

# A Different Look at Hillary Clinton's Campaign

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Posted: May 31, 2008 05:34 AM

The notion that Hillary Clinton ran a terrible campaign in 2008 has become accepted wisdom among the punditry and in the blogosphere. Criticizing her campaign for not having a post-Super Tuesday strategy, losing key Democratic constituencies, raising expectations in key states and all her other campaign shortfalls, is an appealing narrative to many people including supporters of both Clinton and Barack Obama, but it is driven as much by tautology, Clinton lost therefore she ran a bad campaign, as by thoughtful analysis.

While Clinton's campaign made some very public mistakes and instead of winning the nomination devolved into increasingly far-fetched rationales for explaining why Obama's lead was not legitimate, in many respects her campaign was quite extraordinary. The candidate and her team did an excellent job positioning her, bouncing back from defeats, reinventing the candidate and broadening her base.

Ultimately, of course, the campaign, came up short, but dismissing her campaign as simply poorly run oversimplifies what actually happened. As soon as John Kerry lost in 2004, Clinton began to be viewed as the inevitable nominee for 2008. It is now forgotten that while her nomination was viewed as inevitable, many Democrats worried that she was unelectable. Conversations about the presidential campaign during the 2005-2007 period did not revolve around the question of who the nominee would be, but rather of whether or not Clinton could win the general election. Concerns about Clinton's electability derived from the strong and irrational negative views which many voters had of her as well as her profile as coming from the far left of the Democratic Party.

From the time she got to the senate, Clinton worked to recast herself as a hard-working centrist senator, rather than a liberal ideologue. Politically, this made sense at the time because polls consistently showed that Clinton was strong with her party's liberal base. However, this approach created a small opening for being defeated from the left, one through which, Barack Obama's campaign laterdrove a truck.

Before that happened, however, Clinton had been more vulnerable from the right. That is why moderate Democrats such as, then Virginia governor and current US Senate candidate, Mark Warner explored presidential bids. Warner's was not the only campaign which did not get off the ground. Powerful, experienced and highly qualified candidates such as Joseph Biden, Chris Dodd and Bill Richardson were reduced to being essentially fringe candidates. Even John Edwards, the party's 2004 candidate for vice-president and somebody whose profile screamed electability was barely able to run a serious campaign. The failure of any of these bids to get any traction was in no small part due to the effectiveness of Clinton's political operation.

It was not just political positioning that Clinton's campaign did well. Her comeback in New Hampshire, after a very harmful loss in Iowa, could not have happened without the organization, strategic thinking and hard work of a very good campaign. Hers was a true comeback, as polls had showed Obama with an 8-10 point lead and indicated that Edwards was closing in on Clinton for second place. Her New Hampshire comeback was far more impressive than her husband's in 1992 when he finished a strong, but not unexpected, second place in New Hampshire.

The Clinton campaign also displayed an impressive flexibility which made it possible for her to remain competitive after suffering a big loss in South Carolina as well as after her string of defeats eleven straight following Super Tuesday when her campaign looked to be all but over. Her experience and readiness message, which was never altogether convincing, was not competing with Obama's disciplined message of change and consistent record on key issues such as the war in Iraq. Clinton needed to make a change to keep her campaign alive, but making major changes in the middle of a presidential campaign is very difficult.

In this context, Clinton reinvented herself as the electable candidate who could speak to lower income white voters. Although, both of these claims were more spin than substance, this was an enormous and unprecedented political accomplishment. The Clinton campaign successfully managed to repackage the liberal senator from New York, who had been the a flashpoint for criticisms from social conservatives for almost two decades and who had been dogged by doubts about her electability for years, into the voice of the Reagan Democrats and the only person standing between the country and four more of years Bush-McCain.

To many people this transition seemed distasteful. Clinton seemed just a little too pleased with herself as she promoted gimmicky economic solutions, spoke of "hard working Americans, white Americans", stressed that Obama could not win in November, and attacked him as elitist and for saying things at "a closed door fundraiser in San Francisco", while not mentioning that she had raised more than \$3 million in that great city. Nonetheless, the political skill it took to affect this transformation and to frame the election for the political and media elite was truly extraordinary. Dysfunctional or badly run campaigns are not able to do things like that.

While Clinton and her team ran a better campaign than that for which they will probably get credit, she still squandered a huge lead in the polls, an initial lead in fundraising as well as much broader political support. After eight years of being part of an administration that never really embraced progressive ideas, and more than a term as a senator trying to move to the center, Clinton had become somewhat unmoored by the time the primaries started. While she likely still believed in the same things in which she has believed since converting from a conservative Republican at Wellesley 40 years ago, ties to her liberal base had begun to weaken. This was particularly true among younger voters who did not remember the Hillary Clinton from 1991-3 or earlier, but had become more accustomed to the moderate senator who in their eyes had voted the wrong way on the most important decision of the 21st century.

It is impossible for anybody other than Clinton or those extremely close to her to know why she cast this vote. Perhaps she did it because President Bush managed to convince her that Saddam Hussein had WMDs, but there may well have been a political consideration to this as well. Clinton may have felt that to stand out and oppose this war, something numerous other liberal

senators, including John Kerry and John Edwards, did not do, would have confirmed views of her as too left wing and would have made her genuinely unelectable. Ironically, Clinton, probably unwittingly, put the political cart before the horse, because the same vote that she thought would preserve her electability, ended up helping her lose the nomination.

Clinton probably still would have won if not for two developments that were largely out of her control. The first is that her strongest political asset, President Bill Clinton, turned out to be something of a mixed blessing. At times he campaigned tirelessly and effectively, particularly in states like Texas, and with less success, North Carolina. However, Bill Clinton clearly has lost some of his touch since leaving the White House almost eight years ago, and has been given to angry outbursts and poorly chosen sound bites throughout the campaign, which at times have been quite damaging to his wife's campaign.

The second development was more decisive. Had Obama failed to raise more money than Hillary Clinton, not won in Iowa, not surprised many by consolidating African American support early in the campaign, not proven to be the most exciting Democratic candidate in at least a generation, encountered a major crisis earlier, or not responded to the first major crisis faced by his campaign with an extraordinary speech, Clinton would have likely won the nomination. Clinton's campaign was prepared for everything; everything except Barack Obama and a campaign that exploited her least defended vulnerabilities, while engaging and mobilizing primary voters beyond what anybody expected.