

Hillary Reborn

At State, as in the Senate, she often talks softly—but that doesn't mean she doesn't carry a big stick.

By John Heilemann
New York Magazine Online
Published Oct 16, 2009

Illustration by Andy Friedman



Hillary Clinton was on the trot again this week, with an itinerary that took her from Zurich to London to Dublin to Belfast to Moscow and a nonstop schedule of diplomatizing on topics ranging from the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations to the Iranian nuclear crisis. But the headlines Hillary generated back home—and there were plenty of them—had precious little to do with her official duties as secretary of State.

They were about her disclamation of any interest in a future presidential bid. About her insistence that she really (really!) is Barack Obama's foreign-policy supremo. About the new Gallup numbers showing that Hillary is now more popular than Obama, which represents a truly stunning nineteen-point swing since the start of the year. About Hillary qua Hillary, in other words.

The sudden Clinton clamor in the media strikes the ear as especially cacophonous in light of how quiet she has been for most of her nine months in her new job. And the sound of silence out of State, in turn, has given rise to a clear conventional wisdom about Hillary's role in Obamaville, which is part of what she was reacting to in her interviews with NBC and ABC this week. The CW, put succinctly, is that Hillary is a virtual nonentity in the administration: that in terms of political status, she ranks in the second tier, and that when it comes to policy sway, she has been out-barked and out-bitten by the pack of alpha dogs that the president has installed around her.

It's easy enough to understand this interpretation of Clinton's standing. After her soap-operatic campaign, the absence of drama around HRC creates cognitive dissonance for the punditocracy and other Beltway tea-leaf readers. Yet the truth is that the conventional wisdom is wrong, I think, in both its particulars and its overall verdict. And not just

wrong but illustrative of a set of misapprehensions about how the woman thinks and operates—or, at least, how she’s learned to do so, especially with respect to the navigation of new terrain. Indeed, one need only look back as far as her time in the Senate to understand how she now sees and plays the game, and why, on everything from the battle over U.S. policy in Afghanistan to the shaping of her future, she’s perfectly likely to win.

To get a fuller sense of the Clinton CW in Washington, it helps to start by taking a gander at *GQ*. In its new issue, the magazine offers a list of “the 50 most powerful people in D.C.,” on which Hillary ranks eighteenth. That might not sound so bad, all in all, except it puts her in tenth place in the administration, behind Rahm Emanuel, Bob Gates, Peter Orszag, David Axelrod, Tim Geithner, Larry Summers, Eric Holder, Valerie Jarrett, and Leon Panetta. Worse, the list slots six players on Capitol Hill (Max Baucus, Harry Reid, Nancy Pelosi, David Obey, Henry Waxman, and Barney Frank) ahead of Clinton, too—at least three of whom she would certainly have outranked had she remained in the Senate.

The matriarch of the sisterhood of the traveling pantsuits probably doesn’t give two whits about what such a magazine has to say about her mojo. But not so the perception that her influence over foreign policy is de minimis—a view summed up by a recent piece in the *Washington Post*, which argued that Hillary is “largely invisible on the big issues that dominate the foreign-policy agenda, including the war in Afghanistan, the attempt to engage Iran, and efforts to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

When NBC’s Ann Curry, citing that assessment, asked Clinton this week on the *Today* show if she’d been “marginalized,” Hillary deemed the suggestion “absurd” and then went on: “I’m not one of these people who feels like I have to have my face in the front of the newspaper or on the TV every moment of the day. I would be irresponsible and negligent were I to say, ‘Oh, no. Everything must come to me.’ Now, maybe that is a woman’s thing. Maybe I’m totally secure and feel absolutely no need to go running around in order for people to see what I’m doing.”

It’s possible, of course, that gender studies is the appropriate prism through which Clinton’s behavior should be viewed. But for my money, history provides more insight—in particular, the history of Hillary’s ascension to the upper chamber on the Hill in 2001.

Though it wasn’t all that long ago, people still often forget just how peculiar and challenging her insinuation into that world was. After eight years in the skin-blanching spotlight, she arrived with a degree of fame far greater than any of her peers—and also totally out of proportion to her official status as a freshman in a body where seniority is all. How did she deal with it? By scrupulously avoiding the cameras. By being wonky and learning the ropes. By enacting a degree of deference and obeisance to her colleagues, almost all of them male, that must have been painfully hard for her to swallow. (Remember, please, the stories about how she ritually poured the coffee for other senators, always recalling who took cream or sugar.) By establishing an image, as Robert Byrd famously put it, as a “workhorse, not a showhorse.”

As it was then and there, so it is here and now. At the start of the year, Clinton found herself deposited in a realm—Foggy Bottom in particular, the diplomatic orbit in general—just as cloistered and clubby, hidebound and testosterone-fueled, as the Senate. (And one, it should be noted, she never expected or particularly aspired to enter.) Her approach to the task has been nearly identical. She has steered clear of the press and put her nose to the grindstone, studying furiously and doggedly to get on top of her brief. She has delved deep into the managerial mess at the State Department left behind by her predecessors. She has quietly built relationships and alliances with Gates and national-security adviser Jim Jones. She has uncomplainingly—in fact, gladly, I'm told—delegated responsibility to megawatt envoys Richard Holbrooke, George Mitchell, and Dennis Ross.

To the outside world, all this laying low has made Clinton look like less of a player. But the reality is almost exactly the opposite. From the outset, Hillary recognized that she could only exercise influence inside the administration if she were trusted by Obama and the people close to him. And although the president himself and Emanuel never had much doubt that she could be a team player, many others in the Obamasphere were supremely skeptical. But no longer. “In terms of loyalty, discretion, and collegiality,” says a senior White House official, “she’s been everything we could have asked or hoped for.”

The unfolding debate over Afghanistan is maybe the most conspicuous example of Hillary’s adroitness at working the inside game. Compared with Joe Biden and General Stanley McChrystal, her position has been opaque. But now comes word that Clinton and Gates are lining up on the same side in favor of a middle course in the region—not the full-blown troop surge that the general advocates nor the bare-bones approach that the V.P. favors. By all accounts, the likeliest outcome is that Obama will wind up pursuing the Gates-Clinton split-the-difference strategy. And while no one will ever call it the Hillary doctrine, it will be the kind of quiet win that leads to greater internal power for her in the future.

Playing the inside game works to Clinton’s advantage in other ways as well. It’s no coincidence, I’d argue, that her popularity has sharply risen in these months when her profile has been lower, when she’s been perceived as selflessly working on behalf of her boss. Hillary’s greatest political vulnerability has always been the sense among many voters that she is ambition incarnate. That she’s forever shimmying up the greasy pole. That everything she does and says is all about her own advancement.

But now Obama has put her in the perfect position to play the good soldier. To say with (almost) a straight face that she’s looking forward to retirement, that her White House aspirations are behind her. That all she cares about is doing a good job and serving her new master. And as she does, her approval ratings seem to climb by the day.

Has Clinton seriously ruled out another presidential run? I have no idea. What I do know is that her statements on the matter are perfectly meaningless. In the old days, of course, going back on such unequivocal renouncements carried a high political price. But

Obama—who renounced his own renouncement of any chance he would run for president in the space of nine months in 2006 and incurred no penalty—may have put an end to that convention. If he has, it may be yet another thing for which Hillary, by an irony, finds herself tossing a bouquet to her former rival, oh, around 2015.

As it was then and there, so it is here and now. At the start of the year, Clinton found herself deposited in a realm—Foggy Bottom in particular, the diplomatic orbit in general—just as cloistered and clubby, hidebound and testosterone-fueled, as the Senate. (And one, it should be noted, she never expected or particularly aspired to enter.) Her approach to the task has been nearly identical. She has steered clear of the press and put her nose to the grindstone, studying furiously and doggedly to get on top of her brief. She has delved deep into the managerial mess at the State Department left behind by her predecessors. She has quietly built relationships and alliances with Gates and national-security adviser Jim Jones. She has uncomplainingly—in fact, gladly, I’m told—delegated responsibility to megawatt envoys Richard Holbrooke, George Mitchell, and Dennis Ross.

To the outside world, all this laying low has made Clinton look like less of a player. But the reality is almost exactly the opposite. From the outset, Hillary recognized that she could only exercise influence inside the administration if she were trusted by Obama and the people close to him. And although the president himself and Emanuel never had much doubt that she could be a team player, many others in the Obamasphere were supremely skeptical. But no longer. “In terms of loyalty, discretion, and collegiality,” says a senior White House official, “she’s been everything we could have asked or hoped for.”

The unfolding debate over Afghanistan is maybe the most conspicuous example of Hillary’s adroitness at working the inside game. Compared with Joe Biden and General Stanley McChrystal, her position has been opaque. But now comes word that Clinton and Gates are lining up on the same side in favor of a middle course in the region—not the full-blown troop surge that the general advocates nor the bare-bones approach that the V.P. favors. By all accounts, the likeliest outcome is that Obama will wind up pursuing the Gates-Clinton split-the-difference strategy. And while no one will ever call it the Hillary doctrine, it will be the kind of quiet win that leads to greater internal power for her in the future.

Playing the inside game works to Clinton’s advantage in other ways as well. It’s no coincidence, I’d argue, that her popularity has sharply risen in these months when her profile has been lower, when she’s been perceived as selflessly working on behalf of her boss. Hillary’s greatest political vulnerability has always been the sense among many voters that she is ambition incarnate. That she’s forever shimmying up the greasy pole. That everything she does and says is all about her own advancement.

But now Obama has put her in the perfect position to play the good soldier. To say with (almost) a straight face that she’s looking forward to retirement, that her White House

aspirations are behind her. That all she cares about is doing a good job and serving her new master. And as she does, her approval ratings seem to climb by the day.

Has Clinton seriously ruled out another presidential run? I have no idea. What I do know is that her statements on the matter are perfectly meaningless. In the old days, of course, going back on such unequivocal renouncements carried a high political price. But Obama—who renounced his own renouncement of any chance he would run for president in the space of nine months in 2006 and incurred no penalty—may have put an end to that convention. If he has, it may be yet another thing for which Hillary, by an irony, finds herself tossing a bouquet to her former rival, oh, around 2015.