

# It Takes an Agenda

Conservatives cannot live by Hillary-hate alone.

By David Weigel

IT'S A BALMY, beer-drinking evening in the middle of August, and the conservatives trickling in to a meeting of the Robert A. Taft Club can't enjoy it. They're mostly under-30 Washington professionals, and they're fed up with the Republican Party. They think George W. Bush's bumbling and ideological hat-trading have reduced the conservative movement to a pitiable, piddling state. If Karl Rove stepped inside, he'd come out looking like Oscar de la Hoya after a bout gone wrong.

They settle into a debate about the future of the conservative movement and the Republican Party. Panelists take turns whipping the party for its sins. "We beat them on immigration," says Richard Viguerie, the direct-mail pioneer, "but right now, we just don't have the strength or the resources to affect public policy the way we want to." He beseeches the crowd to help save the movement, but that gets a muted reaction. So he steps it up: "I still think that in the short term, as many problems as we have right now, Hillary Clinton can bring conservatives back together."

The name does the trick: soft laughter moves around the room. Keeping Hillary out of the White House is literally the only motivation some conservatives have to pull the Republican lever in 2008, especially if their party nominates a pro-choice candidate for the first time since 1976. "Just enough people might go to the polls next November nursing one conviction that trumps all others," Terence Jeffrey wrote a few weeks after the panel (which he also appeared on). "There's no way they would vote for

Hillary Clinton." Fred Barnes, the *Weekly Standard* executive editor and a sturdy weathervane for Republican popular opinion, expressed the same thing in a late-September column: "Nearly all Republicans, plus a lot of independents, rally around the need to defeat Senator Hillary Clinton and keep her away from the presidency. So it follows, not entirely logically, that they wish for her to win the Democratic nomination."

Is this wishful thinking from a party and a movement on the ropes? Not according to pollsters. There are voters who have given up on the GOP over the last few years and utterly loathe the Clintons in general or Hillary in particular. Americans are aching to vote Democratic, and polls that test a generic Republican candidate against a generic Democrat give Clinton's party a double-digit lead. But their enthusiasm flags when they ponder the flesh-and-blood Democratic frontrunner. Pollster Scott Rasmussen points out that at least 45 percent of Americans don't like Clinton personally. She simply rubs them the wrong way—in every way. Despite that generic lead, she only ties or narrowly outpaces Rudy Giuliani, Fred Thompson, and John McCain.

"Of the top three Democratic candidates, she's absolutely the weakest in the general election," Rasmussen says. "Hillary is a unifying factor for Republicans, and Republicans aren't otherwise unified. If Hillary is the nominee, this is a competitive race."

But see if you can spot the problem. Conservatives are fraught, angry at their traditional party, unable to decide on a

standard-bearer, unsure even what they stand for. They don't think this is the year to sort those problems out. They're counting on a short-cut when the Democrats nominate an unelectable cold fish who has infuriated the Right for a decade and a half. Millions remember how they felt when she belittled other wives for "staying home and baking cookies," and Bill Clinton promised voters "two for the price of one" if they sent his family to the White House.

On the Right, the list of grievances was even longer. Both Clintons were seen as ambassadors of 1960s radicalism and cultural decadence, and Hillary was the worse of the two: a pro-choice feminist who didn't take her husband's name until pollsters told her it would help him make a political comeback.

Yet for all of that outrage, Republicans lost that election to the Clintons. And the hope that voters will see what they see and reject what the Clintons stand for resembles the plan Democrats clung to in 2004. They choose John Kerry on the theory he would be the least controversial general-election candidate, then counted on an electorate fed up with George W. Bush to deliver the election.

In the nearly three years since, Hillary has been the *de facto* Democratic candidate. The Right's efforts to attack her have fallen completely, pathetically flat. Her popularity is low, but not much lower than Bush's was in 2004. If the linchpin of a 2008 campaign is unifying Republicans in the cause of defeating Hillary, it might be enough to stitch together most of the conservative movement—but not enough to win.

Compare the efforts of 2007 to the efforts of 1999 and 2000. After First Lady Hillary Clinton started seeking a Senate seat, Republican donors practically sprained their wrists signing checks. Rudy Giuliani, a social liberal whom Republicans weren't as comfortable with then as now, raised more than \$20 million. When Giuliani left the race, Rep. Rick Lazio raised \$4.5 million in six weeks.

That wasn't the limit of the Hillary effect. The National Republican Senatorial Committee saw its donations surge when it asked supporters to banish the Clintons from Washington once and for all. By the middle of 2000, the committee raised \$20 million, twice as much as it had raised in 1998 and triple what it raised in 1996. "She's now the Republican Party's No. 1 fundraiser," said a spokesman for the National Republican Senatorial Committee to a reporter from *The Hill*.

It was a simpler time. This past July, the National Republican Senatorial Committee sent out a "quiz" to donors that warned, "Hillary Clinton is calling Senate Democrats to push a passage of measures to institute government-run health-care." Imagine, a President Hillary Clinton with a massive Senate majority to do her bidding! But appeals like that have done nothing for the NRSC: their Democratic counterparts have out-raised them by \$34.1 to \$18.1 million. The month of the quiz letter, the Democrats beat them by \$2.7 to \$2.2 million.

It's the same story in the presidential race. Since the start of the year, the nine remaining Republican candidates have raised about \$104 million. The Democrats, including Clinton, have raised \$144.3 million. When John McCain campaign manager Rick Davis sent out an 11th-hour fundraising e-mail, he played what he thought was his strongest card: "There are many reasons to support John McCain, but as we approach this quarter's fundraising deadline Saturday at midnight, let me remind you of just

one of them: John McCain is the only candidate who can defeat Hillary Clinton." That was the prelude to a weak finance report and a staff purge that completed McCain's descent to hobbled dark horse.

And those efforts have been absolute triumphs compared to the third-party anti-Hillary efforts and PACs. The first sign that conservative donors were growing less animated about the Clintons was the launch of Stop Her Now in February 2005. Republican strategist Arthur Finkelstein planned on raising \$10 million for a campaign along the lines of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, the 2004 group that raised \$27 million to attack John Kerry's Vietnam service and his homeland antiwar activism.

Finkelstein failed. The group recorded a radio ad that was never broadcast and from its founding through June 2005, reported only one \$500 donation. Over the next year, Clinton glided to her Senate re-election as the group raised only \$25,000, and she out-raised her opponent by nearly ten to one.

Stop Her Now actually survived that election after Texas philanthropist Richard Collins (a Swift Boat donor) bought it and hired a new crop of media consultants. Now the group offers a news feed that collates Hillary headlines and a series of cartoons that mock the senator as a humorless, power-mad talk-show host. Collins wants to raise about \$8 million before the end of the race—a much more modest goal than Finkelstein's \$10 million for a race in New York—but there will be no mention of family problems or sex scandals. "We want to define the radical ideas of Hillary Clinton," he says, "but not in a mean-spirited way."

What changed between 2000 and 2007? Why isn't the mention of Hillary Clinton's name the motivating factor it used to be for conservatives? Some activists argue that the GOP and the

movement are distracted. In Rudy Giuliani, there's a Republican frontrunner who defies decades of party stances on social issues and personal mores. Conservative donors are too busy sorting out the party's future to cohere and battle Hillary.

"Back in 2000 we had a plan," says Viguerie. "It was a simple plan: beat Hillary. Keep Hillary out of the Senate. And at first we had Rudy Giuliani as the focus of that, but after he dropped out, you could help out Rick Lazio. We'll get a presidential candidate, and then we'll get focused."

That might be one reason the Right can't rally against Hillary. Conservative division has led to depression, a sense that a Clinton restoration is inevitable, and that the best plan going ahead is to wait for her election and watch as, like her husband, she stumbles and seeds a GOP comeback. A mid-July CBS News poll revealed that 53 percent of Republicans thought it was very or somewhat likely that Clinton would win the presidency. Few Republicans think the party can win back Congress in 2008. Combine that with the anger that between one-third and one-quarter of the GOP base feels toward George W. Bush, and the relentless negativity starts to make sense.

"There's a big difference between 2000 and 2007," says John LeBoutillier, a former Republican congressman from New York and the head of Stop Hillary PAC. "In 2000, everyone on the Right hated Clinton and Gore, and we rallied to the guy we didn't know: Bush. It's different now. We hate Bush, and we hate the Bushes. We hate watching the Clintons palling around with the Bushes on goodwill tours and the like."

There is another reason conservatives can't count on Hillary: she offends and irritates them so deeply that they have trouble actually strategizing against her. They launch attacks, but compared to the carefully plotted Swift Boat strike on

John Kerry or the years-long effort to spotlight Al Gore's strange bragging and fibbing, the anti-Hillary attacks are erratic, grabbing early media attention and then fading out of the picture. Conservatives fixate on long-dormant scandals, like Bill Clinton's treatment of Kathleen Willey and Juanita Broadrick, without appreciating that reporters no longer want to chase those stories and that their very mention stokes sympathy for Clinton's wife.

But it's all some anti-Hillary agitators know how to do. In July, Sean Hannity told professional Hillary slayer Dick Morris the question he wanted some intrepid hack to ask the candidate: "Do you believe the women that claim that your husband serially abused them? Juanita Broadrick, Kathleen Willey, Paula Jones. Is that a legitimate and fair question?" Morris repeatedly shook his head and tried to explain where Hannity was going wrong: "Whenever anybody hits Hillary on her personal life, her marriage, or whether she is a lesbian or not, it plays into her hands."

Morris is right. Clinton has never been as popular as she was in 1998 and 1999, during the height of her husband's sex scandals, when voters grew to see her as a courageous wronged woman. (New York Democrats recruited Clinton to run for their open Senate seat hoping to cash in on that popularity. She didn't, as it's sometimes remembered, "parachute" into the race.) She's not completely immune from Republican attacks on her character, but she can deflect an awful lot of the damage. Most attacks on Hillary's past, her ethics, or her scandals either backfire or fall off the radar.

Why is the media so disinterested? Simple: Hillary-phobia doesn't sell like it used to. Four books about Clinton have been released from major publishers in 2007, with varying levels of fanfare. According to Nielsen Bookscan, Carl Bernstein's *A Woman in Charge*

has been a sizable hit, selling 52,000 copies on the strength of the author's fame and interviews with Clinton's late childhood friend Betsy Ebeling. (It benefited from anticipation, too: its original release date was in 2003.) But *Her Way*, a much-hyped effort by investigative reporters Jeff Gerth and Don Van Natta Jr. released the same week as Bernstein's book, has sold only 18,000 copies. Bay Buchanan's *The Extreme Makeover of Hillary (Rodham) Clinton* sold half as many. Amanda Carpenter's *The Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy's Dossier on Hillary Clinton*, helped along by a push and some free distribution at the Conservative Political Action Conference, sold 1,000 fewer copies than Buchanan's book. A little perspective: no one expected Sen. Joe Biden's autobiography to be a hit, and no one's much interested in poring through it for dirt, but it has moved 10,000 copies anyway.

There's still a market for anti-Hillary books, and if you're a publisher they're a better bet than *Ten Reasons You Can't Trust Chris Dodd* or *Mike Gravel: Unfit for Command*. But the Hillary books are, in the end, bad for conservatives. Just as she did in her Senate race, Hillary has raised millions of dollars with pearl-clutching direct mail and e-mail pleas to help her defend herself from the vast conspiracy that wants to destroy her. The *Politico*'s Ben Smith has dubbed the anti-Hillary groups a "small bunch of failed business schemes that pile up debt while Hillary herself raises money off their attacks."

So she eggs along her opponents in an ongoing, losing effort. Nothing that conservatives can do to Hillary Clinton can fix the fractures in the movement or recommit the voters who have abandoned them during the Bush era. Attacking Hillary is a short-term fix, a flawed strategy that Democrats tried only three years ago as they nominated a ticket with a muddled Iraq War position and

tried to make up the difference with \$300-million worth of third-party attacks. They never dealt with their internal crises, hoping that a campaign against Bush would be enough to win.

"I'd prefer these things be contests of ideas," says Craig Shirley, a longtime political strategist who's doing some work for Stop Her Now. "Our conservative, libertarian ideas are better than their collectivist ideas. But running on ideas, you know, that requires the people on our side to have the courage and intellect to understand what this is all about."

That would require a little bit of cool-headedness and distance, and the Republican Party doesn't have much of either at the moment. When I pressed John LeBoutillier on what the conservative movement needed to do, he fretted about the damage of the last seven years. "The Bush experience has really turned them off," he said. "We're so thrown that we don't have our heads on straight." But when I asked if his energy would be put to better use reforming the Republican Party, he hedged. Clinton had to be defeated first.

Obviously, 2008 is not going to lack for anti-Hillary campaigns. There will be more books, more speculation about scandals, more digging into financial records—a treasure hunt for some silver bullet that will finally end her career. This is exactly what the Clinton campaign is ready for, and they're in luck: the swing vote that will elect the next president is far angrier at Republicans and George W. Bush than it is at her right now. It's moved on. It wants to hear some new arguments.

The question for conservatives is whether they want to spend the next year making those arguments or whether they want to spend it spinning Hillary Clinton. ■

*David Weigel is an associate editor of Reason.*

# Rudy Bombs in London

America's mayor poses as the heir to Churchill and Thatcher.

By Alex Massie

LAST MONTH, Rudy Giuliani traveled to London to establish his *bona fides* as an international statesman. A Downing Street chat with Prime Minister Gordon Brown was accompanied by meetings with Tony Blair and Winston Churchill's granddaughter, Celia Sandys, who claimed, implausibly, that Giuliani was "Churchill in a baseball cap."

The *piece de resistance* was Giuliani's appearance to give the inaugural Margaret Thatcher Memorial lecture at a dinner sponsored by the Atlantic Bridge think tank and attended by many of the Iron Lady's most dedicated admirers.

The rationale for the trip was simple: if Giuliani can appear as a world leader, he can create the impression that he is George W. Bush's natural, even inevitable, successor. It was an audacious gambit that a co-operative press corps was only too happy to buy. "His foreign policy pronouncements were certainly Thatcher-esque," gushed the *Washington Post's* Dan Balz. MSNBC's Joe Scarborough was even more enthusiastic, suggesting, "the picture of Rudy Giuliani, America's Mayor, in front of 10 Downing Street, sends a signal to Republican voters that this guy is ready for primetime."

If only this were true. A more rigorous analysis of Giuliani's London trip—one that looks at what the candidate actually said, rather than at how he was perceived—reveals a different reality: one characterized by confusion, intellectual incoherence, and a misreading of history so terrible one is tempted to conclude it must have been deliberate.

The speech was an opportunity for Giuliani to impress a friendly audience

with his grasp of international affairs and his appreciation of the complexity of the challenges facing the next president. It was an opportunity he flubbed. More than one eyebrow was raised when it became clear that Giuliani did not see fit to construct a proper speech, delivering a rambling talk from notes rather than a formal address.

Giuliani criticized what he termed the "failed approach of dealing with terrorism from the point of view of being careful and being cautious and treating it as a crime rather than as an act of war." He seemed not to notice, or be aware, that the lady his address was supposed to honor had taken exactly that approach. Giuliani acknowledged that the United Kingdom has, alas, more experience with terrorism than the United States, "so there's a lot we can learn from you"—which makes it all the stranger that he seemed so determined to ignore any lessons the UK might be able to provide. The scale of the threat posed by Islamist terrorism might be greater than that posed by Irish Republicanism, but it seems quixotic to praise the British experience of dealing with terrorism while refusing to absorb its lessons.

Any successful strategy needs to recognize that dealing with terrorism is much more likely to be a police action than a problem that has a military solution. The British military approach in Northern Ireland was designed to create a stalemate, convincing the IRA that neither side could win a military victory. But that could not have been achieved absent successful intelligence and police action—exactly the approach

Giuliani criticizes when it comes to what he terms "the terrorists' war on us."

To take one example: in 1981, Thatcher insisted that IRA hunger strikers were entirely responsible for their own actions and could expect no sympathy or succor from the British state. If they wished to starve themselves to death in political protest, that was their prerogative. The lady was not for turning. When Bobby Sands became the first of 10 terrorist martyrs that summer, Thatcher remained unmoved. "Mr. Sands was a convicted criminal," she told the House of Commons. "He chose to take his own life. It was a choice that his organization did not allow to many of its victims."

An admirably tough position, you may feel. Yet once the hunger strikes were over, the Thatcher government quietly acceded to some of the IRA inmates' demands. They would not have to wear prison uniforms, for instance. The government conceded that the prisoners were a different category of inmate from run-of-the-mill criminals. Rather than showing weakness, this demonstrated the strength of a flexible, layered approach.

Four years later, Thatcher ignored the furious protests of Ulster's Unionists and signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement, giving the Republic of Ireland a say for the first time in the government of Northern Ireland. Though it would be 13 years before the Good Friday Agreement was reached in Belfast, Thatcher's initiative was the first step on the long road to some sort of peace. That peace, of course, would not have been possible had the Thatcher government not implicitly accepted that Irish nationalists