

Books review

The 2016 Presidential Election: “WHAT HAPPENED” ? “HACKS”!

Two books by women who were deeply involved in the 2016 presidential campaign (*What Happened* by Hillary Clinton and Donna Brazile’s *HACKS: The Inside Story of the Break-ins and Breakdowns That Put Donald Trump in the White House*), provide a fascinating look at different interpretations of the same event by these two powerful Democratic women who shared a commitment to the same goal—making Hillary Clinton the first woman US president. *What Happened* was published in September of 2017, *Hacks* a couple of months later.

After her disappointing loss to Barack Obama in 2008, Clinton thought long and hard about whether she wanted to put herself through another grueling presidential campaign. She knew that it would be strenuous, stressful and often unpleasant, consuming her life for a couple of years, taking her away from family and friends. But she also knew this was a unique opportunity—to design policies that could solve people’s problems, “a chance to do the most good I would ever be able to do”; and with the “most relevant experience, meaningful accomplishments and ambitious but achievable proposals” she felt sure that she’d win.

A force in Democratic politics for decades, Donna Brazile had stopped working on campaigns after serving as Al Gore’s campaign manager in his 2000 run for president. She’d built a satisfying life with her political consulting firm, her pundit roles on CNN and ABC and her teaching at Georgetown University, still in the political mix, but no longer responsible for the outcome. When in 2009, President Obama asked her to become the Vice Chair of the DNC, she accepted, focusing her attention on raising money and strengthening the Voting Rights Act. All the DNC officers except the Chair serve in an unpaid capacity as a sort of board of directors of the DNC. The Chair, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, managed the DNC’s day-to-day operations and full-time professional staff. On July 14, 2016, Wasserman Schultz alerted Brazile and the other DNC officers to a hacking incident at the DNC about to be reported by the Washington Post. From her casual tone Brazile assumed that Wasserman Schultz had handled the matter and there was no cause for alarm.

Yet a week later, just before the opening of the Democratic convention in Philadelphia, Wikileaks released 20,000 DNC emails, many containing disparaging comments about Bernie Sanders and his supporters, dealing a blow to hopes for restoring party unity at the convention, forcing the resignation of Wasserman Schultz as DNC Chair, with Brazile replacing her as the new interim DNC Chair. Despite her reluctance to take on that role, Brazile, who had known Hillary since the 1980s and considered her a good friend, looked forward to helping elect what she was sure would be the first female American president.

But as we know, it didn’t work out that way. In *What Happened*, Clinton tries hard to explain how she could possibly have lost to an unconventional novice like Donald Trump. She identifies three factors.

First, her own mistakes during the campaign: her Wall Street speeches; her “basket of deplorable” and “put the coal companies out of business” comments; the email controversy that she could never explain in a way people could understand. Her failure to recognize that these would be given such importance by the press and weaponized by her political opponents was, she felt, her biggest mistake in the campaign.

Second was her problem connecting to voters, which she attributes to not being a “natural politician,” (a rather significant shortcoming in one running for president). Clinton acknowledges but can’t understand

why so many voters found her unlikable, inauthentic, or untrustworthy. And yet, an incident recounted in *Hacks* (but not mentioned in *What Happened*) sheds some light—the way the Clinton campaign handled Hillary’s fainting episode at the memorial service at Ground Zero. Instead of quickly responding that Clinton was exhausted from her strenuous schedule, something people could understand, her campaign’s explanations were delayed and implausible, drawing unwanted attention to the state of her health. In Brazile’s words, “For a campaign that had a reputation for being closed off and sometimes less than truthful, this was a huge blunder.”

Third, and to Clinton, most important were the many factors beyond her control: “Clinton fatigue;” trying to succeed a two-term president of her own party; Bernie Sanders and Jill Stein vacuuming up significant progressive support; Russian hacking; and the greatest barrier of all, her gender, her absolute conviction that American voters are just not ready to except the idea of a woman president—and the role that sexism and misogyny played in the 2016 presidential election. “Exhibit A is that the flagrantly sexist candidate won,” she wrote.

After Brazile took the reins of the DNC following the convention, she discovered two unexpected problems. The first was financial. To her astonishment, she learned that the DNC was broke. The DNC had amassed millions of dollars in debt after Obama’s 2012 presidential campaign. Two Clinton PACs had paid 80% of this debt and had placed the DNC on an allowance, paying the DNC’s basic operating expenses while using it as a fund-raising clearinghouse for the Clinton campaign. Without telling Brazile or the other officers, Debbie Wasserman Schultz had arranged for a \$2 million loan to the DNC from the Clinton campaign (none of this was mentioned in *What Happened*). Much of *Hacks* describes Brazile’s difficulties in extracting money from the Clinton campaign to carry out the work of the DNC for the other Democratic candidates.

Brazile’s second challenge was getting a handle on the Russian cyber attacks on the DNC that had first reported in the Washington Post in early June 2016. Her description of the attacks was much more detailed, technical and frankly scary than Clinton’s, who blamed the Koch Brothers’ billions for weakening our democracy and making it easier prey for the Russians. Clinton understood and articulated the danger to our democracy posed by the Russian hacks but offered little detail of how they’d happened. Brazile, on the other hand, was responsible for getting to the bottom of it and set out to educate herself in the technical details of how the hacks had occurred with briefings by the FBI; learning from a team of computer professionals she assembled to locate and destroy the malware in the DNC’s computer network; and consulting with certain intelligence professionals to understand the very real and continuing threats posed by Russian spies, cyber and otherwise (at one point she considered moving her desk away from the window in her DNC office).

At the beginning of *What Happened*, Clinton lays out a long list of reasons why she wrote the book, from catharsis to creating a record for the future. But the main point of the book seems to be to give her one more chance to marshal all the arguments that make her case that she really, really should have won.

Donna Brazile’s book is an insider’s view of the nuts and bolts of a presidential political campaign and an entertaining read filled with suspense and enough juicy gossip to satisfy the most ardent political junky. But more than that, her intention for writing it is clear from its title, ***HACKS: The Inside Story of the Break-ins and Breakdowns That Put Donald Trump in the White House***—to sound the alarm about the very real threat the Russians pose to our democratic institutions with clear examples of what that can look like, so timely as Special Counsel Mueller’s the investigation into Russian interference in our elections heats up.