

Emailgate: The Clinton Spin Doctors In Action

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Hillary Clinton's email dilemma got somewhat sharper over the weekend, with Sunday programs heavy with the theme. Her use of a private email server during her stint as Secretary of State was given a new lease of life by the Office of the Inspector General's report which took significant issue with her practices when in office.[1]

The Democratic strategists insisted that there were larger issues at stake. Such breaches are small feed in the broader matters of state affairs. Clinton campaign spokesperson Brian Fallon even suggested that the IG report's demolition of the secretary's previous claims did not "make her statements untruthful." [2] In such circles, it is criminal not to be postmodern.

The campaign statement on Wednesday drew on that great tradition of Clintonian spin doctoring which sees the lie as sacred. Her opponents were bound to "misrepresent this report for their own partisan purposes" when the documents showed "just how consistent her email practices were with those of other Secretaries and senior officials at the State Department who also used personal email."

Was it Clinton's fault? Hardly, came the crafted response – it was a matter of a faulty system, one exploited by previous secretaries of state. "The report shows that problems with the State Department's electronic recordkeeping systems were longstanding and that there was no precedent of someone in her position having a State Department email account until later the arrival of her successor." Victimhood again becomes sellable: someone, or something else, did it.

Further attempting to douse the fires with notions that her practice was common (when caught with one's hand in the till, argue that everybody does it), the statement went on to argue that there was "no evidence of any successful breach of the Secretary's server."

Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) came up with an even less impressive defence. Yes, she had been mistaken in her email practices, but ignorance of the law and protocol could very well be justified. "She thought it was approved, and the practice was allowed, and she was wrong." [3]

Schiff also took the line that an abusive practice is rendered less extreme, let alone consequential, if others are doing it. (Where treason doth prosper indeed!) Former Secretary of State Colin Powell, for instance, was the stellar example, one not mitigated by the fact that no emails were ever turned over. "The fact that [Clinton] provided 55,000 pages of emails mitigated the fact that she used a private server." The problem for Schiff here is that Powell was the only secretary of state making such extensive use of private email in the conduct of government business.

The IG report does not make pretty reading for the avid Clintonite. It dismisses a core claim that using government servers was not standard practice during her tenure, pointing to departmental protocols dating back to 2005.

By not actually seeking permission to use a private email server, she had been in violation of established practice. By the time Clinton assumed office, cybersecurity practices were even more “comprehensive”, “detailed and more sophisticated.”

As for turning over the emails, there was no mitigating factor: she should have surrendered them before leaving office, not 21 months after. “[S]he did not comply with the Department’s policies that were implemented in accordance with the Federal Records Act.”

Clinton has supreme form when it comes to imaginative, and careless “record keeping”. Her lax attitude to such details was evident during the course of her time as First Lady, when she and her husband presided over the fraying of the post-Cold War Republic.

In 1999, when special prosecutor Ken Starr and Republicans were busying themselves with filling files over an assortment of scandals, a million subpoenaed emails vanished in the Project X affair. The reason? A technical problem with a West Wing computer server. The unseen hand of technological error has often proven helpful to the Clinton cause.

Little wonder then that the latest weaving apologia fell flat in Republican circles, where fiction and fact are synonymous. Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.), Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee chairman, advanced a theory that the Russians profited from Clinton’s use of a private email server, suggesting that a State Department server would have been somehow immune. “You have to assume,” claimed Johnson on CBS’s *Face the Nation*, “that our enemy and adversaries had to have had access to every email that ever went over her private server.”[4]

Johnson, happy with that assumption, suggested that such a private email server might have affected “the invasion of Crimea or eastern Ukraine”; “negotiations with Iran” and even the issues surrounding Assad.

As for the other Democratic contender for the nomination, Bernie Sanders, the IG report was replenishing manna. “It was not a good report for Secretary Clinton. That is something that the American people, Democrats and delegates are going to have to take a hard look at.”

While Clinton lacks the Teflon attributes of her main rival and presumptive GOP presidential nominee, Donald Trump, Sanders is hoping that such practices disqualify her from the race. That may well be wishful thinking, reflected by attitudes towards the normalising properties of corruption. Take the dismissive stance of Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.): “This goes on and on and on. We’re reaching the final stages of a primary.” The Clintons have shown themselves to be not only survivors of scandals, but thrivers off them.

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Notes:

[1] <https://oig.state.gov/system/files/esp-16-03.pdf>

[2] <http://www.factcheck.org/2016/05/ig-report-on-clintons-emails/>

[3] <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/281634-rep-adam-schiff-clinton-was-mistake-n-on-using-personal>

[4] <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/281638-gop-senator-clintons-email-could-have-led-to-russian>

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