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Sent: Wednesday, September 5, 2012 11:41 AM
To: H
Subject: FW: Bill Clinton's convention appearance could influence two elections

From: Toiv, Nora F
Sent: Wednesday, September 05, 2012 10:44 AM
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Subject: Bill Clinton's convention appearance could influence two elections

latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-clintons-20120905,0,6788270.story

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Bill Clinton's convention appearance could influence two elections

The former president, now a key supporter who will place President Obama's name in nomination at the Democratic National Convention, could also help his own wife into the White House in 2016.

By Paul West, Washington Bureau

11:01 PM PDT, September 4, 2012

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — When Bill Clinton takes his star turn Wednesday night at the Democratic National Convention, it will be another step on a remarkable climb back to the pinnacle of American politics.

He will be opening a new chapter in a fraught relationship with President Obama — one that was strained four years ago, has since been mended and could well influence the outcome of the November election.

And if everything goes the former president's way, it could conceivably lead to another Clinton winning the White House in 2016. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is not on the premises, in keeping with the diplomatic tradition of steering clear of partisan politics, but her husband's ubiquitousness here would certainly come in handy during any future presidential try by her.

All this is possible because, nearly 12 years after leaving office still marred by impeachment, the former president is arguably the most popular figure on the political scene. His personal approval ratings have never been higher, easily exceeding Obama's. His easy drawl is bombarding the airwaves in battleground state television ads broadcast by the Obama team.

Obama has asked Clinton to place his name in nomination, which makes him the first ex-president to have that honor and provides further proof, if any were needed, of his importance to the reelection effort.

Clinton is already raising money for Obama from wealthy donors and volunteering strategic advice. "He calls me frequently," said a senior Obama campaign official in Chicago. "He is all the way in."

He is also keeping the family business alive while his wife finishes her term as secretary of State. He has been making endorsements in down-ballot races and raising money for Democrats who backed her presidential campaign and could be in a position to help her again.

Secretary Clinton, one of the few figures on the national scene whose aura rivals her husband's, has seen her personal ratings rebound to near-record highs during her tenure as the nation's senior diplomat. She has announced plans to return to private life after the 2012 election, prompting intense speculation about another bid for the Democratic nomination.

"Why wouldn't she run?" House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi has said, echoing the assessment of many others inside and outside Clinton circles. She would turn 69 in 2016, but even those who say she hasn't made up her mind don't think age would be an impediment.

Because she will be on the opposite side of the planet Wednesday — meeting with China's leaders as part of a 10-day, six-nation trip — her husband will not only be promoting Obama and burnishing his own legacy in Charlotte. He'll be her stand-in too, said Ann Lewis, a top Clinton White House aide and senior advisor in Secretary Clinton's 2008 campaign. "He's been practicing the role of spouse for several years," she said. "He's pretty good at it."

The former president once lamented that he never confronted a crisis serious enough to establish his greatness as president. But the worst economy since the Great Depression has cast a rosier view on his eight years in office. Borrowing his popularity, Obama has picked up speech lines from Clinton, who retains his gift for explaining complex concepts in simple terms.

"Nobody has a better grasp and understanding of the issues than this man," Obama said at a New York fundraiser in June, with Clinton at his side.

Clinton's address Wednesday will be his seventh in a row to a Democratic convention. The first, also a nominating speech, was in 1988. That night, he bombed. His biggest applause line: "In closing...." By then, two of the three major TV networks had already cut him off.

Today, at 66, he's a slim slice of his once-beefy self — the product of exercise and a vegan diet after heart surgery. He's busy with travel, philanthropic works, lucrative speaking gigs (more than \$13 million in fees last year, a personal best) and undiminished lust for the political game.

His prominence in Obama's campaign is partly a role reversal for the titans of the Democratic Party. In 2008, lingering tensions between the Clinton and Obama camps led many Democrats to wonder whether the former president would deliver a full-throated endorsement at the convention in Denver. (He did.) Back then, Obama was riding high, and Clinton's most prominent campaign efforts didn't come until the final days before the election.

This year, he was brought on board early, reflecting the hard reality of a reelection fight that will be more difficult than the one that brought Obama to power. Obama aides describe Clinton as a validator: someone who can reel in wavering Democrats (including conservative-leaning Clinton Democrats) and reach out to undecided voters. Obama often drops Clinton's name into his speeches, arguing that his economic plan is just like the one that gave the country prosperity during the Clinton years.

Clinton has the potential to help with "important voting groups that Obama is struggling with," including "whites, men, seniors and political independents," according to a recent analysis of poll data by Lydia Saad of the Gallup organization.

In the Obama campaign ad running in North Carolina and elsewhere, the former president, looking less haggard on camera than he often does in person, casts Obama's economic program as an extension of his own.

"It only works if there is a strong middle class. That's what happened when I was president. We need to keep going with his plan," says Clinton, presidentially attired in dark suit and tie, while Obama is shown, sleeves rolled up, in more casual garb.

For the Obama campaign, the wide respect the Clintons are enjoying can cut both ways. A Romney campaign attack ad accuses Obama of peddling lies, reinforced by a 2008 video clip from the Democratic primaries of Hillary Clinton saying, "Shame on you, Barack Obama."

Another Romney commercial displays a quote from Bill Clinton as though it were an endorsement — after the former president went off-message in a TV interview and praised Mitt Romney's "sterling business career" at a time when Obama was attacking it.

Romney has also run negative ads that accuse Obama of weakening the work requirements in the 1996 welfare overhaul law, a signature Clinton achievement. (Clinton, in a statement issued at the Obama campaign's request, said that Romney's claim was "not true.")

The convention will officially launch an even more active fall campaign schedule for Clinton, an aide said. In the 60 years since presidents have been limited to two terms, no chief executive has taken a more extensive political role after leaving office than Clinton. The other living ex-presidents (Democrat Jimmy Carter and the Republican Bushes) did not even attend their party conventions this year.

But attention will soon start shifting to Clinton's wife. A path-breaking former first lady — the first to win election to the Senate — she has deepened her resume as a globe-trotting secretary of State, with firsthand experience in foreign policy and national security. She has recently shown Americans another side of a woman who has been in the public eye for two decades.

"When she was a senator you were less likely to see Hillary dancing," said Lewis, referring to video clips of her kicking up her heels in South Africa and Colombia.

Secretary Clinton has said she isn't running again for president, though not everyone takes her at her word. She may write another book and perhaps join her husband in charitable activities and as a major draw on the speaking circuit.

After putting "18 million cracks" in the ultimate glass ceiling in her first try, she would be in a strong position to run again. When Bloomberg News asked 284 swing-state delegates who the party's best candidate would be in 2016, she finished first, with 68%.

"She will clearly be the front-runner" to claim the Democratic nomination at the convention in 2016, said Douglas Brinkley, a presidential scholar at Rice University — regardless of the outcome in November.

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