

Grano Series – Race to the White House

The 4th annual speakers series, held in Toronto at Grano Restaurant, explores the key issues on the 2008 US election from four different perspectives

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On Hillary Clinton

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The following is an edited transcript of Camille Paglia's speech at the Grano Series. Ms. Paglia is a leading social critic and best-selling author. She teaches at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia and writes a column for Salon.com.

I have been asked to address the topic of Hillary Clinton and the 2008 presidential campaign. Let me start by saying that, as a long-time opponent of the Iraq war and as a registered Democrat, I am not at all confident that the Republicans will be automatically defeated next year. Anyone who thinks that the managerial ineptitude of the Bush White House, and the multiple disasters and embarrassments that have flowed from it, is going to rebound against the Gop is quite mistaken. The Republican party in the U.S. is running away from George Bush as fast as it can.

I faithfully listen to conservative talk radio, which is a very dynamic medium in the U.S. I listen to it all day long and into the night—when I'm not listening to sports radio, which is also of great sociological interest. Thus I can tell you that right now, because of the immigration crisis that has convulsed the Republican party, there is enormous animosity toward the Bush administration among rank and file Republicans. And, therefore, whoever is nominated by the Republicans is in no way going to run on George Bush's record. Bush is the past, and the error of the Democratic party lately is to think that George Bush is the target. This is absolute folly—to go on and on with this obsession with Bush, who is the biggest lame duck that anyone has seen in many a moon.

Forget it! The Democrats have to get themselves together on the question of geopolitics. The candidates need to project an authoritative persona and display some command of world history, some vision for the future. They need to provide some answer to the intractable problem of jihadism, which is not going to go away by anyone waving a wand. At the

moment I feel we're heading toward a Republican victory. And I just don't understand the giddy, false confidence of my fellow Democrats.

Whoever the Democratic nominee, I will gladly vote for him or her. If it's Hillary Clinton, I will vote for her, but I'm hoping it's not! I just don't see how Hillary can win unless there is the kind of splintering of the Republican party that occurred in the election that brought Bill Clinton to the White House. Bill Clinton would not have been elected in 1992 had Ross Perot not led his renegade movement. George Bush the elder would have been a shoo-in were it not for Perot. If Hillary is the Democratic nominee, her only hope is that the nominee of the Republican Party isn't sufficiently conservative for the Republican rank and file, so that someone else is nominated, such as Newt Gingrich, as a protest third-party alternative. And it can happen.

My history of analyzing Hillary Clinton goes back a long way—from the moment she arrived on the national scene in 1992. She and I are the same age, so there's a kind of parallel track. We were at Yale at the same time—I at the graduate school, she and her future husband at the law school across the street. We never knew each other, but we've had similar experiences, which is why I think I understand her and her aims and aspirations and limitations perhaps better than most.

I understand her in other ways, too. Her father was from Scranton, Pennsylvania, where some of my relatives live. I was born not far away in the Southern Tier of upstate New York in a factory town—Endicott—so I understand the working-class roots of that area and the kind of hardscrabble life her father's family had led. Even though Hillary grew up in the affluent Chicago suburbs, her voice sometimes curiously reverts to the harsh Scranton accent—it's something she deliberately uses when speaking to working-class voters.

Hillary's family became prosperously middle class, but her father earned an income by essentially doing manual labor from their home. He ran a one-man drapery business. And the way her home was run in childhood, successive biographies have revealed, was almost as a kind of prison. I think it's pretty clear that her father was psychologically abusive toward her mother and brothers and that the sunny picture Hillary painted of her childhood in her memoir and elsewhere is a falsehood.

You can see it in the strained smile in her early pictures. She's like little Miss Perfect, smiling brightly while her brothers look moody or miserable—those two ne'er-do well brothers, who have been such failures as adults. Hillary's brothers will always be a huge embarrassment to her campaign; they've repeatedly dragged her down, and she's had to bail them out of trouble.

But Hillary is enormously competitive. She formed her personality in that strange, high-pressure household where her father was irrational,

demanding and peremptory. Thus her vision of men is distorted. Hillary's attitude, evidently learned from her mother, is that women must endure and save men from their worst selves. Men are basically flawed—they're children. It's women who are the strength of human history. Whatever men do, women must tolerate it. You go to church and receive God's blessing and then return to your mission to save society from man's depredations.

There's a kind of twisted psychology in all this that helped produce the Clintons' notoriously dysfunctional marriage, where Bill misbehaves and Hillary helps cover it up. I have never understood the silence of my fellow feminists on this matter. Bill Clinton projects an image of geniality, kindness, generosity—I understand that he's extremely popular in Canada! But what has been overlooked in his history is his abusiveness towards women—in particular working-class and lower-middle-class women—which normally would send feminists into a tailspin. It's been tolerated, however, because of the general liberalism of his policies.

One of the main things I, as a feminist, hold against Hillary is the way she has systematically enabled Bill Clinton's womanizing by trashing his accusers' characters. As a product of Wellesley College—one of the glossy, elite Seven Sisters colleges—and of Yale Law School, Hillary has the attitude that she belongs to the superior class of woman, the truly valuable woman. Lower-middle-class women, on the other hand—such as staffers at the White House or the Arkansas governor's mansion or State House—or working-class women, such as Paula Jones, are trash. If these women say or do anything to endanger the Clintons' career, they must be destroyed.

You hear this attitude very clearly from the proxies the Clintons regularly use—such as James Carville, who was the “war room” mastermind of the first Clinton victory in 1992. Carville has a football mentality. He's an amusing man whom I personally like, but he is absolutely ruthless. He has exported his Machiavellian brand of campaign politics around the world and it's made him millions of dollars as a campaign consultant.

Carville is the one who said of Paula Jones' accusations, “Drag a hundred dollar bill through a trailer park, and there's no telling what you'll find.” That was the way he dealt with Paula Jones' justified complaint about the way she had been solicited and callously treated by Bill Clinton. It was a case of overt sexual harassment of a state employee that my fellow feminists have been absolutely silent on.

Never mind all these flaws, however! In the U.S. we desperately need a woman in the White House. I hope to see a woman president during my lifetime. I can't think of anything more important from a feminist point of view. We are lagging enormously behind the rest of the world here. But it is not true that Hillary Clinton is the first serious woman

candidate for the presidency. There is a long line of female candidates going back to the nineteenth century, including Victoria Woodhull, who was a radical feminist at odds with her fellow feminists. A series of prominent women have put themselves forward for the presidency, such as Bella Abzug, Patricia Schroeder and Shirley Chisholm, who was African-American. Perhaps the most credible candidate thus far was a Republican, Elizabeth Dole, who simply could not get the financing to continue.

Here's the problem: we have an insane system of campaigning in the U.S. that is dependent on raising money. Money for what? For millions of bloody dollars for buying TV ads and consultants who have made a fortune off of advising our candidates. Well, who the hell cares about TV anymore? Everyone has moved to the Web. As a consequence of this endless fund-raising grind, many excellent candidates don't put themselves forward.

My favorite woman candidate would be Senator Dianne Feinstein of California, who was once the mayor of San Francisco. I think she should have been the first woman president. This is a woman of tremendous deliberative gravitas, with deep knowledge of the military through her service on Senate military committees. She first came to national attention in 1978 because of her amazing coolness under fire when the mayor of San Francisco and a gay city councilman were assassinated in their offices by a deranged fellow councilman. Dianne Feinstein, as the president of the board of supervisors who would now automatically become the mayor, had to go before the media at that traumatic moment and announce that these murders had occurred right there in City Hall.

I will never forget seeing that on TV. I said, "Who *is* that woman?" She was amazing: you could see her deep emotion and yet also her disciplined, authoritative control. I had never seen such sense of command by a woman politician in an emergency. I said, "That woman should be president," and I began to follow her career with interest. I've always been very impressed with her when she is interviewed on TV talk shows. She is centered, she has core values, and she does not veer all over the place, according to what consultants are telling her.

But when Hillary speaks on camera, what you get is the rhetoric of the day. The spin changes from day to day depending on the polls. Hillary is smart, but everything she says is by rote. Yes, she can talk at great length; yes, she can give strong speeches; but everything is highly conceptualized and planned. Hillary has no emotional intelligence, no real intuition or instinct for the stage. She feigns connection with the common person, but that's not the company she keeps. Nevertheless, she is a woman of great experience in politics, a woman who knows the Washington bureaucracy and who won't act like a newbie when she arrives in Washington.

Hillary has a tough hide. That's extremely important in this day of the modern media. For anyone, male or female, to survive in politics in the U.S., you have to be ready to take a hail of criticism of the most insane kind. In fact, the campaign trail is a rite of passage where candidates are besieged with a rain of insults and false accusations as well as the resurrection of every dark skeleton from years long past. I think it's important for any leader to be able to maintain focus. It's almost an anthropological principle of history. As a leader, you may be elevated to the top through some wave of popularity, but the moment you reach the top, there's some eternal human impulse that kicks into action to tear you down. You have to be prepared for that. Hillary Clinton is hard-bitten and cynical from experience, and I don't think that should be discounted in this era when any emergency can strike. You can't be knocked off stride simply by some rude article in the newspaper.

At any rate, the Clintons emerged pretty suddenly from obscurity. Bill Clinton had made a much-commented-on speech to the 1988 Democratic convention that went on too long—when he said, “in conclusion,” people applauded! But Clinton, a centrist Southern governor, was nevertheless seen as the wave of the future. Clinton only got into the presidential race when Mario Cuomo withdrew. Cuomo, then governor of New York, would have probably made a fine president, but he thought the re-election of the elder George Bush was inevitable; so he didn't run. That was a terrible mistake, because Cuomo would have had a clear shot at the White House.

So Bill Clinton arrived on the national scene essentially unvetted. The national media, so eager for a Democratic candidate, failed to do a thorough inquiry into his past. And there were plenty of scandals involving women -- women, women everywhere in his past in Little Rock. All of this burst upon us with the Gennifer Flowers case, while Clinton was still on the road in his 1992 campaign. Flowers was a voluptuous Southern blonde, whom I had the pleasure to hear sing at her nightclub off Bourbon Street in New Orleans a couple of years ago—the year before Hurricane Katrina hit and put her club out of business. I can assure you that even now, Gennifer Flowers exudes a sexual charisma that demonstrates why Bill Clinton would have been smitten with her for twelve years. I believe every one of her allegations about her affair with Bill!

So the Clintons burst on the national scene, and the liberal mainstream media didn't ask enough questions about Bill Clinton's past. But for many members of my generation of 1960s women, Hillary was very refreshing. I was an early fan of Hillary from the start. I thought she was great! For example, during the 1992 campaign, I was on *The Phil Donahue Show* with Susan Faludi, my opponent in feminism. Near the end of the debate, Donahue said, “I have something to show you,” and he ran

the news footage from that very day where Hillary had been asked something on the road, and she snapped, "Well, I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas." That line is going to stick to her forever because it seemed like she was dissing homemakers from her position as a pricey, Ivy League-bedecked lawyer. But I thought it was hilarious and wonderful—that sharp sardonic woman's voice. I thought, "Yeah, that's the voice of my generation!" Susan Faludi and I turned to each other after we had been warring for the whole program, and we enthusiastically said, "Yes, we like Hillary Clinton." It was the *only* thing we agreed on—and we've agreed on nothing else ever since!

On Inauguration Day there was also a moment that I was very fond of but that's been totally forgotten now. At the public reception, people who had lined up outside were filing into the White House as part of the celebration, but there was some sort of snafu. Suddenly, Hillary, not realizing there was an open mike, said to Bill, "Listen, there are people out there getting screwed!" I thought, "Wow, there it is again—the voice of my generation of women"—we who wanted to use four-letter words like sailors, who wanted to break through bourgeois decorum, who wanted to remake the image of the professional woman. So I was a Hillary fan.

But then, on that same day, I had a little qualm as I watched the Clintons on tv at the Inauguration gala. As Barbra Streisand was singing, I thought it was very odd that Hillary Clinton, in her designer gown, was sitting there scowling with a glowering look that seemed totally inappropriate for that festive occasion. I mentioned it a year later in a debate on CNN's now-expired show, *Crossfire*, with Ann Lewis—who continues to be a hired flunky for Hillary Clinton. Lewis said, "Oh, please—you're talking about an expression on someone's face, with all these policy decisions that are so much more important?"

Well, Ann Lewis probably knew bloody well then what the rest of us didn't know for years—that Bill Clinton may have had a dalliance with Ms. Streisand and that Hillary was in a big snit about it that day, which was why she was glowering as Streisand sang. My attitude remains that no matter what was bothering her, Hillary had an obligation on that important occasion to show a persona of graciousness. The problems in the Clinton marriage that were revealed on Inauguration Day were a premonition of what was going to come during the Lewinsky scandal, which brought the government to a standstill.

Newspapers began calling me early on to comment on Hillary. My first big piece on Hillary was a 1993 cover story of the *Sunday Times* magazine in London. The headline -- not written by me! -- was "Kind of a Bitch: Why I Like Hillary Clinton." However, I, along with many of my fellow Democrats, became very disillusioned with her that year because of the way she fumbled the healthcare-reform initiative. This was a very important moment in American politics: we desperately needed healthcare

reform, and the issue had tremendous momentum. Republicans too believed that reform was urgent and were looking for solutions. But Hillary handled it in the most ham-handed way. She would not even reveal the names of the hundreds of panel members and advisors who were working through all these labyrinthine, bureaucratic, futuristic, Big Brother proposals that she had put forward. It was an absolute fiasco.

This was the first year of the Clinton presidency. Why would Bill Clinton put his wife in charge of that massive reform attempt, when one-sixth of the national budget was tied up in medical care? And why would he foolishly promise, "We're going to have this report to you in a hundred days"? What an artificial and unrealistic deadline. Bill was waving a plastic card around for the cameras and saying, "This is all you'll need, this one card!" Well, of course, everyone thought, "Oh, good Lord, we're going to have a master computer with everyone's private healthcare information on it."

There were a million legitimate questions that people had that were never answered, and the whole scheme fell of its own weight. So Americans have been waiting fifteen long years for healthcare reform to be put back on the table. Now all the leading Democratic nominees for the presidential nomination have their own individual healthcare proposals. They don't really differ that much, except that Hillary's is mandatory, with penalties included. So I think it would be an issue very vulnerable to attack from Republicans next year.

Then there was the endless series of scandals throughout the nineties as one thing after another came up from Hillary's past—the Whitewater controversy and so on. I ended up writing a very notorious cover story for *The New Republic* in 1996 called "Ice Queen, Drag Queen," where I said that Hillary's whole persona as a woman is essentially a drag queen impersonation. I stand by every word I wrote, although it took the rest of the media years to catch up to it. I continue to believe that it's Hillary's psychological flaws and ambiguities, and not just her policy positions, that will undermine her candidacy next year. I just can't see people crossing party lines in the numbers needed to vote for her.

It's not because Hillary's a woman; that charge of sexism is absurd. I think the U.S. is ready to elect a woman president. There are, for example, many prominent, outspoken women conservatives right now, including female pundits, columnists, talk show hosts and so on. I think the time is right for a woman leader. But it's just that this particular woman may not be the right woman. She has so much baggage that the Republicans are shrewdly holding back on. It's quite obvious that they want Hillary to be the nominee: she would be the easiest by far to defeat.

Part of the problem is Hillary's relationship to social class, which I think is very troublesome. She was embarrassed in some way by her

father and her relatives, and she has run away from it in ways I find dismaying. I am very uncomfortable with how Hillary bonds with people of wealth and power and, in particular, the frivolous Hollywood elite. I'm a lifelong fan of popular culture, but I have disdain for most of the current Hollywood elite. I think they're mostly airheads and that the quality of product coming from the American entertainment industry these days is extremely poor. The way the Clintons' heads are so easily turned by showbiz personalities is highly embarrassing. But it's symptomatic of trends in American politics over the past twenty years. For example, I think that former Senator Fred Thompson, a Republican candidate for president, made a terrible mistake in announcing his candidacy on a late-night talk show. I mean, what have we been reduced to when talk shows become the stage for an announcement of such gravity for the most powerful position in the world? It's tacky!

There was a notorious cover of the National Enquirer tabloid showing the Clintons' Hollywood pals jumping up and down as if on a trampoline on the bed in the historic Lincoln Bedroom in the White House. They were going, "Yay! We're here now!" What absolute juvenility that the Lincoln Bedroom was turned over to an endless series of Hollywood parakeets, whom the Clintons met through their friendship with Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, the producer and creator of "Designing Women", and whom they knew from Arkansas. It was Bloodworth-Thomason who was probably behind Hillary's makeover for her Senate campaign—the pantsuits and chic hairstyles and so on. At the present moment, Hillary is basically a Hollywood product.

Nevertheless, we have to ask whether the imperative to have a woman in the highest office is so urgent a matter for the United States that we can overlook all of Hillary's faults. What kind of president would she make? Well, number one, she's highly organized; she's a workaholic who doesn't see recreation as part of human life. She appears not to enjoy life in any natural way. She has become a kind of artificial personality. I feel that she's haunted by the past and is therefore obsessively focused on the future. But such people can be very useful and productive in public office.

My main problem with Hillary is that, while she might be very organized, I honestly don't see her talent as an executive or leader. She would be better suited as a cabinet officer or as an ambassador to the U.N. I mean, would she really be able to manage the government bureaucracy, to give it a sense of morale or spirit? She is too stridently partisan. She has a kind of Manichean mentality; everything is black or white. There are, in her view, all these evil people in the world who oppose the Clintons, who aim only for the betterment of humanity, who have no self-interest whatever, and who have been defamed by a vast right-wing conspiracy as well as by enemies within the party.

Hillary is a thoroughgoing Methodist, a very determined and sometimes grim social activist. She has a tremendous power of denial. She evidently thinks that she is the beneficiary of God's grace; it's a nearly Puritan bequest: God has a mission for her, and therefore anything that she does is positive, and anyone who opposes her must be destroyed. This attitude is not the most positive ideal for politics, which demands consensus, a give-and-take. You can't always achieve your aim. So Hillary's programmatic rigidity sometimes turns into a delusional projection for a utopian future, which she believes is going to come to pass through big government.

There's been a lot of reporting over the years that most of the disasters of the Clinton regime can be traced back to Hillary: the strategic misjudgements from the firing of the entire travel office of career employees, who were dear to the media, to the refusal to settle with Paula Jones, which led directly to the Lewinsky imbroglio. (Monica's name emerged during the discovery process in Jones' lawsuit.) The Monica Lewinsky scandal paralyzed the American government for two years and anyone who doesn't see that is blind: the government was tied up by Bill Clinton protecting himself.

That man should have resigned that first month; he was close to doing it but decided to fight it out. The senior members of his party had almost convinced him to resign. He should have resigned out of shame for what he had done. Al Gore would have been president while his reputation was still high. Gore would have gotten his sea legs in office and, I believe, would have been re-elected. By the time he did run, he had become a fool, the prisoner of Naomi Wolf and his daughter Karenna, Ivy League airheads with a bizarre gender-based dream vision of what Al Gore should be. So instead of the real Al Gore—conservative, steady and boring in a three-piece blue pin-striped suit, looking like a diplomat and an authority figure—we had him bouncing around the country showing off his buff chest and wearing earth tones.

It was a tragedy, what happened to Al Gore. I didn't vote for him in 2000, but I wish I had been able to. I voted for Ralph Nader instead and I don't regret it. So go ahead and blame me for the election of Bush! But in all candor, I don't feel that Al Gore would have been the strongest president to face the challenge of 9/11. The threat of world terrorism had been marginalized by the Clinton-Gore administration and completely ignored while the Lewinsky scandal was consuming the government. The Clinton administration was appallingly non-responsive to the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993. In the late nineties, I was warning about that in Salon.com. Why was the U.S. so passive and oblivious? It seemed obvious that there was a growing terrorist problem out there.

But who was our National Security Advisor? Sandy Berger, a genial guy who maybe should have been a dog catcher. Berger had no

credentials whatsoever to be National Security Advisor to the president. And Berger should be in prison right now. He stole documents from the National Archives about the Clinton administration's handling of security issues—stuffing documents into his socks and hiding them under a trailer outside the building. And Bill Clinton goes on tv and laughs it off: "Oh, that's Sandy. Everyone knew how messy his desk was!" This was *his* National Security Advisor as jihadism was rising around the world? Canada, get over your infatuation with Bill Clinton! You're living in an illusion. 9/11 was the terrible result of Clinton's problems and failures.

Anyway, back to Hillary. Hillary has had great trouble finding an authentic personal voice. Recently she went into an African-American church and carried on: "This is the day the Lord has made!" Good heavens, it was pure Aunt Jemima! Obama, on the other hand, has a perfect right to use African-American locutions and Southern intonations. He was a community organizer in African-American neighborhoods in Chicago. But Hillary has never had that kind of experience—she's just a tourist. Her condescending assumption that African-American women are going to support her because of her husband is utterly insulting to the capabilities of the African-American electorate—which is why Oprah Winfrey's embrace of Barack Obama came as such a blow. Hillary had assumed that she had Oprah, and all the rest of the major media, in her pocket.

Hillary's voice problem was obvious recently when she was questioning General David Petraeus as he was making his report about the putative success of the surge in Iraq. Hillary had clearly been coached to talk softly, so as not to offend TV viewers with her usual stridency. But her voice ended up as an annoyingly monotonous undertone. Why does every single thing she does seem feigned? Why is there this sense that she's never entirely natural, that she never just speaks from her heart? We feel *the plan* too clearly. That air of falseness, her discomfort in public, is going to undermine her in the long run. The leading Republican candidates have all been far more natural—they seem like real guys. Whether it was Mitt Romney or Rudy Giuliani or Fred Thompson, when they were being interviewed on talk shows or on the road, people shoved microphones in their faces, and these candidates showed a sense of spontaneity and fun. It's because they, unlike Hillary, have consistent core values.

The latest item trotted out by the Hillary campaign is that she is the new Margaret Thatcher. She is like the Iron Lady. She has strength—and you notice how Hillary is always saying the word "strength" over and over? She has the "strength" to lead the nation. Well, excuse me. Margaret Thatcher, whatever you might think of her, had strong core values. She had one ideology and was persistent and consistent in pushing it forward. You never were in any doubt as to where Thatcher stood. She did not rely on consultants to spoon-feed her talking points, and she did not think

every morning, "Oh, what shall I say today?" She spoke from her own unique position at all times. There is absolutely no basis of comparison between Margaret Thatcher and Hillary Clinton.

A better comparison would be to Dianne Feinstein who, in my view, never strikes a false note. When Senator Feinstein speaks, she's able to combine a sense of compassion and feeling with intellect and knowledge. It's a wonderful fusion—a quality that should be possessed by our first woman president. But nevertheless, if it turns out that Hillary proves to be the strongest candidate of a flawed lot and we end up with her in the White House, it will be a great experiment. If she fails, it's still important that Hillary be respected as a pioneer in terms of her ability to put together this massive money-making campaign. Relying on her husband's contacts and knowledge, she has been able to set up a national organization for extorting money—which has now led her into more scandals, such as the Norman Hsu case. It's a bit embarrassing. But Hillary has laid the groundwork for the first successful woman president. Women candidates of either party will follow the map she has made.

A main issue right now is the giant albatross around her neck, Bill Clinton. For a while it seemed that Hillary was running on her own and that Bill Clinton, who loves to hog the spotlight, was remaining decorously in the background. But as her campaign started to flounder, he moved much more aggressively into the foreground in ways that make me uneasy as a feminist. I mean, surely we don't want the first woman president coming into office on the coattails of her husband?

When Bill's around and they're campaigning as a team, as they did in New Hampshire, she is more relaxed because he has an intuitive feeling for the crowd: he's a great performer. He loves touchy-feely contact with people, whereas she is stiffer and much more standoffish. I think her consultants feel that when they're together, it projects a more natural feeling about her, but let's face it—at this point, it's a pretend marriage between two people who hardly see each other.