

Clinton's Experience: Fact and Fantasy

From the Archive: Hillary Clinton's win in Saturday's Nevada caucuses and her big lead in South Carolina restore her status as Democratic frontrunner but lingering doubts about her honesty and her coziness to Big Money continue to dog her path to the White House, a problem that Barbara Koepfel identified during Clinton's first run in 2008.

By Barbara Koepfel (First published on April 15, 2008)

The problem for presidential candidate Hillary Clinton is how to stop kicking herself in the leg. Although she's scored real achievements over the years, when repeating her 35-years-of-experience mantra, she pushes the facts too far.

By now, her gaffes on Tuzla, Bosnia, where her claims of "landing under sniper fire" and "running for cover" are well-known. Ditto her lines on Northern Ireland where Nobel Peace Prize winner Lord Trimble of Lisnagarvey, Ireland, said she was "a wee bit silly" for exaggerating the part she played in bringing peace.

But if we reality-check some other claims, what *can* we say of her 35 years, on which she hopes to distinguish herself from Sen. Barack Obama, who has actually logged more years in elected posts, counting his years in the Illinois legislature?

To start with, for 14 of the 35 years that she's counting, Clinton was a full-time corporate litigator in Little Rock, Arkansas, at the Rose Law Firm. Further, for her White House years aside from her work as chair of the President's Task Force on Health Care Reform she served as First Lady, not policy maker.

While First Lady in Arkansas, she did, as she claims, help "transform the education system." Teachers and others there agree that, as chair of a commission to re-write Arkansas' deplorable education standards, she was effective. Among other things, the new norms raised teacher salaries and amounts spent per pupil, and reduced class size.

Since Arkansas ranked 49th out of America's 50 states in most educational measurements, and dead last in the percent of students who went on to college, the base was so low that any gains would be good. But it's a fact the numbers improved.

Add to the fact column her work on child welfare boards, like the Children's Defense Fund and the Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families.

Dubious Claims

Other claims, however, are downright dubious, if not terminal twaddle. Let's start with her now-impassioned concerns for workers' rights. This is surely an eyebrow-raiser, since her record on labor issues is roughly zero.

For example, she was on WalMart's Board of Directors from 1986-1992, a company legendary for its low wages and union busting. Not surprisingly, her official biography omits this six-year stint.

Nor does she mention it when she woos blue-collar workers. In an effort to expunge the WalMart connection, Clinton returned its \$5,000 campaign contribution to her in 2005.

According to Sam Ortega, a Wall Street Journal reporter and author of *In Sam We Trust: The Untold Story of Sam Walton and How Wal-Mart is Devouring America*, the company fiercely fought any union attempts to organize WalMart workers threatening, spying on and firing supporters, all illegal acts.

Ortega writes that, during a Teamsters' campaign at a distribution center, "Sam Walton bluntly told them he'd take away their profit-sharing if they voted for the union."

Further, Ortega says many workers "remember his (Walton's) threats with perfect clarity." He adds that one worker, Larry Havener, recalls, "He told us if the union got in, the warehouse would be closed."

Worse, Ortega writes, "union activists were soon laid off, always for some other stated reason, of course." Moreover, "Walton asked all employees to call John Tate the company's chief union-buster if they noticed anything that smacked of union activity," Ortega notes.

Low Wages

WalMart's devotion to low wages seems not to have lost Clinton any sleep. Ortega notes that in 1988 two years *after* Clinton joined the Board an Arkansas state senator publicly attacked the company for "dumping its overhead on state taxpayers, saying many of its near minimum-wage workers made so little they had to get by on public assistance."

Another problem plaguing the company was the use of child workers some as young as nine by its foreign suppliers: When shown photos of children in Saraka, a Bangladesh sweatshop that made WalMart-label shirts, the company claimed ignorance.

But in 1990, the Saraka plant had a fatal fire killing some 25 children, the year *before* WalMart contracted with the company. An NBC News report said the child workers were locked in the factory until they finished each day's production.

Moreover, despite her long-term concern for health care along with child welfare, Clinton's signature issues she stayed on the Board although Ortega says WalMart insured fewer than 40 percent of its workers.

Why? Perhaps it was Clinton's \$15,000 annual WalMart salary, which rose to \$45,000, for her service at four meetings a year, at a time her husband earned just \$35,000 as Governor. Perhaps it was her corporate lawyer role at the conservative Rose Law Firm in Little Rock, where she worked from 1978 until the couple moved to the White House. Perhaps it was Arkansas' "right-to-work" fundamentalism that made her mute. Whatever the motive, today's worries for working-blokes' concerns ring hollow.

Then there's NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement), which passed on her husband's watch in 1994. Critics worried then, and insist now, that it caused the loss of hundreds of thousands of U.S. manufacturing jobs. Later, candidate Clinton claimed to have doubted NAFTA's merits from the start. But the record indicates otherwise. In 2004, she praised NAFTA as "good for New York and America."

Health-Care Choices

But more than any others, Clinton's claims about her desire to improve health coverage and care through her efforts as chair of President Clinton's health care task force are seriously flawed.

History and numbers tell the story best. In 1993, health care was a crisis for the U.S. public: 37 million Americans had none, and millions more had very little. Thus, public opinion polls ranked it as the number-two concern, second only to the economy since the country was in a recession.

A majority wanted universal health care: Even many providers and the American Medical Association initially favored some form of universal plan. The universal model adopted in Canada and most Western European countries, called the single-payer system, is not socialized medicine, as insurance companies repeat by rote.

Governments do not tell patients which doctors to see. Nor do they dictate what doctors may or may not do. Instead, it's a payment mechanism, like Medicare: The government pays the health care bills directly, rather than the insurance companies.

This way, overhead costs linked to billings are slashed: In 1993, when First Lady Clinton launched her health-care task force, a hospital official in Windsor, Canada, told me his costs associated with billing the Government for patient services accounted for just 9 percent of the hospital's budget, while the average U.S. hospital spent 14 percent a big difference in a multi-million-dollar budget. In Canada, the savings left huge sums for covering patient care.

Did Clinton's task force examine the single-payer option? Alas, it was never on the table. According to Vicente Navarro, a physician and professor of health and public policy at Johns Hopkins University, and a member of Clinton's task force, he tried repeatedly to get it considered, and failed.

In a 2007 CounterPunch article, "Why Hillary's Health Care Plan Really Failed," Navarro writes that although he promoted the views of the single-payer community (unions, grassroots organizations and many providers) "they were heard but not heeded. I had the feeling I was in the White House as a token."

Mixing Single-Payer

Why such disdain for the system used in most industrialized nations? Navarro says Bill Clinton was pushing the managed-competition model, backed by the insurance industry, where the companies "have full control over health-care providers." As proof, he writes that Bill Link, vice president of Prudential, stated that "For Prudential, the best scenario for reform would be ... managed competition."

The plan that Hillary Clinton's task force ultimately sent to the Senate failed to pass, but not, Navarro insists, because of "bad timing" or the "excessive generosity" of the plan's proposed benefits, as is generally believed. Rather, it died because President Clinton and Hillary Clinton refused to send a plan that was truly universal, and one around which the public could mobilize.

Thus, no plan was approved and insurance companies continued to control and prosper from the U.S. health-care model.

Fourteen years later (at the time of this article), another 10 million were uninsured and millions more were under-insured often impoverished by serious or even not-so-serious illnesses.

Again, why? Why rule out even a cursory discussion of single-payer models?

Navarro says Hillary Clinton told him a single-payer plan was not politically possible. But to pass NAFTA, the President twisted every congressional arm he needed to make the deal. So, why couldn't he use the bully pulpit to mount the same push for universal health care an issue on which most of the public agreed? One answer could be contributions from the insurance industry and those connected to it: According to the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP), over Bill Clinton's career, insurance industries rank among the top 20 donors, while law and the financial firms are among the top 10 the sectors often tightly linked to the insurance industry.

Fast forward to 2008 and, based on CRP figures, the industry continues its generosity, this time to Hillary Clinton giving \$913,000 to date. Obama has benefited too, with \$700,000.

(The complicated Clinton health-care plan failed in 1994, but President Barack Obama eventually pushed through a somewhat similar plan in 2010 although it still fell short of universal coverage, leaves many of the insured with high deductibles and has become a rallying point for Republican opposition to Obama and other Democrats.)

Since Bill Clinton and other Hillary supporters complained in 2008 that she was picked on by the press, she would do well if she only claimed what is legitimate. This way, the press would not have to flush out the fables.

Barbara Koepfel is a Washington-based investigative reporter.