

Master of the Senate

BY SCOTT REED

Guess who's become the go-to Democrat on Capitol Hill?

When Hillary Rodham Clinton ran for the U.S. Senate seat vacated by New York's Pat Moynihan, she stumbled like a novice on the campaign trail. She began her race with an endless "listening tour" of New York State where the outspoken former First Lady said virtually nothing. She confused Erie, Pennsylvania, with Erie County, New York, during a radio interview. In a transparent ploy to establish her New York roots, she donned a Yankees cap and received the Bronx cheer. And in an awkward attempt to court the influential Jewish vote, she alternately kissed and then kissed off the wife of Yasser Arafat. She only won the election, many believed, because of the ineptitude of her second-string opponent and the residual affection New York voters had for her husband.

Republican senators—most of whom voted to remove her husband from office and many of whom investigated her on Whitewater, Travelgate, and secret health care reform meetings—promised the new senator a chilly reception. "When this Hillary gets to the Senate," mused then-Majority Leader Trent Lott, "she will be one of one hundred, and we won't let her forget it." Expectations for Senator Hillary Clin-

ton were decidedly low and her greatest impact, it seemed, would be her value in Republican direct mail fundraising appeals.

Three years later, Hillary Clinton has emerged as a giant in the Senate. Many of the same Republicans who voted to convict *Mr.* Clinton—such established Clinton-haters as Jeff Sessions of Alabama, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, and Judd Gregg of New Hampshire—have actually coauthored legislation with *Mrs.* Clinton. More than a dozen Republican Senators have stood with her at press conferences because Hillary guarantees media attention. And the typical comments Republican Senators now make about Hillary Clinton sound like they were written for Hallmark cards.

While she has charmed her Republican antagonists, she has seduced her Democratic colleagues. In her first months in the Senate, she gushed and awed at Democratic dinosaur Robert Byrd of West Virginia. She was appropriately deferential to liberal lion Ted Kennedy. And she politely demurred as her media-savvy New York colleague Chuck Schumer elbowed her out of the way before the television cameras.

As important as interpersonal relations are in the clubby Senate, Hillary has become a powerhouse because she came to Washington with a plan to be successful and has executed it with a determination not seen since Lyndon Johnson.

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U.S. SENATE HISTORICAL OFFICE



Senator **Hillary Clinton** has quickly and methodically become a force to be reckoned with. Like **Lyndon Johnson** before her, she is mastering the Senate to fit her agenda.

Instead of hiring only Clinton loyalists, she appointed a savvy, connected staff beginning with top aide Tamera Luzzatto to steer her through the arcane rules and habits of the Senate. They showed their worth when Clinton pulled an audacious move and surprised the newly appointed Republican Majority Leader Bill Frist with an amendment to extend unemployment benefits for millions of out-of-work Americans. After hours of parliamentary legerdemain, flustered Republicans cried uncle and reached an agreement with Clinton on the amendment. A rookie staff could not have pulled off that maneuver.

Hillary quickly made her Northwest Washington home the top fundraising venue for Democratic incumbents and aspirants. Her generosity, whether she appears at fundraisers for others or spreads money around through her own political action committee, has made it very difficult for senior Senate Democrats to say “no” to her when she needs an item for New York or special language for a liberal special interest group included in legislation.

During the final days of the past legislative session it was Hillary Clinton, not Ted Kennedy, whom an anxious Massachusetts business contacted about quietly removing harmful

rats on the Committee.

Hillary parlayed her fundraising prowess to win a special favor from Minority Leader Tom Daschle—not a seat on the Appropriations Committee which most senators would kill for,

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but a position in the leadership to carve out a Democratic message aimed at countering George W. Bush and protecting at-risk Democrats. Through her message operation she is able to communicate and coordinate with all wings and all regions of the Democratic Party. And to further her credentials as a big thinker for the Party, Clinton was the force behind the creation of the Center for American Progress—a well-financed, Democratic ideas machine led by former Bill Clinton chief of staff John Podesta.

Many believe that every move by Hillary Clinton is a prelude to an inevitable run for the presidency, probably in 2008. That is likely to be so. But while the entire political world obsesses about her political ambitions, Hillary Clinton has quickly and methodically become a force to be reckoned with in the Senate. Like Lyndon Johnson before her, Hillary Clinton is mastering the Senate to fit her agenda. ◆

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