



HILLARYS FOR PRESIDENT!

Policy wonk. Pragmatist. Truth-twister. There are many versions of Clinton—and we'll need them all to navigate the political chaos unleashed by Trump.

BY JACK HITT

ONE OF THE POLITICAL PARABLES about Hillary Clinton that's kicking around the internet features Senator Elizabeth Warren talking about a bankruptcy bill. It all goes back to Hillary's First Ladyhood. The way Warren tells it, she sat down with Clinton to explain how the bill would penalize, if not trap, single mothers dependent on child support. The point of the story is that Hillary absorbed the details in a matter of minutes, saw the big picture, and immediately understood the flaws. "I never had a smarter student," Warren recalled. "Quick, right to the heart of it." Hillary went back to the White House and, a little pillow talk later, Bill Clinton vetoed the bill.

The real takeaway of the story is to introduce you to a Hillary we all know—the smarty-pantsuit vaedictorian and policy wonk who does the tedious homework, masters the footnotes, and gets an A+ for effort on the day's big legislative assignment. This is the Hillary who wins honest praise from her worst enemies, men like Newt Gingrich or Lindsey Graham, because finessing an accommodating solution from the donkeywork of writing legislation is something Washington insiders admire—even if, in the bear pit of Fox News, trying to solve a problem through compromise is held out to *be* the problem.

Then, in the video where she tells this story, Warren adds a twist. The veto was in 2000. That was the same

year Hillary got elected to the Senate from the state of New York, and she took a lot of Wall Street money to do it. When big-money interests resurrected the bankruptcy bill, Hillary voted in favor. "The bill was essentially the same," Warren explains, "but Hillary Rodham Clinton was not." In this account we meet another Hillary—the sellout, the do-anything-to-win turncoat, the Benedict Arnold to Bernie Sanders-style progressivism.

But wait, there's more. If you dig a little further, you'll find that Clinton bargained to insert a line in the legislation that protected single mothers. The Hillary we meet in this deeper version of the story is the cunning wheeler-dealer who understands that the whole game sometimes plays out inside a couple of parentheses. This is the Hillary that leftists dream about, the shrewd tactician who hides out in those details like some kind of liberal sniper, works quietly with the opponents who publicly despise her, and then achieves the best possible outcome under the harshest circumstances.

Nor does it end there; like all good parables, the story has layer upon layer of forensic meaning. Drill down deeper and you find the senator who faced the same bankruptcy bill again in 2005. This time, it contained no provisions protecting single parents, but Wall Street was pushing to get it passed. A tough call—a vote either way would reveal Clinton's true partiality. So the liberal sniper went AWOL: Bill was in the hospital that week and, for the few minutes of the bankruptcy vote, she simply had to be at his side. She

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NATE KITCH

missed the vote but, in a prepared statement, she threw some serious shade at the bill. This is Hillary the cutthroat opportunist, the Janus-faced harpy, the sly Antoinette who wants to have her cake and let them eat it, too.

Take a core sample from almost any story about Hillary Clinton in the massive armamentarium where they are stored and—like one of those *Simpsons* subterranean pan shots, revealing layers of absurd archaeology—all the Hillarys we have come to know will appear: the A student, the opportunist, the mastermind, the rat fink, the pragmatist, the truth-twister. Normally, in a paragraph of this sort, this is where you'd expect the word "Rorschach" to appear—the notion that all these competing Hillarys are simply different perspectives held by different people with different political views. But Clinton is long past such things. She's a late-stage celebrity: Every version of her is a settled assumption, in the way that, say, Michael Jackson was, all at once, a musical genius, a bleached Diana Ross manqué, a pedophile, a brilliant choreographer, and a mediocre zookeeper.

From the beginning of the primary season, there has been one statistic that has stood out: The number of people who already hold a firm view of Hillary Clinton, positive or negative, adds up to 97 percent. Think about that: It explains why you've never seen a news story about her consultants fretting over "how to define our candidate before

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the opposition does." Hillary began her campaign needing no introduction to anyone. She comes pre-hated and pre-admired. To Democrats, she already feels like a lame duck; to Republicans, an impeachment scheduling problem. If Clinton wins in November, she will be sworn into office on the West Front of the U.S. Capitol with all the mystery of Franklin Roosevelt coughing out his fourth oath in 1945.

By electing Clinton, America will get all our Hillarys, and no surprises. Her enemies know what they're up against, her allies appreciate her many strengths, the press has been pre-schooled in her hunker-down style of squeezing out petulant clarifications, and her progressive critics formed their suspicions several presidents ago. For this electoral moment, though, Clinton may be precisely the president we need, flaws and all. Donald Trump's pursuit of the White House has ground up our political landscape like a hurricane in a Florida trailer park. Trump hasn't just caused a deep and possibly irreparable fissure in the Republican Party. He's also short-

circuited the mainstream press, recalibrated conservative media, and further splintered our delicately binary Congress. The America that lies on the other side of this election will bear little resemblance to the world before Trump. In fact, the only vaguely familiar thing in the nation's capital on Inauguration Day may well be Hillary Clinton herself.

Given a presidential candidate who contains Whitmanesque multitudes and a nation that is exhausted with each and every one of them, there are aspects of a Clinton presidency we can already predict. First the good news: Hillary will arrive in Washington with several thousand Clintonian bureaucrats in her wake. That means there will be no growing pains of a new administration wrangling with the permanent government entrenched in Foggy Bottom and K Street. Which is essential, because she will get no honeymoon period, and any claim to a mandate will be instantly dismissed. Her admirers say she loves the treadmill of hard work? Great. The drudgery begins on day one.

Now the bad news: Hillary will arrive in Washington with several thousand Clintonian bureaucrats in her wake. That means we'll immediately return to *status Obama ante*—nonstop convulsions of real and imagined scandals that will dominate Washington for at least the next four years. Americans will be forced to reacquaint themselves with an almost forgotten quotidian grind—independent prosecutors, special reports, the nuances of perjury, and panels of Sunday-morning gasbags intoning that it's never the crime that gets you, it's the cover-up.

Few politicians have been so vilified by their enemies, and for so long, as Clinton. Her strengths and failings have been unrecognizably obscured by the hyperventilated dust storm that stretches from Susan Sarandon's sun-drenched pool to David Duke's midnight klavern. Those who detest Clinton have so overstated her failings that they are unable to see her as anything other than a kind of colossus that moves in a staticky cloud of ever-present suspicion. Boiled down, though, the main charges against Hillary are twofold: She's an Olympic-level liar (the email server), and she's corrupt on a global scale (the Clinton Foundation).

There's no question that Hillary instinctively goes for the slippery near-truth when she finds herself boxed in politically, and that she mixes money and politics in ways that blur the line. But it's important to understand just what Clinton's real failings are—because these faults, in a paradoxical way, appear to be perfectly calibrated to benefit her in the post-Trump political environment, as though she were some cave-dwelling chameleon that has adapted over the millennia to breathe hydrogen cyanide. To understand what a third Clinton administration would look like, let's take the charges against Hillary one at a time.

As a charity, the Clinton Foundation receives reasonably high marks from those who monitor the philanthropic set. Its fund-raising, on the other hand, is a bit tacky—built on back-to-back round-robins of gaudy VIPs congratulating



each other while handing over checks, a networking scheme modeled on those old Renaissance Weekends where superambitious people gathered for bad food and career enhancement. Sure, some sultan has donated multimillions to fly in as a special guest to hobnob with the unwashed throngs of thousandaire donors. But the harshest investigation of this Rolodex-plumping operation, conducted by the Associated Press, revealed nothing extraordinary. The AP strained mightily to find any evidence of pay-for-play, but ended up having to settle for lots of paragraphs governed by words like “appear” and “perception.”

The Clintons are way too slick to get busted for that, anyway—as Hillary’s enemies would normally be the first to remind us. The Clinton Foundation has always dwelled right at the cusp of legality, just to this side of Michael Kinsley’s famous Washington law—“The scandal is not what’s illegal, the scandal is what’s legal.” The Clinton Foundation is no different than George H.W. Bush’s Points of Light Foundation (founded and earning donations *while* he was the sitting president) or Colin Powell’s America’s Promise (run by his wife, Alma, *while* he was secretary of state). That politicians take money from people seeking favors in return is not news. It’s business as usual in Washington. Just ask former House Speaker John Boehner, who once handed out campaign checks from the tobacco industry to House members on the *floor of Congress* precisely as they prepared to vote to preserve the industry’s \$49 million taxpayer subsidy.

So why all the right-wing outrage about the Clinton Foundation? It comes down to a subtlety that can only be explained by someone who, like myself, comes from old-old money. I grew up among the fallen gentry of Charleston, South Carolina, where our money is so old we don’t have any. Bush is merely from *old* money, as is Powell (though only by proximity). The Clintons’ real crime is that they are tasteless parvenus who started with almost nothing (there are

those who can never forget Bill’s mom, Virginia Kelley, the racetrack denizen with that white streak in her hair and one of her four husbands on her arm). To raise funds, old-money foundations need only come into existence to quietly open the comely wallets of the country-estate set. But new money—and this is the Clintons’ real sin—has to *ask*.

The other reason Clinton’s grubby foundation has been amped up into a Teapot Dome/Crédit Mobilier level of scandal is because of a cognitive flaw in the Trump voter that I discovered at a dinner party a few nights ago. After a pleasant meal, the topic of the election inevitably came up. Suddenly, a Yale professional at the table outed himself as a Trump voter. His rant turned exclusively on the “obvious” fact that Hillary is the most corrupt politician in history and will exit the presidency a billionaire while bringing the American Republic to an end. He didn’t care about Boehner dealing out cashier’s checks like playing cards during a House vote, or Trump paying off the attorneys general of Texas and Florida to drop fraud prosecutions over his big-store con known as Trump University. To the Trump voter, such specific examples of pay-for-play pale in comparison to Hillary’s vague air of corruption.

After this quarrel, I realized two things about the way many Trump supporters conceive of Clinton. First, the charges against Hillary are a classic case of blaming your opponent for your own sins. All the flying squads of Ken Starr, Trey Gowdy, and James Comey have gone right at Clinton with full subpoena power and years of time. Yet they all came up empty. Trump, on the other hand, has very specifically engaged in bribery, and we know this because he has told us all, on national television, so *many* times. It was one of his early riffs in the debates. He would single out Jeb Bush and other opponents and explain to the audience that he had donated lots of money to them over the years, and had expected full political corruption in return. “When you give, they do whatever the hell you want them to do,” he cawed in an interview, after which the peristalsis of his mouth-like opening relaxed into a flaccid smirk.

Second, Trump’s critique of Hillary as the master of corruption can be made about any politician running for office today. Attacking her for what everyone does is the oldest political charade in the books. But if her opponents are serious about their outrage over Crooked Hillary, then this could be the first advantage of electing her president. The day after she’s inaugurated, let the new Congress crack down on campaign financing, tighten ethical standards for elected officials, and ban blatant scams like pay-for-play. If we outlaw all the things Hillary’s enemies hate in her, we’ll be doing away with everything the rest of the country hates about the entire political class. So sure, ruin Michael Kinsley’s joke. Bring it.

The other charge routinely leveled against Hillary is that she’s a “congenital liar,” as William Safire dubbed her decades ago. If she’s elected in November, we’ll be hearing this assertion for the next four years, so it’s best to understand just what we’re in for.

Hillary lies the way her husband lies, which is to say she does *not* lie. What she does do is even more irritating. My Trump-supporting dinner guest screamed at me that no one lies as brazenly as Hillary Clinton. But take any of her lies, sit down with the facts, and—well, as James Comey found, it’s like trying to pith mercury. Clinton said, for instance, that Comey testified that she had told the truth in her statements about the email controversy. Well, not precisely. What he said was, “We have no basis to conclude she lied to the FBI.” Clinton’s parsing was weaselly, but not a lie.

The Big Lie, as practiced by Richard Nixon—when he insisted he “scrupulously respected the neutrality of the Cambodian people” while *bombing* Cambodia—is a lie so huge that, usually, everyone falls for it because of the sheer audacity of the claim. Bill Clinton, by contrast, was the first to perfect what should be called the Tiny Truth. In his infamous deposition, he managed to get “sex” defined as intercourse, and then said that he had not had sex with Monica Lewinsky, which as we all know is true in the smallest possible sense of anything being true.

For Nixon, the Big Lie served as an occasional dodge; for Trump, it’s his native tongue. Trump said that he saw a video of American Arabs partying the afternoon of September 11, but he made that up. Trump said he saw a video of pallets of money being handed to Iran as ransom, but he made that up. Trump said he opposed the Iraq War before it started, but he made that up. Trump said he spoke to a Chicago cop with a surefire solution to crime, but he made that up. Trump said he received a letter from the NFL about debate scheduling, but he made that up. Big Lies fall from Trump’s lips with the frantic improvisation of a crook under an interrogation lamp.

The sheer magnitude of Trump’s horseshit, in fact, has prompted an unexpected reconfiguration of America’s media—one that will benefit Hillary tremendously, should she be elected in November. Thanks to Trump, some television hosts have discovered the ratings pull of a different style of journalism. Jake Tapper of CNN grilled Trump about his bigotry regarding the all-American judge of Mexican descent so skillfully and persistently that Trump wound up making several more mistakes, and now avoids the subject entirely. The interview was such a departure from standard TV interview fare—which strives to be “fair” in the face of nonstop falsehoods—that *On the Media* devoted an entire segment to deconstructing Tapper’s technique.

Other journalists have followed suit. When Trump lawyer Michael Cohen challenged Brianna Keilar of CNN to name which polls showed Trump behind, she hit him with the truth. “All of them,” she said. When *The New York Times* ran a story about Trump “softening” his immigration stance after one of his bloodcurdling nativist dog whistles, the rest of the media vilified the paper. When Matt Lauer beat Hillary with a two-by-four before letting Trump spout one unchallenged lie after another, other journalists suggested he be reassigned to the weather desk. CNN has even taken to running onscreen disclaimers: “Trump: I never said Japan should have nukes (he did),” and “Trump calls Obama Founder of ISIS (he’s not).”



A split has also appeared among conservative media, but it’s existentially different. Since Fox News and its ilk never struggled with the mealy ideal of objectivity, their chief concern was how to mix smart conservative critiques (think Chris Wallace, Megyn Kelly) with the fun of totally made-up crises (birtherism, the existence of Muslim-only cities) and errant stupidity (the war on Christmas, anything on *Fox & Friends*). But just as Roger Ailes has moved from Fox’s second floor directly into Trump Tower, the craziest faction of Fox’s aging and angry demographic has broken away. Alt-reality, in fact, is now a fully defined ratings demo of its own. Its primary outlets are *Breitbart* and *Newsmax*, *The Blaze*, and Julian Assange’s WikiLeaks. Trump has managed something that liberal Democrats have attempted for years—to isolate the alt-reality wing from reality-based business leaders, national security neocons, and economic conservatives. George Bush’s Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson, noted hawk Robert Kagan, and Hewlett Packard CEO Meg Whitman are all voting for Hillary.

By deeply fragmenting the media ecosystem, Trump has done Clinton an enormous favor. The “vast right-wing conspiracy” that hounded Bill and Hillary from the moment they stepped foot in Washington originally had a name—the Arkansas Project—and was funded by the Pittsburgh billionaire Richard Scaife. They perfected a method of following rumors, mostly by fluffing far-out stories such as the Clintons murdering Vincent Foster or running a drug operation out of Little Rock. Since then, the methodology has matured into a carefully crafted propaganda machine that concocts stories and field tests them in outlying web sites and loony YouTube channels, essentially trying them out to see which ones would migrate up through Fox News and go viral enough to be taken seriously by the mainstream media. But now that Trump has split off the alt-reality crowd and claimed them for his own, they aren’t even taken seriously by the more “serious” right-wingers at Fox News, let alone *The New*

York Times. The recent accusation that Clinton was using a body double to hide her health problems, for example, sluiced up from Reddit for a day, only to wash out to the remote crannies of the Twittersphere where Scott Baio is a star.

After the election, this fact-free sensibility will find itself even further segregated, possibly with its very own cable TV alt-reality outlet. There, climate deniers and listening-device fetishists can trade proofs of Bill Clinton's bastards, weigh Julian Assange's evidence that Clinton murdered DNC staffer Seth Rich, or solve columnist Jennifer LeClaire's dilemma of deciding whether Hillary is the "Antichrist" or an "Illuminati Witch"—all while watching commercials for Jim Bakker's End Times "Emergency Food Supply": 274 servings on sale for a limited-time offer of only \$100.

When her opposition is split like this, Clinton's talent for working with her enemies serves her best. Thanks to the schism created by Trump, she won't have to worry about a post-election rapprochement among the opposing factions. If the alt-reality crowd despises Nancy Pelosi without even thinking, they hate Paul Ryan with the heat of a thousand suns. The Capitol is rife with rumors of a post-election coup to force out Ryan as speaker. The far right fumes about mainstream Republican leaders being too accommodationist and believes that more incoherence is the answer. In all likelihood, the election will only widen this fissure. If Trump loses such that the down ticket suffers, alt-reality congressmen are the most likely to survive, given their gerrymandered districts, while Ryan's reality-based comrades are more likely to get tossed out. When it comes to the congressional landscape, losing will only make Trump and his allies stronger.

On the Democratic side, the progressive wing of the party will also emerge from the election considerably stronger. Elizabeth Warren is already gearing up to hold Clinton to her Bernie-soothing promises. *Politico* reports that Clinton has agreed not to appoint cronies like Robert Rubin or others who are "beholden to the industries they regulate." In short, the post-Trump universe now is split into so many factions on both the right and the left that every victory in Congress will require stitching together a crazy-quilt of alliances. If Ryan wants to pass legislation he can claim as his own, he'll have to cut deals with the Democrats. If progressives want to enact meaningful reforms or centrist Democrats want to maintain the status quo, they'll need to forge alliances with foes as well as friends.

This is where Hillary's key flaw—her lack of commitment to any specific position—will work to her benefit, as well as ours. Every issue will be a multisided fight—and who better to navigate such terrain than the chameleon in chief? Clinton is savvy enough to get votes by quietly inviting her enemies in Congress on both sides to vilify her and explain to their voters that they had no choice but to support some bill because the evil madam president made this the only way to pass a much-needed defense spending bill, etc.

Clinton has a quarter-century of experience bathing in the vitriol of her foes; only in moments of weakness has she ever treated them the way they have treated her. She is unafraid of even her most contemptuous enemies. When she ran for the Senate in 2000, she was widely expected to lose, because she couldn't win the support of rural voters and tough, angry men left behind in Rust Belt cities like Buffalo. But Clinton went to Buffalo to do that thing her enemies despise: a listening tour. She visited Buffalo 26 times, and when the votes were tallied, she took Buffalo and won a Senate seat.

Unlike Obama, Clinton does not expect dignified senators to simply come to her view. She will pick up the phone in the middle of the night, the way LBJ did, and have members of the House and Senate bolting from bed to the sound of an operator saying, "Please hold for the president of the United States." Hillary will threaten her own side, sweet-talk her enemies, issue infuriating and slippery statements, and betray whomever it takes—all to get enough votes to add up to 51 percent.

Hillary getting to a new job always seems to be an occasion accompanied by portents of catastrophe. But once she's hired, she happily deploys any and all of her multiple personalities to achieve something that looks a lot like democratic

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political bargaining. With Clinton, what begins in scorn ends in support: When she was finished as first lady, she had an approval rating of 60 percent; as a departing senator, 66 percent; as departing secretary of state, 65 percent.

The political landscape that lies before us next year will require a president who has the capacity to be a cutthroat negotiator, a quiet friend, a forgiving enemy, a turncoat, and a detail-obsessed wonk. If the country elects such a person, there is a distinct possibility that American democracy will discover that inch-by-inch progress on legislation happens after vigorous wrangling, which eventually gets to a deeply unsatisfying resolution that leaves almost everybody in a grumpy mood, and sort of works, but not all that well and yet well enough to get us to the next fight—which, if you will recall, is exactly what the Founding Fathers sketched out on paper in 1787. And here's the thing: If it unfolds that way, under President Hillary Clinton, then historians will be able to honestly say that Donald Trump lived up to his promise, however accidentally, and made America great again. 🇺🇸

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