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The Power Of Clinton, The Invisibility Of Obama

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LOUISVILLE -- I see that Dr. Rand Paul has taken out after Bill Clinton, dredging up Monica Lewinsky. And I know why Paul did so. The former president was here in Kentucky yesterday and in this state, as in many others, he is a far more potent and popular foe than President Barack Obama.

On my first day working for The Huffington Post, I came back to Kentucky, where I began my career many years ago at the Courier-Journal. The people who run the University of Louisville Kentucky Author Forum wanted me to do an on-stage interview with a certain best-selling author who is also my new boss: Arianna Huffington. It was a tricky mix of professional incest and personal nostalgia, but the event worked out well and I also got a chance to play Kentucky reporter once again out in the state. I raced over to Lexington and here is the ground-level, outside-the-Beltway reality I witnessed:

Like Voldemort's, Obama's is a name no one dares utter -- and that includes Clinton speaking to Democrats.

At a sunny, noontime rally on the campus of the University of Kentucky in Lexington yesterday, the former president made a stirring, well-argued case for Democratic Senate candidate Jack Conway and for Democrats generally -- without once mentioning Obama and rarely mentioning the presidency. It was as though we suddenly had only two branches of government. To be fair, almost no one else at the one-hour rally mentioned the sitting president. And Kentucky is staunch Republican territory. "We're farther ahead in the generic ballot here than ever," GOP Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky told me yesterday. "President Obama was never popular here, even at his peak."

Still, the eerie invisibility of the president is a telling commentary on the Democrats' confused, divided and defensive predicament as they brace for the verdict of the voters on Election Day, Nov. 2. There was something odd -- and, if you're a Democrat, depressing -- about a former Democratic president avoiding any mention of his Democratic successor.

Clinton sincerely wants to help out on the trail -- and certainly wants to avoid the accusation that he didn't try to help. But his travels have turned into a personal victory lap that often makes him -- not the candidate he's touting -- the center of attention. That was true here in Kentucky. The rally's mechanics were mostly handled by the Secret Service; more to the point, the final (and therefore top-billed) speaker wasn't Conway. It was Clinton. The Conway people didn't mind. They were glad to have him. Rail-thin but not frail, wearing a tweedy professorial sports coat and his signature rueful, knowing smile, Clinton was treated with a respect bordering on awe. His familiar mane of white hair, thinning now, was translucent in the sun, giving him an almost otherworldly look: the Sage from a Better Age.

Clinton is beloved in Kentucky. He won the state twice. He speaks the local dialect, which contains Appalachian notes of working-class pride, suspicion of big shots and Baptist revivalism. But more than that -- and more than just in Kentucky -- Clinton's economic record (22.7 million jobs created, and he tends not to forget to mention the .7) looks spectacularly good in the context of what has followed.

These days there is almost an Old Testament, milk-and-honey reverence for that economic record, at least as expressed by former Kentucky Sen. Wendell Ford. An old-school podium pounder, Ford -- stooped but still strong voiced at 86 -- talked of

the former president in messianic terms. "Bill Clinton found us the path to gold!" he shouted. The crowd of 2,000, most of them students, didn't laugh. They seemed to think he was right.

How any of this helps Obama is far from clear; it isn't even clear that it helps many Democrats -- since they'd be joining the same Washington party that the current president ostensibly heads.

But Clinton is all too happy to show Obama how it's done. As a campaigner and as president, Clinton's gift was his ability to untangle the knots of even the most complex policy issue and explain it in plain language to people suspicious of the powerful - - but eager not to be screwed by them or to be seen as dupes. Republicans and their corporate allies were out to shut down the few good things that government does for you, he said, in the name of balancing a budget that they themselves destroyed. "I gave you budget surpluses!" Clinton said, as if this had been an act of personal beneficence.

Knowing his audience, the former president focused on Pell Grants, and on a new program that allows graduates to pay back their loans over longer periods and at lower rates. Paul, he said, will try to take that new program away -- and, given the GOP's deliberate vagueness about spending cuts -- there is reason to think Clinton is right.

Which is why Paul got personal today. Which means Clinton drew blood. Which means that he did what he came to do. Which means Obama will remain invisible, at least in Kentucky, at least for now, and probably for a long time to come.