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2008 primary

Old Clinton team ready for action  
Bill's supporters seem eager to help Hillary

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Clinton  
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If Sen. Hillary Clinton enters the 2008 presidential race, the New Hampshire campaign team that pushed her husband to a second-place finish in the state's 1992 primary would be resurrected, Democratic activists say. Many Bill Clinton supporters say they would transfer their allegiances to his wife, who advanced her potential bid this week by hiring top-level campaign staff and reaching out to local Democrats.

"I would love it if she did run, and I'm just waiting to hear," said Deb Crapo, who helped organize Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign in Rockingham County.

Support for Clinton seems fueled as much by love for her husband as by faith in her political talents. Long after his ascent to the White House, Bill Clinton has remained close to his New Hampshire volunteers, inviting them to holiday parties in Washington, sending letters and hosting lunches when he traveled through town.

"That kind of personal attention from the president of the United States will not go unrewarded," said Nancy Richards-Stower, who volunteered for Bill Clinton in 1992. "I think it would be very difficult for any of us who worked so hard for him to look him in the eye and tell him why we weren't going to be working our butts off for Hillary. I will not wear anybody else's button."

Clinton has yet to create a formal campaign in New Hampshire, and she has refrained from openly courting prominent New Hampshire Democrats. Unlike other likely Democratic candidates, such as Sen. John Kerry and Sen. Joe Biden, Clinton didn't lavish local lawmakers with campaign contributions in the run-up to last month's election.

But her primary jockeying has begun.

"She'll be calling a wide range of people to get their advice as she enters a new phase of thinking," said Karen Hicks, a veteran campaign strategist who will serve as Clinton's national field director.

And the skeleton of Bill Clinton's presidential campaign machine remains ready to re-emerge the moment

Clinton announces her candidacy, New Hampshire Democrats said.

Clinton supporters "are in hibernation. They're waiting for their marching orders," said Arnie Arnesen, a political analyst and former radio talk show host. "She has so many advantages that it's almost mind-boggling. She doesn't need a Rolodex; she doesn't need to build relationships."

Volunteers from Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign explain the couple's enduring appeal: the way they maintain contact with their New Hampshire supporters, the way both excel at one-on-one conversations, and the fact that after two terms in the White House, they still seem down to earth.

The campaign, Crapo said, "would be like a reunion" of Bill Clinton supporters. "I think almost everybody would sign on."

"I think that there's a lot of loyalty," said Anita Freedman, a Bill Clinton volunteer who said she'd "absolutely" support Hillary Clinton. "I have been unfortunate enough to lose my husband and about two-and-a-half years ago to lose my daughter unexpectedly. Some of the first people on the phone were the Clintons."

But Bill Clinton's old supporters won't suffice on their own. Clinton will need to construct her own network, many activists said.

"I think that she will build her own campaign," said Hicks, who was Howard Dean's New Hampshire campaign director in 2004. "She's going to be a candidate that will work really, really hard. She'll do the right kind of things in New Hampshire."

There will "be a big emphasis on meeting people face-to-face," Hicks added. In her New York campaigns for U.S. Senate, "she spent a lot of time visiting every nook and cranny in the state."

Although Bill Clinton's campaigning and oratory skills have at times threatened to overshadow his wife, she has political talents of her own, Democratic activists said.

"I think that she's very thoughtful, very deliberate and very exacting in what she does," said Ricia McMahon, a state representative from Sutton who co-chaired the 1992 Clinton New Hampshire campaign.

"She is substance; she is depth; she is a quick study," said George Bruno, a former state Democratic Party chairman who served as ambassador to Belize under Bill Clinton.

And not least of her political advantages is her ability to raise large sums of money, relying in large part on her husband's old network of donors.

But Clinton, like her husband, doesn't come baggage-free. After a midterm election that many analysts deemed a referendum on the conflict in Iraq, she could face criticism for her 2002 vote to authorize the war. And after two Bush presidencies, voters could recoil from another White House dynasty.

"Such a high profile carries many hazards," said Bruno, who supported Wesley Clark in 2004 and is waiting to see which candidates enter this primary race before giving his endorsement. "If she wants the nomination, and if she wants the support of New Hampshire primary voters, she'll have to fight for it."

Some potential candidates, notably former vice-presidential nominee John Edwards, have garnered considerable New Hampshire support, said Rob Werner, chairman of the Merrimack County Democrats and an Edwards supporter. "In historical terms, she's not a terrifically strong front-runner," Werner said, referring to polls that show Clinton receiving about one-third of primary votes.

Clinton's apparent acceleration of her White House timetable followed a media frenzy over Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, who recently opened the door to a possible presidential bid and who will visit New Hampshire this weekend. Clinton hired a national spokesman and fundraising director this week, and she

has been speaking with prominent New York Democrats about a possible run for president.

The primary field is still wide open, and candidates have plenty of time to court votes, said Terry Shumaker, who helped run Bill Clinton's campaign and who has known the Clintons for 15 years. "I can count on one hand the number of people who have already decided to back this candidate or that candidate. It's extremely early."

But as the front-runner, Clinton gets to shape the tenor of the contest, Democratic activists said.

She "clearly becomes the leading candidate the minute she announces," said Chris Gallagher, a Concord lawyer and prominent Bill Clinton supporter, who is "leaning towards" supporting her if she announces her candidacy.

The question facing Democrats is which candidate will emerge as the "not-Hillary." Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack, Sens. Evan Bayh and Biden, among others: They're all hoping to emerge from a crowded Democratic field to face Clinton in a one-on-one match, Gallagher said.

All that's left, Gallagher said, is for Clinton to start the race.

"The kindling is there, and all it needs is a match," Gallagher said.

***Information from the Associated Press was used in this report.***

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This article is: 29 days old.