

The Legend of Mark Uterus



A few months ago, I wrote a column on this website about the U.S. Senate race in my home state of Colorado. At the time, Democratic incumbent Mark Udall was leading Republican challenger Cory Gardner in all of the polls. My belief was that Udall was headed toward certain victory because of how well the Democrats' "War On Women" strategy has historically worked in this state, and how relentless the Udall camp had been in portraying Gardner as a misogynistic extremist intent on banning women's contraceptives.

You see, Colorado Democrats have had quite a bit of time to perfect this technique because they're the ones who actually launched the *War on Women* against the Republicans back in 2010; only it began under a different name: The Colorado Model.

The *Colorado Model* was first inspired, ironically, by something that happened during the Republican primary that year. There was a grueling battle for who would represent the GOP for the state's *other* Senate seat. The Republican contenders were Jane Norton (a former Lieutenant Governor) and Ken Buck (the Weld County District Attorney). Norton was seen as the early favorite, but as Buck built momentum, Norton's campaign grew desperate. When a video surfaced of Buck making a joke at a party that Coloradans should vote for him because *he didn't wear high heels*, Norton pounced, portraying the comment as sexist. In reality, the remark was in reference to Norton herself earlier suggesting that people should vote for *her*, "because I wear high heels."

Buck eventually won the primary, but Democrats saw an opportunity, in a state with a growing voting demographic of *young women*, to play off of the sexist stigma. In a year when the electorate was extremely upset over President Obama's failing economic policies and the Affordable Care Act, Buck's opponent, Democratic Senator Michael Bennett, placed nearly all of his campaign focus on portraying Buck as an enemy to women. Every stitch of Buck's personal history – from his stance on abortion to the cases he'd tried – was perversely and relentlessly twisted into a narrative that he was a misogynist. In the face of a Tea Party tsunami that captured the House of Representatives for the GOP, Bennett (who had an approval rating of only 39%) won a razor-thin victory spearheaded by a 17 point lead with Colorado women.

You can't ignore a political success story as dramatic as that, and national Democratic strategists certainly didn't. Two years later, they introduced the *War on Women* to the rest of the country. People like Rush Limbaugh and Todd Akin, who had made high-profile, derogatory comments about women, were held up by the Democratic Party and the national media as the leaders of the Republican Party. The narrative contributed to Mitt Romney's eventual loss in the presidential race, as well as state-wide losses here in Colorado.

That brings us to present-day, mid-term election season in the year 2014, in the state where it all began: Colorado. In half of the campaign commercials we see on television here every day, we're told of GOP candidates who are supposedly "on a crusade" to take away women's contraceptives, women's equal pay, and pretty much every possible right imaginable that somehow relates back to women and their bodies. It is beyond ridiculous, but as I described above, it has a history of working here in Colorado. That's why, in my column back in June, I predicted a win for Mark Udall.

Something extremely fascinating, however, has happened since then.

Over the months, Mark Udall has been demonstrating a virtual unwillingness to campaign on anything *other* than *women's reproductive issues*. Whenever he talks, he's talking about women being under assault, and how their advancement in society will be set back decades without people like him in office to protect them. It has come across as a creepy case of tunnel-vision, and it's gotten to the point where his campaign ads (overflowing with gynecological language and imagery) have come to resemble more of a Saturday Night Live parody than a serious politician's attempt to make a case for his re-election.

The Denver Post, a reliably liberal paper, and thus typically supportive of Democratic politicians, has been so turned off by Udall's shameless and disingenuous pandering that they, in a move that surprised many, endorsed Cory Gardner. Their editorial board wrote, "Rather than run on his record, Udall's campaign has devoted a shocking amount of energy and money trying to convince voters that Gardner seeks to outlaw birth control despite the congressman's call for over-the-counter sales of contraceptives. Udall is trying to frighten voters rather than inspire them with a hopeful vision. His obnoxious one-issue campaign is an insult to those he seeks to convince."

The Colorado Springs' *Gazette* concurred, writing that "Udall's campaign against Gardner makes obvious his desperation to keep Colorado's attention off his record and on a bizarre narrative about social issues resolved decades ago."

Udall's campaign has even earned him the unflattering nickname of *Mark Uterus*, spawning several social media parody accounts (complete with #LadyParts hashtags) and entertaining radio skits. The bizarreness and silliness of it all has filtered down to the Colorado electorate, and the state has begun to sour on Mr. Uterus... er, I mean Mr. Udall. To the amazement of many, Gardner has taken a lead of somewhere between 3 and 7 points, according to recent polls. Some polls even show that

Gardner has completely erased the gender gap in female, likely-voter support. This is an astounding feat considering that Udall *had* been well ahead with that demographic for several months – to the point where Democrats were considering Udall's seat a safe one.

Gardner certainly hasn't won yet; anything can happen between now and election day. No one in the Republican party should be doing a victory dance over his lead in the polls. In fact, it should be noted that Democratic candidates typically under-poll a bit in this state. But if the momentum holds, and Udall does lose to Gardner in November, the Udall campaign's decision to discount important issues, and concentrate almost exclusively on catering to the reproductive instincts of women, will have to go down as one of the biggest political flubs in the state's history.

Imagine the poetic justice in the *War on Women* dying in its birthplace, because the person employing it actually scared off the women voters he was courting with his incessant, obsessive pandering. The story could be called *The Legend of Mark Uterus*, and it would undoubtedly be one for the books.