

The Return of Syntax Politics: Hillary Clinton's Outlandish NAFTA Claim Debases Democratic Trade "Debate"

By Alan Tonelson
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Since none of the presidential candidates this year has said anything on trade policy that's come within light years of an insight, GLOBALIZATION FOLLIES doesn't have a dog in the current fight. But we also have no compunction about saying who has sent this lamest of all national trade debates crash-diving to hitherto unimaginable lows – and that would be Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Campaigning during the run-up to the crucial March 4 Ohio primary, the New York Democrat denounced her opponent, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, for depicting her as a supporter of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which was signed early on during her husband's administration.

"The agreement was negotiated in the Bush administration," said Sen. Clinton, in a riposte clearly aimed at Ohio workers and communities harmed by NAFTA and other recent trade deals. "It was passed in the Clinton administration."

It's hard to know what's more depressing – the return of those cynical but embarrassingly obvious parsing exercises that practically defined the Clinton presidency, or the underlying falsehood itself. We hope that Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert pounces all over this comeback of syntactical politics – e.g., "not having sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinski," defining what the meaning of "is" is, and smoking but not inhaling – and simply sets the record straight.

Bill Clinton's role in NAFTA was hardly confined to providing himself and his Mexican and Canadian counterparts with White House pens and a room with a view during the signing ceremony. His administration launched genuine negotiations to handle labor and environmental issues when these were more than gassy progressive slogans. He decided to settle for non-binding commitments in so-called side letters and weak enforcement mechanisms. And after striking this final compromise, he conducted what one scholar has called "the most extensive campaign ever waged for a trade agreement," including trotting out the former living Presidents and Secretaries of State, sending Vice President Gore to duel opposition leader Ross Perot in a famous cable TV debate, and promising almost all legislators heaping helpings of pork in exchange for their ratification votes.

Substantively, Sen. Clinton's gaffe – and all it implies about her commitment to revamping U.S. trade policies – may not be much worse than Obama's vote for the Peru free trade deal after slamming NAFTA, on which Peru is modeled. But stylistically, her revisionist history of NAFTA is so clumsy, so dripping with desperation, and, above all, so buffoonish, as to raise fundamental questions about her judgment and her choice of advisors (who clearly view such sophomoric hair-splitting as genuinely clever), not to mention her sense of integrity and self-respect.

Verbal gimmickry like this might hasten the demise of Sen. Clinton's flagging candidacy if any of the mainstream press knew anything about trade and called her on it. But, when all the mindless rhetoric and cynical charges and countercharges are done, the biggest losers will be the

American people, who are yet again being denied political leaders with a remote clue about the harm unfair trade practices and lopsided globalization policies are doing to this country – and more importantly, with policies to reverse the negative effects.

(Sources: "Clinton Criticizes Obama Over Fliers on Trade Pacts Distributed to Voters in Ohio," by Julie Bosman, The New York Times, February 24, 2008 and Frederick W. Thayer, Interpreting NAFTA: The Science and Art of Political Analysis [New York: Columbia University Press], 1998, esp. pp.165 ff)

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