

## Hillary Clinton campaign deploys not-so-secret weapon: Bill

Ed Pilkington in New York and Zach Stafford in Chicago

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Say what you like about President [Bill Clinton](#) – and many things have been said about him over the years, flattering and otherwise – but one thing is certain: he isn't cheap. On Thursday he travelled to Chicago to headline two fundraising events for his wife Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign where top donors were required to bundle \$50,000 each for the privilege of hearing him speak.

Not that the main donors hosting the event – billionaire JB Pritzker, entrepreneur Matt Moog, venture capitalist Howard Tullman and other members of Chicago's business elite – would have balked at having to raise such a sum. At least for the price, they were granted a ringside seat at the making of US political history.



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Clinton's appearance at the fundraisers were the first time that he has been publicly rolled out in support of his wife's bid for the White House in this election cycle. Until this week, Hillary Clinton's Brooklyn-based campaign had kept him firmly in the background.

He was present on Roosevelt Island in June when she [formally announced her candidacy](#), but even then he was limited to waving from the sidelines and kept away from the podium. Since then there has been nothing; as Bill himself has put it: "My role should primarily be as a backstage adviser until we get much, much closer to the election."

That the first task he should be asked to perform in Hillary Clinton's 2016 iteration should be raising cash surprises nobody – he is, after all, the human equivalent of an ATM. "His money-raising powers are off the chart," said Matt Bennett, an aide in President Clinton's White House who worked on both his presidential campaigns. "Most candidates dislike the job but he actually enjoys it – and when he is in close quarters with donors he has such charm that they tend to do whatever he asks them to."

Bill Mahoney, a Chicago attorney and "enthusiastic" Clinton backer who attended one of the fundraisers, told the Guardian that having the former president in the room was powerful because "he is smart, he knows the issues, he's energetic, he can remind the base here of the economic successes that occurred when he was president. And he can be a foundation for what Secretary Clinton wants to do with the economy."



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Jimmy Fallon posing as Donald Trump interviews Hillary Clinton on the Tonight Show

Phil Alexander, CEO of ConceptDrop, was present when Bill Clinton toured the Chicago startup incubator space 1871 in between Thursday's two fundraisers. Alexander told the Guardian that the former president spoke at length though in general terms about the criticisms that his wife had faced in her campaign. Clinton argued that what had happened was not tied to her merit or experience as a potential candidate." He reiterated that the presidential election was a marathon, not a sprint, Alexander said.

The question now is to what extent Clinton's Chicago jaunt was a taste of things to come – will we now begin to see him more regularly on the campaign trail? Hillary Clinton could certainly do with some help from somewhere. She continues to suffer from the long-running sore created by her choice to set up a [private email server](#) when she was US secretary of state.

Despite the effort her campaign team has invested in humanizing her and making her appear approachable – [Scooby-Doo](#) [van](#), [late-night talkshows](#) and all – her [poll ratings](#) in crucial early caucus and primary states have steadily declined in recent weeks. Most worryingly, her support levels are heading earthward even among the demographic she has most passionately embraced in the 2016 race – [Democratic female voters](#).

But is her husband the right person to seek help from? Paul Begala, who played a key role in Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential victory and went on to advise him in the White House, thinks that the commentariat often overthinks the answer to that question.

"At the end of the day, this is Hillary's campaign and she will win it on her own merits. But it can only help to have Pres Clinton in her corner," he said.

Clinton was a "beloved figure" who amply displayed his value in 2012 when he made what Begala reckoned to be one of the most [consequential speeches](#) in Barack Obama's bid for re-election at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. "If you had one of the greatest players who ever lived on your team, would you put him in the game? It would be malpractice not to."



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Bill Clinton joins Hillary and their daughter Chelsea at the Foundry United Methodist church's Bicentennial Homecoming Celebration in Washington on Sunday. Photograph: Molly Riley/AP

But political scientists who have studied the role of spouses in elections see a more complicated picture. Kelly Dittmar of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University pointed to the phenomenon known as "spousal reflection" in which the presence of a spouse can have an impact, positive or negative, on the candidate.

"For male candidates the concept of spousal reflection is that you use your female spouse to reflect the masculinity and leadership of the man, as a benefit to him. But female candidates don't receive the same benefit, as their spouses often reflect their femininity, which – in politics – may cue weakness," Dittmar said.

During Hillary Clinton's first presidential attempt in 2008, Bill was seen more frequently in public, actively laboring on her behalf at rallies and on stages. It didn't always go so well – he famously got into several heated disputes with Obama's campaign, making rash remarks that were then widely interpreted as playing the race card.

They [included his claim](#) that Obama's anti-Iraq war posture was a "fairy tale". At the height of the carping, Ryan Lizza of the New Yorker likened Clinton to an "ill-tempered coot driven a little mad by Obama's success".

Newspaper cartoonists made hay with the idea of Bill stomping all over his wife's campaign. One cartoonist depicted Hillary making a stump speech while Bill's giant shadow loomed over her.

Clearly, Hillary Clinton's campaign chiefs are going to do everything they can to prevent a repeat performance of Bill Clinton in 2008. But while he may remain fairly invisible on the campaign trail for a while longer, his presence is already being felt behind closed doors.

The campaign's communications director Jennifer Palmieri has indicated that he often turns up for strategy huddles at campaign HQ. She told a [Politico panel](#) earlier this summer: "He doesn't come to every meeting we have, but he does join his wife often in some of our discussions, and I'm always fascinated to hear what his observation is going to be because it's always something no one said."

Even away from the prying eyes of reporters and cartoonists, though, there are questions about whether his advice is always the most helpful. [The New York Times reported](#) that Clinton was "adamant" that his wife had nothing to apologize for her use of a private email channel while serving as America's top diplomat.

Which would have been fine, had it not later transpired – by [Hillary Clinton's own admission](#) – that she did indeed need to apologize and wished she had done it earlier.

The Democratic pollster Peter Hart wonders whether Clinton is properly equipped to be able to advise on a modern presidential campaign in the age of Twitter and Instagram. "I don't want to speculate on the advice he's giving, but it is true that we all draw on our own experiences and all the challenges Bill Clinton faced ended in 2000."

Hart sees evidence of that in the way that [Hillary Clinton](#) has handled the email controversy. "This is the era of transparency. A candidate who is opaque finds it difficult – and up to now Hillary has at best been translucent."