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Clinton's Final Full Day in Indiana

Plus, Obama shows he's patriotic and personable.

By John Dickerson

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Hillary Clinton

SOUTH BEND, Ind.—Hillary Clinton's rally at Indiana Tech. on Sunday afternoon started to sound like an auction. She mentioned that it had cost a supporter of hers \$63 to put gas in his tank. Audience members started shouting out what they'd dropped at the pump. "Ninety-five!" yelled a woman. "A hundred and two!" shouted another. If gas prices keep rising, Clinton may start handing out little cupfuls of unleaded at rallies.

While Obama was talking about his patriotism and downscaling his rallies to appeal to downscale voters, Clinton was trying to expand her differences with him on the gas tax into a broader critique. She said Obama also had the wrong plans to address the foreclosure crisis and the uninsured. "I understand what folks are up against," she said. "There is a big difference between us, who understands what you are going through and who can you count on to be on your side to get the solutions that are going to help you."

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Despite criticism of her gas-tax cut, Clinton is happy to embrace her new populism. At a town hall appearance hosted by ABC's *This Week*, when Clinton was asked to name an economist who agreed with her plan, Sen. Clinton returned to her Bush-like posture on the value of expert opinion. "I'm not going to put in my lot with economists," she said. "Elite opinion is always on the side of doing things that really disadvantages the vast majority of Americans."



Clinton delivered a clipped version of her stump speech in three stops across Indiana today, and at its heart were these tidy little stomach punches to her opponent. "He attacks me because he doesn't have a plan for immediate relief," she said in South Bend. In Fort Wayne, she said that Obama would rather side with the oil companies than Hoosiers.

The crowds were ready to hear about Clinton's plan to lower the gas tax for the summer, but they didn't seem ready to take it out on Obama. When Clinton took her shots at him, she got no particular reaction. The Obama crowds, by contrast, boomed when Obama mentioned Clinton's plans to peel off the 18-cent gas tax. Saturday, he pointed out that Clinton had such trouble finding an economist to support her plan that she had to rely on a Shell Oil Co. lobbyist to speak in favor of it. "It's a Shell game," said Obama to a big laugh.

Obama kept up the pressure Sunday by releasing his third ad on the gas-tax legislation, calling it a "bogus" idea. It was his second negative ad on the topic, which the Clinton campaign predictably tried to paint as an act of panic. "The Obama campaign is running scared right now," said deputy communications director Phil Singer.

The two candidates have been spending so much of the last week debating the gas tax that

It's going to be tempting to view the results of the primary as a referendum on that debate. If Obama loses, we'll have to see if there's any evidence to conclude that voters rejected his straight talk on the gas-tax gimmick. If Clinton loses, we might be able to make the case that Obama successfully tapped underlying fears about Clinton's trustworthiness to make his argument that she was pandering by offering a solution that was no real solution at all.

Right now, the polls show that the people are with Sen. Obama on the issue. Seventy percent of respondents in a recent *New York Times* poll (PDF) said they believed the proposal to lift the gas tax was mainly promoted to help the politician proposing it rather than voters.

At the Democratic fundraising dinner where both candidates ended the day Sunday, the reaction to the gas tax was more difficult to decipher. Clinton won big applause when she framed the issue as a "choice between whether you pay the gas tax or going after the big oil companies. The choice to me is clear: We need to go after the oil companies." Obama said the only way people would get relief is if the oil companies passed on the savings. "Do you trust the oil companies to give you the profits?" he asked the crowd. The room shouted back, "No." He continued: "Are we the party of expediency? Are we the party of just getting by? To the next election?"

Overall, Obama won the better reaction from the crowd of party loyalists. Clinton was well-received, but when Obama was announced, people got up from their tables and moved toward the stage. When he finished, the room erupted in a standing ovation.

The Indiana primary is the last contest that seems really up in the air. The polls are close and both campaigns and candidates have been working all-out. After Tuesday's contests in Indiana and North Carolina, the candidates will continue to trade off contests that favor them, and the superdelegates will continue to slowly make up their minds.

It's true, as it has been for more than two months, that Clinton has a narrowing and ugly path to victory. NBC's calculation, based on likely outcomes, looks like this on the eve of the vote: "Assuming Obama wins half of the delegates tomorrow (93), he needs just 38% of all remaining delegates to get to the magic number of 2,025. If Clinton wins 94 delegates on Tuesday, she will need 66% of all remaining delegates." Since Super Tuesday, Obama has received the support of roughly 100 superdelegates, picking up five for every one who sides with Clinton.

The outcome Tuesday will be less about the numbers of votes cast and delegates won and more about the questions the contests might help answer for both candidates. Can Obama show that his former pastor's remarks have not hurt him with voters? Can Clinton show that voters still think she should be considered a viable candidate even if the press doesn't think so? And can she gain more evidence to make the case that Barack Obama is a fundamentally flawed candidate?

Though the math is against her, Clinton looked buoyant and carefree Sunday as if she were the front-runner. She stood atop the stairs to her plane watching her aides toss a football (a time-honored way to pass the time while waiting for the candidate to get into the motorcade). When one made a particularly good catch, Clinton applauded. On *This Week*, she joked that Rush Limbaugh had a crush on her, and she needled host George Stephanopoulos. After her last rally, Clinton stopped at Dairy Queen to order a Blizzard with Snickers and pose with voters and employees. Barack Obama wasn't the only candidate trying to look comfortable among regular people.

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LAFAYETTE, Ind.—The first photo-op of the soft-focus portion of Sen. Obama's day on Saturday was to be a potluck supper at his ancestral home. He'd already held two events outlining his personal and patriotic closing argument for primary voters. The end of the day was to be devoted to events that would show him interacting on a personal level with human beings.

When we arrived at the farmhouse in Kempton, Ind., where his great-great-great uncle once lived, there wasn't a scrap of food. The wind was blowing so hard they'd put away the tables, chairs, and chafing dishes for fear that someone would get hurt. Only a Japanese game show would make people eat under such gale-force conditions.

Surrounding the white clapboard home in all directions was acre after acre of brown dry stalks, which elevated the apocalyptic feel. So did the house, which was devoid of furniture. The event also seemed to be devoid of voters. Had they been blown away? How could the candidate create a warm tableau with rural folk if they were not extant?