**The Case of Clinton vs. Chen**

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Once again a declared presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton now faces prospects for election (or even nomination) that are not as bright as had once been thought. She may turn out to be even less inevitable than she was in 2008. Among many reasons Clinton is not a sure thing is her weakness for being economical with the truth, especially when encountering obstacles to her ambitions.

Hard Choices, her memoir of her years as secretary of state, did nothing to dispel that notion, even though the book’s main purpose was to build preemptive defenses against criticisms of her unimpressive tenure. (I reviewed Hard Choices in National Review’s July 21, 2014, issue.) The danger in writing first is that others with differing memories later produce their own accounts, to embarrassing effect. Some will come from political enemies or disgruntled former colleagues with their own agendas. But others will come from those with no scores to settle, seeking only to tell their stories about crossing paths with the author at decisive moments.

One such powerful competing narrative is Chen Guangcheng’s autobiography.

Despite repeated sightings of China’s “liberalizing,” Chen’s experiences demonstrate that Communist Party brutality and repression, akin to those from Mao’s Cultural Revolution, persist to this day. Blind since early childhood, Chen suffered enduring cultural biases against the disabled, but he refused to accept being marginalized into a life of poverty and uselessness. Gaining a modest education through strenuous family efforts, he became an advocate for the disabled against the extraordinarily rigid Party bureaucracy.

As his “barefoot lawyer” reputation grew, both in China and internationally, he attracted cases with wider implications. Particularly noteworthy was his work against China’s barbaric “one child per family” policy, which too often resulted in forced abortions and sterilizations, beatings, and other cruelties imposed on those disobeying the Party’s diktat. Chen and his family were viciously treated, physically and psychologically, an abuse that culminated in four years in prison for Chen, followed by house arrest in his native village. It is hard to say which punishment was worse. Convinced that the Party’s ultimate objective was his death, Chen and his wife plotted his escape from the village to seek safety in the wider world.

Clinton’s Hard Choices devotes an entire chapter to Chen’s drama, signaling Clinton’s concern over its continuing saliency and damaging political implications. Chen’s danger-filled story of escape, asylum, betrayal, and then emigration to America is riveting. Clinton’s, by contrast, has all the candor of spin artists working overtime, highlighting her penchant for slippery, selective recall. Chen was seeking freedom and security; Clinton throughout was trying to erase a pesky political problem.

On April 25, 2012, Chen contacted America’s Beijing embassy seeking asylum. Clinton’s first “hard choice” was not just whether to agree, but also whether to send a U.S. car and personnel to spirit him into the embassy compound. Because the embassy is surrounded by Chinese security personnel, the chances of a blind fugitive’s entering on foot were essentially zero. Clinton says that “in the end it wasn’t a close call,” but, given the case’s subsequent publicity, what else could she say now? Nervous White House aides, informed only after the fact, wanted the problem to “go away.”

Clinton clearly understood that the pressure came directly from Obama, whose message, she says twice, “was clear: ‘Don’t screw up.’” (Doubtless, both Obama and Clinton would be pleased to know that this was also Donald Rumsfeld’s favorite admonition.) From embassy staffers, whom he praises for consideration and kindness, Chen heard that U.S. policy changed after an April 27 NSC meeting, chaired by Obama. Chen’s “situation should be resolved immediately,” i.e., he must leave the embassy without delay.

Clinton’s memoir never mentions any April 27 NSC meeting, much less whether she attended or what she said. Intense negotiations with Chinese officials began on Sunday, April 29. Clinton’s subordinates unquestionably acted on her direct instructions throughout, so the striking variances between Chen’s and Clinton’s versions are telling. Clinton strikes first, complaining that Chen was “unpredictable and quixotic, as formidable a negotiator as the Chinese leaders outside.” Chen’s alternatives were returning to Chinese soil or leaving China entirely — and there is no doubt about Clinton’s preference. So much for refuge in our embassy, which Chen calls “the one safe place in all of China.”

Beijing diplomats worked to persuade Clinton’s aides, who responded by working to persuade Chen. Clinton admits, for example, that State’s top lawyer, Harold Koh, “spoke movingly of the difficulties Chen would face if he decided to leave China,” suggesting that Chen study law at NYU’s Shanghai campus. (This was a far more dangerous offer than what Chen says NYU actually proposed — that he study at the school’s Manhattan campus, in safety in America rather than under a Chinese gun.) Clinton complains that Chen hardened his tone, insisting his vulnerable family be brought to Beijing before any final decisions. She writes that Kurt Campbell, her regional assistant secretary, was not happy: “Kurt dreaded going back after the Chinese had already conceded so much.” (Apparently he did not dread Chen.) Chen says Campbell continuously stressed that “our time is extremely limited.” But in fact, the “limit” was entirely one of political inconvenience: Clinton’s imminent arrival in Beijing for annual bilateral consultations.

Having “undergone over seven years of abuse at the hands of the authorities with whom the Americans were now negotiating,” Chen resisted the pressure to seal a deal. And Campbell’s “dread” was misplaced: The Chinese agreed to bring Chen’s family to the capital. Clinton thought “now all we needed was for Chen to walk out the [embassy] door” — to stay in China, and be treated at a Beijing hospital for injuries sustained while escaping his village. Further critical differences emerge. Clinton writes that, after speaking by phone with his wife, “Chen jumped up, full of purpose and excitement, and said, ‘Let’s go’” — emphasizing his supposed enthusiasm to stay in China and receive treatment.

In his account, Chen says otherwise. Koh continued to press the urgent need to decide. “The first time we met,” Koh said to Chen, “I told you that time was of the essence. I don’t think you should refuse an offer that’s already in hand [i.e., to stay in China and study law at NYU Shanghai]. This is a good proposal.” Chinese officials “are quite angry with you, and also angry at the U.S.,” Koh opined, hardly comforting to a man fearing for his life from those very officials. Clinton’s aides “kept encouraging me, as if I were a child, to see just how beneficial the Chinese terms were,” Chen writes. America, Campbell soothed, would be his “big brother.” And besides, said Campbell, “we have guarantees from the Chinese government.”

Still Chen would not agree. Campbell threw up his hands, saying, “I’m so upset, I don’t know how else to help you,” breaking into tears, and then “storming out of the room.” Chen himself was clear-eyed: “American hearts might be in the right place, but what was needed now was an iron will to persevere and negotiate hard.”

Instead, Chen says, “the American negotiators were unrelenting” on him. Finally, Koh told Chen he has 20 minutes to decide, or Beijing will declare him a traitor. Chen asked himself, “At this point, what could I do?” U.S. ambassador to China Gary Locke then issued a quasi–Miranda warning: “Are you ready to leave the embassy of your own free will?” Chen says that was when he used the phrase “Let’s go”: “Suppressing the emotion in my voice, I said, simply, ‘Let’s go.’” This is hardly Clinton’s account of Chen “full of purpose and excitement.” And no wonder, given the Communist Party’s prior brutality and what he could therefore readily predict.

Once outside the compound, Chen was again vulnerable, surrounded by up to 400 Chinese police officers after arriving at the designated hospital; embassy staffers and Chinese friends and supporters were kept away. The White House reaction, according to Clinton: “Full damage-control mode. The guidance to us in Beijing was simple: Fix this.” Clinton takes credit, at length, for reversing the damage done by ejecting Chen from the embassy by getting him out of China to America.

Chen has a different view, crediting American public opinion, graphic news coverage of his daring dash for freedom and the abuses against him, and congressional pressure from, among others, Nancy Pelosi, Frank Wolf, and Chris Smith for essentially forcing Beijing into allowing his departure. Even if we grant Clinton some credit for Chen’s leaving China, she made hash of matters until then.

You wouldn’t know it from Hard Choices. If one chapter of Clinton’s memoir is so vulnerable to evisceration, what does that say about the rest? And she recently suffered, even before declaring her 2016 candidacy, doubts about her veracity regarding using insecure phones, computers, and private e-mail accounts at the State Department. Since her tenure as secretary is ostensibly her most significant qualification for the Oval Office, her State record will receive extraordinary scrutiny. She must hope she fares better with Hard Choices’ other 24 chapters.

U.S. national security will likely be at the very center of the 2016 campaign. After six-plus years of Obama’s “engagement” with our adversaries, whatever minimal global order and stability existed is disintegrating, and our adversaries know it. We are seeing the results of the Obama-Clinton policies, and Clinton has much to answer for. Those who believe that the Chinese Communist Party is a reforming, increasingly democratic institution should heed Chen’s penetrating insight: “I firmly believed — as I still do — that if you bow your head before the Communist Party, it will soon make you get on your hands and knees, and next it will stomp on your crouching body until it destroys you.” This is why he refused to give up his human-rights work, and why he was such a threat to the Party itself.

Do we think Clinton has the slightest idea what Chen is trying to explain to us regarding China’s current leadership? Or how it applies to Russia? Iran? North Korea? Cuba? In 2016, this too should be at the center of attention. Mr. Bolton is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. He is the author of Surrender Is Not an Option: Defending America at the United Nations and Abroad..