

The risks and rewards of the former president on the campaign trail*

*Flip the cover for Melania Trump

The Washington Post

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SUNDAY, AUG



**Bill Clinton:
'Boy, What a Future
We Can Make'** P.22



THE QUANDARY

THAT IS

BILL

Can the master politician help secure a Hillary presidency? Or will a misstep complicate her path?

STORY BY NEELY TUCKER



The plane descends through a haze of afternoon heat and humidity, the Arkansas River appearing as a lazy brown ribbon running through fields of green. There, flanking its southern banks, lies the City of Clinton, also known as Little Rock.

Once the plane touches down at Bill and Hillary Clinton National Airport, it's a short drive downtown to the William J. Clinton Presidential Center, the primary feature of which is the William J. Clinton Library and Museum.

Here, you can stroll into the Clinton Presidential Park and across the Clinton Presidential Park Bridge. Or you can walk west onto President Clinton Avenue, taking you through the city's hip River Market district.

But we have not come to see the highs and lows of home-state monuments to the 42nd president of the United States, though there are plenty more to consider.

As thunderstorms break the heat on this Friday evening in July, we're here because he has accessorized the ring finger on his left hand with a band of gold that has bound him, in so many complicated and historic ways, to Hillary Rodham Clinton, the Democratic nominee to be the 45th president of these United States.

We're here to see, striding onto the dais for a Democratic fundraiser at Verizon Arena in North Little Rock, the potential first first gentleman in American history.

William J. Clinton is regal in a blue suit — two-button, herringbone-stripe — white shirt and power-red tie with a matching red H (for Hillary) lapel pin. Both suit buttons are fastened, perhaps signifying the formality of the evening. (Twelve days later, when he wears much the same outfit to the Democratic National Convention, he will button only one, perhaps signifying the more intimate nature of that speech.)

The silver hair is impeccable. The voice, a bit hoarse. Like many ex-pat Southerners, his native twang (“yes-ter-daaay”) has returned now that he's back home.

The prospect of Mr. & Mrs. presidential portraits was raised eight years ago when she ran but failed to get out of the primaries — and his angry, Wild Bill outbursts were at least partly blamed. Now, should she lose again, it is almost certainly the Clintons' last national election after three and a half decades in public life.

So with the family legacy on the line, with it all down to win-or-go-home, let's see how the Supportive Campaign Spouse is holding up this time around.

He's easy and relaxed on stage, name-checking friends in the audience — “Davie, you remember this?” — and seeking to motivate the base in a state

that is now solidly held by Republicans.

He touts Hillary: “The Republican head of the Farm Bureau on Long Island endorsed her for reelection. ... And he's still for her in 2016 ... because he knew she's the real deal!” He jabs Trump: “Anybody that spends all their time trying to keep you mad at somebody else is not really your friend.” He recites an anecdote/joke on Texas, always popular here, that ends with the punch line, “If they can suck as hard as they blow ... they'll have all the water they need!”

The crowd of 2,000 eats it up. They've donated a collective \$500,000 for this night with their former governor, the man from Hope. As the rain pummels the roof, they have him all to themselves. The media platform is near empty. A couple of newspapers, some local television. Exactly two national news organizations applied for accreditation.

For the *Hillary* Clinton campaign, this is perfect.

Particularly after his 2008 performance, the job of this potential first first gentleman is pretty much the same of any traditional first lady: Do good deeds, raise some cash and don't get in front of the candidate. Bill Clinton, who famously loves to talk, has made more than 400 appearances at fundraisers, rallies, shopping malls and so forth in support of his wife's campaign in the past eight months — but has not given a sit-down interview since last fall.

And yet ... he has already flubbed it.

He made negative front-page news by meeting with U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch on an airport tarmac as the FBI was finalizing its investigation into his wife's email accounts while she was secretary of state.

“Bill Clinton has made a mess,” wrote Dan Balz, *The Post's* senior political correspondent.

Heading into the homestretch, it seems obvious that even if he makes no further mistakes, even if he gives brilliant tactical advice, promotes inspiring programs for the working class and offers soaring rhetoric about the Great Promise of America, he is still going to be pilloried by opponents as being morally unfit to return to the White House.

He allegedly cheated on his wife, repeatedly, even in the Oval Office, and with a young woman who wasn't that much older than their daughter. He was impeached by the House of Representatives. Used the Lincoln Bedroom as a fundraising package. Said, “I did not have sex with that woman.” Said, “It depends upon what the meaning of the word 'is' is.”

Fortunately for Team Clinton, there is Team Trump.

America's alternative first spouse is Melania Trump. Her website had said she has a college degree



SO SEAMLESSLY DID BILL AND HILLARY WORK TOGETHER AFTER MEETING AT YALE LAW SCHOOL THAT, EVEN BEFORE HIS PRESIDENTIAL BID, THEY WERE ALREADY KNOWN AS “BILLARY.”



THE IDEA IS THAT THE POTENTIAL FIRST GENTLEMAN CAN BEST CAMPAIGN AS THE DEVOTED HUSBAND AND LOVING GRANDPA, STUMPING FAR AWAY FROM THE TRAIL.

Above: Hillary and Bill Clinton laugh during the dedication ceremony of the William J. Clinton Presidential Center in Little Rock in 2004. **Opposite page:** The couple at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Mass., in 1979.



(she has also testified in court that she has one), but journalists who have examined her academic record report they could not verify it.

In her one and only campaign speech, she plagiarized Michelle Obama. Also, the third wife of the Republican nominee once posed nude for the cover of *British GQ*. The headline: “NAKED SUPERMODEL SPECIAL!”

In the battle of spouses, it is Bill “blue dress” Clinton vs. Melania “no dress” Trump. Vote your conscience, America.

“In the spring of 1971,” Clinton told the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia in late July, “I met a girl.”

It was his very first sentence, spoken with raised hands and eyebrows. It was fond, affectionate and completely focused on *his* dazzling and impressive spouse who happens to be *your* candidate. For nearly 45 minutes, he waxed eloquent about their marriage of 40 years, their ups and downs (prudently skipping the details on the downs), and even, in a presidential campaign first, talked about the moment “her water broke.”

In Little Rock, two weeks earlier, it took him nearly 45 minutes to mention much about his spouse at all. He spoke about Democratic Party values and the vast financial inequalities in the nation and opioid addictions in coal country and wind farms in Iowa.

When he finally did mention his wife, it was strictly business: “Boy, what a future we can make. That’s what Hillary’s whole campaign is about.”

Taken together, the speeches show him at his supportive best.

In Little Rock, away from the national glare, he told them that his wife was as smart, capable and determined now as when she was the first lady of Arkansas. They’ve gotten on a bit in years now, he mentioned in an aside. Each morning, wherever he or Hillary are, they get a picture or short video of their toddler and infant grandchildren from Chelsea or her husband, Marc Mezvinsky.

In Philadelphia, he sought to cast her as his partner in a long, slow walk into the twilight of their years.

Adjusted for gender, these quotes and imagery could have come from any first lady from Mamie Eisenhower to Laura Bush.

Here he is again on the traditional Supportive Spouse tact, in a mass email sent to party supporters on July 24:

“Hillary and I have been married for over 40 years. Seeing her work up close is truly incredible — she’s committed to the task at hand, she’s always keeping the people she’s fighting for at the very front of her mind, and she’s one of the warmest people you could ever meet.

“I realize not everybody gets to see the Hillary we know, and that’s where you and I come in. The people who love Hillary have got to do what we can to make sure everyone knows what she’s about.”

After asking for a donation — starting as low as \$3 — he signs off as “Bill.”

Getting the picture? The idea, at least so far, is that the potential first gentleman can best campaign as the devoted husband and loving grandpa, stumping for votes far away from the trail. This is what he often did in 2008, too — he made 47 stops in seven weeks before the Pennsylvania primary, most of them in small towns — but that season, he was most certainly not the Supportive Spouse.

“The constant fear is that he will embarrass her,” the *New Yorker* wrote in a May 2008 story titled, “Bill vs. Barack.” “Every story has seemed to reinforce an image of Clinton as a sort of ill-tempered coot driven a little mad by Obama’s success” running against Hillary.

This year, the campaign is once again dispatching him to Small Town, U.S.A.

“He can travel to smaller television markets that we simply don’t have the time to get her to,” says Robby Mook, Hillary’s campaign manager. “He can speak to rural and Southern voters with particular credibility because of his time as governor of Arkansas.”

All that said? You dance with the one that brung ya.

Bill Clinton is one of the most brilliant political minds of his generation. He’s the original political star in the family. Despite his well-documented shortcomings, he is still his wife’s best fundraiser, and “both from a substantive but also tactical perspective,” Mook says, “he’s really our most valuable surrogate.”

The endless questions of this campaign regarding Bill’s role if Hillary wins — Where will his office be? Will he sit in on classified briefings? — are not that different from when they first appeared on the national stage. The issue then was how much *Hillary* would intrude on *Bill’s* presidency.

So seamlessly did they work together after meeting at Yale Law School that, even before his presidential bid, they were already known as “Billary.” When he lost the Arkansas gubernatorial election in 1980, it was she who went onstage at the University of Arkansas to discuss the election and how her husband lost.

Clockwise from top left: The Clintons hold hands at a campaign event in Davenport, Iowa; Bill Clinton and President Obama play golf at Joint Base Andrews, Md., in 2011; Clinton visits a school supported by his foundation in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 2014.

Bill Clinton stewed at home, sulking.

He regained the office in 1983, eventually spending about a dozen years as governor. By the presidential campaign of 1992, he was the candidate ... but she made triple his (pitiable) salary as a partner at the Rose Law Firm. She was rated as one of the most powerful lawyers in the nation by the National Law Journal and was board chair at the Children's Defense Fund.

A Los Angeles Times profile of her that summer noted that she was told on the campaign trail "with tiresome predictability" that *she* should be the candidate. "If they were a law firm," the paper said, "she would be the litigator, he the mediator."

When running as an incumbent in Arkansas, Bill told voters that Hillary was "one of the best arguments for reelecting me." He said she was "at least half of our campaign." He speculated he might appoint her to a Cabinet position. When he was embroiled in a scandal about an extramarital affair, he brought her along on a "60 Minutes" interview to vouch for their relationship.

"I'm not sittin' here as some little woman standin' by my man like Tammy Wynette," she said, giving the now-notorious phrase a contemptuous roll of the neck, speaking with a pretty fair Southern accent herself. "I'm sittin' here because I love him and I respect him and I honor what he's been through and what we've been through together."

Still, if she was the nontraditional feminist wife, at times he could be the traditional Southern husband: The quickest way to get *him* mad was to insult *her*.

During a 1992 Democratic debate, former California governor Jerry Brown cited a Washington Post story for a claim that Clinton was "funneling money to his wife's law firm for state business."

That was further than the story went, however, and Clinton was livid.

"Let me tell you something, Jerry," he said, standing just a few feet away, wagging a finger. "I don't care what you say about me ... but you ought to be ashamed of yourself for jumping on my wife. You're not worth being on the same platform as my wife."

A few seconds later: "Jerry comes here with his family wealth and his \$1,500 suit and makes a lying accusation about my wife."

And, *still* not able to let it go: "My wife is a fine person who has not done anything unethical. She has given tens of thousands of free dollars' worth of free time to serving our state, to doing free work for the state."

Paul Begala, a key adviser to Bill on that campaign, counsel to him once in office and now a founder of a pro-Hillary super PAC, was there that night. He says it was not political theater.

"I thought the current governor of Arkansas was going to punch the former governor of California."

The protective anger surfaced again in the 2008

campaign, but this election ... maybe it's changing. Consider the Republican National Convention in mid-July.

The woman who once said there was a "vast right-wing conspiracy" against her philandering husband was herself the target of the vast tide of right-wing anger. "Lock her up! Lock her up! Lock her up!" roared the crowd. "Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!" Outside, vendors sold T-shirts that read (of the ones we can print): "Life's a bitch. Don't vote for one."

And Bill, the red-faced, finger-pointing, protective husband, said ... absolutely nothing. (In public, anyway.)

"He's gotten better at it," Begala says. "He likes to say his mother didn't have to whip him twice for the same mistake."

He has just turned 70. Fifteen years removed from being the most powerful politician in the free world. Almost 12 years removed from heart bypass surgery. Now a vegan, he sometimes appears almost frail, so much thinner his frame, so much weight has he lost.

"The fewer tomorrows I have the more I think about everybody else's tomorrows," he tells the Little Rock crowd, sounding wistful.

Since he left office, he and his wife have not been nearly so entwined. It has been something like a commuter marriage.

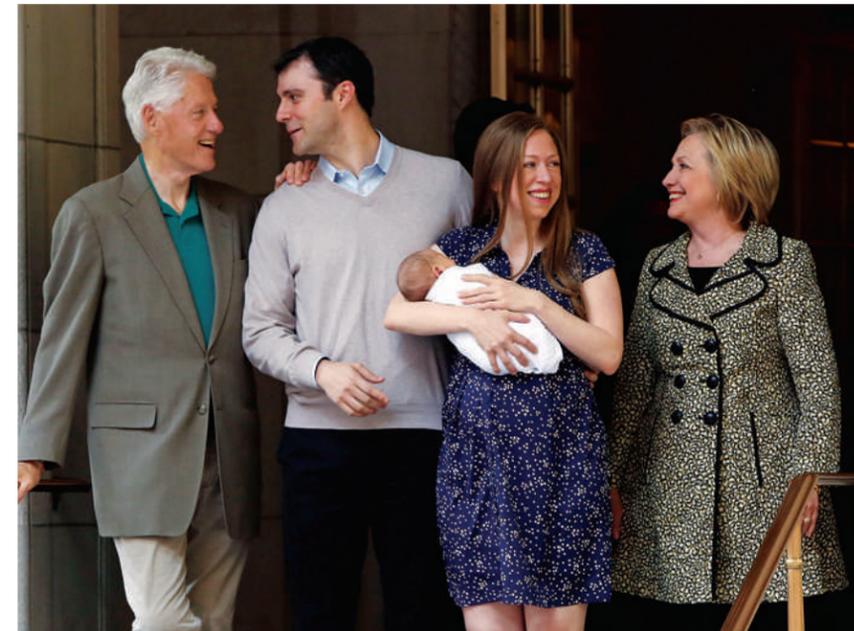
When Hillary first campaigned for a U.S. Senate seat in New York, Bill was still in Washington, serving as president. She won by 12 percentage points. Six years later, she was reelected by 34 percentage points. Then she was appointed secretary of state.

In 2002, he set up a nonprofit to battle HIV/AIDS. The since-renamed Bill, Hillary & Chelsea Clinton Foundation now touts itself as "one of the fastest-growing NGOs in the world." Its 2014 financial statement showed it took in \$338 million in 2014 contributions and grants, with net assets of \$372 million. He now serves on the board. As it often seems with the Clintons, there are questions about its funding and spending.

In domestic matters, after the White House years, the family home moved to Chappaqua, N.Y. Bill's office was in Harlem. Hillary was most often in Washington.

His 2004 memoir was "My Life." Hers, published the same year, was "Living History." In 2011, he wrote "Back to Work: Why We Need Smart Government for a Strong Economy." In 2015, she penned "Hard Choices," about her time as secretary of state.

Opposite page, from top: The Clintons, daughter Chelsea and her husband, Marc Mezvinsky, leave the hospital after the birth of Chelsea's second child, Aidan, in June. Bill Clinton at the Democratic National Convention last month after Hillary Clinton accepted the party's nomination for president.



TO THE EXTENT THAT POLITICAL SPOUSES CAN BECOME SEPARATE ENTITIES, IT SEEMED THE CLINTONS WERE MOVING IN THAT DIRECTION. THEY SELDOM SEEMED TO BE IN THE SAME CITY, MUCH LESS THE SAME HOUSE.





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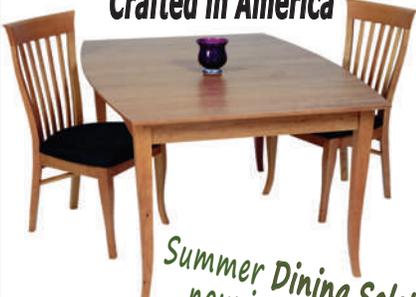
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To the extent that political spouses can become separate entities, it seemed the Clintons were moving in that direction. They seldom seemed to be in the same city, much less the same house.

On Inauguration Day, that could change.

The potential first gentleman certainly seems to want to get back there. He doesn't sound like he wants to sit around the basement watching football and staying out of Hillary's hair.

"I personally think, almost on the eve of my 70th birthday," he tells the crowd in Little Rock, "that the only things that matter are whether, at the end of all this fooling around, you can say people are better off when I quit than when I started, children have a brighter future, and things are coming together instead of being torn apart, and all the rest is background music. That's what I believe," he says, as the applause rises. "And if you believe that, then we've got to do a better job of turning that into good politics."

This doesn't sound very first spouse-ish. This sounds like a man with a personal legacy that he wants to address from a larger pulpit.

After his talk, people crowd around the rope to get a handshake, and he's off to the airport named after him — flying north, as his friend Willie Morris, the famed Southern author once observed, toward home.

Outside, the rain has stopped. The heat and humidity have, for a moment in this blistering summer, passed on.

It allows you to walk down President Clinton Avenue to the Flying Saucer Draught Emporium for a late dinner. It allows you to think of the contradicting histories of Bill Clinton. How is it possible for a man to have come so far and achieved so much from so little and still be able to give an air, there in that last minute of his speech, that he could have been so much better than what his self-inflicted wounds have allowed? ■

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