

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: Philippe Reines <[redacted]>
Sent: Friday, June 11, 2010 7:44 PM
To: H
Cc: CDM; Huma Abedin; Jake Sullivan
Subject: FT

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Our clips service doesn't have the license necessary to provide FT (or Reuters) content, so here's the long awaited FT profile – you'll be especially interested in the guest column David Milliband wrote:

An FT interview with Hillary Clinton
By Daniel Dombey
FT
June 11 2010 22:21

This is what it is like to be Hillary Clinton. The motorcade, twisting and skidding through rain-splashed streets for more than an hour; the public meetings and camera lights at journey's end; the spotlight that has not let up for two decades. It is almost as if the 2008 US presidential election – hailed as the most exciting for a generation – had never ended.

But this is a campaign without a vote. Today, Clinton's convoy is snaking through São Paulo, Brazil, not South Hampton, New Hampshire. She herself is no longer an aspirant for the White House, despite what the overnight flights, town hall meetings and strategy sessions that make up her gruelling schedule might suggest. Instead, she is in Latin America to shore up relations with the region and promote a new idea of US leadership, one very much built around herself.

She's had bigger and more ecstatic audiences than the 700-odd students and staff crammed into the hall tonight at Zumbi dos Pradares, an Afro-Brazilian university, but she's still greeted by a wave of raised arms as the audience snaps away at her with their mobile phones.

In the convoy moments before, she was wrapped in a shawl, suffering from a cold and angry at the delays that pushed us into the side streets speckled with box-like bars, warehouses and love hotels while Brazilian motorists sought to cut into our path. There is no sign of that now. With the metabolism of a born politician, she feeds off the energy of her audience and takes questions from students, teachers and local celebrities for an hour. Hillary Clinton never looks happier than when she is centre stage.

Most US secretaries of state wouldn't bother with this sort of event, much less initiate it and arrange for it to be screened on the biggest local channel. Yet this is what Clinton does on almost every foreign trip – and she seems to spend half her life on her official 727, crammed with long-time aides and armed bodyguards. The schedule is backbreaking and constantly shifting. She has notched up more than a quarter of a million miles since taking office.

On this Latin America trip, thrown into confusion by an earthquake in Chile, we have already visited four countries in 24 hours. We go to tiny Uruguay, where our stay is so brief we check into a hotel just for a shower; Argentina, where we spend almost all our time at the presidential palace; Chile itself, where we don't leave the airport; and Brazil, where we spend almost a full day.

So what exactly is Clinton trying to do on this never-ending world tour? Travelling with her for a week, talking to people inside and outside the administration, I tried to find out.

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"We now have a case to make and it is not just a case that is made to the president or the prime minister

or the foreign minister or an ambassador," she tells me a few weeks later, as she perches on a sofa in her expansive office, with its view of the Lincoln Memorial. "People now have a voice and an opinion and a vote in many instances on the direction that their own societies take ... I want to model a different kind of leadership that is open and willing to listen but [also] to stand our ground if necessary."

She argues that these trips of hers help to restore the US's image in the wake of the Bush administration – by making contact with public opinion abroad, and so boosting American power. Her aides say that, as a battle-hardened politician who also happens to be one of the most famous women in the world, she is ideally placed to carry out the task. But the deeper question is whether she is merely implementing the foreign policy crafted by Barack Obama, her boss and former rival, or whether her role – and ambitions – go beyond that.

Is she a kind of saleswoman-in-chief for the US, I ask? "Well, I think that is part of the job," she replies, toying with the napkin underneath her glass of water. "If you are making a case for American values and for American leadership, you have to make it where people now get information ... Given the bridges we had to build and some of the repair work we had to do, we had to travel."

As in São Paulo, her system is under strain – "I've been fighting this all day," she says as she masks a cough set off by her allergies (Washington's cherry blossom trees are shedding their flowers). Life is still hectic – the volcanic ash cloud has just all but paralysed Europe and televisions throughout the State Department are showing the first British election debate. But Clinton remains enthusiastic, affable and unhurried, her speech peppered with exclamations such as "oh my gosh", even as she discusses issues of state. She politely asks if I have any updates for her about Europe's airspace shutdown and tells me she's been talking to Norway's foreign minister about it.

"He said that this dust gets into engines of any size, even Air Force One – it's chunky! I don't know how else to describe it," she says, an odd note of hilarity entering her voice as she pronounces the word "chunky".

Clinton often speaks in this eager, unvarnished way – a world away from the clipped, on-message manner of her immediate predecessor in the post, Condoleezza Rice. If anything, she is an undiplomat – known less for calibrated circumlocutions than for her plain speaking and sometimes her gaffes, a woman who retains both a formidable political constituency and a laugh she once admitted can send cats scurrying from a room.

Her staff point out she is only the third elected politician in 60 years to have served as secretary of state, and the first to come from outside the foreign policy establishment since James Baker, George H.W. Bush's right-hand man and perhaps her most illustrious recent predecessor. She may be the most substantive politician in the office since William Jennings Bryan, the three-time presidential candidate who served as secretary almost a century ago. "Her stature on the world stage, her almost presidential stature, has set her apart," Bill Burns, the top career diplomat at the State Department, tells me. "Leaders want to meet her. And the town hall meetings do make a difference with public opinion."

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State visitor Hillary Clinton is greeted by Air Force Base Commander Colonel Celso de Araujo at São Paulo airport in March

Back in São Paulo, the meeting at the university ranges far from the confines and dramatis personae of traditional diplomacy. Annie, a young woman with red and blue dreadlocked hair, tells Clinton about her dance and percussion classes and asks how to study in the US without paying college fees. A nervous young man confesses himself lost halfway through an abstruse question about tariff policy; Clinton, smiling and nodding in that vaguely automatic way of hers, bears with him all the same. Another female student asks for an autograph. When answering, Clinton sometimes opens her eyes wide as she emphasises a phrase; at other moments, seemingly at random, she pulls her hands apart as if demonstrating the size of a fish.

Then a law student called Marina asks about abortion – which is illegal in Brazil – and Clinton moves into treacherous terrain. She speaks of the Brazilian hospital she visited in the 1990s that treated not just

expectant mothers but women suffering from the consequences of backstreet abortions. "Wealthy women have rights in every country," she says. "And poor women don't." Her strength of feeling can't be hidden as she denounces "the great toll that illegal abortions take and the denial of women being able to exercise such a fundamental personal right".

Tom Shannon, the US ambassador to Brazil, tells me later: "I understand the possible concern that we might have come close to domestic issues. But she wasn't laying out a prescription for Brazil. She was sharing her experience as a woman in American politics and as secretary of state." It's true: Clinton doesn't quite cross the line. Onstage, she is controlled without seeming artificial, convivial without appearing over-effusive, what a previous age would call a real trouper. At the podium she looks straight ahead, her lips carefully expressionless. Still, the old competitive instincts haven't left her. Perhaps it is the lecterns at press conferences, reminiscent of the Democratic presidential debates, but on exiting the podium at a joint appearance with Argentina's president Cristina Fernández, Clinton makes clear her satisfaction at having had the last word. The expert debater who usually bested Obama has not left the stage.

Yet that competitive urge coexists with what one insider describes as her "almost inhuman loyalty" towards Obama. Her mastery of the facts – an "information carnivore" one of her officials calls her – comes despite the consensus in much of Washington that her role consists largely of implementing the foreign policy Obama and his inner circle have framed, rather than helping frame it herself.

In São Paulo, she shows her loyalty in striking fashion when she is asked repeatedly about positive discrimination – another sensitive topic in Brazil – not least because, Clinton herself observes, Afro-Brazilians account for more than half the country's population but only 2 per cent of university students. "That suggests to me that some special steps need to be taken [in] recruiting and admitting students so that they can have a chance to succeed," she tells the hall, again inching towards domestic politics, before speaking of her pride in the progress the US civil rights movement has made in the past half-century. She says: "The election of Barack Obama, many believe, was the greatest accomplishment of all because it demonstrated that an African-American could be elected president of the United States."

Among the crowd, I catch my breath and scribble down her words. It's hard to think of a more fulsome statement from the woman who fought so hard against Obama – and who squandered a huge poll lead and millions of dollars in the struggle against him.

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The great collaborator Clinton has established strong working relationships within the Obama administration

When I ask Clinton later about how she managed to move from the antagonism of the primary race to the obedience of office, she dismisses my question with an anodyne "that's politics". She adds: "We're working really hard and well together ... It just never comes up any more, it seems like ancient history to me." Not so ancient, I think, that she is willing to admit the failings of her campaign. "I always run inclusive and successful organisations," she retorts when I ask her whether she'd applied any lessons from that searing experience to her new post.

She admits she didn't want the job at State – she says she was exhausted by the election and missed the Senate – "but at the end of the day, I'm pretty old-fashioned and if the president asks you to do something, you'd better have a really good reason why you can't." Also, she adds: "Suppose I had won and I were asking him to be in my cabinet ... I would have wanted him to say yes."

Others say the relationship is more complex, that by dint of her loyalty and unflagging hard work, Clinton has moved closer to the charmed circle and made herself an even more formidable political force than before. "Quite simply, she gives good advice and the president over a year and a half has recognised that," says Anne-Marie Slaughter, head of the State Department policy planning unit. "The relationship is based on her performance in the job."

By all accounts, it's a collaborative partnership, though not perhaps a warm one. Clinton boasts a good working relationship with the main players of the administration – and has formed something of an alliance with defence secretary Robert Gates, although on life-and-death issues such as Afghanistan, it is

Gates, not her, who has taken the lead. As one official told me, secretaries of state have often either been popular with their own department – Colin Powell comes to mind – or with the rest of the administration – as was Condoleezza Rice – but Clinton has managed to be both.

In truth, Clinton's language remains harder-edged than Obama's – she recently claimed that Iran's Revolutionary Guard had staged a slow-motion coup – and she has sometimes been more willing than he is to hint at using the military. "She seems to step up with a bit of spine just at the right time," says Kurt Volker, a US ambassador to Nato under George W. Bush.

She has also assumed an ever more prominent role in talking to leaders such as Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan – apparently because she is trusted both by them and Obama. Meanwhile, she has been careful to keep her husband, the former US president, in the background. Aides say they have barely seen him in the building – though Clinton herself says that behind the scenes Bill Clinton gives her strategic advice. "One of his favourite sayings, that I remind myself of all the time, is a kind of baseball saying," she says: "Don't major in the minors; keep your eye on not just the headlines but the trend lines."

It is her co-operative stance rather than any notable effort to set out a grand vision of her own that is the chief theme of her time so far at State. When I ask Clinton to name her proudest achievement in office, she replies "the effective and collaborative approach that this administration has taken towards identifying and solving problems." A more process-oriented, less provocative answer would be hard to imagine.

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But maybe, I think, the US has less scope for grand strategy than it did in the past couple of decades, when the country seemed to bestride the world colossus-style. Clinton herself suggests that so formidable are the tasks confronting the US that the administration has little scope to enter into internecine fights but needs instead to focus on the challenges to hand. Whatever the reason for her stance, it seems to be a smart decision – by all accounts she's overcome many of the suspicions the White House retinue had towards her.

"It's fair to say that she was not born into the administration's inner circle but slowly but surely, for the most consequential decisions, she now has a prime seat at the table," says one official. Praising what he calls her "Terminator-quality durability and determination," he adds: "She's done an amazing amount of work, judging that the way to build a strategic vision is bottom up, by mastering the details."

Indeed, Clinton's ability to master the most arcane foreign policy briefs is the marvel of her building. She has dropped into obscure working groups and shown an unnerving knowledge of their details. At her confirmation hearings last year she exchanged facts about the arctic with an Alaskan senator; at the meeting in São Paulo she becomes enthused about freight transport policy both in Brazil and the US. She herself acknowledges that finding her feet on foreign policy was something of a struggle, despite her campaign claims of expertise in the field. "It was so intellectually challenging, just to get our arms around all of these issues," she says. During her first year, she was criticised for apparent gaffes – including the way she called for Israel to halt all building of settlements on occupied territory only to hail a partial freeze a few months later as unprecedented. On an election campaign, she says, "you may be in a different city four times a day but you have a message you're trying to deliver that is repetitive and aimed at your audience. But here you might deal with 10 different countries' problems, six different regional or global challenges in the course of a day."

As the Latin America tour shows, she is now trying to do both – travel incessantly and solve an array of international issues. She is at the forefront of the US's efforts to consolidate relations with a number of important countries – predominantly Russia and China, but also rising powers such as Brazil, Turkey, Indonesia and South Africa – and to cool down anti-American feeling in hotspots, notably Pakistan. She says the push is working, hailing a "change in public opinion in places that were pretty negative about the US" – a reference to Russia and Pakistan. But it is far from smooth sailing. Differences about Iran and over Israel's raid on aid-bearing ships off Gaza have stoked tensions with Turkey and Brazil recently, amid questioning of the effectiveness of the Obama administration's policies.

During my time with her on the road, the stop in Brazil is the focal point – not surprising given the

country's increased profile as Latin America leader. Clinton is now heading the administration's push to secure sanctions on Iran, and in Brasilia she tries and fails to win President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to her cause. She employs an almost combative tone at a press conference with Celso Amorim, Brazil's foreign minister. At moments she appears to barely contain her irritation, as she denounces "an Iran that runs to Brazil" as well as other countries such as Turkey and China "telling different things to different people to avoid international sanctions". Amorim is spiky in his own way - drawing parallels to the 1990s sanctions on Iraq and the claims about weapons of mass destruction before the 2003 war. "Of course, I don't agree with everything the Secretary said," he says.

It is not a happy experience - indeed this past week both Brazil and Turkey voted against sanctions at the United Nations - yet Hillary Clinton is nowhere near giving up. Years ago, one of Bill Clinton's biographers described his approach to government as a "permanent campaign", and it appears to be his wife's preferred form of existence as well. If there is one constant in Clinton's life, it is that she never throws in her cards, whether what motivates her is power or public service.

"Never, never!" she exclaims, when I ask whether she ever thought of walking off into the wings after the frustrations and indignities of her time at the White House. "I have a very realistic sense of what high-stakes politics requires and it took me a while to get there because it's shocking when you are in the arena ... but once you figure it out, you can take it seriously for purposes of analysis and understanding, but you can't take it personally." Such treatment seems to rankle all the same. She's been listening to coverage ahead of the British debate and is plainly irritated by the coverage of the leaders' wives. "Whether a woman's running for office or she's supporting her husband who's running for office and she gets criticised for wearing open-toed shoes or for the colour of her coat, there's just a lot of history that you bear if you are a woman who puts herself out in the political arena," she says.

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Another country Clinton boards her official 727 to fly from São Paulo to Costa Rica. Injustice towards women appears to be the issue that most enthuses Clinton in this job - as in her many other incarnations in American public life, whether as First Lady or before. "I feel passionately it is in not just the American national security interests but the world's, that women be given the opportunities and the tools to make the most out of their own lives," she says.

In the 1990s she steered clear of reading the newspapers because of the way she was treated. Today, she says, "I certainly don't read coverage of me, I read what else is going on that I need to know about to do my job." "It's all baloney," says Philippe Reines, her press adviser, who set up the meeting with her and is sitting to one side in her office.

"Yeah, yeah, right, that's what he tells me," Clinton responds.

I wonder. She may not read the stories about her, but she has boosted her domestic profile still further by talking to American magazines such as Esquire, Vogue and Parade. To what end? Clinton has said she will only serve one four-year term as secretary of state - understandable, given the grind of the job. When I ask whether she expects a woman president in the next decade or so, she responds: "I'd love that, obviously I would love that. I want to be front and centre when it happens."

"Any chance it would be you?" I ask.

"No, no, I don't think that's in the cards," Clinton says. She's given more categorical denials in the past. "I think that there's a whole generation of young women and not so young, but mature, seasoned women who are earning their stripes and recognising how tough it is out there. It is not for the faint of heart to run for president, and I believe it is harder for women, it just is, and that's just a fact." But, says one US official, "all the profiles and all this media treatment undercut the argument that she is finished with electoral politics. Why do all this stuff? She's already Hillary Clinton. You have to ask: 'What's the idea behind raising her domestic profile still further?'"

Indeed she is now, by some counts, the most popular politician in America and some in Washington say she could be a good fit for the vice-presidential slot in the 2012 elections.

Back in São Paulo, once the town hall meeting is over, Clinton faces a seven-hour flight to Costa Rica. The journey goes on and on, and as saleswoman-in-chief for the US in an unruly world, she faces a long, hard road. Today the US sometimes struggles to assert itself on the world stage. But the obstacles are rather fewer if the product she is pitching is herself. A secretary of state like none before her, Hillary Clinton, long one of the most formidable figures in US politics, is looking stronger than ever.

Daniel Dombey is the FT's US diplomatic correspondent

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David Miliband: "Hillary is a rock star ... she has a great sense of fun, and a great sense of humour"

It's too early to start chalking up a scorecard because Hillary Clinton, and the Obama administration, is laying the foundations for long-term change in America's foreign policy. The challenges are immense – probably more difficult than the inheritance of any previous administration. But American leadership is essential and a commitment to multilateralism – in fact multi, multilateralism using different and overlapping forums – is real and right.

You also have to remember that Hillary is a rock star. When I arrived at the Nato Foreign Ministers meeting in March 2009, it was a nice surprise that all the staff, never mind the press, seemed to have turned out in droves for my arrival. Then I realised that Hillary was 10 minutes behind me.

That said, the thing that most surprised me about working with Clinton was not her intelligence or her hard work, all of which are well known, but that behind the serious exterior is someone who has a great sense of fun, and a great sense of humour. She has seen politics from all sides, and can laugh at herself as well as at others.

She's a remarkably good listener, always synthesising ideas and opinions to develop her own. She thinks strategically as well as tactically. She's also very, very un pompous. Hillary is a very political person but in a particular way, she honours politics and public service and believes that democratic politics is not a necessary evil, but a calling of value and vocation. She knows you win some and you lose some, but it's essential to take part.

There's one other thing. Hillary is a people person in that she thinks deeply about the psychology of the people she's dealing with. Their motivation, their loyalties, their culture. It's real emotional intelligence in trying to understand why people disagree and how you can get them to agree. I think that must be why so many other members of the administration say she is a very good colleague.

David Miliband is shadow foreign secretary

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Gideon Rachman: "Relations between the White House and the State Department are not particularly close"

A school teacher asked to write a report on Hillary Clinton's stint as secretary of state would have to give her 10/10 for effort but a rather more modest mark for actual achievements – maybe a six or a seven.

Secretaries of state are generally judged on two criteria. First, how have they done in the endless bureaucratic turf wars that characterise Washington politics? Second, how effective have they been in promoting US foreign policy in the wider world? Success in one area usually helps in the other. Henry Kissinger was a superb Washington infighter – and his close relationship with President Nixon made him all the more effective overseas. Colin Powell, George W. Bush's first secretary of state, was widely admired outside the US – but came out on the wrong side of many of the Washington battles, which limited his ability to get things done in the wider world.

Hillary Clinton has skilfully avoided being sucked into the debilitating Washington struggles that so damaged Powell. Despite the often poisonous rivalry between the Obama and Clinton camps during the

campaign, Clinton has a good working relationship with the president. But while relations between the White House and the State Department are cordial, they do not seem to be particularly close. Clinton appointed many loyalists from her own campaign to the State Department, with the result that State is rather detached from Obama's inner circle. Obama's penchant for making high-profile speeches in foreign capitals such as Cairo, Prague, Tokyo and Istanbul means that the president himself has done more than anyone else to define his administration's approach to the world.

That still leaves a role for Clinton to fill in the crucial details of policy. But special representatives have been appointed to deal with Afghanistan and the Middle East – and the Treasury is critical to China policy. Asked about Clinton's impact as secretary of state, one senior European policymaker purses his lips and says: "She's done some great trips, and she's highly professional. But it's hard to see any particular area where she has really driven policy."

Gideon Rachman is the FT's chief foreign affairs columnist

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David Rothkopf: "When she has been asked to deliver tough messages, she has done so unflinchingly"

Hillary Clinton has been a cautious secretary of state: she has protected the president well and pursued his agenda without upstaging him – an early concern, given her stature. She has worked very well with other members of the cabinet, and is reconsidering the role and structure of the State Department.

That includes a review of the role of diplomacy going forward. Clinton has not only acknowledged the rise of new powers and a changing global power structure but has taken steps to reshape US foreign policy structure accordingly. An important part of that has been recognising the importance of co-operating with private and non-state actors such as NGOs, as well as dealing with non-state threats.

When the administration has called upon her to deliver tough messages, she has done so unflinchingly. This has allowed the president to articulate a strategic vision which Clinton then goes about implementing. Still, neither the secretary of state nor the president determines the global situation. The US may be the most powerful country in the world but it is one among many powerful countries, and many aspects of the situation we face today are beyond our control. The Obama administration has been dealt an extremely difficult hand: not only Iraq and Afghanistan, but Iran and North Korea's nuclear programmes, the rise of emerging powers and a complex and still unfolding series of financial crises.

We have gone from a world in which the US thought it had limitless resources and unbounded options to one where the limits are clear; from a world in which you could work in the G8 to one where you have to work in the context of the G20; a world where new technologies and new powers play a bigger role. All of those things would dictate a change in foreign policy regardless of who is in office.

Hillary Clinton has established a very solid foundation. The next step is to identify a couple of signature issues – and have a couple of signature successes. That will take her to the next level.

David Rothkopf is a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace with expertise in national security