'What Happened': Hillary Clinton weighs in on her 2016 loss to Donald Trump

September 29, 2017 5:24 PM

By Glenn C. Altschuler

In “What Happened,” Hillary Rodham Clinton tries to explain why she lost the presidential election of 2016 without seeming bitter, defensive, or shifting blame away from herself. Her book contains an account of the extraordinarily divisive campaign, insights into Ms. Clinton’s personality, character, and values, and the challenges confronting women in politics. In the end, the task she has set for herself turned out to be difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish.

As she analyzes “the perfect storm” she faced, Ms. Clinton rounds up the usual suspects. She re-visits the “reality TV show” campaign of Donald Trump, which stoked the anger, anxiety, resentment, racism, and xenophobia of white voters. She points to WikiLeaks’ dissemination of Democratic National Committee and Clinton Campaign emails, stolen by Russian hackers and to Russia’s fake news social media disinformation strategy. She documents voter suppression practices, obsessive coverage by the mass media of her use of a private email address as Secretary of State, and a lack of coverage of policy differences between the candidates. She emphasizes the impact of James Comey’s October 28 letter about the FBI’s investigation into her emails, which led to “wall to wall negative coverage,” and may account for the decision of an overwhelming percentage of late deciders to cast their vote for Trump, despite their view that he was unqualified to be president.

Since the election turned on razor thin margins in three states (Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin), Ms. Clinton is surely right that one or more of these factors was decisive. That said, her narrative will be familiar to virtually all readers of What Happened, and seems belabored.

Ms. Clinton’s postmortem on her own campaign seems, well, defensive. She “totally rejects” the charge that her organization was “unusually flawed or dysfunctional.” Although she acknowledges that she sometimes “struggled to stay on message,” Ms. Clinton denies that she failed to speak about the economy, jobs, and the grievances of working men and women. She does not address what she might have done to counter the perception of a majority of voters that she is not trustworthy – or what pollsters
identified as a lack of enthusiasm, even among her supporters.

Most important, Ms. Clinton emphasizes that she’s proud to be a pragmatic progressive, who has mastered the details of policies. But she implies throughout What Happened that candidates who discuss complex solutions to difficult problems, and are willing to compromise, will lose to candidates who pander to voters with simple, simplistic answers ("four minute abs, or even no minute abs"), slogans, and appeals to prejudice. Ms. Clinton kept waiting for reporters to challenge Trump, on “his empty deceitful promises.” But they were “too busy chasing ratings and scandals,” she writes, and “his reckoning never came.”

Alas, this critique has considerable validity – and raises legitimate concerns about our democracy. However, it also implies that Hillary Clinton was not to blame for Donald Trump’s victory.

In my view, “What Happened” is at its best when Ms. Clinton addresses the role of women in politics. A sexist double standard, she demonstrates, is alive and well. Far more than their male counterparts, Ms. Clinton suggests, women must struggle with “likability” and “authenticity”: the more successful they are, the less people like them. She also makes an intriguing argument about the applicability of a female style to effective governance. “Just as a household falls apart without emotional labor,” she suggests, politics fails when listening is less important than speaking.

Like her or not, you can’t help agreeing with the advice Hillary Clinton gave to young women in her concession speech: “Never doubt that you are valuable and powerful and deserving of every chance and opportunity in the world.”

*Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.*