

OCTOBER 22

Welcome to the Presidential Pageant

Less than two weeks before Election Day 2004, the ABC television network cancelled Miss America. Fifty years after it premiered on national TV, the famous “beauty pageant” has fallen on hard times. Last month, the annual show drew just 9.8 million viewers, the smallest audience ever.

“The pageant has changed, but not for the better,” commented an editorial in a New Jersey newspaper, the Asbury Park Press. “Eliminating most of the talent portion of the competition from this year’s broadcast was a mistake. Trotting the contestants out in string bikinis rather than one-piece suits probably did more to alienate traditional viewers than attract new ones.”

Despite this year’s modernizing make-over, the Miss America pageant is a throwback to the 1950s, the decade that launched it onto the nation’s TV screens – an era when sexism was inseparable from supposed Americanism. Women were reduced to competitors in bathing suits who could sing and flash their shiny white teeth while they briefly made conversation. Perhaps subtly but pervasively, the spectacle was an exercise in humiliation.

These days, we shouldn’t burn a lot of calories patting ourselves on the back. In 2004, television routinely features a steady flow of rigid gender roles – as a close look at an array of commercials attests – and the use of women’s bodies to sell products is standard media operating procedure.

Throughout our society, there are plenty more options for women today, professionally and personally. But the media images of females are still heavily slanted by stereotypes. Meanwhile, in the workaday world, women receive just 76 cents for every dollar paid to men for comparable jobs. We have a long way to go before there can be any credible claims of social equality.

As reflected in the viewer ratings, the concept of Miss America has gone out of fashion. In contrast, the networks devote countless hours to covering what we might call the Mr. America pageant – also known as the presidential campaign.

While this country has become a good deal more skeptical about the mythic allures

MEDIABEAT 2004 | NORMAN SOLOMON

of Miss America, the news media and the nation as a whole are still boxed in by the Mr. America extravaganza. During thousands of public appearances, presidential candidates pose, preen and posture, trying to measure up to our images of what and who the man in the Oval Office should be. And the media evaluations often seem scarcely more sophisticated or discerning than the retrograde judges who assign points according to arbitrary standards of physical proportions and womanly poise.

They're polar opposites – an inconsequential Miss America contest and a momentous presidential contest – yet political journalists, especially the ones on television, often lapse into reviewing debate performances and stump speeches on the basis of little more than style. Reporters and pundits are apt to applaud well-executed spin without reference to the factual basis or wisdom of the assertions.

We may scoff at the imagery of Miss America, with her regal cape and glittering crown. And it will certainly be a step forward if the pageant can't find a major network next year to air the retro show.

But for half a century, few people had reason to care exactly who became Miss America. Ever since the 1950s, however, each battle to win the presidency has been more about television than the one before. Candidate performances in front of TV cameras – and how journalists characterize those appearances – have assumed ever-greater importance in the nation's presidential selection process.

Ordinarily, as a practical matter, the game of political drama merely requires that someone play a passable version of a wise president on television. What we see on the screen are the pretenses of a man who tries to follow a script written to fit the public's fondest image of Mr. America. The gaps between televised appearances and real-world realities have never been more profound than the abyss between George W. Bush's favorite televised personas and the consequences of his presidential reign. It may soon be this president's misfortune that most voters have seen through the poses of a pleasant TV performer.

Norman Solomon is co-author, with Reese Erlich, of "Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You" (available as a free download at coldtype.net). His columns and other writings can be found at normansolomon.com.