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## THEY SAID IT

The American people understand what liberalism is and don't like it. So our opponents plan to go out to the [voters] incognito. They're putting on political trench coats and sunglasses and will never, even in the lowest whisper, mumble the "L" word again.

President Ronald Reagan, White House address to conservative leaders, July 5, 1988.

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## BRINGING A GUN TO A KNIFE FIGHT.

For the better part of eight years now, Democrats have been simultaneously mocking and recoiling in horror from George W. Bush and his "cowboy" rhetoric and bearing. It seems that they have spent half their time deriding him for being a "faux Cowboy" who is "all hat and no cattle" and the other half shrieking like school girls about the destructive and menacing effect of Bush's crude belligerence, as revealed in such phrases as "bring it on," and "dead or alive."

It was a bit ironic, then, that over the weekend the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, Barack Obama, took a page from the George W's "false bravado handbook" and declared that he is more than willing to mix it up with the GOP "smear machine." "If they bring a knife to the fight," Obama told supporters Friday evening, "we bring a gun." And here we thought that the Democrats didn't care much for guns.

In all seriousness, though, we think that Obama's statement is actually quite important and quite telling. Or at least it is when coupled with the fact that the Obama campaign team made a big production last week about the launch of its new website, *fightthesmears.com*, which is dedicated to "debunking" the lies told about and smears executed against the candidate by Republican politicians and the right-wing media. You see, the two in combination suggest a specific mindset on the part of Obama, his advisors, and his campaign staff that is quite possibly the only notable weakness in their strategy for gaining the White House.

But before we delve too deeply into this mindset and its potential implications, let's put this weakness in perspective by taking a step back and looking at the race as it is evolving.

For starters, we should note that this past January, while the smart money still was saying that Mitt Romney or upstart Mike Huckabee would be the GOP nominee, we predicted not only that McCain would win the GOP nomination, but that he would go on to become the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States as well. The first forecast turned out to be spot on. And as of yet, we see no reason not to stick by the second. In other words, if forced to make a pick, we still think McCain is the guy.

That said, we are more than willing to acknowledge that we are in a distinct minority here. The current polls show Obama opening up a slight lead, and the consensus among political analysts, pundits, and professional pollsters and forecasters is that that lead will only grow. David Paul Kuhn put it this way in a weekend piece for *The Politico*:

One week into the general election, the polls show a dead heat. But many presidential scholars doubt that John McCain stands much of a chance, if any.

Historians belonging to both parties offered a litany of historical comparisons that give little hope to the Republican. Several saw Barack Obama's prospects as the most promising for a Democrat since Roosevelt trounced Hoover in 1932 . . . .

"I can't think of an upset where the underdog faced quite the odds that McCain faces in this election," said Sidney Milkis, a professor of presidential politics at the University of Virginia. Even "Truman didn't face as difficult a political context as McCain."

Add to this the fact that McCain is woefully underfunded and will thus likely have to rely on government matching funds and the accompanying spending limits, while Obama continues to rake in the cash, and there should be little question that the senior Senator from Arizona indeed has his work cut out for him.

Actually, let us backtrack a second. That phrase, "has his work cut out for him," is a little misleading. It is true, as the general connotation of that phrase would suggest, that McCain is a long shot. But, in our estimation, it is not so true that McCain has much work to do or, more accurately, that any work that he does will make much of a difference.

The Obama campaign has decided that its strategy will, in part, consist of trying to paint John McCain as the ideological and partisan heir to George W. Bush, that Senator McCain is, in fact, Senator "McSame," the living, breathing version of George Bush's "third term."

They should save their breath. If ever there was a known quantity in presidential politics, John McCain is it. Outside of George Bush and perhaps Hillary Rodham Clinton, McCain is probably the best-known active political figure in the country. Moreover, he is known principally as a "maverick," who has made a career out of spurning his own party to "reach across the aisle." Any attempt to redefine McCain as George Bush is likely to be unsuccessful. The voters have a good idea who he is, and there is little chance that Obama et al. will be able to affect that impression negatively.

The downside of this for McCain is that he is just as unlikely to affect the public's impression of him for the better. He is who he is. And just as there is little that Obama can do to change McCain's image, there is little that McCain can do either.

The fact of the matter is that this election is not really about John McCain. It is true that McCain is probably the only one among the the initial Republican hopefuls who would have any shot in November, but that's more a measure of the GOP's current weakness than of McCain's strength. He is passable, tolerable. He's fine. He was a war hero. And as far as Republicans go, he's not too bad. But he's also nothing spectacular. He is, in non-scandalous ways, something like Nixon in '72, serviceable but unexciting.

Indeed, if we had one bit of advice to give Senator McCain it would be this: Go away. We're not picking on the Senator and don't want him to disappear from politics for good, mind you. We just think that he would benefit from the public seeing less of him for a while. Frankly, if McCain wants to do himself and the country a favor, he should follow the example of his fellow Republican Warren G. Harding (the 29<sup>th</sup> President of the United States), who in 1920 ran his campaign from the front porch of his home in Marion, Ohio. Harding, of course, turned out to be a crook. And certainly we would rather McCain turned out to be like Harding's vice president, Silent Cal Coolidge. But when it came to campaigning, Harding absolutely had the right idea. He just stayed home.

Would a similar strategy help McCain? Probably not. But it wouldn't hurt him either. Like we said, this election isn't about him.

This election is all about Barack Obama, who, in contrast to McCain, is exciting, or at least he is exciting to the likes of MSNBC's Chris Matthews, who gets all tingly up and down his leg when he hears Obama speak. Obama is everything that McCain is not: young, dynamic, personable, infectious. And he is the candidate on whom this election will hinge.

Of course, Obama is also a liberal, or more accurately, a leftist. And as James Campbell, one of the stars of the second-generation of intellectual experts in voting behavior, recently noted, Obama easily qualifies as a "far-left" candidate. And far left candidates have historically had a real problem selling themselves to the electorate. Obama may be in an enviable position right now, but radical leftism is one of the great equalizers in American politics. George McGovern learned this the hard way. In the nation's largest electoral landslide ever, he lost every state but one to the aforementioned "serviceable but unexciting" Richard Nixon.

In our opinion then, the real key to this election will be Barack Obama's ability to hide his leftist extremism behind the gentle façade of soothing rhetoric and energetic charisma. We don't mean to call the guy a

liar, but there is little question that the Obama team is relying on certain amount of misdirection here, hoping to focus attention on the political persona of Barack Obama rather than on the man himself. The only question remaining is how successful they will be in doing so.

And that brings us back to Obama's declaration that he would "bring a gun to the fight." The tone of Obama's statement indicates that he and his campaign see this "fight" as something of a necessary evil, a fight in which they are compelled to engage, not because of the fact that they are involved in politics, but because they are facing the Republicans, who are masters of smearing, attacking, and "swiftboating." The statement, coupled with the web site dedicated to "fighting the smears," indicates that Obama and his team see any and all attacks on him, on his wife, on their Church, on their friends, on their affiliations, on their fundraisers, or on their record, not as legitimate political discourse, but as dishonest rumor and fear mongering. And this may well be their downfall.

What we can glean both from Obama's response to that which normal people call "politics" and his generally sluggish behavior with regard to distancing himself from those political affiliations that could conceivably prove damaging, is that the candidate is, even at this late date, still unaware that his beliefs are wildly outside the political mainstream. Obama spent twenty years of his life soaking up the political and religious precepts of radical black liberation theology. He spent twenty years as a community organizer and a legal activist inside the far-left, highly corrupt, Chicago political machine. He spent twenty years associating with, taking advice from, and earning credibility with radical, old-school leftists who saw the "ends" as the only important political consideration and were willing to achieve them by any means necessary. Barack Obama may have been merely a child during the 1960s, but he, more than any other mainstream candidate in the four decades since, embodies the radicalism and counter-culture spirit of the '60s "revolutionaries." And he doesn't appear to know that this makes him different from most Americans.

To understand a little better how this might affect the race, it might be instructive to take a look at the relationship between Barack Obama and his longtime spiritual mentor, Jeremiah Wright, particularly since Senator Obama became Presidential Candidate Obama.

As the conservative writer Jennifer Rubin noted last week, Obama had an inkling that Reverend Wright might be a little controversial as long as 16 months ago, when he “subtly pushed Wright out of [his campaign’s] kickoff ceremonies.” But did he do anything beyond that? Did he, as Rubin put it, “prepare his campaign and develop an approach to deal with what would become the drip, drip, drip of *YouTube* releases and corresponding cringe-inducing headlines about his association with black liberation theology, and the hate-spewing preachers who regularly spoke at Trinity United”? Nope. He didn’t do a thing.

Obama appears to have believed that his affiliation with Wright was minimally consequential at best. And so not only did he do nothing to sever the relationship and put Wright far behind him, he didn’t even consider the possibility that such actions would be necessary. It’s as if it never occurred to him that a man who would talk about the government creating AIDS to kill black men or would scream “goddamn America” might be a little off-putting to most Americans – white, black, brown, and otherwise.

And so he ended up with a panicked, ill-considered attempt to play down the affiliation with Wright, to minimize Wright’s extremism, to gently distance himself from the man personally, and eventually, full-blown capitulation to public sentiment. Citing the nefarious Karl Rove, Rubin summarized Obama’s handling of Wright thusly:

In the unfolding tale of Reverend Wright, Karl Rove pointed out, “In just 62 days, Americans were treated to eight different explanations.” And that was all before Obama finally left Trinity United following Father Pfleger’s hateful

attack on Hillary Clinton. Others have recounted the hopscotch of explanations: from denial that the church was controversial to defense of his continued relationship with Reverend Wright – whom he could no more “disown” than he could the black community or his own grandmother, the one he slandered, that is – to separation from Wright but defense of the Church to departure from the church.

Wright went from being the “crazy uncle” to a man who could derail the Obama presidential train, and it all caught both the candidate and his advisors by surprise.

If this were an isolated incident, we might be willing to cut the guy a break. But it’s not. It is merely the most dramatic example in a recurring pattern in Obama’s campaign. It never crossed his mind that his wife’s rants against the unfairness and endemic wickedness of this nation might strike people as unappealing, particularly since they are coming from a couple that collectively owns four Ivy League degrees, has earned six and seven digit annual incomes for the last several years, enjoys all the privileges of power (including many that are denied to “common people.”), and stands on the precipice of the most powerful position in the world.

It never occurred to him that referring to the hate-monger Louis Farrakhan in an excessively respectful way might indicate, well, respect for the man and his hateful beliefs. He never considered how it might look to the rural men and women of this country for him to describe them as bitter xenophobes who “cling” to God and guns. He never pondered how it might look to average Americans for a man running for the presidency in the midst of “the war on terror” to be friendly with and politically connected to two ex-con members of one of this nation’s best remembered and most notorious terrorist gangs, the Weather Underground. And not only does the list go on and on but it will likely continue to grow.

Above, we suggested that this campaign will hinge on the Obama campaign's ability to minimize the "personal distractions" and keep the spotlight on the candidate's message, namely that he is younger, better looking, and a better speaker than the other guy. The problem is that it is hard to minimize distractions, when you don't have any idea what might be distracting. And that is the position in which Obama finds himself. Because of the fact that his political beliefs are so far outside the mainstream, even for a Democrat, he has no real idea what will and what will not be perceived as unusual and potentially controversial by the centrist voters who will decide this election.

As for his opponent, John McCain, the American people like him well enough to make him president. They will like him tomorrow. And they will like him in November.

The question that remains is how well they will like Obama. Will they be taken by the excitement and the energy? Or will they be discomfited by the leftism and the general hostility to those things that most Americans consider good and decent about this nation.

The answer depends on how plausibly Obama and his campaign staff can deny that leftism and how well they can anticipate what will be considered leftist. If they don't get better at the anticipation part of this game, it's possible that the gun they bring to the fight will serve no purpose other than to shoot their guy in the foot.

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