

A Book Review from *Commentary*, July-August 2006

Madame President?

Can She Be Stopped?
Hillary Clinton Will Be the Next
President of the United States Unless . . .
by John Podhoretz
Crown. 272 pp. \$26.95

Reviewed by
Jonathan Kay

In the run-up to the 1988 presidential election, Peter Kostmayer, a Democratic congressman, summed up his party's strategy this way:

We're not going to blow it this time. Just shut up, gays, women, and environmentalists. Just shut up. You'll get everything you want after the election. But just, for the meantime, shut up so we can win.

According to John Podhoretz, a columnist for the New York Post, regular commentator on Fox News, and contributing editor of the Weekly Standard, Hillary Clinton and her supporters are intent on implementing the same strategy—and they are already smart enough to shut up about their true beliefs.

But make no mistake, Podhoretz warns. Although Mrs. Clinton might be masquerading as a centrist, she is liberalism's "Trojan Horse, its stealthy way back into power." Whatever she might say in the course of a campaign, once sworn in as President she would immediately set about raising taxes, over-regulating the economy, coddling trial lawyers, embracing protectionism, appointing bleeding-heart judges, and backsliding in the war on terrorism. In short, Hillary Clinton would roll back all of the gains made by conservatives since 2000, and then some.

Can She Be Stopped? is a manifesto aimed at averting this parade of horrors. Written as a warning to his fellow conservatives, Podhoretz's diagnosis is stark, and so is his forecast: if conservatives are not careful, "the candidate [they] most dread" will be standing in front of Chief Justice John Roberts, right hand raised, on January 20, 2009.

Podhoretz's first order of business is to persuade skeptics that a Hillary candidacy must be taken seriously. On account of the heavy baggage the former first lady is seen to be lugging, many on the Right do in fact discount the threat she poses. But Podhoretz argues convincingly that she is no longer the polarizing and therefore unelectable figure she once was.

Since winning a Senate seat in 2000, Mrs. Clinton has cultivated a reputation as a collegial, hard-working lawmaker, all the while burnishing her moderate bona fides by such acts as voting in favor of the Iraq war and delivering a controversial (by Democratic standards) speech in 2005 urging the government to ensure that abortions occur “only in very rare circumstances.” To a considerable degree, she has succeeded in distancing herself from the 90’s-era firebrand who tried to foist a Rube Goldberg-like national-health-care scheme on America and proclaimed her husband the victim of a vast right-wing conspiracy.

True, polls show that 40 percent of Americans still hold a negative opinion of her. But this, in Podhoretz’s view, is not necessarily a fatal disability. In today’s highly partisan atmosphere, with mud flying in all directions, any serious candidate is bound to be disliked by a large quotient of the population. Mrs. Clinton has a head start in this department only because she is already a celebrity.

Nor does Podhoretz see any special reason why she would be held back as a woman. If men have enjoyed a natural advantage in presidential politics, that is because voters favor candidates who seem tough and confident—attributes typically associated with men. Unlike many other female politicians, however, Hillary has never tried to simper or exploit her feminine wiles. She does not have the “Straight-A-student demureness of Condoleezza Rice,” but neither is she a “hair-shellacking big-’do type, like Republican Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson.” Instead, Podhoretz places her in the league of hard-edged political brawlers like Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, and Margaret Thatcher.

So what can be done either to stop her at the primary stage or, should she win the nomination, prevent her from prevailing in the general election? Podhoretz has plenty of advice for conservatives—more than can be neatly summarized here. But his main points include the following:

(1) In the pre-primary season, smoke Hillary out by treating her as the party’s leader even before Democrats do. As Podhoretz sees it, the Democrats have clear positions on only a few domestic issues, and are completely at sea when it comes to foreign policy and defense. By pressing Hillary to declare herself on controversial matters—tax cuts, the United Nations, Iraq, gun rights, abortion, free trade, fighting terrorism—Republicans can force her to break ranks with and alienate what he calls “the neo-loon Left,” whose outsized influence among party activists can decide the Democratic primary.

(2) “Do not fight the last war.” That is, refrain from raising the issue of Bill Clinton’s impeachment, or the Starr report, or the cigar, or the dress, or anything else that may have figured in a 1998-era Jay Leno monologue involving Monica Lewinsky. It would only make Republicans look desperate.

(3) Stick together. Much of the book is taken up with urging hardcore conservatives not to bolt the GOP for a third-party protest candidate—something Podhoretz seems to regard as a genuine possibility. Even now, he points out, with the Republican party still

controlling the White House and both houses of Congress, the country is moving away from the small-government ideal embraced by many conservatives. Deficit spending, mushrooming budget earmarks, and internecine fighting over immigration have conspired to demoralize the GOP base. In the face of all this, conservatives must not allow themselves to make the ideal the enemy of the good by deserting the party.

(4) Nominate as the Republican candidate for President the man who represents the most effective counterweight to Hillary's brand of crypto-radical politics. In Podhoretz's judgment, that man is Rudolph Giuliani.

As a political writer, John Podhoretz might be described as George Will meets Fox News. Like Will and other columnists of an older generation, he has an extraordinary command of American electoral history, polling statistics, campaign finance, and all the other minutiae that inform expert political analysis. Unlike them, however, he gladly does combat in the partisan mud-pit—and, as readers of National Review Online are well aware, he is no less fearless about mixing it up in debate with his fellow conservatives.

The style of such pugilistic encounters is reflected in the tone and language of this book. To wit: Al Gore speaks “like someone in dire need of Librium.” East-coast liberals “think George W. Bush is an idiot chimp Hitler clone.” Hillary Clinton was advised in the 1990's by “lunatic pseudo-intellectual conspiracy freaks with self-important hair.” Tim Robbins is “the Oscar-winning actor whose talent for playing nincompoops onscreen is dwarfed by his talent for simply being a nincompoop in real life.”

This combination of high erudition and low (and often funny) talk makes for an exceptionally spirited and engrossing read, if one that is best savored in smallish bites. In the pages of the New York Post and on Fox News, Podhoretz deploys the art of aggressive political punditry with energy and finesse. Perfectly suited for a 700-word blast, it can be a little hard to take over the course of an extended argument.

But this points to what is perhaps most interesting about *Can She Be Stopped?* Ten years ago, a book like this might never have been written, or published. Typically, in the era before cable television and the Internet had created mutually exclusive media markets on the Left and Right sides of the political spectrum, election tracts were aimed at influencing centrist voters. Podhoretz's book is a new and different sort of animal. It takes for granted that its readers have already made up their minds about the big questions of where they stand and where the country should be going, and are only in need of guidance as to how best to get there and what ammunition to pack for the battles ahead.

Mettlesome, frisky, humorous, *Can She Be Stopped?* provides that guidance, and more. Along the way, it also provides a virtuoso lesson in how to conduct the new, tribal brand of politics that, for better or worse, has now become our common lot.

JONATHAN KAY *is managing editor for Comment at Canada's National Post.*

