

Thirteen and Counting: The Faces of Two Freshman Women Senators

Introduction:

Debbie Stabenow and Jean Carnahan are two of four women who began their terms in the United States Senate on January 3, 2001. They join eleven other women in the Senate to create the largest number of women ever serving at the same time. Despite the fact that both are women and both are Democrats, their journeys to the Senate were extremely different. Like the other women Senators who preceded them, and the nine that they join as freshman, they are now faced with navigating a political body that has been largely characterized as a “Boys Club”. These women come to the Senate with years of political experience, and distinct ideas of how best to serve their constituents and the country. Both Stabenow and Carnahan won in close races receiving 49.5 percent and 50.5 percent of the vote respectively (www.votesmart.org). Stabenow is known for her dedication to seniors, particularly as an advocate for prescription drug coverage for senior citizens (Ferguson, Ellyn, 01/31/01). Carnahan spent her years as the first lady of Missouri focusing on improving education and health care for children (Romano, Luis, 12/9/00).

Stabenow and Carnahan join the ranks of thirteen women to make this session of Congress momentous with the highest number of women Senators in history. The two Senators will join eleven other women in the weekly dinner meetings where the seating has changed from a table for two to “qualify as a banquet” (Leonard, Mary, 01/19/01). Following the mold revealed in Nine and Counting (Mikulski, 2000) by their predecessors Stabenow and Carnahan are expected to collaborate with the other eleven women Senators to create a force of power in the evenly divided Senate (Leonard, Mary, 01/19/01). Although having thirteen women Senators does not reflect the proportionate

number of women in the United States, the thirteen women Senators come for the first time and return to the Senate with a wealth of experiences. These women are expected to have a large impact on the debates in the Senate, and come to Washington with concerns and issues that they will be sure are addressed.

Debbie Stabenow – Democrat from Michigan:

Debbie Stabenow was born in Gladwin, Michigan on April 29, 1950, the daughter of a nurse and a car dealer (www.senate.gov and Schmitt, Eric, 11/13/00). She grew up in Clare, Michigan, and began her early political life when she was elected junior class president in high school (Schmitt, Eric, 11/13/00). She graduated from Michigan State University with her BA in 1972 and received her Master's in Social Work from Michigan State in 1975 (www.senate.gov). She worked as a school social worker in Lansing public schools prior to running for public office for the first time in 1979 (www.mi-democrats.com). Ms. Stabenow was elected to the Ingham County Board of Director at the age of twenty-four and served as Chairperson from 1975 to 1978. Her decision to run was spurred by the personal fight against the impending closing of a nursing home. Her political activism, which has previously been in her work as a social worker, in antiwar rallies, and in the campaign for George McGovern, had shifted in support of her own candidacy (Schmitt, Eric, 11/13/00). She then ran for State Representative in 1979 at the age of twenty-eight, where she served successfully as a representative of Michigan's Eighth Congressional District for eleven years. In 1991 she was elected to the Michigan State Senate, where she served until 1994. She was defeated in the campaign for governor of Michigan in 1994, and was elected to the United States House of Representatives in

1996. She was most recently elected to the United States Senate in 2000 (www.mide democrats.com, www.senate.gov, and <http://politics.yahoo.com>).

Stabenow successfully defeated the incumbent Senator, Republican Spencer Abraham, in an extremely close race. Despite the fact that her opponent outspent her two to one, Ms. Stabenow was able to beat her opponent through the use of a well-timed media blitz and her strong stance on the issues, particularly prescription drug benefits (Time, 11/20/00). She is the first woman to be elected as a Senator from Michigan (Christoff, Chris, 11/08/00). Ms. Stabenow ran on a platform that included prescription drug costs and health care. She was endorsed by NARAL as a pro-choice candidate and a “dedicated defender of choice” (US Newswire, 11/08/00). NARAL assisted in her campaign by enlisting two professional organizers in the campaign, as well as contacting over one hundred and fifty thousand pro-choice voters to come out to the polls (US Newswire, 11/08/00). Ms. Stabenow was also endorsed by the Sierra Club as an “environmentally friendly Congressional candidate” while serving in the House (Sierra, Sept-Oct 1996).

Despite these endorsements, Stabenow was faced with a difficult campaign. Abraham’s seemingly endless stream of finances made it impossible for the Stabenow supporters to maintain his level of media coverage. The race was characterized by several television attack advertisements on both sides, with an Internet site labeled “liberaldebbie.com” targeting Stabenow as a soft “diehard liberal” (Christoff, Chris, 11/08/00). Stabenow returned fire by characterizing Abraham as a Republican controlled by special interests, who had not fulfilled his promises to his constituents in the six years he spent in the Senate (Christoff, Chris, 11/08/00). The ad that hurt Abraham the most

was the one featuring a woman whose teenage daughter had died of a rare disease in 1999. The mother had attempted to contact her insurance company repeatedly for treatment, and had attempted to contact Abraham twelve times for assistance (Christoff, Chris, 11/08/00). The polls started to show Stabenow's gain soon after this ad aired. The Stabenow campaign decided to wait until the middle of October to begin the media blitz with commercials discussing her platform on education and prescription drugs for the elderly (Schmitt, Eric, 11/13/00). The gamble paid off, and Stabenow came from behind in the polls to win the Senate races by a mere 43,000 votes out of over four million cast (Schmitt, Eric, 11/13/00).

Senator Stabenow attributes the difficulty of the campaign, as well as her success, to several factors. She stated that the campaign was difficult for her as a result of her dual role as a candidate and as a member of the house. She reports that she did not come into the campaign with a background of personal wealth, and that the fact that she is a woman may have been seen as a negative in the campaign (Pickler, Nedra, 12/07/00). Despite the possible negative effects of these realities, Stabenow turned them around to her benefit. She reports that she "campaigned the old-fashioned way" in order to win support and financial assistance from her future constituents (Pickler, Nedra, 12/07/00). In addition, Stabenow states that her background allows her to relate to the concerns of her constituents, including college tuition, raising her children as a single mother, and financial security (Pickler, Nedra, 12/07/00). Stabenow is described as "nice" and "quick to smile and quick to hug" (Pickler, Nedra, 12/07/00). Despite her appeal because she is approachable, Stabenow cites a change in how women are seen in politics in years since she was defeated in her bid for lieutenant governor. She stated that "there is a certain

element there of sexism in underestimating women and I think that had been the case in my situation” (Pickler, Nedra, 12/07/00). In addition Stabenow attributes her support by the unions that opposed her in her bid for governor in 1994 as a sign that things are changing.

Evidence that the people of Michigan support Senator Stabenow was clear on the day that she took her oath into office. Hundreds of her supporters traveled from Michigan to Washington, D.C. to stand packed into the Senate gallery and a Capital hill restaurant to watch her begin her six years serving them as their Senator (Ferguson, Ellyn, 01/04/01 and Pickler, Nedra, 01/08/01). Stabenow did not waste any time getting comfortable in her new role; as she attended classes entitled “Getting Your Office Up and Running” and “Life in the Senate” (Bailey, Ruby L., 12/05/00). As a result of her two terms in the House of Representatives, Senator Stabenow is ranked fourth in seniority among the new senators (Bailey, Ruby L., 12/05/00). She cites her experience in the House as a positive factor in adjusting to her role as a Senator. She listed her primary goals to address education, child welfare, prescription drugs, campaign finance reform, and education (Bailey, Ruby L., 12/05/00). Senator Stabenow has been appointed to four Senate committees including the Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee, the Banking Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee, the Special Committee on the Aging, and the Budget Committee (Associated Press, 01/11/01).

Senator Stabenow’s first move in her new role as Senator was the introduction of the Medication Equality and Drug Savings Act of 2001, designed to follow her promise to make prescription drugs for the elderly one of her top priorities. This bill would allow citizens to buy prescriptions in other countries, such as Canada, where they are sold at

less expensive prices (Durbin, Dee-Ann, 01/26/01). Stabenow introduced this bill late in January, and addresses a bill passed last year by Congress. According to former Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, the previous bill does not do enough to assist in making prescription drugs affordable in the United States, particularly for the elderly (Ferguson, Ellyn, 01/31/01). The bill introduced by Stabenow would allow individuals to transport medicines into the U.S. if they could show the intended use, prescription by a health professional, and show the medication does not pose a health risk. In addition the bill would allow for a small fee to be charged for the Federal Drug Administration labeling of these prescriptions, prevent higher prices from reimportation, and remove reauthorization of reimportation every five years (Ferguson, Ellyn, 01/31/01). This bill is a culmination of Stabenow's work toward making prescription drugs more affordable. During her campaign Senator Stabenow arranged for buses to transport her constituents to Canada, where they could fill their prescriptions at a lower price (Ferguson, Ellyn, 01/31/01 and Durbin, Dee-Ann, 01/26/01). The bus was dubbed "the RX Express" (Time, 11/20/00). In addition to the Medication Equality and Drug Savings Act of 2001 Senator Stabenow has co-sponsored bills including a patient's bill of rights, a bill requiring insurance to cover contraception, and a campaign finance bill (Durbin, Dee Anne, 01/26/01).

Also at the top of her list of priorities is Stabenow's fight against President Bush's proposed tax cut. As a member of the budget committee Stabenow should have had a role in crafting the budget plan. Despite her position on the committee, she and the other ten Democrats on the committee were faced with voting on a budget that they did not have this opportunity (Ferguson, Ellyn, 03/30/01). Instead committee chairman Pete Domenici,

a Republican from New Mexico, bypassed the panel to send the budget directly to the House, where the resolution passes 222 to 205 (Ferguson, Ellyn, 03/30/01). Senator Stabenow proposed a trigger point to be included in the tax cut plan, so that if the expected surpluses do not appear, the tax cut would be limited and decreased accordingly (Ferguson, Ellyn, 03/30/01). In place of Bush's proposed \$1.6 trillion tax cut over ten years, Stabenow endorsed a proposal that would give an immediate \$60 billion tax rebate. This rebate would provide \$300 to individuals and \$600 to couples in 2001 and permanently lower the income tax rate from 15 percent to 10 percent (Ferguson, Ellyn, 04/06/01).

Debbie Stabenow is obviously not a politician who leaves her promises and rhetoric behind her on the campaign trail. In her brief career as a U.S. Senator, she has addressed many of the issues and concerns that she touted while campaigning, and she shows no sign of cowering or using her freshman status as an excuse not to get things done. Earlier in her career she was willing to "put her money where her mouth is" when she donated her approved Congressional pay raise in order to buy whistles for local children (PR Newswire, 12/08/99). The whistles were given out to give the children a way to defend themselves against possible attackers. Not only did she vote against the pay raise; she traveled to Osborn High School in order to distribute the whistles. This example of Stabenow's dedication to her beliefs, and putting her own financial well-being behind that of the safety of children (who, by the way, cannot vote for her), reveals the strength of character in Michigan's newest Senator. This career politician has not forgotten whom she works for, and arrived on Capitol Hill ready to prove those that underestimated her wrong.

Jean Carnahan, Democrat from Missouri:

Jean Carnahan was thrust into the national limelight on October 16, 2000, the very day that she was told of her husband and eldest son's deaths. After forty years of playing the politicians wife, and of staying behind the scenes or standing quietly next to her husband, Jean was now the one the public looked to for support and guidance. In the midst of her grief Mrs. Carnahan was told that Missouri's Governor, Roger Wilson, had announced that if her husband, Mel Carnahan, won in the Senate race in Missouri, that he would appoint her to fill his seat in the Senate until the special election in 2002 (Romano, Luis, 12/19/00). Because Mel Carnahan died so closely to the election, Missouri law did not allow his name to be removed from the ballot. Mrs. Carnahan had only a few days to make her decision, and it was one that she made alone (Romano, Luis, 12/19/00). No one can know what was going through her mind at that point, no one can say what made her decide to say yes. Mrs. Carnahan says that it was a reason to keep going, and a challenge, and a promise to continue the work that her husband began (Romano, Luis, 12/19/00).

What is clear is that the new Senator Carnahan has more political experience than was attributed to her, and that she was more involved and knowledgeable of her husband's campaign and politics than anyone imagined. Jean Carpenter Carnahan was raised the daughter of a hairdresser and a maintenance worker. Her parents often worked more than one job to support the family (Romano, Luis, 12/19/00). She met Mel Carnahan at church when they were only fifteen years old and then again at school when they were seated next to each other alphabetically. They attended Anacosta High School in Washington, D.C., and the story goes that on their second date he told her he planned to marry her, and to follow his father into politics (Romano, Luis, 12/19/00). Prior to

either of these events occurring, both Jean and Mel attended George Washington University, graduating with business degrees (Romano, Luis, 12/19/00 and www.votesmart.com). In 1954 they moved to Missouri, where Mel would begin his political career, and Jean would act as his lead campaigner. As Missouri's first lady Mrs. Carnahan restored the governor's mansion, made it more accessible to the public, and wrote three books (Romano, Luis, 12/19/00). She also assisted her husband in the development and implementation of the 1993 Outstanding Schools Act, which included early childhood programs, advocated for corporate day care, and motivated increases in health care for the children of Missouri (Romano, Luis, 12/19/00).

Despite the traumatic journey to the Senate, Carnahan soon transformed herself from the widow of a politician to a Senator to be taken seriously. She sponsored an amendment to increase defense spending by \$100 billion over ten years, along with her fellow female Senator Mary Landrieu, a Democrat from Louisiana (Goldstein, David, 04/10/01). She also showed her dedication to education when she moved to take \$450 billion away from President Bush's proposed tax cut to go toward educational and debt reduction spending (Goldstein, David, 04/10/01). She has joined the ranks of moderates who are quick to point out that in a Senate divided fifty-fifty between party lines, collaboration is the key to accomplishing anything in the Senate. Following this line of thinking, Senator Carnahan joined with Senator Susan Collins, a Republican from Maine, in proposing an amendment that allows higher rates for home energy costs in personal bankruptcy cases (Goldstein, David, 04/10/01). In addition to these issues Senator Carnahan supports a woman's right to choose and gun safety measures. She qualifies this support in that she opposes partial birth abortions except in life threatening cases, and

wants to protect the rights of sportsmen to use guns (Romano, Lois, 12/19/00). She has been appointed to the Armed Services Committee, the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee, the Governmental Affairs Committee, and the Special Committee on Aging (www.votesmart.com).

Senator Carnahan had taken criticism for her non-partisan rhetoric in light of her vote against ex-opponent John Ashcroft in his confirmation as U.S. Attorney General, as well as for speaking for campaign finance reform while enlisting financial backers for her own reelection campaign in 2002. After a brief period of relief from the political attacks as a result of her widow status, Republicans are now focusing on finding a candidate who can defeat Carnahan in the special election. According to Time magazine, the favorable ratings that Senator Carnahan received immediately after her husband's death and subsequent election results may be waning as she begins her term as a Senator (Dickerson, John F., 03/26/01). Carnahan's unfavorable rating went up to twenty-nine percent after her Ashcroft vote, but Democrats claim it to be a result of that one vote (Dickerson, John F., 03/26/01). According to a Republican source "The Ashcroft vote turned her into a politician" (Dickerson, John F., 03/26/01). Senator Carnahan seems to subscribe to the belief that that is why she was elected, as she continues to use the political expertise learned at her husband's side in her role as a Senator.

One of her main focuses while in the Senate is to address the needs of children and child abuse in particular (Quaid, Libby, 03/15/01). Senator Carnahan has along history of tending to the needs of children, both in the State of Missouri and at home, as she raised four children of her own. She agreed that President Bush's proposed \$200 million for the prevention and treatment of child abuse was a primary step in addressing

the issue. Carnahan does not, however, see funding as the only solution and governmental role in the reauthorization of the Child Abuse and Treatment Act (Quaid, Libby, 03/15/01). She, along with Senator Debbie Stabenow, and Senator Hillary Clinton, encouraged Congress to look closely at how existing laws are functioning, and what is in fact wrong with the system. In a forum on issues focusing on women and families, Carnahan listened to Diane DePanfilis, an associate professor of social work at the University of Maryland-Baltimore, when she called for more funding for child protective services, family support programs, and parenting classes (Quaid, Libby, 03/15/01). Carnahan's dedication and interest in the issues that families face did not occur simultaneously with her arrival to the Senate. Senator Carnahan has long been a proponent for families, with her lobbying for the 1993 Outstanding Schools Act in Missouri, as well as her behind the scenes contributions to improving health care for children in that state.

On her official governmental website Senator Carnahan is defined as “a wife, mother, grandmother, authors, children’s advocate, and public speaker” (<http://carnahan.senate.gov>). She has won several awards of distinction for her work for children and families, and has authored three books while serving as the first lady of Missouri. Aids and politicians who worked with Mel Carnahan prior to his death knew what the public is soon realizing; that Senator Carnahan was then, and is now, much more than an ornament on her husband’s arm, or an “empty vessel” to be filled with political rhetoric (Williams, Marjorie, 10/27/00). In reality Jean Carnahan was her husband’s not so silent partner in his political career, and it is her intention not only to pick up where he left off, but also to make her own mark on the political system. Senator

Carnahan summed her abilities best when she said, “some people spent a lifetime underestimating my husband to their detriment. I suggest they not do it with me” (Carlson, Margaret, 01/15/01 and Glasser, Jeff, 11/20/00). Strong language coming from a woman Senator who was appointed to the Senate through the “widow’s mandate” (Williams, Marjorie, 10/27/00).

Personal Reflections:

As I read article after article about Debbie Stabenow and Jean Carnahan, I was struck by the language used to describe them. Despite the fact that these two women are currently serving as United States Senators, words like “*beaming, lively, a young broad, sincere, sunny, nice, quick to smile and quick to hug, curly red-haired little girl, mother, widow, stay at home mother, perpetual den mother, mischievous giggle, perfecting the political wife’s adoring gaze, taping on Oprah, tastefully dressed, and ladies teas*” appeared in the descriptions of them (Pickler, Nedra, 12/07/00 and 01/08/01, Romano, Lois, 12/19/00, and Schmitt, Eric, 11/13/00). The articles moved quickly from a description of the experiences and accomplishments of Stabenow and Carnahan to a discussion of their demeanors, of the way they relate to people, of their apolitical lives. While it may be a benefit to women politicians to be seen as offering different qualities than the male politicians that the public has become tired of; it also seems to undermine their power and authority. While women may be more willing to collaborate, to listen to others’ ideas, and to work together across party lines, it would be foolish to underestimate the power that they hold in an evenly split Senate.

Both Stabenow and Carnahan revealed their power and determination in their past experiences, and particularly in their campaigns to become Senators in 2001. In the same

articles that include the words and phrases cited previously Stabenow and Carnahan are described as having the following characteristics, *“a common-sense quality, a steely will and determination, a woman who had great depths and great breadth of experience, a real partner, more care-giving, the encourager, a toughness and a real hard political capacity, a community powerhouse, no housewife sitting at home unawares, a skilled political operative, a strong leader, a proven leader, who will fight, commonsense approach, and a unique style of consensus”* (Associated Press Newswires, 01/11/01, Ferguson, Ellyn, 01/04/01, Goldstein, David, 04/10/01, Pickler, Nedra, 12/07/00 and 01/08/01, Romano, Lois, 12/19/00, Schmitt, Eric, 11/13/00, and US Newswire, 11/08/00). When speaking of Senator Stabenow, Senator Robert Torricelli, a Democrat from New Jersey, stated, “We knew she was going to succeed” (Bailey, Ruth, 12/05/00). Stabenow was opposed by an incumbent with a never-ending supply of financial backing, while she herself had to wait until October to begin her media campaign due to limited funds. Carnahan was faced with the decision of whether or not to accept the appointment to replace her recently deceased husband, only days after losing him and her eldest son. These Senators have shown their fortitude in their early days in the Senate, in their ability to oppose presidential appointments on principal, by introducing legislation that is important to their constituents, and by their willingness to continue to learn upon their arrival to Washington, D.C.

Uniqueness of Women in the Senate:

It is evident from reading Nine and Counting, as well as the literature available on Debbie Stabenow and Jean Carnahan that women are arriving to the Senate with unique perspectives and experiences to add to the mix. In a discussion of the weekly dinner

meetings of the women of the Senate, Kay Hutchinson Bailey, a Republican from Texas, reveals that the discussion centers on families, local conveniences, learning their way around Capitol Hill, and which of their male counterparts are “the biggest pain in the neck” (Leonard, Mary, 01/19/01). These women pride themselves on their ability to work together, across party lines, in order to accomplish their goals in a partisan government body. In addition to their professional goals, which Hutchinson predicts will focus on health, education, and the economy, these women have discovered the importance of relating on a personal level, of getting to know each other, and of sharing their experiences of being a woman in government (Leonard, Mary, 01/19/01). While historically women in the Senate have been expected to maintain their focus on so called “women’s issues” the nine veteran Senators and four freshman Senators have shown that all of the issues are women’s issues. This is revealed in the appointment of women Senators to several important Committees, including the Appropriations Committee, the Budget Committee, and the Finance Committee (Leonard, Mary, 01/19/01). Despite these gains, the experiences of Debbie Stabenow and Jean Carnahan show that women in the political arena are still behind in the respect that is given to their male counterparts. Why were Debbie Stabenow, a career politician, and Jean Carnahan, a veteran of forty years in politics with her husband, described as a “divorcee” and a “widow”, thus characterizing them in terms of the men in their lives. While there is a growing power in the words “mother, grandmother, sister, and woman”, it is still not enough when a woman serving in the Senate is preceded by her marital status.