

CHARLES M. BLOW

I’m Not A Super Predator’

Days before Hillary Clinton thundered to an overwhelming victory over rival Bernie Sanders in South Carolina — largely on the strength of black voters who supported her by an even higher percentage than they supported Barack Obama with in 2008 — a young, proudly queer, black activist, Ashley Williams, was in Charlotte, N.C., plotting an action that would make a statement of its own.

She was planning to attend a private Clinton fund-raiser in Charleston, S.C., and confront the candidate about her support of policies — specifically the 1994 crime bill — that contributed to the explosion of racially tilted mass incarceration in this country.

Williams and her friends decided to make a sign — but what to put on it? They toyed with phrases from a now infamous speech Clinton gave in 1996 — when the 23-year-old Williams was a toddler — in which Clinton said:

“We need to take these people on. They are often connected to big drug cartels. They are not just gangs of kids anymore. They are often the kinds of kids that are called super predators: no conscience, no empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way, but first we have to bring them to heel.”

They settled on a phrase and over a couple of hours they blocked out the letters on a pillowcase. Williams practiced in a bathroom mirror folding the banner into her bra and whipping it out. (She figured that she'd have to hide it on her body so that it wouldn't be confiscated before she revealed it at the fund-raiser.) But it was too thick. So she cut away the back half that had no writing. Perfect.

The night of the event, she nervously made her way through security with her secret banner hidden away, and took up position near where she assumed Clinton was to speak. As soon as Clinton de-

A response that was long overdue.

scended the stairs of the mansion, took the microphone and began her remarks, Williams turned to the crowd and unfurled her banner. Then she turned to Clinton, who was confronted with her own worst words:

“We have to bring them to heel.”

On the video of the encounter, recorded by a friend of Williams who accompanied her to the event (After all, in this age, an action without a video is like a tree falling in the forest with nobody around to hear it), an exchange follows:

Williams: “We want you to apologize for mass incarceration.”

Clinton: “O.K., we’ll talk about . . .

Williams: “I’m not a super predator, Hillary Clinton.”

Clinton, obviously caught off guard, struggles to find an appropriate response as Williams continues to pressure her and the crowd begins to grumble, “That’s inappropriate,” and the Secret Service closes in on Williams.

Then Clinton says something about answering for her statement and mass incarceration in general that left me flabbergasted:

“You know what, nobody’s ever asked me before. You’re the first person to ask me, and I’m happy to address it, but you are the first person to ask me, dear.”

Could this be true? How was this possible? How is it that of all the black audiences she has been before in the interceding two decades, and all the black relationships she has cultivated, no one person ever asked her what this young graduate student was asking?

In that movement, I knew that the people of my generation had failed the people of Williams’s. Her whole life has borne the bruises of what was done, largely by Democrats, when I was the age she is now.

She said she has grown up knowing families and whole communities devastated by vanishing black people, swept away into a criminal justice system that pathologized their very personage. That night, Williams forced a reckoning.

For it, Williams has been viciously, and I believe, unfairly attacked as a political operative on a hit mission, all of which she denied to me in detail during our phone interview on Saturday. She also said that Sanders was wrong for actually voting for the bill.

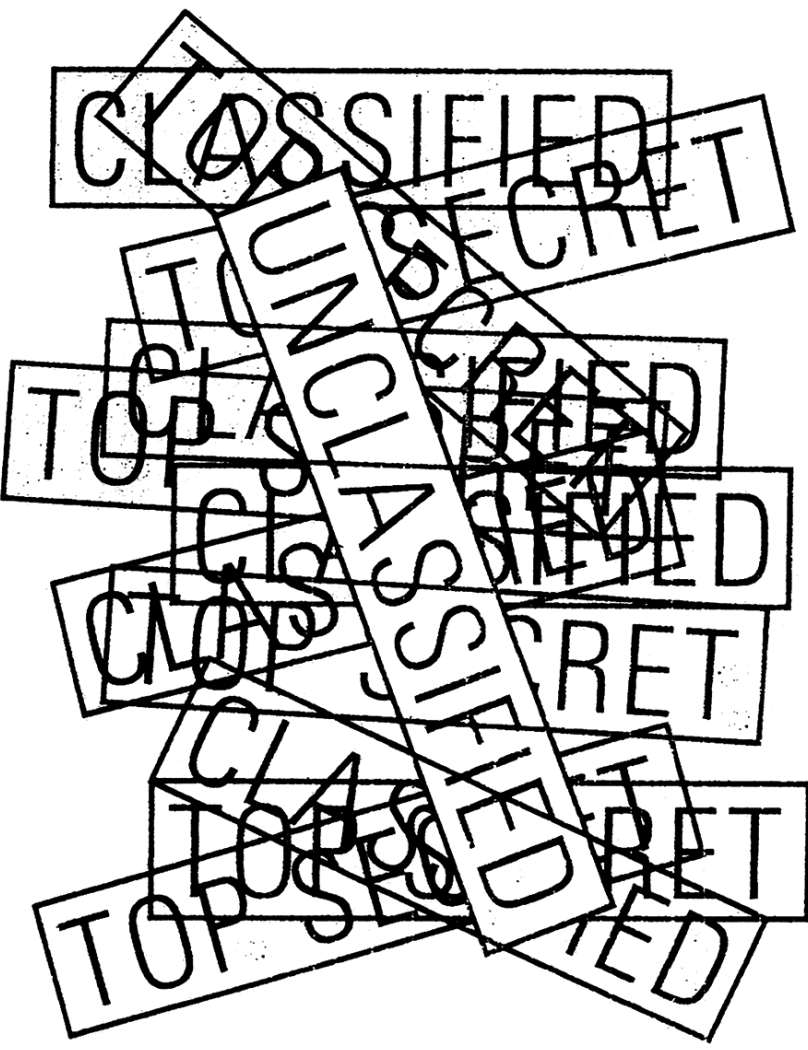
Perhaps most stinging was Bill Maher, who used an expletive to call protesters like Williams “idiots,” and said: “People need to learn the difference between an imperfect friend and a deadly enemy. You want to tear Hillary Clinton down? Great. Then enjoy President Trump.”

But this is a false choice, one too often posed to young activists who insist on holding power accountable. It’s the same argument they hear from the police: Allow us to operate in your communities with impunity and abandon or the criminals will do so to even more devastating effect. Following this line of reasoning, silent absorption of pain and suffering is the only option. I wholly reject that.

After the encounter, Clinton said in a statement published by The Washington Post’s Jonathan Capehart: “Looking back, I shouldn’t have used those words, and I wouldn’t use them today.”

The statement isn’t really an apology for championing the bill itself, and as such, I find it wanting. But at least Williams’s action provoked a response that many of us who came before her failed to demand.

For that, Ashley Williams, and activists like her, should be celebrated for shaming silence. □



PABLO DELCÁN

The Secret of ‘Top Secret’

By Abbe David Lowell

EVERY few years, a news event demonstrates how dysfunctional, arbitrary and counterproductive the country’s system of classifying information really is. Sometimes it’s an article or book about government conduct that causes hand-wringing among intelligence officials. Sometimes it’s a prosecution under the nearly 100-year-old Espionage Act for mishandling classified information, instead of for actual spying. Now we have calls for prosecuting Hillary Clinton because, when she was secretary of state, she had documents on her private email server that have since been declared top secret.

Mrs. Clinton, along with others accused of mishandling classified information, argues that government information is “overclassified” and that it is poorly labeled, making it impossible to know what is actually top secret. They are right. This debate might prove useful if it forces the government to deal with a bigger issue: the need for a saner system for classified information.

Too much information is classified, and those restrictions last too long. Right now, there are thousands of people in the government who can classify information. Think about the reality: A person can put a “classified” stamp on a document and ensure it is kept secret, or can leave it unclassified, subject to disclosure, and later be accused of having revealed something needing protection. No one risks any real penalty for using the stamp; the only punishment comes from not using it. The result is overclassification.

One person’s decision may not be consistent with that of another. Many times,

Our broken system of classifying government documents.

I’ve seen information in a document marked “top secret” that is easily available on the Internet. Similarly there are numerous examples where the exact same paragraph is marked “secret” in one document but left unclassified in another. Yet people have been prosecuted for disseminating such information, and at trial, the government blocks them from using the unclassified document as a defense.

Moreover, the courts will not accept the argument that information should not have been classified in the first place. Given how almost random the decision to classify is, this is astounding.

Classifications typically last 10 years. There is no real system for reviewing decisions, so information that was stale weeks after it was classified remains secret for years longer. The government may prosecute someone for discussing information that was classified long ago for a reason that is no longer valid. Here, too, the inappropriate length of classification is not a defense.

Often, the motive for classifying something is to protect not that information, but its source. For example, a document states that Kim Jong-un of North Korea had a hamburger for lunch. That is not information that has to be protected, but that we know that he ate it reveals a source that needs protecting. This is where the classification system has to operate properly because real lives and methods are in peril. Yet this kind of information, in my experience, is typically not what is being protected.

The laws used to charge improper dissemination of classified information also subject people to the most selective prosecution imaginable. Consider these real

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examples.

A high-ranking official gives behind-the-scenes intelligence to a reporter in hopes of putting the administration in a good light. No one is charged. But a lower-ranking official tells a different reporter classified information calling attention to a Middle Eastern terrorist organization and is charged with a felony.

The former head of the C.I.A. gives classified information, including code words for intelligence programs and war strategy, to a biographer with whom he is in a relationship and then lies about it. He is allowed to plead guilty to a misdemeanor. But a State Department analyst who speaks to a reporter about the threat of North Korea’s nuclear program, and then lies about it, is charged with a felony and serves 11 months in jail.

In Mrs. Clinton’s case, people can reasonably assert that in using a private email server she thwarted open government rules or risked the possibility that sensitive information would be disclosed. But the idea that she violated laws about classified information is simply wrong. Any investigation based on after-the-fact determinations of classification would do nothing to protect national security and would distract from the need to reform classification laws. □

PAUL KRUGMAN

Planet on the Ballot

We now have a pretty good idea who will be on the ballot in November: Hillary Clinton, almost surely (after the South Carolina blowout, prediction markets give her a 96 percent probability of securing her party’s nomination), and Donald Trump, with high likelihood (currently 80 percent probability on the markets.) But even if there’s a stunning upset in what’s left of the primaries, we already know very well what will be at stake — namely, the fate of the planet.

Why do I say this?

Obviously, the partisan divide on environmental policy has been growing ever wider. Just eight years ago the G.O.P. nominated John McCain, whose platform included a call for a “cap and trade” system — that is, a system that restricts emissions, but allows pollution permits to be bought and sold — to limit greenhouse gases. Since then, however, denial of climate science and opposition to anything that might avert catastrophe have become essential pillars of Republican identity. So the choice in 2016 is starker than ever before.

Yet that partisan divide would not, in itself, be enough to make this a truly crucial year. After all, electing a pro-environment president wouldn’t make much difference if he or (much more likely) she weren’t in a position to steer us away from the precipice. And the truth is that given Republican retrogression and the G.O.P.’s near-lock on the House of Representatives, even a blowout Democratic victory this year probably wouldn’t create a political environment in which anything like Mr. McCain’s 2008 proposal could pass Congress.

But here’s the thing: the next president won’t need to pass comprehensive legislation, or indeed any legislation, to take a big step toward saving the planet. Dramatic progress in energy technology has put us in a position where executive action — action that relies on existing law — can achieve great things. All we need is an executive willing to take that action, and a Supreme Court that won’t stand in its way.

And this year’s election will determine whether those conditions hold.

Many people, including some who should know better, still seem oddly oblivious to the ongoing revolution in renewable energy. Recently Bill Gates declared, as he has a number of times over the past few years, that we need an “energy miracle” — some kind of amazing technological breakthrough — to contain climate change. But we’ve already had that miracle: the cost of electricity generated by wind and sun has dropped dramatically, while costs of storage, crucial to making renewables fully competitive with conventional energy, are plunging as we speak.

The result is that we’re only a few years from a world in which carbon-neutral sources of energy could replace much of our consumption of fossil fuels at quite modest cost. True, Republicans still

robotically repeat that any attempt to limit emissions would “destroy the economy.” But at this point such assertions are absurd. As both a technical matter and an economic one, drastic reductions in emissions would, in fact, be quite easy to achieve. All it would take to push us across the line would be moderately pro-environment policies.

As a card-carrying economist, I am obliged to say that it would be best if these policies took the form of a comprehensive system like cap and trade or carbon taxes, which would provide incentives to reduce emissions all across the economy. But something like the Obama administration’s Clean Power Plan, which would use flexible regulations imposed by the Environmental Protection Agency on major emitters, should be enough to get us a long way toward the goal.

And as I said, no new legislation would be needed, just a president willing to act and a Supreme Court that won’t stand in that president’s way, sacrificing the plan-

The issue that matters most.

et in the name of conservative ideology. What’s more, the Paris agreement from last year means that if the U.S. moves forward on climate action, much of the world will follow our lead.

I don’t know about you, but this situation makes me very nervous. As long as the prospect of effective action on climate seemed remote, sheer despair kept me, and I’m sure many others, comfortably numb — you knew nothing was going to happen, so you just soldiered on. Now, however, salvation is clearly within our grasp, but it remains all too possible that we’ll manage to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. And this is by far the most important issue there is; it, er, trumps even such things as health care, financial reform, and inequality.

So I’m going to be hanging on by my fingernails all through this election. No doubt there will be plenty of entertainment along the way, given the freak show taking place on one side of the aisle. But I won’t forget that the stakes this time around are deadly serious. And neither should you. □

ONLINE: CAMPAIGN STOPS

Joy-Ann Reid on Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton and the fight over Barack Obama’s legacy.

nytimes.com/campaignstops

SHAME ON DISNEY-ABC

ABC, which is owned by Disney, will launch a new show on March 8, "The Real O'Neals." It is billed as a comedy about an Irish-American family, loosely based on the life of one of its producers, Dan Savage. For those not acquainted with him, his maniacal hatred of Catholicism is so strong that it would be as though David Duke were hired to produce a show about African Americans.

That comparison is an understatement: Duke may be a bigot, but he is not known for his foul comments. By contrast, Savage is so vulgar that the original full-page ad I wrote was turned down by this newspaper. Why? Because the obscenities were deemed too incendiary for its readers, *even with the use of asterisks in place of letters.*

Savage has accused a politician of having sex—he used an obscenity—with the consecrated Host, the body and blood of Jesus. His filthy remarks about Jesus and Our Blessed Mother are so over the top that they would make Larry Flynt blush. Pope Benedict XVI, Pope John Paul II, and Cardinal Francis George are portrayed as perverts. And priests—he indicts all priests—are depicted as predators.

This is a man who intentionally tried to infect a Christian activist, Gary Bauer, with his sick bodily fluids. He did so by licking the doorknobs of his office, including the bathroom door. When it comes to getting down and dirty, Savage has no equal in public life.

ABC has won awards from the gay community for its show, "Modern Family." It has won awards from African Americans for "Black-ish." So concerned was the network that it might offend Asians with its new show, "Fresh Off the Boat," that it invited leaders to meet with producers. But when it comes to Catholics, ABC delivers Dan Savage.

Anyone who thinks I exaggerate about Savage's cruel record of bigotry, please go to our website, catholicleague.org, and read the ad we initially submitted.

Bill Donohue
President



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