



The Real Hill-Bill Problem

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[Charles Krauthammer](#)

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Americans don't normally take much notice of Argentine elections. But they did notice when Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, wife of President Nestor Kirchner, was elected to succeed him on Sunday, ensuring not just a co-presidency but the prospect of alternating presidencies as far as the eye can see.

Of course, spousal succession, while new to the United States, is hardly new to [Argentina](#). Its tradition of wifely power begins with Eva, who, despite the absence of any constitutional title, had queenly powers. The real deal, however, was Isabel, Juan Peron's next (and third and last) wife, who succeeded him as president in 1974. She was a cabaret dancer whom Peron picked up in a Panamanian nightclub, the Peronist equi-

valent of winning the [New Hampshire](#) primary. Not surprisingly, her presidency was one of the most catastrophic in Argentine history.

The Kirchners are Peronists as well, but Cristina is no Isabelita. She is a highly accomplished person -- student activist, lawyer, senator and, by some accounts, the more formidable figure in this two-person political partnership. Sound familiar? Like [Hillary Clinton](#), she, too, met her husband in law school, was instrumental in his ascent to the presidency and had long planned with her husband an eventual alternation of power.

The Argentine example is a pretty vivid dramatization of the Clintons' intentions -- and of the cloud hover-

ing over the current Clinton candidacy.

The problem is Bill. But not the way it is usually understood, i.e., the sex scandal waiting to happen. There is that, of course. But there are deeper, more subtle considerations that would arise even if the man -- do the thought experiment -- were as self-disciplined as Nestor Kirchner.

First, for all of their worship of Diana and the Kennedys, Americans are instinctively republican and suspicious of dynastic politics. A vote for Hillary is a vote for the last entry of a Bush-Clinton-Bush-Clinton quarter-century.

We've had just two father-son presidencies in the 230 years of the republic, and the first (the Adams family) had the son taking office 24 years after the father, and just one year before the father's death. The Bush succession is more anomalous with only eight years separating the two presidencies, a proximity that launched a thousand [Maureen Dowd](#) ruminations on the hidden furies driving Oedipus Prez.

But the father-son connection is nothing compared to husband-wife. The relationship between a father and an adult son is psychological and abstract; the connection between husband and wife, concrete and quotidian. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife. [George Bush](#), pere, didn't move back into the [White House](#) in January 2001.

Which is why Hillary's problem goes beyond discomfort with dynastic succession. It's deep unease about a shared presidency. Forget about Bill, the bad boy. The problem is [William Jefferson Clinton](#), former president of the United States, commander in chief of the armed forces, [George Washington](#)'s representative on Earth.

We have never had an ex-president move back into the White House. When in 1992 Bill Clinton promised "two for the price of one," it was taken as a slightly hyperbolic promotion of the role of first lady. This time we would literally be getting two presidents.

Any ex-president is a presence in his own right. His stature, unlike, say, Hillary's during Bill's presidency, is independent of his spouse. From Day One of Hillary's inauguration, Bill will have had more experience than she at everything she touches. His influence on her presidency would necessarily be immeasurably greater than that of any father on any son.

Americans did not like the idea of a co-presidency when, at the 1980 Republican convention, [Ronald Reagan](#) briefly considered sharing the office with former president [Gerald Ford](#). (Ford would have been vice president with independent powers.) And they won't like this co-presidency, particularly because the Clinton partnership involves two characters caught in the dynamic of a strained, strange marriage.

The cloud hovering over a Hillary presidency is not Bill padding around the White House in robe and slippers flipping thongs. It's President Clinton, in suit and tie, simply present in the White House when any decision is made. The degree of his involvement in that decision will inevitably become an issue. Do Americans really want a historically unique two-headed presidency constantly buffeted by the dynamics of a highly dysfunctional marriage?

Only one solution comes to mind. Argentine-U.S. relations are quite rocky these days. The posting of a charming and dynamic ex-president to the Kirchner court in [Buenos Aires](#) might do those relations a world of good. The Romans had a fine appreciation for the art of exile. This might be an excellent occasion for us to start cultivating it.

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