Book review

'HRC: State Secrets and the Rebirth of Hillary Clinton': this year's model?

Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes reveal how Clinton used her position to forge 'a new narrative'

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By Glenn Altschuler

Following her failure to be nominated as the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party in 2008, Hillary Clinton's political career appeared to be over. After she was appointed secretary of state by President Barack Obama, her former rival, Mrs. Clinton has re-emerged as a popular and formidable public figure and the odds-on favorite to become her party's presidential nominee in 2016.

In "HRC: State Secrets and the Rebirth of Hillary Clinton," Jonathan Allen, the White House bureau chief for Politico, and Amie Parnes, the White House correspondent for The Hill, reveal how Mrs. Clinton used her position to forge "a new narrative" about herself.

Mrs. Clinton stopped wrestling publicly with the role of her husband, they argue, and presented herself as competent, compassionate, independent and tough. Equally important, she built political networks and acquired new allies within government and the business world that she could enlist in another run at the White House.

"HRC" gives political junkies plenty to chew on. Drawing on some 200 interviews, many of them conducted under conditions of anonymity, Mr. Allen and Ms. Parnes provide sharply etched portraits of Clinton staff members, including Doug Band and Huma Abedin. And the authors identify the members of "the special circle of Clinton hell" reserved for Democrats who endorsed Obama or remained neutral after Bill and Hillary campaigned for them, raised money for them or appointed them to office. (Claire McCaskill, U.S. senator from Missouri, according to the authors "got the seat closest to the fire.")

Following a detailed review of Mrs. Clinton's four years on the world stage, in which she visited 112 countries, Mr. Allen and Ms. Parnes give her high marks as secretary of state.

By employing "smart power" (which uses military force and economic sanctions when necessary but also
offers carrots such as political and financial assistance), skillfully managing the State Department bureaucracy and forging personal relationships with foreign leaders, they claim, Mrs. Clinton helped boost global assessments of American leadership from the disastrous lows of the George W. Bush years to a tie for first place.

They acknowledge, however, that Mrs. Clinton did not negotiate a major treaty, articulate a significant new foreign policy doctrine or solve any big problems during her tenure. And that on issues ranging from the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, to the surge in Afghanistan, to the "pivot" to Asia, she was an adviser in an administration in which Obama was the decider.

Mr. Allen and Ms. Parnes view virtually everything that Hillary Clinton has done since 2008 through the prism of her preparation to climb to the top rung on the political ladder.

Although the 2012 attack on the consulate in Benghazi, Libya, and the killing of Ambassador Chris Stevens could prove to be a political liability, the authors believe that she is well-positioned to run as a former secretary of state, U.S. senator, political pro, and advocate of "smart power," a success in her own right, on a centrist platform to improve the lives of women, children and workers by bringing together government, business and the private sector.

And she is unlikely to repeat the mistakes of 2008, when she expected to be anointed. She downplayed gender as an issue, hired staff based on loyalty rather than competence, and allowed herself to be out-hustled by a technologically savvy rival.

If Hillary Clinton decides to run -- and the authors seem to think she will -- it will not be easy. Soon after she left the State Department, the authors point out, voters began again to view her as a partisan politician. Her approval rating dropped from 64 percent in April 2013 to 58 percent in June.

At the end of October, only 46 percent of the men and women surveyed by The Wall Street Journal and NBC News had a "very positive" or "somewhat positive" impression of her. These days, moreover, populism is in, "the establishment" is out, and experience isn’t a plus to Democrats, Republicans or independents. Mrs. Clinton, who will be 69 years old in 2016, may look like yesterday's candidate.

Of course, as New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie has recently discovered, a lot can happen between now and 2016. And so, we will have to wait a while to see whether the super PAC, Ready for Hillary, which has gotten a "yellow light" to commence day-to-day operations, was aptly named.