

# I, Carly

The other woman with her eye on the White House. BY MICHAEL WARREN

Ashland, N.H.

The Pemi-Baker Valley Republican Committee's monthly all-you-can-eat spaghetti dinner isn't the kind of place you expect to see a crowd. Especially one that includes college students, and on a Friday night, no less. But the American Legion on Main Street is hopping. Greeting guests at the door is Omer Ahern Jr., the committee's round-faced, mutton-chopped executive vice president. And he's ecstatic.

"Everybody's excited," Ahern says. "We've never had this many people here."

The spaghetti is delicious, but the 100 or so people have really come for the evening's guest speaker, Carly Fiorina. The former chief executive of technology giant Hewlett-Packard is quite a draw among Republicans these days. The woman who once graced the covers of business and tech magazines is now more likely to pop up on Fox News. More recently, she's becoming a familiar face here in New Hampshire as she prepares to run for president of the United States. Sources close to Fiorina say she'll make that announcement on May 4.

You get the sense candidates don't often make their way north past Manchester, Concord, and Lake Winnepesaukee to this little town in the foothills of the White Mountains. And Ashland is a long way from Palo Alto, California, where Fiorina attended Stanford and, from 1999 to 2005, ran HP. But she seems right at home here, sidling up to an empty seat in the middle of the hall with her plate of spaghetti and meatballs, chatting with the locals. At one point, a loud burst of laughter erupts from her

Michael Warren is a staff writer at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.



table as Fiorina regales the folks with a story between bites.

In her speech, she mentions working shortly after college as a temporary secretary. "Some of you will know what I mean when I say that the big technology breakthrough at that time, which we appreciated as secretaries,

was the IBM Selectric typewriter." Half the room, nearly all women in their sixties, looks at each other, nodding and clapping in recognition.

The people here eat up her personal journey, from medieval history major and law-school dropout to high-powered tech executive. They gasp in sympathy when she mentions the death of her stepdaughter to "the demons of addiction" and Fiorina's own battle with cancer. They listen raptly as she identifies a "sense of disquiet" among Americans over the future of the country. Fiorina ticks the problems off—a stagnant economy, an out-of-touch federal government, a "web of dependence" that has captured too many citizens—building up to what's supposed to be her most profound diagnosis.

"I think the American people also fear that we are missing something. I think what they think we're missing is leadership." She says it solemnly, but the Republican audience begins giggling at the most obvious assessment of Barack Obama ever uttered. Fiorina rolls with it. "Why, does that sound like an understatement?" she deadpans.

It's an understatement to say that Fiorina has a difficult path to the White House. She's never held public office, and her only political experience is losing the California Senate race in 2010 to Barbara Boxer. *Real Clear Politics* includes 12 current or likely GOP candidates on its average of primary polls, and Fiorina's not one of them. That's because most polling outfits don't even ask about her. A Quinnipiac survey in late April found her support among primary voters at 1 percent, the same as two-term Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal—and the generic "someone else." More than one Washington journalist I've talked with dismissed her candidacy before I could finish saying her name.

But there's something intriguing about Candidate Fiorina. She's a veteran of big business who rails against crony capitalism. She's a modern, independent woman who's unabashedly pro-life. Carly, as everyone

THOMAS FLUHARTY

knows her, is less Sarah Palin and more Ronald Reagan, a natural storyteller with a quick wit and an ear for emotional narratives.

"I fully expect I'll be underestimated. I have been all my life," she says in an interview. "What I need to do is perform."

For the past several months Fiorina's been performing nonstop. She wowed observers in January at the Iowa Freedom Summit, the first major event of the 2016 presidential cycle. While most possible candidates stuck to the biographical, Fiorina went after the big target: Hillary Clinton. She was a hit.

"Like Hillary Clinton, I too have traveled hundreds and thousands of miles around the globe, but unlike her, I've actually accomplished something," Fiorina said, in what's become a staple applause line. "You see, Mrs. Clinton, flying is not an accomplishment. It is an activity."

Sometimes, Fiorina doesn't even have to make the comparison herself. In New Hampshire, a male voter says he can't wait to see Fiorina face off against Clinton, *womano a womano*, in a general election debate. "I just think that would be awesome," Fiorina replies, and the crowd agrees.

"What Hillary Clinton desperately wants to talk about is that she gets to be the first woman president. What she desperately wants to talk about is there's a war on women. What she desperately wants to talk about is playing the gender card," Fiorina continues. "If I am standing next to her on a general election debate stage, she can't talk about any of those things. You know what she's going to have to talk about? Her track record."

True, but so would Fiorina, specifically her record as CEO of Hewlett-Packard. Books have been written about Fiorina's tumultuous tenure at the top of one of the world's largest technology firms. Fiorina says she'd run on her performance at HP, not away from it. "We doubled the company from \$45 billion to \$90 billion," she told Fox News's Bret Baier recently. "We went from market laggard in every product category to market

leader in every product category and in every market in which we competed."

Critics—and there are legions of them, from Silicon Valley to Wall Street—say her six-year term at HP was a disaster. Falling stock prices and massive layoffs dominated her last years at the company. A controversial 2001 merger with Compaq, which was nearly killed by a shareholder uprising led by the son of cofounder Bill Hewlett, irreparably damaged her image within the company. After several quarters of disappointing stock performance, the board fired Fiorina. HP's stock recovered considerably in the following years, though, while competitors like Dell and IBM struggled, suggesting Fiorina's strategy may have paid off after all.

Despite her ugly exit from HP, Fiorina's time there figures large in her campaign pitch. She reminds crowds that as the leader of a multinational corporation, she's met with dozens of foreign leaders. "I've sat across the table from Vladimir Putin," Fiorina often says. Heading a large company attuned her to the inherent problems of large systems. "Virtually everything I spent my time on was 'How do we bust up this bureaucracy?'" Fiorina says of her CEO days. That sounds like a presidential campaign theme.

"This is a government that has become so big, so powerful, so costly, so complex, so corrupt, it no longer serves the people," she says. "It is the weight of government, the power of government, the complexity of government that literally now is crushing the potential of this nation." A Fiorina administration, she promises, would "reimagine government" for the purpose of "unlocking potential" in the American people.

Some of the details of "reimagining government" are easier to pin down than others. Fiorina espouses an "influence through strength" view on foreign policy, arguing that rebuilding the Navy's Sixth Fleet and restarting our missile-defense programs in Eastern Europe would "send a message" to Vladimir Putin and other bad actors in the world. The Obama administration should

abandon its nuclear talks with Iran, and Congress should do everything it can now and in the future to maintain the sanctions regime until Tehran gets serious about stopping its nuclear ambitions. She supports female soldiers in combat roles—"Israel's been doing it for years"—but also says standards shouldn't be lowered.

To cut domestic spending, she says, Congress should adopt zero-based budgeting to eliminate bad and duplicate programs. But on entitlement spending, she's less urgent. "When we are satisfied that we don't have hundreds upon hundreds of billions of dollars of waste, abuse, and corruption, then let's start talking about raising the retirement age for Social Security," she says. Tax reform should simplify the code and help reduce the deficit, but Fiorina is wary of plans like Marco Rubio's that increase the child tax credit. "If you're a single person or a young married couple, and you're trying to work your way up, you're going to be hit with a big tax bill," she says.

On immigration, Fiorina says she prioritizes border security and reforming the worker-visa program. She also draws a line when it comes to illegal immigrants. "If you have come here illegally, and you have stayed here illegally, you never get to earn the privilege of citizenship," she says. "It's not fair. Maybe you get to earn legal status, maybe your children can become citizens, but citizenship is a privilege to be earned."

Her positions put her smack dab in the mainstream of the Republican party. That can mean one of two things. Fiorina will get lost in the noise, overtaken by the better known, more politically experienced options. Or, as Fiorina's strategists have put it, she can take the role of consensus conservative, exceed expectations in Iowa and New Hampshire, and gather enough momentum to contend for the nomination. Then again, many assume she's actually angling for the number-two spot on the Republican ticket. Is Fiorina running for vice president?

"People ask that because I'm a woman and I'm not a politician," she says. "I'm running to be president." ♦