

Ozone Man, a new rival for Hillary

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SENATOR Hillary Clinton's presidential ambitions may be about to encounter an unexpected obstacle in the form of the Ozone Man, her husband's former vice-president, Al Gore.

For the past couple of years America - indeed much of the world - has been fascinated by the prospect of whether Clinton might succeed George Bush to become the first woman in the White House. It is no secret that she has been stalking the national political stage, recalibrating her policies towards a more mainstream platform and raising money by the bucketful.

Her husband, Bill, who was president from 1992 to 2000, was described last week by *New Yorker* magazine as "the advance man in chief", spruiking his wife in Iowa and New Hampshire, whose primaries can determine who gets the nomination.

Gore represents a potential wrinkle in this scenario. Instead of Bush-Clinton-Bush-Clinton, what about Clinton-Gore followed, after the Bush interregnum, by Gore-Clinton? This is how it would work.

Decision time is fast approaching for Team Hillary. Clinton easily won the Democratic nomination for US senator for New York earlier this month and will be re-elected in November. The pressure will then be on her to declare her presidential intentions. Those close to her are reported as saying there is an 80 to 90 per cent chance that she will make the historic bid.

The only thing likely to stop her is a hard-nosed assessment that she could not win the presidency. It has been assumed that the Democratic nomination was hers for the taking. As a cover story on Clinton in *Time* magazine last month put it: "If Hillary ran and lost, both Clintons would come out tarnished - no small

consideration when a promising Senate career and a presidential legacy are in the balance."

Hillary Clinton's political plusses are considerable. No other candidate has ever enjoyed her 100 per cent name recognition, and about 53 per cent of voters have a favourable impression of her, a *Time* poll shows. Against this, her negatives are high, both with the anti-war Democratic heartland and red state Republicans who think she is the devil. People love her or they hate her; there's not much middle ground. Nevertheless she would only have to hold all the states John Kerry won in 2004 and win one more. Not impossible. In fact, it would seem quite doable if Bush's low ratings flow on to the Republican candidate.

What no one had factored in was the possibility of a highly credible contender for the Democratic nomination. Suddenly Al Gore is everywhere, restoring his reputation and staking a claim to be the man who can save the planet, a task that has taken on a considerable urgency according to the scenario outlined in his film *An Inconvenient Truth*. He also has the considerable advantage of not having the pro-Iraq war baggage carried by members of Congress (all of whom voted to endorse the invasion). He would not divide the Democratic Party the way Hillary Clinton does.

This is not to say he does not have negatives himself. Gore is hardly charismatic. He has none of the sizzle the Clintons bring to barnstorming. He has already lost one presidential bid, so might be seen as not deserving a second chance. However, in 2000, Gore did win the popular vote and it is conventional wisdom that had he not declined Bill Clinton's offer to campaign for him, he might have got over the line.

The revulsion expressed by the morally upright Gore for the scandal-studded Clinton was palpable and quite possibly cost him the presidency.

Today things are different. Gore has emerged from the Clinton shadow. He is an energised and interesting political figure, a credible climate crusader who

engages people in a way that was once unimaginable. Wooden Al is now witty Al. "I used to be the next president of the United States," he likes to say. Maybe he still is. He declines to rule it out.

This is Clinton's nightmare. In six years she has made a remarkable transformation from first lady to respected senator and seemed set to continue her political trajectory to at least try to go where no woman has gone before. The thought of being derailed by the plodding Gore must drive her crazy. But she is also pragmatic and she might soon have to decide if she wants to go into history as a senator or as a vice-president.

For a Democratic dream team it's hard to go past a Gore-Clinton ticket. The combination of Gore, the stolid untarnished statesman with eight years of national experience (who four years ago predicted the Iraq war would be counter-productive for the war on terrorism) and Clinton, the political superstar who is also female, could give Americans a more palatable electoral option than the riskier Clinton-led ticket.

Gore would never agree to be running mate to another Clinton, so although Hillary would need a vice-presidential candidate from the South, it is hugely unlikely she could bring him on board. And would Clinton set aside her larger ambitions? It is hard to imagine because she is a risk taker. I can't see her doing it, but then again, she has everything to lose.