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Hillary's Moment: Clinton Faces the World

By Joe Klein

Time Magazine

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It was Halloween night in Jerusalem, and Benjamin Netanyahu came dressed as a peacemaker. "We're prepared to start peace talks immediately," the notoriously reluctant Israeli Prime Minister proclaimed, with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton standing at his side, poker-faced. "I think we should ... get on it and get with it."

It was a ploy, of course. The Palestinians were tangled up in themselves, yet again. They had elections looming, and their leader, Mahmoud Abbas, had to hang tough: he was demanding a total freeze to Israeli settlement-building on the West Bank — which was precisely what the Obama Administration had previously said it favored. Netanyahu was offering a partial freeze, not including new settlements in East Jerusalem, the desired capital of a future Palestinian state. This was a nonstarter for the Palestinians, but it had the holographic glow of a step forward. It was an "unprecedented" offer, Netanyahu trumpeted, with the joy of a chess master springing a trap. (See photos from 60 years of Israel.)

It was a tough moment for Clinton, playing second fiddle at the Bibi-does-Gandhi show. President Barack Obama had softened his language on the settlements a few weeks earlier: instead of a total freeze, he had talked about Israeli "restraint" in settlement-building. And now Clinton seemed to cement the Administration's retreat, agreeing that Netanyahu's proposal was, indeed, "unprecedented," even though the U.S. still favored a total freeze. The most important thing, she added, was for the parties to get to the table as quickly as possible. The onus was back on the Palestinians — and the Palestinians quickly expressed outrage at the Obama Administration's retreat. Their Arab neighbors soon joined in, causing Clinton to backtrack two days later, telling reporters the Israeli plan "falls far short" of U.S. expectations, although she still insisted on calling it "unprecedented," which was neither diplomatic nor wise.

Suddenly the Obama Administration seemed wobbly on the Middle East; clearly, Clinton had been too bullish on Netanyahu's proposal (which had been negotiated over months with Middle East envoy George Mitchell and was seen, privately, by the Americans as real progress). But the Administration's mission was to get the parties into peace talks without preconditions. The Israelis were now in favor of talks. The Palestinians were setting preconditions. And Clinton had violated an essential rule of her job: boring is almost always better. (See photos from the life and career of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.)

Clinton's Three Qualities

For the past 40 years, the awkward Middle East press conference has helped define the job of Secretary of State. You go to Jerusalem or Ramallah; you stand there "guardedly optimistic" in public; in private, you try to move a comma, but the Israelis or Palestinians move a semicolon to block your comma. The result is almost always the same: gridlock. The breakthroughs, when they come, emanate from others. Walter Cronkite asks Anwar Sadat if he'd be willing to go to Jerusalem ... and Sadat, to everyone's surprise, says yes. The Israelis and Palestinians hold secret meetings in Oslo and

reach what appears to be a breakthrough — they're talking! — which then becomes another dead end.

The job of Secretary of State is more thankless than glamorous; in some ways, the Department of State, a noble antique, is still trying to come to terms with the invention of the telephone. In an era when Twitter haiku-messaging rules, diplomacy moves at the speed, and requires the nuanced complexity, of literature. Power has drifted from State to the National Security Council and the Pentagon, especially in wartime. Only a few of Clinton's recent predecessors have distinguished themselves. Henry Kissinger, a National Security Adviser who belatedly became Secretary of State, was Richard Nixon's schizophrenic alter ego; George Shultz was a strong policy voice in the Reagan Administration; James Baker had clout because he was George H.W. Bush's best friend and a world-class dealmaker. Most of the others have been frustrated or forgettable. And yet this is Hillary Clinton we're talking about — the second most popular American in the world, an eternally compelling and supremely talented character, the subject of constant speculation, a walking headline. Her very presence in the job makes it crucial once more.

It is a cliché to say that by naming Clinton, Obama brought his most popular potential opponent into the tent. The conventional wisdom, too cynical by half, is that he thereby succeeded in neutering her, a theory bolstered by Clinton's reticence during her first nine months on the job, with special envoys like Mitchell and Richard Holbrooke doing the heavy lifting of diplomacy. But by naming Clinton, Obama also gave her great power, which cuts both ways: if she becomes dissatisfied with her role or the Administration's policies, she can become a torpedo aimed at the Oval Office. Colin Powell had similar power and a real gripe — the Iraq war — but never used it. Clinton has no such gripe, but as the Obama Administration settles in and policy differences begin to emerge among the key players, the Powell conundrum looms: How will Clinton choose to use her power? How will Obama react if and when she does?

Traditionally, the Secretary of State is judged on his or her ability to formulate policy, negotiate deals and manage the striped-pants bureaucracy. Clinton has no history as a global strategist, although her performance in the 2008 campaign indicates that she is a bit more conservative than the President, more the foreign policy realist than the Wilsonian idealist. It is also too early to judge her skill as a manager or negotiator — although her performance in Jerusalem indicates that she needs a few lessons in Middle East Haggling 101.

There are, however, three qualities that could make her a memorable Secretary of State. She brings a vision of departmental reform — the need to elevate foreign aid programs to the same status and rigorous scrutiny as diplomacy — that could change striped pants into chinos in the developing world. She is also the first elected politician to hold the office since Edmund Muskie briefly did during the Carter Administration, which has enabled her to better understand and interact with the politicians who run places like Afghanistan and Pakistan. But most important, she is an international celebrity with a much higher profile than any of her recent predecessors and the ability — second only to the President's — to change negative attitudes about the U.S. abroad.

She has the potential to become the most powerful public diplomat the U.S. has fielded in quite some time, although her performance so far, at home and abroad, has occasionally been perplexing. At home, she has often seemed tentative and deferential. In a conversation with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates aired by CNN in early October, Clinton's cautious formality took a backseat to Gates' brisk, humorous confidence on policy issues. Abroad, she seems far more confident, at times to the point of recklessness, as in Jerusalem. (See photos of the last days of Hillary Clinton's campaign.)

Independence and Candor

In the last week of October, Secretary Clinton moved squarely to the center of the world stage, attempting, at the behest of her special envoys, to improve the rocky alliance with Pakistan and nudge the Middle East pugilists into talks. In the course of the trip, there were the first stray wisps of a hint that Clinton wanted to begin asserting her independence, as the Administration, facing roadblocks across the world, struggled for a firmer foreign policy tone after an opening nine months that might be called the Rodney King — "Can't we all just get along?" — phase.

During her three days in Pakistan, she ran a gauntlet of town-hall meetings and media interviews that may have been unprecedented, to use the word of the week, for a U.S. Secretary of State. The trip, planned by Holbrooke and Pakistan

specialist Vali Nasr, offered an unusually subtle itinerary for a U.S. diplomatic mission. A visit to a Sufi mosque that had been bombed by Sunni extremists, for example, sent a powerful message to Pakistan's moderate Islamic majority. "We saw her praying there," an academic named Shala Aziz told me, "and, for the first time, I'm thinking, The Americans have hearts." (See photos of the suicide bombings in Islamabad.)

The big news was that Clinton allowed herself to be hammered with hostile questions from students, talk-show hosts and Pashtun elders — and that, on occasion, she pushed back, raising incredibly sensitive issues, like why no one in the Pakistani government knew where Osama bin Laden was, even though he had been in the country since 2002. Press accounts either emphasized the embarrassment of a Secretary of State's getting pummeled or fixed on Clinton's undiplomatic bluntness. But they missed the point: her candor, her willingness to listen to and acknowledge criticism, had begun to undermine the prevailing Pakistani image of the U.S. as arrogant and bossy, more interested in having the Pakistani military fight its war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban than in having a true strategic partnership. The contrast was especially sharp after George W. Bush's eight years of unqualified support for the military dictatorship of Pervez Musharraf. "In the past, when the Americans came, they would talk to the generals and go home," said Farahnaz Ispahani, a government spokeswoman and Member of Parliament. "Clinton's willingness to meet with everyone, hostile or not, has made a big impression — and because she's Hillary Clinton, with a real history of affinity for this country, it means so much more."

Transformative Experience

There are no toasts at state dinners in Pakistan, because there is no alcohol. There are opening statements, though, and Clinton's — delivered impromptu on the first night of her trip after tossing aside her notes — was surprisingly emotional. Earlier in the day, President Asif Ali Zardari, the widower of Benazir Bhutto, had presented the Secretary with an album of photos from her first visit to Pakistan, in 1995, and a framed photo of Bhutto and her two sons with Clinton and daughter Chelsea. "It did bring tears to my eyes," Clinton said at the state dinner in her honor at the presidential palace, "because I so admired your wife. She gave her life ..." She faltered then, choking up, but quickly pulled herself together, talking about the "reasons why we do what we do — to provide opportunities for all."

Clinton's first trip to Pakistan as First Lady in 1995 had been a transformative experience for her — the beginning, I believe, of the process that made her a plausible candidate for Secretary of State. I traveled with her on that trip; when we set off, she seemed depressed and even more private than usual. The Democrats had cratered in the 1994 congressional elections, and she had been trounced in her efforts to enact a universal health care plan. It was a very personal defeat; as Clinton traveled the country trying to sell the plan, crowds shouted her down and cursed her. Privately she admitted she was shocked by the hatred. The trip to South Asia seemed a bit of a vacation — it was Chelsea's spring break — but also a retreat to a more demure, First Lady-like role after two years as health care policy czar, although it proceeded in a decidedly wonky, Hillarian fashion. Jackie Kennedy had gone to India and famously ridden an elephant; Hillary Clinton traveled to five countries and packed her schedule with visits to NGOs.

"That was the greatest trip, just unbelievable," Clinton says now. We were sitting in her hotel suite the day after her Jerusalem gaffe, the Secretary in an electric-blue shift rather than her usual formal jacket and pants. She was wearing glasses and appeared rather freckly without her makeup. "I guess that trip has animated and informed everything I've done since," she said. She emerged from the trip reinvigorated, with a new mission. By the end of 1995, at the U.N. Conference on Women in Beijing, the First Lady had propounded a new Clinton Doctrine: "Women's rights are human rights." (See photos of Beijing's changing skyline.)

Clinton is not an easy interview. She is preternaturally cautious, a consequence of her Methodist propriety and 20 years of insane public scrutiny. She does not like to talk about herself, but she did tell me one interesting story about Bhutto. When her husband was governor of Arkansas, she and Bill and Chelsea visited London and stood on the sidewalk outside Bhutto's hotel, waiting for the then Pakistani Prime Minister to arrive. "She was wearing a yellow embroidered shalwar kameez with a chiffon scarf. I was just a fan, standing on the sidewalk with everyone else. It was the only time I ever did anything like that," Clinton says.

When Clinton and Bhutto met formally, on the first day of the 1995 trip, they hit it off immediately, in part because

Bhutto was also obsessed with the impact the Islamist tide was having on women and children. I remember asking Bhutto that day what the biggest change in her country had been over the past 25 years, and she said, "I used to be able to walk down the street wearing jeans, without a headscarf. Now I can't." When I asked her why, she said — bluntly — "The Saudis," who had been aggressively funding religious schools. Of course, Bhutto's acquiescence to, and participation in, the general corruption of the Pakistani government was part of the reason public schools were so inadequate and madrasahs became popular. (See photos from the aftermath of Benazir Bhutto's assassination in 2007.)

Ironically, the rise of Sunni extremist groups like al-Qaeda has brought Clinton's interests — microfinance, education and health care — to the center of national-security policy for the first time. The impetus came not from the State Department but from the military, where counterinsurgency doctrine demanded that social services in war zones — schools, justice, economic development — reinforce the military's efforts to secure the population. As a result, there was immediate chemistry between Clinton and General David Petraeus, author of the Army's counterinsurgency manual, who became one of her prime military mentors when she served on the Senate Armed Services Committee. At one point, well before Obama made his presidential intentions known, I asked Petraeus if there was any potential Democratic candidate who understood how his mind worked, and he said, "You mean, aside from Hillary?"

It was Clinton who brought together Petraeus and Holbrooke ("my two alpha males," she calls them) for the first time — at her home in Washington on the Friday before the Obama Inauguration. The affection and respect she gained for the military while serving in the Senate has helped make the relationship between State and the Pentagon less fraught than usual — although Defense Secretary Gates' insistence on the need for bigger State Department budgets hasn't hurt. In fact, relations with the Pentagon have gone smoother, at times, than Clinton's relationship with the White House staff. Clinton was particularly irritated by the ridiculously strict vetting process that thwarted her favored candidate for USAID director, Paul Farmer, from getting the job. "It was all sorts of niggling things," says a Clinton adviser, "like, Farmer had at one point brought more than \$10,000 in cash into Haiti. The money was for a needle-exchange program, but the amount was illegal."

Another of Clinton's military mentors, retired General Jack Keane, once told me, "I'm a Republican. I disagree with her about practically everything, but she'd make a hell of a Commander in Chief." There is a palpable toughness to the woman, a hard edge that contrasts with the President's instinctive impulse toward conciliation. One of the sharpest exchanges of the presidential campaign came when Obama accused Clinton of echoing the "bluster" of George W. Bush after she said the U.S. would be able to "obliterate" Iran if it used nuclear weapons against Israel. Clinton's edgier tone has been evident from the start of the Administration: she took a sharper position than the President on an Israeli settlement freeze by claiming, in May, that Obama wanted "to see a stop to settlements. Not some settlements, not outposts, not natural-growth exceptions." And then, in Jerusalem, her use of the word unprecedented seemed a rhetorical leap beyond the No Drama ground rules. (Read "Clinton's Collateral Damage.")

The White House was not entirely thrilled with either statement. But then the White House staff is several steps removed from a negotiating process. The Palestinians are weak and divided. The Israelis have been difficult, as always: whenever Mitchell raises East Jerusalem in talks with the Israeli Foreign Minister, the Israeli stands up and walks out of the room. Despite Netanyahu's momentary, tactical enthusiasm for peace talks, his Likud Party has always favored the de facto incorporation of Palestinian lands into the state of Israel.

Hillary's Choice

The tensions between the White House and State raise a fascinating question going forward. Obama and Clinton are in substantive agreement on the President's diplomacy-first philosophy and on most policy issues — although neither is willing to disclose the content of their private conversations — but style often predicts substance in foreign policy; neither Obama's gauziness nor Clinton's inconsistent bluntness overseas seems particularly solid. There is a growing perception that the Administration's policies have been thwarted across the board: Afghanistan is a mess, Iran seems ready to scuttle the nuclear negotiations, there's no progress in the Middle East, the Syrians and North Koreans remain recalcitrant, the Russians have been offered a freebie on missile defense, and the Chinese have been given a pass on human rights with no apparent quid pro quos.

The White House argues that some progress has been made: Iran is on the defensive, and North Korea has said it will return to the six-party talks. Clinton argues, correctly, about the need for "strategic patience." But the only thing Obama really has to show for his efforts so far is a Nobel Prize for Potential and — no small thing — the wisdom to have refrained from doing anything so wildly stupid as invading Iraq. The President has been willing to use military force — the Predator drones that have decimated al-Qaeda's leadership testify to his lack of squeamishness — but this Administration is supposed to be about the efficacy of using subtler expressions of U.S. power. That doesn't happen overnight, but for Obama's policies to be considered a success, it has to happen sooner or later, in a way that can be explained to the public.

There is also a growing sense that the President's inexperience is beginning to show — not in his overall policy, which represents the views of a broad, moderate national-security consensus ranging from Brent Scowcroft to John Kerry, but in his execution of the details. The Afghan strategy review has been too public and taken too long; the Middle East peace hunt has become a wild goose chase. A letter to Iran's Supreme Leader is a productive gesture only if it gets a response; if it doesn't, it seems weak and supplicatory. A call for the Israelis to freeze settlements is effective only if it is accompanied by the credible threat of a reduction in aid. "You can't be seen pushing countries around — demanding [that] Israel freeze settlements, demanding that Hamid Karzai reform his government — and not get results," says Leslie H. Gelb, author of *Power Rules*. "The leaders of these countries are tough, successful politicians, and they'll begin to take you less seriously." (See photos from the 1979 revolution in Iran.)

Clinton is unwilling to acknowledge these problems, and her staff is loath to admit her occasional mistakes. Her praise for the President is fulsome, and aides say the relationship with Obama really — really — is strong. But there are also burlblings and emanations from Clinton's staff and friends, Foggy Bottom body language, that suggest there is a need for the Administration to produce a second act after the Rodney King phase. And the White House is perplexed by the uncharacteristic lack of discipline indicated by Clinton's occasional overseas gaffes.

These tensions are well within the boundaries of normal, creative policymaking. There is absolutely no indication that the Secretary is frustrated to the point of jumping ship — or returning to politics as a candidate for governor of New York, as has been rumored. Quite the contrary, she seems intent on making history as Secretary of State. To do that, though, she will have to have the same authority at home as she has abroad. She will have to become the President's primary foreign policy voice. Over the first nine months of the Obama Administration, seven different Obama officials have spoken on the Sunday talk shows about foreign policy. Clinton has been on each of the Sunday shows once. "Either you have one person sending the foreign policy message, with the clear approval of the President," says a former Republican Secretary of State, "or there is no message." (See photos from eight months of Obama's diplomacy.)

Aides to Obama say they would like to see her on the Sunday shows more often. (Indeed, Clinton's staff acknowledged that she was asked to appear two additional times but was traveling and unable to do so.) Ultimately, though, television is a metaphor for the larger questions that need to be resolved: How much can these former rivals — both extremely guarded and private people — really trust each other; and, if not Clinton, who will emerge as the President's alter ego on foreign policy? At this point, the strongest member of Obama's national-security team is Gates — but he's a Republican and an unlikely spokesman or presidential confidant on anything beyond Pentagon issues. General Jim Jones has settled in as National Security Adviser, but he's not a political animal — and every President needs a close foreign policy adviser who understands the intersection of long-term strategy, politics and diplomatic chess.

Clinton's value to the Administration was clear in Pakistan. She wowed a public so skeptical that it had been questioning the \$7.5 billion in purely economic and humanitarian aid the Administration had promised. "How much damage control have you been able to do on this trip?" asked Meher Bokhari, a television-news-show host, at the end of Clinton's meeting with Pakistani women. The Secretary seemed nonplussed by the bluntness of the question. "I don't know," she said. "I hope some."

Afterward, I asked Bokhari to answer her own question. "Well, this trip was long overdue," she said. "The Pakistani people really needed to talk to an American about our concerns — the strings attached to aid programs, the drone attacks, their history of support for the military dictatorship. And it needs to be followed up. But if you ask me about the damage control" — she paused, thinking it through — "I'd have to say a lot. She accomplished a lot."

In the end, though, Clinton's success will be determined by whether she can expand her role beyond public diplomat. She will have to become a more sure-handed negotiator and, most important, a trusted adviser to a President who knows where he wants to go in the world but hasn't quite figured out how to get there.