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## Hillary Clinton Should Be The Next Ted Kennedy

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Hillary Clinton would be more useful to America as a progressive Senator than as a centrist president, which is how she has positioned herself in contrast to the more liberal Barack Obama and John Edwards. Obviously Clinton still hopes to win the White House. But if she loses the nomination or the November election, would she, freed from presidential ambitions, be willing to reposition herself as the progressive she once was and spend the rest of her career building a solid legislative record? Some think it's too late -- she's already established herself as a triangulating centrist. Others, including some of her long-term friends, think she's still a closet progressive. If so, she should learn from the example of Ted Kennedy, who has been the most effective progressive in the Senate for many years -- before and especially after he lost the Democratic nomination for president to incumbent Jimmy Carter in 1980.

Like Hillary, Ted Kennedy got his start in mainstream politics because of family connections. His brother John was elected president in 1960. Two years later, Ted, then 30 and with few accomplishments of his own, was elected to his brother's Massachusetts seat in the Senate. When John was assassinated in 1963, Robert - the next in line - assumed the Kennedy mantle. He was elected senator from New York in 1964 but lacked the patience to be an effective legislator. He had few legislative achievements during his four years as a senator. His staff and his wife Ethel pushed him to run for president. After Sen. Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota won 42% of the vote against incumbent President Lyndon Johnson in the New Hampshire primary, revealing that LBJ was vulnerable to defeat, Kennedy jumped into the contest, energized by the twin issues of opposition to the war in VietNam and poverty at home. Had he not been killed in June 1968, after winning the California primary, it is likely the Bobby would have won his party's nomination and defeated Richard Nixon for the White House.

With both brothers John and Robert dead, Ted Kennedy became the heir apparent and family elder. Not surprisingly, he was under enormous pressure to run for president. In 1980, he decided to wage an insurgent campaign against the incumbent, fellow Democrat Jimmy Carter. Early polls showed him ahead of Carter, but Kennedy seemed a reluctant candidate, unable to articulate his reason for running and lacking the requisite fire-in-the-belly. Labor unions, feminists, environmentalists and other progressives rallied to his campaign, but his heart wasn't in it. Kennedy won ten presidential primaries, but Carter won 24, helped by the Iran hostage crisis, which temporarily boosted his popularity. Kennedy bowed out, then delivered an inspiring speech at the Democratic convention in New York.

From the beginning, Kennedy resolved to make his mark in the Senate. And he has. He has served in that body for 45 years - longer than all but two other senators in history. In that time, he has been the progressive stalwart. He's learned the rules of legislating, recruited a brilliant and loyal staff, and demonstrated the patience to work the Senate floor, build personal relationships with colleagues, including those he disagrees with, and work closely with progressive activist groups to sponsor and enact important legislation.

Kennedy's success has not simply been his voting record, but his leadership and his willingness to ally himself with activist unions, environmentalists, feminists, civil rights crusaders, immigrants, senior citizen groups, and others. He has consistently been an inspiring orator, lifting crowds up with his fervor and his obviously sincere passion for the underdog and the ordinary worker. He has been the most persistent and articulate advocate for universal health insurance, long before it was a mainstream issue. He has been the strongest advocate in the Senate for the poor and disadvantaged, sponsoring and helping enact laws to provide job training, heating assistance, teacher training, bilingual education, and health care. He has been a champion of abortion rights, labor law reform, raising the minimum wage, voting rights, immigrant rights, Head Start, financial assistance for college students, clean air and water bills, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Family and Medical Leave Act. He voted against the Iraq war resolution and has been a leading opponent of right-wing nominees on the Supreme Court.

When the Democrats have been in the majority, Kennedy has been an outstanding offensive quarterback. When his party was relegated to the minority, Kennedy learned how to maneuver to stop bad legislation from getting adopted. He has occasionally miscalculated, such as his alliance with President Bush on the No Child Left Behind Act, but more often he succeeds by moving the ball forward, showing extraordinary legislative skill. He knows when to hold out and when to forge compromises when needed to get things passed.

Other senators -- including Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Barbara Boxer of California, Sherrod Brown of Ohio, and the late Paul Wellstone of Minnesota -- may be equally progressive, but no senator has Kennedy's track record of legislative accomplishments on behalf of those Americans left out of the mainstream.

When someone finally writes an honest history of the Kennedy family, it should be Ted Kennedy who gets the most pages -- not only because he outlived his older brothers, but because he accomplished much more in American politics than either John or Robert.

Can Hillary Clinton follow Kennedy's example? As a Senator, she hunkered down, learned the ropes, and built personal ties with fellow Democrats and some Republicans. She tried to walk the tightrope between being a media star and being a

freshman Senator who wasn't supposed to bask in the limelight and outshine her more experienced colleagues, despite being part of a political dynasty.

But from moment she stepped foot on the Senate floor, everyone knew that she had larger ambitions. No doubt her self-image is not as a legislative long distance runner like Kennedy. Every backslap, legislative compromise, and public speech was geared to building her legislative resume and her media image for the bigger contest for the White House. It was obvious that she viewed the Senate as a steppingstone to running for President.

Her candidacy for President makes sense only because she spent eight years as an activist First Lady and then, since 2001, as an increasingly moderate Democrat in the Senate, calculating her votes with an eye toward an eventual run for the White House. (In the National Journal's rankings, based on their 2006 voting records, Clinton's composite score of 70.2 on economic, social and foreign policy issues put her as the 32nd most liberal Senator. Kennedy, with a 93.7, ranked third, behind Richard Durbin of Illinois and Barbara Boxer of California. Barack Obama ranked 10th).

But if she loses this bid for the White House, will she then be free to be what some of her friends believe is the "real" Hillary -- a progressive? It may be too late. She may be too stuck in the middle of the road to change course. She's become the voice of the Democratic Party establishment, the triangulating centrist who is too tied to Wall Street and big business to be a champion for working people, the poor, environmentalists, and opponents of American militarism. If, however, she has the courage of her one-time convictions, she could be an effective champion for change.

In her presidential campaign, she focuses on her accomplishments as an agent for change as First Lady and as a first-term Senator. She takes credit for a handful of legislative achievements. She rarely talks about her political activism in college, law school, and while serving as Arkansas' first lady. Although she was never a 1960s radical, she absorbed many of her generation's ideas about the need for progressive change.

After Rev. Martin Luther King was killed in 1968, Clinton, then a student government leader at Wellesley College, helped organize a two-day strike and worked closely with the few black students on campus to organize teach-ins and other activities to pressure the college to recruit more black students and faculty. That year, she traveled to New Hampshire for Sen. Eugene McCarthy's anti-war campaign for president. She wrote her senior thesis in 1969 about the legendary Saul Alinsky, the Chicago activist who is considered the founding father of community organizing. As part of her research, Clinton traveled to Chicago to interview Alinsky. She concluded her report by placing him in the political company of Socialist Eugene Debs, poet Walt Whitman and Martin Luther King Jr. - describing Alinsky as a champion of "the most radical of political faiths - democracy." (For several years, Wellesley agreed to keep the thesis under lock and key, in response to a request from Clinton. It is now available on-line and in the college library.)

She entered Yale Law School in 1969, one of the handful of women in her class. There, she worked with the attorney for Black Panthers accused of murder and clerked one summer for the left-wing lawyer Robert Treuhart in Berkeley. In 1970, with a grant from the Law Student Civil Rights Research Council, she worked for the Washington Research Project, where she became friends with civil rights lawyer Marian Wright Edelman and began her ongoing interest in children's rights. Later, when Edelman founded the Children's Defense Fund, a liberal research and lobby group for children, Hillary Clinton to serve on its board from 1976 to 1992, and as its chair from 1986 to 1991.

In 1972, she and Bill Clinton, whom she'd met at Yale, worked on George McGovern's anti-war campaign for president. In 1974, while Bill was teaching law in Arkansas, she worked for Joan Doar, the House Judiciary Committee's special counsel, on the impeachment of Richard Nixon. When she got married in 1973, she continued to use her maiden name, Hillary Rodham, as did many feminists of her generation. But in 1980, when Bill lost his re-election bid for Governor of Arkansas and they both tried to adopt a more moderate image, she began using the name Clinton.

In 1977, Jimmy Carter appointed her chair of the Legal Services Corporation, a federal anti-poverty program. Although LSC was then under attack by conservatives for providing legal help not only to individuals but also to grassroots community groups, she successfully lobbied Congress to increase the LSC budget. At the same time, as the wife of the Arkansas governor, she served on the board of the state's most powerful company, Wal-Mart.

Is that early progressive Hillary so far in the past that it would be like waking up the dead? Does she still have those progressive instincts and harbor those progressive thoughts? Can we imagine a Senator Hillary Clinton, now 60 years old, spending the next twenty or so years in the Senate, challenging big business on workers' rights, global warming, tax reform, universal health care, and militarism? Could she find satisfaction in being a voice for a new wave a feminism, gay rights, and civil liberties? Does she have the patience to dig in for the long haul and establish herself as a champion for the underdog? Or will she need to spend the rest of her life justifying her husband's DLC-style moderation and her own track record as a centrist Democrat from a liberal state?

Hillary Clinton has another twenty years to define and establish her legacy. Right now, she is a political "could-have-been" - her husband's sounding board and chief advisor, an effective but not great senate legislator, and, most likely, a failed candidate for president. Starting next year, perhaps freed from further presidential ambitions, and as part of a larger (and perhaps filibuster-proof) Democratic majority in the Congress, Clinton could dig in and begin to set a new course for herself and for her legacy. As she gains in longevity, seniority, and experience, she should take the senior Senator from Massachusetts as her model.