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Hillary's big problem: Premature triangulation

Two years from now, Hillary Clinton might be pleased to hear the kind of boos and antiwar chants that greeted her in mid-June when she spoke at the annual Take Back America conference of Democratic activists and argued against a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq. But so much of politics is about timing. And right now, Clinton is facing a serious problem of premature triangulation.

As long as she needs support from Democratic primary voters, Hillary Clinton will want to defer the media rewards of an all-out "Sister Souljah moment." Let's recall that in 1992, when Bill Clinton went out of his way to denounce the then-little-known rap singer Sister Souljah at a Rainbow Coalition conference, he'd already clinched the Democratic presidential nomination and was looking toward the general election.

Bill Clinton's triangulation gambit, using Sister Souljah as a prop for his calculated move to ingratiate himself with establishment pundits, had been foreshadowed by a Washington Post article that reported the day before: "Some top advisers to Clinton argue that ... he must become involved in highly publicized confrontations with one or more Democratic constituencies." The constituency that Clinton chose to polarize with was African-American activists.

These days, and from here to the horizon, there's no larger or more adamant Democratic constituency than the antiwar voters who want the U.S. military out of Iraq pronto. At this point, Hillary Clinton's pro-war position is far afield from the views of most grassroots Democrats.

Clinton's foreseeable game plan is to eventually confront antiwar activists head-on as she portrays herself as a strong-on-defense Newer-Than-New Democrat. Two years from now, if she has the nomination cinched, she'll be eager to ratchet up her strategy of playing to the gallery of corporate-media journalists by presenting herself as a centrist alternative to both the Republican Party's right wing and the Democratic Party's "special interests" (a.k.a., the party's base).

But first Hillary Clinton would need to win enough delegates to become the party's presidential nominee. To that end, she'll try to finesse and blur the war issue in hopes

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that her hawkish position won't rub too many Democratic primary voters the wrong way.

It's not going to be easy. What happened at the Take Back America conference was mild compared to what Hillary Clinton has coming in primary and caucus battleground states once the presidential campaign begins in earnest. And she may encounter unexpected difficulties as her pro-war reputation grows.

If Hillary Clinton thinks she can postpone an all-out confrontation with the antiwar movement until a time and place of her tactical choosing, she's going to be very disappointed. And at the end of her 2008 quest, Clinton may discover that she has triangulated herself right out of the nomination.

Norman Solomon's latest book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," was just published in paperback. For more information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com