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Clinton's Defeat: Outside Factors Hurt, but Blame Falls on the Candidate



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Finishing Amie Parnes and Jonathan Allen's engrossing book, *Shattered: Inside Hillary Clinton's Doomed Campaign*, listening to Clinton offering her perspective on why she lost to CNN's Christiane Amanpour, and watching FBI Director James Comey testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee in the same week leaves a decidedly mixed view of the last election.

The book delves into what went wrong in the Clinton campaign and why, as well as the internal power struggles and foibles of the key characters in Clinton World. While I am unaware of any major factual mistakes in the book, it made the outcome seem preordained when it most certainly wasn't.

Where the book is most helpful is putting into context events that were not fully appreciated last year. The WikiLeaks releases of internal Democratic National Committee emails and messages from Clinton campaign chair man John Podesta came at critical junctures. Some surfaced on the day that Tim Kaine was announced as Clinton's running mate, others just minutes after the disclosure of the lurid Billy Bush-Donald Trump conversations on Access Hollywood. Other leaks kept dribbling out, keeping the Clinton team off-balance and off-message throughout the campaign.

Clinton this week took official responsibility for the loss but blamed other factors. "I was the candidate. I was the person who was on the ballot," she said. Later she added: "Did I make mistakes? Oh my God, yes. You will read my confessions, my request for absolution. But the reason I believe we lost were the intervening events in the last 10 days." Earlier in the session, she had said, "I was on the way to winning until the combination of James Comey's letter on Oct. 28 and Russian WikiLeaks raised doubts in the minds of people who were inclined to vote for me but got scared off. If the election had been on Oct. 27, I'd be your president."

Technically speaking, Clinton was probably right, but she would have been more convincing if she had given a more detailed account of the mistakes made by herself, her husband, and her campaign. She neglected to mention her fateful decision to set up a private email server. Nor did she try to explain why her husband wandered over to say howdy to Attorney General Loretta Lynch on the tarmac of the Phoenix airport at a critical juncture in the email probe, which effectively disqualified Lynch and put the investigation into Comey's hands.

The American people faced a choice between the two most unpopular presidential nominees in history. When the spotlight was pointed on Trump, as it was for most of the campaign, his poll numbers dropped; when it shifted to Clinton, her numbers tumbled. To Trump's credit, in the campaign's closing weeks he heeded his advisers' advice to stifle his provocative tweets and public pronouncements. His lower profile, coinciding with Comey's public statements, had the effect of putting the spotlight onto Clinton.

When Comey first raised Clinton's emails in July, he told House Republicans that there was nothing there but that he'd get back to them if things changed. The big change was the discovery that the laptop belonging to Huma Abedin's husband, disgraced former Rep. Anthony Weiner, contained emails sent by Clinton from her private server. Because the FBI's New York field office was filled with Clinton-hating agents who leaked like sieves, Comey figured that this information was bound to seep out and that it was better that House Republicans hear it from him directly rather than from blogs or newspapers. So less than two weeks before the elections, he announced that more emails had been found even though the FBI didn't yet know what was in them. Then, nine days later, he cleared Clinton for a second time. But by that time, the spotlight of bad publicity had clearly damaged her campaign.

Given Vladimir Putin's background as a KGB officer and his pattern of using disinformation and meddling in the internal affairs of other countries, it was not surprising that he would make mischief in the American campaign. And given his hatred of Clinton for promoting democratic efforts in his country, it was likely that Russian intelligence agencies were trying to sabotage her candidacy more than help Donald Trump, although there is little question that they did. Pilfering emails from the DNC and Podesta's private email proved more effective than the Russians could have hoped.

But those leaks and Comey's pronouncements would not have made a difference had Clinton run a better campaign. Instead of trying to win over malleable voters, her team tried to re-create the Obama coalition of minorities, millennials, liberals, and urban voters—never mind that the candidate was a 69-year-old white woman who had been in the public eye for 25 years, not a young, charismatic, fresh face seeking to become the first African-American president.

The campaign paid scant attention to working-class whites, particularly those in small-town and rural America, who had been important in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal coalition as well as in Bill Clinton's successful campaigns in 1992 and 1996, and who, ironically, made up the core of Hillary Clinton's support against Obama in 2008. The campaign relied too much on analytics, failed to closely monitor critical states in the final three weeks, and didn't allocate sufficient resources to Wisconsin, Michigan, and rural Pennsylvania. Finally, the campaign was riven by infighting, and the candidate could never come up with a rationale for her presidency better than "you can't elect Trump."

But you have to give credit to Trump and his campaign. He tapped into fear, anger, and resentments that political pros had either ignored or dismissed. He settled down and became as focused as he is capable of being in the final two weeks, when it really mattered. And his campaign blew through cracks in the vaunted blue wall of states that Democrats thought was impenetrable.

The 2016 presidential election had a lot of moving parts, a lot of variables that alone might not have affected the outcome but collectively certainly did. No one or two things explain a race that below the radar was closer than national polls indicated—and that on Election Day elevated to the presidency a political novice whose strength among ordinary voters was masked by the loathing of the elites.