

## **Obama Moves to Sharpen His Critique of Clinton**

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**By MICHAEL LUO**

Seeking to rebound from defeats Tuesday night in Texas, Ohio and Rhode Island, Senator Barack Obama's campaign signaled on Wednesday that it was preparing to sharpen its critique of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, challenging her contention that she has been more thoroughly scrutinized than her opponent.

"She's made the argument that she's thoroughly vetted, in contrast to me," Mr. Obama said as he flew back to Chicago from Texas Wednesday. "I think it's important to examine that argument, because if the suggestion is somehow that, on issues of ethics or disclosure or transparency, that she's going to have a better record than I have and will be better able to withstand Republican attacks, I think that's an issue that should be tested."

Shortly after that, Mr. Obama's campaign put out a sharply worded memo criticizing Mrs. Clinton for not releasing her income tax returns; Mr. Obama has made his returns public.

"Though her campaign has tried to kick the issue down the road, Democratic voters deserve to know, right now, why it is she is hiding the information in her tax returns from last year," the memo said.

Howard Wolfson, Mrs. Clinton's communications director, fired back with a statement raising the issue of Mr. Obama's ties to the developer Antoin Rezko, who is now on trial in Chicago. Instead of answering questions about Mr. Rezko, Mr. Obama said, Mr. Obama had chosen to "lash out."

Mr. Wolfson said the Clintons' tax returns since they left the White House would be available on or around April 15. He said that 20 years of their returns are already publicly available, and that Mrs. Clinton has filed required public financial disclosure forms.

"Instead of making false attacks, we urge Senator Obama to release all relevant financial and other information related to indicted political fixer Tony Rezko," he said.

The back and forth Wednesday between the campaigns offered a glimpse of just how heated the upcoming weeks promise to be, after Mr. Obama failed to knock Mrs. Clinton out of the race on Tuesday. Of the four states holding primaries, he won only in Vermont, while Mrs. Clinton won in Ohio, Texas and Rhode Island.

Fresh from her triumphs, Mrs. Clinton contended on Wednesday that the momentum in the race for the Democratic nomination had now swung to her, even though it appears that the results on Tuesday did little to cut into Mr. Obama's lead in pledged delegates.

After flying to Washington from Ohio overnight, Mrs. Clinton was in high spirits as she appeared on a number of morning news shows Wednesday. She was even able to laugh off — while at the same time appearing open to — the possibility of sharing a ticket with Mr. Obama, provided she got top billing.

"That may, you know, be where this is headed," Mrs. Clinton said on "The Early Show" on CBS with a broad grin and a laugh. "But, of course, we have to decide who's on the top of the ticket. And I think the people of Ohio very clearly said that it should be me."

But most of her comments outlined the case she is expected to make in the coming weeks to voters, as well as to the all-important super-delegates who are increasingly likely to decide the nomination.

The next contest is Saturday, with caucuses in Wyoming, followed by a primary in Mississippi on Tuesday, but there is no big-state contest until the Pennsylvania primary on April 22.

Mr. Obama found himself trying to explain why he has been unable to keep Mrs. Clinton on the mat, just as he failed to do after winning in Iowa and again in South Carolina.

"The bottom line is that we are in a very strong position," Mr. Obama said on the "Today" show

on NBC. “Senator Clinton barely dented the delegate count yesterday. We’re going on to Mississippi and Wyoming, where we feel confident that we can do well. And this process is going to ultimately be about who’s got the most delegates, and we think we’ll be in that position.”

He also told reporters Wednesday before leaving Texas, “It is very premature to start talking about a joint ticket.”

The Obama campaign emphasized the mathematical reality that it will be extremely difficult for Mrs. Clinton to catch Mr. Obama in the pledged delegate count, if it is possible at all.

Mrs. Clinton’s victories in Texas, Ohio and Rhode Island narrowed the gap by 15 delegates, according to a New York Times count that does not include the results from the Texas caucuses, which are not yet final. Overall, according to a New York Times projection that includes a survey of unpledged super-delegates, Mr. Obama has 1,456.5 delegates compared to 1,370 for Mrs. Clinton; 2,025 are required to ensure nomination.

A fund-raising e-mail message sent to Obama supporters overnight said the results “make one thing clear.”

“When the dust settles from today’s contests, we will maintain our substantial lead in delegates,” the e-mail continued; it was signed, “Thank you, Barack.”

Notably, the e-mail message did not mention Mrs. Clinton; instead, it criticized Senator John McCain, who now has enough delegates to assure the Republican nomination, saying that he had “already dismissed our call for change as eloquent but empty.”

An anti-war group, Campaign to Defend America, announced Wednesday that it had begun a \$1 million advertising offensive against Mr. McCain. The ads, starting in Ohio and Pennsylvania, paint Mr. McCain as promising what amounts to a third Bush term, and use the tag line, “McSame as Bush.”

In recent days, Mr. Obama, as the front runner in the Democratic contest, has been focusing on drawing contrasts with Mr. McCain. Mrs. Clinton has trained her fire on both Mr. Obama and Mr. McCain.

In the pitch she is making to Democratic superdelegates, Mrs. Clinton tries to use the certainty of Mr. McCain as an opponent to her advantage by emphasizing her national security credentials. Still, national polls generally show that Mr. Obama would fare better against Mr. McCain than Mrs. Clinton would.

“The race changed once it became clear that John McCain would be the Republican nominee,” Mrs. Clinton said on “The Early Show.” “And I think Democrats took a hard look at John McCain, with his emphasis on national security, and then took a hard look at the two of us, and concluded that I’m the best possible candidate to be commander in chief.”

Mark Penn and Harold Ickes, both senior advisers in the Clinton campaign, reiterated the argument in a strategy memo issued Wednesday morning, saying their candidate was more expert on the economy than Mr. Obama.

For his part, Mr. Obama countered on “Today” that “the American people are going to want a clear break from the Bush-Cheney foreign policies of the past.”

He added: “And I think whoever is offering that clean break is going to be in a much stronger position to debate John McCain.”

A central challenge for the Clinton campaign on Wednesday was how to deal with the question of whether it remained mathematically possible for her to overtake Mr. Obama. Mr. Penn and Mr. Ickes sought in their memo to rebut the line that Obama supporters were taking Wednesday, that he leads in the overall popular vote and has won nearly twice as many states. They counter that Mrs. Clinton has done better in states that will be battlegrounds in the general election, including Ohio, Michigan, Nevada and Florida.

None of the Democratic candidates, however, campaigned in Michigan or Florida, as part of an agreement with the Democratic National Committee to penalize those states for moving up their primaries.

Indeed, potentially the most controversial part of the Clinton memo comes at the end, when Mr. Ickes and Mr. Penn again make a case for the party leadership deciding to seat the delegates chosen in those primaries anyway; Mrs. Clinton won in both states.