



Obama models campaign on Reagan revolt

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Awash in money and publicity but behind in the polls, Barack Obama, advisers say, is planning a classic insurgent's campaign to wrest the Democratic nomination from Hillary Rodham Clinton -- one that relies on a surge of momentum from early-state victories and faces a make-or-break test in the South Carolina primary.

Obama is touting a new and unconventional brand of grass-roots politics, but his strategy borrows from precedents set by a previous generation of Democrats such as Jimmy Carter and Gary Hart. His advisers also invoke as inspiration a surprising Republican: Ronald Reagan.

"Now, it is blasphemy for Democrats," Obama pollster Cornell Belcher said of Reagan, "but that hope and optimism that was Ronald Reagan" allowed him to "transcend" ideological divisions within his own party and the general electorate.

The upbeat message, Obama advisers say, won't prevent the candidate from stepping up both veiled and explicit contrasts with Clinton, who he hopes to portray as an old-hat conventional politician whose varied positions on the Iraq war reflect calculation rather than leadership.

Obama's need to transcend conventional politics is evident by looking at the practical hurdles to his nomination. He boasts best-selling books and magazine cover spreads and -- most relevant to his 2008 ambitions -- is winning the fundraising race in both total dollars and with a record number of contributors.

But bundles of cash and good buzz have not eroded what most national polls show as a durable double-digit lead for Clinton, built largely around her nearly two-to-one advantage with Democratic women.

This has Obama relying on a carom-shot candidacy, in which, come January, he will need to exploit Clinton's weakness in the first-in-the-nation Iowa caucuses, then have nearly all the bounces go his way in other early contests if he hopes to compete credibly once the race goes national with voting in half the states on Feb. 5.

Obama strategists say for now they are not running a national campaign but are depending on what senior adviser David Axelrod calls "a sequential series" of victories.

This is why Obama is already on the air with television ads in Iowa and New Hampshire and so far is out-spending Clinton in every early state.

The trend includes more than twice as much spending in Iowa (\$1.6 million to Clinton's \$750,000) and in New Hampshire (\$1.2 million to Clinton's \$600,000).

\$839,000) and nearly three times as much in South Carolina (\$350,000 to \$120,000) in the first half of this year.

The South Carolina Democratic primary electorate is usually more than half African-American, and Obama advisers predict these voters will back one of their own to give him an essential victory a week before Super Tuesday.

History suggests the hazards of this momentum-based approach. Nearly every Democratic nominating contest for the past 40 years has featured some variation on the same script: reform candidates trying to use grass-roots energy and media momentum to beat rivals with more traditional profiles and, usually, more support from the party establishment.

Occasionally it works, as when George McGovern won the Democratic nomination on an anti-war message in 1972 or when Jimmy Carter bounced off an Iowa victory to become unstoppable in 1976.

Usually it doesn't work, as reflected in the experiences of candidates such as Eugene McCarthy, Jerry Brown, Bill Bradley or, most recently, Howard Dean, who in 2003 was riding a wave that looked much like the one Obama is trying to surf now, before wiping out once voting actually began.

A close parallel to the strategy Obama is trying to execute (with a different conclusion) is the one that took Gary Hart to the brink of a major upset of Walter Mondale in 1984.

Hart stunned the party establishment when his future-oriented "new ideas" message led to a big victory in the New Hampshire primary. Mondale soon rallied by saying Hart's supposed new ideas reminded him of a fast-food hamburger commercial: "Where's the beef?"

Obama's hope is to answer that question most fervently by emphasizing that he opposed the war in Iraq from the outset.

Hart, who in addition to his own insurgent campaign also managed McGovern's in 1972, sees new vitality in the old strategic model, questioning Clinton as he once did Mondale.

"There still is an enormous number of people in the party who are unhappy with [Clinton] for what they perceive to be her vacillation on the war and her reluctance to confess error," he said in an interview. "People who care about these things remember when, remember how, remember who took leadership.

"She's one of the best-known women in the world," Hart added. "She's been in the White House for eight years. She's a senator from one of the largest states. And 60-plus percent of the Democratic Party wants somebody else."

It will be a challenge for Obama to become that "anybody but Clinton" candidate, an urge that is another common reaction to Democratic front-runners.

Obama advisers, speaking privately, acknowledge that the race likely will hinge on whether the debate is on Obama's terms (Who presents the fresher and more compelling face for the future?) or on Clinton's (Who can give voters the most reassurance about ability to do the job?).

"If the debate is about changing politics and moving the country in a different direction and bringing people together, we like our odds in that debate," said a senior official in the campaign, who insisted on not being identified in order to discuss strategy candidly. "If the debate is primarily about who is going to be a strong, tough leader, that debate, quite frankly, is probably going to benefit Hillary Clinton."

Obama's goal is to draw contrasts with Clinton without drawing blood. "There is a difference between contrasting and attacking," Belcher said. Obama is relying on his oratory to portray himself as the aspirational candidate -- "we're more interested in looking forward, not in looking backward,"

Obama says on the stump, inferring that Clinton is the anachronistic choice. In response, Clinton invokes the 1990s prosperity under Bill Clinton to argue that "yesterday's news was pretty good."

Beneath this larger contest over message and public image, however, lie a number of tactical considerations.

Numerous polls show Clinton running third in Iowa, behind Edwards in first place and Obama in second. Obama's goal is to win that state or, in combination with Edwards, demonstrate that there is a powerful anti-Clinton constituency.

A weak showing for Clinton in Iowa would make New Hampshire a must-win for her. She has a lead there, including in a poll this month by CNN/WMUR. She won 36 percent to Obama's 27 percent and Edwards' 11 percent. The country's first viable female candidate wins 41 percent of women and splits men with Obama at 30 percent each.

If he is able to win or come close in Iowa, New Hampshire or Nevada, that would send Obama on to South Carolina. Rick Wade, an Obama adviser there, said an Obama victory in the state is "critical" to his chances.

Belcher flatly predicts: "We are going to outright win South Carolina."

Democrats debated in the Palmetto State Monday night. A July CNN/Opinion Research Corp. poll finds Clinton leading with 39 percent and Obama at 25 percent. Other polling in June showed Obama leading.

Obama's greatest challenge in winning South Carolina is wooing black women, who are swaying between him and Clinton. "When you talk about the broken politics of Washington, the people who are most affected by it are single women, working moms," Axelrod said.

AXELROD SAID.

Obama's wife, Michelle, has already visited South Carolina several times. The campaign sees her as a key means to reach black women. By late summer or early autumn, Wade said the Obama campaign will be advertising in South Carolina, as well.

But Obama's campaign staff is aware that if they do not appear to contest the earlier electoral challenges, from Nevada to New Hampshire, they may lack the momentum to win South Carolina.

Dean fell prey to the same pitfall. His campaign never recovered after imploding in Iowa. After the first 2004 caucuses, John F. Kerry rode a wave of perceived electability from Iowa to the convention, not unlike many Democrats before him.

"The liberal wing of the Democratic Party falls in love with quasi-messianic figures who come along regularly with an exciting, aspirational vision for where the country must go, often coupled with an unpopular war, at least an unpopular war among progressives, and for a significant time they are ascendant within that liberal wing of the Democratic Party," said Steve Grossman, the chairman of Dean's 2004 presidential campaign who is now a fundraiser for Clinton.

Yet, Grossman emphasized, "when the broader cross section of the Democratic Party takes a somewhat more dispassionate look at the field and says who is ready to be president of the United States and bring the kind of vision and leadership to the job, those quasi-messianic figures tend to fall short. And the more established candidate tends to win, because people are looking for something rock solid and predictable when it comes to presidential voting."