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The Clinton Legacy

How Will History Judge the Soft-Power Secretary of State?

Michael Hirsh

In late January, only a few days after his second inauguration, U.S. President Barack Obama delivered a surprisingly fond farewell to his old political rival Hillary Clinton. Sitting for a joint interview with the outgoing secretary of state on *60 Minutes*, Obama lauded their “great collaboration.” He continued: “I just wanted to have a chance to publicly say thank you, because I think Hillary will go down as one of the finest secretaries of state we’ve had.”

The president had reason to be grateful. His Lincolnesque effort to create a team of rivals had paid off, thanks largely to Clinton’s own efforts at reconciliation. During her four years in office, Clinton, displaying impressive humility and self-discipline for an ambitious politician, managed to put one of the fiercest presidential primary battles in U.S. history behind her. Once the runaway favorite to win her party’s nomination, Clinton transformed herself into a loyal messenger and passionate defender of the Obama faith.

But neither Obama’s gratitude nor Clinton’s graciousness should cloud history’s judgment. By any standard measure of diplomacy, Clinton will be remembered as a highly competent secretary of state, but not a great one. Despite her considerable star power around the world, her popularity at home, and her reputation for being on the right side of most issues, she left office without a signature doctrine, strategy, or diplomatic triumph. It is a stretch to include Clinton in the company of John Quincy Adams, George Marshall, Dean Acheson, and Henry Kissinger—some of the great secretaries of state who profoundly changed U.S. foreign policy. Although she has avoided all talk of what comes next, it may well be that Clinton’s tenure as diplomat

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in chief will someday be viewed as a steppingstone to the presidency, as it was for Thomas Jefferson and Adams.

It is not that Clinton can't point to some notable and enduring achievements. Because of her worldwide popularity and tireless travel—she set a new record for a secretary of state by visiting 112 countries—Clinton helped undo the damage that the habitual unilateralism of the George W. Bush administration had done to the global image of the United States. As Clinton put it to me in a 2010 interview, “My big-picture commitment is to restore American leadership, and I think that’s about as big a job as you can get. And everything I’ve done is in furtherance of that.”

This goal was shared by the whole administration. In his first term, Obama faced the daunting task of winding down two major wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He needed to contend with the reduction in U.S. leverage and prestige following the strategic mistakes and economic collapse of the Bush years. As a result, the administration was keen on emphasizing the “soft” diplomacy of U.S. image building and values promotion over “hard,” or coercive, diplomacy, which necessitates direct involvement in conflicts.

Despite her frustrations with a White House that often did not heed her advice, Clinton elevated this effort to levels unseen in previous administrations. Indeed, her most lasting legacy will likely be the way that she thrust soft diplomacy to the forefront of U.S. foreign policy. By speaking out about Internet freedom, women’s rights, public health, and economic issues everywhere she went, Clinton sought to transcend traditional government-to-government contacts. She set out to create—or at least dramatically expand in scope—a new kind of people-to-people diplomacy, one designed to extend Washington’s influence in an Internet-driven world in which popular uprisings, such as the Arab Spring, could quickly uproot the traditional relationships between governments.

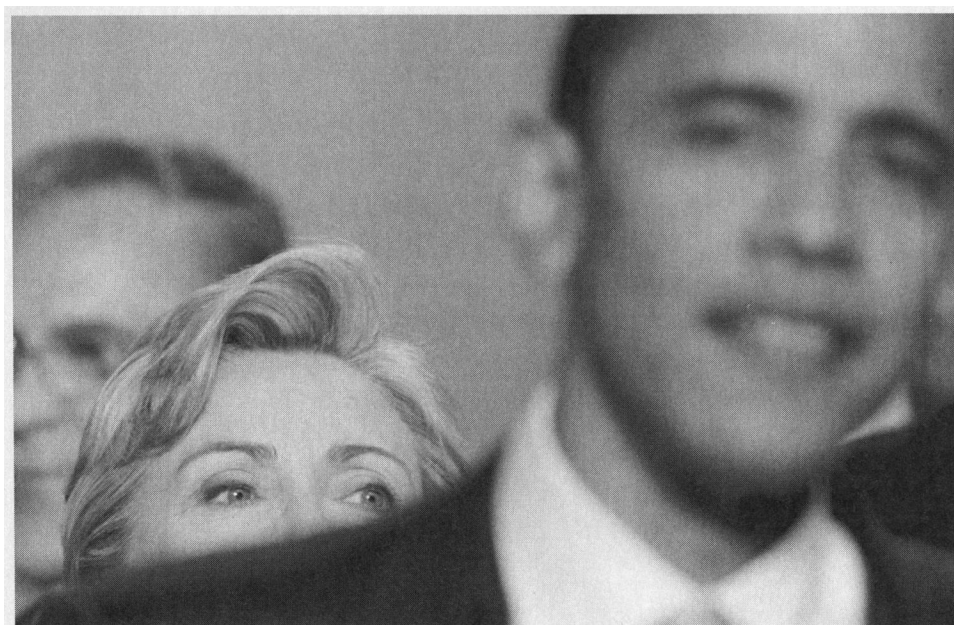
Beyond that, Clinton often played the realist hawk in an administration that started with overconfidence about its president’s transformational powers. In 2009, she allied with Defense Secretary Robert Gates to press for a 30,000-troop surge to address the chaos in Afghanistan, even though the president’s instincts were for a far smaller escalation. Later that year, when Obama had nothing to show for offering an outstretched hand to Tehran (a policy that Clinton had encouraged), she prodded the president into imposing unprecedentedly

severe sanctions on Iran. In 2011, she corralled a troupe of advisers, including Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, to convince Obama to support a NATO-led intervention in Libya. And it was Clinton's State Department that was mainly responsible for the administration's attempt at a strategic "pivot" to Asia, designed largely to counter China's growing influence. Clinton personally led the way with a historic trip that brought long-isolated Myanmar (also called Burma) into the fold of American partners, with a deft mix of realpolitik and democracy promotion. Clinton also became the caretaker of major relationships with other heads of state with whom the somewhat aloof U.S. president engaged only sporadically.

The effectiveness of Clinton's approach is as yet unclear. The outcome of the Arab Spring appears to be increasingly Islamist and anti-American, and among the legacies Clinton bequeathed to her successor, John Kerry, is a resurgent jihadist movement in the Arab world—including an al Qaeda that is "on the rise," as she admitted only days before her departure. U.S. relations are deteriorating with Pakistan and Russia, and it did not help that Clinton avoided involvement in direct negotiations with those countries over critical issues that divided them from Washington. Nevertheless, a global Pew Research Center poll and other international surveys have shown a substantial improvement in U.S. standing in world opinion, especially among Europeans. So there can be little doubt that Clinton restored some luster to an American brand badly tarnished by the previous administration.

GOING SOFT

Like George Shultz, Ronald Reagan's revered secretary of state, Clinton regularly stressed that diplomacy and economic development must go hand in hand. She preached that helping partner countries achieve social stability—built on progress on health, food security, and women's rights—would create stronger alliances and new paths to solving traditional foreign policy problems. In a January 2011 speech in Qatar, just as the early signs of the Arab Spring were starting to appear, Clinton issued what now looks like a prescient admonition to Arab leaders, taking them to task for failing to "build a future that your young people will believe in, stay for, and defend." She said that the Arab people had "grown tired of corrupt institutions and a stagnant political order," and she warned the regimes that their "foundations [were] sinking into the sand."



Overshadowed: Hillary Clinton, Washington, D.C., January 2007

Clinton then took her message directly to the people in the countries she visited. She held regular town-hall meetings abroad, speaking not just to the international press but also to local citizens and local media, an approach that may have helped ease some anti-Americanism in Islamic countries (although few polls show it yet). “I think that really is new,” her former policy-planning chief, the Princeton scholar Anne-Marie Slaughter, told me in a recent interview. “She’s the one who kept saying, ‘You’ve got to have government-to-government, government-to-people, and people-to-people contacts.’ She’s been very clear that the people of different countries are not just the object of policies; they are active agents of change and evolution. And, above all, of problem solving.”

A test case for whether the Clinton model of diplomacy can work going forward may be the current turmoil in Egypt, where President Hosni Mubarak’s successor, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi, appears to be wavering in his commitment to democracy. Although Washington deals mainly with Morsi’s government and the Egyptian military, the State Department has fostered ties between nongovernmental organizations in the United States and Egypt that focus on education and development. “One way to think about it is that because of her integrated framework, we always have someone to call,” said Slaughter. “Mubarak fell and the Muslim Brotherhood is in power, but

REUTERS / LARRY DOWNING

now we have contacts with women's groups, techies, and entrepreneurs through various programs. If diplomacy is building relationships that you can call on in a crisis, then she has developed the frame." Now, a power-grabbing Morsi finds himself under pressure to moderate his actions not just from U.S. government officials but also from grass-roots pro-democracy organizations supported or trained by Washington.

Even as she helped design the realpolitik pivot to Asia, Clinton also pushed this people-to-people approach with China. She promoted the 100,000 Strong Initiative, a program aimed at dramatically increasing the number of Americans studying at Chinese universities (ten times

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as many Chinese study in the United States). She emphasized economic development in Central and South Asia, where she sought to stabilize Afghanistan and counter Pakistani recalcitrance by proposing a "New Silk Road" that would promote new trade routes in order to induce Islamabad to cooperate more with Kabul. And when Obama

announced in February his plan to negotiate a transatlantic free-trade pact with Europe, he was embracing a proposal pushed by his former secretary of state.

Yet in the end, although Clinton excelled at soft diplomacy, she shied away from the kind of hard diplomacy that traditionalists identify with foreign policy greatness. One thinks of Adams' authorship of the Monroe Doctrine and the Transcontinental Treaty with Spain, Acheson's aggressive championing of containment, Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy between the Arabs and the Israelis and his clever exploitation of the Sino-Soviet split. Some critics have interpreted Clinton's more modest agenda as stemming from political caution. In a recent assessment, the journalist David Rohde quoted a State Department official who suggested that Clinton's hesitation to get personally involved in conflicts was related to her future presidential ambitions.

Indeed, Clinton consistently avoided getting her hands dirty with direct mediation. She happily agreed to leave key negotiations in crisis spots to special envoys, charging George Mitchell with overseeing the Israeli-Palestinian portfolio and relying on Richard Holbrooke to bring about a political settlement in Afghanistan and Pakistan. She rarely stepped in as each of them failed to make much headway. Other pressing

issues, such as North Korea's nuclear program, she simply put off. Her policy of "strategic patience" with North Korea, under which Washington refused to offer any new incentives to Pyongyang in the hopes of restarting nuclear disarmament talks, did not work. The problem festered for four years, and as soon as Clinton left office, the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un greeted her successor with yet another nuclear test.

It may be unfair to fault Clinton for the deadly attack on U.S. personnel in Benghazi, Libya, which occurred last September. Nonetheless, she became the first secretary of state to lose an ambassador in the field since Adolph Dubs was killed in 1979, while Cyrus Vance held the office. And Clinton does deserve some blame for what she herself admitted in Senate testimony about the incident: that she and her State Department colleagues were taken by surprise by the rise of new jihadist groups in Libya and the region. "We've got to have a better strategy," she said. "The Arab Spring has ushered in a time when al Qaeda is on the rise." Clinton thus appeared to concede what the former Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney had relentlessly argued during the 2012 campaign: that the terrorist group responsible for 9/11 and its offshoots are not close to being defeated.

In her farewell testimony, Clinton spoke of the "Pandora's box" of weapons flowing through countries in the Middle East and North Africa. And that Pandora's box may yield even worse ills on Kerry's watch. The post-Qaddafi chaos in Libya, the civil war in Syria, the emergence of a terrorist sanctuary in northern Mali—all these developments have taken the Obama administration by surprise. Some U.S. officials now fear that these countries could break up or turn into permanently strife-ridden lands that resemble the postcolonial countries of Africa, such as Somalia or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where tribes and ethnic groups never stop warring even though the countries' borders remain superficially intact.

The spreading violence in the Middle East and North Africa could come to be seen as one of Clinton's grimmest legacies. It all but ensures that however much Kerry tries to focus on Asia, he will likely get pulled back into the Middle Eastern mire that the Obama administration's first-term national security team left him. Indeed, if any one situation demonstrates the potential costs of the administration's caution in the region, it is that in Syria, where the president's decision to avoid arming the rebels has struck critics as inaction in the face of a terrible humanitarian crisis and a conflict that could destabilize the entire region.

IMPROV DRAMA

On a number of critical issues, anything resembling a larger strategy was often hard to find in Obama's first term. In a recent conversation with me, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the dean of the Democratic national security establishment, criticized the administration's foreign policy for being "improvisational." To be fair, the improvisation was sometimes effective. In one case, Obama and Clinton barged into a meeting at the 2009 global climate change talks in Copenhagen and forced the Chinese president to agree to a nonbinding pact under which rich and poor countries alike pledged to curb their carbon emissions. And last year, Clinton displayed cleverness and agility in negotiating the release of the Chinese dissident Chen Guangcheng, who had taken refuge in the U.S. embassy in Beijing. But those were rare instances of successful impromptu mediation.

At other times when Obama's foreign policy team was forced to act on its feet, the results were not as impressive. The administration failed to anticipate the increasingly Islamist bent of the countries whose regimes were ousted in the Arab Spring, and it has been slow in formulating a coordinated response to the abuses against democracy by Morsi and other Islamist leaders. Instead, Obama appears to be approaching Morsi in much the same *realpolitik* way he once dealt with Mubarak—paying lip service to democracy and human rights but essentially leaving Egypt's internal chaos to sort itself out. The democracy expert Larry Diamond told me in an interview that he saw "very little sign—to be blunt, no sign—of any coherent strategy to try to defend and sustain the very, very tentative democratic progress in Egypt or to . . . create a more facilitating environment." Clinton's State Department did not develop a strategic framework for addressing the Islamist middle phase that the Arab world appears to be undergoing on its way to modernization and democracy—a transition that was entirely predictable given Islam's traditionally dominant role in Arab society. In her final testimony before the Senate, commenting on the new wave of jihadism in the region, Clinton said, "We've got to get our act together." It was a helpless remark that recalled former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's notorious lament from a decade ago: "We lack the metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror."

Still, one must ask: Could any secretary of state realistically have done a better job grappling with such unexpected unrest? Probably

not. "Anybody would be improvising now," Reuel Marc Gerecht, a conservative Middle East analyst, told me. "I wouldn't fault the administration too much." Clinton's defenders question how any overarching strategy could have addressed something as chaotic and complex as the Arab uprisings. James Steinberg, a former deputy secretary of state and former Clinton aide, has invoked the famous line attributed to the former Chinese leader Zhou Enlai, who, when asked in the 1970s about the significance of the French Revolution, supposedly replied, "It's too soon to tell." "Traditional ideas about grand strategy don't really capture the challenge of dealing with broad popular movements," Steinberg said to me in a recent interview. "It's less about a strategy and more about how do you position the U.S. to positively take advantage of it?"

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It's a fair point. The diplomatic world keeps pining for the next George Kennan, someone who might sum up the country's overall mission in a strategic concept as simple as containment. But Kennan, in truth, had things relatively easy compared with today's policymakers. He faced a bipolar world consisting of two utterly opposed ideological systems and an adversary whose strengths and weaknesses could be analyzed in a static way. Twenty-first-century strategists confront a far more complex and multidimensional world, one in which a lone terrorist or hacker can threaten a superpower.

To its detractors, the Obama administration has looked consistently weak and indecisive in its response to the Arab Spring. But these critics generally fail to offer appealing alternatives. Obama and Clinton have had good reasons, for example, to avoid a large-scale intervention in Syria. After a decade of war, Washington cannot afford to look like it is interfering, yet again, in a region that has already seen far too much Western meddling. Obama's concerns that U.S.-supplied weapons would find their way to jihadist militants are equally valid.

WHO IS OBAMA'S KISSINGER?

For four years, Clinton had to spend a lot of time and energy simply making herself heard on Pennsylvania Avenue. It was often as hard for her to persuade the White House to take her advice as it was to deal with foreign governments. Although Clinton sometimes got her way and served as the administration's public face, Obama and a coterie of devoted national security aides—including Denis McDonough, Obama's former deputy national security adviser and now the White House chief of staff—were the main authors of the administration's foreign policy. And despite Obama's kind parting words, Clinton never really developed warm personal ties to her former rival. This gap made her job much harder, since in Washington, real power is measured in presidential face time, and a close relationship between the White House and the State Department is critical to a secretary of state's success. (Acheson, fortunate enough to be Harry Truman's alter ego, used to say that he had "a constituency of one.")

Her distance from Obama, by most accounts, was a source of frustration and disappointment for Clinton, especially at the beginning of her tenure. She likely felt shortchanged by the difference between her original job description and the reality that emerged. In the fall of 2008, when Obama surprised Clinton by asking her to take the job, he told her that he had his hands full with the collapsing economy and needed someone of her global stature to take care of foreign policy. The implication was that Clinton would be the dominant figure.

But that never happened. Early in Obama's first term, a senior aide to Clinton told me that "the biggest issue still unresolved in the Obama administration is, can there be more than one star?" The answer, it soon became clear, was no; the only star was going to be Obama himself. Despite his short tenure as a senator, Obama prided himself on his grass-roots knowledge of foreign affairs, having grown up partly in Indonesia with a foreign stepfather, and he had developed his own definite worldview. As the aide put it, "If you ask, 'Who is Barack Obama's Henry Kissinger?' the answer, of course, is that it's Barack Obama."

When Clinton did appear to get out ahead of the White House, she was quickly reined in. In 2009, Clinton hinted that she was developing a policy to unite the Arab autocracies in an anti-Tehran bloc, and she gave a speech calling for Arab regimes to join a Cold War-style "defense umbrella" to protect against Iran's nuclear program. *The New York Times* soon quoted a "senior White House official" as saying that

Clinton was speaking for herself. That was the last mention of a defense umbrella. Later, she tentatively supported a CIA plan to arm the Syrian rebels, but Obama shot down that idea as well.

Clinton also suffered from the same problem that former Secretary of State Colin Powell confronted in George W. Bush's first term: the presence of an influential vice president who constituted a separate power center on foreign policy. In Powell's case, that was Dick Cheney; for Clinton, it was Joseph Biden, the deeply experienced former chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In 2009, for example, top administration officials were split over how to handle the quagmire in Afghanistan. Biden counseled the president to scale down the U.S. presence there and rely on a policy of counterterrorism, carried out by special operations units and drone strikes. Although Clinton and Gates' call for a troop surge won the day, by 2012, Obama began siding with Biden and started accelerating the U.S. withdrawal. The Iraq withdrawal plan, too, was handed over to Biden and his team. A senior administration official described what happened at an early meeting in 2009: "All of sudden, Obama stopped. He said, 'Joe will do Iraq. Joe knows more about Iraq than anyone.'"

Despite the lack of a singular triumph to her name, however, there is a case to be made that the impact Clinton had on U.S. foreign policy will be felt long after she has left office. In an interview midway through her tenure, I asked Clinton how she assessed her effectiveness and why she hadn't "taken a big issue and totally owned it." She responded that she had "inherited such a range of problems and deficits across the world that it would be a luxury to say, 'I'm going to focus on this and this alone.'" Like Obama, Clinton set out to repair the damage that Bush had done to the country's stature around the world, and in that, she had some noteworthy success. As she put it, "We've worked very hard to restore relations with allies, and I think we've made a lot of progress in doing so . . . and frankly taking situations that had badly deteriorated, especially Russia and China, and turning them around to be able to put them on a much more positive footing." Asked what she most enjoyed about the job, she replied, "A lot of it is not the headline stuff. It's the slow and steady progress that I think provides a much firmer footing for us."

Slow and steady progress is not necessarily the stuff of greatness. But it is valuable nonetheless, and it may be what, in the end, the world will remember most about Clinton's tenure as the country's top diplomat. 🌐