

The would-be president is messing with ire

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Fans-turned-critics say Hillary Clinton is sacrificing principle in the hunt for votes, writes Anne Summers.

IT IS still more than two years before the major parties in the United States decide upon their candidates for the 2008 presidential elections, and it is widely assumed that the Democratic Party candidate will be the junior senator from New York, Hillary Rodham Clinton.

You might expect the political conversation among Democrats to be along the lines of "Is Hillary electable?" (given the preponderance of red states on the American political map) but many in her natural base have already washed their hands of her.

At a dinner party in New York City last week with a group that included writers, lawyers, a former senior staffer for the Clinton administration and a columnist for *The New York Times*, the hatred of Hillary Clinton was unconcealed. It was articulated with the passion of persons scorned. Clinton has not just disappointed, she has betrayed them.

I might have been more surprised at the way these Upper West Side liberals were slagging off someone many of them would once have seen as a political ally if not a friend, had it not been for a pretty savage piece in that week's *New York* magazine.

"The Trouble with Hillary" by columnist Kurt Andersen pretty much covered the waterfront of why Clinton is so disdained by so many New York liberals. She is "all about cool calculation and calibration in service to the main chance", Anderson wrote, but unlike her husband who was equally calculating, she lacks his charm and appearance of sincerity. One problem Clinton has is that no one likes her.

"She has cold, staring eyes," one of my dinner companions remarked. She comes across as "wooden, priggish, cold, too much superego, and too little id", said Andersen.

A far bigger complaint is not about her personality, but her politics. In recent months, Clinton has cosied up to the leading members of the "vast right-wing conspiracy" she once excoriated for trying to bring down her husband. (That was before she knew the truth about Monica Lewinsky.)

The former House speaker Newt Gingrich torpedoed the "Hillarycare" health insurance plan back in 1994 but that hasn't stopped her making recent common cause with him - on the need to reform health care. She infuriated many on her side when she gave a joint press conference with what Andersen described as "her two most appalling Christian-

right colleagues", Rick Santorem and Sam Brownback to call for \$US90 million (\$120 million) in federal funds to investigate their contention that the internet and other electronic media are "satanic".

Never mind that Clinton buys into this devil stuff. More upsetting was her consorting with Santorem, the Pennsylvania senator whom many Democrats see as the devil incarnate. The Democratic Party is so determined to defeat Santorem in this year's Senate race that it has endorsed a once-unthinkable candidate, anti-choice, pro-gun Bob Casey, who happens to be the son of the man who, as governor of Pennsylvania in 1992, took Planned Parenthood all the way to the Supreme Court to try to restrict access to abortion.

So abhorrent is Santorem that even women's groups and the progressive moveon.org have swallowed hard and supported Casey.

Clinton is also criticised for her seeming shift to the centre on abortion rights, for her loony belief that video games such as Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas have secret sex scenes embedded in them, and for her recent co-sponsoring of a new flag protection act that, said Andersen, will make flag burning and inciting riots "even more illegal than they already are".

All of this is seen as Clinton positioning herself for the presidency. There is no doubt that to win she needs to appeal to a far broader base than New York City liberals. She has done so before.

Clinton had to persuade the largely conservative voters of New York State to elect her - a liberal, feminist, pro-choice, anti-gun carpetbagger - as their senator. As one political insider reminded me last week, she succeeded by conducting an extensive "listening tour" of the state, going into towns and villages that had never seen a celebrity, taking note of their concerns and convincing them she would act on them.

This insider is confident Clinton can do the same with America.

To become president she has to hold all the blue states captured by John Kerry in 2004 and to find an additional 34 electoral college votes. The most discussed scenario says she must win Ohio (20 votes) - which was narrowly lost by Kerry and was the subject of allegations of vote-rigging - and two other, smaller states.

Mathematically, it is possible. Politically, the challenge is to make herself appeal to enough people in those three conservative states to put her over the line.

It is a quest that is no doubt aided by movie star Tim Robbins saying last week that "Hillary Clinton can kiss my butt" because of her refusal to call for an immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, a position that upsets her former supporters more than any of her other policy slides.

But her stance enables her to position herself as a potential commander-in-chief and neutralises the appeal of, say, John McCain if he is the Republican nominee - on this issue at least.

We can expect more political somersaults from Clinton once she gets herself re-elected senator in November and can then fully focus on the main game. And there will be many more screams from scorned supporters.

The big question is: will spurning her base enable her to win enough "red" necks to become the 44th president or will she end up being reviled by everyone? It's going to be a fascinating ride.