



Will a 'feared' book damage Hillary's presidential hopes?

April 22, 2015

Anthony Zurcher

We're in week two of Democrat Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, and - thanks to a New York Times article about a yet-to-be-released book - her family's financial interests are under increased scrutiny.

The book in question is *Clinton Cash: The Untold Story of How and Why Foreign Governments and Businesses Helped Make Bill and Hillary Rich* - and it's fairly clear from the title exactly what conclusions author Peter Schweizer draws.

He alleges that while Mrs Clinton was secretary of state, her family's non-profit organisation, the Clinton Foundation, was accepting donations from foreign interests and her husband, former President Bill Clinton, was bringing in six-figure fees for speeches overseas in exchange for special considerations and favours.

Questions about the propriety of the foundation's donation policy aren't new. The International Business Times, for instance, has published a series of articles digging deep into the Clinton family's relations with Colombian petroleum company Pacific Rubiales and its founder, Canadian-born billionaire Frank Giustra, who sits on the Clinton Foundation board.

Word of this book has been bubbling in conservative circles for a while - Kentucky Senator Rand Paul has been alluding to the "big news" ever since he launched his presidential bid in early April.

But the New York Times article, which calls Schweizer's work the "most anticipated and feared book" of the presidential cycle so far, has boosted interest in the topic. So what can we make of all this? Here are five questions to get us started.

What does *Clinton Cash* claim?

Schweizer's book isn't scheduled to be released until 5 May, so the quotes being circulated have been provided by Amy Chozick of the New York Times, who has seen a preview copy.

According to the Times, Schweizer writes: "We will see a pattern of financial transactions involving the Clintons that occurred contemporaneous with favourable US policy decisions benefiting those providing the funds."

Some of the "hundreds of large transactions" that the Clintons have made during Mrs Clinton's time in public service, he writes, "have put millions in their own pockets".

While Mrs Clinton was secretary of state, Schweizer writes, her husband was being paid by foreign interests as much as \$500,000 (£335,000) to give speeches. In 2011 he gave 54 speeches for \$13.3m "the majority of which were made overseas".

Schweizer contends that Mrs Clinton backed a free-trade agreement with Colombia that benefitted a donor's South American "natural resources investments" (presumably a reference to Giustra), had conflicts of interest in the recovery efforts after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and received "more than \$1 million" from a Canadian bank that was funding the proposed Keystone XL pipeline through the US while the State Department was considering whether to approve the project.

The State Department review in question has not yet been concluded, it should be noted, more than two years after Mrs Clinton left office.

Clinton Cash is published by HarperCollins, a mainstream US house - not a more partisan imprint like Regnery, which has made a small fortune from anti-Clinton books. Critics will be quick to point out that HarperCollins is owned by conservative media magnate Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, however.

Who is Peter Schweizer?

Schweizer is a former speechwriting consultant for Republican President George W Bush, a fellow at the conservative California-based think tank the Hoover Institution, president of the Government Accountability Institute and a senior editor-at-large for Breitbart.com, a right-wing news and opinion website.

He's written two other books, Extortion: How Politicians Extract Your Money, Buy Votes and Line Their Own Pockets and Throw Them All Out: How Politicians and Their Friends Get Rich Off Insider Stock Tips, Land Deals and Cronyism That Would Send the Rest of Us to Jail.

In Extortion, Schweizer accuses members of Congress, Republican and Democratic, of running a glorified protection racket, where they shake down donors under the threat of adverse legislation.

"Pay me money, and I will promise not to make your life miserable," is how he describes it to the National Journal. "Fail to pay, and bad things will happen to you."

It was enough to stir the ire of Republican Speaker of the House John Boehner, who said Schweizer was making "bogus and salacious claims to sell books".

Others have defended Schweizer's work. "Schweizer is no hack," tweets Scott Lincicome of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "He's written several great books on DC corruption."

What are people saying about the book?

Not surprisingly, many on the right are heralding the book as further evidence of Clinton malfeasance - and a possible major blow to Mrs Clinton's presidential ambitions. "She's in big trouble," tweets Commentary's John Podhoretz.

It is yet further evidence of Mrs Clinton's secrecy and corruption, they contend - in what has become an early line of attack on candidate Clinton.

In an ironic twist many of the same commentators who regularly bash the New York Times are now citing its article as evidence supporting the seriousness of the charges against the former secretary of state.

"Dems attacking the messenger, but even the NYT admits his [Schweizer] reporting is solid and documented," writes Guy Benson, political editor of the conservative website Townhall.

Others on the right are less hopeful that the story will have a lasting impact, given the enthusiasm with which reporters covered Mrs Clinton's recent van tour of Iowa. "Remember who we are dealing with here," writes Pocket Full of Liberty's Jay Caruso. "The spectacle of a bunch of professional journalists chasing after Hillary's Mystery Mobile like a gaggle of screaming teenage girls hoping to get a glimpse of a New Direction group member should give anybody pause to think they're going to ask any hard questions."

How will the Clinton campaign respond?

Now that Mrs Clinton's campaign is fully up and running, expect a robust defence of the Clinton Foundation, praising its global effort to address childhood obesity, Aids and poverty.

"The Clinton Foundation is a philanthropic organisation that funds programs to help people throughout this great nation and all over the world," says Adrienne Watson of Correct the Record, a liberal group supporting Mrs Clinton, in a press statement. She adds that if Republican candidates "think attacking the foundation for its work to stop the Aids epidemic in Africa is an electoral strategy, then bring it on."

The campaign will also likely attempt to paint Schweizer's book as just another right-wing attack on a woman who has been targeted by political hotheads and conspiracy theorists for decades.

"Schweizer is a partisan right-wing activist whose writings have been marked with falsehoods and retractions, with numerous reporters excoriating him for facts that 'do not check out', sources that 'do not exist' and a basic failure to practice 'Journalism 101'," writes David Brock of the liberal group Media Matters for America.

Brian Fallon, a Clinton campaign spokesperson, also offers an opening shot, as quoted by the Times: "It will not be the first work of partisan-fueled fiction about the Clintons' record, and we know it will not be the last."

Will this have a lasting impact on Mrs Clinton's campaign?

The trick with any "appearance of impropriety" allegation is that, without concrete proof of corruption, the seriousness of the charge is in the eye of the beholder.

Will the book be able to make a connection between donations and official actions? That's a difficult task, and the Times article gives no indication that the book provides direct evidence.

This could, then, end up being treated like many of the other stories unfavourable to Mrs Clinton - trumpeted by her critics and dismissed by supporters.

According to Chozick, however, the Times - as well as the Washington Post and Fox News - have entered into "exclusive agreements" with Schweizer "to pursue the story lines found in the book". If these news outlets can unearth details of a quid pro quo, Mrs Clinton's political outlook could darken quickly. Then again, it could lead some Clinton supporters to turn on the Post and the Times. In fact, it already has.

"The partnership between HarperCollins, Fox News and the nation's two leading newspapers amounts to an open declaration of war in a presidential election, and the consummation of an alliance with a totally disreputable 'news' conglomerate," writes the National Memo's Joe Conason. "This is the journalistic equivalent of the Hitler-Stalin pact."

At the very least Republican candidates for president will prominently feature Clinton Foundation references in their campaign stump speeches.

Mr Paul has added a form to his website asking visitors to provide "additional information" on foreign contributions to the foundation.

The risk for Republicans who want this story to gain traction is that the more this gets turned into another partisan football, the more it will fade into the growing din of campaign politics and hot air - whether it deserves to or not.—BBC