



'08 Dems: The morning line

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First out of the starting gate, with an unexpected burst of speed is the late entrant Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill). Not on anybody's radar six months ago, he has already vaulted right over half a dozen others to land close on Hillary's heels in second place.

But Obama faces the key decision: Where is he - still a virtual virgin in national politics - going to position himself? He *could* run as your standard Democratic liberal - that fits his two-year Senate record of party loyalty (18th most liberal, according to National Journal). But he'd clearly prefer to follow the dictates of his own book and craft a modern triangulated path, running as the "New Democrat" that Bill Clinton was in 1992.

In a run to the center, he'd continue to attack the unpopular war in Iraq,

but also appeal for a post-partisan environment - embodying the emerging broad consensus that decries impeachments, government closure, partisan gerrymandering and take-no-prisoners negative campaigning.

But he'll have to fight Hillary for that turf - after all, her husband carved it out first, and she's now invested several years of her own labor into the claim.

Poor Hillary: She suddenly finds herself eclipsed by the phenomenon *du jour* - the first African-American to have a serious shot at the White House. At the same time, another woman - House Speaker Nancy Pelosi - has become the trailblazer for women in U.S. politics.

For the first time since she entered electoral politics, Clinton is having trouble finding enough oxygen in the room. Obama and Pelosi are sucking most of it up.

Yet the real threat to both Hillary and Obama may be coming from left field. Former VP candidate John Edwards has tacked decisively to the left, leading the way in opposing the war.

Daringly, Edwards challenged Hillary right in her New York City backyard on Martin Luther King Day - insisting that "silence is betrayal" on Iraq, much as King said it was on Vietnam.

President Bush's Iraq "surge" energizes the Edwards challenge - and sticks Clinton and Obama in an awkward spot.

All three Democrats will condemn the sending of more troops - but Bush will proceed anyway. The left will demand a cutoff in funding to force troop levels down - and expect Democratic officeholders to deliver.

But Clinton has said she wouldn't vote for a funding cutoff, and Obama probably won't either. That lea-

ves Edwards - who has the luxury of not having to vote - with the strongest antiwar position of the three.

In the past, Hillary has sought to make up for her support for the war by moving left on other issues and increasing the stridency of her attacks on Bush. But that tactic gets riskier now - could it let Obama take the center away from her?

By grabbing all of the money and most of the consultants, Obama, Edwards and Clinton seem to leave no running room for Al Gore or any of the other wannabes. (Sorry, Connecticut Sen. Chris Dodd - you deserve a chance, but you haven't got one.) At best, like New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, they can hope to wind up with the vice-presidential nomination.

Clinton is still the likely winner. She'll have more money, more party support and an army in reserve: tens of millions of single women who've never voted before will come out for her. But she better do better in the stretch than she has in her flat-footed start.

Let the race begin!