An Early Campaign Gaffe Makes a Non-Issue Big

By JENNIFER STEINHAUER

You can parse a voting record. Flip-flops — political ones — are fair game. But don’t talk about a woman’s hair.

In one of those classic campaign gaffes, Carly Fiorina, the Republican nominee for the Senate seat held by Barbara Boxer, the California Democrat, was caught mocking Ms. Boxer’s hair into an open microphone on Wednesday. She also had a few tough words about the newly minted Republican candidate for governor and her B.F.F.-on-the-stump, Meg Whitman.

Ms. Fiorina’s comments were, all told, really no more incendiary than a bit of warm pasta salad — who hasn’t indulged in some off-the-record chitchat about the grooming habits of others now and then? But they presented her with a political problem that could haunt her throughout the campaign.

They both inform and confirm the image from her days as chief executive at Hewlett-Packard that she is tart and unpleasant. And they open the entire campaign to perceptions, however tired or unfair, that women can be dragged down the road of pettiness, perceptions that detract from the serious and pressing issues of the day.

“The fact is that some voters, including many women, find this interesting and no doubt form their character judgments on such matters,” said Bruce E. Cain, a professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley.

“Of course, bad or old-fashioned hair can become a metaphor for being out of step and in need of change,” he added. “I would like to believe that people use the trivial to express their thoughts about what matters, rather than believe that the trivial matters. That said, it is not a good way to start a woman-on-woman race by playing into negative stereotypes about female culture.”
While the comments may be viewed through the prism of sex, they more likely mark Ms. Fiorina as a novice more than anything else. “I think this is a mistake of a rookie candidate who doesn’t know when to keep her mouth shut,” said Garry South, a Democratic strategist in Santa Monica. “If a man had made the comment, it would have been viewed as sexist. When a woman says it, it would be viewed as catty.”

Senator Boxer saw an opening, and took it. “Let her talk about hair; we’re talking about jobs,” said Rose Kapolczynski, her campaign manager.

Video of the episode shows Ms. Fiorina waiting to be interviewed by a Sacramento television station, scrolling through her BlackBerry and asking a staff member why Ms. Whitman would want to appear on Sean Hannity’s show on Fox News, which she deemed too tough an interview.

Then, after commentary on the passion for hamburgers shared by her husband and male staff members, Ms. Fiorina somehow pivoted to the locks of her Democratic opponent.

“Laura saw Barbara Boxer briefly on television this morning and said what everyone says, ‘God, what is that hair?’ Soooooooiday,” Ms. Fiorina said, scrolling, scrolling.

Even in the age of uncivil talk-show discourse and vicious campaign advertisements — Ms. Fiorina’s campaign constructed one that depicted her primary opponent as a possessed sheep — physical appearance, especially hair, is a place most candidates and their staff are careful not to go.

“If you are dissing their hair, you are dissing their personality and their lifestyle,” said Billy Lowe, a celebrity stylist who owns a hair salon in Los Angeles. “It is probably the one thing a woman spends most of her time on every day. It’s always on their minds. Your hair is your personality.”

News 10 in Sacramento, an ABC affiliate, used a CNN satellite to conduct the live interview with Ms. Fiorina, who was in Los Angeles. Producers at News 10 decided not to broadcast or post Ms. Fiorina’s comments.

“We had a vigorous editorial debate,” said Tim Geraghty, vice president and news director of News 10. “To put on a clip of an interview with someone talking about someone else’s hair did not fit with that brand we are trying to establish for News 10 in Northern California.”

Ms. Fiorina is particularly sensitive to the hair issue; hers is shorter than usual because she lost it during recent chemotherapy treatments for breast cancer. She talks about her hair — missing it, people’s reaction to it, even its political implications — frequently on the campaign trail. She
did so when questioned by the Fox News host Greta Van Susteren, who teased her for mocking Ms. Boxer, saying, “All of us have suffered from the old bad hair.”

Ms. Fiorina replied: “Oh, you know, I was, I was quoting a friend of mine. My goodness, my hair’s been talked about by a million people, you know? It sort of goes with the territory.”

Ms. Van Susteren, who is not always warm and fuzzy toward Democrats, suggested that Ms. Fiorina call Ms. Boxer to apologize.

Ms. Whitman and Ms. Fiorina — the state’s first Republican female candidates for the respective offices they seek — will be tied together throughout this campaign, joined by party, goal and sex. But several people connected with both campaigns — who would not speak for attribution because they do not wish to be fired, or alienate either candidate — described the candidates’ relationship as frosty and somewhat rivalrous.

During a news conference earlier Thursday, Ms. Whitman told reporters: “Things happen early morning on TV. Having been now in the race for 15 to 16 months, you can actually see how it happens. Carly and I are good friends, and I’m looking forward to running with her.”