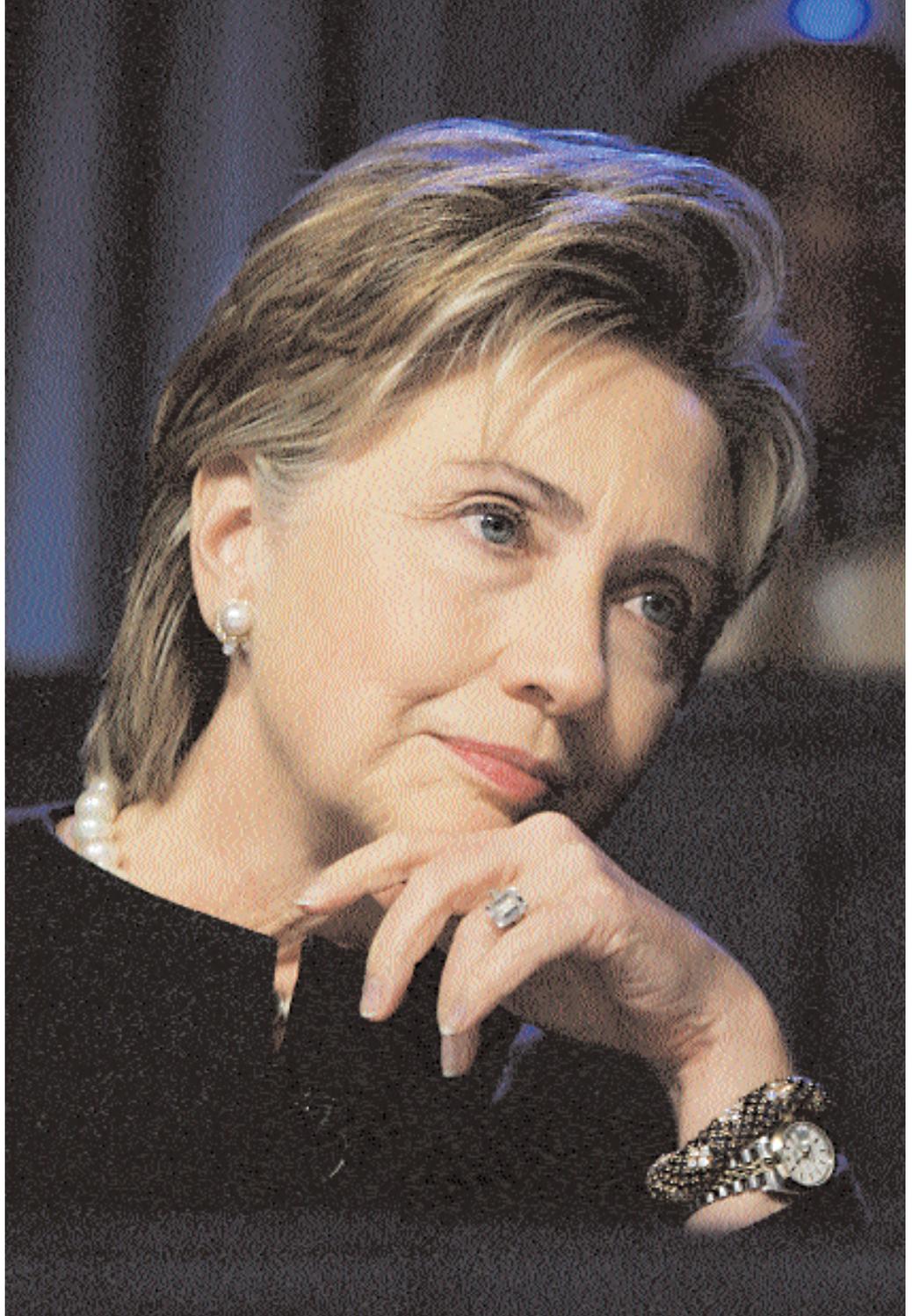


No, they're not for same-sex marriage, but Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama—the 2008 Democratic presidential front-runners—are good for gays in general, right? Or are they? An insider's view  
By Rod McCullom

**T**he opening battle in the war between 2008 Democratic presidential front-runners Hillary Rodham Clinton, the junior senator from New York, and Barack Obama, the junior senator from Illinois, was surely fought the last week in February, after David Geffen—the out billionaire, entertainment mogul, and onetime friend of Bill—told *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd that Republicans thought Clinton was the “easiest to beat” and that she and her husband “lie with such ease it’s troubling.” The scorching interview was published February 21, the day after Geffen hosted a star-filled fund-raiser for Obama in Los Angeles, as he had in years past for Bill Clinton.

But now the tables had turned, and Geffen’s statements triggered a rapid response from Team Hillary, which decried the “politics of personal destruction” (remember that old chestnut?) and demanded that Obama distance himself from the comments and return the \$1.3 million he had raised the night before. The Illinois senator fired back that he was not involved and played up the Clintons’ past relationship with Geffen (whom, it was speculated in press reports, had soured on the former first couple because Bill refused his request to pardon imprisoned activist Leonard Peltier). The dispute



## COVER STORY

# BEHIND THE GAY-FRIENDLY FACES



was the talk of Washington, Hollywood, and New York for days, and although both candidates quickly returned to playing nice, the episode was a perfect example of how heated the 2008 presidential campaign—expected to be the costliest in history and possibly the most contentious—had become.

That Clinton and Obama, both surging dramatically ahead of the six other declared Democratic candidates, were essentially fighting over a gay man uncannily foreshadowed the role that LGBT people will play in their candidacies—and the

general election two Novembers from now. Although the two senators, not to mention the Republican slate of contenders, will be squaring off on many issues, foremost among them Iraq, gay people and their issues could be as meaningful as any other factor when electoral margins of victory are sometimes measured in the thousands of votes or less. After all, who could forget how expertly the Republicans exploited homophobia in 2004 to narrowly defeat John Kerry?

“The Democrats have seen the importance of LGBT issues,” says Ramon Gar-

denhire, a political consultant and the former deputy director for LGBT outreach at the Democratic National Committee. “There are too many important issues on the table to take anything for granted.”

So what does that mean, exactly? After numerous interviews with campaign staffers, consultants, activists, journalists, and others who have observed and interacted with Clinton and Obama, *The Advocate* pieced together the following portrait.

“They’re both very strong candidates,” says John Aravosis, the out editor of the überpopular progressive AmericaBlog.com. “They are almost identical on the issues, and that’s very good.” Although neither supports same-sex marriage (at least not publicly), they are both in favor of civil unions and repealing “don’t ask, don’t tell.” They also support adding sexual orientation to federal hate-crimes law and back the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which has been languishing in various incarnations on Capitol Hill for decades but might finally pass in this Congress, according to Aravosis and other observers.

The only point of departure is on the Defense of Marriage Act. “Obama campaigned for the Senate in 2004 saying that he was for a repeal of that law,” says Aravosis, “but he hasn’t recently addressed this.” Clinton is also ambivalent about her previous support of DOMA, he says, and unlike Obama, carries

the baggage of having supported the 1996 measure when she was first lady. “But that was 11 years ago during a much different political climate,” Aravosis adds.

“We know Hillary is a tough fighter and loves a good political street fight,” he says. “But she’s running on her White House years, so she has the Clinton legacy of giving in to compromise, like on ‘don’t ask, don’t tell.’ Has she learned from the mistakes?” The answer: Who knows?

Of the two, Clinton is certainly the better-known candidate, with a political track record going back decades. Or is she? c

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The national pastime might be baseball, but since 1992 an obsession with Hillary Clinton has been right up there too. “Is she gay or straight, closet conservative or secret liberal, snarling she-wolf or one smart cookie baker?” asked a recent *Mother Jones* article that created a huge buzz in progressive and conservative circles. It argued that Clinton is “way beyond something so banal as a politician.” Instead, she’s become more like a jigsaw puzzle, and we shape the facts of her life—Bill and Monica, Whitewater, Vince Foster—to suit our own biases and construct our own Hillary. In a nutshell: “Hillary herself once said she had become some kind of Rorschach blot in which Americans see many things.”

“Strategic and smart,” says Joe Solmonese, president of the LGBT advocacy group Human Rights Campaign, in describing her. “She is very analytical, concerned about messaging, and has been working with many of us since 1991,” he says, when Bill was seeking his first term in the White House.

On March 2, Hillary delivered the

meeting to discuss how to defeat the proposed amendment. “There was a point during that briefing when one senator was talking to another senator and not paying attention,” he told the crowd. “And Senator Clinton did something that some of you know I sometimes do. She did this snap-point thing”—he paused as the audience and the senator laughed—“and she said, ‘Pay attention. This is important. We’re going to win this one.’” Clinton—and the “snap-point thing”—received a huge standing ovation.

“At that meeting there were some big hitters, like Hilary Rosen,” says one prominent lobbyist who attended the HRC board meeting at which Clinton spoke, referring to the entertainment industry executive, whose former partner, Elizabeth Birch, led HRC for eight years. “But do you know who Hillary made a beeline for? Eric Alva,” the marine staff sergeant who was the first U.S. soldier wounded in the Iraq war and who recently came out publicly. “Clinton introduced herself to him and thanked him for his service. It was very touching.

**“You have to ask yourself, when looking at Clinton, Obama, or any candidate, How do we bring the movement forward? We need that first important building block.”**

keynote speech to HRC’s spring board of directors meeting in Washington, D.C. Her remarks—to about 400 people at the International Trade Centre—created headlines for two disparate reasons: One, she vowed to create a full partnership with gays if elected to the presidency; two, critics accused Clinton of discounting gays by not putting the meeting on her public schedule.

Not true, says Solmonese: “We invited all the candidates, and Hillary was the first to accept.” New Mexico governor Bill Richardson, also vying for a nomination, was to speak at HRC’s Los Angeles gala dinner in March, he adds. “My hope is that all of the major candidates, Democratic and Republican, will have these conversations with the LGBT movement.”

In his speech to introduce the senator, Solmonese described Clinton as quietly leading and organizing the opposition to the Federal Marriage Amendment. He recounted a time when she gently chastised Republican and Democratic senators who were having a private conversation at a

“On a more personal level,” the source adds, “she is very comfortable and at ease with gay men and lesbians. She just doesn’t advertise it—it wouldn’t sound sincere.”

Most people are not aware that during Clinton’s White House years, one of her closest confidants was a gay man: Neel Lattimore, the first lady’s press secretary during the first administration. Lattimore was outed in 1998 by the same conservative “researchers”—the so-called “vast right-wing conspiracy”—who thrust Troopergate, Paula Jones, Monica Lewinsky, and the Clinton impeachment onto the national stage. The Right’s then-lead anti-Clintonist, writer David Brock, who outed *himself* in 1994, wrote a generally favorable biography of Hillary in 1997. Now, after a political about-face, he heads the acclaimed Media Matters research organization, which debunks right-wing bias in the media. Both Brock and Lattimore declined repeated requests for an interview.

Hillary’s love affair with gay voters and vice versa has been a rocky road to Damascus—or Des Moines, depending on whom

you speak with. Although the senator is clearly on good terms with many gays and lesbians and has strong experience to run for the White House, her positions on some gay issues often test the limits of their enthusiasm. “After working with Hillary Clinton for six years, it’s obvious she is concerned but still very skittish on gay issues,” says another well-known activist. “She’s very concerned about how things play out in the red states versus the blue states, and she’s looking for compromise.”

Pam Spaulding, the lesbian political junkie and editor of the online magazine Pam’s House Blend, explains that since Clinton is in favor of ENDA and federal hate-crimes legislation, “Those are concrete ways that she does support progress for [gays and lesbians]. However, when it comes to marriage equality, it depends on which audience she is talking to. She has been clear that from her perspective, marriage is between a man and a woman; but she has also taken the standard civil-unions position.”

That triangulation usually works well on the national stage, but it set off a major rift last year in Clinton’s relationship with gays and lesbians at home in New York State. “My only issue with Senator Clinton—consistently—has been her support of DOMA,” says Alan Van Capelle, executive director of the influential and well-funded gay group Empire State Pride Agenda. “I can forgive people in 1996 who could or did vote for DOMA. But it’s 11 years since that vote, and candidates are courting our community. It’s great to talk about visitation in hospitals, fighting the marriage amendment, amending hate-crimes legislation—but it doesn’t square well with gay voters to support those pieces of quality legislation and then say, ‘We need a law on the books to defend marriage from gay people.’ You don’t have to support DOMA in order to be against gay marriage.”

Activists’ frustration with Clinton’s opposition to same-sex marriage came to a boiling point February 10 when a memo written by Van Capelle to his board members was leaked to the press, including *The New York Times*. In the e-mail Van Capelle wrote that he was refusing to “lend my name and sell tickets” to a gay-oriented fund-raiser for Clinton’s reelection. “Let me begin by stating that I believe Hillary Clinton has served the people of New York well in the United States Senate and that she deserves reelection,” he wrote. “My vote for Senator Clinton will come despite her re-

grettable statements on the issue of marriage for same-sex couples and her current support for DOMA.”

One lobbyist familiar with the political machinations in the New York State capitol, where he has been trying to gain support for a marriage-equality bill in the state legislature, describes the e-mail drama this way: “It was extremely difficult to even lobby Republicans to support a marriage bill. ‘Marriage,’ they would laugh. ‘Hillary Clinton isn’t even on board for that. We can take the exact same position here that she takes in Washington.’” The lobbyist paused. “Isn’t that crazy? The senators from New Jersey are so much more progressive on this issue than Clinton or [New York senior U.S. senator Chuck] Schumer. But they aren’t running for president.”

The Van Capelle memo pushed marriage equality to center stage in the 2006 midterm election. Then—New York State attorney general Eliot Spitzer’s ultimately successful campaign for governor included a strong commitment to marriage equality. In October, Clinton met with prominent LGBT activists, voters, and Christine

Quinn, the out speaker of the New York City council, and urged them not to be focused on a single issue.

Ethan Geto, the veteran gay activist and political consultant who managed Howard Dean’s 2004 presidential campaign in New York State and is advising Clinton on LGBT issues, organized the October event. He introduced Clinton as what he called “the elephant in the room.”

“We’re engaged in a dialogue with someone who has the stature, who has the credibility, the viability to be the party’s standard-bearer in 2008,” Geto told the audience assembled in the Upper East Side apartment. “When you look at Senator Clinton’s record, she may not agree with us on every last policy issue, but when you look at the totality of the record, there is no one in this country who may be the president of the United States with whom we have a warmer, stronger, closer productive working relationship.”

Solmonese agrees: “Senator Clinton might not be exactly where you want her on the marriage issue, but other things are just as important to many other people.

ENDA, for instance. It’s still legal to terminate a gay or lesbian employee without cause in a majority of the states. That basic right might be something very real and concrete that we can do now. Marriage equality is a long-term civil rights struggle. It won’t happen overnight.

“You have to ask yourself,” Solmonese continues, “when looking at Clinton, Obama, or any candidate, *How do we bring the movement forward?* If it’s a series of building blocks, we need that first important building block.”

Adds Quinn: “Every single time since I’ve been elected speaker—every time I’ve picked up the phone to ask Senator Clinton to help the LGBT community—she has said yes. She has assigned staff; she has taken her own time and political capital.”

At that October meeting Clinton didn’t commit to Spitzer’s marriage-equality plan, stressing that civil unions and “full equality of benefits, nothing left out” was probably the best way to achieve immediate results. But, she added tellingly, “if our governor and our legislature support marriage in New York, I’m not going to be c

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Barack Obama (far left) and Hillary and Bill Clinton (far right) in Selma, Ala., on March 4

against that.” It was an indication that she had indeed “evolved”—as she said at the meeting—since she first ran for office in 2000 and opposed same-sex marriage.

However, not everyone is impressed. Pam Spaulding says that talk of civil unions has become the standard operating procedure for Democrats. “Of course, ‘full equality of benefits’ assumes that the federal DOMA law is repealed or amended,” she says, pointing out that none of the Democratic contenders seem willing to address that.

“Back in 2000 Howard Dean was considered revolutionary for signing civil unions legislation in Vermont,” says Keith Boykin, an attorney, black gay activist, and television personality. “But now so does Connecticut, and in New Jersey it’s everything except the name. And, of course, Massachusetts has gay marriage. Some gays are demanding more. Hey, even Bush says he is for civil unions—or at least he said that in 2004.”

Boykin has a unique perspective on both Clinton and Obama, having worked

in the Clinton White House as a special assistant to the president and director of specialty media—he remembers Hillary as “focused” and clearly in control of the issues—and attended Harvard Law School with Obama. He says he has concerns about both candidates.

“So much was accomplished in the Clinton administration, but many opportunities were missed,” he recalls. “I remember being with Bill Clinton in an Oval Office meeting in 1993, and he said he wanted to be remembered for two things: Gays in the military and universal health care,” Boykin laughs. “Well, eight years later, we had ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ and no universal health care. And ultimately he was remembered for something else”—the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

Boykin doesn’t fault Hillary for her much-criticized attempt to lead a health care revolution in 1993: “What would have been wrong with making sure children and the working poor had health insurance?” Instead, he says the Clintons surrounded themselves with “people who were timid on

too many issues.” “Has she changed?” he asks. “I don’t know. I hope so.”

Boykin has a different recollection of Obama. “We knew each other but weren’t good friends,” although both were well-known: Boykin because of his prominence as an out black gay activist and Obama because he was a “celebrity on campus,” the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review*. However, Boykin says, what concerns him about Obama is the senator’s frequent references to religion and faith, which have often been “tools of oppression” of LGBT people, he says, “especially in the black community. The black church is welcoming Obama, so this election will be interesting to watch.”

On the other hand, some black LGBT activists welcome Obama’s strong commitment to his faith and see it as an asset. “It’s the perfect way to counter the right-wing fundamentalists,” says the Reverend Kevin E. Taylor, a New Jersey activist and pastor of the Unity Fellowship Church, part of a predominantly black LGBT denomination. “Because he can meet them in

the church and declare that we won't use that space to bash people—any people. Obama belongs to Trinity United Church of Christ, and their pastor is very strong on gay issues, which is rare for a black megachurch."

One gay member of that church recalls positive interactions with Obama. "When he is in town, he always comes to services and has for as many years as I have, which is at least four or five," he says. "He greets me by name and knew my former partner—he's always very personable and friendly. A few years ago he addressed an informal meeting of the LGBT outreach ministry before he became a senator."

The Reverend Taylor was just named to New Jersey's Civil Union Review Commission by Gov. Jon Corzine and has a keen interest in Obama's stand on DOMA. "On the issues—that's about the only advantage he has over Senator Clinton, because they are both middle-of-the-road, don't-rock-the-boat centrists," he says, although he admits he is leaning toward Obama.

"In 2004, Obama said he wanted to repeal DOMA. What about now?" Taylor asks. "We can have civil unions in New Jersey, but they aren't portable across state lines. Before I support him fully, I'd have to ask, How does he get along with gays and lesbians in Chicago?"

With the exception of Geffen, Obama hasn't surrounded himself with high-profile LGBT people on the national stage. However, he does enjoy significant gay and lesbian support back home in the Windy City, and it seems to be spreading across the country.

"Barack is totally comfortable with gay people. I just bumped into him at a brunch at Equality Illinois [a gay rights group]," says Mary F. Morten, a lifelong activist and the former LGBT liaison to Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley. "Sure, he mentioned gays in his announcement speech in Springfield, Ill., which he didn't have to do. But it's not just a media opportunity with him. He is part of the community."

Morten has worked with Obama since he was a state senator in the late 1990s. "My partner and I have had lunch and dinner with the Obamas many times," she re-

calls. "And there is no discomfort factor. We don't talk about our personal lives unless it comes up—for instance, like when discussing HIV and AIDS." Morten says she and many other Chicago activists are not so focused on marriage equality but on more "bread-and-butter issues like lack of access to medical care and high rates of HIV in the inner cities." Another issue, she says, is violence directed against LGBT youths, like the shooting of six black gay men at a December party in Chicago.

"Both of us being black, he can totally relate to that," Morten says. "Marriage I can take or leave. I'm much more interested in antiviolenence and women's issues, like choice and health care. [Obama's wife] Michelle and I serve on a few boards together, and I know for a fact that they are good, progressive people." She adds with a laugh, "Plus we go to the same hair salon."

Solmonese of HRC says these choices are playing out on many levels. "Everyone has a different set of priorities. Senator Clinton may not be where you want her to be on the war or even on marriage. But her being a woman might encourage many lesbian voters to get involved. It's the same with Senator Obama. He is energizing many black voters and many black LGBT voters who have never had a candidate they can identify with. And maybe Bill Richardson's [Latino] background will encourage some more people to get involved," he says.

Obama is likely to pick up a lot of gay support in the Midwest and the South, says Michael Bauer, a Chicago political consultant. In February, Bauer cohosted a million-dollar fund-raiser for the Obama campaign in Chicago. He is on a first-name basis with Obama, Clinton, and John Edwards, having served as a 2004 Democratic National Convention delegate. "They all know my partner, Roger, and I," Bauer says. "They are all great candidates, and I can appreciate the fact that Obama admits that he is struggling to reconcile same-sex marriage and his faith. A lot of people are. Hillary Clinton is. We all have family members, friends, and neighbors who are. We shouldn't hold our candidates to higher standards: Then we will get eight more years of oppression."

Bauer has a colorful anecdote that he

says illustrates Obama's comfort level with gay men. "This was last year, in 2006, at the inaugural ball for [Illinois] attorney general Lisa Madigan," he recalls. "Barack and Michelle greeted Roger, and she gave him two pecks on the cheek like Europeans do. And Barack did the same. It was a small gesture, but it was from the heart."

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, gives Obama high marks for including references to gay men and lesbians in his speeches to general audiences, such as his presidential announcement in Springfield and his famous 2004 keynote speech to the Democratic National Convention, in which he included gays in his litany about the similarities between residents of red and blue states.

Obama's famous words—"We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around our libraries in the red states. We coach Little League in the blue states and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states"—energized gays across the country.

"That was totally unexpected," remembers Foreman. "He started off talking about how there were many people using wedge issues to divide the country, and then he turned the conventional wisdom around." It was "an excellent speech," he adds, "and succeeded in driving the point home that we are everywhere."

On national and local stages not dominated by gay audiences is where the true measure of both Obama's and Clinton's commitment to gays and their concerns will be taken, Foreman says. "The challenge for gay voters is to see how these candidates talk about us and our issues on the campaign trail. It has to be repeated and repeated.

"The candidates need our votes because gay people have become a powerful voice across the country, economically and politically," he adds. "And it's far too early to commit to a candidate. Think of it like a fancy ball or a party. You want to flirt and laugh and make the cute guy get your attention. That's what we need to do so they can keep pursuing the gay vote and eventually move on some issues. You don't go to the dance floor with the first guy who asks you; you look around and assess your options. That's what we should do." j

*McCullom, a former television news producer, is the editor of the Rod 2.0 blog.*

THE ADVOCATE  
Poll

Who do you think would do more for LGBT people if elected president: Hillary or Barack?

Sign on to The Advocate's Web site beginning March 27 to cast your vote and leave your comments. Results will appear in the May 8 issue.