

# Is a Clinton Revival Timed-Out?

There may not be a big demand for 1990s nostalgia, but the 2016 presidential race could offer one more contest involving a Clinton and a Bush. Yet, some Democrats fear Hillary Clinton could ultimately fail because she lacks a vision for addressing today's problems, says Beverly Bandler.

By Beverly Bandler

During the 1992 campaign, while facing criticism for her legal work on behalf of a failed savings and loan, Hillary Clinton remarked: "For goodness' sake, you can't be a lawyer if you don't represent banks."

For goodness' sake, can you be president of the United States if you don't understand the role the banks played in the 2008 Financial Crisis? Can you be president if you are oblivious to the real condition of the nation?

It may be difficult to see just how far the U.S. has fallen if you have two expensive and grand homes in two of the best postal zips to which you are driven in a limousine, dine and dish with multi-millionaires and billionaires, and require presidential suites for high-paying speech events.

Both Clintons give evidence that they have become detached from the realities of most Americans. "We are in the best shape of any big country in the world in the next 20 years," Bill Clinton said recently. Perhaps Bill, who has rightly been called "the architect and primary spokesperson for the corporatist and pro-Wall Street wing of his party," should have said: "We Clintons are in the best shape."

It turns out that some of the primary beneficiaries of Clintonism and the "Third Way" concept of the so-called "pro-growth progressive" movement ended up being the Clintons, their cronies, the financial establishment and the other members of "the 1 percent", including, of course, the Republicans who never pretended to be other than corporatists intent on destroying the parts of government they couldn't own.

## **New Zeitgeist**

"Hillary Clinton is dangerously out of step with 'the new zeitgeist' with her finance-friendly politics that supported her rise to power," says prominent political journalist William Greider.

"Beyond recession and financial crisis," notes Greider, "we are in much deeper trouble than many people suppose or the authorities want to acknowledge."

Despite the recent economic uptick, many Americans subsist on inadequate pay while working long hours, sometimes needing multiple jobs to pay the bills. For the bottom 80 percent, livelihoods are fragile.

“Four out of five Americans will live near poverty, without work, or relying on welfare at least once during their lives, according to a recent survey from the Associated Press,” reports Journalist Jane C. Timm.

The number of Americans living in poverty hovers just below 50 million. According to the latest Census, 46.2 million Americans, 15 percent of the country, are “officially” poor. A supplemental Census estimate that attempts to ascertain poverty levels based on measurements that are considered better than those used for decades, puts the number of Americans in poverty in 2013 at 48.7 million.

But those figures only tell part of the story: “The Associated Press/GFK survey notes that Census figures are a snapshot, they don’t account for those who shift in and out of near-poverty, welfare reliance, or unemployment. When those numbers are accounted for, the number of Americans who face such hardships surges to 79%.”

While most Americans live paycheck to paycheck with fear that the next paycheck might not be coming the relative handful at the top continue to amass wealth beyond the imagination of the vast majority of their countrymen and women.

“America’s wealth distribution now looks like a lopsided ladder: The bottom 40% of the population owns just 0.3% of the nation’s wealth,” writes Timm, “while the top 20% has 84% of the nation’s wealth, according to a 2010 study on wealth distribution and balance.”

### **Is America ‘Awesome’?**

As for America being “awesome,” as a Fox News host gushed recently, historian Lawrence Wittner points out that the United States is now “tops” only in violence and weapons exports. A close look at the social, economic and environmental statistics makes the United States look more like a Third World nation with a classic oligarchy and an endangered middle class, with powerful corporations treated better than people.

Yet, the word “corporation” does not appear in the Constitution. The word “people” does. The government was not designed to serve as the Protector of Wall Street. Government is supposed to serve all the people, to “provide for the general Welfare.” That was the design of the U.S. Constitution when the Framers replaced the non-functional Articles of Confederation.

It was also the idea reflected in the modern Democratic Party that Franklin Delano Roosevelt created in the 1930s. It is a fundamental concept that seems to elude both current main political parties in Gilded Age II.

Hillary Clinton, one half of the Ultimate Power Couple, is on course to run for president of a nation in crisis in 2016. But who is she? What does she believe? What is her worldview? Does she share her husband's perspective that treats the role of government as some kind of Job Mart, lining up compliant workers to benefit the well-heeled and well-connected.

Indeed, what are Hillary Clinton's positions: On the financialization of the economy and the power of the banks? Corporatism? Corporate welfare? Jobs? Poverty? Inequality? Education? Climate change? Environmental quality? On the austerity budget? The Middle Class? Militarism?

What does she believe is the role of government? What does she believe was the legacy of the New Deal? What does she believe the Democratic Party stands for? How does she define Fascism and Democracy? Is she still really a Goldwater Girl in Democratic camouflage? Is she still in the embrace of 1990s Clintonism, "New Democrats" centrism? Not only are her stated positions crucial but the *basis for them*, how she understands the world today and the history that has brought us here.

On foreign policy, is she a Neocon Lite who will support every militaristic call for interventionism around the world? What lessons has she learned, if any, from her vote for the Iraq War and her instigation of the "regime change" in Libya, two decisions that have contributed to chaos across the Middle East and North Africa.

### **Rebranded and Retrenched**

As columnist Doug Henwood notes, "Hillary (and she has clearly rebranded herself as just a first name) embodies the 'New Democrat' politics of the 1990s that now seem hopelessly obsolete, no match for a world of chronic economic stagnation, polarization and climate catastrophe.

"She was very much a partner in inventing that ideology, business-friendly, hawkish, tough on unions and the poor, with her husband. The Clintonites purged the Democrats of their social-democratic wing, consolidating the victories of the Reagan Revolution. At this point, it's hard to say what Hillary or the Democrats stand for, other than being protectors of the status quo.

"What is the case for Hillary? . . . She has experience, she's a woman, and it's her turn. It's hard to find any substantive political argument in her favor. During her career as New York's junior senator and as secretary of state, she

has scarcely budged from the centrist sweet spot, and has become increasingly hawkish on foreign policy.”

Some Democrats like to compare the Clintons glowingly to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, but others see the Byzantine power couple Justinian and Theodora, who brutally put down a popular revolt and made senators prostrate themselves when they entered the royal couple’s presence.

Yet, as Washington-based writer Rich Yeselson observes, “How you feel about Hillary Clinton’s inevitability depends a lot upon how alarmed you are that the GOP, the most radically extreme major party formation since the Southern ‘Slave Democrats’ of the 1850s, might take full control of the federal government in 2016

“Clinton is exactly the kind of candidate one would expect the Democrats to nominate in 2016. She has the typical political credentials of a modern presidential candidate: eight years in the Senate, followed by a high cabinet post. She has 100 percent name recognition. She has a powerful fundraising apparatus. And her policy positions are broadly aligned with the vast majority of Democratic Party elites and much of its electorate, too. In this, she is the embodiment of what, in a useful phrase, [former] *New Republic*’s Noam Scheiber has described as ‘boardroom liberalism.’”

### **The Clinton Years**

Hillary’s political fortunes are bound up with Bill’s eight years in office, since she was an integral part of his administration. And, though the economy performed better than under the two Bushes who sandwiched the Clinton years, Democrats should reflect carefully on those years.

Robert Borosage, co-director of *Campaign for America’s Future*, points out that “Democrats understandably feast on the comparison between the salad days of the Clinton presidency and the Bush debacle. Twenty-two million new jobs under Clinton; the worst jobs record since the Great Depression under Bush. The longest period of growth in U.S. history under Clinton; the weakest recovery and biggest bust under Bush. Budget surpluses under Clinton; deficits as far as the eye could see under Bush.”

But Borosage, nonetheless, says, “The [Democratic] party must free itself from the legacy of former President Bill Clinton and the centrism of his New Democrats. Clinton’s successes in office have little relevance for Democrats today. The 1990s were a very different time both politically and economically. In fact, many of Clinton’s policies led to the travails now facing Americans. They are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

“And Clinton’s strategy of co-opting conservative themes offers no way out. As leader of the New Democrats, Clinton tacked to the prevailing winds of that conservative time. On the economy, Clinton’s New Democrats scorned old ‘tax and spend’ liberals. They boasted that they understood markets, were skeptical of big government and disdained the outmoded social welfare policies of the New Deal and Great Society. The promise of America, they argued, was ‘equal opportunity, not equal outcomes.’

“After taking office, Clinton shelved most of his populist promises. In today’s political environment, Clinton’s retreats and concessions on social issues are embarrassing anachronisms.”

Borosage continues, “On economic issues, Clinton’s Rubinomics contributed directly to digging the hole we are in. Deregulation helped unleash the ‘financial wilding’ that eventually blew up the economy. The celebration of deficit reduction bolstered the illusory belief in ‘expansionary austerity’ that has driven Europe back into recession and sabotaged any chance of getting a sufficient stimulus here at home.

“Austerity continues to starve public investments vital to our future. The banks emerged from the crisis bigger and more concentrated than ever

“No matter how repellant Republicans may look to [the young, people of color, single women] voters, they are unlikely to turn out in large numbers for a party whose policies have failed them. Democrats and the country have to move beyond the old economy and the old arguments. Obama had it right: We need a new foundation for growth one that embraces the need for dynamic and activist government.”

Yet, it was President Barack Obama who called on Bill Clinton to make the case for his re-election at the 2012 Democratic convention. But what positives remain of the Clinton years?

### **Fearing the ‘Third Way’**

In the 1990s, there were many progressive/liberal Democrats who were alarmed by the Clinton policies and what they would portend for the future, particularly the deals he struck once the Republicans gained control of Congress in 1994.

Comparing the Democratic Party’s resistance to imposing a work requirement on women with children in the 1970s, lawyer Carol Lipton noted that “no Democrat at the time would have envisioned a Democratic president less than 20 years later, [dismantling] the ideological core of welfare, maintaining and supporting families, and substituting the Clintonian neoliberal vision of the undeserved poor having to make efforts to look for jobs that were menial, low-paying, and

engaging in time-sucking job hunting efforts.”

It’s fair to say that many of us ordinary rank-and-file Democrats were uncomfortable with some Clinton policies back then, but the economy was relatively strong and thus few could envision the future consequences of Clintonism when the good times stopped rolling.

The last 15 years have revealed the painful downside of those “reforms” as millions of American families fell from their disappearing middle-class jobs through the shredded safety net into poverty. For those reasons, some progressives view Bill Clinton’s legacy as a surrender to the greed of corporatism that felt good at the moment only because of the inflated stock market bubble of the 1990s that burst in the ensuing decade.

Political columnist Matt Bai says, “Clinton tried gamely to leave behind lasting change, and he failed. In many more areas, though, the progress that was made under Clinton, almost 23 million new jobs, reductions in poverty, lower crime and higher wages, [was] reversed or wiped away entirely in a remarkably short time.

“Clinton’s presidency seems now to have been oddly ephemeral, his record etched in chalk and left out in the rain. George W. and his Republican Party [undertook] a ferocious and unbending assault on Clinton’s progressive legacy. As Clinton points out in his speeches, Bush and the Republicans abandoned balanced budgets to fight the war in Iraq, widened income inequality by cutting taxes on the wealthy and scaled back social programs.

“Some Democrats, though, and especially those who are apt to call themselves ‘progressives,’ offer a more complicated and less charitable explanation. In their view, Clinton failed to seize his moment and create a more enduring, more progressive legacy, not just because of the personal travails and Republican attacks that hobbled his presidency, but because his centrist, ‘third way’ political strategy, his strategy of ‘triangulating’ to find some middle point in every argument, sapped the party of its core principles

“They say, he was less a victim of Bush’s radicalism than he was its enabler. Ideologically Clinton’s presidency fit snugly into the era of Reagan and Bush. Faced with ascendant conservatism Clinton saw his job, in a sense, as getting the Democratic Party to adjust to it, rather than to resist it.”

### **Hillary’s Coronation?**

Hillary Clinton’s expected presidential candidacy should be seen in the context of this recent past. She should not presume a “coronation” and a possible rematch with the Bush dynasty, if Jeb Bush wins the Republican nomination.

Americans are angry and a good number of them are “real” Democrats, who have the perception that the charismatic and smart neoliberal Clintons empowered themselves as they helped to enfeeble the Democratic Party. Unquestionably that was not their intention, but that is what happened.

The Clintonian version of the “Best and the Brightest” told fellow Democrats in the 1990s that they should “do more than just defend old programs.” Yet those sooooo smart, highly educated people failed to do the basic homework to learn the purpose of those programs, the context in which they were initiated, the principles they represented, and the national needs they met.

As professor Lawrence Davidson posits, the Clinton and their fellow corporate Democrats forgot the “why” of the New Deal.

Yet, just as the Clintons’ New Democrats of the 1990s viewed the New Deal Democrats as yesterday’s news, so do many of today’s Democrats view Hillary Clinton as out of touch with this decade’s problems.

As R.J. Eskow from Campaign for America’s Future comments, “‘Clintonism,’ the Wall Street-friendly economic ideology of a bygone era, has passed its sell-by date.”

Today’s America is different from the 1990s politically and economically, and it is also not 2008. In many ways the situation is comparable to the 1920s when another Gilded Age was roaring for the lucky few but not for the fragile middle class and surely not for the struggling working and lower classes. Such imbalanced socio-economic structures are inherently unstable as well as intensely unfair.

Looking out over today’s national landscape of struggling communities, desperate families and decaying infrastructure, Noam Chomsky has commented that America is “not a pretty sight.”

The challenge for Hillary Clinton is whether she can demonstrate that she has a vision big enough to detect ways for addressing the multitude of problems or whether she can only see the comforts of the well-heeled friends who surround her.

Americans deserve clear answers to hard questions, not campaign bromides and reminiscences of a time gone by. Clintonism, however well intentioned it may have been, turns out to have been an illusion cloaked by a brief period of boom that did not survive the inevitable bust.

## **A Downward Trend**

As progressive media critic Jeff Cohen has written, “Despite gains on issues like gay rights and pot legalization, the trend since the 1980s has been economic/environmental decline alongside the solidification of corporate power and economic inequality a long-term downward trend that has persisted through the Bill Clinton and Obama years, though at a slower rate than with the GOP in the White House.

“The only way to reverse this dangerous trend is to tell the truth about and challenge corporate Democrats. As much as I’d like to see a woman president (I have two daughters), a good place for that challenge to happen would be through a progressive candidate taking on Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Democratic primaries, if she runs. Without that battle and many others, the corporatization of the Democratic Party and our government will continue to threaten all our futures.”

As hard as it may be for some Democrats to accept, the reality is that Clintonism helped Reaganism break the country.

Andrew Levine of the Institute of Policy Studies says: “Bill Clinton was the best Reaganite president ever not the most visionary, not the one with the most competent subordinates, but the most effective. No one, certainly not Reagan himself, did more to privatize and deregulate, and to undo government programs that perform worthwhile functions. Reagan famously proposed ‘starving the monster.’ This is what Bill Clinton did.”

Now the Clintons expect to be further rewarded with the presidency of Hillary Clinton – “Eight years for Bill! Eight years for Hill!”

Should they be rewarded? Can Hillary Clinton be expected to fix what her husband’s presidency helped break? Would she? Would they?

As Slate’s Jamelle Bouie writes, “Hillary Clinton is a triangulating corporate Democrat who forged her political identity against a relentless, ideologically driven GOP and built her core support among the wealthy elites of the Democratic Party. The former makes her suspicious of (if not hostile to) the left on foreign and domestic policy, while the latter, coupled with her time as New York senator, makes her receptive to the failed ideas and expertise of Wall Street.”

Bouie adds, “The task for liberals, and the left more broadly, is to correct that blind spot in the party and, in the process, force [Hillary] Clinton to see that the 1990s are over, and the public is more than primed for a big swing.”

Hillary Clinton is a woman of accomplishment and one has to respect her remarkable political journey, her notable skills, her toughness, and the rich experience upon which she can draw. But if Hillary wants to return to where her

husband “left off,” the nation is in for even bigger trouble than we have now. She will offer progressives and Americans with common sense no choice but to try and stop her.

Perhaps Hillary Clinton can find the imagination, intellectual integrity, political courage and maturity for another option.

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## New Trick for Sinking Iran-Nuke Talks

Neocons and other U.S. hardliners, who want to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran, never stop scheming up ways to torpedo a deal that would constrain but not eliminate Iran's nuclear program, with the latest idea a threat to impose new sanctions if Iran

doesn't capitulate, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Notwithstanding the obvious asymmetries in soon-to-resume nuclear negotiations with Iran (it's Iran's nuclear program, not the U.S. one, that is being restricted; it's the United States, not Iran, that is sanctioning someone else's economy) the perceptual and political similarities that Americans and Iranians have brought to this encounter are striking to anyone who has been following the subject closely.

To begin with, the chief policy-makers in each country clearly want to reach an agreement. On the Iranian side this includes not only the foreign minister who has been conducting the negotiations and the president who has been directly overseeing them but also the Iranian policy-maker who matters most: the supreme leader. It is almost inconceivable that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei would have made it possible for President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to have gone as far as they have already gone, and to sign Iran up to the commitments they already have made in the preliminary agreement reached in late 2013, if he did not genuinely share the objective of completing the negotiations and reaching a final agreement.

Both the U.S. president and the Iranian supreme leader have publicly voiced skepticism, however, as to whether the negotiations will in fact succeed. Probably the expressed doubts are in each case partly tactical, to limit the perceived political damage to each leader should the negotiations fail. But the doubts probably also reflect genuine assessments of the challenges that each side faces in reaching, and securing domestic support for, an agreement.

That gets to one of the clearest elements of symmetry between the two sides. Each government is burdened with substantial opposition from domestic elements that oppose any U.S.-Iranian accord. The hardline opponents on each side act and sound remarkably alike. Each is embedded in a broader domestic political opposition to the incumbent presidential administration and is quick to exploit any setback to that administration for political advantage (and each realizes that if the nuclear negotiations can be torpedoed that would be a significant setback for the president they oppose).

Each never tires of demonizing the other country and attributes the most malevolent intentions to it. Each fulminates about how its own country's leaders are supposedly conceding too much and giving away the store. Each couches its opposition in terms of getting a better agreement, when in fact it does not want any agreement at all.

A reminder of how much of a factor is hardline opposition in Iran came the other day when hardliners in the Iranian parliament forced a sort of no-confidence vote over how Zarif has been handling the negotiations. Zarif prevailed, but just barely. Only 125 of the 229 legislators present voted in his favor, with 86 voting against.

The next big ploy of hardline opponents in the United States will be to push a new version of sanctions legislation similar to what Senators Mark Kirk and Robert Menendez introduced in the previous Congress. The new version is still being written, but the previous version contained elements that might well have constituted a violation of the preliminary agreement, and if it had been enacted an unsurprising Iranian reaction, one that Iranian hardliners probably would have demanded, would have been to declare Iran's commitments under that agreement to be null and void and to walk away from the negotiating table.

But let us assume, in line with what we have heard lately from the American hardliners, that the new version to be voted on as early as this month would not be a blatant violation of the existing agreement but instead would be a "conditional" measure that would impose additional sanctions on Iran if a final agreement were not reached by the deadlines that the negotiators had previously announced (March for a political agreement, and June for a full document with all technical details).

Now let us perform a thought experiment in which we imagine Iranian hardliners doing what would be their closest possible equivalent to what the American hardliners are trying to do. Imagine that the Iranian majlis, or parliament, enacts legislation that commits Iran to taking certain steps if agreement is not reached by the announced deadlines.

Specifically, if there is no agreement, Iran would resume building up a stockpile of low-enriched uranium. It would resume enrichment of uranium to the 20 percent level. It would resume development of the nuclear reactor at Arak in ways that would facilitate use of it to produce plutonium. It would rescind the additional special access given to international inspectors and revert to the lesser level of inspection consistent with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and prior agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency.

In other words, the Iranian hardliners' legislation, just like the American hardliners' legislation, would undo the commitments that each side made in the preliminary agreement of November 2013. And just like the American hardliners, the Iranian hardliners would justify their legislation as a conditional measure that would help to provide an incentive to the other side to negotiate seriously and not to drag out the talks indefinitely. As such, the measure would be portrayed as an aid to negotiations rather than an undermining of them.

What would the U.S. reaction be to such an action in the majlis? Would the legislation, as claimed, make the U.S. administration more inclined than before to make concessions, increasing the likelihood that an agreement would be reached on the announced schedule? Of course not.

Americans of various political stripes would denounce the action of the majlis as a major show of Iranian bad faith. The talk in Washington would not be about making more U.S. concessions but instead about what the United States could do to pressure Iran in return. Those who had openly questioned Iran's seriousness about wanting an agreement would say, "We told you so."

Even those in the U.S. administration with high confidence in the good will of Rouhani would have their faith shaken in his ability to implement the terms of an agreement. And American hardliners would voice the most outrage of all (however much they would privately welcome this boost to their own deal-killing endeavors).

What works in one direction works in the other. The responses to the imaginary legislation of Iranian hardliners point to the likely responses to the (unfortunately real) legislation being cooked up by American hardliners. Iranians of various stripes would see it as a major show of American bad faith. It would amplify the already considerable doubts in Tehran about true American intentions and about the ability of even a well-intentioned Barack Obama to make good on the U.S. side of a deal in the face of resistance by a Republican Congress.

In Iranian eyes it would make any further Iranian concessions seem less apt to bring desirable results, thus more risky politically for any Iranian leader to offer, and thus less likely to be offered. Consequently the negotiations would be more likely to fail. U.S. officials conducting the negotiations know what, which is why they oppose the legislation. Those pushing the legislation know that, too, which is why they are pushing it.

It is usually only when speaking in private or when too inexperienced or naive to disguise true intentions that the pushers acknowledge their objective. More often they promote the idea that what they are doing will provide the United States with useful leverage and induce Iran to make still more concessions. And some people genuinely believe that.

This is one of several respects in which Americans tend to believe that bargaining with another state works in an asymmetric, exceptionalist way, in which other humans respond to pressures and inducements in a fundamentally different manner from how Americans themselves respond, when in fact there is far more symmetry.

Thinking in role-reversal terms might help to correct that mistaken belief.

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