

The Bloom Is Off the Clinton Rose

by Conrad Black (May 2015)

The Hillary Clinton campaign is off to a surprisingly, and in some respects reassuringly, slow start. It has never been entirely clear what the source of the Clinton magic was, but it isn't very lively right now.

There is no denying Bill Clinton's remarkable achievement, as the governor of a relatively small state, in putting together a winning campaign for the Democratic nomination in 1992 and then defeating a competent incumbent president, whose popularity had peaked at 88 percent 18 months before the election, after the almost bloodless (to the U.S. and its allies) eviction of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. Clinton was fortunate in that the incumbent, George H. W. Bush, was clearly complacent after his administration's near-perfect execution of the Gulf War and had allowed the maladjusted billionaire Ross Perot to fragment the Republicans. The fact that President Bush had been elected twice as vice president with the heavy majorities accorded his running-mate, Ronald Reagan, obscured his indifferent personal electoral history. He had held a safe congressional district but was twice defeated running for the U.S. Senate in Texas, and in the 1988 presidential race he coasted in against a poor Democratic candidate, Michael Dukakis, as, in effect, a third term for the popular and successful Reagan administration. George Bush Senior was a war hero and had served capably as U.S. representative to China, ambassador to the United Nations, and director of Central Intelligence, as well as chairman of the Republican party and vice president, but he was a much better office-holder than a candidate, and was more vulnerable than he appeared.

Bush, the scion of a wealthy family, was prone to malapropisms. He raised taxes after promising, "Read my lips: no new taxes," and when there was an economic downturn in 1991, his advice to Americans was just to spend more. Bill Clinton was more fluent, and his "I feel your pain" campaign was slick and plausible, and it exploited the Perot schism, which a more politically skilled Republican president – such as the party's previous three successful candidates (Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan), all of whom were reelected in landslides – would have avoided.

Bill Clinton is a charming and attractive man, with a twinkle in his eye of the sort that incites the approval often accorded a likable but naughty person, male or female. He is

intelligent and well informed, and in policy terms was a sensible leader who was like Nixon in producing a mélange of traditionally conservative and liberal measures. He was the most fiscally conservative Democratic president since Wilson, if not Cleveland, the most active promoter of minority rights of any president except, in their ways, Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson, and a strong law-and-order president, even by Nixon/Reagan standards. He was reelected safely enough over Robert Dole, a congressional giant but not an astute presidential campaigner (his response to everything in the presidential debates was to refer to his "small foundation's" activities), and Clinton again benefited from the aberrant Perot distraction.

Clinton deserves credit for bringing Mexico into the Free Trade Agreement with the United States and Canada, against the wishes of his supporters in organized labor; for his agile handling of NATO expansion; and for eliminating the federal deficit, though he raised taxes more than was necessary. Some of his personal financial complexities might have been damaging, but he survived them, and they were superseded in the bloodlust of his opponents by his sexual indiscretions. These peccadilloes were a sideshow; the tawdriness of his indiscriminating promiscuity offended his enemies, while his laddishness seems somewhat to have invigorated many of his supporters. His record as a feminist, reinforced by the presence of his (often irritated) wife, insulated him against the unbridled wrath of female America. The president of the United States, if minded to such activities, should frequent discreet, adult women, as (Franklin) Roosevelt and Kennedy and others did, but the impeachment process inflicted on Clinton by the Republicans was abusive partisanship (as had been the previous impeachment efforts against Andrew Johnson in 1868 and Richard Nixon in 1973–74). He is unlikely to be held accountable for it now, but President Clinton was the chief author of the \$800 billion current-account deficits, and of the requirement for the U.S. financial industry to issue billions of dollars of worthless mortgages.

Clinton was not especially popular when he left office, after a slew of last-minute pardons to generous contributors, and Hillary had played no particular role in the administration after her energetic but completely unsuccessful effort to promote a system of universal health care. Mrs. Clinton was elected to the U.S. Senate from New York in 2000, and she certainly moved on from her earlier positions as someone who never saw a tax increase she didn't like and preferred Palestinians to Israelis, and she was a conscientious and sensible member of the Armed Services Committee. She attended prayer breakfasts and got on well with her colleagues, and she was easily reelected in 2006, but was not an unusually creative senator.

Two Senate elections in a state it is almost impossible for a Democrat to lose would not normally qualify someone to be the odds-on favorite for a presidential nomination, but she was in 2008, and led Barack Obama in the primaries. But the time had come to break the color

barrier for the nation's highest office, and Obama was the first reputable national African-American leader since Martin Luther King. He effectively convinced the Democrats and then the country that, by voting for him, white America could expiate its guilt and shame over what Abraham Lincoln called "the bondsman's 250 years of unrequited toil," followed by a century of segregation, and, as a bonus, would not be bothered again with charlatans like Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson (though they have in fact been quite visible). Obama pulled the Clintons' party out from under them, an astounding feat given the Clintons' hardball political acuity.

Hillary Clinton was no particular talent as Obama's first secretary of state, and she must take part of the blame for the murders in Benghazi of the American ambassador to Libya and other officials. If the Republicans nominate a candidate with a serious aptitude for winning presidential elections (for the first time since Reagan), they will hold her accountable for the Obama charade that terrorists had been completely run to ground and the murders were the responsibility of an anti-Islamist video produced by a private citizen, as she explained in a preposterous and demeaning telecast to the world's Muslims, which the Republican National Committee should use to refresh the memory of the voters next year. The destruction of her official e-mails, from a hard drive she operated personally on behalf of the State Department, will be very inconvenient for her in the hands of serious opponents. So should be her many gratuitous liberties with the truth, such as her claim to have been under sniper fire at the Tuzla Air Base in Bosnia as first lady, a complete fabrication she blamed on "jet lag." The gifts to the Clinton Foundation from foreign governments while Mrs. Clinton was secretary of state could also cause some problems. By traditional criteria, Hillary Clinton should not be a shoo-in for the nomination and should be a vulnerable candidate if she is nominated.

And yet she seems to have the clearest path since Charles Evans Hughes, running as a Republican in 1916, to a major-party nomination in an election in which the party does not have an incumbent. All Americans, and the whole world, can be relieved that Elizabeth Warren is not throwing her spiked helmet into the ring to be George McGovern in drag 44 years on. The one who could have potential to derail Hillary Clinton is James Webb, former Republican assistant secretary of defense, secretary of the Navy, and Democratic senator from Virginia. He is a decorated Vietnam veteran, a patriotic but rational advocate of national defense and of proactive maintenance of the country's reasonable national-security interests. He was right from the start on the Iraq War and would steer a sane course between the George W. Bush crusading militarism and the Barack Obama preemptive-concession pacifism. He is one of the few American public figures who recognize what an unjust wrecker of innocent and socially recoverable people the U.S. justice system is. He is an accomplished author and television producer and is the sort of authentic and thoughtful character who could catch fire. He puts

me in mind of the comment, generally attributed to Thucydides, that the society “that separates soldiers from scholars will have fools doing the thinking and cowards fighting the wars.” But Webb is an undeclared longshot at this point.

Hillary Clinton may not look as unbeatable as her vast and well-rehearsed cheering section is loudly pretending. There is evidence that the bloom is off the Clinton rose after all these years. Hundreds of thousands of copies of her latest book were remaindered. There is no spark of novelty or originality in her campaign, just a desperately predictable pitch to the Clintons’ usual constituents in the feminist (the frightening, teeming masses of Debbie Wasserman Schultzes) and minority chunks of the electorate. She can’t associate herself too much with the outgoing administration, despite her prominent service in it, with its mountainous deficits, very inadequate economic recovery, and submissive foreign policy, though it would be hazardous to be too antagonistic to Obama. But the rapidly developing debacle of the Iran nuclear discussions cannot be laid at Hillary Clinton’s door, as she sounded comparatively believable as secretary of state in promising “crippling sanctions,” though President Obama himself was still sounding fairly purposeful at that point.

As the always amusingly mordant habituée of the revealed thigh, Ann Coulter, put it, “Nobody wants to watch her wallow around in those neon pantsuits for the next five years.” This is a bit ungracious but may speak for millions whose presence is still unsuspected. There is a whiff of tedium about the whole business; and America fundamentally suspects that it could do better than another Clinton–Bush round. The fact that either Hillary Clinton or Jeb Bush would almost certainly be an improvement on George W. and BHO is less comfort than is sought by a nation accustomed to outstanding presidents’ arising when needed. There is a vacuum, and the person to fill it must bring an element of freshness and novelty, as did Reagan and Bill Clinton and Obama (with varying degrees of follow-through). The identity of that candidate is not now obvious.

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