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Clinton aides: Bill screwed up

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[Bill Clinton](#)'s off-message musings in recent days on [Mitt Romney](#), taxes and the state of the economy prompted a series of urgent and agitated calls between senior aides to both Clinton and President Barack Obama.

In the past, these kinds of complaints have often prompted Clinton lieutenants to kindly suggest that the [Obama](#) team can go to hell: a former president can, should and will say what he wants.

This time was different: Clinton's team was as aghast as Obama's at how the boss had wandered blithely into remarks that left even sympathetic listeners wondering what exactly he was getting at. He also gave [gleeful Republicans](#) an opening to skewer Obama with a popular Democrat's own words.

(Also on POLITICO: [Clinton's 2012 track record](#))

Clinton, in a ritual that would be familiar to anyone who has worked for him during the past 20 years, protested that his words were being wrested from context and blamed a manipulative news media for stirring up trouble to satisfy its own lust for chaos and conflict.

But his own team, and eventually Clinton himself, agreed there was no choice but to issue embarrassing what-the-former-president-[meant-to-say](#) clarifications, which were crafted in close consultation with senior Obama aides at the White House and campaign headquarters in Chicago, according to people involved in the negotiations.

(PHOTOS: [Bill Clinton's career](#))

The clarifications did little to quiet the political speculation industry's preoccupation with what Clinton was *really* up to: Trying to send a brushback pitch of some kind to Obama? Trying to win personal favor among Wall Street Republicans? Or perhaps engaged in some carom-shot calculation to help Hillary Clinton if she runs for president in 2016.

The genuine explanation, say people close to Clinton, is the same one that usually is the case: He was simply saying what he really thought, but in fuzzy, free-associating language almost guaranteed to produce controversy.

This was a habit that Clinton usually learned to control as president. But the circumstances now are much different.

Clinton, say associates, while mentally sharp, is older and a step off his political game, less attuned to the need for clarity and message-discipline during interviews.

"He's 65 years old," said one adviser, explaining how Clinton in a CNBC interview managed to say that the economy was in recession when it is not.

At the same time, aides had to read Clinton's comments on CNBC several times about the right timing for repealing the Bush tax cuts for top earners before they could fashion a response to reporters and the upset Obama team about what he was getting at.

Clinton said delaying any changes in the Bush tax cuts was "probably the best thing to do right now," since there's no real chance of a larger-scale fiscal reform deal until 2013. That was easily — if inaccurately — taken as an endorsement of the Republican position on taxes. Instead, Clinton believes that the tax cuts should be allowed to lapse over the long term.

"First, on extending the Bush tax cuts, as President Clinton has said many times before, he supported extending all of the cuts in 2010 as part of the budget agreement, but does not believe the tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans should be extended again," his office said in a statement. "In the interview, he simply said that he doubted that a long-term agreement on spending cuts and revenues would be reached until after the election."

Something similar occurred days before, when Clinton said on CNN that Romney has a

“sterling” business record at Bain Capital and suggested that seeming to condemn private equity, as Obama’s team has done, is an unproductive line of attack.

“Because he rambles, his remarks can be interpreted many ways, however someone wants,” said one Obama adviser privy to discussions between the two camps. “But they wouldn’t be putting out clarifications” if Clinton agreed with how Republicans were using his words.

And Republicans have used those words with relish. Congressional Republicans sent out statements Tuesday cheering what they called Clinton’s endorsement of their views on the Bush tax cuts. Conservative opinion leaders pointed to Clinton’s comments over the past week as a sign he’s rooting for Obama to fail.

“Bill Clinton is very much in control with respect to 2012: He wants Barack Obama to lose, and is helping that cause,” the Weekly Standard’s William Kristol wrote, musing: “An Obama reelection loss would leave Clinton as the only twice-elected (i.e. successful) Democratic president since FDR.”

Obama could be forgiven for believing that Bill Clinton was easier to deal with when he was an open adversary, as in the South Carolina primary during Hillary Clinton’s presidential run in 2008.

In truth, those days are long ago. While some of the former president’s top advisers still view Obama’s team with cold suspicion — a common complaint is that it is arrogant and ungracious toward Clinton and his legacy — the two principals have a cordial and supportive relationship.

Clinton and Obama — joined by Obama aides Jack Lew and Valerie Jarrett and Clinton aide Doug Band — had dinner Monday during the president’s visit to New York.

The White House is happily enlisting Clinton as a surrogate, including at a major Democratic National Committee fundraiser in California next week.

“I think the only thing people will remember about President Clinton’s remarks is that he didn’t demonize Gov. Romney. And I think that’ll put him in a much stronger position in October, when it counts, to deliver a message about why Barack Obama should be reelected and Mitt Romney’s prescription for the economy is not the right one,” said former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, a Clinton ally.

But reminders keep coming that Clinton’s a high-risk surrogate.

For one thing, Clinton is a magnet for publicity and speculation like few other politicians. Even his most passing utterances drive ratings and traffic among news sites, creating a constant peril for the Obama campaign, obsessed with message discipline, that he will hijack the desired campaign message. The hyperactive 2012 media environment — which helped bring down another loose-talking 1990s pol, Newt Gingrich — only increases that danger.

For another, Clinton has scant interest in message discipline.

Not unreasonably, a leader with an international profile, who has been out of office for nearly a dozen years, believes that he has earned the right to speak his mind on topics from his own perspective — which is inevitably more nuanced than a campaign operative would prefer.

Clinton does indeed believe it would be far better for Obama to criticize Romney’s policy ideas and record as governor than to wage war on Bain. He is also frustrated that modern politics is so bitter and remorseless that if he is not seen as being contemptuous of Romney personally, that must indicate he is not fully supportive of Obama.

“He’s not a windup doll,” said one aide, invoking a phrase repeated by other Clinton allies.

In fact, he never was. And nor was Clinton ever as keenly calculating in his speeches and interviews as both supporters and foes tended to assume.

Three decades ago, Arkansas editorialist Paul Greenberg gave Clinton a brutal moniker, “Slick Willie.” It is true that Clinton can sometimes lapse into comically equivocating words: “It depends on what the meaning of ‘is’ is,” is one of the most famous examples.

But it is more true that — certainly by the standards of politicians — he was and remains an uncommonly transparent man. During the White House years, reporters learned if they wanted to know what was really on Clinton’s mind all they needed to do was listen — especially during after-hours events such as fundraisers.

Inevitably, he would try out ideas and language he was still developing in his own mind, or tip his hand about pending moves.

“Bill Clinton is a political genius but he’s the least Machiavellian genius you could think of,” said Paul Begala, who effectively lived with Clinton during the 1992 presidential campaign and later served in the White House.

At the same time, Begala said, Clinton is past the point where he feels he needs to give a damn about what’s playing big on cable news or the Drudge Report.

“I don’t think he’s any longer that concerned with the day-to-day, hour-to-hour news cycle,” Begala said. “He’s much less concerned about the minute-by-minute jitterbugging of the press — and that jitterbugging has increased so much” since he became president.

Rendell, who has criticized the Obama campaign himself for some of its rhetoric on Bain Capital, shrugged at the idea that Clinton might need to worry more about the impact of his on-air musings.

“Maybe, but that’s not Bill Clinton, and it’s one of the reasons why he’s so beloved by the American people. They think he says what’s on his mind,” Rendell said. “Everyone should just calm down, because when it counts — when voters are actually focusing in October, Bill Clinton will be the most effective weapon the president has, other than Barack Obama.”

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