

Should She Stay or Should She Go?

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Hillary Clinton is at the point where staying in the race for the Democratic nomination for president will yield increasingly small and unlikely returns, and potentially be very damaging to her. After Obama and Clinton split Oregon and Kentucky on Tuesday, Hillary Clinton finds herself confronting the usual question of whether or not she should continue in the race, and if she does, how strongly she should criticize her primary opponent, Barack Obama. This is the question which has been facing Hillary Clinton for at least a month now. There seems to be a belief among many pundits and commentators that Senator Clinton has much gain and little to lose by staying in the race and continuing to do what she is doing, but it is worth investigating this notion more closely.

Clinton's decision to remain in the race is probably based upon the slim hope of achieving one of three positive outcomes. She could become the nominee for president, she could become the nominee for vice-president or she could become the nominee for president in 2012. The question for Senator Clinton is whether staying in the race brings her closer to any of these already distant goals.

Given that Senator Clinton's increasingly desperate sounding arguments that she is actually winning have gotten very little traction and are not moving her closer to the nomination, Clinton's chances of being the Democratic nominee rest on one of two things happening. Neither will occur through electoral means; and both are quite unlikely. The first is that she will somehow be able to begin succeeding in persuading the superdelegates that she is the deserving candidate. This will be very difficult, particularly as the movement of superdelegates goes to Obama, and while not yet a flood, has been substantially more than a trickle in recent weeks.

The second is that something dramatic will happen to Obama making his nomination impossible. This could be a devastating new negative, or a serious injury or impairment to Senator Obama. Staying in the race and continuing to attack and weaken Obama, however, will not increase the chances of either of these things happening. By the end of March, Clinton had already guaranteed a strong second place finish which is all she needed to do to position herself in this way for the nomination. Continuing to win states she is expected to win, and lose those she is expected to lose does not advance Clinton's argument.

Staying in the race will do little to advance Clinton's chances of becoming the vice-presidential nominee either. Clinton has certainly earned the right to be considered for this position, but the best thing Clinton could do towards this end is to begin to build bridges to Obama and reach out to some key constituencies in the party who she has alienated during, and before, the campaign. These voters, including African Americans, anti-war activists and young people, are already behind Obama, but would potentially be hostile to Clinton on the ticket.

Continuing to question Obama's electability and generally hindering his chances, even if only for a few more weeks, is not going to raise Clinton's chances of becoming Obama's running mate. Moreover, continuing to spin out increasingly bizarre scenarios about why she is winning only confirms the negative image that many voters already have of Clinton, that she isn't always truthful, and will say and do anything to get elected.

The notion that Clinton is strengthening her hand for 2012 by staying in the race now is poorly thought out at best. For Clinton to win in 2012, McCain has to win this year and be vulnerable in 2012. This is unlikely, but clearly not impossible. However, there are larger factors working against Clinton's chances for 2012. In 2012, Clinton will be 64, which is getting a little old for a presidential candidate, particularly for one who already has trouble connecting with young voters. Bill Clinton's presidency will have receded further into the history and fewer voters will see the relevance of those eight years. More troubling for Clinton, her network of Clinton-era supporters will be less useful. It is also likely that new Democratic candidates will emerge in the wake of an Obama loss that appeal to voters more broadly than Senator Clinton. It is also not impossible that Obama, who will be 50 years old with eight years in the senate, would run again in 2012 if he loses in 2008.

Additionally, and most importantly, the notion that an Obama defeat in November will somehow redeem Clinton and make her the favorite for the Democratic nomination overlooks the very real possibility that if Obama loses to McCain, activists in the Democratic Party, instead of looking to Clinton to save the party in 2012, will blame her, not without reason, for Obama's defeat.

If McCain wins, the question of the impact of Clinton's attacks on Obama, particularly in the context of a primary fight that was largely viewed as already over, will persist. The millions of voters who voted for, contributed to and volunteered for Obama may not be so quick to turn to his erstwhile Democratic tormentor to save the party four years from now. In fact, it is not hard to imagine that should Obama lose and Clinton receive some of the blame for that defeat, that there could be a movement in the anti-war and activist wing of the party to challenge her in a Democratic Senate primary in New York in 2012 or otherwise make her political life difficult in the future. If things go very badly for her, she could become New York State's answer to Joe Lieberman.

It seems that if 2012 was something about which the Clinton campaign was seriously thinking, her advisers would have persuaded her to cut a deal and leave this race earlier, but this has not happened. Clinton probably understands that while the odds of her winning in 2008 are not good, this year remains her last best hope to become president. Ironically, staying in the race isn't really helping her achieve that goal either.

Thus, if Hillary Clinton's goal is either to be the nominee for president or vice-president this year, or the nominee for president in 2012, getting out of the race as quickly as gracefully as possible would be the right decision. Why, then, has she not done this? There are two possible explanations for this. The first is that Senator Clinton has decided to get out of the race, has already begun to alter the tone of her campaign and rhetoric and is simply waiting for the right moment to get out. If this is the case, we can expect a pretty quick departure by Senator Clinton by June 5th or so at the very latest. However, if we do not see this concession by early June, we

can assume that Senator Clinton and her advisers have made the mistake of believing their own spin. This would suggest that they believe she is truly the most deserving of the nomination and are willing to damage the party in a quixotic bid to win the nomination.

If this is the case, than the next few months will be a political roller coaster for the Democratic Party, but one that is likely to end by going badly off the rails. Currently, any day that Obama and Clinton lead the news and the blogs is a good day for Senator McCain. If Clinton does not get out of this race in early June, she will be guaranteeing weeks, if not months of these headlines throughout the summer. The Clinton campaign has already begun and may continue to use her victory in Kentucky to argue that she should stay in the race because Obama cannot close the deal, win key swing states or demographic groups. It is clear this is not helping the Democratic Party or Barack Obama, but it seems equally clear that Clinton herself is not being well served by this approach.