



# Still a long road to go to the White House

*No matter who takes out the Democratic race, Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama will be in for a real battle with John McCain to win the US presidency in November, suggests **Geoff Garrett***

WHEN the US presidential election campaign ramped up about a year ago, four things seemed likely. First, the election would be a referendum on the Bush administration's war in Iraq. Second, the major party candidates for the general election would be settled nine months earlier, on February 5, the largest and earliest Super Tuesday, in which roughly half the country would vote. Third, the winning candidates would be Hillary Clinton for the Democrats and John McCain for the Republicans. Finally, Senator Clinton would have the upper hand in the general election because of the unpopularity of Bush's Iraq war.

Today, only one of these predictions seems half-right: though he may not have performed quite as well as expected yesterday, Senator McCain is the long odds-on favourite for the Republican nomination.

In terms of the issues dominating the election campaign, Iraq has receded quite dramatically in recent months. This is partly because the troop surge has curtailed the killing and moved the war from the front pages, partly because Americans are worried about the ever-widening collateral damage from the sub-prime mortgage meltdown.

But the real story may be that while there is a chasm separating the Democratic and Republican parties on Iraq, there are no major differences within the two parties.

Republicans will do whatever it takes to win in Iraq. Democrats want to get out as soon as they safely can. As a result, we should expect Iraq to climb back towards the top of the agenda in the general election.

Turning to the party horse races, Super Tuesday crowned a remarkable comeback for McCain after almost falling out of the race last northern summer and running on financial fumes since.

McCain's principal strength is his "straight talk express" independence from his party and from the opinion

polls. His championing of campaign finance reform and his opposition to the Bush tax cuts are jarringly out of step with the Republican mainstream. McCain remains an unwavering supporter for the Iraq war despite more than 2:1 opposition to the war among the general public.

McCain's candidacy revived last American autumn when the troop surge in Iraq started to work, at least in terms of reducing the killing and moving Iraq off the front pages. His stature as a war hero, national security expert and Washington veteran then allowed him to rise above the Republican scrum.

After Super Tuesday, the Republican Party will begin closing ranks behind McCain, focusing on his pro-Iraq and pro-small government one-two punch.

The same cannot be said on the Democratic side. Super Tuesday did not break the deadlock between Clinton and Obama. Each won a handful of states, big and small, and from different parts of the country.

The spinning from each camp will be intense. Clinton will highlight that she won bigger states than Obama, led by the two biggest of all, California and New York, which must be cornerstones of the Democrats' game plan in November.

Obama will say he won more states than Clinton, evidence that his march towards victory continues: from 20 percentage points behind Clinton a few months ago, to 10 points behind after the Iowa caucuses, to a race that is too close to call.

Insiders will focus on the delegate count, because it is the state delegates who will actually vote on the party's nominee on the floor of the Democratic national convention in Denver at the end of August.

The Democrats' proportional representation system of translating primary votes into delegates will likely keep the Clinton and Obama race tight all the way to the convention. In Denver, the choice for Democratic nominee may ultimately fall to the more than 800 unelected "super

delegates", party grandees and former office holders.

The choice between Clinton and Obama, vying to be their party's first female and African-American candidate respectively, is more about the candidates as people and their vision than about their specific policies, which are quite similar.

Clinton portrays herself as a strong and independent woman, a battle-hardened problem solver who will hit the ground running to meet the myriad complex and pressing domestic and international challenges facing the US.

Obama casts himself as multiracial and post-partisan, rising above the bitter divisiveness of Washington to unite and inspire Americans, and the world, to realise their highest and noblest aspirations.

No matter who comes out of the Democratic race, he or she will be in for a real battle with McCain to win the presidency. In notional head-to-head polls, McCain has always been the most popular potential Republican candidate because of his appeal among independent voters. He is leading Clinton and trailing Obama in these polls because Obama does better than Clinton among independents. But the margins are well within the bounds of statistical error.

Notwithstanding all the excitement surrounding Super Tuesday, we are in for a long wait to find out who the next president will be. The stakes are very high, and the remaining contests will be hard fought.

Whoever is inaugurated next January will try to convince the US and the world that he or she is not another George W. Bush, but rather the heir to more esteemed presidents: Bill Clinton for Hillary Clinton, John F. Kennedy for Barack Obama, and Ronald Reagan for John McCain. Time will tell if any one of them is up to this lofty ambition.

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