

For Clinton, A Following Of 'Marshans'

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-LAS VEGAS -- Blogger Michelle Marshall has a confession to make. She's one die-hard Clintonite who has already moved on. She's ready to vote for Sen. Barack Obama.

But don't tell that to the legions of Hillary Clinton fans who have made Marshall their de facto leader. They're the faithful, the ones who call themselves "Marshans," read her posts every day, send checks to her Web site and refuse to believe that anyone other than Clinton can beat Sen. John McCain.

In recent weeks, as Clinton's withdrawal from the race has become all but inevitable, Marshall has tried to tiptoe toward leading her followers to accept Obama as the nominee. But every time she suggests that it might be over for Clinton, she is bombarded by comments to the contrary.

"My readers are really hurt. They've got their heart and soul in it," Marshall said. "I don't have that. I'm not angry with anyone. I just want [Democrats] to win."

This would come as an unwelcome surprise to the Hillary lovers who have found an outlet for their angst on Marshall's Web site, TaylorMarsh.com. Her online persona bears the stage name Marshall adopted decades ago when she sang off-Broadway. Today, the name is synonymous with unrelenting devotion to Clinton, as Marshall's blog has pounded away at the Democratic National Committee, Obama and anything else that stood in the way of a Hillary Clinton presidency. Marshall's blog is ranked in the top 5,000 most-read blogs on Technorati, which indexes and ranks millions of blogs.

Throughout the primary campaign, Marshall and her readers have raised money for Clinton, organized calls to superdelegates and helped send volunteers to primary states. But mostly the Marsh fans have come together to hash and rehash every little development in a campaign that has swung wildly between enormous highs and crushing lows.

Sometimes, such as last weekend, the two seem to happen simultaneously. Clinton won big in Puerto Rico, but lost the decision on Michigan's delegates. The win was evidence of Clinton's strength, Marshall said, and the Michigan resolution was evidence of the obstacles the Democratic Party is putting in her path.

"The time has come for a third party," wrote someone posting under the name HyTimes in the comments section of her blog. "The Democratic (sic sic sic) Party has thrown the Clintons under their bus."

"If she suspends rather than ends [her campaign] it means she can still step in to save this sorry party when Obama implodes before August," offered another contributor.

In her early days of blogging about the Democratic primary, Marshall's readers were few and her writings mild. But as the contest heated up, her commentary became as fiery as her red hair. Obama supporters who post unfavorable comments about Clinton are called "Obama trolls," superdelegates are "spineless" and "lack the courage" to make Clinton the nominee. Marshall is now so reviled by some of Obama's supporters that they've tried to discredit her on their own blogs.

"Nobody's more in touch with Clinton supporters, except maybe the Clinton campaign," Marshall bragged one morning in the loft office of her stucco home in Las Vegas, after reading her e-mails and clicking through the thousands of comments left on her blog after a recent primary.

Marshall first attracted Clinton voters when she wrote an item about the terse reply Pentagon officials issued to the New York senator last summer when she asked whether they had a plan to get out of Iraq. Marshall posted an item that said: "[They] might as well have said, Lady, leave this to us. Your queries are aiding the enemy."

"It was like, 'Oh my God, they are going to do this to her,' " Marshall recalled, deciding that she could help by advocating for Clinton online.

As her popularity grew, her blogs were posted on the Huffington Post, Firedoglake and other liberal outlets. Now she's almost able to break even some months, with a few Web ads and donations from Clinton supporters who read her site. Marshall is also trying to parlay her popularity into an on-air radio program -- she does a live webcast every day.

Before launching the blog, she acted and sang in theater in New York, wrote personal ads for the LA Weekly and for a year helped run an adult entertainment Web site. Marshall later wrote a book about that year called "My Year in Smut."

She's 47, and said she still has the practicality of a childhood in Missouri and the thirst for fame from years in New York and Los Angeles. She moved to Las Vegas a little more than five years ago hoping she would succeed on the radio in a smaller market, but it didn't pan out.

During the course of the presidential primary, Marshall has harshly and frequently bashed Obama, recently taunting that "her map beats his math." In a March blog entry, she sarcastically called Obama "Mr. Hope" and said the fraud trial of his Chicago supporter Antoin "Tony" Rezko would stick on Obama's shoe and "the stench will follow him into the general election if he's the nominee."

She took a swipe at him again this week by mocking his recent departure from Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago with the posting of another controversial YouTube video of a preacher at the church, and writing: "Just think if Senator Obama hadn't fled the comfy confines of his church a little over 24 hours ago. Then he'd really have some explaining to do."

But her jabs are nothing compared to the broadsides delivered by her readers. One, whose screen name is "Die for Hillary," wrote at 3:06 a.m. one day last week: "Guys for me its now a war, they cannot take it away from us, we the people need to stand up and show them!!!! SUGGEST SOMETHING LETS PLAN!"

A few minutes later, Heidi Li Feldman, a Georgetown law and philosophy professor who raises money for Clinton and regularly reads Marsh's blog, responded under the screen name HLF: "Whether, for the general election, the Dems end up running the person who can win (that would be Senator Clinton) or the person far less likely to win (that would be Senator Obama) is just not possible to predict right now. I feel I have to keep saying the following. The superdelegates can pledge and endorse all they want but they can reverse and retract all they want. They have done it before and they can do it again."

A reader who calls herself Patsy, and writes a blog titled Soldier 4 Hillary, later posted a link to a YouTube video she made of herself arguing that Democrats should nominate Clinton. It was titled "WARNING! WE NEED A PRESIDENT! NOT A BFF!"

Marshall is aware that her readers are voicing misgivings that many Democrats have about Obama -- the fear that he's an "October surprise" waiting to happen, that he will be seen as a lightweight (Best Friend Forever) against McCain's experienced war hero, that Hispanics and working-class whites won't vote for him no matter what he says.

On the night that Clinton won Kentucky and Obama won Oregon, Marshall leaned back on her living room sofa and pressed mute as Obama declared that he had moved a step closer to winning the Democratic nomination. Marshall frowned, took a sip of white wine and let loose.

"If Obama is our nominee, I think he is going to lose Missouri. I think he is going to lose Florida. I think he is going to lose Kentucky," she said. "Will Obama get the Latino vote in a general election against John McCain? Good luck. And how about women? You'll never convince me that Hillary Clinton is not the better candidate."

She never addresses Clinton's negatives, the right-wingers who would use her as a rallying point, the "likability" issue. The Clinton baggage is secondary to the Clinton dynasty.

"He is the only two-term Democratic president in my lifetime," Marshall said.

Her dual-picture television was simultaneously tuned to CNN and MSNBC in what has become a primary-night ritual with her husband, Mark, who turns on gas meters for a living. (That's how they met -- when he came to hook her up.) But as she celebrated Clinton's win with a loud shout of "She kicked his [butt]! That's what you call a shellacking!" -- she was again forced to consider the cold reality pasted on her television screen.

"If Hillary the fighter would have showed up last year, there's no question, she would have spanked all the boys," she said. "But I never count anyone out until it's over."

In an Obama-McCain matchup, she said she will use her growing power to make the case to scorned Clinton supporters that voting against John McCain is the way to go.

"I'm still on this road," Marshall said. "The only party that will do anything to help people where I come from . . . is the Democratic Party."

On the TV screen, Obama paused from his talk of moving toward victory to praise Hillary Clinton's "courage, her commitment and her perseverance."

"He better do this," Marshall said. "He better do a lot of this."

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