



## Too Late to the Duck Hunt

(Published in *The Washington Post*, May 9, 2008)

[Charles Krauthammer](#)

Colaboraciones n° 2294

May 14, 2008

By the time [Hillary Clinton](#) figured out how to beat [Barack Obama](#), it was too late. When she began the race in 2007 thinking she was in for a coronation, she claimed the center in order to position herself for the real fight, the general election. She simply assumed the party activists and loony left would fall in behind her.

However, as Obama began to rise, powered by the party's Net-roots activists, she scurried left, particularly with her progressively more explicit renunciation of the Iraq war. It was a fool's errand. She would never be able to erase the stain of her original war vote and she remained unwilling to do an abject [John Edwards](#) self-flagellating recantation. It took her weeks even to approximate the apology the left

was looking for, and by then it was far too late. The party's activist wing was by then unbreakably betrothed to Obama.

But going left proved disastrous for Clinton. It abolished all significant policy differences between her and Obama, the National Journal's 2007 most liberal senator. On health care, for example, her attempts to turn a minor difference in the definition of universality into a major assault on Obama fell flat. With no important policy differences separating them, the contest became one of character and personality. Matched against this elegant, intellectually nimble, hugely talented newcomer, she had no chance of winning that contest.

She tried everything. Her charges that he was a man of nothing but

words came off as a petulant, envious attack on eloquence. The power to inspire may not be sufficient to qualify for the presidency, but it is hardly a liability.

She tried a silly plagiarism charge, then settled for the experience card. In a change election, this was not a brilliant strategy. It forced her to dwell on the 1990s, playing candidate of the past to Obama's candidate of the future. Her studied attempts to embellish her experience led her into a thicket of confabulated Bosnian sniper fire.

It wasn't until late in the fourth quarter that she found the seam in Obama's defense. In fact, Obama handed her the playbook with [Jeremiah Wright](#), [William Ayers](#), [Michelle Obama](#)'s comments about never having been proud of America and Obama's own guns-and-God condescension toward small-town whites.

The line of attack is clear: not that Obama is himself radical or unpatriotic, just that, as a man of the academic left, he is so out of touch with everyday America that he could move so easily and untroubled in such extreme company and among such alien and elitist sentiments.

Clinton finally understood the way to run against Obama: back to the center -- not ideologically but culturally, not on policy but on attitude. She changed none of her positions on Iraq or Iran or health care or taxes. Instead, she transformed herself into working-class Sally-get-together-gun, off duck hunting with dad.

The gas tax holiday was never an economic or policy issue. It was meant to position her culturally. It heightened her identification with her white working-class constituency. Obama played his part by citing economists in opposing it. That completed her narrative: He had the pointy-headed professors on his side; she had the single moms seeking relief at the pump.

It was an overreach. It not only deflected attention away from the amazing Rev. Wright at the height of his spectacular return. It also never played as the elitist-vs.-working-folk issue she had wanted, because it isn't just economists who know the gas tax holiday is nothing but a cheap gimmick. Ordinary folks do, too. And the gas tax idea had the unfortunate side effect of reinforcing Hillary's main character liability vis-a-vis Obama: cynical Washington pol willing to do or say anything to win votes vs. the idealistic straight shooter refusing to pander even if it costs him.

The lightness in Hillary's step in the days before Indiana and North Carolina reflected the relief of the veteran politician who, after months of treading water, finally finds the right campaign strategy. But it was far too late. And the gas tax overkill, one final error of modulation, sealed the deal -- for Obama.

There's only one remaining chapter in this fascinating spectacle. Negotiating the terms of Hillary's surrender. After which we will have six months of watching her enthusiastically stumping the country for Obama.

ma, denying with utter conviction Republican charges that he is the out of touch, latte-sipping elitist she

warned Democrats against so urgently in the last, late leg of her doomed campaign.

© 2008, The Washington Post Company