

# Fashion in the Political Arena

DENVER (AP) — For Natalie Meyer, winning the role means dressing the part.

"The first impression is your last," says Meyer, Colorado's thrice-elected secretary of state. "And that depends a whole lot on fashion."

In politics, she explains, "You have to get 51 percent of the vote, and to do that you have to be recognized."

"Most successful elected officials — particularly women — have presence. When they walk into a room people know they're there. And a whole lot of having presence depends on how you look. So how I look is very important to me."

It would be hard to miss the commanding image of this statuesque 61-year old, who stands out anywhere at 5 feet 11 inches with soft silver hair, her head held high.

Typically turned out in a Diane Freis calf-length multicolor silk floral dress, Meyer is not likely to be mistaken for a wallflower. But even with her height, the effect isn't automatic.

"Taller women have a unique challenge. It's easier to have presence if you're tall, but you have to be very careful."

"For example, we have real difficulty wearing very short skirts. I have as much leg as some short women have body. If you're trying to communicate or work on a deal and you're showing four inches of leg from the knee up, men are unsure if you're there to proposition them or conduct a business deal."

For that reason you won't find any miniskirts in Meyer's closet.

"Designers need to recognize there's a whole group of professional women who can't buy their suits because they're offering wonderful jackets with skirts that are way too short."

Most designers haven't recognized that the American woman is getting taller, says Meyer. "The tall women shops simply make the clothes longer but wider. And there's nothing more uncomfortable than a short-waisted dress."

The solution: Designers should offer skirts with bigger hems or in a variety of lengths.

Plunging necklines likewise rate a no-no for their come-hither effect.

"If you're attempting to sell your body, that's what you wear," she says with a chuckle. "But I'm attempting to sell my whole self — not my body — to give a message."

"If you confuse that message in any way due to a low-cut blouse, the person you're attempting to persuade hasn't heard your message."

If you really want to get across, remove your glasses, says Meyer.

"I'm very much an eye person," she says. "When I'm giving a speech I inevitably take off my glasses. Successful women have developed confidence to look directly at the person they're talking to. It's the ability to have very good eye contact, which is important when you're trying to sell yourself."

"In politics you have to sell yourself before your ideas are purchased. I have to convince people I'm worth buying, worth voting for. That presence is necessary to get your foot in the door."

A former Colorado teacher and principal who fell in love with grassroots politics, Meyer thrives in her role as a politician.

In 1982, her twenty years of political management experience helped her win election as secretary of state, and she has been twice re-elected.

Currently active in Women in State Government, Meyer enjoys a national reputation as one of Colorado's top political technicians.

Even if miniskirts and revealing necklines get a thumbs-down, Meyer says "Vive la difference" on the subject of the sexes. Floppy bowties and mannish suits just aren't her speed.

"As women have matured in the professional field, they've come way past the time when they felt they had to dress to replicate men in suits with high-necked, stiff, starched shirts."

"If our fashion looks exactly the same as a man's, it says we don't have anything additional to offer the workplace. And that's not true."

"There's plenty of room for both men and women in the workplace. Women tend to be consensus workers, tend to work for win-win situations instead of confrontational situations. They bring a different element of caring, maybe from

the role of raising children.

"If you dress exactly like a man, your body language says upfront, 'I'm not sure who I am. I'm trying to be you.'"

Meyer strives to instill a positive self-image in her three adult daughters. "That helps them learn how to put themselves together in the morning to present themselves to the world."

Women have many more elements of their attire to consider to make a favorable impression, she says.

"Men don't have to think about earrings or whether they're wearing a suit or dress. Women spend longer getting ready. If you don't, you don't feel comfortable through the day. If you don't have the full picture, somewhere along the line you've glitched your presence."

What to do? "Be yourself but be sure you're proper and feminine."

For Meyer, being herself means developing her own personal style. She acknowledges that she's "too big to wear a lot of frillies and ruffles," but can wear bright, cheerful, colorful dresses.

"And some are pretty dramatic," she adds.

Creating your own personal style means being pragmatic. Like paring away non-essentials.

"I've done away totally with a purse, and my briefcase serves as my bag," says Meyer, who's often on the run. "I don't

want to have a handbag, briefcase and carry-on bag. Then you can't navigate your way through the airport, and by the time you get on the plane, you can't move either arm."

"And rest assured, nobody will ever stop to ask if your briefcase matches your clothes."

Similarly, Meyer gives high heels the boot. "They're too hard on the feet when walking between appointments."

She relies on shoes with comfortable low heels. Her shoe of choice is a "very standard" red Ferragamo flat with a bow.

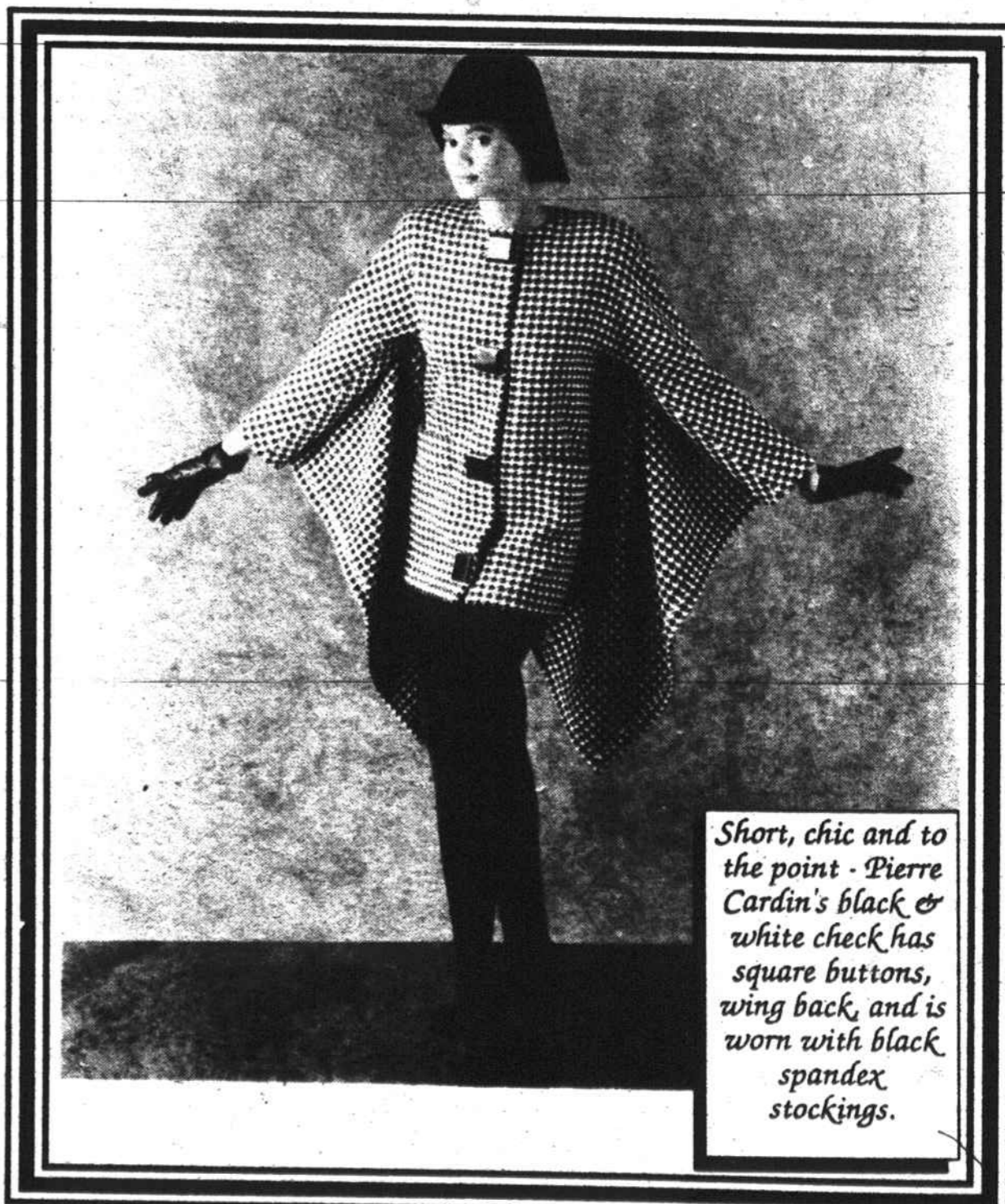
"I have wonderful heels gathering dust in my closet," she admits. "I've given up on that portion of being as well dressed as I could be, just for the sake of comfort."

Ever the pragmatist, when packing for a trip Meyer makes sure all her clothes match black, navy or red shoes.

The favorite color of this fiercely flamboyant official is red.

"Red and navy are really power clothes. They're dramatic, show you have enough self-confidence to wear dramatic clothes. If you're very timid about what you wear, it says something about yourself."

"What I want to convey is this: I'm a person used to letting the buck stop here, calling the bottom line. And that's what people want in their politicians. One who can make decisions. You set fashion by example."



Short, chic and to the point - Pierre Cardin's black & white check has square buttons, wing back, and is worn with black spandex stockings.

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