

# The Hillary machine builds momentum

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Within the next few weeks Senator Hillary Clinton is expected to announce the establishment of a presidential exploratory committee, the first step in her historic quest to become the first woman president of the United States.

Having such a committee will allow her to start raising money for her bid. Already a fabled fund-raiser for her Senate campaign and Democratic Party colleagues, Clinton is considered by some US political experts as likely to be the first candidate in history to raise \$US1 billion (\$1.28 billion) campaign war chest.

That's a lot of money - almost three times the record amount George Bush raised for his re-election effort in 2004 - but she will need every cent of it if she is to win the White House in November next year. After all, she spent \$US36 million to hold onto her New York Senate seat late last year, even though she was the clear frontrunner and there was no credible opponent.

Winning the country will be a herculean task, with polls showing a disapproval rate of about 40 per cent, but it is not impossible. Clinton's discipline, her focus, her formidable organisation and her unprecedented level of funds will propel her to where no woman has been before.

As an example of her already formidable national organisation, a colleague in San Francisco told me that after he criticised Clinton on a local radio station last month he had calls from two of Clinton's people within half an hour. That's attention to detail.

So far there have been two questions about Clinton: will she run? And can she win the presidential election?

It was always assumed the Democratic Party nomination was hers for the asking. Not any more. Now she is facing stiff opposition from the people whose primary votes she needs to secure the nomination. And it's all about the war. New York's *Newsday* this week described Clinton as being caught in "the Iraq paradox".

That paradox is encapsulated in what happened to Al Gore's 2000 vice-presidential running mate, Senator Joseph Lieberman, in Connecticut last year. Furious anti-war Democrats denied him endorsement for the Senate race because of his "yes" vote supporting the war in 2002, opting instead for the little-known Ned Lamont, who opposed the war. Trouble is, even in liberal Connecticut the electorate is much further to the right than the Democrats who turn out at primaries. Lieberman ran as an independent against Lamont - and won.

This episode must have chilling resonance for Clinton as she calculates how to respond to George Bush's new strategy for Iraq and how to place herself in relation to her colleague Ted Kennedy's plan to legislate against a troop increase and weighs up whether she should apologise for voting for the war in the first place. She has

described the Iraq policy as "failed" but, so far at least, has not repudiated the original decision to invade or called for the troops to be brought back.

Yet unless she does, she might find herself unable to win the support she needs within her party if she is to be the contender in 2008.

The Iraq war has taken off as a political mega-issue within the United States. It has had some extraordinary political fallout, most notably the defeat last November of the left-wing Republican Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island (he voted against the war) and the ousting of two Republican members of Congress from the key primary state of New Hampshire.

Before this development, Clinton had been honing a carefully calibrated transition from her preoccupation as first lady with families and children's issues which, it was claimed by adversaries, meant she would never have the stuff to order troops into combat.

She had worked hard to build her credentials as a potential commander-in-chief. She got herself on the Senate Armed Services Committee (the first New Yorker to do so), she speaks frequently on foreign policy and defence issues and, according to an article to be published on Monday in *The New Yorker* magazine, she talks about her husband's experience with Middle East and Balkans policy "as a way of signalling that nothing prepares a person for four years in the White House like eight years in the White House".

Now Clinton is caught between the rock of needing to prove to the country she is tough enough to take the US to war and the hard place of reassuring Democratic primary voters that she regrets her support for the Iraq invasion.

Clinton is facing tough challenges from anti-war Democrats. The former senator John Edwards (John Kerry's running mate in 2004) has repudiated his 2002 vote for the war and wants an immediate start to troop withdrawals. Edwards has declared his candidacy and is regarded by Clinton as one of her two biggest obstacles.

The other is the charismatic African-American Illinois senator Barack Obama, who has not declared and whose rhetoric on Iraq is rather contradictory but whose hands are clean because he was not in the Senate in 2002 when the vote that now haunts Clinton was taken. Both men are outpolling Clinton in Iowa, where the first caucus will take place and which will be an early indicator of the relative strengths of the various contenders.

Clinton is said to be irritated by the pressure on her to declare her candidacy so early - a year away from the first caucuses and primary election. Her husband, Bill, was able to wait until October, just three months out, before he made it official. She had planned to do the same, spending the year building prestige with her work in the Senate. She won't have that luxury now and the political abacus is being overworked as she figures out when to jump and what to say about Iraq.

Clinton won't be derailed, however. Her political trademarks of preparation, organisation and fund-raising are in overdrive and once they kick in we will see her run the perfect campaign.

She did it in New York where, arriving in a state in which she had never lived and having no personal election experience, she set out to charm voters by travelling, listening, responding and taking constituent representation to new levels. It worked. She won 67 per cent of the statewide vote last year. The question is: can she do the same with America?

She has started. Ever since the election she has been engaged in what *The New York Times* last week called "nearly non-stop political consultations" at dinners and drinks in Washington and New York with a wide range of potential allies whose advice she needs on how to stitch up the nomination. She is working hard at gauging how to play Iraq.

Clinton herself is not an instinctive politician and this is seen as one of her weaknesses. Unlike her husband (who is 100 per cent on her case) and the newly anointed Democratic hero Obama, she is not warm and passionate and inspiring and finds it difficult to rouse enthusiasm even among her supporters. She is cautious to a fault. She seems to have too many advisers - 13 political consultants last August, according to *Time* magazine, in addition to 32 full-time staff and 10 people in her Senate office - and this could be crippling.

Recently she refused to meet the French Socialist Party presidential candidate, Segolene Royal, for what could have been an inspiring photo opportunity: the first two women ever to lead the US and France - if they win their campaigns, of course.

But Clinton "cannot afford the slightest false move", one of her advisers was quoted as saying, so she cancelled rather than risk being tainted by Royal's recent meeting with a Hezbollah politician.

Another wild card is the elevation of Nancy Pelosi to Speaker of the House of Representatives. Pelosi, who is now the public face of the Democratic Congress, is polished, professional and knows how to create a good media event, such as when she surrounded herself with 19 of her own and colleagues' children and grandchildren for her inaugural taking of the Speaker's chair. She is also considerably to the left of Clinton.

Pelosi has denied Clinton the chance to be the first woman to assume national political power in the US. If Pelosi's performance starts to wane, will this hurt Clinton? Interestingly, there is at least one poll that claims US voters would rather have a black president than a female one.

Despite these obstacles, I think Hillary Clinton's focus and her funds will see her prevail. At the end of what promises to be a long, gruelling but hypnotically exciting day in American politics, I believe Obama's lack of experience will rule him out of contention - although Clinton might consider him as a running mate (that's another story), that Edwards will burn brightly for a time but crash after the Super Tuesday

primaries, and that having Pelosi as third in line to the presidency will get Americans accustomed to the idea of a woman running the national scene.

Clinton's challenge is to convince her party's anti-war hardliners that she is their best chance to beat the Republicans in 2008. It will be fascinating to watch how she finds a way through this political quicksand and avoids being bogged down by the Iraqi paradox.

She will, in my view, find a way and get the nomination, and once she does enough Americans will find the opportunity to vote for history so irresistible that she will win.

**Alan Ramsey is on leave.**

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