
Is Hillary Clinton dishonest? A lot of Americans think so

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Updated: April 5, 2008 at 12:00 am

Comments:  0

WASHINGTON - The flap over Hillary Clinton's false claim that she braved sniper fire during a 1996 trip to Bosnia has highlighted a problem that's plagued her for much of her public life: A lot of people think she's dishonest.

Ever since she stepped onto the national stage when her husband ran for president in 1992, she's found her honesty challenged along with his - sometimes thanks to her failure to tell the truth and sometimes thanks to the eagerness of her critics to portray innocent misstatements as lies.

Either way, the issue has helped to define her and put a drag on her political standing.

"This is a real difficulty for her," said independent pollster John Zogby. "With Bill Clinton, there was always an honesty problem. But he always was able to overcome it through charm and brilliance. ... It doesn't look like she is able to transcend those fundamental problems that she has with the truth."

A recent Gallup Poll found that 53 percent of Americans think Clinton isn't "honest and trustworthy." Just 29 percent said the same of her Democratic rival Barack Obama, and 27 percent said it of Republican John McCain.

Gallup analyst Jeffrey Jones called the credibility gap between Clinton and McCain "the largest between any two candidates for any dimension tested."

Another recent poll, this one conducted by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center before Clinton had to back down from her account of her

Bosnia trip, found that 29 percent of white Democrats considered her a "phony," almost twice as many as the 15 percent who described Obama that way.

Pew researchers concluded that Democrats' views of Clinton "are more influenced by perceptions that she is phony than by any other trait or emotion tested."

More than just a passing complaint, the doubts about her honesty color overall opinions of her, said Andrew Kohut, the director of the Pew center.

"There's some deep perception of her," Kohut said. "What the analysis shows is this perception of being a phony is a real driver - this has an impact on her overall favorability rating."

In the most recent primary state, Mississippi, an exit poll found that only 49 percent of Democratic primary voters thought Clinton was "honest and trustworthy" and 50 percent said they didn't think she was.

By contrast, 70 percent of primary voters there said they thought Obama was honest and trustworthy; 29 percent didn't.

Obama won Mississippi.

A series of polls in earlier primary states for McClatchy and MSNBC found a 12-point "honesty gap" for Clinton. Likely primary voters looking for honesty as the most important quality in a candidate broke for Obama over Clinton by an average of 40-28 percent.

Her worst state was Iowa, where she was third

among "honesty" voters behind Obama and former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards. She finished third behind them in the Iowa caucuses, a disappointing result that helped knock her off her perch as the front-runner for the nomination.

How did she get the reputation?

Some of the charges against her are dubious.

One, for example, says she exaggerated her role in pushing through medical coverage for uninsured children. But a new independent review by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania found her version credible.

Another accuses her of fabricating a story about daughter Chelsea Clinton being close to the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. "She invented the entire story," said former Bill Clinton political adviser and now Clinton nemesis Dick Morris. Yet while Clinton got some details wrong, her daughter has said that she was near the Trade Center when it collapsed.

Other charges, however, hold up, most notably challenges to her repeated boast that she flew into Bosnia under sniper fire and raced across the tarmac to the safety of waiting vehicles. Videotape of her arrival clearly shows a safe, routine airport reception. Caught in the contradiction between her words and the facts, she said she "misspoke."

Thursday night she mocked herself on "The Tonight Show" with Jay Leno: "I was worried I wasn't going to make it," she said. "I was pinned down by sniper fire."

This wasn't the first time that her honesty has been challenged.

She's exaggerated her role in some political successes, such as passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act, which allowed people to take unpaid time off of work to care for the ill. She played no noticeable role that history records.

She's also given downright misleading answers when pressed about some controversies, such as the removal of documents from the safe of a dead White House lawyer or her role in the decision to fire the entire White House Travel Office staff. Facts that emerged after her explanations of both instances contradicted her accounts.

"She is not seen as trustworthy by the American people," said Obama campaign manager David Plouffe in a recent memo, hoping to raise doubts about her in the eyes of the delegates who'll choose the Democratic presidential nominee.

"It will be next to impossible to win a general election if more than half the electorate believes that you're not trustworthy.

This is going to be a real important issue, as superdelegates and voters decide who they think would be most electable in the fall. The American people simply are not going to elect someone that they believe is not being honest and trustworthy."

But at least one analyst said that Clinton could survive questions about her honesty, as her husband did.

"She's fought that from the days of his presidency from Travelgate," the flap over the White House Travel Office, said Bruce Gronbeck, a communications professor at the University of Iowa.

"I don't ever expect her to have strong trust numbers. (But) she has an amazing ability to recover. She's an extraordinary healer. She can heal herself and carry on."

Cases where Clinton's honesty has been challenged

The White House Travel Office:

After Clinton's husband took office, his administration fired all the employees of the White House Travel Office, replacing them with friends.

Clinton later told investigators she had "no role in the decision" to fire them and didn't know the "origin of the decision."

In a memo that was discovered later, however, former White House aide David Watkins said Clinton had said, "We need those people out and we need our people in." The Office of Independent Counsel said there was overwhelming evidence that she'd played a role in the firings and called her denials "factually false."

Vince Foster:

After her friend, former Arkansas law partner and White House lawyer Vince Foster killed himself, Clinton said she had no idea why her White House Chief of Staff, Maggie Williams, who's now her campaign manager, had removed documents from Foster's White House safe. "I don't know that she did remove any documents," Clinton said.

It was later revealed, however, that White House lawyer Bernard Nussbaum, a close ally of Clinton, had removed files and handed one labeled "Whitewater" to Williams, who took it to the Clintons' White House residence. It also was revealed that Williams had acted at Clinton's direction.

The Family and Medical Leave Act:

Her campaign Web site boasts that her record includes "helping to pass the Family and Medical Leave Act."

But the bill was pushed in Congress for years and passed twice, only to be vetoed by former President George H.W. Bush. Congress passed it a third time as Bill Clinton took office. He signed it into law on Feb. 5, 1993, barely two weeks after he became president.

Hillary Clinton's own White House schedules, recently released, make no mention of any meetings on the bill.

The North American Free Trade Agreement:

Clinton claims that she privately opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement when her husband pushed it through Congress.

But her recently released appointment schedule from her years as first lady reveal instead that she made private pitches for the trade agreement.

The State Children's Health Insurance Program:

Clinton claims that she played a key role in pushing through the State Children's Health Insurance Program, boasting in a campaign ad that she "got health insurance for 6 million kids."

Some news organizations, as well as the Obama campaign, call that claim false.

But an independent review by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania took a second look and found her account credible. Said the center's Brooks Jackson: "Clinton is right on this one."

Africa:

Speaking in Pennsylvania two weeks ago, Clinton introduced former U.S. Ambassador Joe Wilson. "He and I did travel together to Africa and, sort of, paved the way for the president's trip the following year, which was historic," Clinton said.

But Wilson didn't accompany Clinton on her March 1997 trip to Africa. Wilson did accompany both Clintons on the president's 1998 Africa visit.

"She made a mistake on that," Wilson said. "She misspoke on that. I worked closely with her and her staff on the president's trip, which she went on."

The Clinton administration official who accompanied Clinton on her 1997 trip was Susan Rice, who's now a senior foreign policy adviser to the Obama campaign.

Chelsea Clinton and Sept. 11:

Clinton nemesis Dick Morris accuses her of fabricating a story about daughter Chelsea Clinton being close to the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

"She invented the entire story on national television," Morris said. "And didn't blink an eye."

Here's what really happened:

Clinton said Chelsea had gone on "what she thought was going to be a great jog. She was going to go down to Battery Park, she was going to go around the towers. She went to get a cup of coffee and, and, that's when the plane hit."

Responding to a question about whether her daughter heard the "rumble," Clinton said, "She did hear it."

Weeks later, Chelsea Clinton told a magazine that she was in an apartment 12 blocks away when the first plane hit. A UPI article said she was outdoors closer to the site when "she heard the rumble of the second tower collapsing."

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