Clinton victories in Ohio, Texas intensify divisions in Democratic Party

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With a narrow victory in Texas and a sizeable one in Ohio, Hillary Clinton dealt a significant setback to the campaign of Barack Obama and insured that the contest for the Democratic Party presidential nomination will continue for at least another two months, until the April 22 primary in Pennsylvania, the last large state to vote.

The extension of the campaign for the presidential nomination suggests that the political crisis within the Democratic Party will intensify and the underlying policy disputes will emerge more clearly and publicly.

The intra-party strife will benefit the Republican Party, at least in the short term, since Senator John McCain clinched the Republican presidential nomination by winning all four contests on Tuesday. McCain visited the White House Wednesday to receive an official endorsement from President Bush.

Despite her popular vote victories, Clinton was able to gain only a net of 12 convention delegates, according to figures reported Wednesday. Obama held a lead of 101 delegates—1,562 compared to 1,461 for Clinton, according to an Associated Press tally. Another 12 delegates remained to be allocated due to late vote-counting in Ohio and the convoluted caucus/primary process in Texas. 2,025 delegates are required for nomination.

In Texas, Clinton's narrow 51 percent to 48 percent margin translated into an even narrower 92-91 margin in convention delegates after the caucuses, where Obama supporters were in the majority. In Ohio, Clinton gained a 74-65 edge in delegates after winning by a ten-point margin in the popular vote, 54 percent to 44 percent.

The campaigns also divided the two small New England states that voted Tuesday, Clinton taking Rhode Island and Obama Vermont.

Obama is expected to gain the majority of delegates in two lesser contests in the coming week, caucuses Saturday in Wyoming and a primary Tuesday in Mississippi. Then there is a six-week break before the next vote, in Pennsylvania. After that, seven more primary states remain: Indiana, North Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky, Oregon, South Dakota and Montana, as well as a primary in Puerto Rico June 7.

There is little likelihood that either candidate will gain the required 2,025 delegates in the course of the remaining contests. One of the two will be in the lead, with the outcome in the hands of the automatic delegates (so-called superdelegates), mostly Democratic Party elected officials and members of the Democratic National Committee. Some 350 out of the 796 superdelegates have not yet committed themselves publicly to Clinton or Obama.

Amid the oceans of press commentary and the microscopic dissection of every possible voting bloc, real and imaginary, there has been almost no discussion about the political significance of the protracted and deadlocked character of the struggle for the Democratic presidential nomination.

There has been no such fiercely contested race since 1968, when the Democratic Party was severely divided over the Vietnam War, and these divisions—which exploded into police violence against antiwar demonstrators outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago—ultimately aided the victory of the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon.

In 1968, the nature of the foreign policy divisions was evident. First Eugene McCarthy and then Robert F. Kennedy challenged the incumbent Democratic president, Lyndon Johnson, calling for a reversal of US policy in Vietnam.

In the face of the Tet offensive by the Vietnamese National Liberation Front and the mounting US balance of payments crisis produced by war spending, Johnson announced he would not seek renomination. Vice President Hubert Humphrey eventually entered the race as the standard-bearer for the dominant pro-war faction of the Democratic Party establishment, and after Robert Kennedy's assassination he gained the nomination despite not winning a single primary.

Forty years later, the split within the Democratic Party is equally deep and rancorous, but the issues are for the most part deliberately concealed, both by the politicians and the media, from the public. These issues relate not to domestic policy—there is little difference between Obama and Clinton here—but to foreign policy, and particularly the war in Iraq.

Clinton was initially the frontrunner, backed by the bulk of the party establishment, which lined up behind the war in Iraq either out of conviction or political cowardice. Clinton's vote for the war authorization in October 2002 signaled her belief that it was necessary to publicly back the Bush war drive in order to remain a credible candidate for "commander in chief" at some future date. The performance of the congressional Democratic leadership in 2007—when it spurned the mandate of antiwar voters and refused to take any action to halt the war—is another demonstration of this position.

The Obama campaign was promoted and given the necessary

financial backing by sections of the US ruling elite who regard the decision to invade and occupy Iraq as a disastrous foreign policy blunder which has set back the strategic interests of American imperialism, and whose cost—estimated at $3 trillion by one recent study—has brought the country's finances close to bankruptcy.

These elements are neither pacifist nor "antiwar," as Obama's militaristic rhetoric in relation to Afghanistan, Pakistan and other potential targets of US attack makes clear. But they believe that there must be a change in the public posture of American foreign policy, one that would have even more impact if an African-American were to enter the White House.

As *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius wrote last month, "Imagine the television footage of Barack Obama's first trip abroad as president—the crowds in the streets of Moscow, Cairo, Nairobi, Shanghai, Paris, Islamabad."

Much of the Democratic Party establishment seeks to downplay the war in Iraq, both because of their own complicity in it and because they fear the consequences of an open posing of the issue against the pro-war candidacy of McCain. They would prefer a campaign focused on domestic issues like economic policy and health care.

It is the nature of the American political system that conflicts over policy are fought out not so much as a matter of parliamentary debate, but on the bigger stage of a national presidential campaign, with rival factions compelled to seek mass support. The underlying political differences, however, are largely manifested in the form of a bitter clash of personalities and personal ambitions.

The political debate is conducted not frankly and openly, but rather through political symbolism and the politics of personal destruction, as manifested in attack ads and so-called negative campaigning.

Among the most revealing incidents in the run-up to Tuesday's primaries—and one which the Clinton campaign exploited to significant advantage—was the uncovering of a memo revealing that Obama's principal economic advisor had met with Canadian officials to discuss the candidate's statement that he would seek to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement. This affirmation, the advisor assured the Canadian government, was a matter merely of "political positioning," not actual policy.

While Clinton made the most of this revelation, her own posturing on NAFTA has an identical character, and the same could be said about virtually everything said on the campaign trail by both candidates, including their duplicitous pledges to end the war in Iraq.

The other campaign tactic employed by Clinton in the run-up to Tuesday's primaries was fear-mongering. One campaign commercial—featuring a ringing "red phone" and the images of sleeping children—appealed to fears of terrorism and promoted Clinton as the candidate best suited to be "commander in chief." The ad invoked one of the main themes of the Bush 2004 campaign, and of the campaign which Republican candidate John McCain will be waging.

This approach is aimed not only at scaring voters into supporting her, but also at appealing to the only constituency that can hand her the nomination—the elected and party officials who make up the superdelegates. Her campaign's argument to them is that it is more in keeping with US strategic interests to wage a campaign closer to that of the Republicans on issues of militarism and foreign policy, and approach Iraq as a matter of tactical blunders, rather than questioning the justification for launching the war in the first place.

Obama, for his part, is loathe to wage a defense from the "left," for fear of alienating the sections of the ruling elite that form the decisive constituency for the Democratic Party. As a result, it is not only Clinton who is shifting to the right, but the entire Democratic campaign.

During the days preceding the primaries, Obama found time to issue two foreign policy statements: the first declaring that he opposed any US talks with the Palestinian movement Hamas, which at the time was under Israeli bombardment in the Gaza Strip; and the second stating his support for the US-backed Colombian government in its cross-border military aggression in Ecuador. The clear aim was to portray himself as a credible "commander-in-chief," prepared to carry out the kind of actions that are necessary to defend the interests of American imperialism.

The Republican Party, the Bush administration, and the McCain campaign have all seized on Clinton's arguments against Obama's fitness to be commander-in-chief as grist for their own attacks, should Obama become the Democratic nominee.

In his victory speech Tuesday night, McCain reiterated his support for the escalation of US military involvement in Iraq (the "surge") and dismissed the conflict between Clinton and Obama over her vote for the war authorization bill in 2002. "It is of little use for Americans for their candidates to avoid the many complex challenges of these struggles by re-litigating decisions of the past," he said. "Americans know that the next president doesn't get to re-make that decision."

Republican consultant Scott Reed gloated, in an interview with *Time* magazine, "What Hillary has been saying in Texas is music to our ears. All we have to do is run her ad and put a tag at the end, 'Paid for by the Republican National Committee.'"

The expectation on the Republican side is that if Obama wins the nomination, a significant section of the Democratic Party establishment will follow the example of Senator Joseph Lieberman—the party's 2000 vice-presidential candidate—and openly or tacitly give its backing to McCain.

On the other hand, should Clinton succeed in claiming the nomination based on the support of superdelegates, under conditions where Obama retained the lead in delegates chosen in the primary contests, the likely result would be the alienation of substantial layers of younger voters who voted for Obama.