Political commentator Eleanor Clift's Wednesday lecture at St. Ambrose University is titled "America at a Crossroads - Politics or Partisanship," but many will likely be more interested in inside baseball, particularly considering the unusual uncertainty surrounding the Democratic party's nomination for president.

Clift, a Fox News analyst and *McLaughlin Group* panelist, last week filed two intriguing items for *Newsweek*, at which she's a contributing editor.

In her column, she discussed the potential fallout if Hillary Clinton, trailing in the number of committed delegates to the Democratic National Convention in August, secures her party's nomination for the presidency because of superdelegates - current and former elected and party officials who are not bound to a particular candidate:

"The nomination is slipping away from Hillary Clinton. She's got to rack up huge margins in Texas and Ohio on March 4 and in Pennsylvania on April 22, where polls now show her with double-digit leads. But even if she wins by two to one, she's likely to lag behind Obama in earned delegates and would have to rely on the superdelegates to put her over the top. The maneuver would reek of entrenched privilege and destroy the fragile new coalition of young people and minorities [Barack] Obama has brought to the party."

And in a blog item that same day, Clift noted that some Democratic bigwigs are considering a

push for Al Gore:

"A scenario that a few weeks ago seemed preposterous is beginning to look plausible to some nervous Democrats looking for a way out of the deadlock between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. It goes like this: We love them both, but neither is a sure bet when it comes to electability. It's not about gender and race, each has more mundane vulnerabilities. Hillary's negatives will drive white men to John McCain; Obama's inexperience will require a gut check on the part of voters. What if the superdelegates decide *not* to decide, denying either candidate the requisite number of delegates to secure the party's nomination? Democrats want to win. The new rallying cry: Gore on the second ballot."

"The convention rules allow another name to be introduced," Clift said in an interview last week. "And a lot of people think an Al Gore-Barack Obama ticket would be unstoppable."

And although that sounds like a fantasy, Clift said that "because this election season has been so wild and crazy, you can think of almost anything, and it's within the realm of possibility."

Other scenarios involve Michigan and Florida - two states stripped of their delegates by the party for moving their primaries to an earlier date, and two states where Clinton scored convincing wins. Given the tightness of the race, the disposition of those delegates could decide the nominee.

Beyond analysis based on political machinations, Clift said this presidential election represents a genuine opportunity to move beyond partisan conflict.

"The messages that are playing out, particularly on the Democratic side but also on the Republican side, are that there's a lot of frustration in the country about the way politics are conducted in Washington, and the failure of the political class to confront and come up with solutions to the country's problems," Clift said. "It has to do with the attitude. It has to do with the role of the lobbyists. It has to do with a willingness to work across party lines. We've heard some of this rhetoric in the past, but I think this election seems to present it in the starkest way, because of the country's frustration with politics as usual."

The result, she said, is a debate among the leading Democratic candidates that's less focused on ideology and more concerned with the ability to get things done.

"I think Barack Obama probably embodies the post-partisan message most strongly, but I think it underlies all the candidates' message," Clift said.

Clinton, she added, "knows where all the the levers of power are, where all the bodies are buried, and she's failed in her attempts to bring about policy changes in the past, and she's learned from those mistakes, and she's therefore better equipped to navigate all of the obstacles in Washington.

"Then you have Barack Obama saying that because he is better able to rally the country, he can bring pressure from the outside and force change upon Washington. He's less specific, but his message seems to be reverberating, and he is bringing lots of new people into the political process."

(And although we didn't discuss it, presumptive Republican nominee John McCain is nearly legendary for his independent streak, most famously with campaign-finance reform.)

Clift has long been interested in the role of women in politics, co-writing (with husband Tom Brazaitis, who died in 2005) *Madam President: Shattering the Last Glass Ceiling* in 2000, and authoring *Founding Sisters & the 19th Amendment* in 2003.

But she said she wouldn't see a Clinton loss - either in the nomination process or in the general election - as a failure. "I don't think women collectively should take it as a setback," she said. "I think it probably would go more to the history that she brings, as a Clinton and as part of what's now seen as a dynastic political family.

"Whoever gets the nomination," she added, "we've made history with this election because we've broken some barriers."

Eleanor Clift will speak at 7 p.m. on Wednesday, February 20, in the ballroom of St. Ambrose University's Rogalski Center, at the corner of Ripley and Lombard streets in Davenport. The lecture is free and open to the public.