DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL candidate Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton during the CNN Democratic Debate at the Kodak Theater in Los Angeles.

How the Democratic candidates for president can avoid disaster

By Glenn Altschuler and Robert J. Spitzer

The Democratic Party seems headed for a train wreck this August. If neither Hillary Clinton nor Barack Obama surges before the primary season ends on June 7, the party may well get a brokered convention in Denver, with unelected superdelegates holding the balance of power. As superdelegate Donna Brazile said last week, "If 795 of my colleagues decide this election, I will quit the Democratic Party." A deal in a smoke-filled room will almost certainly fracture the party and tarnish the nominee.

Perhaps unwittingly, Obama has identified another option: "My strong belief," he said in Seattle last week, "is that if we end up with the most states and the most pledged delegates from the most voters in the country, it would be problematic for the political insiders to overturn the judgment of the voters." By implication, he has also bound himself to step aside if the senator from New York commands the majority.

Democratic National Committee Chair Howard Dean should take the hint and press both candidates to sign off on such an arrangement, in public and as soon as possible. The scheme has several benefits for the party, which has a history of blowing good opportunities in the general election with lengthy, divisive, nomination conflicts.

It would, first and foremost, ratify the Democratic candidate as the democratic choice by siding with the majority of party voters. Second, it would eliminate the prospect of bitter infighting -- and recriminations -- between June and August. Third, it would give the nominee time to raise money, organize and focus on the contest against John McCain. And fourth, it would end wrangling about the role of delegates from the renegade states of Michigan and Florida, which were denied seats at the convention because they violated party rules and moved their primaries to January.

Should Clinton sign on? On the surface, the arrangement seems less desirable for her. So far, more superdelegates have expressed support for her than for Obama. She scored victories in Florida and Michigan, and might well do so should a re-run primary or caucus be scheduled.

Nonetheless, with her campaign faltering, it's actually in Clinton's interest to roll the dice. Superdelegate support is hardly firm, and may well evaporate if Obama continues to rack up victories. Equally important, a victory that seems the product of a brokered convention could be a pyrrhic victory. Hillary Clinton does not want to run in the general election as the candidate of insider Democratic, wheeler-dealer bosses.

Trying to parlay victories in Michigan and Florida into convention votes is also a losing gambit. When Clinton declared her intention to do so last month, she was skewered in the media as self-serving and sneaky, and took a tumble in the polls.
Most importantly, Clinton has a good chance to emerge with more delegates than Obama on June 7. After her losses in the Chesapeake primaries (Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C.), and likely defeats in Hawaii and Wisconsin, she gets to contest Texas, Ohio and Pennsylvania, three large states, each with a demographic mix favorable to her. If she runs the table, she'll take the lead in delegates, and Obama will have to bow out. If she doesn't, she probably won't get the nomination anyway.

By rolling the dice, Clinton can burnish her public image. She'll look fair-minded and statesmanlike, by putting the will of the people and the good of her party ahead of her self-interest. The strategy might get her some additional votes in the primaries and, if she's the nominee, improve her ability to unite the party and appease Obama's supporters.

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