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Can Anyone Stop Hillary?

By David Von Drehle

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Hillary Clinton has not decided whether to run for President again. I have this on good authority, despite a recent barrage of reports detailing the many moves that signal a campaign in the making. People close to Clinton and familiar with her thinking insist that she hasn't made a decision. Moreover, "it's not a decision she is going to make anytime soon," says one insider.

But what about the high-ranking personnel from President Obama's political brain trust who are moving into jobs in pro-Clinton groups? The sources patiently repeat themselves. Clinton, they inform me, is very busy writing a memoir of her work as Secretary of State while also replenishing the coffers of her family's charitable foundation to support her work on behalf of women and children. "She's going to continue to go about her life the way she has chosen to," says the insider. "She's not being coy. When she says she hasn't decided, she hasn't decided."

But what about the recent email blast that retired general Wesley Clark, a Clinton diehard, sent to past supporters whose names are embedded in Clinton's database, exhorting them to rally to Hillary's cause? "People wanting her to decide, or people getting anxious about it, are working on their own timeline, and frankly there is only one person whose timeline counts," says an increasingly exasperated insider. "Anyway, she could stand on the White House lawn tomorrow and say she wasn't running, and no one would believe her."

Perhaps it all comes down, in Clintonian fashion, to definitions. It depends on the meaning of the word *decide*. And on the meaning of the word *run*. In Hillary Clinton, the United States of America is now experiencing a rare, if not unprecedented, political phenomenon; she requires a new lexicon. Clinton is so globally famous, so politically wired and so primed for the presidency after two campaigns at her husband's side and one epic race of her own that her life as a private citizen has become virtually indistinguishable from her life as a candidate.

We can believe that she hasn't "decided" to "run" because there is almost nothing that a decision would change

for her. It would be like Jennifer Aniston deciding to get her picture in a supermarket tabloid or Warren Buffett deciding to be quotable. All outward behaviors remain the same. Whether she raises money from wealthy donors for the Clinton Global Initiative or coaxes cash for a presidential campaign, the canapés and grip-and-grins are identical for Clinton. Her stump speeches while accepting awards for past achievements are barely distinguishable from speeches she might give while collecting endorsements in Iowa living rooms. The charming handwritten notes she has been showering lately on far-flung friends serve to nurture political support, whether or not that is the intention, because friendship and politics are inseparable after half a century on the hustings.

Lesser figures--mere governors, Senators, Vice Presidents--face mounting pressure to decide whether to run for President: there are so many pieces to accumulate and put into place. To an astonishing degree, Clinton already has all the pieces: universal name recognition, fervently devoted followers from coast to coast, a robust donor network, legions of experienced counselors, personal mastery of the issues. And she has the cream of two generations of Democratic operatives scrambling to assemble these pieces on her behalf. Her unofficial apparatus already includes a grassroots operation, Ready for Hillary, that has raised more than \$4 million in predominantly small donations; a super PAC called Priorities USA Action, to groom megadonors to fund future air wars; a rapid-response team, Correct the Record, primed to shoot down criticism; a think tank, the Center for American Progress, ready to work up white papers and field-test applause lines; and a women's network, Emily's List, eager to rally the sisterhood to smash the glass ceiling at last.

Clinton has not decided whether to run for President because to do so would only slow her down. Lots of people can be a presidential candidate--ask Patrick Buchanan or Dennis Kucinich or Herman Cain. There is only one Hillary able to dominate discussion of 2016 even as she sails above it. Indecision serves her well by preserving flexibility in her schedule, by shielding her from answering every Internet controversy and by allowing the Republican opposition to take shape and draw fire.

How long can this go on? Longer than you might think. The typical reasons for a candidate to "decide"--credibility with donors and voters, access to media, ability to recruit staff, leverage to secure endorsements--wouldn't move Clinton because she already has those things. There's not a door she can't open nor a camera she can't command. Last year, Clinton told interviewer Barbara Walters that she would make a decision in 2014, but some sources in her camp, who generally speak about 2016 only if granted anonymity, suggest that it was a ballpark figure. By saying 2014 while the calendar said 2013, Clinton was merely indicating that her decision was a long way off. "If you polled 25 smart political people and you asked them on a strategic tactical level if a presidential candidate should be doing anything in 2014, they would tell you no," said one insider. "No one in the history of the Republic has started to run this far out."

There's that word again: run. We know from biographers that Team Clinton actually started running for President sometime in the 1960s, when young Bill fretted about preserving his political viability while avoiding the Vietnam draft. If they ever stopped running, it was only in a semantic sense. Along with her husband, the former First Lady is the embodiment of the so-called permanent campaign, in which years blur into an endless

loop of staged events and solicitations for money and skirmishing for control of the next news cycle. If that's not running, what is?

The Gravity

When Clinton's Press Secretary Nick Merrill recently answered some questions from TIME about his boss's plans by declaring in an email that "there is no candidate, there is no campaign," I found myself flashing on the image of a black hole--the astrophysical phenomenon that manages to be both invisible and superpowerful at the same time. Scientists confirm the presence of a black hole by measuring its effects on nearby stars as it bends their orbits and heats the gases swirling in its galactic vicinity.

The existence of Clinton's 2016 campaign cannot be directly observed through a formal announcement ritual or by linking to documents at the Federal Election Commission. But its massive influence on the stars and gases of Washington is unmistakable. Most of her fellow Democrats are signaling scant interest in taking her on. Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, a hero of the left, has repeatedly said she would not challenge Clinton in the primary. Likewise, Senators Kirsten Gillibrand of New York and Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota--who might otherwise vie to be the first female President--have said they would support her candidacy. "I think if another woman ran against Hillary, she would bring down the wrath of women around the country," said one veteran Democratic strategist, echoing a widespread view inside the party that Clinton earned another shot at history when she surrendered gracefully to Barack Obama in 2008.

Vice President Joe Biden would love to run, though he would be 74 by Inauguration Day and past donors and former staff report that he sees little room for himself in a field with Clinton. Ambitious governors like Martin O'Malley of Maryland, Andrew Cuomo of New York and Deval Patrick of Massachusetts are young enough to wait another cycle or two. To find a Democrat openly courting the race you have to visit the unlikely terrain of Big Sky Country, where former Montana governor Brian Schweitzer has been enjoying a minor burst of publicity as he flirts with a dark-horse challenge.

This dearth of competition--which could change if Clinton were suddenly, somehow, to appear vulnerable--is a testament to her immense pull inside the Democratic electorate, which is disproportionately female. She has cleared the field of major challengers despite the fact that the party's left wing has serious reservations about her centrist record and gilded connections. In addition to Clinton's fierce detractors on the right, progressive Democrats tend to see her as a hawk on foreign affairs and an enabler of Big Business. Despite this antipathy, however, no fresh figure has emerged to pick up the banner of the left. At this point, only a cantankerous Vermonter, Bernie Sanders, has shown much appetite for the race--and Sanders, a self-described socialist Senator, will have to switch parties if he wants to challenge her in the primaries.

In other words, the Stop Hillary movement among Democrats may never get started. As a co-founder of the Progressive Change Campaign Committee, Adam Green might be expected to lead the effort, but Warren's decision to remain on the sidelines has left him resigned to seek concessions from the overwhelming front

runner. Clinton "determines her own fate," Green tells TIME. "If she embraces things like more Wall Street reform and expanding Social Security benefits instead of cutting them, there will be very little space for a primary challenge of the left."

Toby Chaudhuri, a veteran adviser to progressive Democratic groups, concurs. "There isn't a huge space for a challenger, so the left is really focusing on making sure Clinton is where she needs to be. We'll be paying a lot of attention to where she comes down on issues like privacy, Guantánamo, ending the war in Afghanistan, Syria and others."

She's already making some of the necessary gestures. No longtime Clinton watcher is surprised to find that the noncandidate's noncampaign has been keeping a nonschedule immaculately tuned to the heartstrings of various Democratic constituencies. One day she's delivering a paid speech to clients of the Wall Street bankers at Goldman Sachs; another day finds her at Yale decrying income inequality. When Bill de Blasio was sworn in as New York City's most progressive mayor in decades, Hillary and Bill were conspicuous in the front row--just as they were on hand to celebrate super-moneyman Terry McAuliffe when he took the oath as governor of Virginia. Does she contradict herself? Like Walt Whitman, she contains multitudes.

Of course, she won't be nominated without at least a token challenge. Someone will take the bait, professional Democrats predict, if only to establish credibility as a Clinton running mate or to catch the eyes of publishers, speakers' bureaus and cable networks. "There will be a race because there has to be a race and it's only good for the party and the candidate to have a race," says Erik Smith, head of Blue Engine Message and Media, a Democratic consulting group. That said, he notes, "The challengers who would worry the Clinton campaign most are all supporting her and have done so early."

Meanwhile, anticipation of a Clinton candidacy is already red hot inside the Beltway, as both parties avert their eyes from a midterm election pitting the dueling faces of an unpopular Congress--the ballot-box version of shingles vs. flu. Hundreds of operatives from past Clinton campaigns are vying with Obama veterans for positions on what they hope will be the ground floor of something very big. Republicans are launching efforts with names like Stop Hillary 2016 and the Hillary Project, which mix online attacks with spirited fundraising and merchandising appeals in hopes of thwarting Clinton while also cashing in on her galvanizing name. In both parties, Hillary has always been good for business.

The Decision

Clinton's luxury of indecision coincides with a phase of presidential politics treasured by insiders. The election is close enough to be real yet far enough away that key factors--the candidates, the state of the economy, the foreign and domestic news--remain blissfully unknowable. Pundits have free rein to make predictions that cannot be checked. One widespread forecast holds that Clinton is poised for a cakewalk of historic proportions.

The theory goes like this: Between his first victory in 2008 and his narrower win in 2012, Obama suffered a

significant 4% loss in support from white women. Nevertheless, his strength among minority voters was sufficient to give him a relatively easy re-election victory. Demographic trends indicate that the minority share of the electorate will grow even more by 2016 even as the Republican Party remains split over policies, like immigration reform and voting rights, that might attract those voters. As a result, Clinton is positioned to hold on to Obama's minority support while catalyzing the enthusiasm of women. The combination could produce a landslide.

Veteran Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg, an old Clinton hand from way back, is among those who argue that the political landscape is highly favorable to Clinton in 2016. Other party elders are not so sanguine, however. "No matter who we nominate, the Republican theme will be the same: it's time for a change," one senior Democratic strategist told me. "Hillary will be cast as a third term for Obama. They'll try to hang all the trouble with health care on her. And if they manage to put up a serious candidate, we could be in a tough spot."

Call it pessimism or call it realism--for nervous Democrats, 2016 looks to be another hard fight across the narrow ground of a few swing states. Broad demographic trends will matter less, they fear, than a relative few hearts and minds in places like Ohio, Pennsylvania and Michigan. Hopeful Republicans are making the same calculation, which is fueling the ambitions of aspirants with strong working-class appeal, men like New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, Ohio Governor John Kasich and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker. By this analysis, nominee Clinton could find herself--as in 2008--hoisting shots and boasting about her bowling skills in a gritty fight for Rust Belt voters.

This prospect gives her pause, according to sources close to Clinton, and she will be using the coming year to make her own cool-eyed assessment of GOP chances. Like all of her toughest calculations, this will take place inside a tight circle of trusted family and friends: husband Bill, daughter Chelsea, longtime staff members Capricia Marshall, Melanne Vermeer, Cheryl Mills and Maggie Williams. Not all of them are gung-ho for another campaign. According to a report in Politico, which Clinton sources did not dispute, both Mills and Williams have argued against waging a 2016 campaign, while Chelsea has said publicly that she wants her mother to take a break before making any big decisions.

There has never been a would-be presidential candidate with more firsthand knowledge of the grind than Clinton. She knows the toll that campaigns take on candidates and their families; she knows what both victory and defeat feel like; she has had a front-row seat on the burdens and frustrations of the presidency as well as its pomp and power. Putting everything onto the scales, "she would not run just for the sake of running or to be the first woman to win the nomination. She has to believe she can win," a source close to Clinton explained. Some of her supporters might accept second best, "but she is the person who has to run, and she looks at it differently. There has to be a path to victory."

And so, this person added, it remains possible that Clinton could leave the cards of history face down and walk away from the table. Clinton is not like most politicians, said the source, who can't imagine why anyone would say no to a shot at the White House. "It's so cool--you get the plane, get the helicopter. She understands better

than almost anyone alive that this is a very personal decision about not only her own life but also her family's life." No shred of privacy, if the Clintons have any remaining, would go undisturbed by an ever more inflamed political media, and even in victory her presidency might be stymied by a continuation of partisan gridlock.

At the same time, "she has seen what President Clinton has done in the 13 years since he left office--all the contributions to the public good that have not required him to hold high office. She understands that if you care about making something better, there's more than one job in America where you can do that."

The Strategy

But suppose that she does what Clintons always do and runs anyway? She would enter the race with a suitable bang of delirious rallies and million-dollar checks sometime after the off-year balloting in November. Her advisers say she could be expected to run a campaign that is more tech-savvy behind the scenes than her 2008 effort and more openly targeted toward women. The last time around the track, Clinton soft-pedaled the idea that she was waging a history-making crusade, leaving Obama to seize the symbolic high ground. Her concession speech in 2008, in which she credited her supporters with putting "18 million cracks" in the glass ceiling, made it clear she would not make the same mistake twice.

Moreover, her record as Secretary of State marks her as a particularly macho brand of Democrat. Though former Defense Secretary Robert Gates has caused a stir by revealing in his memoir that Clinton once acknowledged that her opposition to the 2007 troop surge in Iraq was political, a deeper read of Gates' book--along with Clinton's public record and interviews with current and former Administration officials--reveals a robust proponent of military intervention.

As head of the State Department, Clinton sided with the generals in favor of a large Afghanistan troop surge. She pressed to arm the Syrian rebels and later endorsed air strikes against the Assad regime. A new report from the Senate Intelligence Committee faults her department over security lapses leading up to the 2012 terrorist attack on Americans in Benghazi. But in earlier decisions, Clinton's team at State enabled Obama's lethal drone campaign. On at least three crucial issues--the surge in Afghanistan, bombing Libya and the raid to kill al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden--Clinton favored more-aggressive action than Gates himself.

"She is a hawk, but she's a smart hawk," says James Jeffrey, a former ambassador under Clinton and a Deputy National Security Adviser in George W. Bush's White House. Her spokesman, Merrill, prefers the word *pragmatic* but doesn't dispute the larger characterization of Clinton's attitude toward military force: "Her approach was always that diplomacy, development and defense were only effective if used together."

Blurring the bright lines of an increasingly polarized public has always been the Clinton family business. Give them the choice of A or B and they'll gravitate to C. Her husband was the Bible-quoting libertine who jogged to McDonald's (before heart disease made him a virtual vegan). He preferred "triangulation" to "false choices"--a trait shared by his wife, the feminist drinking buddy of a spear-rattling John McCain.

Can it play again after all these years? Can a candidate who helped define the 1990s captivate a change-hungry electorate hurtling toward the 2020s? Can the sprawling, inbred, rivalrous soap opera of so many previous Clinton campaigns be tamed to compete in the sleek and disciplined post-Obama era? Can a divided Democratic Party, with its beleaguered incumbent President, paper over its differences before the divided Republican Party, with its Tea Party dissidents, papers over its own? These are the sorts of questions that hover over a candidate whose path to the White House seems as clear as any in modern memory. There hasn't been a path so bright since Clinton surveyed her future in 2005, before Obama appeared over the horizon.

And there will be answers--eventually--though not at a pace to satisfy the ravenous appetite of Washington. Hillary Clinton is master of her own calendar. For the time being, she steers the stars and heats the gases; her unseen candidacy dominates the political galaxy. The timing and nature of the next steps are up to her to decide.

--With reporting by Michael Crowley, Jay Newton-Small and Zeke Miller/Washington

Corrections Appended: The original version of this article's first mention of Clinton's press secretary Nick Merrill failed to include his last name. The article also incorrectly stated that Clinton delivered her concession speech at the 2008 Democratic Convention.



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