

The politics of provocation: Clinton, Obama and the American media

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A remark by Hillary Clinton in South Dakota Friday touched off a media furor over the weekend, with allegations that she was basing her beleaguered campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination on the possibility that the frontrunner Barack Obama could be assassinated.

In the course of a discussion with the editorial board of the *Argus-Leader* newspaper in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Clinton defended her decision to continue campaigning despite Obama having achieved an apparently insurmountable lead in the total number of Democratic convention delegates supporting his nomination.

It was not unusual, she said, for nomination fights to extend into the month of June. “My husband did not wrap up the nomination in 1992 until he won the California primary somewhere in the middle of June, right?” she said, adding, “We all remember Bobby Kennedy was assassinated in June in California.”

The substance of Clinton’s argument—that there is ample precedent for contesting a nomination well into the summer—was not helped by the two examples that she chose. Bill Clinton became the presumptive nominee of the Democrats in 1992 no later than April, when he won the New York primary. In 1968, primaries and caucuses played much less of a role and the nomination eventually went to Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who did not compete in a single one.

Clinton avoided, for obvious reasons, the example which more closely tracks the current contest: the 1980 challenge by Senator Edward Kennedy to the renomination of President Jimmy Carter, which was bitterly fought until the eve of the Democratic convention in August, and ended with a deeply divided party losing the general election to the Republican Ronald Reagan.

Clinton’s selective use of history is as tendentious as her claims to have “won” the popular vote in the Democratic primaries. But it is clear that Clinton was making an argument about the legitimacy of her continuing in the presidential race, not speculating on the likelihood that Obama would suffer the fate of Robert F. Kennedy.

Randell Beck, executive editor of the South Dakota newspaper, issued a statement saying that “the context of the question and answer with Sen. Clinton was whether her continued candidacy jeopardized party unity this close to the Democratic convention. Her reference to Mr. Kennedy’s assassination appeared to focus on the timeline of his primary candidacy and not the assassination itself.”

The corporate-controlled media nonetheless made the most provocative interpretation of her remarks—beginning, significantly, with the *New York Post*, owned by right-wing billionaire Rupert Murdoch, which did not even have a reporter following the Clinton campaign. From the *Post* it was picked up by the Drudge Report, the right-wing gossip web site that first came to prominence in 1998 during the drive to impeach Bill Clinton.

Both these publications have a vested political interest in fomenting internecine strife within the Democratic Party, something which screaming headlines suggesting Clinton wishes Obama dead were calculated to achieve. The rest of the major media, regardless of their political predilections in the presidential race, obediently followed suit.

This path was traced in a revealing commentary posted on the web site politico.com, under the headline, "[How small stories become big news.](#)" Co-editor John Harris admits, somewhat shamefacedly, that his own publication played a role in building up the story by being the first to get a negative reaction to the Clinton comment from the Obama campaign. The subsequent media pile-on was excessive, he concedes.

"Her comment was news by any standard," Harris writes. "But it was only big news when wrested from context and set aflame by a news media more concerned with being interesting and provocative than with being relevant or serious. Thus, the story made the front page of The New York Times, was the lead story of The Washington Post and got prominent treatment on the evening news on ABC, CBS and NBC." He concluded, "(I)t was striking to see the broadcast networks and big papers, which were still going at full boil that evening and the next morning even though they had plenty of time to assess the (dwindling) significance of the story as the day wore on."

Throughout the Memorial Day holiday weekend there were reports and re-reports of what Clinton said and her subsequent apology—directed, curiously, to the Kennedy family and making no mention of Obama. Then there were the reactions of Obama campaign spokesman Bill Burton, and commentaries from media pundits voicing near-universal condemnation of Clinton. The Obama campaign also circulated to the media a semi-hysterical denunciation of Clinton by Keith Olbermann on his MSNBC cable television program "Countdown With Keith Olbermann."

Obama eventually decided to tamp down the controversy, telling a Puerto Rican radio station Saturday, "I have learned that, when you are campaigning for as many months as Senator Clinton and I have been campaigning, sometimes you get careless in terms of the statements that you make, and I think that is what happened here. Senator Clinton says that she did not intend any offense by it, and I will take her at her word on that."

By Sunday, Obama's chief campaign strategist David Axelrod went on ABC television to declare, "As far as we're concerned, this issue is done. It was an unfortunate statement, as we said, as she's acknowledged. She has apologized. The apology, you know, is accepted. Let's move forward."

The affair reveals much that is diseased and reactionary in contemporary American politics. Once again, media sensationalism diverts public attention from the serious political issues confronting the American people—war, economic crisis, attacks on democratic rights.

With Obama now virtually certain to clinch the Democratic presidential nomination after the last two primaries on June 3, in South Dakota and Montana, he has become the focus of

attention for both the ultra-right and liberal media, in different ways.

The role of the Murdoch press in touching off the uproar over Clinton's remarks is significant. Three times in the past ten days the question of the possible assassination of Obama has been raised, and each time the initiative has come from right-wing quarters.

On May 16, one-time Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, appearing at the convention of the National Rifle Association, made a clumsy joke after a sharp noise was heard backstage as he came to the podium to speak. "That was Barack Obama," Huckabee said. "He just tripped off a chair. He was getting ready to speak and somebody aimed a gun at him, and he dove for the floor." This remark was aired live on CNN, and Huckabee subsequently issued an apology.

On May 23 came Clinton's remark to the *Argus-Leader*, which was virtually identical to previous comments along those lines, made to *Time* magazine in March and then to reporters May 7 after her victory in the Indiana primary. Each time she cited the primary contests of 1968 and 1992 as examples to justify her effort to continue her campaign into June. This argument was so familiar to reporters covering the Clinton campaign on a daily basis that the Associated Press, in its dispatch on the South Dakota appearance, made no mention of it. It was the intervention of the Murdoch press which triggered the media storm.

On May 25, on Fox News, a discussion of Clinton's statement became the occasion for a directly provocative remark by a Fox commentator, Liz Trotta, formerly with the ultra-right *Washington Times*. Venting her spleen at Clinton, Trotta said, "now we have what some are reading as a suggestion that somebody knock off Os—Osama—um, uh—Obama. Well, both, if we could."

The host of the Fox program, Eric Shawn, clearly taken aback, replied, "Talk about how you really feel," while Trotta laughed. The next day, Trotta returned to Fox to issue a pro forma apology "to anybody I've offended," and claim that her expressed desire that Obama should be assassinated was a "lame attempt at humor."

There is a widespread and perfectly legitimate concern, particularly among black voters, that Obama's emergence as the first African-American presidential candidate of one of the two major parties could make him the target of assassination attempts. Sixty percent of all voters, and 80 percent of African-American voters, voiced this concern in recent polls.

The reaction in sections of the media liberals, however, goes well beyond such sentiments. The most revealing was the aforementioned commentary by Keith Olbermann, in which he chastised Clinton for raising the specter of an Obama assassination, although he admitted, "Not for a moment does any rational person believe Senator Clinton is actually hoping for the worst of all political calamities."

According to Olbermann, Clinton's transgression was to mention the murder of Robert F. Kennedy at all: "You actually used the word 'assassination' in a time when there is a fear, unspoken but vivid and terrible, that our again-troubled land and fractured political landscape might target a black man running for president... This is unforgivable, because this nation's deepest shame, its most enduring horror, its most terrifying legacy, is political assassination. The politics of this nation is steeped enough in blood, Senator Clinton, you cannot and must not invoke that imagery! Anywhere! At any time! This, Senator, is too much."

This overwrought language demonstrates a degree of political disorientation. American imperialism has slaughtered millions over the past century—in many cases, Mr. Olbermann might recall, with liberal Democrats rather than conservative Republicans in the White House. The murders of John and Robert Kennedy were terrible acts, but the mass murders in Vietnam and ongoing in Iraq were and are far more terrible.

Olbermann has been an increasingly strident media advocate for Obama, although one suspects that if Clinton were the frontrunner instead, he would be equally histrionic in his support for her. In any case, his condemnation of Clinton is clearly motivated by concern that any reference to the violent history of the United States discredits the US political structure and is potentially destabilizing, something which is perceived among the ruling elite as dangerous under conditions of mounting social tensions and economic turmoil.

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