

The 11 moments that define Hillary Clinton

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Hillary Clinton, the former first lady, senator, and secretary of state, is on a quest to finish one of the greatest comebacks in American political history by becoming the first woman elected president

Hillary 101

Hillary Clinton is iconic to both her fans and her detractors. At the end of 2014, **for the 13th consecutive year**, she was named the woman that Americans most admire in the world. And yet politicians, authors and talk show hosts, **including some liberals**, have made careers out of demonizing her.

Now, for the second time, she is seeking the presidency, and one of the highly polarized views of her will win out in 2016.

To understand why one person simultaneously inspires so much enthusiasm and so much enmity from the American public — and to understand what has propelled her from mountain to valley and back again — you have to carefully examine the mix of ambition, determination, policy acumen, and political maneuvering that drove a conservative Midwestern girl to become the Democratic Party's best hope for winning the presidency in 2016.

And you have to understand that her political life has been lived in an era of increasing polarization, decreasing trust in public figures and institutions, and perpetual electoral politics.

Clinton's long tenure in the eye of the national political storm — a quarter of a century by Election Day 2016 — makes her unique among this cycle's crop of presidential aspirants. By contrast, Scott Walker, Marco Rubio, Rand Paul, and Ted Cruz are new on the landscape. Democratic rival

Bernie Sanders was elected to Congress two years before Clinton came to Washington, but his profile has been much lower. Even Jeb Bush, whose father and brother were president, has never before been a national political player in the way Clinton has been as first lady, New York senator, secretary of state, and two-time presidential candidate.

All that time in the spotlight has brought concomitant scrutiny, and the file on Clinton is thick. Its pages are filled with gritty battles, triumphant victories, bruising defeats and humiliations, scandals and pseudo-scandals, political resurrections, policy evolutions, and too many contradictions to count.

It's almost too much for anyone to process at once. After all, Clinton herself already has written *two* full-length memoirs. One instructive way of trying to grasp who Clinton is today, and where she came from, is to look at the defining moments of her public life, from overachieving student to political spouse to high-ranking government official.

Before there was Hillary Clinton, there was Hillary Rodham

Hillary Clinton rose to national prominence before she was Hillary Clinton — and when she was still a college activist named Hillary Rodham, who delivered an eloquent, passionate address at the 1969 Wellesley commencement.

Clinton's speech was compelling enough to catch the eye of editors at Life magazine, who subsequently published part of the address. That meant she was already well-known by the time she arrived at Yale Law School the following year.

"Hillary Rodham was a star," Michael Medved, a law school classmate of Clinton's, wrote during the 1992 presidential campaign. "Everyone knew about her speech and talked in reverential tones about the extraordinary wisdom and eloquence that her address had displayed."

Hillary's commencement address was an extemporaneous response to Republican Senator Edward Brooke, who spoke immediately before her. He criticized the activism of the youthful generation graduating that day, calling for a return to civility.

Brooke implied that their struggle for social change was dangerous, saying that although some of the "waves of protests passing over the United States" were legitimate, others were "coercive" and created "social tension" and "counter-productive disruption." Such protests, he said, alienated potential allies and destroyed "their empathy for the professed goals of the protesters."

Hillary's fiery response to Brooke made her a star. She stood, announced that she was speaking as the voice of her entire class, and rejected Brooke's assertion that they should be seeking empathy and allies through civility and quiet activism:

“Part of the problem with empathy with professed goals is that empathy doesn't do us anything. We've had lots of empathy; we've had lots of sympathy, but we feel that for too long our leaders have used politics as the art of making what appears to be impossible, possible. What does it mean to hear that 13.3 percent of the people in this country are below the poverty line? That's a percentage. We're not interested in social reconstruction; it's human reconstruction. How can we talk about percentages and trends? The complexities are not lost in our analyses, but perhaps they're just put into what we consider a more human and eventually a more progressive perspective.”

Her generation, she said, was "searching for more immediate, ecstatic, and penetrating modes of living." That meant questioning the way power and responsibility were allocated in society, and in institutions like colleges, churches, and the government.

It also meant forging a path forward after losing faith in the generation that came before:

“This is one word that when I asked the class at our rehearsal what it was they wanted me to say for them, everyone came up to me and said "Talk about trust, talk about the lack of trust both for us and the way we feel about others. Talk about the trust bust." What can you say about it? What can you say about a feeling that

permeates a generation and that perhaps is not even understood by those who are distrusted? All they can do is keep trying again and again and again.”

Clinton's response did more than win her fame: it established themes that would recur again and again throughout her political career. The speech was more idealistic than specific, but Hillary clearly came across as someone who combined progressive ideals with sharp pragmatism about what might be necessary to achieve them. Winning empathy for progressive causes, she said, was not enough. Real change was required — even if it came at the cost of political expediency or social cohesion.

Playing politics as a Southern first lady

Hillary Rodham exited Yale Law School as a rising star, and soon won a prestigious job working on the House of Representatives' impeachment inquiry against President Nixon. Then, in 1974, she gave all that up, moved to an unfamiliar state, and placed her own career ambitions behind those of the man she was considering marrying.

Her decision put her on a two-and-half-decade trajectory as, primarily, a supporting character in Bill Clinton's political life. "Are you out of your mind?" her friend Sara Ehrman asked, according to **Hillary's memoirs**. "Why on Earth would you throw away your future?"

Clinton wrote that she made the move for "love." But even back in 1974, she was convinced there were big things ahead in her 27-year-old boyfriend's future. "Bill Clinton is going to be president of the United States someday," she told Tom Bell, a co-worker at the time, **according to David Maraniss**. "You don't know him — I do. He is going to be president," she told another then-coworker, Bernie Nussbaum, **according to Carl Bernstein**.

Once settled in Arkansas, Rodham began to build her own career, taking a job at the prestigious Rose Law Firm. Yet from the start, she was uninterested in the traditional role of political spouse. Rather than be silent

on issues of substance and strategy, she took on key roles in Bill's campaigns from the very beginning.

One challenge she faced was adapting to the unfamiliar — and deeply conservative — culture of her new state. Rodham had always intended to keep her last name when she married — and after her 1975 wedding she did just that. But when Bill failed to win reelection as governor in 1980, Rodham's friends urged her to consider taking his name after all.

"Ann Henry told me some people were upset when they received invitations to events at the Governor's Mansion from 'Governor Bill Clinton and Hillary Rodham,'" Hillary wrote in her memoirs. "Chelsea's birth announcement, also featuring our two names, was apparently a hot subject of conversation around the state." After several of these appeals, she wrote, "I decided it was more important for Bill to be Governor again than for me to keep my maiden name."

The newly dubbed Hillary Rodham Clinton returned with her husband to the governor's mansion in 1983. She remained a key adviser throughout, and led the administration's efforts to propose major reforms to the state's education system, and to improve health care in rural areas.

Yet she couldn't yet escape Bill's shadow. When he briefly leaned against running for reelection as governor in 1990, Hillary considered a bid to succeed him. But according to Carl Bernstein's book ***A Woman in Charge***, pollster Dick Morris found that "she had not developed her image, and that she was seen as Mrs. Clinton. She was not seen as Hillary."

And once Bill ran for president in 1991, these challenges only became more fraught. A *Nightline* **report** dubbed Hillary "the new political wife," because she had "a career" and "opinions." Bill joked that Hillary had such political expertise that the campaign slogan "might well be, 'Buy one, get one free.'" Eventually, though, he was forced to clarify that "she wouldn't be a co-president. We have our differences of opinion and, in the end, I have to decide."

When Gov. Jerry Brown (D-CA) said Bill was "funneling money through his wife's law firm for state business," Hillary's response was memorable —

and controversial. "You know, I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas," she said. "But what I decided to do was to fulfill my profession, which I entered before my husband was in public life." Though she also said women should be able to choose their own paths, her remarks came under fire as being condescending to stay-at-home mothers.

"While Bill talked about social change, I embodied it," Hillary wrote in *Living History*. "I had my own opinions, interests and profession. For better or worse, I was outspoken. I represented a fundamental change in the way women functioned in our society."

The fight for Hillarycare

Before there was Obamacare, there was Hillarycare. And Hillarycare was a disaster — or so went the conventional wisdom. But the experience of Obamacare has left many Democrats with a bit more appreciation for what Hillary Clinton tried to do in 1994 — and how she tried to do it.

In January 1993, President Bill Clinton created the Presidential Task Force on National Health Reform and put his wife, Hillary, in charge of it. This was a controversial decision at the time: Hillary Clinton wasn't elected, nor had she been appointed to a key position and confirmed by the Senate, but she would craft the Clinton administration's most significant piece of domestic legislation. It was a sharp signal that Hillary Clinton intended to be a different kind of first lady.

Clinton's task force was both secretive and sprawling, eventually encompassing 30 working groups and more than 500 participants. But more damaging than that, many in Congress felt the White House was usurping their role in crafting legislation. In retrospect, some who served on the task force agree that they overstepped.

"I was the biggest mistake of the Clinton health-care bill," Sara Rosenbaum, a George Washington University professor, **has said** of the work she did drafting the legislation. "It was a terrible error to have the

president doing what Congress was supposed to do. It was a misuse of the relationship between the legislative branch and the executive branch."

The bill never even made it to a vote in Congress. After a withering campaign against it by both Republicans and the health industry, it collapsed under its own weight — and Hillary Clinton took much of the blame. After the defeat, Democrats took a beating in the midterm elections, losing the House for the first time in more than 40 years, and Hillary backed off of her policy-heavy role in the White House.

And yet, in retrospect, Hillary's efforts look a bit better. For one thing, Democrats had only 56 seats in the Senate — a far cry from the 60 the Obama administration needed to pass their health-care bill. As much as the bill's failure is blamed on its complexity, the more persuasive story is that the Clinton administration simply never had the votes to pass it.

Moreover, one of the main criticisms that congressional Democrats make of the Obama White House's health-care process was that, well, it wasn't enough like Hillary's process. They believe too much was left up to Congress, and the administration didn't do enough to craft a careful, sensible piece of legislation.

"The [Obama] administration was sitting back, encouraging what became five different bills, three in the House and two in the Senate," ex-Senator Jim Webb, who is considering a 2016 run for president, told **Vox**. "It was very confusing, and it scared the American people."

Moreover, many consider the Obamacare process unforgivably sloppy — both in how the legislation was drafted and in how it was implemented. There's a sentence in the Affordable Care Act that is so poorly worded, for instance, that it may lead to the Supreme Court gutting subsidies in more than 30 states. And during the dark days of the HealthCare.gov debacle, many wished that the bill was being implemented by someone with Hillary Clinton's love of diving deep into the smallest details.

In many ways, the process that led to Obamacare was a response to the failures of Hillarycare. But the failures of Obamacare have, in retrospect,

left many Democrats feeling more forgiving of the process behind Hillarycare.

"Women's rights are human rights"

Bill Clinton's White House didn't want Hillary Clinton to attend the Fourth World Conference on Women, held by the United Nations in Beijing in 1995. The Clinton administration was struggling to normalize relations with China, which had been all but severed since the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. They feared that the first lady would lecture China's hyper-sensitive government officials on their treatment of women, upsetting the slow effort to rebuild US-China ties.

But Hillary Clinton did go to Beijing, and she gave a speech that shocked both her Chinese hosts and her husband's administration in its searing indictment of how China and other governments around the world treat women.

The speech became one of the most important moments in post-1989 US-China relations, helping set the standard that even as the US did business with China, it would continue to confront its human rights abuses frankly and openly.

For Clinton, it reframed her global image — from first lady to political force in her own right. The themes she tackled in the speech would shape her time at the State Department and now serve as an underpinning to her presidential bid.

Within China, the speech remains a touchstone of women's struggle for equality. The day before Clinton announced her candidacy for president, for example, a prominent scholar of Chinese gender issues named Wang Zheng cited the 1995 conference as helping to create a "generation of feminists who grew up during a historical time when feminist discourse had been disseminated and making tremendous impact in China."

The most famous line of the speech was "If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, let it be that human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights once and for all." But the

moment that made the speech so significant was her direct confrontation of China's abuses:

“I believe that now, on the eve of a new millennium, it is time to break the silence. It is time for us to say here in Beijing, and for the world to hear, that it is no longer acceptable to discuss women’s rights as separate from human rights. These abuses have continued because, for too long, the history of women has been a history of silence.”

She went on after this line to describe in painful detail many of China's worst abuses, and to describe each as "a violation of human rights." The speech also expressed Clinton's assertive approach to the world, its problems, and the role of American power in addressing them. Her foreign policy is often simplified or misunderstood as hawkishness for the sake of hawkishness. In fact, as the 1995 speech shows, Clinton differs from hawks in her more cosmopolitan emphasis on using power to promote human rights for the sake of human rights, rather than as a means to narrowly further the national interest. As she later said of her trip to Beijing as first lady, "It became more and more important to me that we really lay down a declaration of American values when it comes to women."

Whitewater: the persistent scandal

To understand why the Clintons have reputations on the right as secretive schemers, and on the left as victims of vindictive witch hunts, you have to know a thing or two about the Whitewater scandal.

"In the minds of Clinton accusers, Whitewater became shorthand for cronyism, cover-up, and excess of the financial, political, and even sexual varieties," John Harris writes in *The Survivor: Bill Clinton in the White House*. "To Clinton defenders, Whitewater became a synonym for false accusations, partisan vendettas, and prosecutorial abuse."

The story started in 1978, when Bill served as Arkansas's attorney general (and would be elected governor, at age 32, that November). Bill and Hillary began scouting opportunities for investment income to supplement his

government salary and her earnings as an attorney at the Rose Law Firm. "I worried that because politics is an inherently unstable profession, we needed to build up a nest egg," Hillary wrote in her 2003 memoir, *Living History*. "I had never given much thought to savings or investments until I realized that if our growing family were going to have any financial cushion, it would be mostly my responsibility."

Some of these efforts were successful. Guided by her friend Jim Blair, an experienced commodities trader, Hillary began investing in cattle futures, and saw **her initial \$1,000 investment grow to nearly \$100,000** in less than a year. That gain came in for considerable scrutiny during Bill's presidency; **one analysis** estimated that even under the most generous of assumptions, the odds of a return that large during the period in question are about one in 31 trillion. Hillary was also **allowed to buy 10 cattle contracts** (normally worth \$12,000) with only \$1,000 in her trading account, increasing suspicions that she had received favorable treatment because Bill held political office. A later White House investigation into the trades found **no evidence Hillary committed any trading violations**.

But some investments didn't go well — and that's what the Whitewater scandal is about. Also in 1978, Bill and Hillary formed the **Whitewater Development Corporation** with James and Susan McDougal, intending to buy up **230 acres of riverfront land** and sell it as lots for vacation homes. Jim McDougal, a real estate entrepreneur, was an old friend of Bill's and cut the Clintons into a deal where they wouldn't pay any upfront investment — but could still stand to profit from the home sales. The land was **purchased for \$203,000**, and paid for by a \$180,000 loan on which the Clintons and McDougals were jointly liable, plus a second loan McDougal took out for the down payment.

The Whitewater project was a failure. The location was bad; the land **wasn't even accessible after the frequent heavy storms that caused the river to flood**. And amidst the stagflation of the late '70s and early '80s, interest rates were surging, rendering vacation homes unaffordable for many families.

Investing in a bad land deal isn't a crime. What Jim McDougal did after the initial deal, however, was.

He bought a small savings and loan association, renamed it **Madison Guaranty**, and defrauded both it and the small business investment firm Capital Management Services to the tune of \$3 million; the bank's failure wound up costing the federal government around **\$73 million**. How this relates to the Whitewater investment — if at all — is disputed to this day, and the details are hazy and complicated. But the Clintons' critics alleged they were involved in Madison's wrongdoing.

David Hale, Capital Management Services' former president, claimed that the Clintons were in on the conspiracy. Hale alleged that Clinton pressured him to issue a fraudulent \$300,000 loan to Susan McDougal, money that Hale claimed had been **used in part to shore up Whitewater**. **Other allegations swirled** about the Clintons and Madison, including claims that McDougal used Madison funds to pay off Bill's gubernatorial campaign debts in 1985, and that Bill appointed a friendly state bank regulator to protect McDougal. McDougal himself, after the fraud conviction, turned against the Clintons, alleging that they were in on his schemes.

Investigations into Whitewater uncovered real wrongdoing. Fifteen people, in total, were convicted of various charges. The McDougals were convicted of fraud, as was Jim Guy Tucker, Clinton's successor as governor of Arkansas. Webster Hubbell, a law partner of Hillary's who served in the Clinton Justice Department, **pleaded guilty to fraud charges**. But ultimately, none of the many investigations into Whitewater — including, most famously, one by independent counsel Kenneth Starr — found that the Clintons did anything criminal. The conclusion was that it's likelier they were victims of Jim McDougal's malfeasance than that they were co-conspirators.

To the Clintons' defenders, Whitewater is shorthand for the many scandals ginned up by the president's political opponents — others include **Filegate**, **Travelgate**, and the suicide of White House deputy counsel and peripheral Whitewater figure Vince Foster (which conspiracy

theorists pegged as a murder) — in a desperate attempt to bring down Clinton. This culminated in Starr, who was originally appointed to investigate Whitewater, seeking Clinton's impeachment on completely unrelated charges. To the couple's detractors, by contrast, Whitewater is proof that the Clintons are products of a corrupt Arkansas political culture, and are willing to do anything — including break the law — to help themselves and their friends.

Surviving Monica Lewinsky

"On Wednesday morning, January 21 [1998], Bill woke me up early," Hillary recalls in *Living History*. "He sat on the edge of the bed and said, 'There's something in today's papers you should know about.'"

There were news reports, Bill explained, that he'd had an affair with a former White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. This was hardly an unprecedented accusation. Accusations of an affair with model and actress Gennifer Flowers nearly destroyed his 1992 presidential run. In early 1998, he was already embroiled in a sexual harassment lawsuit brought by Paula Jones, who alleged that then-Gov. Clinton exposed himself to her in 1991. But Bill assured Hillary — just as he assured most everyone around him — that his relationship with Lewinsky was innocent. He helped the intern with job-hunting, nothing more. "This was completely in character for Bill," Hillary writes. "He said that she had misinterpreted his attention, which was something I had seen happen dozens of times before."

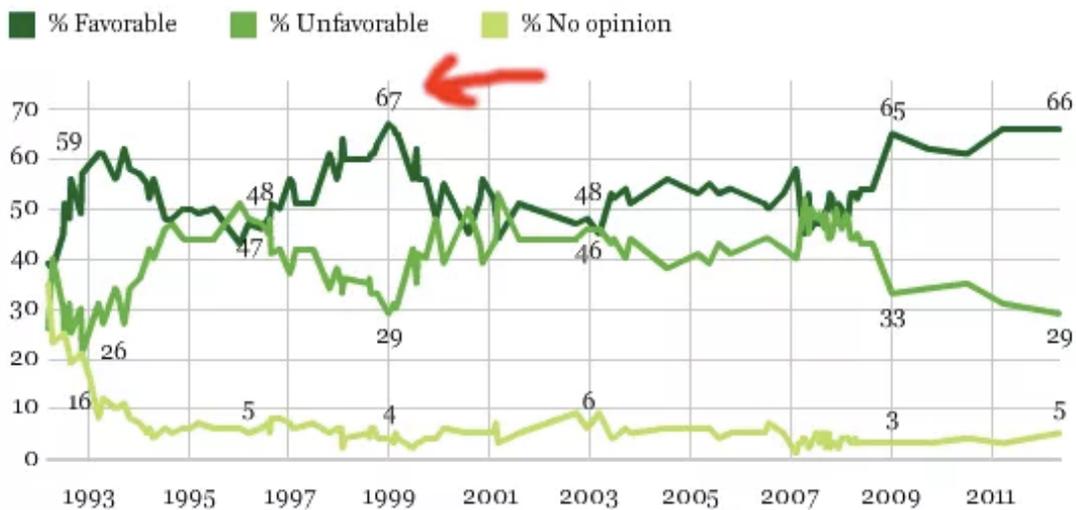
By that summer, the story had unraveled. Lewinsky produced a dress with the president's semen on it to Whitewater independent counsel Kenneth Starr, whose purview had expanded to include the affair. On August 17, Bill admitted in grand jury testimony, and on national television, to a relationship with Lewinsky. And because that contradicted his testimony about Lewinsky during the Jones lawsuit, it set the stage for his impeachment on perjury charges.

Hillary has said Bill only admitted the affair to her mere days before admitting it to the country. "I could hardly breathe," she writes. "Gulping for

air, I started crying and yelling at him, 'What do you mean? What are you saying? Why did you lie to me?' ... I didn't know whether our marriage could — or should — survive such a stinging betrayal."

The marriage did ultimately survive — and that earned Hillary harsh criticism from the press, including accusations that refusing to divorce Bill was somehow a betrayal of feminism. In April 1999, **Maureen Dowd** wrote in her New York Times column that Hillary "was unmasked as a counterfeit feminist after she let her man step all over her." But the public at large empathized, and her approval ratings soared.

Favorability Ratings of Hillary Clinton



GALLUP

Even more crucially, the scandal and Bill's impeachment helped spark Hillary's interest in pursuing political office of her own. "Hillary had never previously felt the need to assert her own 'legitimacy,' separate from the single voice of her and Bill's journey," Bernstein writes in *A Woman in Charge*. "Now, with Bill having squandered so much of what was to have been their presidency, she felt differently." As the Clintons' longtime political adviser **Harold Ickes** put it, "This is a race for redemption," to "permit her supporters to say there was a lot more here than anybody thought."

The centrist, "workhorse" senator from New York

US Senate lore often divides the body's members into "**showhorses,**" **who mug for the cameras on C-SPAN,** and "**workhorses,**" who get things done in tedious committee negotiations.

When Hillary Clinton entered the Senate with zero legislative experience but more name recognition than her other 99 colleagues behind her, she was determined to play the workhorse role. And even though it seemed like a poor match for the objective situation, she did it extremely well — plowing away on committee assignments and upstate New York economic development teams, earning praise from senior members on both sides of the aisle and the grudging respect of a press corps she was boring to tears.

Part of the nature of being a freshman workhorse is that she didn't sponsor any history-making bills and didn't play a lead role in any headline-grabbing legislative fights. A complete history of the United States could be written with no reference to any of Senator Clinton's workmanlike legislative career. But at the same time, no history of *Clinton herself* should neglect the period that most clearly demonstrates that despite her difficulties courting positive media attention and her distaste for soaring oratory, she's a formidable politician who excels at the aspects of the job that don't involve giving speeches.

In that light, it's worth recalling how tempting the showhorse role must have been.

The Democratic Senate classes of 1998 and 2000 didn't feature any charismatic upstarts with potential national profiles. There was no Barack Obama or Elizabeth Warren or even Al Franken or Cory Booker in this group. Meanwhile, the 2000 election, in which Al Gore won more votes than George W. Bush, left a huge swath of the country eager for a spokesperson who would stand up for the will of the majority.

Gore himself wouldn't do it, out of a sense of obligation to help the country heal. The most objectively powerful Democrat in the country, Senate

Leader Tom Daschle, was an unassuming guy who always had to keep one eye on the dicey domestic politics of his South Dakota seat.

If Clinton had wanted to serve as the champion for embittered liberals, she could *easily* have played that role. Her stint as senator from New York, like Bobby Kennedy's before her, was pretty clearly intended as a stepping stone to the White House. Following in Kennedy's footsteps as a national ideological spokesperson would have been a logical approach.

But she did the opposite. She **cultivated Robert Byrd as a mentor**. She impressed senior members with her humility. She co-sponsored bills on minor subjects with Republicans. She worked tirelessly on penny-ante economic development schemes for upstate New York. When senators stage joint press conferences, it's typical to see them shuffling and sidling to try to secure better positioning in the shot. As Josh Green **wrote for the Atlantic**, Clinton was "the only one who routinely steps backward and defers to her colleagues."

Indeed, Clinton played the role of earnest legislator so well that in 2006 there was chatter that maybe she would **run for Senate majority leader rather than president**.

In the end, of course, her aspirations were bigger than that. But her Senate stint was telling. Her road to the White House ran through the Senate. That meant that as long as she was a senator, she was going to be a *good* senator by Senate standards. And she was. Clinton has developed, at times, a reputation for being a "bad" candidate or "bad" at politics, by which people normally mean she's not as good at informal public riffing as her husband or as proficient at big set-piece speeches as Obama. But there's a lot more to politics than public speaking.

And Clinton excels at all those more private aspects. She lined up support to be elected senator in a state she'd never lived in. She wooed and impressed senior US senators. She's cleared the 2016 field of all rivals.

This is not the kind of stuff that is easy or dramatic for the media to witness and relay, but it's a crucial element of real-world politics.

"I got it wrong"; Hillary and the Iraq mistake

"I thought I had acted in good faith and made the best decision I could with the information I had," Clinton writes in her post-State Department memoir, *Hard Choices*, "and I wasn't alone in getting it wrong. But I still got it wrong. Plain and simple."

That's Clinton on her 2002 Iraq vote. It was a sincere vote that reflected Clinton's very real status as someone who is on the more hawkish end of the Democratic Party spectrum. But like any vote, it was also a bit of a political calculation. And in 2002, it was a no-brainer. With George W. Bush's approval rating sky-high and veteran Democrats burned by their opposition to the 1991 Persian Gulf War, mainstream Democrats backed the invasion.

Not all Democrats, by any means, but most of them. Democratic House Leader Dick Gephardt was for it. So was Democratic Senate Leader Tom Daschle. And presidential aspirants John Kerry and John Edwards. To vote against the resolution was to take a factional stand as part of the Democratic Party's dissident left wing. Not a nonexistent left wing by any means — Gephardt's deputy, Nancy Pelosi, was there, and so were liberal stalwarts like Ted Kennedy — but definitely a dissident one. To cast that vote would have gone against all of Clinton's instincts, and her fame combined with Gephardt and Daschle's support would have instantly cast her as a major leader of an anti-war movement — a step she wasn't even slightly interested in taking.

But her timing was terrible. Republican wins in 2002 and 2004 left the remaining caucus significantly more liberal.

At the same time, the deteriorating situation on the ground made electability and expediency arguments on behalf of hawkish Democrats look weak. As the war became increasingly unpopular, the base increasingly demanded leaders who shared their views and could run hard against Bush's quagmire. Most previously pro-war Democrats more or less quietly shuffled away from their former votes in order to align with the new order. But for an aspiring president, it was a vicious trap. Say she'd made a

mistake, and Clinton would call her own judgment and leadership abilities into question. Refuse to say so, and she'd infuriate liberal primary voters. Clinton never quite figured out how to thread the needle. And as her campaign against Barack Obama wore on, her team delivered mixed messages. Sometimes they'd attack Obama as excessively dovish, while at other times they plied journalists with the idea that it was naive to think Clinton and Obama's differing stances on the 2002 vote reflected anything other than the differences in the offices they held that autumn.

To most voters, Iraq has lost its salience, and Clinton's record on the issue is now under the bridge. It's also key to understanding her somewhat odd alienation from the progressive media ecology of the 21st century. Rachel Maddow, Chris Hayes, ThinkProgress, and what we used to call "the netroots" all cut their teeth in the mid-aughts war on Democratic timidity. Thus, rather than serving as a counter to the "vast right-wing conspiracy" that tormented the Clintons in the late 1990s, the resurgent left came to be another source of anti-Clinton attacks. Clinton values loyalty and isn't afraid to hold a grudge, which has left her with anomalously poor relationships with people and institutions that ought to be her biggest allies.

How the 2008 loss turned Hillary into a hipster

There was an easy way in 2008 to predict whether a Democratic voter would support Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama: find out his or her age. Voters older than 65 favored Clinton by a wide margin, while those under 30 leaned heavily toward the hotshot senator from Illinois. The New York Times summarized the exit poll data in April 2008:

57 percent of voters 65 and older have supported Mrs. Clinton and 36 percent have supported Mr. Obama. Most of the Clinton voters say they want a candidate with experience.

Of voters age 30 and younger, 59 percent have supported Mr. Obama and 38 percent have supported Mrs. Clinton. Most of Mr. Obama's supporters say they want change.

On Super Tuesday in February 2008, for example, Obama captured 57 percent of the 18- to 29-year-old vote, while Clinton got 38 percent. Back then, Obama arrived as the candidate of hope and change — the hip, young senator who easily attracted the youth vote.

Clinton, meanwhile, struggled to appeal to young voters, in ways that would ultimately doom her candidacy. There was a sentiment among young voters at the time that Clinton just wasn't cool. I wrote about [this in 2008 in one of my first articles for Newsweek](#).

"While the Obamaniacs display their support proudly on messenger-bag pins and Facebook statuses, I have found Hillary supporters to be a quieter bunch, not looking to attract attention," I wrote. "As one of my friends from college describes it, being a Hillary supporter is 'like being one of the geeky kids standing in the corner, trying to avoid eye contact' so she does not have to be asked, again, why she just doesn't get it."

That article now feels like a time capsule: it doesn't describe the Hillary that we know today, the one who is the [subject of the infamous "Texts From Hillary" meme](#) and who [takes selfies](#) at the White House with Meryl Streep.

The former secretary of state is viewed as a confident, successful woman — and that turns up in the poll numbers. A recent Fusion poll found that 58 percent of Democrats between 18 and 24 say they would support Clinton in a primary. Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) trail far behind, with 13 and 9 percent support, respectively.

How did Clinton become cool? It appears, in part, to be a conscious decision on the part of her and her staff about framing. 2008 Clinton was hesitant to run as a "woman" but very much identified with female-coded issues. The 2016 Clinton is proud to be a woman trailblazer who worked on national security issues — and generally looked badass while doing so. Jonathan Darman, a veteran Clinton reporter from 2008, wrote a bit about this change in looking at how her team quickly embraced the Texts From Hillary Tumblr, the meme that is the epitome of Clinton's 2016 lady-boss stance:

The speed with which she's embraced it suggests something has really changed in her. If this were 2008, the conversation around her would have been: 1) What is Tumblr? 2) What is Facebook? and 3) How do we get them to take down the Tumblr and/or how do we destroy Facebook?"

The Clinton candidate of 2016 didn't seek to destroy a new internet meme — she embraced it. It's those types of decisions that have recast Clinton as a candidate with a sheen of cool, a markedly far place from how she was seen in 2008.

Hillary and Barack: a marriage of convenience

At the end of the 2008 Democratic primary, Hillary Clinton seemed like the party's past. She had been soundly beaten by Barack Obama in a bitter, divisive campaign that painted her and her husband as vestiges of the old politics — the politics Obama's youthful, diverse coalition that was taking over the Democratic Party wanted to escape.

Eight years later, Clinton is entering the 2016 Democratic primary in the most dominant position of any candidate of either major party in modern history. She leads the Democratic Party's sitting vice president by more than 40 points in most polls. Much of the Obama administration's top talent has left, or is leaving, to build her campaign. She has gone from the party's past to its future.

The key move for Clinton was one few expected: after private debates and public rumination, she agreed to become Obama's secretary of state, sealing a marriage of convenience between the two most powerful forces in the party.

The effect on her polling was immediate. In January 2009, 93 percent of Democrats approved of her, according to Gallup — up from 80 percent just five months earlier. Putting Obama's interests above her own, at least in the short term, earned her respect among the party faithful.

Clinton had won back most Democrats by losing — and losing gracefully. But capturing the political class would be a much tougher trick. Obama's

top advisers wanted nothing to do with her. Some of them worried that bringing her aboard would dilute his change message right out of the box. Others, including David Plouffe and Robert Gibbs, simply detested her. Complicating matters, Obama had promised to let her fill the political jobs at the State Department with her own people, a vow that made for contentious dealings between their camps through the presidential transition and the first several months of Obama's new administration. There were early news stories about how Obama's White House team was clipping Clinton's wings by running American foreign policy out of the West Wing. And Clinton's alliance with then–Defense Secretary Bob Gates in pressing for more troops in Afghanistan was unsettling to a team of Obama aides who had portrayed Clinton as too hawkish and had come into office promising to end two wars.

But Clinton showed herself to be a loyal foot soldier to Obama, eventually gaining the respect and the ear of the president and his top aides. One of his advisers pointed to Clinton's behind-the-scenes work on the Affordable Care Act — she consulted with Obama aides on strategy, pushed other Cabinet members to put their own priorities on the back burner, and lobbied Democrats in Congress to vote for the bill — as an early sign that she was on board. Both sides say the Copenhagen climate summit in December 2009 was a watershed moment for the relationship. Obama and Clinton crashed a private meeting of foreign leaders and toiled to win a watered-down carbon-reduction agreement. Clinton played the able staffer to Obama's principal, and both found out that diplomacy is harder than it looks.

In the following year, Clinton was a force for Obama on Capitol Hill, helping secure needed Republican votes for a new arms-reduction treaty with Russia and getting top Democrats to ensure that a new Iran sanctions law didn't preclude the president from negotiating with Tehran. The latter required Clinton to shift from the ultra-hawkish stance she'd had on Iran as a senator to one that aligned with Obama's hopes for a deal. Clinton's top policy aide, Jake Sullivan, was among the first to explore the possibility of

striking a pact that would require Iran to slow its march toward developing nuclear weapons.

For four years, Clinton was at Obama's side — or promoting his policies in Washington and foreign capitals — during the most tense and momentous periods of his presidency. She was a strong advocate for the raid that killed Osama bin Laden at a time when Vice President Joe Biden and Gates expressed reservations, and she stitched together the international coalition that toppled Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. Meanwhile, her husband, former President Clinton, meted out payback to Democrats who had supported Obama, involving himself in a spate of primaries that pitted Clinton loyalists against Obama backers. But he, too, showed deference to Obama — and to the ultimate goal of putting his wife in the White House. His speech slicing up Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan was the most memorable at the Democratic National Convention in 2012, and he hit the campaign trail hard for Obama and Democratic congressional candidates that fall. And while she was at State, Clinton continued to build her political and donor networks by forming partnerships with business leaders, raising money — including from Clinton campaign and foundation donors — for the US pavilion at the world's fair in Shanghai, and advocating for US commerce overseas.

On a trip to southeast Asia just after he won reelection, Obama called Hillary into his cabin on Air Force One to ask her to remain in office rather than stepping down in early 2013 as she had long planned to do. She declined. She had once wrapped her decision to work for him in the patriotic overtones of loyally serving the president of the United States. It was time to begin shifting the weight of loyalty in their relationship in her direction. While there have been subsequent bumps in their relationship — most notably in Clinton's criticism of Obama's policies in Syria — she already had begun the process of recruiting many of his leading strategists and advisers into her fold. Obama's 2012 campaign manager, Jim Messina, signed on to run the big-spending Super PAC Priorities USA when it became clear Clinton would be the prohibitive Democratic favorite

for the presidency. Buffy Wicks, a top Obama organizer, joined that group, too. Former Obama national security spokesman Tommy Vietor has been working with Clinton aides for years now. Counselor John Podesta and former White House communications director Jennifer Palmieri left their jobs with Obama to build the Clinton campaign.

In 2008, the Clinton wing of the Democratic Party ran into the Obama wing of the Democratic Party — and lost. In 2016, the Clinton wing of the Democratic Party is running *with* the Obama wing of the Democratic Party. By becoming part of the Obama administration, it made it possible for the Obama administration to become part of the Clinton campaign.

From runner-up to prohibitive favorite

It wasn't only Clinton who changed from 2008 to 2015. Democrats' understanding of politics changed, as well — in such a way that Clinton's weaknesses back then now look, to many, like strengths.

Back then, many Democrats clung to a hope that the fresh-faced and charismatic Obama could fundamentally transform politics and Washington. By contrast, they thought Clinton was doomed to remain controversial, polarizing, and mired in the same old partisan conflicts. Once Obama became president, the sky-high hopes of liberals were brought down to earth. Partisanship was omnipresent, and the key challenge now seemed to be dealing with it, rather than rising above it. And many liberals **frequently started bemoaning** that Obama wasn't a tough enough negotiator, and **wondering if** Clinton would've done a better job handling the Republican opposition.

By 2012, Clinton had shown Obama supporters she was part of the team, through her service at State and her willingness to keep criticisms internal. But she even developed somewhat of an aura of *cool* — a prospect that seemed unimaginable in 2008. Witness the success of the "**Texts From Hillary**" meme, which shows a photo of the sunglasses-wearing secretary of state reading her smartphone on a plane, paired with humorous captions about whom she might be texting with. The humor doesn't mock Hillary but

portrays her as an **"in-charge badass,"** as the meme's co-creator Stacy Lambe put it. "I think people have learned to appreciate who she is and value her again," Lambe **told Marin Cogan** of GQ. Clinton herself soon adopted the photo from the meme **as her Twitter avatar**.

Clinton's path since she left State to this point hasn't been entirely smooth. Her approval ratings have dropped as she reentered the partisan fray, and she has sometimes stumbled. For instance, during a book tour in 2014, she **had difficulty explaining** when she changed her position on same-sex marriage, and said she and her husband were **"dead broke"** when they left the White House. Other criticism focused on money: her recent practice of giving **expensive paid speeches**, and her family foundation's **fundraising from foreign governments**. More recently, the controversy **over her use of a personal email address** at the State Department has dominated headlines.

But still, Clinton has racked up massive leads in **national** and **early state primary** polls, even when Elizabeth Warren, **who is not running**, is included. There's no one galvanizing issue hurting Clinton among Democrats, **as her Iraq War support did in 2008**. Nearly all potentially viable Democratic contenders have opted against running, and Clinton has **racked up** party endorsements long before she even announced her campaign. As **Ezra Klein argues**, this doesn't mean Clinton is running unopposed — her success is, rather, "the product of Clinton's strong, successful campaign to win over Democratic Party elites." "Hillary has basically almost been nominated," University of Maryland political scientist David Karol, an expert on the primary process, **told me in December** (though he admitted that that's "a dangerous statement to make"). There's obviously still a campaign to be run — with long-shot candidates like **Martin O'Malley**, **Jim Webb**, **Bernie Sanders**, and **Lincoln Chafee** joining the Democratic field (or considering it). But as of now, it sure looks like the next defining moment for Hillary Clinton will be her performance as her party's 2016 presidential nominee.