

Democrats hold first debate of 2008 campaign

by George E. Condon Jr.

ORANGEBURG, S.C. - The fastest-starting presidential campaign in history gave the country its earliest-ever candidate debate Thursday night when the eight Democrats fighting for the party's 2008 nomination squared off in South Carolina, arguing most passionately over their positions on the war in Iraq.

Sen. Barack Obama A full 279 days before the state holds its primary election and 264 days before the first vote that counts is cast in Iowa, the candidates gently poked at each other, joined in sharp condemnation of the Bush administration and maneuvered for early advantage in a race whose finish line is so far in the distance.

All four of the incumbent senators in the field - Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, Barack Obama of Illinois, Joe Biden of Delaware and Chris Dodd of Connecticut - voted earlier in the day for a Democratic plan to force the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq by Oct. 1.

But some of their opponents were more focused on the vote more than four years ago that permitted President Bush to launch that war as the contenders now most stridently anti-war tried to embarrass Clinton - who was joined in 2002 by Biden and Dodd - for siding with Bush back then.

The other candidates present on the stage of South Carolina State University's Martin Luther King Jr. auditorium were Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico; Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio; and former Sens. John Edwards of North Carolina and Mike Gravel of Alaska.

Kucinich, whose long-shot campaign is driven by his opposition to the war, said that Iraq vote should be critical to voters. "This isn't 'American Idol' here. We're choosing a president. And we have to look at the audition that occurred - when my good friends were called upon to make a decision and then made the wrong decision."

Asked to cite mistakes they had made, Clinton mentioned "believing the president when he said he would go to the United Nations and put inspectors into Iraq to determine whether they had WMD." She called that vote "a sincere vote based on the information available to me," adding, "If I knew then what I now know, I would not have voted that way."

Similarly, Biden, Dodd and Edwards recanted their pro-war votes, with Biden saying his biggest mistake was "overestimating the competence of this administration and underestimating the arrogance."

Edwards, who repeatedly apologizes for his vote, tried to turn his fire on Clinton for not being sufficiently contrite, calling it "a question of conscience." He added, "I think it's important to be straightforward and honest."

But Edwards was also stung when the debate turned to a question about his decision to bill his campaign for two \$400 haircuts this year, something that annoyed some of his contributors and made him the butt of late-night comedians.

"That was a mistake, which we've remedied. It was simply a mistake," he said, quickly adding that the question is "whether I live a privileged and blessed lifestyle now (and) the answer to that's yes. A lot of us do. But it's not where I come from. And I've not forgotten where I come from."

Richardson seemed to jabbing at Edwards a few minutes later when he was trying to explain why he had been so slow to demand the removal of Alberto Gonzalez as attorney general. The governor conceded it was because Gonzalez, like Richardson, is a Hispanic. But he said, "I think the American people want candor. They don't want blow-dried candidates with perfection."

The debate, sponsored and aired by MSNBC, also had moments of both humor and strange behavior. The biggest laugh inside the hall came when moderator Brian Williams of NBC News asked about Biden's famed "verbosity" and proclivity for verbal gaffes. When he concluded his 61-word question asking if he could assure voters he would show enough discipline, Biden responded simply, "Yes." He then did something rarely seen in his long Senate career and remained completely silent.

The uncomfortable moments in the debate came from remarks by Gravel, who grumpily dissented on most views expressed by the others and who, at one point, said of the other candidates "they frighten me." Asked to be specific, he cited "the top tier" only to add Biden to the list because "you have a certain arrogance."

As another sign of how accelerated this campaign is, the candidates leave South Carolina for what is being viewed as another important showdown, separate appearances in San Diego at the state Democratic convention over this weekend.

The debate was the first great opportunity that the candidates in the second tier have had to knock down the three front-runners they are trying to catch - Clinton, Obama and Edwards - and to do so in a state with out-sized influence because it holds the first primary in the South.

For that reason, the pressure here was on those three to stay atop the polls.

"Hillary needs to show she is a warm and caring person," said former South Carolina Democratic Gov. Jim Hodges. "And it is an opportunity for her to take control, to show she is head and shoulder above all the rest when it comes to the issues."

Obama, a newcomer to the national scene and the least experienced of all the candidates, "has to demonstrate some substance" to go with his obvious charm, added Hodges.

While there were no obvious gaffes, Obama did seem to stumble in the latter half of the debate. He had to be prodded to list Israel as an important U.S. ally. Then when asked how he would respond if al-Qaida attacked two major U.S. cities, he was the only responder not to say he would retaliate or strike back. Instead, Obama talked of managing an effective emergency response and said he would make sure he did not "alienate the world community."

Obama also let himself get drawn into a spat with the two longest-shot candidates, Kucinich and Gravel, over Iran, appearing exasperated in the exchange.

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