

NOT FOR HIRE

—*Alaska*

Preface

Alaska's youngest governor, Sarah Palin, is taking US politics by storm. Her anti-corruption drives have found astonishing success – her approval rating is at 90 per cent. Now Rudy Giuliani is rumoured to want her as his presidential running mate.

WRITER

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Curriculum Vitae

Sarah Palin

- 1964 Born Sarah Heath in Sandpoint, Idaho, family moved to Skagway, Alaska, when she was three months.
- 1972 Family moves to Wasilla, small town 50km north of Anchorage.
- 1984 Voted Miss Wasilla and Miss Congeniality, Wasilla. Runner-up in Miss Alaska contest.
- 1987 Graduated University of Idaho, Bachelors degree in journalism.
- 1988 Marries long-time boyfriend, Todd Palin. Todd has been production manager for BP for 18 years.
- 1992 Elected to Wasilla City Council.
- 1996 Aged 32, wins election as Mayor of Wasilla, serves two four-year terms.
- 2002 Runs to be Lieutenant Governor of Alaska. Defeated in primaries.
- 2004 Appointed chairwoman of the Alaska Oil & Gas Conservation Commission.
- 2006 Wins governorship of Alaska.

It is a late-summer Sunday and Sarah Palin is dawdling at her lakeside home in Wasilla, 50km north of Anchorage. The float-plane moored at the end of her lawn looks most unsafe with its tin-can fuselage and daddy-longleg wings. No, she laughs, it is her husband Todd's plaything and she never gets in it. This is a good thing because Palin, 43, is that very precious commodity in the United States right now – a politician voters actually like. Elected to serve as Alaska's first female governor (and its youngest ever) almost a year ago, she is still riding approval ratings of nearly 90 per cent. Good going, especially for a Republican at a time when support for the party nationally is on the skids.

Palin, a mother of four children aged six to 19 and whose first foray into the public eye was as a beauty queen in her late teens, established herself as political force by taking on members of her party engaged in unethical behaviour. A former two-term mayor of Wasilla, she was appointed chairwoman of Alaska Oil & Gas Conservation Commission in 2004 and blew the whistle on another member, Republican Gregg Ruedrich, for dodgy dealings. He paid a fine but remains head of the state party.

It was a reputation for exposing sleaze, not to mention her TV-anchor features ("naughty schoolteacher looks", as

one TV comic described them) – that propelled Palin to the front line. In 2006, she trounced her predecessor Frank Murkowski for the party nomination for governor and won elections in November.

She seems like the right person at the right moment. Since taking office, four former state lawmakers have been charged with taking bribes (one has pleaded guilty) and the state has been plunged into a fresh scandal as the FBI announced a probe into allegations that senior Alaska Senator Ted Stevens may have used a big business with state contracts to renovate his homes. The investigation now threatens his son, a former state senate president, and several others in Alaska's Republican hierarchy.

Monocle: You must have heard the recent gossip that Rudy Giuliani, if he emerges as Republican nominee for President next year, might ask you to be his running mate. Would you consider it?

Sarah Palin: I think it is so far in outer space, the possibility that he would ever want a hockey mum from Wasilla to be his running mate, that I haven't considered it. I think the obligation that I have here is to serve my four-year term as a governor of Alaska. That's the deal that I struck with voters. There is much more that Alaska can do to contribute to the

US and I think I can help it do that as governor. But it would obviously be an honour for me to serve the country. And for Alaska's sake too, it would be very good for our future for an Alaskan to be serving nationally.

M: This summer the FBI shocked Alaskans with a dawn raid on the home of Ted Stevens, an icon of the state. His son seems to be in the frame too, as well as Alaska's one other member of Congress. This looks like a vindication of your position. Do you feel good about that?

SP: It pains me when I consider the personal perspective. Senator Stevens has given his life to this state. But at the same time, it is reflective of the fact that people are tired of politics as usual and want to be able to trust government officials. They want us to be running a clean show.

M: Alaskan politicians have a bit of a reputation for cosiness with lobbyists and under-the-table favours. Why is it important to stop this?

SP: When I spoke out at the Oil & Gas Commission, the attempt was made to thump me for doing such a thing and I said "No, no. This is not fair and not right" and I felt an obligation to do something about it. Energy is such an important area for the state and for the

nation – Alaska provides 25 per cent of the domestic supply of energy. Alaska had better start changing the way we do business because we are in a position to contribute to the US. The only way we are going to be able develop resources further on state and federal lands is if we can prove that we are responsible, honest and trustworthy and there is no corruption up here. And the only way we are going to get to that position is if the people can trust their government. We have to change the atmosphere. Under prior administrations, people were so doubting of the decisions being made on their behalf because there were rumours of ethical lapses and conflicts of interest.

M: You were a bit of an upstart running for Governor in 2006, weren't you? What did people think?

SP: They thought I was nuts. We had no money. In terms of a campaign, we had no high-profile endorsements. Those who you would normally seek endorsements from were pooh-poohing the idea. Not having the establishment behind me and not having a campaign that was in any sense a conventional one, no one thought it was ever going to work. At first it was mostly a friends and family thing. It was risky, but at the same time it got to be a situation where people could judge me by my enemies. That says a lot.

M: So you made enemies in your own party. Is that still the situation now and does that affect how the national Republican party treats you?

SP: There is little love lost between me and the state party. Sure, I have lost the support of the party establishment here and I don't think they [the national party leadership] are getting a whole lot of good news reported to them about me. But with the revelations that are now coming out from the FBI, we have been able to explain a lot to the public about the criticism that I and some of my actions have received.

M: One of your first actions was to pass a new ethics law for state legislators. Does it surprise you that something wasn't done before to stamp out sleaze?

SP: When you consider the corruption that has been going on, the legislators should have been policing one another. The administrations in the past should have stepped in with an ethics reform package or begun speaking out against the obvious things that were amiss. That's infuriating to me, to consider that here again we like to boast of being self-sufficient. We talk of our pioneer spirit and how Alaskans don't care how they do things on the outside. And yet it has taken the outside to come in and say, "You guys need to clean up

your business." It had to happen, but I regret that.

M: This is a very male state. Have you been a victim of sexism in your public career and in that regard, have your good looks and beauty-queen past hindered you?

SP: If I have, I am totally oblivious to it. I haven't let it be an issue because it's just so passé, so 20 years ago to me. If anything though, what I have encountered, is age discrimination. It never occurred to me I was too young, but maybe I was. I feel pretty old right now. As for my looks [laughing], I don't know. Yes I did the beauty queen thing. But I was never a girly-girl. I did it for college scholarships. It paid for tuition for many years.

M: Back to the running-mate question. Say the Democratic ticket is Clinton-Obama, a woman and a black man, you can see why the party might approach you?

SP: That's diversity right there, isn't it? Wow! And who do the Republicans have? Good old rich white boys. I think that's another factor that has to be considered by Republicans, that in some way their candidates are a reflection of more politics as usual. Not to slam good old rich boys, but it sure wouldn't hurt for new energy and new perspective to be enveloped by the Republican Party. — (M)