

THE ORWELL PRIZE 2008

LOGLISTED ENTRY: JUSTIN WEBB, BBC RADIO 4 From Our Own Correspondent

FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT

JUSTIN WEBB

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There is only a year to go -- well just over a year if we are being pedantic -- before the people of the United States choose the successor to George Bush. At the moment the person most Americans feel is likely to get the job is Hillary Clinton, the New York senator and wife of former President Bill Clinton. This week she has delivered what may well be the killer blow to her main rival the young black Illinois Senator Barack Obama. He's been behind her in the polls but ahead in the race to raise money but that's no longer the case. Mrs Clinton has raised a record-breaking 27-million dollars in the last three months. The Hillary steamroller is gathering speed and rather than risk being crushed, many Democrats with career ambitions in Washington have been getting on board. Justin Webb has been spending time with them .. or trying to:

[GOTO AUDIO

NAME: WEBB

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IN WORDS: Annie doesn't

OUT WORDS: alter that fact

DURATION:5'08"]

Annie doesn't return our calls any more. We did send her a dinner invitation but the night came and went and Annie didn't. When we telephoned the family home to find out what had happened, her embarrassed husband admitted he'd never even been told that the pleasure of their company had been requested. In fact, he wasn't told much these days, he said. He confided that there were nights when he'd dress his young children in their pyjamas, bundle them into the car, and take them downtown into Annie's office so that they could see their mother before bed.

These are children who used to have schedules like Cabinet Ministers, full of meetings and appearances, with the parents acting as senior civil servants smoothing the way between playgroups and music practice and swimming lessons.

Now, not to put too fine a point on it, they've been dumped. Nannies keep them fed and watered and played with, but parental quality time has been sacrificed. Annie (of course that's not her real name, but she exists, and I suspect there are hundreds like her), Annie is busy making money. But not for herself. In fact, we discover, she's not asking for a salary at the moment – it wouldn't seem right. Annie is devoting all her time and energy, all her daylight hours and some of the night-time ones – gratis – to raising money for Hillary Clinton.

Fundraising is an American art form. People who are very good at it are aristocrats in this town – talked of in hushed and admiring terms. And depended on by politicians, who remember, or have people who remember, the sums involved, the TV adverts paid for and the votes bought.

During a brief and rather strained meeting a few days ago I asked Annie what she was hoping for by way of reward when President Hillary Clinton takes over in January 2009 – ambassador to Togo I suggested. The atmosphere froze. I think Annie has her eye on Rome.

And she may make it, or if not Rome then a White House pass and a job as "head of outreach" to this that or the other segment of the community – a job that allows you to say I work at the White House, I am in the Administration. A job that is the desire of almost all Washingtonians, a job that is both very short term (you burn out fast and you're anyway limited to eight years because your president is) and at the same time very long term, because of course they can't take it away from you, this fact, that you were in the X White House.

The point is that none of this will be available to you – even as a Democrat – come the inauguration of 2009, if you didn't work for Hillary – that is the message that's unmistakably imprinted on the minds of those who have wavered. This election is being sown up by a team of hard nosed, big money brokers in the spashily wealthy salons of Georgetown, Washington's equivalent of Chelsea, where the streets are cobbled, the houses are painted pinks and yellows, and the gardens are tended daily by teams of Mexican manicurists.

This is where Cindy calls Daisy, who once raised a cool million for someone by getting a bunch of wealthy lawyers in a hotel ballroom and charging them 10,000 dollars each for surf and turf. Cindy who's already on the campaign, tells Daisy (Daisy is probably resting on a chaise longue only three doors down the street): "I've spoken to Hillary or to someone close to her: and WE MUST HAVE YOU ON BOARD". Daisy rather fancies the dashing young challenger Barack Obama – fancies him literally and metaphorically – but is now reeled in by the thought of the social exclusion that could result if Hillary were to win and acts of disloyalty were to be punished.

The upshot is that the Hillary campaign is the biggest show in town by a long, long way. She reeks of money and power. A recent party for Hillary people – a book launch – was held at the Corcoran art gallery in the centre of Washington, literally across the road from the White House.

Wonderful news: part of the proceeds from the book sales were going to this already staggeringly well-endowed gallery, this in a city where infant mortality is at third-world levels. You wonder whether the Clinton team, drunk on money, have slightly lost sight of the bigger picture? But the party ended with a precious reminder of how this steamroller could still be stopped, tipped unceremoniously on one side. Bored with the icy distant small talk of the Hillary women, my wife and I came across one of the big, male characters of the previous Clinton White House.

I introduced Sarah.

"Your wife," he grinned "surely your daughter?"

Ah, how refreshing.

Hillary's women think they have it sown up, but not everyone is fully on message. Bill and his charming, lascivious buddies, could still, gloriously, cock it all up. No amount of money can alter that fact.