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## Palin pumps up GOP show

By LAWRENCE C. LEVY

As political soap operas go, the Republicans' show in Minnesota may have more plot twists than the Democrats' Drama in Denver. With the added touch of a howling hurricane and teenage sex, the GOP could challenge the cheesy and addictive allure of the real soaps — and probably did yesterday once Gustav coverage faded with its winds.

In just a few episodes, the Republicans' new star, Sarah Who, became better known as Sarah Woosoo — once John McCain's surprise vice presidential choice, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, had to acknowledge that her 17-year-old daughter was pregnant. Then, just as viewers thought they were getting to know the 44-year-old self described "suburban hockey mom," Palin again became Sarah Who — with a steady drip, drip, drip of (so far) minor challenges to her iconic narrative.

Add to that the gasp-inducing drama of Gustav, and the show could have been called — indeed, many Democrats feel it should be — the Mess in Minnesota.

That isn't the case.

The biggest benefits of Palin's selection remain intact. They're the more serious consideration by some women still smarting over the fate of Hillary Rodham Clinton, and the surge of support from religious conservatives who had doubted McCain's commitment to their causes. And then there's the added benefit: Far from merely reminding America about a Republican administration's failings with Katrina exactly three years ago, the storm may have improved McCain's and the party's image. There's no doubt of the conservatives, who don't care much about her thin resume in national affairs. Asked how Palin could represent a party that promotes "family values," former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee chuckled. "Before it's all over, she'll be accused of kidnapping the Lindbergh baby," said the Baptist minister. "But we will still love her."

The litmus test Palin passed was that her daughter kept the baby and will marry the father. As long as that is the truth, most else can be forgiven — especially if she is seen as a target, fair or not, of the left.

Gustav, including the cancellations of convention events, turned out to be an ill wind that did not blow badly — for Republicans. It reduced the public role of the unpopular President Bush to last night's video visit. It afforded Bush and the

Gulf Coast's GOP governors an opportunity to do a better job this time. It also gave party leaders a chance to show a more compassionate side, as many events became disaster relief fundraisers.

If anything, the more that Democrats deride Palin on any score — Barack Obama was smart to back way off, once he realized that his campaign's initial assault could backfire — the more that some women may resent what they see as a sexist attack on a woman who has done well balancing family and career. The harder the media try (as they should) to deconstruct her background, the more enthusiastically conservatives will embrace her.

The relative lack of a big polling “bounce” for Obama after last week's stellar convention attests to the benefits for Republicans and the dangers for Democrats. In 2004, Bush garnered 48 percent of independents and 11 percent of Democrats. Because Obama is likely to bring additional blacks and young voters to the polls, McCain has to do better than that. But McCain also is more popular than Bush across the board. And, frankly, he doesn't need many more Democrats to win.

Of course, this political calculation gets swept away if a stream of revelations about Palin continues to dominate the news, or if something really splash emerges that shows she is lying.

So far, none of what's now out there—hiring a lawyer to defend herself in a state legislative probe or pursuing federal funds for local projects as a mayor when she now is boasting about the big “earmark” she rejected as governor — should hurt her with anybody not reflexively opposed to her. Nor McCain, who is under some legitimate fire for choosing her after a short vetting process.

At some point, if the Palin soap opera becomes too repetitive or unbelievable, the ratings will fall, especially among those moderate women for whom a candidate's opposition of abortion rights is not automatically disqualifying. If the story starts to sound more like “The Beverly Hillbillies” meets “Ocean's Eleven” — if she seems more a “hick” or a con woman — the Republicans will be off the air before Election Day.

For now, the show goes on for two more unexpectedly intriguing nights. Tonight, when Sarah Who (or Wooooo) takes the national stage, she isn't likely to command the 40 million viewers that the Obama Show attracted to tomorrows acceptance extravaganza. But she'll have a bigger audience than the Republicans ever imagined they'd get even for McCain — much less for a governor who would have been lucky to get any speaking role.

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