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Hillary Clinton 'truly regrets' Gandhi joke

Remarks called stereotypical, racially insensitive

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ST. LOUIS, Missouri (AP) -- Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton apologized for joking that Mahatma Gandhi used to run a gas station in St. Louis, saying it was "a lame attempt at humor."

The New York Democrat made the remark at a fund-raiser Saturday. During an event here for Senate candidate Nancy Farmer, Clinton introduced a quote from Gandhi by saying, "He ran a gas station down in St. Louis."

After laughter from many in the crowd of at least 200 subsided, the former first lady continued, "No, Mahatma Gandhi was a great leader of the 20th century." In a nod to Farmer's underdog status against Republican Sen. Kit Bond, Clinton quoted the Indian independence leader as saying: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."

The director of a U.S. center devoted to Gandhi's teachings called the remarks stereotypical and racially insensitive, while an educator said the flap underscored the need for politicians to be cautious when trying to get laughs.

"Political speeches can't be like episodes of The Simpsons," said David Robertson, a University of Missouri-St. Louis political science professor.

After being approached by The Associated Press to clarify the remarks, Clinton suggested in a statement sent late Monday that she never meant to fuel any



Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton speaks Saturday at a fund-raiser for Senate candidate Nancy Farmer, right.

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VIDEO

U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton apologizes for joking remarks she made about Mahatma Gandhi. (January 7)

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stereotype -- often used as a comedic punch line -- that certain ethnic groups were synonymous with operating America's gas stations.

"I have admired the work and life of Mahatma Gandhi and have spoken publicly about that many times," Clinton said in a two-sentence statement. "I truly regret if a lame attempt at humor suggested otherwise."

So does Michelle Naef, administrator of the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence, the Memphis, Tennessee-based nonprofit group founded in 1991 by a Gandhi grandson to promote his grandfather's teachings, including nonviolent resistance.

While crediting Clinton and her husband, former President Clinton, as long having "supported the Gandhi message," Naef said Saturday's remarks "could be incredibly harmful" in perpetuating racial myths.

"I don't think she was, in any way, trying to demean Mahatma Gandhi," Naef said. "To be generous to her, I would say it was a poor attempt at humor. Perhaps I'm overly sensitive, but I find it offensive when people use stereotypes in that way."

To Robertson, the professor, the flap demonstrates the potential peril of when humor by politicians falls flat.

"The more prominent the politician, the more they've taken positions on equality in the past as Mrs. Clinton has, the more this is going to be troubling to some people," he said. "It's understandable that groups want to make sure they're treated with complete respect."

When it comes to Hillary Clinton, he said, "there's no reason to think she doesn't admire Gandhi, like so many people do. After all, Gandhi was influential to Martin Luther King Jr., and I know she respects King."



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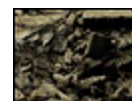


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