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Haunted by Hillary

By FRANK BRUNI  
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Charlotte, N.C.

AT their party's ebullient convention last week, the Democratic politicians with an eye on the 2016 presidential contest were out in full force and almost in full stride, never mind that 2012 has yet to be settled.

Martin O'Malley, the Maryland governor, popped up here, there and everywhere. Mark Warner, the Virginia senator, was nearly as ubiquitous. And Joe Biden made the fiery most of a prime speaking slot just before President Obama's.

But all of them knew that their efforts would probably be for naught and their aspirations in vain if a certain someone who was then half a world away decided to reach — again — for the White House. Like a poltergeist in a pantsuit, Hillary Clinton haunted Charlotte.

She was the grand phantom of the 2012 political conventions, but not the only one. Both the Republican gathering in Tampa and the Democratic conclave here were almost as fascinating for what and who were missing as for what and who were present: for the appearances that didn't happen or that occurred only briefly or belatedly.

The Democrats lacked not only Hillary but also, in the beginning, God. To some party stalwarts that's probably a statement of the utmost redundancy. Hillary is God, or at least a holy ghost.

Will she run in 2016? I can't tell you how many times I heard that question and how largely it loomed in Charlotte. There's a strong belief that she's seriously considering one last bid, and a fervent wish that the Hillary saga not yet be over, because it's as riveting as any in the last quarter-century of American politics.

The video that was shown just before Bill Clinton delivered his speech on Wednesday night reminded delegates and the rest of us of the Clintons' epoch in the White House, years of serial scandals and provisional hairstyles. It reminded us, too, that for Hillary, a setback is merely a prelude to redemption, a warm-up for the last laugh. She's the comeback kid.

From Hillarycare, Whitewater, Travelgate, Monica Lewinsky and the bruising presidential primaries in 2008, she rebounded to where she is today, a Democratic deity so revered that the 2016 nomination is presumed hers if she wants it. It's seen almost as a matter of destiny, a piece of unfinished business. The party realized one kind of history with Obama's election and would love to realize another with Hillary's. It's time for a woman. It's long past time.

This particular woman's absence from Charlotte wasn't a clue to her intentions, a tea leaf to be read. Her day job, as secretary of state, had her in Asia. And a picture of her in East Timor, watching Bill's speech, circulated quickly and spoke to why there's such fascination with her these days. In the photograph she sat alone and at peace, attentive but not beholden to the human comet who took her on such a wild ride. She was now traveling through a separate cosmos, blazing an independent trail, lighting up the sky on her own.

Other absences were indeed freighted with tactical significance. They underscored how little it benefits some Democrats to go near a party platform with many planks to the left of the center, and they suggested how unpopular the party or the president is in certain states. Senator Jon Tester, fighting a tough re-election battle in Montana, skipped Charlotte. So did a remarkably long list of other Democrats in similarly fierce fights: Claire McCaskill, who stayed put in Missouri; Bob Kerrey, who didn't leave Nebraska; Heidi Heitkamp, who campaigned in North Dakota; and Joe Donnelly, who did likewise in Indiana.

DEMOCRATS are on tenterhooks about the preservation of their Senate majority, which may help explain another convention phantom: gun control, the issue they feel they mustn't touch. After a summer of bullets and despite a poignant appearance onstage by Gabby Giffords, Obama ignored it, other headliners avoided it and our Glock-toting country went about its merry and murderous way, with a shooting spree every few months and a failure of resolve to do anything about it.

Before Charlotte I was in Tampa, and there were a few moments between Paul Ryan's and Mitt Romney's speeches when I blinked. Hence I missed Scott Brown, the Republican senator from Massachusetts.

What an intriguing predicament he's in. The only way he beats Elizabeth Warren, his Democratic rival, and wins re-election is to persuade his state's voters that the "R" attached to his name is purely decorative, like the hood ornaments on a couple of old Cadillacs. So he stayed in Tampa about as long as the chardonnay in a Real Housewife's glass lasts, and managed in his ultra-brief remarks to reporters to work in the words "moderate" and "pro-choice." After he was spotted with Karl Rove, an aide made sure to characterize the meeting as accidental.

But the only way Brown converts a victory over Warren into, say, a run for national office — and I guarantee you, given his age (52) and his looks, that the thought has lodged deep in his mind — is a renunciation of that vaunted moderation. A renunciation of Massachusetts, really. You can see where I'm going with this. He's Romney redux. Déjà Mitt.

Speaking of flashbacks and memories, one in particular was frowned on in Tampa. Delegates were dissuaded from déjà George.

I refer to the second President Bush, who appeared with his father in a video of just five minutes one night. That was it, and that said it all. Romney, Ryan and other Republicans are running as stewards of the country's finances more trustworthy and less profligate than Obama, but Bush busted the budget and ran up the debt with his tax cuts, his expansion of entitlements, his wars. And Ryan abetted him every step of the way.

Is it any wonder that he wasn't produced in the flesh and given free rhetorical rein, as Bill Clinton was? That his brother Jeb was welcomed onto the stage even as he came nowhere near it?

Republicans want you to look at the country's woes and see only Obama. Democrats want to prevent that, and this election may hinge on what is and isn't tugged out of the shadows. As surely as the specter of Hillary hovers over 2016, the apparition of the last president stalks 2012. And there's no telling yet how these two great ghost stories end.

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