

Analysis: Will a Democrat cross the line to finish first?

Some experts see ugly coming; others expect more of same

11:03 PM CDT on Saturday, March 22, 2008

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WASHINGTON – The Democratic fight has taken some unexpected turns since the circus left Texas a few weeks ago: top advisers thrown overboard for careless remarks, an intense new focus on race, squabbling over the former first lady's calendars.

But mostly, the Clinton and Obama campaigns are sticking with the same arguments they've been making for months – experience vs. judgment, inspiration vs. the poisoned old ways of Washington. Their contest remains essentially a stalemate, as neither has found a breakthrough message or new strategy to end the fight quickly.

One time-honored political tactic remains available for such a close race: unbridled negativity. But both candidates appear reluctant to turn too harshly on each other, perhaps fearing they'll split the party and alienate the superdelegates they'll need to seal the nomination.

"It's hard to see any new lines of attack emerging – just endless variations of the contrasts they've been drawing all along," said Dan Schnur, a Republican strategist who was communications director for Sen. John McCain's first presidential run. "There's not much to be gained by shifting off either of those messages, but there are 5,000 different ways to argue those two points. And they will."

The frustration on each side has grown. Mr. Obama has won more delegates and states, but Mrs. Clinton remains close on his heels and has pulled ahead again in head-to-head national polls. Her wins in Texas and Ohio quashed his hope that party elders would step in and deliver a *coup de grace*.

What's left is a war of attrition, and a "tepid" one at that, as labor activist and Democratic consultant Vic Kamber sees it.

Mr. Obama in particular needs to toughen up, he said. The nice-guy image has gotten him this far but is wearing thin and may not take him all the way.

"There's any number of lines that still could be crossed. Could it get worse? Do I think it will get worse? Yes," Mr. Kamber said. "The passion is there on both sides."

But what to unleash on Mrs. Clinton?

"There's very little to know about Hillary that we don't know already, and some of that stuff they just can't use," he said.

Conservatives spent years hammering her over Whitewater, Travelgate and much more. Reminding voters about those episodes and the Clinton-era atmosphere in Washington could be effective in the short term, analysts said.

But for a Democrat to attack a Democrat that way could easily backfire, said Shanto Iyengar, a Stanford professor who studies political advertising and whose books include *Going Negative*.

That's especially true, he said, for a candidate who represents the "politics of sincerity. From Day 1 that's been his appeal. ... If he decides to really go after Senator Clinton, that would be a serious violation of the very rationale for his candidacy."

But by portraying her as the emblem of distasteful, 1990s-style confrontational politics, every barb she throws proves his case. And because he can't directly question her ethics, he jabs her regularly for such things as failing to release her last six tax returns. This is an oblique way of casting doubt and reminding voters about the supposed darker side of the Clinton years.

An exchange last week provided a case in point.

After the National Archives released 11,000 pages of Mrs. Clinton's schedules as first lady, the Obama team cited the half-dozen meetings on NAFTA as proof that she misled voters about her role in crafting the trade deal. "One thing she was hiding was the truth," said spokesman Robert Gibbs. And a surrogate, Roger Tauss, international vice president of the Transport Workers Union, went further, using language that evoked the worst of Bill Clinton's legacy, accusing her of "carefully parsed words and misleading statements when you don't think you'll be caught."

Clinton spokesman Phil Singer shot back that Mr. Obama was again violating his vow to avoid personal attacks – a retort aimed at the core of the well-cultivated Obama image, not merely at public aversion to negativity. "Once again, the Obama campaign is demonstrating that Senator Obama's words can't be trusted," Mr. Singer said.

In truth, the Clinton side has all but dared Mr. Obama to abandon his above-the-fray persona, through relentless attacks on his experience and, increasingly, his forthrightness. Her aides and backers exploit every inconsistency they can spot between his thin public record and his soaring rhetoric. And they've gotten in the habit of dismissing his promises as "just words," to emphasize the gap they tout between her experience and achievements and his.

Mr. Obama has provided some of the ammunition, as when he was forced to acknowledge that his top foreign policy adviser had – despite numerous denials – held a back-channel talk about trade policy with Canadian diplomats.

The rhetoric has gotten somewhat sharper. Clinton aide Howard Wolfson likened Mr. Obama's demands for the release of Clinton tax returns and other records to the tactics of Whitewater prosecutor Ken Starr.

An Obama foreign policy adviser called Mrs. Clinton a "monster." Clinton backer Geraldine Ferraro, the first woman on a major-party ticket, asserted that Mr. Obama's race explained his rapid rise. But those comments fell outside the comfort zone. The candidates repudiated them and shunned the supporters who made them.

Mrs. Clinton let the uproar over incendiary remarks by Mr. Obama's pastor play out with little comment, though, and was fairly gracious over his speech on race relations. But that's a taboo pressure point, as Bill Clinton learned in South Carolina.

As attacks go, the one that's gotten the most traction came when the Clinton team dusted off an old image – the White House crisis call – to raise questions about Mr. Obama's readiness. She'd touted her superior experience for a year, but the "3 a.m. ad" was the first truly memorable vehicle for that message.

One thing she hasn't done is personally focus sharply on Mr. Obama's relationship with Chicago developer Tony Rezko, who is on trial for alleged corruption. That, analysts say, would signal desperation.

She wants to be president, and that will require not merely outlasting Mr. Obama but doing so without turning off his foot soldiers and voters.

Besides, said Dr. Iyengar, "I don't think she's going to win a contest on ethics."

John Geer, a Vanderbilt professor and editor of the *Journal of Politics*, whose book *In Defense of Negativity* asserts that attacks in presidential races are effective and beneficial, noted that the 3 a.m. phone call ad never explicitly mentioned Mr. Obama. That made it somewhat less personal – one of the many lines that haven't been crossed.

"We're not anywhere close to the kinds of negativity that we've seen," Dr. Geer said, citing the 1984 Mondale-Hart Democratic contest as an example.

This late in the game, neither side is expected to unleash new revelations. By now, anything juicy their researchers have uncovered has been used or rejected as beyond the pale.

"You're not going to push the button for the equivalent of nuclear war in the primaries," Dr. Geer said.

And they're unlikely to shift messages. Consistency has its merits, for one thing. As Democratic strategist James Carville has quipped, he awoke each morning during the 1992 campaign trying to figure out a new way to say, in essence, "It's the economy, stupid."

But there's more to it. Injecting a new theme at this stage would smell of desperation, sparking doubts about authenticity similar to what Al Gore faced when he kept changing his look in 2000.

But Mr. Schnur, the Republican, figures the Democrats won't be able to help themselves when it comes to going for the jugular.

"It's only going to get tougher," he predicted. "It's really easy to be noble when you're 20 points ahead. When you're within the margin of error, the incentive is to get mean."

Framing the fight

CLINTON

Tested in battle: She has shown she can take on Republicans in the toughest fights. Mr. Obama is new to the national stage, hasn't gotten enough vetting, and could be easily bruised by the GOP.

Won the big states: Every large state has gone her way except for Mr. Obama's home state, Illinois.

Ready for the job: Her experience is superior to his, a key component to taking on Republican John McCain.

OBAMA

Won more, and varied, states: Victories in traditionally Republican states show broad electoral strength.

Excited new voters: Much of the big turnout in primaries is driven by Obama-mania.

Better contrast with McCain: He's younger, offers a sharper distinction to Mr. McCain on policy and can vie far more effectively for independents.