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Bill Clinton's Bravura Convention Speech Latest Step in His and Hillary's Rise

Bill Clinton is older and frailer now, but his stunning speech in support of Obama—and the rapturous reception it received—shows he remains a charismatic and revered figure who, along with Hillary Clinton, rises ever higher in public standing and regard.

by [Gail Sheehy](#) | September 6, 2012 4:45 AM EDT

Many Americans who watched [Bill Clinton's bravura performance](#) tonight may have been surprised to see the formerly soaring president has lost height and shrunk in heft. I am not the only one who has noticed that, in person, the 66-year-old Clinton looks almost frail. But he hasn't lost a whit of his passion or his matchless political charisma. He makes frequent reference these days to the fact that compared with his male forebears, who died at earlier ages, he is "living on borrowed time." He is appealing to both his daughter and his wife to take roles in guaranteeing the future of his foundation, "to make sure it'd still run if I drop dead tomorrow."

But he plans to use every minute this fall, not devoted to perpetuating his global foundation, but feverishly campaigning for President Obama. Why? Three top reasons, according to friends: He believes a Romney-Ryan administration would be disastrous for the country. He loves to be wanted, and is perpetually invested in his redemption. And he truly does not know what [Hillary](#) will want to do, nor does she.

Recalling the buoyant economy and exuberant workplace during the Clinton decade could have added to the disappointment of Democrats in their great hopes for Obama. But Bill Clinton defused that comparison. He peeled off some of the guilt on his own economic record by pointing out that Obama started with a much weaker economy than he did. "Not me, not any of my predecessors, could have repaired all the damage he found, in just four years. But if you give the president a new contract, you will feel it, you will feel it."

The fact is, Clinton occupied the White House when Boomers were already migrating beyond youth. The number of 18- to 34-year-old Americans shrank by nine million during his watch. So he could take credit for the

low-low unemployment. At the same time, the bulk of Boomers were entering their peak tax-paying years and he was able to pile up a stunning budget surplus. Meanwhile, the Silent Generation was moving onto Social Security, but being such a skimpy generation, the government was able to manage generous entitlements for the elderly without raising alarms about breaking the bank.

In his generous speech, Clinton praised Obama for appointing several members of his cabinet even though they supported Hillary in the 2008 primary, "Then, he even appointed Hillary." In fact, Bill Clinton was furious that Obama didn't ask her to be his vice president. But Bill Clinton does not hold grudges. He said he was grateful for the "partnership of respect" that Obama and Hillary have forged. "It proves to rest of the world that democracy does not have to be a blood sport; it can be an honorable enterprise that advances the public interest." He built on that theme to emphasize that what's right with our politics is cooperation. What's wrong with our politics is an opposition party that has tried to make a virtue of obstructionism.

Friends and relations continue to say Hillary is exhausted and needs to retreat and refuel after she leaves the world stage in January. Bill Clinton insists he has no idea what she plans to do after stepping down in January as secretary of state. He makes no secret of his desire to hang out around the Oval office again, so why not hold open the door to a 2016 presidential race for her? It keeps him in the game. It allows him to collect chips for her. And it continues his personal payback to the woman who remained loyal through humiliations few could endure.

Bill Clinton speaks at the DNC.

By this time, all those who disparaged Hillary for standing by her perfidious man and predicted an inevitable divorce should look again at what the couple has achieved by sticking it out. When Hillary rallied support during her husband's impeachment, Bill Clinton reached the peak of job approval—73 percent—and remained almost steady at 60 percent for the balance of his presidency. He has added luster ever since as one of the world's most effective and beloved benefactors.

If Hillary does decide to run for president, these two men, in respectful cooperation, will be her biggest boosters.

Hillary's four-year turn on the global stage as secretary of state has continued her elevation to the status of most-admired woman in the world for the last 17 of 19 years. But she does not have a stunning achievement to show for it, such as Kissinger's opening to China. On the contrary, China now accuses the U.S. of attempting to roil other Southeast Asian countries to curtail China's economic success. The man expected to be the next leader of China stood her up this week after she traveled around the world to meet with him.

Hillary has had almost no impact in moving the Middle East away from creeping confrontation with Iran, or in halting the rejection by the majority of Israelis of a peace process with the Palestinians. Granted, all the big issues in foreign policy are being worked inside the White House, where President Obama directs his own team.

And to be fair, consider how easy it would be for anyone to play diplomat against hear-no-evil, see-no-evil, and evil: Vladimir Putin, Bashar al-Assad and Muammar Gaddafi. Hillary did help mobilize the coalition that took down Gaddafi.

Days after the Arab Spring began to flower in Tunisia in January 2011, Hillary issued a prophetic warning to the region's autocratic leaders. "Those who cling to the status quo may be able to hold back the full impact of their countries' problems for a little while, but not forever," she said. Yet she pronounced the Egyptian dictatorship "stable" only weeks before Tahir Square dissidents brought down the autocrat, appearing to be a status quo-nik herself.

Hillary Clinton was in East Timor and could not watch Bill's speech. But chances are, when she does, she will be pleased to see that her husband humbly bowed before her former political foe. And Obama gave her husband a back-rubbing hug. If she does decide to run for president, these two men, in respectful cooperation, will be her biggest boosters.