

RELEASE IN PART B6

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Guessing this is it...

How Hillary Clinton surprised me

Was disgusted when Obama appointed her secretary of state, but Clinton has been a credit to her country and her gender By Lionel Shriver guardian.co.uk, Friday 27 January 2012 15.29 EST

During the protracted tooth-and-nail tussle between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton in the 2008 Democratic primaries, I was one of those fierce partisans desperate for the first black candidate with a serious shot at the White House to win the nomination. Ever opposed to nepotism, I disliked the prospect of our first female head of state achieving the position through marriage to a previous president, a cheap shortcut I considered anti-feminist. Besides, I opposed the political dynasty in principle. The US famously rejected monarchy in 1776, and phenomenons like the Kennedys, Bushes, and Clintons seemed antithetical to the American project.

When in those early, why-can't-we-all-be-friends days of the Obama administration, the new president called a truce by appointing his rival secretary of state, I was disgusted. The woman lost. She wasn't due a compensation prize. By then well weary of her strained attempts at populist folksiness, inconsistent put-on drawl, unpersuasive tearfulness and gratingly nasal voice, I didn't want to have to keep looking at her face.

Self-described as "tired", Hillary Clinton announced this week that she was stepping down from the "high wire of American politics" and would not remain secretary of state even if Obama wins a second term. I've surprised myself. I'm sorrowful, and searingly sympathetic.

Contrary to my expectations, Hillary – sorry to be so familiar, but perhaps it's a tribute to her personable nature that "Mrs Clinton" sounds so stilted – has proven a quietly effective, hard-working secretary of state. Her vigorous, mouthy husband has, incredibly, stayed in the back seat and for the most part kept his trap shut; you never get the impression that Bill is the little man behind every successful woman who's secretly pulling the strings.

Most impressively, considering the intensity of the primary contest, Hillary got with the Obama programme virtually overnight. Maybe it's a girl thing, but she was improbably adept at putting aside both an inevitable enmity towards the man who defeated her and her own disappointment that their roles were not reversed. In accordance with her post, Hillary has executed policy rather than attempting to craft it. Although the DC gossip mill would surely have leaked any power struggles behind closed doors, she and the president have presented a reliably united front.

As America's leading diplomat, she has been modest, professional and firm when necessary, often sticking up for women's rights while not gratuitously stirring pots. Hillary has been a credit to her gender and country both, and within weeks of her appointment the woman ceased altogether to get on my nerves. Her very voice seemed to grow more mellifluous, and it no longer makes me cringe.

I don't blame her for being tired. Even before this week's announcement, I have marvelled at how many aeroplanes she has to take. At how many hotel rooms in which she must have camped without ever bothering to unpack her bags, given a 6am departure for Jerusalem the next day. At how exhausting it must be to small-talk with foreign strangers at tediously lavish parties night upon night, when all you really want to do is slip off your shoes, order a tuna melt from

room service, and watch anything but the news. Always having to watch what she says, not just as secretary of state but as first lady, senator for New York, and presidential hopeful across two decades, she surely craves a private life again – in which her hairstyle and her recipes for oatmeal cookies are her own bloody business.

It isn't entirely clear that Hillary has decisively quit her ambitions to return to the White House on her own terms. At 64, she may still have an option on making another presidential bid, should she miss the fray after a rest she's earned.

In any event, it's mysterious how these ferocious hostilities fostered during closely fought political contests can simply dissolve. Ultimately, Hillary and Obama are on the same side. So if she's gone from public life for keeps, I will miss her. If she recuperates her tolerance for all the bullshit that comes with any presidential run, and the even greater bullshit that comes with actually winning, I might support her.

Her candidacy would be good for the country, and meanwhile my own about-face would be good for my character – because it ain't often I change my mind.