rank and file often demands qualities other than knowledge, experience, and an understanding that facts are, as John Adams said, stubborn things. It is, at the moment, a party in which the loudest and most singular voices, not burdened by responsibility, wield disproportionate power. She may decide that she does not need office in order to have great influence—any more than Rush Limbaugh does.

On a rare fine day in Juneau, not long ago, Palin was seen sitting in the sunshine in the broad plaza near the state capitol, alone with her thoughts and some reading material for more than an hour and a half. Down the hillside below her, the big cruise liners that ply Alaska's Inside Passage in the summer months were beginning to call in the port. Only two years have elapsed since William Kristol and his colleagues disembarked from one of them and hearkened to her siren call. Sarah Palin might well have been wondering whether her own ship is going out, or just coming in.

Todd S. Purdum is *Vanity Fair's* national editor.

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