

# [***Opinion: Man vs. bear vs. Kristi Noem***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BYY-TD01-DY7V-G00C-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

May 7, 2024 Tuesday 6:25 PM GMT

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**Length:** 1187 words

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**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; You're walking through the woods alone. What would you rather encounter: A man or a bear?

That question has [*gone viral*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/06/us/man-bear-safety-tiktok-question-cec/index.html) on social media, as woman after woman says: bear. Bears, after all, kill and assault far[*fewer people*](https://worldanimalfoundation.org/advocate/bear-attacks-statistics/) than men. And these answers have predictably stirred up a response (what on social media doesn't?) as some men complained about the "misandry" of women's answers.

Something these responses largely miss is the palpable, rational and profoundly depressing fear women have of men. I also couldn't help but wonder if the responses divided in any way along political lines, with progressive women being more willing to state the obvious fact that men [*pose a larger danger to women*](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women) than [*any other*](https://www.discoverwildlife.com/animal-facts/deadliest-animals-to-humans) mammal, with conservative women caught in more of a jam - needing to avoid the appearance of some latent anti-male feminism, while also wanting to prove that they're as tough as any guy.

We have seen this tough-as-nails persona exemplified by South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, who described killing her "untrainable" dog and a goat on her family farm. "Whether running the ranch or in ***politics***, I have never passed on my responsibilities to anyone else to handle. Even if it's hard and painful," [*Noem writes in her new book*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/26/politics/kristi-noem-south-dakota-book-killing-dog/index.html).

Judging at least from prominent Republican women, a conservative theory of womanhood is that most women are delicate creatures best suited for [*maternity*](https://nwlc.org/right-wing-group-tells-young-women-that-marriage-and-children-are-all-that-matters-heres-why-we-should-be-relieved/), but a handful of themare just as brutal (and of course as well-armed) as their male counterparts. That bear should be worried about them (especially Noem, who has, in fact, [*hunted bears*](https://dakotafreepress.com/2023/05/21/noem-niece-bag-bears-in-saskatchewan/)).

Throughout every feminist era in the US, there have been women opposing women's progress. Many conservative women [*opposed the right of women*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/local/history/anti-suffrage-women-vote-19-amendment/) to vote. Many conservative women [*opposed*](https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/45/when-the-anti-feminists-roared-back/) the Equal Rights Amendment (which was successfully killed), federal funding for childcare and greater rights for women in the workplace.

Today, conservative women head groups that oppose abortion rights, oppose [*contraception*](https://revealnews.org/podcast/the-long-campaign-to-turn-birth-control-into-the-new-abortion/), oppose [*IVF*](https://www.ortl.org/2024/03/pro-life-leaders-respond-to-alabama-ivf-ruling/) and [*deny*](https://studentsforlife.org/2022/05/25/today-on-explicitly-pro-life-abortions-are-never-medically-necessary/) that women might ever need medically necessary abortions. Even though the US has had an unbroken string of male presidents, the Republican Party has more than four times as many men in the Senate as [*women*](https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/levels-office/congress/women-us-senate-2024) and Republican women make up less than 8% of members of the [*US House*](https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/levels-office/congress/women-us-house-representatives-2024), conservative women routinely [*say*](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/19/us/politics/haley-campaign-gop-women.html) that [*women*](https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/1647-supermajority-survey-on-women/429aa78e37ebdf2fe686/optimized/full.pdf) are treated [*fairly*](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/republican-women-sex-discrimination_n_5c7ed611e4b06ff26ba31e82) in the country broadly and in their [*party*](https://www.politico.com/newsletters/women-rule/2024/03/22/an-abundance-of-johns-a-shortage-of-gop-women-00148532) specifically.

Republican women have long tried, unsuccessfully, to rise to the top of their own party. Former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley ran in this year's GOP primary and was badly defeated by former President Donald Trump. Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin was chosen as John McCain's running mate (a decision McCain later said he [*regretted*](https://thehill.com/homenews/news/386392-mccain-i-regret-picking-palin-as-my-vice-presidential-nominee/)) and wound up becoming a national laughingstock. And now, Noem is vying for Trump's VP slot - and telling a spectacularly awful story about shooting her own puppy in an apparent effort to seem sufficiently tough for a party that salivates at wanton [*cruelty*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/28/opinions/kristi-noem-shot-cricket-dog-obeidallah/index.html).

One throughline runs through prominent GOP women of the last two decades: a seeming obsession with toughness. There's Noem getting homicidally tough on a puppy and then, when facing backlash for killing a dog, saying that President Joe Biden's dog, Commander, should [*meet the same fate*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/05/politics/kristi-noem-dog-commander-biden/index.html).IowaSen. Joni Ernst put out an ad about [*castrating pigs*](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/nov/05/behind-joni-ernst-game-changing-pig-castrating-ad). Haley routinely played up her own toughness, and [*insisted*](https://www.facebook.com/NikkiHaley/posts/10151106423293226/?paipv=0&eav=AfY68oiDvr7qGWfAQT1KFlYRSWFuypxJ8taxMeYpBvOCZb9_MjbDPBygVsUX_Rh9PhY&_rdr) that women "don't whine" to get what we want. Palin relished talking about hunting and seemed to suggest that she thoroughly [*enjoyed*](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sarah-palin-killing-animals_b_793600) killing animals.

But conservative women also have to present as feminine and maternal, because so much of conservative ideology hangs on the traditional gender roles these same women are breaking with their political lives and career ambitions. Noem's [*excuse*](https://www.newsweek.com/kristi-noem-says-killing-dog-was-her-choice-mom-1897721) for the puppy-murder? It was her "choice as a mom." Palin loved to play up her status as a mother of five, while also [*quipping*](https://nypost.com/2008/09/04/shes-a-pit-bull-with-lipstick/) about "the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull? Lipstick."

Why was Haley qualified to be president? Well, she [*said*](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2023/12/09/nikki-haley-parenting-2024-gop-primary/71845453007/), she was UN ambassador, the governor of South Carolina and "The third reason is: I'm a mom." The GOP response to the State of the Union, usually delivered from behind a lectern, was given this year by a Republican congresswoman who was seated in her spotless [*kitchen*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/03/08/katie-britt-sotu-rebuttal-criticism/).

American conservative movements and particularly the conservative Christian religious groups that make up their base have long sold the lie that women are best off as mothers, while men are natural providers; marriage brings these two complementary groups together. And conservatives have long sought to preserve a system in which men maintain political, [*social*](https://prospect.org/power/republicans-solve-problem-women-voters/) and [*economic*](https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/08/gender-pay-gap-senate-republicans-492316) dominance, while women are primarily tasked with raising children and keeping a home.

This has been the justification for keeping women out of the [*ballot box*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/21/politics/john-gibbs-womens-suffrage-19th-amendment-kfile/index.html), out of [*office*](https://sos.oregon.gov/archives/exhibits/suffrage/Pages/context/arguments.aspx) and [*out*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/05/03/conservatives-childcare-parents-mothers/) of [*work*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/02/19/utah-republican-argues-against-equal-pay-for-women-its-bad-for-families-and-society/); it seeps into justifications for abortion bans and the [*lack*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/05/03/conservatives-childcare-parents-mothers/) of government [*support*](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/01/republicans-threatened-biden-universal-daycare-week-in-patriarchy) for [*childcare*](https://19thnews-org.webpkgcache.com/doc/-/s/19thnews.org/2023/11/congress-child-care-policy-stance-republicans-democrats/). [*Some*](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/06/obituaries/phyllis-schlafly-conservative-leader-and-foe-of-era-dies-at-92.html) conservative women have achieved vast national fame and stunning career success by telling other women that it's only natural for women to stay home.

And yet there are women of all political persuasions who are ambitious, intelligent, determined and as ruthless as any man. The problem is that power-seeking women do not tend to be well-received by the American public (one reason there are so few women in positions of power), and power-seeking women really do not tend to be well-received by conservatives, a group that is, by definition, skeptical of change.

While women have always been ambitious and power-seeking, the conditions for women to actually ascend to positions of power are relatively new. And they fly in the face of centuries old strictures, assumptions and rules about a woman's role. No wonder conservative women have such a hard time finding support from their party and from Republican voters.

Republican women, knowing they are at an electoral [*disadvantage*](https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/news/2023/are-voters-biased-against-women-candidates.html)[*compared*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/republican-women-conservative-primary-candidates/2020/11/25/bb803a8c-2eaf-11eb-96c2-aac3f162215d_story.html) to both their male counterparts and their liberal ones, have often tried to have it both ways: rugged but put together; maternal, but not so much that they can't be taken seriously; feminine, but willing to be as cruel as their party leader. This is, I suspect, how a woman like Noem comes to the conclusion that a story about shooting an adorable puppy to death in a gravel pit will somehow endear her to Republican voters, and not make them recoil in horror at her Cruella de Vil cosplay.

Conservative women don't need to sign on to the political tenets of feminism or liberalism. But they are at the center of an untenable tension as ambitious women who want the sky to be the limit within a political movement that tethers women down. Their answer seems to be to deny reality, toughen up (but with lipstick on) and hope that they will be the one special-enough female exception who the boys will see fit to let lead their club. And someday, maybe one of them will. But their party will still have rigged the whole game.

Opinion by Jill Filipovic

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**Load-Date:** May 7, 2024

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