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Hillary's Checkers Speech

Pundits often liken politics to a game of chess, where each candidate has to think several moves ahead in pursuit of victory. But Hillary Clinton's speech last night was more like checkers than chess. She's run out of moves to win the Democratic nomination, but she took a page from Richard Nixon, whose famous 1952 "Checkers" speech sought to mobilize voters to force the Republican presidential nominee, Dwight Eisenhower, to keep Nixon on the ticket as the vice presidential candidate. Rather than make a concession speech last night, despite Barack Obama's clear triumph in winning the votes needed to clinch the nomination, Clinton told supporters at Baruch College in New York City that she needed a few days to consider her options. Then, shockingly, she said to the small crowd in New York and the millions watching on television, "I want to hear from you. I hope you'll go to my Website at HillaryClinton.com and share your thoughts with me and help in any way that you can."

It was an act of desperation, much like Nixon's "Checkers" speech on September 23, 1952. It was just six weeks before the November election, between Republican Eisenhower and Democratic rival Ill. Gov. Adlai Stevenson. Eisenhower, a World War II hero, was so popular that both the Democrats and Republicans had at different times wanted to recruit him as their presidential candidate, but he had never run for political office and his views on key issues were not well-known. He had chosen Nixon, then a senator from California, as his running mate to appease the party's more conservative wing. But just a few days later, newspapers ran stories that accused Nixon of accepting \$18,000 (about \$140,000 by today's measure) in illegal campaign contributions, what some called a "slush fund," from wealthy California backers. Many Republicans urged Eisenhower to drop Nixon from the ticket.

To rally public support, Nixon went to the El Capitan Theater in Hollywood and gave a speech that was broadcast nationwide on radio and TV, one of the first uses of the new medium, to appeal directly to voters. He denied that he'd taken any illegal campaign contributions. The money, he said, was reimbursement for "political expenses," not personal use. At a time when politicians didn't talk much about their personal lives or finances, Nixon provided a complete inventory of his personal assets, including his salary, life insurance, mortgages, and loans, claiming that he lived modestly his entire life, even after being elected to congress. In one of the most famous lines in the mawkish speech, Nixon denied that his wife Pat, who was sitting stoically next to him during the speech, had a mink coat, but instead wore a "respectable Republican cloth coat."

He acknowledged receiving one contribution that might have violated campaign laws. A Texan had given his family a cocker spaniel, which his daughter Tricia named "Checkers." Looking straight into the camera, Nixon said, "the kids, like all kids, love the dog, and I just want to say this right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it."

Then, he ended his speech by asking the public whether he should remain the party's vice presidential nominee. He said, "I know that you wonder whether or not I am going to stay on the Republican ticket or resign. Let me say this: I don't believe that I ought to quit, because I am not a quitter.... But the decision, my friends, is not mine. I would do nothing that would harm the possibilities of Dwight Eisenhower to become president of the United States. And for that reason I am submitting to the Republican National Committee tonight through this television broadcast the decision which it is theirs to make. Let them decide whether my position on the ticket will help or hurt. And I am going to ask you to help them decide. Write and write the Republican National Committee whether you think I should stay on or whether I should get off. And whatever their decision is, I will abide by it."

It was a brilliant maneuver, and it worked. By urging his supporters to flood the RNC with letters and telegrams, he was trying to put pressure on Eisenhower, not only demonstrating that he could mobilize voters, but also hinting that Eisenhower could not win the White House without the conservative wing of the party that Nixon represented. Eisenhower asked Nixon to join him in West Virginia, where he was campaigning, and met Nixon at the airport with, "Dick, you're my boy." That November, Eisenhower beat Stevenson in a landslide.

It is difficult to believe that Hillary Clinton's advisers didn't have Nixon's "Checkers" speech in mind when they decided to make a similar appeal Tuesday night, both refusing to acknowledge that she's lost the party's nomination and insisting that her next steps would be shaped, at least in part, by what her supporters -- whom she claimed were the 18 million people who voted for her in the primary whose voices should be heard -- wanted her to do. While Nixon urged his supporters to write letters and telegrams to party leaders, Clinton asked her followers to contact her directly by using her campaign website. Speaking to a much larger national audience than Nixon had available, when few Americans had TV sets, Clinton obviously knew in advance that the overwhelming message of these emails would be for her to stay in the race or at least demand that Obama choose her to be the party's vice presidential nominee. The subtext of Tuesday night's address was hardly subtle. Clinton's campaign chairman, Terry McAuliffe, introduced her as "the next president of the United States of America!" During her speech, members of the audience chanted, "Denver, Denver," referring to the site of the Democratic convention in August.

Like Nixon, Clinton was clearly trying to mobilize her supporters to put pressure on Obama to put her on the ticket. Some pundits speculated that Clinton might be willing to settle for another deal with Obama -- helping her retire her campaign debt, appointing her to the Supreme Court, or helping her elbow Harry Reid out of the Senate Majority Leader's job -- and thus help

unify the party and enlist Clinton's supporters in Obama's campaign. But news reports Tuesday indicated that Hillary had told key congressional supporters that she was angling for the vice presidential slot.

Her speech later that night was evidence that she is willing to play hardball to get what she wants. Her speech was almost entirely about herself -- her commitment to public service, her stance on issues, her claim that she won more votes than Obama, and the implication that she represents a large segment of Democratic voters that Obama will need to win in November.

Like Nixon, Clinton is a formidable and strong-willed politician. She has many accomplishments to be proud of. But her speech Tuesday night lacked graciousness and any concern for her party and the nation. It was, like Nixon's "Checkers" speech, a pathetic display of both hubris and self-pity.

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