

## Clinton trumpets role as Irish peace facilitator As she stresses experience, details of impact unclear

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By Marcella Bombardieri, Globe Staff | January 7, 2008

DURHAM, N.H. - Traveling around New Hampshire and Iowa in recent weeks, Hillary Clinton has been telling and retelling one particularly moving story about bringing together Catholic and Protestant women in Northern Ireland. The account makes the case that she not only has a deep knowledge of American foreign policy but also has actually helped end violence and conflict.

One might expect that such an important story from her years as first lady would be told in her detailed, 500-page autobiography, "Living History," published in 2003. But it's not there.

A similar anecdote does appear prominently, set in a different location and with another crucial difference - Clinton writes of her role as that of a supportive witness, not the key player who brought enemies together.

Indisputably, Clinton promoted peace in Northern Ireland during several trips there in the 1990s. Among those who followed the peace process, memories differ on whether her role was decisive. One activist from Northern Ireland recalls that Clinton did bring enemies together. A prominent journalist, however, doubts she could have brought foes together for the first time, as she describes.

More than an isolated stump speech snippet, her Northern Ireland story speaks to the larger issue of whether her travels around the world as first lady qualify as serious diplomacy. That experience is a crucial element of her argument that she is the most qualified presidential candidate, and it has drawn fire from her rivals.

"In those years in the White House I had a really extraordinary experience, because I was not only part of the domestic policy team and the diplomatic team we had in those years, but I was also able to help make some of those changes," Clinton said Saturday in Durham.

In that retelling, Clinton said she had hosted a meeting of enemies in the conflict. They had never been in the same room before, and "no one thought this was going to be a very good idea."

But then, a Catholic woman shared her daily fears that her husband wouldn't come home at night. Across the table, a Protestant woman described the same worry about her son.

"And for the first time they actually saw each other not as caricatures or stereotypes, but as human beings who actually had common experiences as mothers and wives and people," Clinton said. "One of the reasons why I'm running for president is to be constantly reaching out to try to bring people together to resolve conflicts and not let them fester and get worse."

In her book, Clinton describes hearing very similar sentiments from Protestant and Catholic women in Belfast in 1995. The difference: The women were already peace activists, not enemies who didn't recognize their shared humanity. "Because they were willing to work across the religious divide, they had found common ground," she wrote.

The story she told Saturday took place at Belfast's city hall, while the story in her book took place in a fish restaurant.

Her book does describe an event at Belfast City Hall on the same trip, a Christmas tree-lighting ceremony with President Clinton. Afterward, she said, leaders of the various factions stayed on separate sides of the room.

John O'Farrell, a former journalist from Northern Ireland who covered Clinton's visits there, said in a telephone interview that she promoted the involvement of women in politics and in the peace process, but he doubted that she had met with enemies who otherwise would not have spoken to each other. Rather, he said, she was working with people who were already promoting peace.

"Her heart was always in the right place, no one doubted that," said O'Farrell, who edited a magazine and did some freelance reporting for the Globe. "But the idea of her bringing together fiercely opposed combatants is a considerable exaggeration."

Asked about the differences between the account in Clinton's book and her description on the campaign trail, a Clinton

spokesman referred a Globe reporter to two Northern Ireland activists who had worked with Clinton there. One of them, Monica McWilliams, a leading women's activist in Northern Ireland, said in a phone interview that she remembers Clinton on more than one occasion facilitating the kinds of discussions the senator has described on the campaign trail, although McWilliams did not recall any details of specific conversations.

"There would have been a lot of women who came together who would not have known each other," she said. "Hillary Clinton had an enormous influence on women in Northern Ireland. She was the real thing." ■

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