

March 9, 2008

## **The Clintons, a horror film that never ends**

Andrew Sullivan

It's alive! We thought it might be over but some of us never dared fully believe it. Last week was like one of those moments in a horror movie when the worst terror recedes, the screen goes blank and then reopens on green fields or a lover's tender embrace. Drained but still naive audiences breathe a collective sigh of relief. The plot twists have all been resolved; the threat is gone; the quiet spreads. And then . . .

Put your own movie analogy in here. Glenn Close in the bathtub in *Fatal Attraction* – whoosh! she's back at your throat! – has often occurred to me when covering the Clintons these many years. The Oscars host Jon Stewart compares them to a Terminator: the kind that is splattered into a million tiny droplets of vaporised metal . . . only to pool together spontaneously and charge back at you unfazed.

The Clintons have always had a touch of the zombies about them: unkillable, they move relentlessly forward, propelled by a bloodlust for Republicans or uppity Democrats who dare to question their supremacy. You can't escape; you can't hide; and you can't win. And these days, in the kinetic pace of the YouTube campaign, they are like the new 28 Days Later zombies. They come at you really quickly, like bats out of hell. Or Ohio, anyway.

Now all this may seem a little melodramatic. Perhaps it is. Objectively, an accomplished senator won a couple of races – one by a mere 3% – against another senator in a presidential campaign. One senator is still mathematically unbeatable. But that will never capture the emotional toll that the Clintons continue to take on some of us. I'm not kidding. I woke up in a cold sweat early last Wednesday. There have been moments this past week when I have felt physically ill at the thought of that pair returning to power.

Why? I have had to write several columns in this space over the years acknowledging that the substantive legacy of the Clinton administration (with a lot of assist from Newt Gingrich) was a perfectly respectable one: welfare reform, fiscal sanity, prudent foreign policy, leaner government. But remembering the day-to-day psychodramas of those years still floods my frontal cortex with waves of loathing and anxiety. The further away you are from them, the easier it is to think they're fine. Up close they are an intolerable, endless, soul-sapping soap opera.

The media are marvelling at the Clintons' several near-death political experiences in this campaign. Hasn't it occurred to them how creepily familiar all this is? The Clintons live off psychodrama. They both love to push themselves to the brink of catastrophe and then accomplish the last-minute, nail-biting self-rescue. Before too long the entire story becomes about them, their ability to triumph through crisis, even though the crises are so often manufactured by themselves. That is what last week brought back for me. The 1990s – with a war on.

Remember: Bill Clinton could have easily settled the Paula Jones lawsuit years before he put the entire country through the wringer (Jones sued Clinton for sexual harassment alleged to have occurred while he was governor of Arkansas).

Recall: Hillary Clinton could have killed what turned out to be the White-water nonstory at the very outset by disclosing everything she could (the scandal centred on a controversial Arkansas property deal).

Consider: the Clintons could have prepared for primaries and caucuses after February 5 – so-called Super Tuesday, when 24 states held their presidential nomination vote – as any careful candidate would. They chose not to do any of these things. Not because they are incompetent. But because they live to risk.

Politics is also their life. They know nothing else. Most halfway normal people in politics could at some point walk away. Reagan seemed happy to. Not the Clintons. In the words of the American-based British writer Christopher Hitchens, these are the kind of people who never want the meeting to end. Hillary Clinton will never concede the race so long as there is even the faintest chance that she can somehow win.

They endure all sorts of humiliation – remember the taped Clinton deposition in the Ken Starr investigation (in which Clinton admitted to the inquiry headed by the far-right prosecutor that he had had an “improper physical relationship” with Monica Lewinsky)? Hillary's dismissal of the Lewinsky matter as an invention of the right-wing conspiracy? – because they know no other way to live. They have been thinking of this moment since they were in college and being a senator or an ex-president or having two terms in the White House are not sufficient to satiate their sense of entitlement. Even if they have to put their own party through a divisive, bitter, possibly fatal death match, they will never give up. Their country, their party . . . none of this matters compared with them.

The patterns are staggeringly unaltered. Last Thursday The Washington Post ran an article reporting on the almost comic divisions within the Clinton camp: how chaotic the planning had been, how much chief pollster Mark Penn hated all the other advisers, how even in the wake of a sudden victory most of the Clintonites were eager to score rancid points off each other.

The secrecy and paranoia endure too. Releasing tax returns is routine for a presidential candidate. Barack Obama did it some time back. The Clintons still haven't – and say they won't for more than another month. Why? They have no explanation. They seem affronted by the question.

When you look at the electoral map if the Clintons run again, you also see a reversion to the old patterns of the 1990s – the patterns that cynical political strategists such as Karl Rove and Dick Morris have been exploiting for two decades. The country – scrambled by the post-baby-boomer pragmatism of Obama – snaps back into classic red-blue mode, with the blue areas denoting Democratic-leaning states around the edge and true red Republican states in the heartlands.

The Clintons are comfortable with this polarisation. They need it. Even when running against a fellow Democrat, they instinctively reach for it. Last week, in response to the Obama camp's request that they release their tax returns, Clinton's spokesman called Obama a new Ken Starr. For the Clintons, all Democrats who oppose them are . . . Republicans. And all Republicans are evil.

And evil means that anything the Clintons do in self-defence is excusable – even playing the race card, and the Muslim card, and the gender card, and every sleazy gambit that the politics of fear can come up with. This is how they have arrested the Obama juggernaut. It's the only game they know how to play.

One is reminded of the words of Bob Dylan: "And here I sit so patiently / Waiting to find out what price / You have to pay to get out of / Going through all these things twice."

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