



Hillary Clinton at the Democratic presidential-primary debate in Brooklyn, April 14, 2016

The Empty Pantsuit

Hillary Clinton doesn't stand for anything—and that is her appeal

BY KEVIN D. WILLIAMSON

Brooklyn

DANIEL and Rachel are Hillary Rodham Clinton voters, part of a crowd that merrily taunts her rival, Senator Bernie Sanders, with the chant SEND BERNIE HOME! SEND BERNIE HOME! When the right-wing provocateur who has infiltrated the crowd suggests that this is a peculiar thing to chant in *Brooklyn*, inasmuch as, as anybody with ears knows, Senator Sanders grew up in Brooklyn, about eight miles away from the Brooklyn Navy Yard (where we're waiting for the candidates to show up and debate, or at least to engage in the weird and backward performance-art spectacles that we insist on pretending are presidential debates), while Mrs. Clinton comes from the well-off suburbs of Chicago, the response among the Rodhamites is somewhere between cow-eyed confusion and that harrowing final scene in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978 version) in which Donald Sutherland (spoiler alert!) points and shrieks at the unassimilated humans who once had been his friends.

They get tired of SEND BERNIE HOME! But the ensuing selection of chants is equally uninspiring: First comes I BELIEVE THAT SHE WILL WIN! Perhaps, but there are lots of people who believe that she will win who also believe that she is a miscreant, a criminal, a crook, and worse. Get your average Washington

Republican talking about it after cocktail hour and he may well agree that she will win. IT'S TIME FOR A WOMAN IN THE WHITE HOUSE! has its appeal, but it comes with an implied question: "Why *this* woman?"

I'M WITH HER! I'M WITH HER! I'M WITH HER!

Of course you are. This is Brooklyn, you are gainfully employed, and you are not stoned out of your gourd on a Thursday afternoon. You are not Bernie people. And neither are you about to confess to the NATIONAL REVIEW reporter that you'd really been hoping Rick Perry would make the cut this time around, or maybe Rick Santorum. *Of course you're with her*. But why?

I BELIEVE THAT SHE WILL WIN!

A big chartered bus goes chugging by, emblazoned with three-foot-high lettering: BLACK MEN FOR BERNIE SANDERS. There is a reproduction of a photo screened onto the side of the bus, which, amusingly, has no black men in it. (It is a picture of Senator Sanders confronting police at a 1963 protest.) Much to the consternation of the Hillary people, who have been standing outside the Brooklyn Navy Yard for hours, the Bernie people, who have developed a slight degree of media savvy, show up about 15 minutes before the debate kickoff, carrying

electrified signs that, in the early-evening darkness, exaggerate their numbers vis-à-vis Team Herself.

“We’ve been here for *hours*,” sighs a young professional non-profit fundraiser, still in his I’ve-got-a-good-job workaday suit but looking barely old enough to shave.

What keeps these two teams of partisans, Hillary’s and Bernie’s, out into the late hours on a still-cold April night in a bleak, dead corner of Brooklyn dominated by housing projects, half a mile from the nearest subway station and a mile from the nearest Starbucks (in a city with nearly 300 locations), is the hope of glimpsing a candidate, or at least a lower-level political celebrity. When a small entourage of Democratic politicos marches past into the heavily guarded Navy Yard, the crowd cheers lustily and then whispers, with nearly one voice, “Who was that?” (It was, unless my eyes deceive me, Chuck Schumer.) But they remain disappointed: Mrs. Clinton does not show up. Of course she shows up at the debate, but she is brought in, quietly, through another entrance, probably in one of those many black SUVs with blackout windows that go rolling through like a modern-day Trujillo dinner excursion.

But they needn’t be too disappointed: Even when she shows up, she doesn’t show up. She isn’t there, and never has been.

“**W**HY Hillary?” Daniel doesn’t seem to have been expecting the question, and he needs a minute to collect his thoughts. He gives a surprisingly cogent answer, which is that he supports the policies of President Barack Obama and believes that Mrs. Clinton represents the best opportunity to consolidate and make permanent those political gains. If you have spent very much time speaking with people who come out to political rallies—who are, let’s not forget, about 10,000 percent more informed, energetic, and committed than run-of-the-mill voters—you will despair, and you will recognize that Daniel’s thoughtful answer, simple though it may be, sounds like Solon compared with the usual sort of thing one hears.

Of course, it does not take very much to unravel Daniel’s sentiment. I ask him which of Obama’s policies is most important to him, and he answers, “The Affordable Care Act.” He is a nurse practitioner who works with a mainly Medicaid-dependent population, and so this does not surprise me. He is perfectly bright, well scrubbed, educated, and no doubt a regular reader of whatever aggregation of digital communiqués passes for a newspaper in his household. But when I inform him that Mrs. Clinton has in fact been vocally critical of the Affordable Care Act, that she has criticized what she calls the “family glitch” that can make many ACA-compliant policies too expensive in practice for many families, that she has been critical of ACA plans’ high deductibles, rising premiums, etc., and that Chelsea Clinton has expanded on this criticism, complaining of “crushing” health-care costs, his eyes turn slightly feral, narrow. He literally clenches his fists and takes a step backward. He is under attack. “It’s still better than what we had before,” he says. It does not occur to him that, regardless of whether he is correct in that assessment, his argument is with Mrs. Clinton rather than with the NATIONAL REVIEW reporter.

Rachel offers up “economic policies” but whiffs with the follow-up: “Which ones?” Sounding more like a Bernie voter, she says she is very concerned that if Republicans have their way, then the United States will end up like some banana republic in which a tiny ruling elite—“the corporations”—effectively owns

and controls everything while the great masses of people founder in penury. I reply that I understand her concern and wonder why her response is to vote for a woman whose husband owns \$1 million worth of wristwatches, who herself was paid \$6,000 a minute to flatter Manhattan investment bankers’ sense of self-importance. “I don’t care about personal things like that.”

HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON has this weird thing she does when she’s even more Nixonian than usual: She forgets to smile until a half a second after she has entered a room. (Anthony Hopkins captures this defect perfectly in Oliver Stone’s *Nixon*.) If you keep your eyes open, you can see her do it (as I have, in Des Moines, Las Vegas, Brooklyn . . .) and practically hear the hoists and pulleys and whatnot lurching squeakily into action to pull that dour mug into its familiar for-public-consumption rictus. Maybe she’s feeling antsy: She’s under federal investigation, and the Brooklyn Navy Yard, scene of the New York Democratic-primary debate, used to house a federal prison. She isn’t lovable, and she knows this. What she is is a scarecrow, a placeholder for the political hopes and anxieties of a certain kind of reasonably well-off white progressive and for non-whites across the income spectrum who remember with fondness (and in error) her much-diminished husband as one of their champions.

The debate ends up being familiar stuff: Senator Sanders and his honking Brooklyn accent, Herself and her horrifying vice principal’s screech, his take-what-we-can-get-while-we-can-get-it approach to every question contrasting with her less-of-the-same difference splitting. In practical terms, what that means is that Senator Sanders demands a \$15 federal minimum wage immediately, while Mrs. Clinton would pause for consideration at \$12.50, which is, as she repeatedly reminded the audience, the approach taken by the State of New York. (Obviously, we want the entire country to be governed by the high ethical standards and bottomless economic acumen constantly on display in Albany.) Bernie promises—his word—“revolution.” Mrs. Clinton promises to deliver the same basket of goodies as Sanders, more or less, without the revolution.

There’s a contrast, sure, but not too much—and that’s her strategy. Like George H. W. Bush accidentally reading his stage directions (“Message: I care!”), Mrs. Clinton a few days after the debate will appear on the cable-news program hosted by her husband’s former press secretary (because that’s not weird and incestuous or anything) and declare that Senator Sanders was dishonestly trying to draw “some big contrast” between himself and Herself on the minimum wage. A big contrast on that issue—or on any issue—is precisely what she aims to avoid, which is why her policy statements, to the extent that they exist, are such a nugatory collection of banalities, vagueness, and wishful thinking.

She has learned her lesson: Issues are dangerous.

THE next day, a hilarious picture makes the rounds: Mrs. Clinton enters the kitchen of a government-supported home for oldsters in East Harlem, with plants in the sink and a little bit of domestic disorder in evidence. She looks—*horrified*, a dowager countess plunked down in a Walmart. It was a good get by Josh Robin of NY1. On a normal day, there’s

no way a working reporter lays a glove on Herself. Her events are tightly scripted and access to them is tightly controlled. In Des Moines, reporters were literally penned in, kept separate from the crowd. That the Secret Service is used for press management goes unremarked upon.

There's plenty of spectacle to be had, sure: At a recent San Francisco fundraiser hosted by the actor George Clooney, protesters lamenting the enormous amount of money involved—you could be a "co-chair" for \$353,400 per couple—decided to make it rain, pelting those attending the gala with dollar bills. Clooney, apparently shamed by the protest, later agreed that the money involved was indeed "obscene." He added: "The Sanders campaign, when they talk about it, is absolutely right."

That looks like it might threaten to be a big contrast, so . . .

Of course Mrs. Clinton laments that "obscene" money, too, even as she collects it by the bucket. She, too, wants to see *Citizens United* overturned—after all, the dispute in that case was whether the federal government might ban the showing of a film critical of *her*. She has learned, and learned well, the lesson of her husband's presidency: Policy doesn't matter. Consistency doesn't matter. Ideology doesn't matter. It sure as hell doesn't matter to Daniel and Rachel. What matters is that Republicans are evil, evil, evil, and that Bernie Sanders is a nobody compared with the great and eternal Herself.

genes are: through parents. Political loyalties are transmitted with remarkable efficiency down generations: In a recent Gallup poll, 71 percent of teenagers identified their politics as being essentially the same as those of their parents. Children identify with their parents' political parties about 70 percent of the time.

As Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels document at great scholarly length in their recent *Democracy for Realists*, voters are guided mainly by irrational reactions to very recent events, making little or no distinction between those that are results of political decisions and those (such as natural disasters) that are not, along with "political loyalties typically acquired in childhood." Rachel tells me that she has seen charts that prove Americans do better economically when there are Democratic presidents. I ask her how much effect she believes policy differences between the parties to have in the near term, and she looks at me as though it is the first time she ever has considered such a question.

Daniel and Rachel and I stand in the shadows of a dozen Brooklyn housing projects, towers of dysfunction that once rendered the neighborhood in which we are standing one of the more dangerous places in New York. The Brooklyn Navy Yard, behind us, was an economic black hole for decades, a blight on the neighborhood until it was largely turned over to free enterprise. Today, it hosts businesses that employ thousands of people

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Mrs. Clinton may be a retro throwback to the 1990s, a time when she was a retro throwback to the 1970s, but her campaign is cutting-edge in one important sense: It is almost entirely free of content, liberated from substance, an empty pantsuit. Of course her policy statements draw from the market basket of comfortable-lifestyle liberalism with which a Clinton candidacy is necessarily associated: She isn't going to suddenly change her views on abortion or (now that she's settled on one that is reasonably popular) gay marriage. But neither is she going to press any of that to the point where a voter might have to think—think—about what it means to support Herself. She can be whatever you want—the \$15-an-hour candidate or the \$12.50-an-hour candidate. What matters to Hillary voters is what she isn't: an addled kook like Bernie, a right-wing caveman like Ted Cruz, a horror show like Donald Trump.

Beyond that, everything is kept intentionally vague enough that the nice young professionals in Brooklyn can project onto Mrs. Clinton's campaign whatever their hearts may fancy. It's not like they know what she really plans to do. It's not like she does, either. For Herself, everything is negotiable.

Before the word "meme" meant "a funny picture and caption I saw on the Internet," it had a more specific and interesting meaning: an idea, style, or behavior that spreads through cultures in a way analogous to the way a gene spreads through a population. Some critics have bemoaned the "meme-ification" of politics, but the fact is that political affiliation has always been a meme and always will be. In fact, political identity is one of the better examples of the form, in that it is largely transmitted the way

producing everything from food to whiskey to sweaters, and it also hosts what will be one of the largest film studios outside of Los Angeles. The move to open up the Navy Yard to business was a project of Republican mayor Rudy Giuliani made possible by Manhattan moneymen, a project continued and expanded on by billionaire megalomaniac entrepreneur and sometime Republican Michael Bloomberg. It's a story seen all over New York, from Williamsburg to the Bowery, and all over the country: capitalism overcoming political shenanigans, cleaning up and repurposing the disastrous "investments" politicians make.

There's another "big contrast" waiting to be made.

"I think this neighborhood is a Democratic success story," Rachel says. She doesn't see the blight, the almost complete lack of enterprise outside of the locked-down Navy Yard, where security conditions are such that one worker therein says it is like "working in a federal prison." (Which, again, it used to be.) She doesn't wonder why there's a craft whiskey distillery operating from a former military site but no grocery store on the corner.

Jonathan Swift asserted that it is impossible to reason a man out of an error he wasn't reasoned into. There's no reaching the Hillary voter. I'M WITH HER is sufficient for them, and she knows this. And that is why she will, to the extent that the Republican candidate permits it, refuse to take a definable stance on almost anything except the vague progressivism that is hers as a matter of course. Beyond that, she is perfectly insubstantial. There may have been an ideologue down in there, somewhere, once upon a time. But Hillary isn't the 2016 zombie candidate; she's the 1965 Zombies candidate. She's not there. **NR**

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