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Sarah Palin's foolishness ruined U.S. politics

By [Richard Cohen](#),

At some point while watching HBO's absolutely smashing (and terrifying) movie "[Game Change](#)," it occurred to me that Sarah Palin has ruined America. The movie has been scalloped out of the book by the same name and focuses on Palin, rather than on the entire 2008 presidential campaign. The decision to do so was absolutely correct. With her selection as John McCain's running mate, American politics lost its way — and maybe its mind as well.

The movie portrays Palin as an ignoramus. She did not know that Queen Elizabeth II does not run the British government, and she did not know that North and South Korea are different countries. She seemed not to have heard of the Federal Reserve. She called Joe Biden "O'Biden" and she thought America went to war in Iraq because Saddam Hussein, not al-Qaeda, had attacked on Sept. 11, 2001. Not only did she know little, but she was determinately incurious and supremely smug in her ignorance.

At the same time, she was a liar. In the movie, she was called exactly that by McCain's campaign chief, Steve Schmidt, who came to realize — a bit late in the game — that one of Palin's great talents was to deny the truth. When confronted, she simply shuts down — petulant, child-like — and then sulks off.

Palin objects to this characterization — [as does McCain](#) — but the movie has been endorsed by too many of Palin's top campaign aides to put its veracity in doubt. Some of them had come to revile the Alaska governor — enough to leak some awful facts but not quite enough to go public. Had the election been really close, I wonder if they would have run out into the street yelling that Palin — a heartbeat away from the possible presidency — was a monster. Everybody loves their country. Some people love their careers even more.

All this is now history, I want to say. But then I must instantly correct myself. *Après* Palin has come a deluge of dysfunctional presidential candidates. They do not lie with quite the conviction of Palin, but they are sometimes her match in ignorance. As with Palin, it

seemed hardly to matter. [Herman Cain](#) for a while was a front-runner. He had a nonsensical tax plan, zero knowledge of foreign affairs and had never held elective office. Yet, for a brief but terrifying moment, many Republicans were saying he should be the next president of the United States.

[Michele Bachmann](#) told a touching fib about vaccinations and [Rick Perry](#) did not know squat about who governs Turkey, a NATO ally and a vitally important Middle East power. He got wrong the number of justices on the Supreme Court — he said eight — and could not remember a Cabinet department he had vowed to eliminate.

[Rick Santorum](#) knows his stuff, but his stuff includes a wild denunciation of John F. Kennedy's famous speech about the proper role of religion in public life and a characterization of President Obama as a snob for extolling the value of college. Newt Gingrich has the wattage to be president, but so does Hannibal Lecter, if you get my drift. As for Ron Paul, he appears to be running for president of some theme park.

I have excluded [Mitt Romney](#) from my list of fools and knaves. (He has other problems.) But there once was a time when Romney would not have stood out as the only candidate who knew something about the issues that confront a president. Since Palin, though, ignorance has become more than bliss. It's now an attribute, an entire platform: Vote for me, I know nothing and hate the same things you do.

Palin is no longer an anomaly. McCain didn't choose her for her intellectual or experiential qualities, nor because he was geographically or ideologically balancing the ticket. She was an antiabortion woman with a pulse: Enough! She, like the out-of-nowhere Obama, had the stuff of celebrity — the snap, the dazzle, the self-assurance, the sex appeal. She didn't need to dance with a star. God told her she already was one.

So far, the Palin effect has been limited to the GOP. Surely, though, there lurks in the Democratic Party potential candidates who have seen Palin and taken note. Experience, knowledge, *accomplishment* — these no longer may matter. They will come roaring out of the left proclaiming a hatred of all things Washington, including compromise. The movie had it right. Sarah Palin changed the game.

cohenr@washpost.com

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