

GERALDINE A. FERRARO, 1935-2011

## *She Ended the Men's Club of National Politics*



Geraldine A. Ferraro and Walter F. Mondale on July 20, 1984.  
Credit...Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

By [Douglas Martin](#), March 26, 2011

Geraldine A. Ferraro, the former Queens congresswoman who strode onto a podium in 1984 to accept the Democratic nomination for vice president and to take her place in American history as the first woman nominated for national office by a major party, died on Saturday in Boston. She was 75.

The cause was complications of multiple myeloma, a blood cancer that she had battled for 12 years, her family said in a statement. She died at Massachusetts General Hospital, where she had been undergoing treatment since Monday. She lived in Manhattan.

“If we can do this, we can do anything,” Ms. Ferraro declared on a July evening to a cheering Democratic National Convention in San Francisco. And for a moment, for the Democratic Party and for an untold number of American women, anything seemed

possible: a woman occupying the second-highest office in the land, a derailing of the Republican juggernaut led by President Ronald Reagan, a President Walter F. Mondale.

It did not turn out that way — not by a long shot. After the roars in the Moscone Center had subsided and a fitful general election campaign had run its course, hopes for Mr. Mondale and his plain-speaking, barrier-breaking running mate were buried in a Reagan landslide.

But Ms. Ferraro's supporters proclaimed a victory of sorts nonetheless: 64 years after women won the right to vote, a woman had removed the "men only" sign from the White House door.

It would be another 24 years before another woman from a major party was nominated for vice president — Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska, the Republican running mate of Senator John McCain, in 2008. And though Hillary Rodham Clinton came close to being nominated that year as the Democratic presidential candidate, a woman has yet to occupy the Oval Office. But Ms. Ferraro's ascendance gave many women heart.

Ann Richards, who was the Texas state treasurer at the time and went on to become governor, recalled that after the Ferraro nomination, "the first thing I thought of was not winning in the political sense, but of my two daughters."

"To think," Ms. Richards added, "of the numbers of young women who can now aspire to anything."

In a statement, President Obama said Saturday, "Geraldine will forever be remembered as a trailblazer who broke down barriers for women and Americans of all backgrounds and walks of life."

As Mr. Mondale's surprise choice, Ms. Ferraro rocketed to national prominence, propelled by fervid feminist support, a spirited and sometimes saucy personality, canny political skills and the calculation by Democratic strategists that Reagan might be vulnerable on issues thought to be more important to women.

But it proved to be a difficult campaign. The incumbent Reagan-Bush ticket presented a formidable enough challenge in and of itself, but Ms. Ferraro found herself on the defensive almost from the start, answering critics who questioned her qualifications for high office. Then there were damaging revelations about the finances of her husband, John Zaccaro, forcing Ms. Ferraro to release his tax returns and hold a marathon news conference in the middle of the general election race. Some said she had become a liability to Mr. Mondale and only hurt his chances more.

### **Quick Study as Candidate**

A former Queens criminal prosecutor, Ms. Ferraro was a vigorous but relatively inexperienced candidate with a better feel for urban ward politics than for international

diplomacy. But she proved to be a quick study and came across as a new breed of feminist politician — comfortable with the boys, particularly powerful Democrats like the House speaker, Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., and less combative than predecessors like Representative Bella Abzug of New York.

She was also ideal for television: a down-to-earth, streaked-blond, peanut-butter-sandwich-making mother whose personal story resonated powerfully. Brought up by a single mother who had crocheted beads on wedding dresses to send her daughter to good schools, Ms. Ferraro had waited until her own children were school age before going to work in a Queens district attorney's office headed by a cousin.

In the 1984 race, many Americans found her breezy style refreshing. "What are you — crazy?" was a familiar expression. She might break into a little dance behind the speaker's platform when she liked the introductory music. Feeling patronized by her Republican opponent, Vice President George Bush, she publicly scolded him.

With Ms. Ferraro on the ticket, Democrats hoped to exploit a so-called gender gap between the parties. A Newsweek poll taken after she was nominated showed men favoring Reagan-Bush 58 percent to 36 percent but women supporting Mondale-Ferraro 49 percent to 41 percent.

For the first time, a major candidate for national office talked about abortion with the phrase "If I were pregnant," or about foreign policy with the personal observation "As the mother of a draft-age son...." She wore pearls and silk dresses and publicly worried that her slip was showing.

She also traveled a 55,000-mile campaign trail, spoke in 85 cities and raised \$6 million. But in November the Democratic ticket won only one state — Mr. Mondale's Minnesota — and the District of Columbia.

And to the Democrats' chagrin, Mr. Reagan captured even the women's vote, drawing some 55 percent; women, it appeared, had opposed, almost as much as men, the tax increase that Mr. Mondale, a former senator and vice president under Jimmy Carter, had said in his acceptance speech would be inevitable, an attempt at straight talking that cost him dearly at the polls.

Most election analysts believed that from the start the Democratic ticket had little chance against a popular incumbent who was basking in an economic recovery and proclaiming that it was "morning again in America." Some said the choice of the little-known Ms. Ferraro had been a desperate move to attract the female vote in a daunting election year. Compounding the campaign's woes was a barrage of questions about the Ferraro family finances — often carrying insinuations about ties to organized crime — that not only blemished Ms. Ferraro's stature as the first Italian-American national candidate but also diverted attention from other issues.

Ms. Ferraro's politics teetered from liberal positions, like her support for the Equal Rights Amendment for women and a nuclear freeze, to conservative ones, like her

opposition to school busing and her support of tax credits for private and parochial school parents. In her first race for the House of Representatives, in 1978, from New York's Ninth Congressional District in Queens, a Republican stronghold, her slogan was "Finally, a tough Democrat."

The abortion issue, magnified because she was Roman Catholic and a woman, plagued her campaign. Though she opposed the procedure personally, she said, others had the right to choose for themselves. Abortion opponents hounded her at almost every stop with an intensity seldom experienced by male politicians.

## **Last Word: Geraldine A. Ferraro**

**In 1984, Geraldine A. Ferraro became the first woman nominated for national office by a major party.**

In 1984, Geraldine A. Ferraro became the first woman nominated for national office by a major party. CreditCredit...Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Writing in The Washington Post in September 1984, the columnist Mary McGrory quoted an unnamed Roman Catholic priest as saying, "When the nuns in the fifth grade told Geraldine she would have to die for her faith, she didn't know it would be this way."

### **Named for a Brother**

Geraldine Anne Ferraro was born on Aug. 26, 1935, in the Hudson River city of Newburgh, N.Y., where she was the fourth child and only daughter of Dominick Ferraro, an Italian immigrant who owned a restaurant and a five-and-dime store, and the former Antonetta L. Corrieri. One brother died shortly after birth, and another, Gerard, died in an automobile accident when he was 3, two years before Geraldine was born.

Geraldine was born at home; her mother, who had been holding Gerard at the time of the crash and who had washed and pressed his clothes for months after his death, would not go to the hospital for the delivery and leave the third brother, Carl, at home.

Geraldine was named for Gerard, but in her book "Framing a Life: A Family Memoir," written with Catherine Whitney, Ms. Ferraro said her mother had emphasized that she was not taking his place.

"Gerry is special," she quoted her mother as saying, "because she is a girl."

Unknown to Ms. Ferraro at the time, her father had repeated trouble with the state liquor authorities and ultimately lost his restaurant license. During the vice-presidential campaign, she learned by reading The New York Post that her father had been arrested on charges of running a numbers racket but had died of a heart attack the morning he

was to appear in court. Her mother was arrested as an accomplice, but the charges were dropped after her husband's death, Ms. Ferraro wrote.

She called her father's death, which happened when she was 8, "a dividing line that runs through my life." In her grief, she said, she developed anemia.

Her mother soon sold the store and the family's house and moved to the South Bronx. With the proceeds from the sale of property in Italy that her husband had left her, she sent Geraldine to the Marymount School, a Catholic boarding school in Tarrytown, N.Y. She sent Carl to military school.

Ms. Ferraro's outstanding grades earned her a scholarship to Marymount College in Tarrytown, from which she transferred to the school's Manhattan branch. She commuted there from Queens, where her mother had moved by then. An English major, Ms. Ferraro was editor of the school newspaper and an athlete and won numerous honors before graduating in 1956. "Delights in the unexpected," the yearbook said.

After graduating, Ms. Ferraro got a job teaching in a public grade school in Queens. She later applied to Fordham Law School, where an admissions officer warned her that she might be taking a man's place. Admitted to its night school, she was one of two women in a class of 179 and received her law degree in 1960.

Ms. Ferraro and John Zaccaro, whose family was in the real estate business, were married on July 16, 1960, two days after she passed her bar exam. She was admitted to the New York State bar in 1961, and decided to keep her maiden name professionally to honor her mother. (She was admitted to the United States Supreme Court bar in 1978.)

For the first 13 years of her marriage, Ms. Ferraro devoted herself mainly to her growing family. Donna was born in 1962, John in 1964 and Laura in 1966. Ms. Ferraro did some legal work for her husband's business, worked pro bono for women in Family Court and dabbled in local politics. In 1970 she was elected president of the Queens County Women's Bar Association.

In 1973, after her cousin Nicholas Ferraro was elected Queens district attorney, she applied for and got a job as an assistant district attorney in charge of a special victims bureau, investigating rape, crimes against the elderly, and child and wife abuse.

The cases were so harrowing, she later wrote, that they caused her to develop an ulcer. And the crime-breeding societal conditions she saw, she said, planted the seeds of her liberalism.

### **Sights Set on Congress**

One night, before he became governor of New York, Mario M. Cuomo gave Ms. Ferraro and her husband a ride home from a bar mitzvah. She told him she was thinking of running for public office. "What about Congress?" Mr. Cuomo asked.

Ms. Ferraro found her opportunity in 1978, when James J. Delaney, a Democratic congressman from a predominantly working-class district in Queens, announced his retirement. In a three-way Democratic primary for the seat, Ms. Ferraro won with 53 percent of the vote. In the general election campaign, a slugfest against a Republican assemblyman, Alfred A. DelliBovi, she won by 10 percentage points, helped by her law-and-order background.

In the House, Ms. Ferraro was assigned to unglamorous committees but used them to her advantage. On the Public Works and Transportation Committee, she successfully pushed for improved mass transit around La Guardia Airport.

Mr. O'Neill, the speaker, took an immediate liking to her, and in her three terms she voted mostly with her party's leadership. Liberal and labor groups gave her high ratings, though she was less adamant than many liberal Democrats about cutting military spending.

Ms. Ferraro was a co-sponsor of the Economic Equity Act, which was intended to accomplish many of the aims of the never-ratified Equal Rights Amendment. She also supported federal financing for abortions.

"She manages to be threatening on issues without being threatening personally," Representative Barney Frank, Democrat of Massachusetts, told *The Chicago Tribune* in 1984.

Others were less laudatory. "Some see her as too compromising, too ambitious, too close to the leadership," *The Washington Post* wrote that same year.

Her friendship with Mr. O'Neill helped her career. Thanks in part to him, she was elected secretary of the Democratic caucus, giving her influence on committee assignments, and in 1983 she was awarded a seat on the powerful budget committee, where she received a crash course in economics. To enhance her foreign policy credentials, she took trips to Central America and the Middle East.

It was Ms. Ferraro's appointment as chairwoman of the 1984 Democratic Platform Committee that gave her the most prominence. In her book "Ferraro: My Story," written with Linda Bird Francke, she said that in becoming the first woman to hold that post she owed much to a group of Democratic women — Congressional staffers, abortion rights activists, labor leaders and others — who called themselves Team A and who lobbied for her appointment.

## A Barrier-Breaking Woman on a Major-Party Ticket

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Janet Hostetter/Associated Press

Even before then, however, Ms. Ferraro's name had been mentioned on lists of potential candidates for vice president, along with Representative Patricia Schroeder of Colorado, the former congresswoman Barbara Jordan and Dianne Feinstein, the mayor of San Francisco. By May 1984, Mr. O'Neill had endorsed her for the No. 2 spot on the ticket. It was, as Ms. Ferraro later put it, "the Good Housekeeping seal of approval."

On July 1, the National Organization for Women threatened a convention floor fight if the Democrats did not choose a woman, and three days later a delegation of Democratic women went to Minnesota to urge Mr. Mondale to do so.

Mr. Mondale made his historic call, asking Ms. Ferraro to be his running mate, on July 11. His campaign believed that she would do well not only among women but also among blue-collar workers. Eight days later, wearing a white dress she had bought on Orchard Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, she accepted the Democratic nomination for vice president.

## Trouble Over Finances

Her campaign was soon stalled by accusations about her personal finances. The storm reached its height in a two-hour press conference on Aug. 21, after Ms. Ferraro had released the tax returns of her husband, Mr. Zaccaro. She responded to question after question in a confident, relaxed manner. Mr. Cuomo called it “one of the best performances I’ve ever seen by a politician under pressure.”

Ms. Ferraro later faced down hecklers in Texas and pro-Reagan auto workers in Illinois. After Vice President Bush was overheard bragging that “we tried to kick a little ass last night,” referring to a debate with Ms. Ferraro, she declined to comment directly, though her aides called the remark insulting and demeaning. There were signs at campaign rallies saying, “Give ’em hell, Gerry!”

Everywhere people were adjusting — or manifestly not adjusting — to a woman on a national ticket. Mississippi’s agriculture secretary called Ms. Ferraro “young lady” and asked if she could bake blueberry muffins. When a Roman Catholic bishop gave a news conference in Pennsylvania, he repeatedly referred to the Republican vice-presidential nominee as “Mr. Bush” and to the Democratic one as “Geraldine.”

Ms. Ferraro’s words raised hackles as well. She was criticized for suggesting that Reagan was not a “good Christian” because, she said, his policies hurt the disadvantaged.

Her inability to escape questions about her finances was partly brought on by her husband’s initial refusal to release his tax returns. She riled Italian-Americans when she explained, “If you’re married to an Italian man, you know what it’s like.”

When her financial situation was finally disclosed, it turned out that the candidate with the rags-to-riches story had a net worth approaching \$4 million, a boat, a full-time uniformed maid and vacation homes on Fire Island in New York and in the Virgin Islands.

Mr. Bush’s wife, Barbara, complained that Ms. Ferraro was masquerading as a working-class wife and mother, calling her a “four-million-dollar — I can’t say it, but it rhymes with rich.”

Her associations and finances revealed one questionable thing after another. The Federal Election Commission fined her 1978 campaign committee for accepting \$134,000 in contributions from her husband and children when they were legally allowed to contribute only \$4,000.

Evidence also emerged that organized-crime figures had contributed to her campaigns. When a House ethics panel investigated her financial disclosures, it came out that one of Mr. Zaccaro’s companies had rented two floors of a building to a pornography distributor.



The disclosures damaged a campaign that was already fighting an uphill battle; Mr. Mondale later said he thought they cost the campaign 15 percentage points in the polls. He also suggested that a male running mate might not have been dissected so severely. After the election, the House ethics committee determined that Ms. Ferraro's financial disclosures had been inadequate. In 1986, the elections commission said one of her campaign committees had improperly allocated funds.

Ms. Ferraro's family experienced legal problems of its own. In 1985, Mr. Zaccaro pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge that he had schemed to defraud a mortgage broker. Two years later he was acquitted of attempted extortion in a cable television company's bid to get a Queens franchise. And in 1988 the couple's son, John Jr., was convicted of a felony for selling cocaine in Vermont while a student at Middlebury College.

After her defeat in 1984, Ms. Ferraro was criticized for appearing in a Diet Pepsi commercial. Feminists in particular called it undignified.

She is survived by her husband, three children and eight grandchildren.

### **Later Bids for Office**

Weary of the spotlight on her family, Ms. Ferraro passed up a chance to challenge Senator Alfonse M. D'Amato, Republican of New York, in his bid for a second term in 1986. But she decided to seek the seat in 1992 and entered the Democratic primary. She finished 10,000 votes (1 percent of the total) [behind Robert Abrams](#), the state attorney general, who lost to Mr. D'Amato in the general election. She again ran for the Senate in 1998 but lost to Charles E. Schumer in the Democratic primary by a lopsided margin.

Ms. Ferraro was later ambassador to the United Nations Human Rights Commission during the Clinton administration and co-host of the CNN program "Crossfire" from 1996 to 1998. She also wrote books and articles and did business consulting.

Near the end of 1998, she learned she had multiple myeloma, a bone-marrow cancer that suppresses the immune system. She was one of the first cancer patients to be treated with thalidomide, a drug used in the 1960s to treat morning sickness that caused severe defects in unborn children.

"Such a strange thing," Ms. Ferraro said in an interview with The New York Times in 2001. "What was terrible for a healthy fetus has been wonderful at defeating the cancer cells."

She addressed her place in history in a long letter to The Times in 1988, noting that women wrote to her about how she had inspired them to take on challenges, "always adding a version of 'I decided if you could do it, I can too.'" Schoolgirls, she said, told her they hoped to be president someday and needed advice.

“I am the first to admit that were I not a woman, I would not have been the vice-presidential nominee,” she wrote. But she insisted that her presence on the ticket had translated into votes that the ticket might otherwise have not received.

In any event, she said, the political realities of 1984 had made it all but impossible for the Democrats to win, no matter the candidates or their gender. “Throwing Ronald Reagan out of office at the height of his popularity, with inflation and interest rates down, the economy moving and the country at peace, would have required God on the ticket,” Ms. Ferraro wrote, “and She was not available!”