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Clinton's account of how she was 'shivved' in the 2016 presidential election

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Hillary Clinton was surrounded by women the moment she lost the 2016 presidential election. “Things had been going too well for too long” when, on the morning of Oct. 28, her spokeswoman Jennifer Palmieri approached her and longtime aide Huma Abedin and said two words: Jim Comey. “I immediately knew it was bad,” Clinton writes in her memoir “What Happened.” There was a moment of mournful sisterhood as Abedin learned that the FBI was probing her husband Anthony Weiner’s computer, ensuring that the final week of the election was going to be about Clinton’s email server. “This man is going to be the death of me,” Abedin said of Weiner. Clinton gave her a hug.

Hillary Rodham Clinton, the first female presidential nominee of a major party — defeated by a man who even Republicans called a sexist — is, as she points out in the book, the frequent answer to Gallup’s question of who is “most admired woman in America.” Nonetheless, she was unable to break the presidential glass ceiling, and her defeat has been genuinely traumatizing for millions of women. Locked out of the White House, she offers solidarity with Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) and other women who are called shrill, or unlikeable, because they want to climb the same ladder as men. “I wish so badly we were a country where a candidate who said, ‘My story is the story of a life shaped by and devoted to the movement for women’s liberation’ would be cheered, not jeered,” she writes. “But that’s not who we are.” Her book finally takes on directly what has been muttered for years: That Clinton was often treated poorly simply because she was a woman.

It will be up to some other woman to carry on the battle, Clinton writes. She’s done with politics. Much of “What Happened” is a meditation on powerful women, a test-run for the speeches Clinton will give for the rest of her life. “I’ve seen women CEOs serve coffee at meetings,” she writes, “women heads of state walk tissues over to a sneezing staffer.”

But still Clinton cannot let that Comey moment go. She quotes Fox News clips, legal analysis and congressional testimony to conclude that she was wronged. She takes subtle pleasure in Comey being fired by Donald Trump six months later. She apologizes to the reader, who has to relive all of this. “It wasn’t healthy or productive,” she writes, “to dwell on the ways I felt I’d been shivved.”

Hillary Clinton's new book, 'What Happened,' published Sept. 12 and aims to "pull back the curtain" on her losing presidential bid. (Monica Akhtar/The Washington Post)

It's a perfect word, "shivved." The Hillary Clinton of this bitter memoir resembles the shrunken, beaten Richard Nixon who told David Frost that he gave his enemies a sword and "they twisted it with relish." Again and again she blames herself for losing, apologizing for her "dumb" email management, for giving paid speeches to banks, for saying she'd put coal miners "out of business." She veers between regret and righteous anger, sometimes in the same paragraph.

"I regret handing Trump a political gift with my 'deplorables' comment," she writes. Then she lays out studies on voter biases from the University of Chicago and the Voter Study Group. Data amassed, Clinton clarifies: "Too many of Trump's core supporters *do* hold views that I find — there's no other word for it — deplorable."

"What Happened" is a raw and bracing book, a guide to our political arena. Clinton, who came within less than 100,000 votes of the White House, recalls how friends urged her to take Xanax (she declined), how there "are times when all I want to do is scream into a pillow," and how she had to restrain herself at snapping at a young woman who tells her after the election that she didn't vote: "Now you want *me* to make *you* feel better?"

Democrats who once begged her to run for president now squirm when they're asked about her. Clinton no longer cares; exiled to her home in Chappaqua, N.Y., she is liberated from the public eye and dismissive of the media which, in her view, maintains one rule book for every other candidate and a Necronomicon for her.

"Why am I seen as such a divisive figure and, say, Joe Biden and John Kerry aren't?" she asks. "They've cast votes of all kinds, including some they regret, just like me? What makes me such a lightning rod for fury? I'm really asking. I'm at a loss."

There has never been a candidate memoir like this, but there has never been a defeated contender like Hillary Clinton. Since at least 1999, when she leapt into the race for one of New York's open Senate seats, the idea of a second President Clinton had loomed in our national consciousness. In 2004, superfans tried to draft her into the presidential race; in 2011, pollster Pat Caddell argued that "the Hillary moment" had come, and that Clinton could "step above partisan politics" if Barack Obama stepped aside. It didn't happen.

The book is also sometimes corny, with quotes from "Hamilton" and details about the hot sauce she carries everywhere (Ninja Squirrel Siracha), suggesting that the Clinton who told young voters to "Pokemon-go-to-the-polls" really meant it. The aphorism "What does not kill us makes us stronger" is credited to both Friedrich Nietzsche and Kelly Clarkson. It is, perhaps, the only political memoir that takes time to thank Beyoncé for her support.

That approach to politics is part of "what happened." The caterwauling about Clinton's loss basically takes two forms — whether one event or gaffe could have reversed the election, and whether another candidate would have let the election even get close.

Clinton is convincing on the first point, citing Trump's own strategists about how the election was lost before the Comey letter. She is all over the map on the second. It's dishonest and unfair, she writes, to suggest that she ran a my-turn campaign that ignored economic issues.

She insists that the press, which she never has to deal with again, is to blame for that impression. It "often seemed bored" by the roundtables she held with voters, which she used "to guide the policies already being hammered out back in our Brooklyn headquarters." Clinton charges that

coverage of her campaign was dominated by emails; coverage of Trump's, including start-to-finish live shots of his rallies, focused on the issues.

She is easier on Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), who she credits for "understanding the political power of big, bold ideas," than on Biden, who "campaign[ed] for me all over the Midwest" then claimed Democrats never talked about his issues.

In a point-by-point debunking of the idea that she ignored the Midwest, Clinton chides the press for ignoring the substance of the Rust Belt tour that followed the Democratic National Convention. "The very same week that Tim [Kaine] and I were driving around Pennsylvania and Ohio, Donald Trump was picking a high-profile fight with the Khans, the grieving Gold Star parents," she writes. "That sucked up all the oxygen in the media. . . . But it was also part of a pattern that over the long-term ensured that my economic message never got out and let Trump control the tempo of the race."

The saga of the Khan family, Muslims in Charlottesville whose son joined the Army and died in Iraq, was compelling and harmful to Trump in the short term. It was also precipitated by the Clinton campaign. It had decided to bring the Khans onstage and elevate their issue; it delighted when Trump took the bait, burning up several news cycles. Two weeks before the election, it rolled out a 60-second ad in which Khizr Khan watched Trump on television and wept at the memory of his son.

Her campaign's messaging, Clinton argues, would have locked up the election had Comey not intervened and sent suburban moderates scrambling. But she made a choice with that messaging. She did talk about jobs, but until the last moments of the campaign, Clinton and most Democrats were convinced that Trump was less vulnerable on traditional issues than on his frequent, insulting gaffes.

Clinton has more in common with Sanders than the book lets on. Both of them wanted to run substantive campaigns. Both of them resented a media that Trump seemed to understand intuitively, even if it was reporting on how this-or-that mistake was, finally, the end for him. Clinton spends two pages on the concept of a shared national resource fund, a concept barely discussed in the campaign — "we would call it Alaska for America," a reference to that state's practice of cutting checks to residents from the oil industry's profits. The reader knows that this is dull; the reader, like Clinton, relies on media that prioritizes scandal and narrative over news. Trump, in the campaign and in power, never let go of the narrative; Clinton could never get her hands around it.

She admits that after her loss she didn't want to go to the inauguration until George W. Bush and Jimmy Carter did. She arrived, and settled scores, making fun of a classless Rep. Jason Chaffetz (who would leave Congress after realizing it was no fun without Clinton scandals to probe). Amid the ceremony, she ran into incoming Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke who, as a congressman from Montana, had called her "the Antichrist." Now she watched him blanch as she quoted the insult back to him.

"One thing I've learned over the years is how easy it is for some people to say horrible things about me when I'm not around," she writes, "but how hard it is for them to look me in the eye and say it to my face."