

Hillary Clinton's *What Happened*: A conspiracy theory of the 2016 election

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Hillary Clinton's *What Happened*, released September 13, is the former presidential candidate's first-person account of the 2016 election.

With all the hallmarks of a volume carefully constructed by a team of ghostwriters, Clinton's book is not so much a political memoir as the Democratic Party's semi-official narrative of its electoral defeat. Those sections of the book regarding Clinton's personal life and thoughts are largely fictional, penned with a view to their impact on various constituencies.

Clinton's theory of the election, drawn from articles in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, the proclamations of state intelligence agencies, and the statements of high-level Democratic Party functionaries, amounts to a grand conspiracy theory in which the movement of great masses of people is reduced to the actions of individual conspirators out to do in Clinton because she is a powerful woman who loves freedom and democracy.

Clinton's *What Happened* is not at all about what actually happened. She and her team of writers cannot provide a genuine political account of why she lost the election.

In Clinton's view, the election outcome was not the result of social, political and economic developments within society. Rather, it was determined by two conspiracies. The first—FBI Director James Comey's intervention into the election campaign—has a degree of credibility. The second—Vladimir Putin's alleged effort to subvert the election—is a fabrication. But neither of these components of Clinton's theory can explain why 63 million people voted for her opponent.

Clinton's assessment of her own campaign can be summed up as follows:

The 2016 Democratic presidential campaign had a correct political orientation, advanced correct policies, pursued a correct strategy and was well organized and led.

Hillary Clinton, as an individual and a candidate, made some relatively minor mistakes, including giving paid speeches to Goldman Sachs and using poorly chosen language to describe the rural poor and the working class. But these mistakes could not, by themselves, have led any substantial number of people to vote against her.

Clinton was, in the words of Barack Obama, the "most qualified" candidate. She had, according to the book's narrative, every right to assume, as she did right up to a few hours before her concession speech, that she would be inaugurated as president on January 20, 2017.

The fact that the "least qualified" candidate won the Electoral College and therefore the presidency was a result of the intervention of outside forces: namely, the unholy alliance of Vladimir Putin and Julian Assange. The election upset was the outcome of the "audacious information warfare waged from the Kremlin," to which the substance of the book is devoted.

One reviewer has noted approvingly that the book reads like a "spy novel." Clinton herself points to the irony of writing a political memoir as though it were a murder mystery:

I wasn't just a former candidate trying to figure out why she lost. I was also a former secretary of state worried about our nation's national security... The voluminous file of clippings on my desk grew thicker and thicker... At times, I felt like CIA agent Carrie Mathison on the TV show *Homeland*, desperately trying to get her arms around a sinister conspiracy and appearing more than a little frantic in the process.

This is Clinton's vision of the election: the American people voted the wrong way, and now it's her job to "solve the crime." It is the thinking of a police mind, and a banal one at that.

Let us reconstruct Clinton's argument.

The 2016 election as the triumph of fake news

Clinton's first chapter argues that America at the end of 2016 was a great place to live. She writes:

There had been seventy-five straight months of job growth under President Obama, and incomes for the bottom 80 percent were finally starting to go up. Twenty million more people had health insurance thanks to the Affordable Care Act, the greatest legislative achievement of the outgoing administration. Crime was still at historic lows. Our military remained by far the most powerful in the world.

These "are knowable, verifiable facts," she writes. But "Trump stood up there in front of the world and said the exact opposite." He "painted a picture of a bitter, broken country I didn't recognize."

According to Clinton, that everything is great in America is shown by the "facts." If someone says otherwise, he or she is not merely expressing an opinion, but peddling an "alternative fact," or "fake news."

Clinton continues, "Listening to Trump, it almost felt like there was no such thing as truth anymore. It still feels that way."

In this opening chapter, Clinton lays out the argument that the story of the 2016 election is the story of how "fake news" gripped the American population and made it susceptible to Trump's claims that something was wrong with American society and the American political establishment.

As she puts it, "WikiLeaks... helped accelerate the phenomenon that eventually came to be known as fake news."

How did WikiLeaks do this? In part by leaking the texts of fawning speeches Clinton gave to Goldman Sachs and other Wall Street firms in

return for hundreds of thousands of dollars in fees from the very oligarchs and parasites her husband's policies had helped enrich. Clinton does not contest the accuracy of the transcripts. So it turns out that the content of the "fake news" about which she complains is "true news," i.e., the truth.

Nevertheless, she bemoans the "wild tales" spread about the "terrible things I must have said behind closed doors and how as president I would be forever in the pocket of the shadowy bankers who had paid my speaking fees."

Her speeches and the six-figure honorariums she received were, she explains, entirely appropriate.

"My life after leaving politics had turned out to be pretty great," she writes. "Like many former government officials, I found that organizations and companies wanted me to come talk to them about my experiences and share my thoughts on the world—and they'd pay me a pretty penny to do it. I liked that there was a way for me to earn a very good living without working for any one company or sitting on any boards. It was also a chance to meet interesting people."

But, she admits, she failed to appreciate that ordinary people, with their limited perspective, might see things otherwise. "I should have realized it would be bad 'optics' and stayed away from anything having to do with Wall Street. I didn't. That's on me."

All of Clinton's supposedly candid admissions of mistakes have the same character. Whether the issue is millions in speaking fees from Wall Street or glib talk about putting coal miners out of work, there was nothing intrinsically wrong about what she did, only her failure to anticipate the response of the ignorant masses.

The return of socialism

Clinton admits to two major electoral surprises: the popular support for socialist policies as reflected in the mass backing for the supposed socialist Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries, and the collapse of minority working-class support for her campaign on Election Day.

Regarding the primaries, Clinton writes: "Nothing in my experience in American politics suggested that a Socialist from Vermont could mount a credible campaign for the White House." But Sanders "tapped into powerful emotional currents in the electorate."

She adds, "When a *Des Moines Register* poll in January 2016 found that 43 percent of likely Iowa Democratic caucus goers identified as Socialists, I knew there could be trouble ahead."

In one of her speeches to Goldman Sachs, Clinton admitted that she was "kind of far removed" from the struggles of ordinary people because of "the economic, you know, fortunes that my husband and I now enjoy."

While she makes no such frank admission in her book, the above quote perfectly sums up the type of middle-class snobbery that pervades it, including a passage where she equates the aspirations of millions of people for a decent job, health care and retirement savings, expressed in their support for Sanders, with a child's selfish desire to "get a pony."

The working class

"We always knew that the industrial Midwest was crucial to our success," Clinton writes. She recognizes that her defeat in those states was not the result of a "surge in Republican turnout." Rather, "enough voters switched, stayed home, or went for third parties in the final days to cost me the state."

She adds, "In demographic terms, our strategy depended on compensating for expected weakness with working class white voters...by doing better among college-educated suburban moderates."

In the end, this strategy utterly collapsed, mainly because large numbers of working-class minority voters, whose votes she had taken for granted, ignored her appeals to ethnic identity and failed to turn out and vote for her. As pollster Stan Greenberg recently wrote in the *American Prospect*, "The Democrats don't have a 'white working class' problem... They have a 'working class problem'... Democrats have lost support with all working class voters across the electorate, including the Rising American Electorate of minorities, unmarried women and millennials."

While Clinton's own empirical account is consistent with Greenberg's explanation, she refuses to use the word "working class," referring only to "working class whites," a term laden with the connotation that its members are in some way racist or homophobic, or members of what Clinton called the "basket of deplorables."

She writes that "Some on the left, including Bernie Sanders, argue that working class whites have turned away from Democrats because the party became beholden to Wall Street donors and lost touch with its populist roots." She does not accept this narrative. Rather, the problem is the rural poor who have turned away from the "culture...of hard work" that would lead them to support politicians such as herself.

Clinton writes that among people living in "poor, rural communities," a "culture of grievance, victimhood and scapegoating has taken root as traditional values of self-reliance and hard work have withered." She adds, "There's a tendency toward seeing every problem as someone else's fault."

To Clinton's surprise, millions of working people, including minority workers in key industrial states, responded to such unvarnished class snobbery and contempt by withholding their votes.

Clinton conducted the entire election campaign on the assumption she would be the next president. Her campaign team, she wrote, "felt like a White House-in-waiting."

When the news dawned on her several hours before the polls closed that she could lose, she felt "shell-shocked." She writes: "I hadn't prepared mentally for this at all. There had been no doomsday scenarios playing out in my head in the final days, no imagining what I might say if I lost. I just didn't think about it. But now it was as real as could be, and I was struggling to get my head around it."

Following the election, the sections of the press aligned with the Democratic Party sprang into action to declare "fake news" a major factor in the outcome, a refrain that was reflected in a five-fold increase in Internet searches for the term in the week after the vote.

In the week after the vote, Google and Facebook announced measures to combat "fake news."

The narrative about "fake news" planted by Russian agents having determined the election was subsequently spun out and developed by the *New York Times*, leading think tanks, intelligence agencies and Democratic politicians such as Clinton herself, culminating in Clinton's book.

The book is in essence a manifesto for censorship.

Clinton writes: "In 2016 our democracy was assaulted by a foreign adversary determined to mislead our people, enflame our divisions, and throw an election to its preferred candidate." This attack succeeded because "many Americans had lost faith in the institutions that previous generations relied on for objective information, including government, academia, and the press, leaving them vulnerable to a sophisticated misinformation campaign."

"The WikiLeaks stories" sent people "down deep internet rabbit holes," Clinton writes. "In other words, a lot of people were online trying to get to the bottom of these crazy claims and conspiracy theories before casting their votes. Too often, what they found was more misinformation and

Russian-directed propaganda.”

The shadowy forces peddling “fake news” targeted those moving to the left:

Interestingly, the Russians made a particular effort to target voters who had supported Bernie Sanders in the primaries, including by planting fake news on pro-Sanders message boards and Facebook groups and amplifying attacks by so-called Bernie Bros.

It is an unintentionally revealing fact that throughout the whole of Clinton’s book, the name “Putin” appears 100 times, nearly five times more than “Sanders,” which appears 22 times.

This is not a psychological tick. When Clinton refers to the social, political and ideological impetus for widespread popular support for a man who claimed to be a socialist, she sees not the will of the electorate, but the actions of foreign infiltrators.

When filmmaker Oliver Stone asked Vladimir Putin if he tried to manipulate the US election, the Russian president replied that the US intelligence bureaucracy plays such an outsized role in American politics that the outcome of elections does not matter very much, making it hardly worth the effort.

The quip by the former KGB leader shows a greater insight into the action of social forces than that shown by Clinton, the presidential candidate of one of the two leading parties of what is billed as the world’s leading democracy.

Every time the United States seeks to intervene in an election overseas, it does so by bolstering some social force. But to what social force did Putin supposedly appeal? Clinton never answers this question, but if she tried to do so truthfully, she would be forced to admit that, by her own account, Russian intervention was aimed at making America’s working people revolt against the country’s financial oligarchy.

But, of course, all of this is a right-wing fantasy. When Clinton speaks about foreign infiltration, she is talking about the growth of antiwar and anticapitalist sentiment among broad sections of the population.

Ultimately, the Democratic Party and the state intelligence apparatus seek to present this opposition as the work of foreign infiltrators in order to provide a rationale for its suppression.

Clinton’s conclusion is that fake news constituted a “torrent of misinformation” that “helped drown out my message and steal my voice... This can all happen again if we don’t stop it.”

She declares, “We need to beat back the assault on truth and reason here at home and rebuild trust in our institutions,” and adds, “Companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google have already begun taking steps—adjusting algorithms, deactivating bot networks, and partnering with fact-checkers—but they must do more.”

Major technology firms did not wait for the publication of Clinton’s book to step up their censorship of the Internet. Since the election, Google has put its denunciations of “fake news” into practice by slashing search traffic to progressive, left-wing and antiwar websites. Search traffic to the *World Socialist Web Site* has, as a result, been slashed by two thirds.

“In 1964... I was a Goldwater Girl,” Clinton proudly proclaimed in a 1992 speech, referring to her support for the segregationist, rabidly anticommunist Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater.” In 1996, she declared, “I feel like my political beliefs are rooted in the conservatism that I was raised with.”

True to her political roots, Clinton’s book is essentially a right-wing tirade. Her narrative expresses the worldview of a highly privileged social layer of which she is a member. To America’s financial oligarchy, all social opposition is the result of a conspiracy stirred up by outside

agitators, to be crushed by censorship and other police methods.



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