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Hillary Clinton's Long, Grueling Quest

By AMY CHOZICK JUNE 7, 2016

If there was a single moment that captured what would carry Hillary Clinton to the 2016 Democratic nomination, it came not during her sun-splashed campaign kickoff in New York last June, or in any of her speeches celebrating hard-fought primary victories over Senator Bernie Sanders.

No, it was the unscripted instant in which a blasé Mrs. Clinton coolly brushed from her shoulder a speck of lint, dirt — or perhaps nothing at all — as a Republican-led House panel subjected her to more than eight hours of questioning in October over her handling of the 2012 terrorist attack in Benghazi, Libya.



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She may not be the orator President Obama is, or the retail politician her husband was. But Mrs. Clinton's steely fortitude in this campaign has plainly inspired older women, black voters and many others who see in her perseverance a kind of mirror to their own struggles. And Mrs. Clinton's very durability — her tenacity, grit and capacity for enduring and overcoming adversity — could be exactly what is required to defeat Donald J. Trump.

As a politician's wife, first lady, senator and secretary of state — and as a two-time candidate for president — Mrs. Clinton, 68, has redefined the role of women in American politics each time she has reinvented herself. She has transfixed the nation again and again, as often in searing episodes of scandal or setback as in triumph.

“She came on the public stage as someone who was a little different,” said Ann Lewis, a longtime adviser. “She attracted fascination, devotion and attacks — and the partisan attacks haven't stopped.”

“Even as first lady, it was ‘Who does she think she is?’” said Melanne Verveer, a close friend of Mrs. Clinton's who was her White House chief of staff.

Mrs. Clinton's confidants say it is only fitting that, having overcome so many obstacles before, including some of her own making, she now faces an opponent so eager to go negative with her — and to refight the bare-knuckled brawls that have defined her career.

In her victory speech Tuesday night, Mrs. Clinton said the biggest influence on her life had been her mother, “and she taught me never to back down from a bully — which turned out to be pretty good advice.”

It was with that same grit that Mrs. Clinton picked herself up after a bruising defeat by Mr. Obama in 2008, when she assured a crowd of tearful female supporters, eight years ago to the day, that they had made 18 million cracks in “the highest, hardest glass ceiling.”

For 14 straight years, and 20 in all, Mrs. Clinton has been named the woman Americans admire most, according to a yearly Gallup poll. But her campaign, and the controversy over her use of a private email server as secretary of state, have taken a toll: Her favorability and trustworthiness ratings have plummeted. And she is being caricatured, once more, as a calculating and inauthentic career politician: Lady Macbeth, now in her own play.

In the same way, her longevity and fame are not undiluted assets: The baggage she brings as a consummate Democratic insider, pointed up most damagingly in the enormous sums she commanded as a paid speaker to Wall Street banks, has weighed Mrs. Clinton down in an election cycle in which outsiders have had the wind at their backs.

Mrs. Clinton’s career has not taken a predictable route by any stretch. She came of age in the feminist movement in the 1960s at Wellesley College — where she urged her peers to spurn incremental change and instead work at “making the impossible possible” — then was drawn to the South in furtherance of her husband’s ambitions. She was one of her husband’s chief campaign strategists and overseer of a failed health care effort, while holding her marriage together through his sex scandals and impeachment.

But if she seemed to embody contradictions, they also reflected a society in which expectations of women, and women’s expectations for themselves, were rapidly changing.

And it has always been hard to parse opinions about Mrs. Clinton and about powerful women in general.

Roy M. Neel, who was a campaign manager for Al Gore in his 1992 vice-presidential run, said in an oral history of the Bill Clinton years that women in the South particularly disliked Mrs. Clinton, the first working mother to serve as first

lady and the first — and, so far, the only — to have an office in the West Wing, because she “appeared to be something of an affront to their sense of who they were.”

If age-old antipathies to Mrs. Clinton can be chalked up in part to Americans’ struggles to adjust to changing gender roles at home, at work and in politics, her history of political combat has also left scar tissue that, in part, defines the candidate she is: wide-eyed about the realities of Washington, but cautious and wary to a fault.

Her prolonged contest with Mr. Sanders, whose campaign was not widely expected to survive the first few nominating contests, laid bare the cost of that restraint, both in style and substance.

As voters have gravitated to Mr. Trump’s unchecked impulsiveness and Mr. Sanders’s unabashed idealism, Mrs. Clinton has displayed little of either.

“This is not an incremental, cautious election, and being cautious is not her friend,” said Anna Greenberg, a Democratic pollster.

“Both primaries exposed the depth of anger and frustration and disgust,” she added. “She has had to, and will have to, adjust to it.”

For 14 months, Mrs. Clinton’s campaign has been out of step with younger voters and with swaths of an angry electorate that has demanded more than the competence and hard work she has promised.

Her difficulties with those voters could be a warning sign.

While her husband could draw on the crisp centrist philosophy of the “third way” Democrats in 1992, when he devoted his candidacy to the “forgotten middle class,” Mrs. Clinton has struggled to hit upon as simple and clear a rationale for her campaign. And, though she has issued the most detailed policy proposals and positions of anyone in the race, what she truly believes remains a mystery for many voters.

Mrs. Clinton has praised Mr. Obama’s accomplishments over the past eight years, and won roughly 77 percent of the vote among blacks through the May 10

contests, according to exit polls. But she has also promised to push harder than Mr. Obama in extending citizenship to undocumented immigrants, opposed his signature Trans-Pacific trade deal, and outstripped his plans to defeat the Islamic State by calling for a no-fly zone in Syria.

She has praised her husband's economic record as president and offered to put him in charge of reviving some of the hardest-hit regions. But Mrs. Clinton has also had to repudiate crucial parts of her husband's legacy.

It has not helped that her campaign has cycled through a half-dozen slogans, from championing "everyday Americans" to "fighting for us," "breaking down barriers," and, most recently, "stronger together" — playing on Mr. Trump's more divisive remarks about Mexicans, Muslims and other groups.

As Mr. Sanders has demonized Wall Street and Mr. Trump has disparaged immigrants, and as they have vowed to reverse economic malaise, Mrs. Clinton has run on a flinty practicality.

The most telling promise she has made is that she will not overpromise. "We don't need any more of that," she has told voters.

But what she has lacked in rhetorical brio, she has made up for by listening to people's problems and prescribing solutions. She has shed tears in conversations with a man whose mother had Alzheimer's and a woman who lost a child to a gun accident.

And she has shown a vulnerability she did not reveal in 2008, when she campaigned as a strong would-be commander in chief, seeking to neutralize any doubts about whether she was tough enough for the Oval Office.

"I am not a natural politician, in case you haven't noticed, like my husband or President Obama," Mrs. Clinton said in one of her debates with Mr. Sanders, a bracingly honest statement.

To her supporters, there may be a kind of strange logic at work. Mrs. Clinton is somehow expected to project the mettle of a commander in chief, the charisma of a drinking buddy, the warmth of a favorite aunt, they say.

“You’re required to be touchy-feely and smiley and also required to grow a hide like an elephant,” said Tina Brown, the journalist. “Which is it?”

An impossible combination, they complain — and if she managed all that, there would no doubt emerge some other vital quality that she was failing to display, because there is no template yet for a female United States president.

“People are so undecided about how they feel about female leadership, and it’s something people really struggle with,” said Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, Democrat of New York. “The ambiguity about Hillary is outside of her. It comes from people’s own perspectives.”

Attitudes about female leadership eventually may change, of course. And in talking to reporters on Monday, hours before reports that she had clinched the nomination, Mrs. Clinton looked past November to a time when female presidential candidates may not require quite so much durability to have a shot at the White House.

“It’s predominantly women and girls, but not exclusively — men bring their daughters to meet me and tell me that they are supporting me because of their daughters,” she said. “And I do think it will make a very big difference for a father or a mother to be able to look at their daughter just like they can look at their son and say, ‘You can be anything you want to be in this country, including president of the United States.’”

Correction: June 9, 2016

Because of an editing error, an article on Wednesday about Hillary Clinton’s path to becoming the presumptive Democratic nominee misidentified, in some editions, the political campaign that Roy M. Neel ran for Al Gore in 1992. He managed Mr. Gore’s vice-presidential campaign that year, not his presidential campaign. (Mr. Gore did not run for the presidency in 1992.)

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A version of this article appears in print on June 8, 2016, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: A Long Journey, Fueled by Grit, to the Finish.
