FACE OFF: Sweet November? The Democrats should win the election, if they can make it past the summer

Contributed by JOY-ANN REID

The increasingly uncivil war between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton has become a media sideshow that obscures the main plot. Despite the turmoil over Michigan and Florida, the drama over the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Bill Clinton, and the seeming disintegration of a 50-year coalition between women, African-Americans and working class white voters, Democrats still hold the advantage where it counts: the race to win the election Nov. 4.

Not that the Republicans aren't trying. In John McCain, they have chosen the best candidate available to them in a tough year.

McCain sacrificed much for his country in Vietnam, and has a few positions, on global warming for instance, that could attract suburban Independents. McCain enjoys the sympathy and adoration of the Washington press corps, and is rarely called on his missteps, or described without the word “maverick.”

With Senator Clinton scorching the earth under Obama, and by extension, herself, and national polls showing McCain in a tight race with either Democrat, some pundits and despairing progressives are ready to skip the election and hand White House keys to McCain.

Not so fast. Once the primary finally ends, McCain faces real disadvantages; his age (he turns 72 in August), his close ties to lobbyists (three senior campaign advisers lobbied for a European plane maker that beat U.S.A.’s Boeing for a $35 billion tanker contract), and his personal history (voting against the creation of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday in 1983 and involvement in the Keating Five savings and loan scandal in 1989), each of which is a 527 ad waiting to happen.

McCain is a clumsy spokesman on the economy – blaming the mortgage crisis on homebuyers and suggesting, during a recent “poverty” tour, that the answer to Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans' Ninth Ward might be to "tear it down" or "whatever.”

More importantly, McCain is a man who decided, based on his ambition to become president and the need to quash right-wing distrust, to run on the continuation of Bush's shakiest policies - tax breaks for wealthy individuals and corporations, unfettered free trade, and the bloody and misguided occupation of Iraq, which McCain is happy to see go on for 100 years. Even foolishly promising that "my friends … there's going to be other wars."

There's also the math. In 2004, Bush won 31 states and 286 Electoral College votes to John Kerry's 19 states (plus the District of Columbia) and 251 electoral votes. In order to get to 270, Democrats must pick up 18 electoral votes, by grabbing a trio of

Western states (Colorado plus Nevada and New Mexico gets you 19) by rolling up Ohio (20) or Florida (27) or by capturing a "red" state like Virginia (13) and adding a toss-up state like Iowa (7).

A long shot? Not really. Al Gore won Iowa and New Mexico in 2000 (though Bush took them back – barely

– in 2004.) New Hampshire sided with Bush in 2000 but went to Kerry in 2004. All three states are trending Democratic this year.

In fact, in the so-called "purple" states won by Bush or Kerry by 5 percentage points or less in 2004: Colorado (4.7%), Florida (5.0%), Iowa (0.7%), Nevada (2.6%) and Ohio (2.1%) for Mr. Bush; and Michigan (3.4%), Minnesota (3.5%), New Hampshire (1.4%), Oregon (4.2%), Pennsylvania (2.5%) and Wisconsin (0.4%) for Mr. Kerry, a recent Gallup survey showed either Obama or Clinton beating McCain, 47% to 43%.

And this year, add to the purple column Virginia, Missouri and Montana, once-solid GOP states that elected Democratic senators in 2006 (as did Ohio).

To win in November, the Democratic nominee (most likely Obama) needs just 120,000 additional votes in Ohio, 100,000 in Colorado or Montana, 10,000 in Iowa and 6,000 in New Mexico. (For context, 122,349,480 people voted in 2004.)

This in a year when Democrats have registered millions of new voters nationwide – an estimated 1 million in the last seven contests alone – while Republican registrations have stalled. Couple that with the record-setting Democratic primary turn-outs, beating Republican turnout in 19 out of the first 25 states to vote (though not in Florida,) even when the GOP race was competitive, and sometimes by 2-to-1.

As painful as it seems, the extended calendar is actually a net plus for Democrats, who will have built and tested critical election infrastructure in 48 of 50 states by the time of the Denver convention in August (Florida and Michigan get their turn after the last primary June 3.)

The potential negatives for both Democrats emerged early, previewing the Republican's hand. And polls show Independents trending hard toward Democratic positions on every major issue.

Add to all of this the likelihood that the economy and Iraq will remain the central issues in November, and it's clear that barring some “October surprise” (an attack on Iran, perhaps?) or a major Democratic candidate (or convention) meltdown, the Democrats' mission of retaking the White House can be accomplished.

If they don't destroy each other first.

Joy-Ann Reid is a writer and media/political strategist, and is a former co-host of “Wake Up South Florida” on WTPS 1080 AM.

JoyAnnReid@Gmail.com