Nice Girl or Pushy Bitch: Two Roads to Nonpromotion

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Twice in the last six years I have served on USICA promotion panels, acquiring, thereby, a healthy respect for the wisdom of such peer evaluation systems. On the other hand, I also accumulated a number of impressions—albeit without benefit of statistics—touching on the way the system perceives and treats women officers, even during these times of transition and raised consciousness.

At the outset, I confess that my own consciousness in 1973 had not yet been sufficiently awakened for me to look for discernable patterns in Officer Evaluation Reports (OERs) written on women officers. I had been fortunate in my own promotion rate and had not at that time perceived any direct personal or institutional sexism in my colleagues' attitudes toward me. I had even suspected—wrongly I think now—that my own rapid advancement was owed in part to affirmative action on the part of promotion panels. Only later, as I became aware of the problems others were having and had my own direct confrontation with sexism in attitudes, did I begin to note the double standard used in evaluating men and women. It was later still that clear patterns began to emerge. Thus, last year's promotion panels provided a model laboratory in which to test my hypotheses.1

I reviewed the class of mid-grade officers, which I reviewed last year, about 46 out of approximately 240 were women. With one out of every six officers female, the

25 promotions that resulted should have yielded advancement for four or five women. But in fact only two made it, in spite of the conscious and genuine commitment to affirmative action of my three male co-panelists, to whom much credit is due.

Less credit is due, however, to the ways in which OERs on women are written. This is the key question: What kind of OER must women officers have to be promoted in midcareer? To my mind, an OER written about a woman officer had to go any length that was necessary to avoid citing the societal values and assumptions that can taint professional women as either pliable, helpful "nice girls," or women with "personality problems"—no matter how competent, talented, or superb they may be.

To illustrate: Of the approximately 46 files of women officers that were reviewed— as if it were possible to believe in 1978 only one officer would have been uniden-tifiable by sex, had no first name or pronoun been used. Only one—superbly rated, by the way—had a file that in no way mentioned characteristics bearing on her sex. The remaining files fell cleanly into two groups: roles given and roles taken.

The first group comprised those terri-bly hard-working, conscientious women who burned the midnight oil (could it be that they were trying to keep up?), who willingly took on any task (possibly those their male colleagues judged less substantive?), who could always be depended upon, who were adept at per-sonal relations, and who were always loyal to the post or the office (surely they never gave colleagues or supervisors any trouble). Notwithstanding the faint and even lavish praise, this group was damned. Invariably the OERs managed to imply in some way or another that these women were compensating for lack of sharpness, managerial ability, and substantive knowledge through hard work and dedication. They never made waves, they were always an "asset" to the post or office, but these nice girls finished last.

The second group elicited subtle efforts from their rating officers. On the one hand, these women clearly "had it." They were skillfully rounded in their profession. They exhibited good judgment on substantive issues, drafted well, and could be depended upon to get the job done efficiently, sometimes brilliantly. But, with the one exception already mentioned, every woman in this group was marked down on personal relations as "too abrasive" or "too nerv-ous about her ideas and projects," or on supervisory ability as one who "will not delegate properly" and "can't get along with subordinates." Ultimately, they were perceived as "too aggressive." I should note that, since rating and reviewing were based on seniority to those rated, and since most senior officers in our Agency are men, the great majority of the ratings and reviews on middle-grade officers are written by male supervisors. It is tempting to offer the explanation that women in this category pose more threat to the male values that dominate our society than the "nice girl" types. Surely the attitudes toward women in USICA are no worse—if not even a little better—than the attitudes toward women that are institutionally and individually held in society at large. But, assuming that we start from a position of relative strength, a lot more ef-fort will be needed to deal with this issue. If these impressions are valid, how can officers—female and male—deal with the problem?

As a start, I would urge that the Foreign Service Agency prepare rating officers' guidelines. One goal of these guidelines would be to raise the conscious-ness of all rating and reviewing officers about the problems implicit in sex-role stereotypes. Actual quotations should be listed as examples, illustrating how easy it is to undercut "womanly qualities" with faint praise and to stigmatize "male characteristics" in women, Second, promotion panel members should contain a carefully written paragraph on this issue to remind panel members of the pitfalls of discrimination that make this kind of writing hazardous.

Third, through this medium end others, women officers, themselves, should be made fully aware of the damage being done to their promotion opportunities by references to sex-role characteristics in their OERs.

Above all it is women's own attitudes and actions that matter most and that will forge change. We must take responsibility to protect ourselves from sexual values in our OERs. We can only monitor this issue if all women are fully aware of the damage being done to their promotion and career opportunities by unconscious or conscious double standards in judging men and women.

1This brief statement only discusses the rating, reviewing, and promotion panel process for FSIOs, since I have had no direct experience with FSS panels. I suspect, however, that the same issues apply to Staff Corps OERs. 2There were, of course, other factors. For example, a sizeable number of women in the class under review had been promoted very recently.