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Clinton's aim is true as Democrats' top gun

By Edward Luce in Washington

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Nobody would go so far as to call it a comeback. But Bill Clinton's appearances on the midterm election trail are starting to turn voters' heads in a way that Barack Obama's simply are not.

Democratic operatives say that Mr Clinton, who went through in 1994 the kind of setback that pollsters say Mr Obama will face in less than three weeks, is more effective at presenting the election as a choice between starkly different alternatives rather than a referendum on what people think of the Obama administration.

So far the president, who has booked most of the next three weeks for campaigning, has been unable to pull that off. This week alone, Mr Clinton has shaken up two Senate races – in Kentucky and West Virginia – with appearances that have assisted Democratic candidates. Mr Clinton was due to speak in Las Vegas on Tuesday night to assist the embattled Harry Reid, the Senate majority leader, and then move onto California later in the week.

"Bill Clinton is about as close to a secret weapon as the Democratic party has got," says Norm Ornstein, a political analyst at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. "He has this ability to fire up the Democratic base that almost nobody else can do right now." Mr Clinton's intervention in Kentucky, where Jack Conway, the Democratic candidate, is locked in a tight race with Rand Paul, the Tea Party icon, is a good case in point.

At the weekend Mr Clinton described Mr Paul, who wants drastically to shrink the size of the US federal government and has talked of abolishing the Federal Reserve, as a "radical with no record to back it up". Mr Paul, who has never run for elected office, hit back by reminding voters of Mr Clinton's former Monica Lewinsky scandal. "I am not sure I would trust a man who had sex with an intern," said Mr Paul. "I mean, do you think he's an honourable person?"

Mr Paul's trip down memory lane appears to have backfired. Few voters seem to care any longer about a scandal that occurred amid what in retrospect looks like a golden age of balanced budgets, job creation and the absence of foreign wars.

"Bill Clinton's strength is that he knows how to fight back and turn adversity into advantage," says Tad Devine, a veteran Democratic operative. "He is also able to enter an individual race, take the temperature, understand what people are feeling and then base his appeal to voters on that."

In the West Virginia Senate race, where Joe Manchin, the governor, is trailing John Raese, a wealthy local businessman, Mr Clinton on Monday came out punching. Referring to Mr Raese's plush Florida vacation home, the former president said: "I'm here for a lot of reasons. One is that I don't think it's fair for West Virginia to have one senator and Florida to have three."

Acknowledging voter anger in a state where Mr Obama has 29 per cent rating, among the lowest in the country, Mr Clinton added: "I am old enough to know that if you make a decision when you are mad – and I am not just talking about politics here – there is about an 80 per cent chance you will make a mistake."

In contrast, a lot of Democrats are critical of the way Mr Obama has framed the midterm campaign, shifting from one attack line to another without sticking to an overarching narrative. Last month, Mr Obama turned on John Boehner, the Republican congressional leader, in what looked like a move to depict him as the voters' alternative.

More recently, Mr Obama has switched to attacking the Chamber of Commerce for allegedly funnelling foreign money into attack ads. But it has generated a lot of criticism. "This election is awash with undisclosed money and it's fair to point out how disadvantaged the Democrats have been," says one consultant. "But it isn't good politics at this late stage when voters clearly want to hear about the economy."

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