Why I Asked Hillary Clinton Not to Run

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By Richard Cherwitz

Now that the 2018 elections are in the rearview mirror, it is time to focus attention on the 2020 presidential election.

There has been much speculation recently about whether Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will attempt to win nomination as the Democrat candidate. She has not explicitly ruled out this possibility and remains in the news speaking about important political issues. In addition, many of her supporters believe she may run. This should give us pause.

As a partisan—I am a longtime Democrat—and someone one extremely worried about the damage President Donald Trump is inflicting upon our nation because of his autocratic tendencies, I truly believe it would be a mistake if Clinton seeks her party’s nomination. While she could do much to restore the rule of law and our standing in the world, as well as renew confidence in our government’s institutions, her candidacy would play directly into Trump’s hands and resurrect the ire of and embolden her opponents—many of whom are Democrats as well as Independents and Republicans.

From the nonpartisan purview of a political communication scholar, I am convinced that Clinton lacks the rhetorical resources necessary to defeat Trump. One of Trump’s most effective strategies has been to use Clinton as a foil. So, rather than having to defend his own weaknesses and failures, Trump will deflect by turning the tables and reminding us of Clinton’s wrongdoings—alleged wrongdoings that many believe even in the absence of prima facie evidence. There is no doubt this will capture the attention of the media and hence prevent voters from focusing on Trump’s lies, dangerous actions and unethical discourse.
So concerned as a scholar and Democrat, I decided it was not enough simply to talk to others about my reasons for not wanting Clinton to run. Instead, I chose to send a letter to Hillary Clinton. My goal was to be respectful, yet brutally honest.

In my letter to Secretary of State Clinton, I made several points.

First, I told her that I am a fan, voting for her in 2016 and never regretting that decision. I explained that she was an excellent Secretary of State and would have made an outstanding President. The latter point was offered not just as a comparison to Donald Trump who will go down as one of the most unethical U.S. leaders but as a way of showing Clinton that I often imagine the wonderful things that would have transpired under her stewardship.

Second, I argued that her many positive attributes notwithstanding, she should announce that she will not run in 2020. I reminded Clinton that, sadly, too many potential swing voters cast a ballot for Trump or at least didn’t vote for her in 2016, buying his critique of Clinton and tapping into negative perceptions of her and President Bill Clinton. To be fair, I indicated that Trump’s critique was baseless and the negative perceptions of her unfounded.

Third, I insisted that Democrats cannot take a chance in 2020. We can ill afford four more years of Trump and the dangers, some of which could be irreparable, he might inflict on our democracy and rule of law.

Finally, I referenced the most recent Gallop poll, showing that just 36% of people have a favorable view of Clinton. That’s down 7 points from where it stood just before the 2016 election and is tied for her lowest favorable rating ever in Gallup polling. Frankly, I do not entirely understand this and know it will be an insurmountable hurdle. As we often say, however, it is what it is.

I shared with Clinton the advice one of my former students offered her: “It’s a crime you didn’t win in 2016, but some wrongs can’t be righted. As Elsa sings in Frozen, 'Let it go.'”

In the concluding sentences of my letter, I emphasized to Clinton that history will vindicate her, highlighting the many positive things she has done to serve the country. Nevertheless, I implored Clinton not to allow a third run for the presidency to impact her important place in history.
I hope Secretary of State Clinton has read my words and will heed them.

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