

Geraldine Ferraro

Geraldine Ferraro with Linda Francke, *My Story*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1985)

Geraldine Ferraro is the only woman to date to represent a major political party as candidate for Vice-President of the United States. In 1984, at the age of 49, she joined Walter Mondale on the Democratic ticket. She and her husband John Zaccaro have three children.

Listen to her words and recall what she experienced in the 1984 presidential campaign.

“I felt terribly frustrated by what seemed to be the male indifference to women’s issues, especially the economic predicament confronting women of all ages – single or married, homemakers or women who also worked outside the home. Though women represented forty-three percent of the work force, the “feminization of poverty” was growing. For most, their paychecks were essential to support either themselves or their families. Fully two-thirds of the women in the work force were single, widowed, divorced, or married to men who earned less than fifteen thousand dollars a year. In my district (Queens, N.Y) alone, there were 25,667 households headed by women –more than twelve percent of all households. In this country 2.8 million women over the age of sixty-five lived in poverty, almost three times the number of men. p. 43

Not only were women paid just over half what men were paid, but the jobs many women held usually provided few of the essential benefits for economic security, such as health insurance and pension plans. Pensions—or lack of pensions—for women was a critical problem. My office in Queens heard regularly from my constituents, many of whom were elderly, whose stories about their loss of income after the death of their husbands were heart wrenching. Younger women who had taken time off during pregnancy or to raise their young children had also been denied any pension benefits. Other women had lost their financial security after a divorce or the premature deaths of their husbands. One woman whose husband had worked for a major corporation for twenty-four years didn’t receive a penny of his pension, because he had died of cancer at fifty instead of fifty-five. p. 44

I never wanted religion - anyone’s religion, including my own – to be an issue in the campaign. Personal religious convictions have no place in political campaigns or in dictating public policy. I have always felt that the spiritual beliefs of elected representatives are between them and their God, not their government. p. 211

The separation of church and state is one of the founding principles of our own Constitution. And a very successful one. We are a religious nation because we do not have a state religion, because the government guarantees freedom of religion but has no role in religion, because not only do we tolerate our religious differences, we celebrate them.

Until 1984. For the first time in over twenty years, religion became a political football in a game that should never have been played. In 1960, President John F. Kennedy, our first and only Catholic President, said: "I do not speak for my Church on public matters – and the Church does not speak for me." I agreed with him entirely. But there was a difference. The fear in Kennedy's time was that his Catholic beliefs would influence his public policy. In my candidacy, the opposite fear was being played out. In 1984, the fears of a very vocal minority were that my Catholic faith would not play a part in public policy. The issue should never have existed.

From the first moment of the campaign, I was disgusted with the religious implications the Republicans were using as political ploys. At the Republican Convention in Dallas, evangelical preacher Jerry Falwell, the founder of the Moral Majority, proclaimed Ronald Reagan and George Bush "God's instruments for rebuilding America." In essence, Falwell was claiming that God was a Republican—in fact, that He was the endorsement behind the Republican ticket. That was a bit much, but nobody blinked an eye. And it got worse."

Senator Paul Laxalt, general chairman of Reagan's campaign, sent out campaign literature to forty-five thousand ministers calling Reagan's supporters "leaders under God's authority," as if the Republican campaign were a moral crusade against all who didn't share this particular Administration's religious convictions. Reagan himself went way out of bounds, accusing those who opposed his controversial call for a constitutional amendment permitting school prayer as "intolerant" of religion.

I provided a natural target for these religious extremists who were trying to get God on the ballot. I was a Catholic woman who supported a woman's right to abortion. That was a sin of faith. To other extremists, I was an Italian-American woman who had stepped out of her traditional role as homemaker, wife, and mother to run for high office. That was an ethnic sin. In the South I was stamped as a Northeastern liberal who advocated federal commitment to minorities, civil rights for homosexuals, and equal rights for women. That was a conservative sin. If all these people had had their way I would not have been on the campaign trail but on my knees in the confessional booth.

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