

Democratic dilemma

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

Democratic voters face quite a conundrum on Iraq. Do they want mainstream leaders, or agents of change?

The front-runners for the Democratic nomination are very much a work in progress. It doesn't help that they're trying to strike a difficult balance. They want to simultaneously appeal to the foreign affairs establishment that supports bringing democracy to Iraq, and the anti-Bush crowd that favors an immediate pullout.

Perhaps it's no surprise then that Democrats in Congress have put off a series of votes on Iraq until after the August recess. They're trying to put pressure on Republicans, but they aren't in any hurry to wrestle with this issue, either.

The Democratic dilemma has been bubbling underneath for a while, but it recently came to the surface.

It began with the rhetorical scuffle between Democratic presidential hopefuls Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama after they parted ways over a question posed during the recent CNN/YouTube debate. The candidates were asked if, as president, they would meet with foreign leaders in countries such as Cuba, Iran or North Korea in their first year in office.

Obama said he would, and Clinton said she wouldn't. That might have been the end of it, but Clinton tried to milk the episode in the days that followed by blasting Obama as "irresponsible" and "naive."

That's code for: "This kid is too young and inexperienced to be president."

Perhaps sensing that he had been stung, Obama returned fire by criticizing what he termed "Bush-Cheney lite."

That's code for: "Hillary Clinton shares the foreign policy priorities of the Bush administration."

Those who support many of those priorities might gain comfort from the assertion, if it were true. But that is an argument for another day. At this moment, what is interesting is that Obama - or perhaps one of his focus groups - seems to have surmised that this jab at Clinton would draw blood.

And maybe it did. We'll have to wait and see. Obama has since thrown more jabs at Clinton, insisting as he did in a tough-talking speech Wednesday that it's time for Americans to "turn the page on Washington's conventional wisdom ... that presidents can only meet with people who will tell them what they want to hear." In laying out some of his foreign policy views, including a hard line against Pakistan, Obama also couldn't pass up a chance to again blast Clinton's vote authorizing President Bush to go to war in Iraq.

Clinton and Obama are making a play for different sets of voters. Clinton wants the support of the mainstream establishment, which may not like the direction of the war but still thinks the United States has a responsibility to prevent the chaos that might follow an immediate American withdrawal. Obama is making a pitch for the grass roots, an anti-Bush crowd that not only thinks the war is a mistake but that future presidents should reinvent the rules of U.S. foreign policy.

That gives Democratic voters something that is always helpful in politics: a clear choice. In order to make it, they have to ask themselves what they stand for and what sort of future they want for the United States and a world that is as dangerous as it ever was.

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