ROBERT SIEGEL, host: A flash point for the Clinton campaign is Hillary Clinton, a strong-minded woman, a lawyer who has had her own career and her own interests in issues. Early in the campaign, there were hints that she might play a major role in the Clinton administration. Then a casual remark about tea and cookies catapulted Hillary Clinton into controversy. Campaign observers say that she has played a quieter role since then, reluctant to let herself become an issue in the campaign or part of the debate on family values. Linda Wertheimer talked to Hillary Clinton this morning.

LINDA WERTHEIMER REPORTING:

Hillary Clinton used to tell voters who asked why she had never run for office, `Vote for him and you'll get me.' But she doesn't say that so much now. She's a woman with an impressive presence. Even in the tension of a campaign, her legal training shows. She is calm and controlled and careful, even when she talks about her husband's campaign when it was spiralling downward during the days in New Hampshire when tabloid stories about Gennifer Flowers nearly finished the Clinton candidacy.

HILLARY CLINTON (WIFE OF BILL CLINTON): What I saw happening in New Hampshire was the wrestling that people had to do with the disconnect between their personal feelings and impressions of Bill Clinton, who had been there, and what the media was telling them about him. And what finally happened in New Hampshire, and what I think was a real turning point in the campaign, is that a substantial number of New Hampshire voters said, `You know, I've talked to this man. I've looked in his eyes. I've met his wife. I've had a long conversation with them. And I'm going to go with my gut. I'm going to go with what my head and my heart are telling me about him and what kind of a leader he'd be. And it defied all of the political predictions and the commentary, but it was real. It was rooted in real people's experience with Bill.

And I think that seeing that--and I knew it was happening--I know what it's like when you put your hand out to shake it with someone else and they avert their eyes or their hand slips by yours and you know they don't want you to be there. They're not approving of you or for whatever reason, they're not favorable. That wasn't happening in New Hampshire. I could see it in the malls. I could see it on the street corners. I could see it in people's homes. People were open to Bill. They were curious. They wanted to know what kind of a person he was. And the night before the election, when all of the newspapers and other polls were showing a disaster, I told the campaign people I wasn't going to any more meetings or briefings about anything because I knew what I saw out there. I was either right or I was wrong, and I was going to bed. And that's the way I felt about it.

WERTHEIMER: You--you can look forward to something similar to what happened in New Hampshire happening again when the national campaign opens. All sorts of--of commentators have--have already observed that the president has few options but a negative campaign, and the president himself has said he'll do whatever he needs to do. And strategically and historically, you obviously are planning for that.

CLINTON: Well, I think you have to given the track record of this administration and the prior one in terms of their political attack machines. So when I know that there's going to be all kinds of attacks--they'll be attacking Bill, they'll be attacking me, which has already started, they'll figure out a way, probably, to attack Chelsea and our cat. I mean, I understand all that. But my view is that first of all, it's not going to work as well as it has in the past because I don't think people want to be sucker-punched again. You know, George Bush got elected with `Read my lips' and Willie Horton ads, and America woke up the next day and didn't have a clue about what he believed in terms of getting and keeping good jobs or providing health care. I don't think people will be as vulnerable.

Secondly, I think that not only Bill Clinton, but the Democrats have learned their lessons. And that is when somebody comes after you, which you regret and you wish they wouldn't do, and I feel like sending a copy of Lee Atwater's Life magazine article to everybody in the Republican attack apparatus asking them to read it and heed his admonition that we should be more caring about one another.

WERTHEIMER: That was...

CLINTON: But heck, if they do it, Linda, then you go back after them. I mean, that is the reality of politics today. If they hit you, you counterattack as hard as you can.

WERTHEIMER: Lee Atwater was the chairman of the Republican Party who made a kind of deathbed confession that he regretted his negative campaigning.

CLINTON: That's right.

WERTHEIMER: I wonder if you--your own press has been relatively negative lately, and one of the things I--I--I've always wondered about--I've always believed, as a person who's covered a lot of politics, that politics really is one of the last places in America where wives who are not the `little woman' will inevitably cause trouble for their husbands who are officeholders. And it's my impression that you and Governor Clinton confronted that, accepted it and just decided that you would still have your own life even though it was risky and there would be downsides to it. Did you have such a discussion? I mean, did you work that out?

CLINTON: You know, I don't know that we ever thought it was necessary to discuss. I mean, Bill Clinton and I met and fell in love in Yale Law School. I've been a lawyer and an activist on issues that I'm concerned about, particularly children's issues, for more than 20 years. And when I moved to Arkansas and started teaching at the law school, I took on a lot of tough calls, like starting the first legal aid clinic in northwest Arkansas and dealing with a lot of sensitive and controversial issues. And I can honestly say that my husband has never, ever asked me to change anything I'm doing, to take a different stance.

Now a lot of people who care about both of us have, you know, sort of said, `Gee, Hillary, do you think you ought to be out front on this issue?' And I appreciate their concern but my husband never has. And what I have done all through my life is to just take stock every day, you know, what I'm doing and what I believe in, and I've made changes as I've gotten older, as we all have, but mostly to be as clear as I possibly can about what's important to me.

WERTHEIMER: You know, if he is elected, you will be the first first lady with her own life who has not been a kind of a--of a--an acolyte to her husband's political career. You will--you will be the first modern American woman in the White House, and have you given any thought to that?

CLINTON: You know, I have been asked about that a lot. And as a result, I've gone back and started reading a lot about women who've been in this position before. And I think each woman who's held this role has come to it with her own personal background and interests but also out of a historic context, and I think it is true that I may be the first--although somebody told me the other day Mrs. Harding had not only worked but had been divorced, so there are things to learn about all of these women--but I may be the first who's actively worked all through my life, you know, and has a very active public life apart from her husband. But I think that is reflective of the time.

Bill and I are reflective of the lives of, you know, most Americans. Most American women now will work for some or all of their life. Most careers will be shared by husbands and wives. Women will go in and out of the work force and have the need for all kinds of help and support that my mother, I think, probably needed but, you know, didn't expect because she was a full-time homemaker. So there's just so much change going on, and Bill and I have lived through it and are representative of it.

WERTHEIMER: Hillary Clinton. I spoke to her earlier today. I'm Linda Wertheimer at Madison Square Garden in New York.

MUSIC PLAYED

CREDITS GIVEN

SIEGEL: I'm Robert Siegel.

NOAH ADAMS (HOST): And I'm Noah Adams. It's "All Things Considered".

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