

Clinton seizes opportunity after crisis

By DAVID PAUL KUHN | 12/1/07 12:56 AM EST



Clinton's appearances showed the campaign's White House experience.
Photo: AP

Friday afternoon began with possible tragedy: a hostage crisis at Hillary Rodham Clinton's campaign office in Rochester, N.H.

As the incident unfolded, Clinton's campaign closed its doors and canceled her public appearances.

But nightfall brought a happy ending: the campaign workers safe, the man in

police custody — and the New York senator flying to the scene to express thanks.

The hostage-taking itself offered a rare, if small, genuine drama in a campaign season governed by strict schedules and scripted stump speeches.

And as soon as it ended, Clinton took full advantage of the opportunity she had unexpectedly been handed.

In her New Hampshire press conference, she stood before a column of police in green and tan uniforms. She talked of meeting with hostages. She mentioned that she spoke to the state's governor about eight minutes after the incident began.

The scene was one of a woman in charge.

“It looked and sounded presidential,” said Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia Center for Politics. “This was an instance of the White House experience of this campaign. They knew how to handle this.”

That the crisis was outside Clinton's control gave it a rare quality in this era of hyper-controlled politicking, Sabato added.

“What’s most important about it is that it’s not contrived,” he said. “It’s a real event and that distinguishes it from 99 percent of what happens in the campaign season.”

Clinton’s campaign has long been dogged by key questions: Is she authentic, does she genuinely have the experience to be president and is the country ready for a woman as commander-in-chief — especially during wartime?

“She has never run anything. And the idea that she could learn to be president as an internship just doesn’t make any sense,” former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, a Republican, said in one campaign ad.

Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani has argued the same line.

“I don’t know Hillary’s experience,” Giuliani has said. “She’s never run a city, she's never run a state. She’s never run a business. She has never met a payroll. She has never been responsible for the safety and security of millions of people, much less even hundreds of people.”

Looking the part

Friday presented Clinton with a moment to look the part of president.

“You had one of these breaking news stories ... and so everybody was glued to the set,” said Robert Thompson, founding director of the Bleier

Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University. “She got on TV and provided a sense of closure and executive cool. It is like how Giuliani used television during his crisis.

“There was a sense that this was a dress rehearsal of how she was going to deal with ... crisis as president,” Thompson added.

In her two public appearances after the hostages were freed, she was stern, but she also spoke of the concerns she felt as a mother, admitting to a “horrible sense of bewilderment” and “outrage.”

Her decision to express her personal anxieties offered a window into how she may veer into territory men avoid — personal feelings during a possible public tragedy.

The personal has at times been hard to find in Clinton. She heads the largest and most manicured of all operations.

Her campaign has an especially organized staff that surrounds her. She stays on script and she stays on schedule.

Even as she flew to New Hampshire on Friday evening, she was planning to return to Iowa on Saturday in order to keep on schedule.

What the hostage incident offered Clinton was a brief reprieve from the petty narrative of her versus Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, a break from what at times has devolved to intraparty bickering.

“Voters look for opportunities to see how candidates react in crisis,” Sabato said. “And this was a mini crisis.”