Media furor over Hillary Clinton's use of private email

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11 March 2015

Hillary Clinton, the presumed frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016, held a press conference at the United Nations Tuesday to address the media uproar over her exclusive use of a private email account while serving as US secretary of state from 2009 to 2013.

The press conference followed a long-scheduled address by Clinton to a UN meeting on the status of women. Clinton made a brief statement on that subject and criticized the letter sent by 47 Republican senators to Iran aimed at scuttling a negotiated agreement on Iran's nuclear program before taking a series of press questions on the email controversy.

The media uproar—all five Sunday television interview programs devoted the bulk of their time to the subject—seems timed to impact Clinton's announcement of her presidential candidacy, which has been widely predicted for early April.

Republican congressmen and sections of the media, spearheaded by Fox News, aim to use the email issue to revive their campaign against Clinton over the events of September 2012 in Benghazi, Libya, when Islamic fundamentalists attacked a US diplomatic facility and CIA annex, killing US Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans.

Clinton's use of a private account for all of her electronic correspondence was known since last summer to members of the bipartisan House committee investigating the Benghazi attack, but the fact did not become public until March 4, when the *New York Times* published a front-page report on the issue.

According to reports by the *Times* and the Associated Press, Clinton transitioned a private server that handled both personal and political email during her 2008 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, using it throughout her four years at the State Department to communicate with other members of the Obama administration, foreign governments, members of Congress, the public at large, and family and friends.

The private account was not secret. Those receiving email from Clinton would have seen a URL ending in @clintonemail.com rather than @state.gov. The main revelation in the *Times* account was not that Clinton used the @clintonemail.com address for her correspondence, but that she used *only* that address. The AP added the fact that the email account was hosted on a server physically located at the Clinton family home in Chappaqua, New York, rather than in a US government facility.

Media pundits and Democratic and Republican politicians have criticized Clinton for a lack of "transparency." Clinton's efforts to conceal her official actions from the American people are, in fact, part of a pervasive regime of state secrecy that encompasses every institution of government and both political parties.

Those who seek to puncture the veil of secrecy and expose to the public the conspiracies, crimes and lies of the government, such as Julian Assange, Chelsea (Bradley) Manning and Edward Snowden, are denounced as traitors and spies by all factions of the political and media establishment and either imprisoned or forced into exile.

At Tuesday's press conference, Clinton said that, in hindsight, her use of the same account for both private and official email had been a mistake, while claiming that she had done so purely for the convenience of carrying only one electronic device. Until 2011, cell phones provided federal officials were permitted to use only one email account, so two accounts would have required two phones.

Clinton declared that the Secret Service guarded the Chappaqua home and that she never used email to send classified materials, in an effort to refute suggestions that the private email server could have exposed US government secrets.

Last fall, in response to a routine State Department request to former secretaries of state to supply old records for archival purposes, Clinton turned over 55,000 pages of emails. The State Department is currently reviewing these to determine which will be made public.

Questioning at the press conference focused on which emails Clinton had turned over and which she held back, and

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what happened to those withheld. Clinton's answers were both vague and carefully hedged.

She said that there were a total of 60,000 emails on her private server, of which about half were related to official business and about half wholly private. The number of emails cannot be directly compared to the pages of emails turned over, so it is not clear what proportion of the emails have been divulged or if any remain.

Clinton was asked three times during the press conference why she alone should determine which emails are turned over to the State Department and which are withheld as private and apparently deleted. In each case she gave a variation of the same response, saying at one point, "For any government employee, it is that government employee's responsibility to determine what's personal and what's work-related."

This is transparently evasive, since Clinton, the former first lady, US senator and presidential candidate before becoming secretary of state, was anything but a typical federal employee. Most federal employees must comply, as a condition of employment, with regulations requiring that all official communications pass through government-controlled accounts and servers.

High-ranking officials, by contrast, have regularly used private email accounts in the two decades since this form of communication became commonplace. Bush White House officials conducted official business on a private gw43.com domain, as well as on a server run by the Republican National Committee—for which, of course, they were roundly denounced by Democrats, including Clinton herself as a senator and 2008 presidential candidate.

Prospective Republican presidential candidate Jeb Bush used a private server for all his email during his eight years as governor of Florida. Early this year he made public a large portion of it, following the same procedure as Hillary Clinton. Bush and his aides, without any outside or independent review, made the selection of what email to divulge.

In both Republican and Democratic administrations, top officials conducted their email with an eye to maintaining control over the records, while insisting that lower-ranking government workers use the federal email system exclusively. In 2012, for example, the State Department issued several orders to its staff to that effect, while Clinton did as she pleased.

Only in 2013, amid mounting concerns over cyberattacks and leaks of classified information—particularly the exposure by Snowden of massive NSA international and domestic spying—did the Obama administration push through a new law that required all public officials, including cabinet members, to use the government email system exclusively for official business. This law took effect in 2014, more than a year after Clinton left the State Department.

That timeline did not stop Republican congressmen from hinting that Clinton might be guilty of a "crime" for using a private email server, or for maintaining control of her email records after leaving government. Given the actual crimes for which Clinton shared responsibility during her four years in the Obama administration—illegal wars, drone missile assassinations, mass illegal surveillance, conspiracies for regime-change in Ukraine, Australia and a dozen other countries—the charge of special privilege in email is small potatoes.

The email furor must be understood as a manifestation of the bitter struggle between factions of the US ruling elite that are seeking to manipulate the 2016 election campaign and shape the policies of the next US administration. Clinton is the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination, with the backing of the entire Democratic Party establishment. Jeb Bush leads a large field of Republican hopefuls, in large measure due to his ability to raise hundreds of millions of dollars from Wall Street interests and tap his family's connections in the military-intelligence apparatus.

There are more than 300 million people in the United States, a complex, diverse and deeply class-divided society, but all political life is channeled through two right-wing parties controlled by the financial aristocracy. The prospect that the presidential campaign will be reduced to a conflict between two families—the sixth presidential campaign by a Bush vs. the fourth by a Clinton—testifies to the narrow and oligarchical character of 21st century America.

The exact contours of the divisions within the US ruling elite remain murky, and may not coincide with partisan conflicts between Democrats and Republicans, but erupt within the parties themselves. It is evident, for example, that the Obama White House was reluctant to come to Clinton's defense.

White House spokesmen repeatedly deferred questions to their State Department counterparts. President Obama told CBS News Saturday that he had learned of Clinton's use of a private email system only from news reports. White House spokesman Josh Earnest later modified this claim, saying that Obama knew Clinton's email address, but was not aware of the private server in Chappaqua.

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