

Democratic Party divisions deepen as Obama parades military support

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The rival campaigns for the Democratic Party presidential nomination intensified their mutual mudslinging over race, gender, and political tactics, as the two candidates each vied for support among the top party officials and corporate interests that will tip the balance in the closely contested race.

Senator Barack Obama responded to criticism by the Clinton campaign of his lack of national security experience by appearing Wednesday with an array of retired generals and admirals who have endorsed his campaign. The display was a calculated response to Clinton's appearance in the company of a similar assemblage in Washington the week before.

Obama sought to square the circle, making simultaneous appeals both to antiwar sentiment—a major factor in his rise to frontrunner status—and to the Washington political elite, which views a bloodthirsty willingness to use military force as a key qualification for the presidency.

Without mentioning Clinton by name, Obama rebutted her claim that she and the presumptive Republican candidate, Senator John McCain, have demonstrated qualifications on national security, while Obama has not.

"After years of being told that Democrats have to talk, act and vote like John McCain to pass some commander-in-chief test," Obama said, "how many times do we have to learn that tough talk is not a substitute for sound judgment?"

The day before, at a campaign stop in Mississippi, he mocked the Clinton's campaign's now-notorious "red telephone" ad, which suggested that Clinton but not Obama could be relied on in a middle-of-the-night crisis. "What do people think I'm going to do?" he asked. "I'm going to answer the phone," adding, "and I won't be browbeaten into launching a war that wasn't necessary."

Also Tuesday, the Obama campaign made a vitriolic attack on Clinton's argument that her residence in the White House as First Lady from 1993 to 2000 gave her national security credentials. Gregory Craig, who served as one of Bill Clinton's principal lawyers at his impeachment trial, denounced this claim, saying of Mrs. Clinton, "She never managed a foreign policy crisis, and there is no evidence to suggest that she participated in the decision-making that occurred in connection with any such crisis. As far as the record shows, Senator Clinton never answered the phone either to make a decision on any pressing national security issue—not at 3 a.m. or at any other time of day."

Obama himself made a less sweeping critique at his Wednesday appearance with the retired military officers, responding to press

questions about whether Hillary Clinton was qualified to be president by declaring, "Yes. As I believe Senator McCain is, and as I believe I am. Keep in mind though, I think it is fair to say Senator Clinton has deployed this as a political strategy."

He added that he did not expect "Democrats to be making these arguments against fellow Democrats," and concluded, "Certainly, if Senator Clinton were the nominee, John McCain will make this exact same argument against her."

A spokesman for the Clinton campaign, Howard Wolfson, responded by repeating the claim that Obama was unqualified. "Senator McCain might make the argument," he said, "but it wouldn't stick because Americans know that, unlike Senator Obama, Senator Clinton has passed the commander-in-chief test."

Instead of rejecting the entire premise of the Clinton attacks—which tacitly invoke the fear of terrorism to justify American militarism—Obama seeks to frame his response as a demonstration of greater party loyalty on his part. "I've been careful to say that I think Senator Clinton is a capable person and that should she win the nomination, obviously I would support her," he said Wednesday. "I'm not sure that we've been getting that same approach from the Clinton campaign."

This was a reference to the logical consequences of Clinton's attacks: by declaring that she and McCain are qualified to be commander-in-chief, while Obama is not, Clinton is paving the way for a section of her supporters to bolt from the Democratic Party and go over to McCain if she fails to win the nomination.

This criticism of the Clinton campaign was echoed by the most powerful Democratic Party official who is still publicly neutral on the nomination, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. In comments to a television station in Boston Tuesday, repeated on Capitol Hill to a group of reporters Wednesday, Pelosi declared that there was no possibility of a joint Clinton-Obama or Obama-Clinton ticket, and she clearly placed the blame on Clinton.

"I think that ticket either way is impossible," Pelosi said. "I think that the Clinton [campaign] has fairly ruled that out by proclaiming that Senator McCain would be a better commander-in-chief than Obama."

Most of Pelosi's closest allies in Congress are supporting Obama already. Pelosi will be the permanent chair of the Democratic National Convention, which opens at the end of August in Denver, Colorado. This position gives enormous influence if process issues, such as the seating of contested state delegations, prove to be important in determining the eventual

nominee.

Foreseeing that the likely result of current trends is a narrow Obama lead in delegates, the Clinton campaign has sought to revive its claims for delegates from Michigan and Florida, two states that violated party rules by moving their primaries forward into January, and were penalized by the loss of all 366 delegates.

The Clinton campaign has raised the demand for seating the delegates from the two states, both of which Clinton won, although neither primary was contested. In Michigan, Clinton was the only major Democrat on the ballot, and in Florida none of the candidates campaigned, to avoid penalties threatened by the Democratic National Committee.

The back-and-forth conflict over national security credentials came as the nomination campaign enters a lengthy pause, following the primary Tuesday in the state of Mississippi, which Obama won easily, taking 60 percent of the vote to 37 percent for Clinton. One third of the electorate and more than half the Democratic primary voters in the state were African American, and exit polls suggested a clear racial polarization, with 90 percent of black voters backing Obama, and nearly 75 percent of white voters backing Clinton.

The Mississippi vote completes a concentrated period of 43 primaries and caucuses in nine weeks, which have failed to determine the outcome of the nomination fight. Only nine primaries remain, and there is now a six-week break until the April 22 Pennsylvania primary, with 181 delegates at stake. Another 189 delegates will be chosen May 4 in Indiana and North Carolina.

With his comfortable wins in Wyoming and Mississippi—two lightly populated states—Obama largely offset Clinton's narrow victories March 4 in the big states of Ohio and Texas and reestablished the lead of just over 100 delegates with which he began the month.

The lead was bolstered by the results of protracted vote-counting in earlier primaries. Last week Obama gained eight delegates in California and several in Texas, on top of the net gain of seven in Wyoming and Mississippi. He also added the vote of the newly elected Democratic congressman in Illinois, Bill Foster, who won a March 8 special election, while Clinton lost the vote of New York governor Eliot Spitzer, who resigned Tuesday.

According to an Associated Press tally, Obama now has 1,598 delegates and Clinton 1,487, counting both pledged delegates—those elected in primaries and caucuses—and “superdelegates”—elected officials and party officers who are free to switch their votes.

Since only 595 delegates are still to be chosen in the remaining primaries and caucuses, and these will be divided relatively evenly because of proportional representation, it is effectively impossible for either candidate to reach the total of 2,025 required for nomination simply by winning pledged delegates.

The decision will be in the hands of the 796 superdelegates, about half of them not yet committed publicly. The two campaigns are waging an increasingly ferocious and unscrupulous struggle to gain their support.

While the Clinton campaign has focused on a right-wing attack on the issue of national security, the Obama campaign has resorted to inciting racial polarization. The focus was an attack on former

congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro, the 1984 Democratic vice-presidential candidate and a prominent Clinton fundraiser.

The Obama campaign dredged up comments by Ferraro to a suburban Los Angeles newspaper last week, noting the obvious fact that Obama's campaign owes much to his identity as the first African-American candidate with a real chance to win the presidency. She compared his success to her own selection as Walter Mondale's running mate in 1984, due mainly to her gender, not her position as a relatively obscure congresswoman.

These comments provoked an avalanche of media commentary, much of it overwrought, such as a diatribe by Keith Olbermann of the cable network MSNBC, who compared Ferraro to David Duke. Ferraro resigned her position with the Clinton campaign, but refused to retract her remarks, repeating them in several television appearances over the next few days.

While Clinton's campaign is effectively blackmailing superdelegates with the prospect of a split over national security issues if Obama is nominated, the Obama campaign is making its own none-too-subtle threat that black voters will stay home if Clinton is nominated.

This threat was underscored by the remarks of two prominent black clergymen, Rev. Eugene Rivers of Azusa Christian Community church in Boston, and Bishop Charles Blake of Los Angeles, a leader of the Church of God in Christ.

Rivers denounced the criticism of Obama as “a virtual race war, politically,” and attacked Clinton's much-publicized suggestion that Obama could become her vice-presidential running mate. “Blacks aren't going to sit back while the winning candidate is told to sit at the back of the bus.” Blake added that if Obama was denied the nomination, there could be a sharply negative reaction among black voters, and “their whole motivation for participating in the political process in this election would be greatly reduced.”



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