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Like the Clinton before her, Hillary an artful dodger

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Slick Hillary?

Former President Clinton earned the nickname "Slick Willy" for his mastery in the political arts of ducking and dodging. He had a knack for convincing people on both sides of an issue that he agreed with them.

His wife may not be as smooth, but Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton is doing a passable impression of the ever-parsing former president.

Would she pardon Scooter Libby?

No comment.

Would she nominate a union leader to be secretary of labor?

Maybe.

Would she repeal the North American Free Trade Agreement?

Can't say.

The Democratic presidential candidate drew several rounds of applause for her appearance before the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union Tuesday. She flashed her sense of humor, displayed a deep knowledge of the issues and held her own in a forum that pitted her against other presidential rivals. But what stood out was her reluctance to address questions head-on.

This habit of hers begs a question: Will the Clintonian tactic help her in the crowded Democratic field or hurt her in the eyes of voters who have grown coarsened by the spin and obfuscation that marred both the Clinton and Bush administrations?

"It's obviously a skill that, in the long run, served Bill Clinton well, and there's something to say for a politician who doesn't alienate people by taking clear positions on issues," said Charles Franklin, political science professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "For Bill, it was certainly a useful skill for political success."

But he said the question for Hillary Clinton "is whether she can pull it off, because it's certainly not an easy thing to do successfully."

She gave AFSCME her best shot.

MSNBC host Chris Matthews asked Clinton at the labor forum whether former White House aide I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby should be pardoned.

"Oh, I think there would be enough to be said about that without me adding to it," she replied.

"That is such a political answer!" complained Matthews.

The largely Democratic audience buzzed, apparently in protest of Matthews' response. One audience member told him to ask a "real question." Clinton finished the person's sentence: "... a question that's really about the people in this audience and not what goes on inside of Washington," she said.

"So we'll leave that as a non-answer," Matthews said.

Clinton 1, Moderator 0.

Libby, the former chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney, was convicted in March of lying to investigators and obstructing Special Prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald's inquiry into the 2003 leak of a CIA operative's identity. A federal judge said last week he will not delay a 2 1/2-year prison sentence for Libby in the case.

Most conservatives want President Bush to pardon Libby. Most Democratic activists don't.

Indeed, Clinton's rivals for the Democratic nomination didn't hesitate to simply reply "no" when asked about a Libby pardon.

It was the same dynamic on trade. Shortly after Rep. Dennis Kucinich vowed to repeal the North American Free Trade Agreement, Clinton was asked if she would move to scuttle it.

She dodged. "Like anything," Clinton said, "NAFTA had some positives, but unfortunately had a lot of downsides."

Clinton can be specific when she wants to be. In her non-answer on NAFTA, she identified a soon-to-be-closed car plant by the small Michigan town where it's located, and she talked in depth about the link between outsourced jobs and health care costs.

Playing to the union crowd, Matthews asked Clinton whether she would nominate a union leader as secretary of the Labor Department. Yes or no? "It's a great idea," she said. "I think we should really consider that." It wasn't what you would call a firm commitment.

Some voters might find it refreshing that Clinton passed up three chances to pander to liberal Democrats. Being against Libby, opposed to NAFTA and in favor of giving unions a voice at the Labor Department are no-brainers in Democratic primary fights.

It may be that she's looking beyond the nomination.

"I kind of see those things as in keeping with her effort to paint herself as a more moderate Democrat than her image as first lady," Franklin said.

Until recently, Clinton distanced herself from the liberal, anti-war wing of the Democratic Party on Iraq a position that her advisers said was true to her convictions as well as smart general-election strategy. But, under pressure from activists who dominate primary and caucus voting, she has steadily edged to the left.

She told the crowd Tuesday that she had been calling for a troop withdrawal "for some time," not mentioning that her rivals have held that position for a longer period. On the other hand, she said some troops will need to remain in Iraq to contain al-Qaida, protect Kurds, keep an eye on Iran, protect the U.S. Embassy and maybe train Iraqi forces.

The answer offered a little something for everybody, for or against U.S. involvement in Iraq. Pretty slick.

EDITOR'S NOTE Ron Fournier has covered politics for The Associated Press for nearly 20 years.

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