

# The Boston Globe

## **In levity, plenty of political points Light-hearted appearances help candidates cultivate a persona**

By Joanna Weiss, Globe Staff | March 10, 2008

As far as Adrian Gostick is concerned, Hillary Clinton's breakthrough moment came the night before the critical Texas and Ohio primaries, during an appearance via satellite on "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart." Looking weary-eyed but smiling, trailing in some polls, Clinton conceded that appearing on a comedy show was, at this stage in the race, "pretty pathetic."

It proved a few things about Clinton, said Gostick, coauthor of the new book "The Levity Effect: Why It Pays to Lighten Up." She could be spontaneously funny. She could banter with a skilled comedian. She could poke fun at herself. "It showed her intelligence," Gostick said. "It showed a humanity that, I think, more and more voters are wanting to see."

In other words, it was not pathetic at all, but the sort of savvy management of public persona that can pay dividends in a tight campaign. A presidential race, after all, is part issues referendum, part personality contest. And the most successful candidates figure out ways to strike a balance between gravitas and humanity.

Barack Obama, Clinton's primary foe, has done his share of persona control. In recent weeks, he has dabbled in lightness, spending time with reporters from People magazine and "Entertainment Tonight," taking part in a spread in Us Weekly, and dancing on the daytime talk show "Ellen," to the strains of James Brown's "Get Up Offa That Thing."

"People are still getting to know Barack Obama," said Jen Psaki, an Obama campaign spokeswoman. "This is an opportunity for people to learn, not just about where he stands on the war in Iraq, but also about his personal side."

But because of the inspirational image Obama tries to project - a leader in the tradition of the Rev. Martin Luther King who transcends both racial politics and politics-as-usual - there are limits to how self-deprecating he can be, said Richard Thompson Ford, a professor at Stanford Law School and the author of the book "The Race Card."

"As a charismatic leader," Ford said, "one can't afford to do things that undermine one's charisma."

Clinton, on the other hand, has seemed in the weeks leading up to her Ohio and Texas victories to be on a self-deprecating-humor offensive. It has stood in stark contrast to the other image Clinton has worked hard to project - the sort of stern, serious, competent person whom, as the campaign suggests in a now-famous ad, voters might trust most to handle a crisis in the middle of the night.

Clinton recently exploited another opportunity to keep herself accessible and human. Just as some media outlets were beginning to speculate that Clinton would drop out of the race, "Saturday Night Live" - in its first week back on the air after the writers' strike - aired a faux-

debate sketch that mocked the media's purported love for Obama and its relative harshness toward Clinton.

When Clinton referred to that sketch in a televised debate in Ohio three days later, the moment seemed shrewdly calculated, said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a communications professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Public Policy.

"I don't think it was spontaneous," Jamieson wrote in an e-mail. Clinton must have known, she wrote, that cable outlets would re-air the sketch, and use it as a backdrop for a discussion of Clinton's argument.

Such sketches make a far stronger case for Clinton than a serious complaint about media bias might, said Joshua Compton, who has studied political humor as a communications professor at Southwest Baptist University in Missouri. Since the 1960s, he said, political scientists have theorized about an "inoculation theory" of comedy, which suggests that being exposed to light, humorous attacks prepares a candidate for stronger criticism.

Mocking her own laugh on "SNL," as Clinton did with the show's impersonator Amy Poehler earlier this month, "seems not only appropriate, but endearing," Compton wrote in an e-mail.

Obama, too, has appeared on "SNL." He made a surprise cameo in October, appearing at a Halloween party and wearing an Obama mask. But it wasn't a self-mocking turn; the butt of the joke was Clinton.

And the venue is probably better suited to Clinton's needs as a candidate, Compton said.

"She needs to counter a harsh image, so what better venue than late-night comedy to show sociability?" he wrote. "Concerns about Obama seem to be more about inexperience, and late-night comedy doesn't do much to counter that."

But if comedy is trickier terrain for Obama, the candidate has been seeking other ways to humanize himself, said Ford, the Stanford Law professor. When Obama's wife, Michelle, complains about his domestic shortcomings on the stump, Ford said, her grumblings have a purpose.

"He wants to be likable, approachable, a real person and not so far held up on a pedestal that people can't relate to him," Ford said. "It's an interesting balance."

But Scott Christopher, the coauthor, with Gostick, of "The Levity Effect," said it might serve Obama well to mock himself more. As time goes on, after all, the jokes about him might increase.

"He needs to engage himself in that a little bit, as Hillary has done. Otherwise, he's going to be targeted by all the 'SNL' guys," Christopher said.

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