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Comeback Kid returns

By LAWRENCE C. LEVY

Welcome back, Bubba - back in the embrace of a party that he once saved from ideological oblivion, back with the skill and charm that more than once saved his political life, back to help his party's leader with the voters that Bill Clinton still may own.

"Everything I learned in my eight years as president and in the work I've done since, in America and across the globe, has convinced me that Barack Obama is the man for the job," Clinton said Wednesday night to an explosive ovation at the convention in Denver. And in one tight paragraph, the Democrats' own great communicator sketched out the qualities and qualifications of the man who denied him and his wife her dreams. As if to leave no doubt of his sincerity, Clinton, who only months ago questioned Obama's experience, declared to the delight of the delegates: "Barack Obama is ready to be president of the United States."

Only hours before Clinton delivered a feisty Greatest Hits and Hopes performance - on behalf of his party, its new leader and, of course, himself - his wife, Hillary, put an emotional exclamation point to the formal nomination of Barack Obama. In exhorting the delegates Wednesday to stop the roll call and declare Obama the party's unanimous choice, it was the second time in 18 hours that Hillary Clinton rose to the occasion of another's history. On Tuesday, the first woman with a serious chance to be president delivered a passionate paen to the first black person to carry the standard for a major party.

Hillary's twin-peak performances were perceived as so persuasive, even if not entirely selfless, that she erased any reasonable doubts about her dedication to the Democratic cause.

Then it was time for Bill to do the same. A time for the most successful Democratic candidate in more than half a century not only to restore his reputation - as everything from a political prodigy to a party uniter - but to refurbish no less than his place history. A time for this white Son of the South to reclaim at least a semblance of the respect, even love, of blacks who remained his loyalist supporters through the lowest of times - but who, fair or not, felt that he betrayed them in the primary by playing "the race card" to stop one of their own.

This was the time for Bill Clinton to get over it. And so he did, at least rhetorically, in a speech that reminded his admirers, as well as his adversaries, that he can make a difference for a party and a candidate still struggling to gain traction.

It was a speech that looked backward and forward, or perhaps looked backward as the key to moving forward and winning the White House. He harkened to the years a Democrat presided over the longest economic expansion in peace time and, more importantly, stressed the moderate principles - the focus on the middle class, especially in the "swing" suburbs - that helped persuade moderate Republicans, conservative "Reagan" Democrats and independents to give the Democrats a chance.

His performance was at times somewhat narcissistic, in talking about how the Clintons' hard-fought campaign helped make Obama a better candidate - that somehow Clinton had a hand in his primary success. But the reality is that now Obama needs Bill, perhaps even more than Hillary, to connect with these middle-class voters with whom he so far hasn't. Clinton, during his own campaigns and his wife's, seemed to understand what they wanted - economic and personal security - and what they needed - to feel that they and their children could get ahead.

Al Gore made a terrible mistake in 2000 in not letting Clinton be his ambassador to the middle class, especially suburbanites. There were states where Clinton could have made a difference for his former

vice president, including his home of Arkansas and swing counties throughout the country. And there are states where Clinton, where both Clintons, can help Obama - especially Ohio and Pennsylvania and Missouri, all crucial.

If Obama is prepared to listen - and we will know more tonight after his acceptance speech in a stadium dwarfed by the Rockies - he will take Clinton's implicit advice and use it to reposition himself as a man in the middle of American politics. It may dismay some of his liberal supporters, who disdained both Clintons, and it may confuse some of his younger ones new to the tactical necessity at time to reposition. But it is the key to winning. It's the so called Third Way, the Clinton way - the way to the White House for another Democrat who is not named Clinton.

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