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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
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To: H
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From: Toiv, Nora F
Sent: Wednesday, March 14, 2012 10:40 AM
To: Mills, Cheryl D
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Don't Tread on Us

By MAUREEN DOWD

Hillary Clinton has fought for women's rights around the world. But who would have dreamed that she would have to fight for them at home?

"Why extremists always focus on women remains a mystery to me," she told an adoring crowd at the Women in the World Summit at Lincoln Center on Saturday. "But they all seem to. It doesn't matter what country they're in or what religion they claim. They want to control women. They want to control how we dress. They want to control how we act. They even want to control the decisions we make about our own health and bodies.

"Yes," she continued to applause, "it is hard to believe that even here at home, we have to stand up for women's rights and reject efforts to marginalize any one of us, because America needs to set an example for the entire world."

As secretary of state, Clinton is supposed to stay out of domestic politics. But this was a moment pregnant with possibility, a titanic clash of the Inevitable (Hillary) and the Indefensible (Republican cavemen).

The attempt by Republican men to wrestle American women back into chastity belts has not only breathed life into President Obama, it has roused and riled Hillary. And that could turn out to be the most dangerous thing the wildly self-destructive G.O.P. leaders have done.

In some kind of insane bout of mass misogyny, Republicans are hounding out the women voters — including Republicans and independents — who helped them gain control of the House in 2010.

Senator Olympia Snowe, who's fed up and leaving Congress, told The Washington Post's Karen Tumulty that "it feels as if we are going back to another era," warning that Republicans could drive women into Democratic arms.

And whose arms would be more welcoming to the sisters than Hillary's? The woman who has been mocked as "the sex-retary of state" by Rush Limbaugh would know just where to hit back.

There has been fevered speculation about Hillary ascending. Patrick Caddell and Douglas Schoen suggested in *The Wall Street Journal* that President Obama should take "the moral high ground" and step aside for his secretary of state. Hillary, they argued sanguinely, could "break the gridlock in Washington."

It's an amusing but absurd scenario.

Al Hunt of *Bloomberg News* wrote this week that Hillary could waltz past Larry Summers into the presidency of the *World Bank* and that she is the automatic Democratic front-runner for 2016. My colleague Bill Keller suggested that she replace Joe Biden on the ticket in 2012 and demote him to Foggy Bottom: "Vice President Clinton would be a formidable asset in governing as well as campaigning, both as a political calculator and as an emissary to Capitol Hill. She has, to put it mildly, an ability to navigate the world of powerful, problematic men."

She wouldn't, however, be able to navigate past two powerful men who would find her elevation problematic: Obama and Biden. Although chatterers love to chat about the Joe-Hillary switch because she's so much more compelling — and masterful — than the whole Republican field, it's not on the radar screen at the White House. It would make the president seem weak, desperate and disloyal and get him a vice president who would pull focus and be a competitor. Besides, before he would go, Biden would handcuff himself to Bo.

The Republican assault on women does, though, provide a glide path to the White House both for Obama in 2012 and Hillary in 2016.

Women have watched a chilling cascade of efforts in Congress and a succession of states to turn women into chattel, to shame them about sex and curb their reproductive rights. They've seen the craven response of G.O.P. candidates after Limbaugh branded a law student wanting insurance coverage for birth control pills, commonplace for almost five decades, as a "prostitute" and "slut."

American women have suddenly realized that their emancipation in the 21st century is not as secure as they had assumed. On "Meet the Press" on Sunday, Gov. Bob McDonnell of Virginia, a Republican, had the gall to say this, justifying his support for a bill designed to humiliate women getting abortions by penetrating them with a wand to take a picture: "Every invasive procedure has an informed consent requirement." What he really meant is that when abortion is an option, informed consent should require an invasive procedure. Along with Rick Santorum's Taliban views, Mitt Romney suggested in an interview on Tuesday with a St. Louis TV station that to help balance the federal budget he would eliminate Planned Parenthood funding: "We're going to get rid of that."

Women who assumed that electing Obama would lift all minority boats are beginning to think: Maybe he's not enough. If the desire of these conservative male leaders to yoke women is this close to the surface, if they are perversely driven to debase women even though it could lead to their own political demise, then women may require more than Obama.

If women are so vulnerable, they may need one of their own.

Is she inevitable?