



# Divided Democrats poised to fail

**The race for the White House could have disastrous consequences for the Democrats, writes Geoff Garrett**

THE American media is reveling in the prospect that the Democrats' race for the White House will continue all the way to the party convention in Denver in late August.

But behind the hype about this week's Pennsylvania primary that Hillary Clinton will most likely narrowly win over Barack Obama, Democratic leaders are haunted by the spectre of their party losing an apparently "unlosable" presidential election in November.

The Bush Administration's approval ratings plumb historic depths amid renewed violence in Iraq and the staggering US economy. Presumptive Republican nominee John McCain continues to struggle to raise money and generate any buzz.

But the strongest current in American politics today is fratricide between Clinton and Obama.

The disastrous consequence for Democrats is that McCain is more than holding his own in opinion polls, pitting him against either potential Democratic opponent.

Last week's Philadelphia debate between the Democratic candidates has been denounced for focusing on the candidates' personal "missteps" at the expense of the big issues voters are concerned about.

But the blame does not lie with the American Broadcasting Company journalists who moderated the debate. Rather, it falls on the interminable primary season.

Clinton's always-high negatives are

now in the stratosphere.

Last month, CBS embarrassed Clinton with its exposure of her repeated "mis-speaking" about the Bosnia sniper fire that was not.

Since then, her campaign has been relentless and merciless in its willingness to attack Obama. Today, Clinton's trustworthiness and leadership are widely doubted.

Even though Clinton will probably narrowly win the Pennsylvania primary this week, further prolonging the race, Obama is now long odds-on to win the nomination. But the magic and excitement that surrounded his post-partisan and multiracial campaign a couple of months ago are gone.

Obama's campaign was built on two core themes. First, though he may be inexperienced, his judgment is impeccable — above all, he was opposed to the Iraq war from the outset. Second, he transcends the usual political fray of Washington to connect directly and sincerely with ordinary people who share his hunger for change in America. Both notions now are badly worn.

Obama's judgment has been called into question by his decades-long ties to a shady businessman, Tony Rezko, and to a fire-and-brimstone black preacher, Reverend Jeremiah Wright.

Obama has also dipped into the duplicity playbook most Americans believe pervades inside-the-beltway politics. While Obama was denouncing the North American Free Trade agreement to win rustbelt votes, his chief economics adviser was whispering to Canadian officials that the candidate was only playing politics on the stump and didn't really mean it.

Worse still, Obama has been fighting a fierce, but losing, rearguard action against charges that he is elitist, a cardinal sin in American politics.

Early in the campaign, no one seemed to care about Obama's two Ivy League degrees, while people marvelled at the fact he walked away from big corporate law job offers to work on the inner-city streets of Chicago.

But two weeks ago, Obama confided at a fundraiser in San Francisco, that bastion of America's rich left wing, that he understood why Middle America is bitter about it being left behind economically and why, as a result, they turned to religion and guns and against immigrants.

Irrespective of the sociological merits of Obama's analysis and its ability to liberate more dollars from fat San Francisco wallets, it was disastrous politics that has put Obama on the grumpy defensive ever since.

Clinton gets little credit for harping on about Obama's perceived failings but her attacks are cutting into Obama's popularity. What used to be seen as elegant, calm and inspiring oratory is now viewed as stiff, out of touch and increasingly irritable.

All this is a godsend for Republicans. Not only is McCain free to raise money and hone his campaign while the Democrats slug it out against each other, but Clinton is doing much of the spadework McCain will need to beat Obama. This includes the one-two punch of asserting that while McCain is ready to be Commander in Chief, Obama is not.

The Republican strategy against Obama has been clear: Don't be fooled by his flashy oratory; Obama is nothing more than a foreign policy neophyte and traditional left-wing Democrat who is out of touch with the concerns of regular Americans.

The longer the Democratic nomination fight continues, the more effective the Republican campaign will be, and the closer the presidential election in November will become.

While the media barracks for the primary race to go on and on, Democrats pray it will end as soon as possible. Pennsylvania, this week, will likely be good for the media but bad for the Democrats.

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