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ON DEADLINE: "Good Bill" Vs "Bad Bill"

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As only he can do, Bill Clinton packed campaign venues across eastern Iowa and awed Democratic voters with a compelling case for his wife's candidacy. He was unscripted, in-depth and generous.

He also was long-winded, misleading and self-absorbed.

"Good Bill" and "Bad Bill" (his nickname among some aides) returned to the public arena Tuesday as Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton brandished her double-edged sword of a husband to fend off rivals in the Jan. 3 caucus fight.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Clinton told 400 Iowans at the start of his three-city swing, "I have had a great couple of days out working for Hillary."

In the next 10 minutes, he used the word "I" a total of 94 times and mentioned "Hillary" just seven times in an address that was as much about his legacy as it was about his wife's candidacy.

He told the crowd where he bought coffee that morning and where he ate breakfast.

He detailed his Thanksgiving Day guest list, and menu.

He defended his record as president, rewriting history along the way.

And he explained why his endorsement of a certain senator from New York should matter to people.

"I know what it takes to be president," he said, "and because of the life I've led since I've left office."

I, me and my. Oh, my.

Late in his 50-minute address, Clinton told the crowd that wealthy people like he and his wife should pay more taxes in times of war. "Even though I approved of Afghanistan and opposed Iraq from the beginning, I still resent that I was not asked or given the opportunity to support those soldiers," he said.

In truth, Clinton did not oppose the Iraq war from the start at least not publicly.

If the former president secretly opposed the war but did not want to speak against a sitting president (as some of his aides now claim), what moral authority does he have now? And did he share his objections with his wife? She started out as a hawkish Democrat but is now appealing to anti-war voters.

Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, her chief rival who actually opposed the war from the start, scoffed at the former president's claim that he always spoke against it.

"If he did," said Obama on Wednesday, "I don't think most of us have heard about it."

The former president also put his own spin on the history of free-trade agreements under his watch, blaming President Bush for turning the accords into job-drainers. "Say what you want about my trade deals," he said, "but I enforced them."

Sen. Clinton benefited from her husband's verbal sleight of hand when he told a long story about a man who credited the former first lady for playing "an independent role in the Irish peace process."

While that may technically be true (Hillary Clinton did travel to Ireland and played host to the region's political players), an "independent role" is not the same as a "critical role," and Clinton didn't bother to explain the distinction.

You might be wondering so what? Clinton won two presidential elections (and five terms as Arkansas governor) despite his "Slick Willy" reputation and habit of self-aggrandizement. He's not on the ballot next year.

His wife is. And she benefits from his popularity and rhetorical skills.

Clinton's stump speeches have always been remarkably accessible despite their length and complexity. One reason is that, while he talks without notes, Clinton's remarks are organized like a neat classroom outline.

For example, on Tuesday he had four big reasons why Democrats should back her:

She has the best policy plans;

She works well with Republicans;

She's a problem solver;

And she has the best range of experience.

For each of those reasons, he had a half dozen or so facts, anecdotes or arguments to support them and each of those categories had several bullet points of their own.

Clinton navigated this mental outline with the same rhetorical crutches he used in Arkansas and Washington.

He would mention something in passing and promise to get back to it ("I'll say more about that in a minute"), and he always did.

He would "show" people what he meant rather than just "tell" them ("I'll give you just one example," he said before giving two or three).

He gave any impatient crowd members hope that the speech would soon end ("And, finally, let me say ...," he said at least twice before launching into another topic).

What he left the crowds with was the assurance that his wife understands their plight. For a man who convinced so many voters that he felt their pain, this may be his most powerful calling card Clinton can leave to Iowa crowds and his wife.

"You need somebody who is strong, competent and has good vision, and never forgets what it's like to be you," Clinton said.

And, no, he wasn't talking about himself.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mark Carlson contributed to this column. Ron Fournier covered the Clintons in the White House and in Arkansas for The Associated Press. On Deadline is an occasional column.

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