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Paul Begala on Hillary Clinton's Coming Run for the White House in 2016

Speculation about 2016 just won't die. But she'll only have a shot if she's learned the painful lessons of the disastrous 2008 campaign.

by Paul Begala | April 14, 2012 4:45 AM EDT

Now that the GOP presidential selection process is effectively finished and President Obama is fine-tuning his message for the general election, it's only fitting and proper that we turn our attention to ... <u>Hillary 2016!</u>

WASHINGTON, DC - FEBRUARY 28: U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testifies before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about the department's FY2013 international affairs budget February 28, 2012 in Washington, DC., Chip Somodevilla / Getty Images

Huh? The speculation about whether the secretary of state will <u>run for president</u> four years from now is, to say the least, premature. I suspect Hillary is bemused by all the talk—none of which she has fed. To the contrary, in October she did her best impression of General Sherman, saying, "I'm very privileged to have had the opportunity to serve my country. I'm really old-fashioned. I feel I have made my contribution. I have done the best I can. But now I want to try some other things. I want to get back to writing and maybe some teaching, working on women and girls around the world. I think it's time for others to step up."

Others, no doubt, will step up. And yet the speculation has only intensified in the months since Hillary declared she wouldn't run—abiding by law that precludes the secretary of state from getting involved in elections.

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Hillary benefits from the fact that the job is designed to be above the political fray; she hasn't had to comment on, say, gay marriage or the Trayvon Martin case. It's a paradox Hillary must understand: the less political you are, the more popular a politician you become; the less you yearn for the presidency, the more the country yearns for you. That's why, in a CNN/Opinion Research poll taken last fall, Hillary topped the charts with a 69 percent approval rating.

How would she do on the trail the second time around? It would depend in large part on whether she's learned the lessons of 2008—above all how to run a presidential campaign. I love Hillary and find it hard to be objective about her, but even I have to admit that her last campaign was a mess. It was riven with rivalries, some of her people were deeply disloyal, and the dirty laundry was aired in public. Hillary herself hates such behavior—and yet it flourished on her watch and under her nose.

Fortunately, Hillary's tenure at the state department indicates that she has indeed learned the painful mistakes of four years ago and consistently applied them on the job.

Perhaps most surprising and impressive to observers has been how harmoniously Hillary has blended with Team Obama. The president-elect may have been the only person in his campaign hierarchy who truly wanted Hillary to serve as secretary of state, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. He overcame every objection and rejected every denial because he wanted a "team of rivals" like Lincoln. Some scoffed that what he would get from Hillary would be a rival team, but Hillary has been the very model of collegiality. That does not come with the territory. In the Reagan years Secretary of State George Schultz had a famously bad relationship with Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger. Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld had a mutual-contempt society. But Hillary has worked seamlessly with the Pentagon—first with Bob Gates and now Leon Panetta.

Same goes for Foggy Bottom's relationship with 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. There has not been a single incidence of a public feud, which is not just the dog that didn't bark; it's the pack of wild hounds who didn't howl at the moon. Unheard of. Hillary has managed to be strong, forceful, independent—and yet completely loyal. If she runs the state department so flawlessly, the thinking goes, surely she can run a campaign—and the country.

Hillary must understand the paradox: the less political you are, the more popular a politician you become; the less you yearn for the presidency, the more the country yearns for you.

Then there's her portfolio as secretary of state, which is not exactly easy. With Iran moving toward a nuclear weapon and Israel talking about a preemptive strike, it is Hillary who must defend America's ally and interests. With North Korea again rattling the sabers (in this case an ICBM), it is, again, Hillary who's responsible for America's response. Same with the mess in Syria, the crisis in Sudan, instability in Egypt, and every other global hotspot. What could be a better preparation for sitting in the Oval Office than serving on-point for the hardest issues in the world?

Tough issues come with the territory, but Hillary is widely recognized to have done an excellent job against difficult odds. That combined with her first accomplishment—learning from a disastrous campaign and running a tight ship in troubled waters—is perhaps what causes so much of the commentariat to swoon. Truth is the Beltway bigshots in the media have never liked Hillary. But even they have come to respect her.

Tags:

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